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In memoriam

Julian Vereker MBE 1945- 2000

Hi-Fi+ has the sad task of reporting the death of Julian Vereker, head of Salisbury-based Naim Audio and one of the most influential figures in British hi-fi. An extended interview with Julian appeared in the last edition of this magazine, focusing on the early years and celebrating the 25th anniversary of his 'classic' NAP250 power amp.

In those days the very concept of 'amplifier sound quality' was largely unrecognised in Britain, a situation which Naim did more than any other company to change. His NAC12 pre-amp was the first in the modern era to omit tone controls - nowadays a credibility must for any amplifier with audiophile pretensions. Over the years Naim Audio has grown from an iconoclastic minnow into one of the largest and healthiest operations on the specialist hi-fi scene, without compromising either its radicalism or purist principles along the way.

Leaving school early, Julian himself was a man of great energy and fierce intelligence, who taught himself whatever he needed to know in whatever field he was then most interested in, frequently re-inventing the rule book along the way. A bon viveur with a connoisseur's taste and a healthy appetite for the best things in life, he was larger than life in every way, spreading his energies across a wide range of interests over and beyond Naim's manufacturing business and record label. Figuring out how things worked, and how to make them work better, was something of a personal obsession, which he applied as assiduously to his computer, boat and bicycle businesses as to his audio activities.

His manner could come across as arrogant and opinionated, but he was always a gentleman underneath, and could be very kind to friends in trouble. He was well respected by his commercial rivals, chairing the FBA and BFA industry bodies for several years. Even though he had little time for society's formalities, always remaining something of a rebel, he was nevertheless proud to receive an MBE for export achievement in 1995. Julian died on January 14th, and will be greatly missed by all who knew him. Hi-Fi+ sends its condolences to his widow Lesley, his two children, and all those down at Naim Audio.



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Playing The System

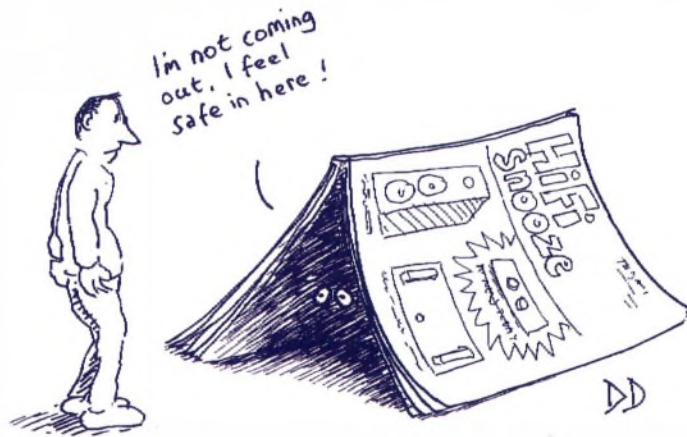
by Roy Gregory

When we want a new piece of equipment, or even a whole new system, what's the first thing that we do? Reach for the reviews. Which is entirely understandable, seeing as they exist to help us appreciate what's out there, and how good it is. And after all, I'm hardly going to disagree, given that I rely on equipment reviews for nearly half of the copy that I print in this magazine.

But whilst I might not disagree outright, it doesn't stop me seasoning the whole process with a gigantic pinch of salt. Why? Because I know just how much damage reviews can do. Let's take Mr Jones as an example. He wants a new CD player, so he trundles down to Smiths and buys a few magazines, where upon he discovers salvation; a group test on £300 machines. And guess what? One didn't just get five stars, they were gold as well! Result. So Mr Jones toddles down to his local hi-fi dealer to purchase a slice of sonic nirvana, in the shape of a Moreflashthancash Sonic Calculator. Where upon the assistant (let's make that 'consultant' - we wouldn't want to offend anybody), sets him up something approaching his system and proceeds to demonstrate exactly why he really needs an Ape Audio Systems Three Wise Monkeys Model 1. And Mr Jones does indeed hear, but looking in his magazine he sees that this CD player only rated three red stars. What should he do? More often than not, I'm afraid to say, he'll opt for the Sonic

Calculator. And he'll probably leave quite happy. It's just that over the coming months he'll stop using his system as the novelty wears off, and next time he feels like treating himself, he'll spend his money on something else.

Fanciful? I've seen it happen. Now Mr Jones might just have been intimidated by the demonstration. He might not have wanted one, and simply agreed with everything that was said simply to avoid embarrassment. Alternatively, he actually thought that the magazine's opinion was more valid than his own. More often than not,



that's nearer the truth.

The problem with reviews is that we use them as a crutch. Take them away and we feel abandoned and unsafe. Instead we should think of them as a tool, and just like any other tool, its effectiveness depends on how you use it. A claw hammer's not too clever when it comes to removing Allen bolts. In exactly the same way, for a review to be useful, we have to appreciate its limitations. For any

source of information, there are clear rules governing its usefulness. Basically, its reliability depends on the methodology employed to derive the data, and how carefully that methodology was applied. Which boils down to the question, how much do you know about what was done, and how good was the guy doing it? In order to be any use at all, a review must consider these issues. Which makes the vast majority of audio writing a senseless waste of the planet's natural resources. Let's just consider what a review should do:

It should establish the appropriate context for the equipment under consideration. This means that it needs to address the issues of system matching and complementary technology. If you are reviewing an OTL amplifier it would be ridiculous to ignore the electrical characteristics which inhibit their use with

demanding dynamic speakers, but which could be tailor made for a lot of electrostatics.

It should discuss the performance of the item with a range of different ancillary equipment, noting the conditions and accessories necessary to optimising the performance.

All equipment involves compromises. The review should identify those specific to the equipment being considered, expressing them in

► terms of the balance of strengths and weaknesses. In other words, how it deviates from reality.

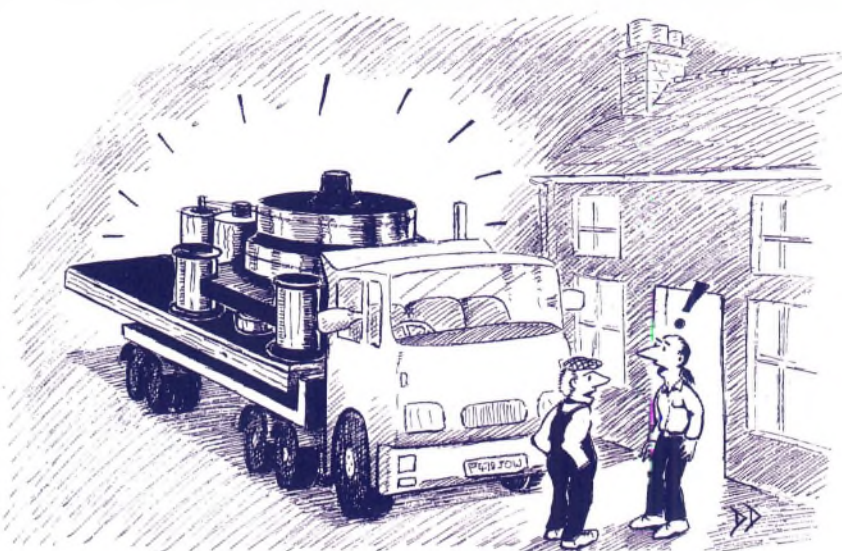
Finally, it should attempt to establish the preferred role and modus operandi for the product being reviewed. What job is it going to do, and with what kind of music?

These are the raw essentials for any review to actually be useful. However, there is one other major factor involved; the reviewer! Every individual has their own biases, be they questions of musical taste or empirical practice. There's more than one way to measure a speaker. Unless you know the who and the how, all the numbers and graphs in the world are utterly useless. And so are the sonic judgements in the text. The most important part of any review is the name of its author. And this has nothing to do with an inflated sense of self importance. Quite the contrary. It's your only defence against the writer's personal perspective.

It doesn't take a genius to work out that the vast majority of reviews fail miserably when you examine them using this framework. And sadly, the worst offenders are in magazines that serve the first time or occasional buyer, the people least equipped to defend themselves against inadequate publishing practises. The problem is that an unfounded opinion is just an unfounded opinion until some idiot goes and prints it in a magazine. Then it miraculously becomes the gospel truth. The strange power of the written word....

Which makes this an opportune moment to spell out exactly what a review can't do:

No review can tell you what product you should buy. That decision should be based on the rest of your equipment, your own personal musical priorities and your particular circumstances (budget, room, neighbours, Irish Wolf Hound etc). No review can possibly accommodate



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that range of variables, and therefore, by definition;

No review can provide definitive answers or supply the audio TRUTH. It doesn't matter how much time a reviewer spends, he simply cannot cover all the eventualities and possible equipment combinations. And yes, experience counts for a lot, but it's not failsafe. All the stars in the sky, all the numbers from here to infinity, and enough graphs to paper your listening room walls won't change that. A review, any review, is a limited judgement.

Which also means that even a bad review doesn't necessarily mean that it's a bad product. Maybe the reviewer didn't like it; maybe the product didn't like his system. Maybe his wife/girl/boyfriend was giving him a hard time. Maybe Arsenal lost at home. Only an arrogant egomaniac would claim that if he can't make a product perform then it must be the product's fault.

None of which is any great secret. These points are self-evident to anybody with a basic understanding of hi-fi. Therefore, any magazine which claims to be able to tell you what hi-fi to buy should be treated with the

contempt it deserves. Why? Because either the people who write it don't know dick about the reality of building hi-fi systems, or they do, in which case they're treating their readers with contempt.

Where does that leave the reader in search of enlightenment? Still reading reviews, only hopefully they'll have a better understanding of how to make the most of them. Use them to draw up a short list of appropriate options (but listen to your dealer too!). And when you do sit down to listen, a good review will give you an idea of what to expect, and what you should be looking out for. The best review in the world isn't a rave. It's a considered judgement, and as such it should read positively to the person who ends up buying the product, and negatively to the person who wouldn't. That's a distant ideal, but at least it gives us something to aim for. In the meantime, don't let reviewers choose your system. You don't let someone else choose your partner, your car or what you'll have off the menu, so why let them choose your hi-fi. They may know more about it, but they don't know you. ►✚

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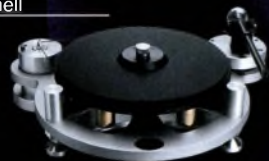
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Home Truths

by Jimmy Hughes

It would be interesting to carry out a straw poll among readers to see how many listen to LP and CD. By that I mean listen to LP and CD with equal seriousness - not simply have both but play one almost to the exclusion of the other. I still run both, but CD predominates - perhaps 90% or more of my listening is CD based. It's not hard to explain why; I get very good results from CD, and its convenience and ease of use are big plusses. More and more, LP listening tends to be reserved for special occasions - or for when I'm feeling nostalgic!

There must be many people who have LP and CD, but are only really committed to one system. I don't think LP and CD are mediums that comfortably sit side-by-side with one-another. CD's simplicity, reliability, and ease of use eventually makes one lazy and very intolerant of LP's foibles. Equally, LP at its best can be staggeringly good, and CD won't easily reach the same standard.

Once you get out of the habit of going through all the little rituals that precede the playing of a black vinyl disc, from cleaning the stylus to wiping dust off the surface of the disc, the whole process can seem like a terrible pain in the butt! Yet these rituals help to get one in the right frame of mind for listening - choosing the disc, carefully removing it from its sleeve, checking that everything's clean and correctly set - increasing the sense of participation in a shared experience. Or am I talking bollocks?

One less predictable result of this personal shift away from LP to CD is the unintentional creation of two

music collections. I did ease off buying new LPs during the mid '80s as the CD bug started to bite. But at the same time I carried on buying used LPs as many too-good-to-miss rare collectable discs came onto the secondhand market. Of course I've ended up duplicating many titles on CD that I originally had (and still have) on LP. But there are still quite a few things I have on LP that aren't yet released on CD - and perhaps never will be. Nor would I necessarily want everything I've got on LP on CD. My collection of Mrs Mills LPs for example...

In this context, while the CD collection is still a living growing thing, my LP collection seems frozen in time, with genuine new additions having petered out some time in the early '90s. Of course fresh titles have been added. But for the most part they've been old things I missed at the time, bought secondhand - discs released before I started collecting or inexplicably didn't buy.

Revisiting my LP collection is like looking into the past. My past. Each LP has its own memories, its own story. Often, I can still recall where I bought a particular disc and the feelings I had when I saw it for the first time. Buying records for me was almost a social event. The anticipation of setting out on a bright clear Spring morning to go to London's West End, hoping that HMV or MDC would have such-and-such new release in stock. And the joy when they did... Very sad!

Even more exciting; rummaging through boxes of used LPs and stumbling on a rare title I'd wanted for years! If the sleeve and disc were still

in perfect condition, then my joy was absolute and I'd walk back from the record shop on air! Back home, the cleansing ritual would start; wet clean the record, new inner sleeve, polish and clean LP sleeve and put it in a protective plastic sleeve. Doing all this erased the previous owner's aura (Nora), making the record mine!

Yet, strange to say, when I look through my LPs now, it almost feels like they belong to someone else - the person I once was. Of course I know the collection belongs to me; I hand-picked every bloody title. But it's like - the real collection's now on CD, not LP. When I discuss music and collecting with friends and they ask if I've got such and such an album, if I answer - 'Yes, on LP' - their response is something along the lines of - sorry, that doesn't count!

Yet one of the great beauties of an original LP is that it's in touch with the past. It's an authentic part of the period that the music or performance belongs to. If you're playing Frank Sinatra's *Songs for Swingin' Lovers*, what better way to hear it than on LP - preferably on a vintage '50s mono hi-fi? Frank was alive when that record was pressed. Good God, he might even have touched it! No CD can give that historical authenticity - just as SACD or DVD-A won't be able to recreate the authentic sound of '90s bands like Oasis, Garbage or Suede. In hi-fi terms the sound may be much improved, but it just won't be as good. It won't be - original. Trust me, I'm a doctor. Of course I may be talking complete bollocks...



Speaker's Corner

by Paul Messenger

The twentieth century wasn't a particularly good one for concert halls. Plenty were built, to be sure, but precious few of them sound as good as their historic predecessors. To a sceptic like yours truly, it's tempting to blame this on the formalisation of the laws of acoustics, which came about early in the late nineteenth century, promising a 'holy grail' of rules and predictability for architects and engineers to follow. The great concert halls of the nineteenth century; the medieval gothic cathedrals; the Greek auditoria from more than two millennia ago; all were created with minimal theoretical basis and much empirical experience. Even the cave-painters of pre-history seem to have had some acoustic appreciation - the zones just in front of the major paintings just happen to have good acoustic properties amongst the stalagmites and 'tites, which is probably no coincidence.

Those who've followed the 20th century rule book have often ended up with poor results, so there may be a connection here. But other factors might also be involved. Building materials and techniques have changed dramatically over the last hundred years. I'm no acoustician, but I do have a rough idea of the basics, and have spent many years trying to figure how they apply to hi-fi in the home. It's actually a complex, somewhat philosophical question, with different answers depending on what you want your hi-fi system to achieve.

To take two opposite extremes,

there are those who want to believe that real musicians are actually there in the room, while others are hoping to create a 'window' onto the concert-hall experience. These two very different objectives are best served by similarly different acoustic environments. The former involves the listening room in the overall acoustic mix, by opting for a 'lively' environment, whereas the latter opts for more of a 'monitoring' acoustic, with less reflections and more damping. Of the two, I tend to favour the former, so apologies to those preferring the alternative. Irrespective of whether you prefer a 'live' or a 'damped' acoustic, the first stage in assembling a hi-fi system ought really to be choosing a decent room. Which isn't necessarily the most helpful advice, as the room is obviously the hardest thing of all to change, but it has to be said nonetheless, as the room can easily be a major performance constraint.

I admit I'm enough of a trainspotter to have taken quite a lot of trouble, on the handful of occasions that I've moved house, to pick one with a room that looks as if it should work well for hi-fi. This hasn't always been as successful as I'd hoped, but it's never been a total failure either. I'd go so far as to suggest that the room itself is probably just as important as the loudspeakers in creating the final sound of a system. If you want to confirm this for yourself (and have some handy French windows), try taking your speakers out onto the

patio. (On a still day when it's not raining!) You'll notice they sound very different in the open air, and very bass-light without the assistance of a normal listening room. Indeed, one of the least publicised but most welcome developments in speaker design over the past decade or so is that designers now take real rooms into account, rather than erroneously assuming that we all live in anechoic chambers. (To go one stage further, I also suspect that apparent differences in the hi-fi tastes across the globe might well be related to their different local room sizes, construction methods and materials.)

Choosing the right sort of room in the first place is therefore very important. It might be possible to improve a poor room by adopting various strategies, but this column isn't going to try and supply a glib formula that can sort out any room you care to specify. Some accessory suppliers might seem to promise that, at least by implication, but I treat such claims with considerable scepticism, if only because it's usually possible to find someone else busily proselytizing a diametrically opposite view. So what does constitute a good room? The basic dimensions are crucial. The worst shape is a cube (or sphere, fortunately rare!). Theoretically the best is probably two-thirds of an egg, sliced lengthways, which is equally uncommon - maybe I'll get around to building one some day (but I doubt it, 'cos it might not work!).

Since eggs are off, we're left with rectangular boxes for the most



► part. In fact it's usually better to avoid perfect rectangles if possible, because parallel sides and horizontal ceiling tend to focus the standing waves to specific frequencies - avoiding parallels will usually smooth out the bass end. That said, we're mostly stuck with our perfect rectangles, and the three fundamental specific room modes they will tend to excite. Small rooms pose the biggest problems, because their small basic dimensions create modes well up into range where bass instruments are playing, muddying up the music. (It's one reason why small rooms are best served by small speakers, as the room is usually providing plenty of reinforcement around the point where the speakers are running out of steam.)

In most rooms the floor-to-ceiling will be the smallest dimension, and therefore the one most likely to interfere with the music. My own room has an 8.5ft (2.6m) ceiling, and this creates a room mode at 50-55Hz; the 14ft (4.3m) width provides a (positively useful) boost at 30Hz, while the length (18+ft, 5.5+m) mode is sub-20Hz. This not only means that each main dimension is different (which is most important), but also that they're nice and evenly spread, none is divisible by another, so the harmonics won't interact. High-ceilinged rooms always seem to sound good, in my experience, and it's probably even better if they have a pitched or sloping ceiling. That doesn't, however, mean the attic is necessarily a good choice, as another body of opinion reckons you'll always get better bass if you work in the basement or ground floor than high up a building.

We're getting well into the anecdotal now, but that's where the real wisdom seems to lie. Solid walls are a good thing, plasterboard-stud construction is definitely best avoided. I myself prefer a suspended

wooden floor and plaster ceiling to concrete slabs, but others take the opposite view. (A mixture of the two can be very effective!) I have one friend in the industry who strongly believes that modern, lightweight building materials and techniques are an acoustic disaster. Plaster, wallpaper and even paint are better avoided, with natural stone or wood giving the best musical results. From one perspective the room is an acoustic cavity being driven by the speakers. From another, the walls, floor and ceiling all act as 'acoustic mirrors', reflecting the sound. Once again we're getting into personal taste. The best stereo image precision is likely to be found when the speakers are well clear of walls and the 'first reflection points are well damped, but some prefer to avoid damping on musical grounds. The wall immediately behind the speakers is particularly critical, because its reflections come

from the same place as the speakers themselves. Some models are intended to be mounted close to this wall, which usually gives a healthy boost to the 50-100Hz bass octave, but at some cost in mid-band unevenness. It also makes them especially prey to the construction and nature of that wall, another and perhaps less obvious way in which your room effects your system.

When it comes to acoustics and hi-fi, one man's meat is definitely another man's poison. A column like this certainly can't begin to supply any sort of definitive answers or approach. But hopefully it will raise the issue in your mind, and encourage a little experimentation. You might be surprised what you can achieve. You might also discover that there's little you can do with your existing room, but at least you'll be getting some idea of what to look for if you move.





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Shows Bristol in February Edinburgh in March



Now entering its thirteenth year, the annual Bristol Show (18th - 20th February) continues to increase in size and importance. Changes to the hotel itself, and even more exhibitors (doubtless attracted by the superb organisation and healthy attendance figures), mean that there is now more stand space than ever, and for the first time a fourth floor of demonstration rooms. At the last count there were some seventy hardware exhibitors representing over a hundred and forty separate brands. And that doesn't include software, magazines or anything else.

More and more companies are choosing to launch new products at Bristol (given its close proximity to the Las Vegas CES, and increasing dissatisfaction with the London Novotel show) and this year is no exception. Top of the list is Arcam, who will be showing the important new FMJ range for the first time in the UK. Meanwhile

Elac's impressive Jet tweeter (the one that PC liked so much in Issue 3) has found its way into a new two-way floor-stander. And building on the impressive prototype they showed for the first time in Frankfurt, the company will also be showing a complete NXT flat panel surround system in which the front three speakers form the screen! This is only the tip of the ice-berg, and the shift away from a season dominated by the September London show reflects a growing awareness of the global marketplace and the collapse of established purchasing patterns. Companies are realising that customers are where you find them, and are starting to get out there and look, rather than waiting for people to make the annual pilgrimage to London. All of which has to be good news for anybody who lives outside the capital.

Amongst the industry's heavy hitters it's easier to list who isn't attend-

ing (Absolute Sounds and Linn) rather than who is. On paper at least, the Bristol show is going from strength to strength, and is an established (and highly organised) fixture in the international hi-fi diary.

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or see the ad. on page 51.

We are also told of an Edinburgh show organised by retailers The Music Mill and Russ Andrews, and scheduled for mid-march. Unfortunately, and despite repeated requests for additional information, the promised details have failed to arrive, and seeing that the shop in question seems to have allowed a fortnight for recovery from the New Years celebrations, it's now too late to obtain anything more concrete. I hope we get something soon as we are planning to go! Those interested should contact the Music Mill on:

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McIntosh Resume Valve Amplifier Production

American hi-fi giant McIntosh have returned (once again) to the production of tube amplification. Their last series production model, the legendary MC275, was finally discontinued in 1973, after a life span of some 12 years. Since then, McIntosh have concentrated on high power solid-state designs, albeit in their own, iconoclastic mould (output transformers!). The first ripples of subversion appeared in the early 90s, with the release of the MC275 Commemorative Edition, an amplifier that proved so popular that straight re-issue models had to be manufactured to extend the supply beyond the limited edition. That too has now ceased, but this is where things start to get really interesting.

With the announcement of the MC2000, an anniversary model designed to commemorate the company's 50th year, McIntosh have unveiled their first all new valve amp design since the 60s. And to do things properly, they even got company co-founder and 275 designer Sidney Corderman to author the beast. And the McIntosh tradition extends far further than that. The fact that they use output transformers on their solid-state designs means that they retain both the manufacturing capability and engineering expertise to produce them in house. The MC2000 is a direct descendent of the people and processes that



produced the original McIntosh amps back in 1949.

Does that make it a dinosaur? No, it's the sum of the vast knowledge that McIntosh have accrued over fifty years of working with valves and transformers. Everything about it is both modern and carefully considered. It is designed as a statement product which a lucky few (very few given a price in the region of £15000) will



be proud to own and use. The looks are pure McIntosh, with a pair of huge blue power meters gracing the front panel, while the dual mono circuit

uses four Svetlana KT88s a side for around 250 w/c. Finish and detailing are to the extravagant level you would expect. And if you want one? The order book closes at the end of March 2000, and it won't be reopened. So you'll have to be fast on your feet. McIntosh can supply you with the in-depth (you'd better believe it) technical details,

and mightily impressive they are too. Way too impressive to cover here.

Which begs the question, why devote the page space to a limited edition amplifier of such astronomical cost and rarity that very few people will be able to own one? Because the MC2000 is the harbinger of things, well at least one thing, to come. When the books are closed on the Anniversary behemoth, there are plans for a smaller model, based on

the circuit but probably employing a single pair of output tubes per channel. Far more affordable, it will also be far more relevant to the real-world hi-fi buyer. Don't expect it to be cheap, but at least you'll have time to save up.

This is the real importance of the MC2000. Fabulous though it is, the monster's offspring will be far more important in real terms. Along with the Kondo/Marshall tie-up, and the impressive new Jadis models, McIntosh's intentions signal the rehabilitation of the medium power valve amp, its return from the wastes of a public consciousness dominated by single-ended triodes. A return to sanity? I wouldn't go that far, but fashion has never had much to do with common sense or reality. For more information contact:

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NAD Silverline Price Reductions

Due to unexpected demand for their prestige Silverline products, NAD have been able to increase their order quantities and production runs on everything from components and metal work to packaging, garnering considerable savings in production costs along the way. This has enabled them to reduce prices across the board. The S200 Power amp reviewed in Issue 4 at £1600, now lists for £1400. With similar savings available across the entire range. Suggested retail prices are now as follows:

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Arcam Launch Up Market Electronics

Way back in Issue 1 we reviewed the top of the range Arcam Alpha 9 CD player with its clever application of the dCS Ring DAC technology, more familiar from the high-end Elgar converter. And whilst its ability to extract and organise information was excellent by any standards, and exceptional at the price, the machine proved to be unusually sensitive to its means of support. And I mean really sensitive. Get it wrong and you end up with no bass and no rhythmic integrity. All of which points to the casework; casework that the 9 shares with the much cheaper 7 and 8 models.

Discussing this with Arcam MD John Dawson, it became clear that the company were far from unaware of this, but felt that it was an acceptable compromise to retain the modular and upgradeable nature of the range. Buy a 7 and you can turn it into a 9 by easy stages. However, it was also apparent that some fairly serious experimentation was going on with heavier (or more heavily damped) casework.

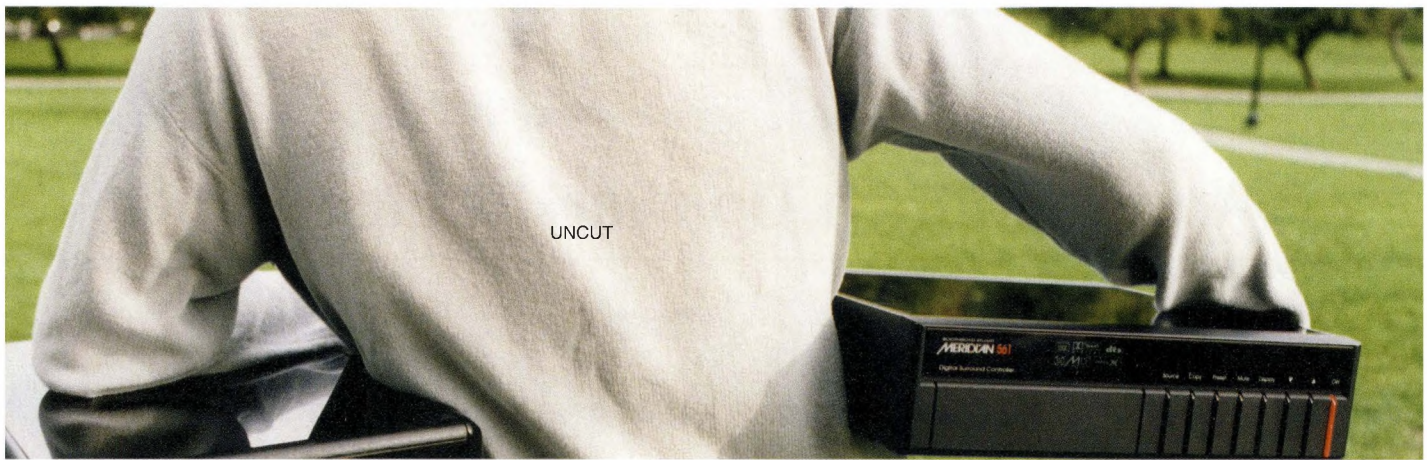


Now, a year later, we have the arrival of Arcam FMJ (or "Full Metal Jacket" for all those people out there who don't count Kubrick or small-arms amongst their special interests). Priced to sit above the existing Alpha line up, the new products are, none the less, linear developments of their cheaper brethren, but with far more substantial casework, sexy silver fascias, and upgraded internals. Cost is around the thousand pounds a box mark, which represents a manageable step for most Arcam owners, although FMJ will only be available through selected outlets. The new range is extensive, offering a CD player, stereo amp and both FM and DAB tuners. The A22 amp will also accept either a DAVE home cinema module or a MARC multi-room control package, and the necessary extra amplification is available in the form of the P25 two or three channel power-

amp. Not surprisingly, Arcam have come up with a nice simple product package which still manages to cover all the bases.

First up for review (scheduled for Issue 6) is the £1100 CD23 CD player. Based on the same dCS/Arcam developed Ring DAC chipset as the 9, the new player benefits from a far more sophisticated power supply as well as the enhanced structural integrity of the new range. The sonic differences should prove fascinating, but if you just can't wait, then there's more information available at www.arcam.co.uk/fmj, or you can call Arcam on (44)(0)1223-203203.





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Morgan Audio Midi Separates

Liverpool based hi-fi manufacturer Morgan Audio Systems Ltd have been quietly building an excellent reputation based on their Deva 250 range of separates; no-nonsense, minimalist, full-width units for around £400 a box. But things look set to get really interesting with the arrival of a new range of midi-sized components. Simply called Deva, they probably wouldn't attract undue attention if it wasn't for the fact that they look rather fine, and if first listening didn't indicate exceptional performance for such a neat, user friendly and inexpensive system.

The range consists of a CD player (£700), FM/MW/LW Tuner (£600), Integrated Amplifier (£600) and a couple of power-amps whose prices are yet to be fixed. They are, of course, all remote controllable from a single handset, and their size and svelte styling is going to appeal to all those people who like the idea of a Linn or Meridian system, but don't like their



prices. And they're not just a pretty face, with a number of internal features and options that are unusual to say the least. For starters, the CD player is a straight 16-bit design. Morgan have opted to dispense with over-sampling completely, along with op-amps. The integrated amp offers six line inputs and both pre and two tape outs. But you also have a range of optional internal cards which offer additional facilities. The £50 phono stage can be configured for MM, MC or high output

MC, with gain and loading provided to the user's specification! There is also an active cross-over option and an equalisation card which provides a sophisticated tone control allowing a degree of room compensation.

Along with the two power-amps (different power but same unity gain to allow for passive bi-amping/active applications) the result is an incredibly versatile and cost effective system which promises to provide the holy grail of both sounding and looking good. As I said, first listening suggests that the sonic returns are exceptional for the investment, and DD should be getting to grips with a full review for the next issue. In the meantime, this is definitely one to watch.

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Valve Amp Guru Hiroyasu Kondo Joins Forces with Jim Marshall

Two legendary figures from the world of valve amplification have joined forces – Jim Marshall, founder of Marshall Amplification, and Hiroyasu Kondo of Audio Note Japan fame are collaborating to create a joint-branded, mainstream, hi-fi product line initially designed by Kondo-san and engineered in the UK by Marshall. Two pre-amps, two power amps, two

integrated amps, a DAC, a CD player, and even loudspeakers are slated, with full production expected by Autumn 2000. Details of UK trade and retail distribution remain to be determined, though major established specialist retail outlets are likely to be targeted. Retail prices are targeted to start at around £1000 per unit, which is a far cry from the likes of the Audio

Note Ongaku for which Kondo is best known.

The first seeds of a potential Marshall/Kondo collaboration were sewn in Hong Kong. Having worked with Marshall Amplification for several years, Peter Watson (PM Components) knew that Jim Marshall has long been keen to diversify production by creating a serious hi-fi line. ▶

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► His main difficulty had been finding sufficient time to devote to the development of the right product line. Kondo, meanwhile, has been anxious to develop a more affordable, complete range of purist, valve-based amplifiers and hi-fi components, building on the prestige of his revered, ground-breaking, single-ended triode designs. The chance meeting between Watson and Kondo started the ball rolling.

Apart from a shared faith in valve electronics, Jim Marshall and Hiroyasu Kondo appear, on the face of it, to be culturally worlds apart. In fact, on closer examination, their shared commitment to the art of musical communication is apparent. After graduating as an electronics engineer

from Tokyo University, Kondo-san spent many years working in the professional audio world for the recording division of CBS/Sony immediately prior to founding Audio Note in 1976. Jim Marshall's name has long been a byword among musicians, the Marshall amp he developed in 1962 defining the elusive sound so many guitarists want.

Today Marshall Amplification has grown steadily over successive decades. Its electronics production and engineering expertise has expanded alongside R&D and other departments to the point where the company now employs 400 staff in more than 65 countries.

Having established the reputation

of Audio Note at the top of the hi-fi tree through the 1980s and early 1990s, Hiroyasu Kondo formed Kondo Amplification in 1998, exhibiting the first high end hi-fi products to bear his own name in September at the Novotel Show, Hammersmith.

The new Marshall/Kondo partnership is now poised to push serious valve audio technology back into the specialist hi-fi mainstream. It will be fascinating to see what sort of product line emerges – but both the early Kondo models and the real world power requirements suggest pentode output devices. If all goes according to plan, we'll know this time next year.



Pizzeria Castello

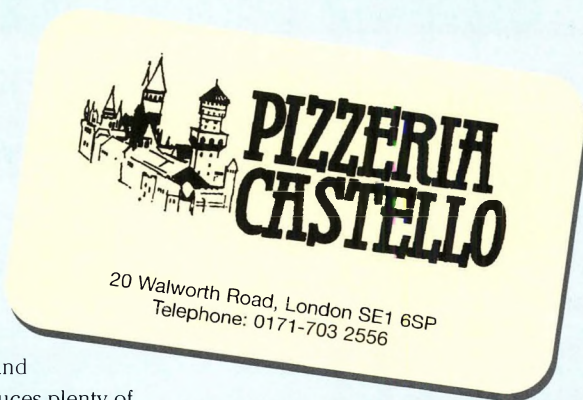
Restaurant Review

A small Italian restaurant on a busy roundabout in one of South London's less salubrious areas might seem a strange choice, given the more exalted cuisine which tends to grace this page, but then appearances can be deceptive. For one thing, Pizzeria Castello is considerably less than a mile from the South Bank, Festival Hall, National Theatre, National Film Theatre and Waterloo Station. In fact, it's just the right distance to stretch legs stiff from theatre seats.

But convenience aside, it's the food that matters. Good, honest, and occasionally imaginative, Italian food. The menu majors on pizzas and pasta, both of which are excellent, as well as an extremely worthwhile 'specials' board (make sure you check it before you order, as culinary frustration can seriously ruin your evening). Portions

are generous, with the excellent Antipasto Misto being perfectly adequate for two. The emphasis is firmly on real Italian cuisine (and hospitality), which produces plenty of unfamiliar, intriguing combinations and sauces which rarely if ever penetrate these shores.

There are no airs and graces here, and if you want starched white table linen and the last word in delicacy, then you are better off elsewhere. But if you need a place where you can ensure a hearty meal of surprising quality, devoid of expensive pretension, then head for the Elephant and Castle. And price? I kept the best bit for last. If you can eat more than a tenner's worth of food here then you're either going for the most expensive



stuff on the menu, or you need your jaws wiring. Central London (ish), with prices from central Yorkshire. An absolute god-send! Just make sure you book, especially at weekends. It's not the secret it used to be, and just the locals keep it busy.

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Flying In The face Of Fashion..

Or, can you sell a valve amp that doesn't use the 300B?

by Chris Binns

Few people still question the continuing relevance of valve technology. Glowing bottles just won't lay down and die. More to the point, in many cases the circuitry and components are actually moving back through history in an attempt to stake a claim for audio honours. You don't believe me? Witness the revival of the 300B valve, paper in oil capacitors and single ended configurations; all pre - 1930's. I rest my case.

For some listeners valve amplification seems to possess an elusive quality, a certain something that can escape the solid state competition, and a number of reasons have been suggested for this. For example, valve amplifiers tend to produce relatively high levels of even order harmonic distortion, but this is far less upsetting to the ear than even tiny amounts of the odd order variety. The circuitry, by and large tends to be more straightforward (i.e a shorter signal path) than with a solid state design. I could go on, yet there seems to be little need for further justification; the products themselves continue to prove that thermionic amplification is more than equal to the task of bringing recorded music to life.

So...Four amplifiers with not a lot in common except for their use of valves. One of them is an integrated design, three of them use triodes, and one is distinctly more powerful than

the others. By way of introduction, it is worth looking at the various circuit topologies involved in these amplifiers, how they fit into the history of valve design, and how we've got to where we are.

The triode is where all amplification started, and the basic circuit involved can be very simple; hence the plethora of transformer coupled designs around. Yes it is simple, so the sonic degradation can be reduced by the use of the minimum amount of components, ergo a short signal path. Also with only (say) five components almost anyone might think they can get it right. (Bitchy,huh?) It is on this basis of sonic purity that the single ended triode amplifier has enjoyed such a renaissance. The magazines wax lyrical about their glorious mid-range, the owners bask in their warm glow.

The next significant step historically was the advent of push pull - put very simply, the audio signal was split into two halves and fed to the output stage, where two valves amplified the signals. Because the distortion would be the same in both halves of the circuit, but out of phase, when the signal was re - combined at the output transformer the distortion would cancel out whilst the two halves of the musical signal would combine to form the amplified waveform. There was also the added advantage of greater efficiency particularly as far as

the output transformer was concerned.

So far, so good. But triodes were still relatively inefficient. The addition of a fourth electrode served to focus the path of electrons from the cathode through the control grid to the anode, and so make possible a more efficient device, namely the tetrode. (By the way, the name of the valve relates to the number of electrodes employed; triodes = 3, tetrode = 4 etc) The pentode is a refinement on the same theme. So greater efficiency and hence more power, but the downside was a loss of linearity. Put simply, the output was not always directly proportional to the input.

Perhaps the most significant development of all was the advent of the 'ultra - linear' or distributed load circuit, whereby this fourth electrode was connected in such a way as to track the signal going through the valve, rather than sitting at a fixed point to do it's focusing. The result was a circuit that aimed to offer the low distortion and linearity of a triode with the efficiency of a pentode. And to a large extent it did. Historically, more audio amplifiers have been designed around this configuration than any other, and there are also variations on the theme

That more or less brings us up to date. The Jadis is representative of the ultra-linear pentode configuration - hence it's relatively high power output, and all the advantages that go

▶ with it. With a hundred watts or so, matching of loudspeakers should not present a problem, on paper at least, and there are all the other advantages that go with this sort of power delivery.

Next up is the EAR V20 amplifier. This uses a multitude of small triodes (more commonly used for pre-amplification), in a parallel push-pull output stage, transformer coupled to the loudspeaker.

These two amplifiers represent variations on the accepted push-pull theme, balancing the added complexity against increased power delivery and load tolerance. But now we move into the slightly grey area of the SAP Anniversary and the GRAAF GM20, both of which are OTL designs. OTL? Output transformerless. Throughout our history of amplifier design, the traditionally high impedance valve has been coupled to the low impedance outside world, i.e. your loudspeakers, via an output transformer. So? Most valve amplifiers have them, what's the problem? Well at best, they can be described as a necessary evil, at worst a transformer in the signal path can be seen as the equivalent of a sewage works in the path of a mountain stream. Electrically there is not a problem - the transformer successfully couples the high voltage, low current at the anode of the output valve to the low voltage high current necessary to drive the loudspeaker. In audio terms, however, it can be seen as a hideous component. If nothing else, the presence of a mile or so of wire in the sacred signal path should raise your suspicions, but what is more, the parameters for good low frequency reproduction are in complete conflict with the requirements necessary for good high end response; not an ideal situation.

Having painted the situation black, transformer design has developed into something of an art form, and the solutions can't be too bad in reality; the testimony being the number of

highly successful designs around. But one can begin to see the obvious temptation here - if a valve amp can sound so good with this compromise in the circuit, what would it sound like without it?

Now is not the time to go into detail about OTL circuit design, but it is possible to couple valves in a fashion capable of driving loudspeakers directly, although to be blunt, there is a compromise of a different sort here; valves are not low impedance devices, period. So where does that leave us? It seems to me that the rarefied world of OTL design has a lot in common with our old friend the single ended triode, (an example of which, you will notice, is absent from this group). Whether it's the result of marketing hype or near religious conversion, the return of the flea-powered triode amp from near obscurity to domination of the valve scene, at least if page-count is anything to go by, has had profound effects on speaker efficiency and loud characteristics. It is now, once again, perfectly acceptable and practical to use amplifiers of ten watts or even less, and there are an increasing number of speakers out there to partner them.

For me, I have yet to find a single-ended triode amp that I really like (although my listening barely scratches the surface). Perhaps it's a function of their simplicity, but there are an awful lot of them out there, and the numbers swell daily. However, just because they're simple doesn't mean that anyone can design one. You still need to know what you are doing, arguably even more so, as the effect of the various design decisions will be only too apparent in the final sound. There never has been an audio panacea, and the mere presence of a direct heated triode output device (let alone a triode coupled pentode!) doesn't guarantee a good amplifier.

But whilst I approach triode amps with caution, I welcome the changes that have been brought about to

accommodate them. If you are going to accept the system matching, bandwidth and level limitations imposed by low powered valve amps, then it's quite possible that other topologies, such as OTL might offer a better solution, whilst an amp like the JA100 serves as a timely reminder of more traditional approaches. Lower powered amplifiers such as the three reviewed here need no longer be seen as outlandish: far from it in fact. Here are four quite different approaches to amplifier design - the fact that three of them are relatively low powered should not present a problem in a world with so many single ended triodes - in fact, quite the opposite. Here comes the competition. ▶+

Triodes, Pentodes and Linearity

When the Cathode in a triode is heated it emits electrons which are attracted to the Anode, but between the two is placed the control grid. The Control Grid normally inhibits the free flow of electrons, due to fixed negative (bias) potential, but by applying the signal to the grid we modulate that value, and hence the flow. The amplification supplied is directly proportional to the signal, making the triode extremely linear.

In a Pentode we find two additional grids between the Control Grid and the Anode. The first is the Focussing Screen Grid, which is positively charged and helps gather electrons to the Anode. Next is a widely spaced Suppressor Grid which is negatively charged to repel free electrons back into the Anode plane. Both these increase the efficiency of the valve. However, if the voltage on the Screen grid is fixed, then its influence cannot vary proportionally with the signal, thus introducing a non-linearity. In an Ultralinear circuit the Screen Grid is also modulated by a tapping from the output transformer, which sets its potential proportional to, but lower than the Anode. Voila, efficiency and improved linearity, although the added complexity can introduce its own errors.

V20

Made In Huntingdon, England by Yoshino Ltd.



EAR V-20

by Jimmy Hughes

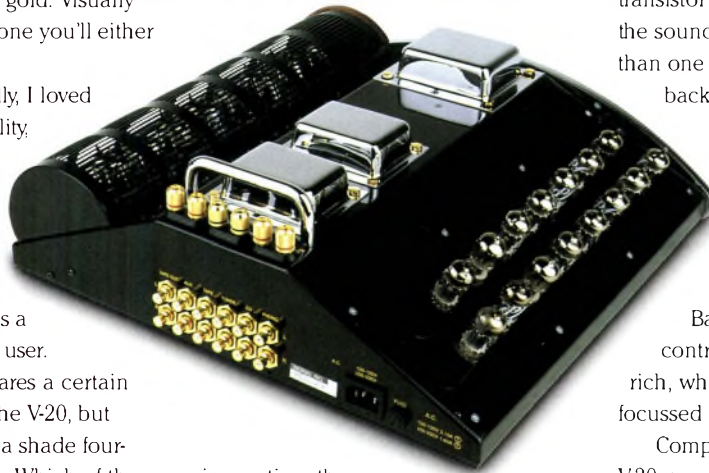
Mention Esoteric Audio Research and mental images of well-built but perhaps rather functional looking valve amplifiers spring to mind. So it's refreshing to welcome an amplifier from EAR that maintains the high technical standards we've come to expect from the company, while looking incredibly stylish at the same time. Not that everyone will like the V-20's appearance; it's not exactly reticent, with expansive splashes of chrome and a dash of gold. Visually it's a bold statement - one you'll either love or hate.

Speaking personally, I loved it. The solid build quality, the excellence of the finish, the adventurous, original styling - really, there's nothing like it. And I say that as a very satisfied EAR 859 user. The latter amplifier shares a certain visual similarity with the V-20, but looks plainer and just a shade four-square by comparison. Which of the two amplifiers sounds better is perhaps less open to debate, but I'll tackle this in due course.

The V-20 costs more than the 859 - rightly so, given its extra complexity and higher output power. A total of thirty valves are used - 20 in the output stage - and designer Tim de Paravicini describes the circuit as an extension of his unique Enhanced Mode Triode arrangement. To quote the handbook, '... the V-20's output stage runs its tubes

with the Grid positive with respect to the Cathode. This results in grid current flowing, but allows the ECC83 (normally a very low-current small-signal tube) to handle significant amounts of power in a linear and reliable manner'.

Each output stage has ten double triodes; that is ten triode sections in parallel for each side of the push-pull stage. Furthermore, the output stage features another Tim de Paravicini



innovation; the Balanced Bridge. This takes the primary windings of the output transformer and splits them equally between the Anode and Cathode circuits of the tubes so they're capacitively cross-coupled, resulting in exceptional linearity and increased bandwidth.

The 859 offers an incredibly refined and subtly detailed presentation that combines warmth and sweetness with remarkable clarity,

articulation, and control. At the same time it possesses the most remarkable naturalness and neutrality - qualities that make it 'disappear' sonically. If the forgoing sounds like a recipe for perfection, it pretty well is. But there's a downside; limited output power. It's 13 watts makes the 859 a questionable partner for medium to low efficiency loudspeakers...

This is where the V-20 scores. It's output power of 20W is still 'low' by transistor standards, but subjectively the sound is far bigger and stronger than one might imagine. It takes one back to the halcyon days of efficient speakers when 10W was considered sufficient even for public address work in a small hall! The V-20 sounds solid, powerful, and very dynamic. Bass is tight and firmly controlled, yet full-bodied and rich, while the treble is airy but focussed and clean.

Compared to my regular 859, the V-20 gave a sharper leaner more forceful musical presentation. The 859 sometimes runs out of drive on loud choral passages, whereas the V-20 seems equal to just about any piece of music you care to play. It's remarkably dynamic, and just keeps giving. Apart from those times when it was clearly pushed too far, I never felt the 859 compressed climaxes. But now, having lived with the V-20, I know it sometimes does - albeit so gently and graciously you're hardly aware of it.



▶ In this context the V-20 has noticeably greater ability to follow the dynamic contours of the music. I was surprised more than once when climaxes in recordings I thought I knew well continued to grow and expand beyond the point where (on the 859) they would've stopped. Of course you still need reasonably sensitive loudspeakers to get the best out of the V-20, but it should adequately drive all but the most inefficient with aplomb.

Usefully, EAR provide the V-20 with three sets of loudspeaker output terminals to allow precise matching of 4, 8, and 16 Ohm loads. Because the V-20 is transformer-coupled, the matching impedance between amplifier and speaker is more critical than it would be with a direct-coupled transistor amplifier. In theory, the 'correct' matching impedance for your loudspeakers is whichever of the three taps gives the loudest sound. So, if the 8 Ohm setting sounds louder than 4 or 16 Ohms, that's what you use.

However, speaking personally, I generally prefer the sound obtained on the lowest impedance offered, even though there's some loss of volume level because of the slight mismatch. The lower impedance setting gives greater control and improves firmness and solidity at frequency extremes. The tonal balance is slightly darker, but paradoxically clearer, allowing you to hear more inner detail. Ultimately, it's down to personal taste, but nonetheless try experimenting with the different options offered before choosing one.



temperature remains pretty constant over a 24 hour period.

In use the V-20 generates a certain amount of heat; with thirty valves how could it be otherwise? But it doesn't run excessively hot - the casework gets warm to the touch, but never uncomfortably so. The mains transformer is mechanically quiet, and

once running you'd hardly know the amplifier was working - only the faintest buzz could be heard with the ear right up close. Likewise, residual hum and noise through the speakers are very low indeed.

Given that my personal view of the 859 borders on idolatory (quite simply, I think it's virtual perfection), the

V-20 had a tough act to follow. From the outset I liked its solid no-nonsense musical presentation, it's firmness and control and the exceptional tightness of the bottom end. It's extra power ensures that climaxes expand voluminosly, while giving the impression that there's bags of headroom available if necessary.

Playing a big choral work, like Beethoven's *Missa Solemnis*, it was possible to indulge in near concert-hall volume levels without feeling that the amplifier was straining. On piano, the presentation was solid and focussed, with good attack and projection. Rock music benefited from the V-20s strong but tightly defined bass, and excellent impact. And so it went on. All in all there was nothing that caught the V-20 out - it seemed equal to everything.

If a 'but' has to be inserted somewhere, it is that the V-20 doesn't quite have the 859's supreme naturalness and fluidity. In a nutshell, the V-20 isn't as magical.

The 859's incredible delicacy and finely shaded subtlety and detail is reduced - replaced by a drier, leaner, more forceful presentation that's very impressive, but lacks the half-lights and finesse of the lower powered amplifier. Not the end of the world, but more circumscribed than the (seemingly) ▶

▶ infinitely varied tonal palette of the 859.

With the V-20 I was more aware of a slight tonal hardness with my Impulse H-1 horn loudspeakers. It's not terrible, but that lovely fresh openness I take for granted with the 859 was suddenly absent. On the plus side, the V-20's tighter leaner bass is perhaps an improvement over the 859's warmer, looser low end - though in reality the 859's fullness at low frequencies is partly a subjective consequence of its smooth sweet top-end.

What was good about the V-20 was its clarity and poise during even the toughest most complex passages. It always made sense of the music, presenting information in a manner that was lucid coherent and exciting. It proved very easy to listen to because there was a complete absence of strain. Yet it was good at recreating the power and struggle that sometimes goes into the performance of music; with the V-20 you sensed the effort and intensity of the playing, not just beauty of sound.

Which to buy? Well, being coldly objective, there's no question that the V-20 is more an amplifier for all seasons than the 859 - one that will slot into a wider variety of systems and perform superbly well with fewer ifs and buts. On paper the output power is low, but the sound is far bigger than specifications would lead you to believe. A loud sound is not necessarily a big sound! The V-20 has a dynamic dimension missing in many transistor amplifiers.

The 859 is perhaps more of a niche product; something you choose, despite limitations, because it happens to do certain things supremely well. The sheer simplicity of the 859 (just five valves) lends it a transparency and neutrality that would be hard to equal no matter how much you paid. But the cost is restricted output power. The V-20 remedies that limitation, but in the process some of the magic is lost...

On a personal note, I must say I've been blissfully happy since getting an 859 - a well-used secondhand example incidentally - some two years ago. Indeed, it makes things sound so good, I hardly ever want to tweak! It's like you haven't got an amplifier in the system at all - it's so neutral and 'invisible' sonically. With it, I can listen to music and forget all about hi-fi - something I've long striven for. But then I've got the speakers to match its very low rated output.

And the V-20? The V-20 sounds great too, in its own very different way. It will appeal to those looking for the cleanness and clarity of valves married to the control and drive of the finest transistor designs. I could certainly live the V-20, even if (ultimately) my affections lay elsewhere in the EAR range. It's a formidable amplifier, and yet another masterpiece from designer Tim de Paravicini.



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Inputs	4 x Line + Tape
Outputs	1 x Tape
Valve compliment	4 x ECC82 (12AU7) 26 x ECC83 (12AX7)
Power output	20Watts per channel 20Hz to 20kHz
Power Bandwidth	12Hz to 80kHz -3dB (half power)
Damping Factor	10
Signal to noise ratio	93dB
Input sensitivity	400mV
Input impedance	47k Ohms
Weight	22kg
Dimensions (WxHxD)	440 x 135 x 420 mm
Price	£2699.95

Manufacturer:

Ear/Yoshino Ltd, Unit 9, Brook Road,
Bilton Industrial Park, Kimbolton,
Huntingdon, Cambridgeshire PE18 0ND
Tel: (44) (0) 1480 861834 Fax: (44) (0) 1480 432006



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ANNIVERSARY

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produced and assembled in Salorno, Italy

SAP Anniversary Integrated Amplifier

by Chris Binns

If OTL amplification represents a departure from convention, then the SAP Anniversary inhabits a parallel universe. It is, as far as I know, unique in terms of its design topology, being both OTL and single-ended. You'd better believe it, and if nothing else it must endow this product with top marks in the oddball stakes - it's unlikely that you will get much further away from the mainstream than this, at least on this planet.

But there is more to this than meets the eye (ear?). The marriage of these two rarefied technologies should represent something of a fait accompli - in engineering terms at least. Having slugged off output transformers without mercy in the introduction to this piece, there is definitely a case for designing them out of the circuit and putting up with the consequences. But the whole concept of dispensing with this ironmongery becomes even more attractive with a single-ended design, as the transformer can only operate at limited efficiency in this sort of circuit. Without getting too technical, in a conventional push-pull design the standing current through the two halves of the output stage meet in the output transformer at opposite ends of the primary winding and so the magnetic field produced cancels out. In a single-ended design the current flows just one way, so the transformer

wants to behave like a solenoid, in other words, a certain amount of the magnetic 'capability' is being used up before any musical signal is being passed. Of course there are ways of reducing the problems, and there is no doubt that there are some very fine transformer designs around, but if you are going to go single

of an output transformer.

Voltage amplification and driving duties are taken care of a pair of 6922/ECC88 double triodes per channel. At this point it's worth noting that both these and the 6AS7s are still in production, so there should be no problems with valve replacement.

Gold socketry is provided for all connections, including excellent and increasingly familiar WBT binding posts. Unusually, there is also a pair of Neutrik Speakon sockets, which makes more sense when you realise that SAP also make their own cables. I guess that takes care of termination, and sonically they make good sense.

Front panel controls consist of six rotary knobs; volume left, input selection, tape monitor, speakers on/off, power and finally volume right. Above each volume control is a clip indicator, which comes on at approximately 15 watts into eight ohms - more on this later. With an input signal from the average CD player or phono stage the knobs are almost fully clockwise at reasonable listening levels. Whilst this is a little disconcerting at first it's done for sonic reasons; the less of the component in the circuit the better, although with slightly less sensitive loudspeakers I was occasionally worried about a lack of gain. Separate volume controls are a love 'em or hate 'em thing, and you know how you feel, so I'll leave it at that. No... on



ended (I dare you to put that on your next party invitation...!) then the idea of removing the output transformer becomes especially attractive. So why hasn't it been done before?!

Push pull or single ended, if you're going down the OTL route you need an output valve with a low operating impedance. Triodes tend to offer this more readily than pentodes or tetrodes, and the SAP is built around eight 6AS7 devices, four per channel. Each valve contains two triodes, each in turn capable of dissipating ten watts or so, which means that they are running well within their limits in this design, an important consideration when they do not have the safety net

▶ second thoughts, I hate 'em.

One small surprise. When did you last see a headphone socket on an esoteric amplifier? Me, I rarely use headphones, but I know people who use quality cans who should be salivating at the prospect. It also explains the Speaker On/Off switch. Despite the absence of output transformers, the amplifier is surprisingly heavy, due in no small part to the massive toroidal mains transformers, one per channel. Construction overall is extremely solid, and although finish was not exemplary, the casework on this amplifier comes from the engineering prototype. Rest assured that normal Italian standards of fit and finish apply to production. Aesthetically, the Anniversary is firmly in the 'functionally elegant' camp, with its clean, uncluttered lines. My only criticism is that the valves look a little awkward, rather as if someone had taken a solid state design and decided to stick them through the top. Simon (the photographer) loved it, so what do I know?

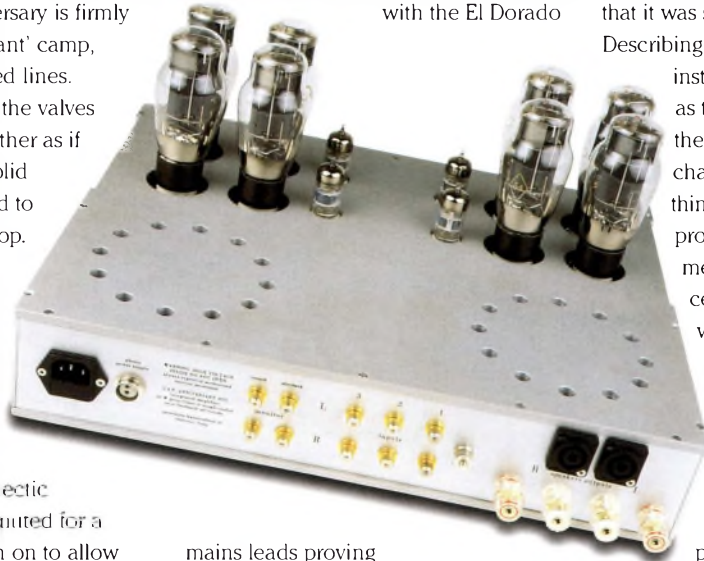
In operation, the SAP proved mercifully free of the quirks and oddities sometimes associated with such eclectic products. Speakers are muted for a minute or so after switch on to allow voltages to stabilise (don't forget, the speakers are connected directly to the output valves...). A small confession; time and time again when reviewing equipment I can't resist a quick listen when I first switch on, and, guess what? Time and time again it sounds crap. Do I never learn? The Anniversary was no exception. To think that twenty five years ago we didn't consider warm up time as crucial.

Matching speakers? Given its limited power and almost phobic aversion to low impedance loads, the power hungry Primary monitors were

clearly out of the question. What I needed was something efficient. What I needed and what I had were unfortunately worlds apart, but I did have my Quad ELS 57's, which is why RG gave me the SAP in the first place. They're not that efficient, and their impedance curve can be a little awkward, but as I pointed out in the introduction, historically OTLs seem to work with electrostatics, which on paper at least, makes them an interesting match. Besides "the best amp for old Quads" is another of those hi-fi holy grails.

Sources were the Meridian 508.24, and a Linn, Mission Mechanic and Reson Lexe cartridge through the Iso.

Cabling was Chord or Nordost SPM, with the El Dorado



mains leads proving especially effective. The Quads have been around for over forty years (!) and I think that even those people that dislike them for their shortcomings would have to admit that they also have considerable virtues. Midrange presentation, speed and lack of coloration are top of that list, whilst with the right partnering equipment I think their weaknesses can be ameliorated.

Lets be straight about this - the SAP didn't hide the shortcomings, but it doesn't draw attention to them either, apart from the available volume levels in my admittedly quite large listening

room. Bass performance was a little on the dry side - however it was fast and articulate with good definition.

But in those areas where the Quads traditionally excel.... I've NEVER heard anything like it. Playing a recording of Josef Suk's *A Summers Tale* (a great recording on Virgin classics) the gentle intermezzo was starting when the editor came round to remind me of deadlines; no sorry that's a lie. He was coming round to bark at me 'cos I was late with my copy, but it's hard to bollock someone when your jaw is anchored to the floor. And this is a man who isn't that keen on ELS57's. I was off the hook.

I'm going to try and avoid cliches here, but the quality of the music coming out of this system was so real, that it was simply astounding.

Describing the sound of the individual instruments became academic as the speakers simply produced the notes, with the same character and shape as the real thing. The acoustic energy propagates so naturally that the mechanics of the reproduction cease to intrude. Certainly when I attend a live performance, if its music I enjoy I don't start pulling it to pieces. I'd rather let it do its stuff as the composer intended. Bartok's *String Quartet No 1* is moody and passionate, with a sombre outlook that is contrasted by

the soaring strings and crescendos. Unfortunately, hi-fi systems all too often miss the point. But not this one. Such was the musical intimacy that the brooding themes were lifted, soaring on the power of the performance. This ability to balance the individual notes with the chemistry of the playing is rare outside of live music.

I was worried that this might sound over the top, but re-reading it I don't think it is. After thirty-five years of listening to hi-fi systems I'd describe few experiences as truly memorable, ▶

▶ but this was one of them. By now, I had the electrostatics far closer than normal to make the most of the available level, and sometimes the effect was like listening to a giant pair of headphones, and just as antisocial. But by now the system's strengths had led me to the kind of intimate, acoustic music that requires a degree of solitude.

More modern music of the rock and pop variety proved fascinating, providing you weren't expecting to upset the local wildlife. Again, it was the sense of intimacy that made the system so appealing, and vocals such as Fiona Apple (*Tidal* Columbia WRK 483750) were nothing short of awesome. Timing and speed, traditionally an area where I feel that single ended designs struggle proved to be effortlessly correct. Some products are described as fast, others as sluggish, but the Anniversary refuses to impose itself in either direction. Notes arrive, fast or slow, at the speed appropriate to their pitch and production. They are just, right!

One downside is that you need to think ahead. Music requiring higher listening levels had a tendency to collapse a little when the going got tough, Stravinsky's *Firebird* being a good example (Decca 458 142-2). After a gentle second movement the orchestra come crashing in with a vengeance, and having set the level at the beginning of the recording, there were audible signs of stress. Incidentally, the clip lights will come on under relatively gentle circumstances, but without apparent distortion until you push things. For someone listening to predominantly acoustic music (classical, pop or jazz) the SAP/Quad combination offers a magical solution, as long as you respect the envelope.

One of the more frustrating aspects of reviewing hi-fi equipment is the ships passing in the night syndrome; you have a particular product now which would work well with something you had three months ago. In this case

I'm referring to the Kochel horn loudspeakers I reviewed a couple of issues ago. I just know they would have sounded great together. As I was lamenting the impossibility of this



partnership I had a visit from an old friend of mine who I had not seen for several years. We all do things we regret, and in this case, letting him have a pair of rather special FA speakers is a particularly painful memory, kept vivid by 20-20 hindsight. They were Vitavox Thunderbolts. What a name. What a speaker. Five and a half feet tall, black vinyl, and totally awesome. Oh, and about 105dB efficient. There used to be a joke about running them from the headphone socket of a Walkman, only it wasn't a joke. I know someone who did until he twisted my arm to make him an amplifier. And before you conclude that I've finally lost my marbles, perhaps it will soften the blow a bit if I point out that they form the basis of a current (and highly regarded) domestic horn loudspeaker system.

Although I only had a short time with which to try this combination it enabled me to pull out some of the less sophisticated music in my collection - I wasn't going to turn in to an animal, but the Quad's volume restrictions no longer applied. Wheyhey! Any doubts about the dry bass disappeared, and musical dynamics were maintained up to ridiculous levels. But it was the same attributes that were obvious with the '57s that continued to shine through, with that elusive, communicative quality regardless of the material. God, was it exciting.

Time was now pressing, and

I feel that this product needs further evaluation. Partnering the SAP with the Quads and then the Thunderbolts represented two extremes from the highly civilized to the totally lawless, yet in both cases the musical results had the same fundamental correctness - and the same magnetic attraction. So far, I have yet to come across a single-ended amplifier that I really like - I find them very sweet but too soft and vague. It would seem that going OTL has re-written that rule. The Anniversary exhibits none of the shortcomings I normally associate with the breed. Quite the opposite in fact. Having praised the SimAudio i5 for its ability to be almost all things to all men, the SAP receives a very different commendation. Limited in application, and ruinously demanding when it comes to system matching, get it right and the results are breathtaking. The SAP demands dedication from its user, but then rewards it generously. The book is far from closed on the SAP. Expect (much) more next Issue. ▶+

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Inputs	3 Line Level + Tape
Outputs	Tape Headphone
Valve Complement	4 x 6922/ECC88 8 x 6AS7
Power Output	22w/4ohms 32w/8ohms 43w/16ohms
Input Impedance	50 Kohms
Damping Factor	4
Dimensions (WxHxD)	420 x 210 x 355mm
Price	5050EU (€3200)

Manufacturer:

Strumenti Acustici di Precisione
Largo Plebiscito 6
84125, Salerno
Italy
Tel/Fax. (39)(0)89-250979
E-mail. sapmkt@tin.it



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Modèle 3A100

Pure Class A

Orlène Schimpler

L'Oréal Paris

St. Louis

Jadis JA 100 Mono-blocks

by Roy Gregory

It's always dangerous to take the place of a popular champion. There's always the danger that people will remember the loser more fondly than whoever overcame them. Especially when that loser has rather more than seventeen years of history behind it. So it must have been with some trepidation that Jadis set out to replace the JA80, the product with which they started the company, and one whose essential elements have remained basically unchanged ever since. Indeed, the 80 occupies a special place in the heart of many listeners, and was a reference or benchmark for more than a few reviewers.

But before we get all misty-eyed let's not forget that the JA80 was not without its problems, and chief amongst them was power. Originally conceived as an 80watt Class A design using two pairs of push-pull KT88s a side, the 80's arrival coincided with the demise of quality KT88 production, and the search was on for a reliable replacement. Unsuccessful outings with the 6550 (also going through a rough patch) led eventually to the 6CA7, a high powered EL34 variant. But by this time the rated power had shrunk to a paltry 50watts, and that was insufficient for the JA80 to be considered a universal amplifier, the whole point of its original specification. Various fixes were tried, but ultimately they all came apart at the point where modern output valves were asked to perform to the levels and specification that older production of the same designs achieved without difficulty.

Which brings us, finally, to the JA100 and a new output valve, the KT90. Seeking ways in which to increase the overall gain of the driver section, designer André Calmettes devised an additional stage based around a complementary pair of EL84s, positioned after the ECC82 and 83 pairing of the original design. This arrangement used to drive a quartet of the reliable and robust KT90 output tubes (a recent Czech design developed in conjunction with David Manley of VTL, a designer suffering similar tribulations with valve quality) produced a very healthy 80 watts in Class A.

Outwardly, apart from the valve line up, the JA100 appears little different from the 80. The large chrome mains transformer cap has gone, replaced by a similar



black cube to the one that covers the output transformer, but otherwise you could easily confuse the two. The only other identifying feature is the balanced input (available single-ended if desired, but still using the XLR socket). All of which means that the 100 is the same large, awkward shape as the 80, and it's still about as heavy as you'd want to

pick up on your own.

Under the skin, the similarities continue. Both transformers are wound in-house at the Jadis factory, an essential element in the amplifier's sonic signature. André Calmettes attributes 90% of the sound of a valve amp to its output transformer (an interesting view in light of the two OTL designs reviewed by C3 in this issue). I'm not sure I'd go that far, but you get the point. Remove the base plate from the chromed steel chassis and it contains the same neat and beautifully executed point to point hard wiring as the 80. It also contains the same heavy copper bus bars, and the same absence of ostentatiously "audiophile" components. These are down to earth designs that rely on a thorough understanding of their intricacies rather than an ill advised deluge of "designer" parts. Instead, you'll see carefully selected and combined componentry chosen for its sonic performance at a given point in the circuit. Today's audiophiles are far too quick to jump on the latest magic ingredient bandwagon (the audio equivalent of drinking by the label, and leading to similar disappointments!).

All the JA designs are laid out in a linear fashion; power-in at one end, signal-out at the other. This arrangement keeps the 230V a/c well away from the signal path, preventing it from doing any damage, but it does place the mains input IEC in the front left corner of the top-plate. And in a final show of continuity, just as the 80 spawned low and high powered alternatives (the 30 and 200), the 100 is the pivotal

► model in a three amp series, accompanied by the smaller 50 and the four chassis 250. The essential message seems to be, why change the things you are doing right? I couldn't agree more.

Set-up and connection are perfectly straight-forward once you've found something large enough to accommodate them. I managed to get them side by side on the Aavik A4X titanium rack, but be warned, you need to plan ahead. Like all valve amps, the JA100s need careful siting, and the floor isn't good enough - not if you want to hear what these amps can really do. Output impedance is set using heavy internal jumpers. Aside from that, connection is as easy as can be, the plastic covered four-way binding posts (becoming increasingly common) are happy to accept both 4mm plugs and spades. I used Nordost SPM and Quattrofil cables, and after some experimentation, settled on the Graaf 13.5B line-stage.

Initial listening started with the Audioplan Kontrast 111i speakers. Audioplan have been the long time Jadis distributor in Germany, so the combination is a fair bet to start with, and the Kontrasts are a happy match with my JA30s, allowing for a straight comparison between new and old. Now, the 30s have been in residence for something close to ten years, despite their limited power (20w/ch with EL34s), and the fact that their arrival pre-dated the current move to more efficient speaker designs. In short, they suffer the very same problems that bedevilled the 80s, but worse. On the plus side is the use of a single pair of output valves per side, which always gives you benefits in the realms of immediacy and rhythmic integrity. And how! It is this midrange presence and vitality that has kept the 30s at the top of my personal play list for so long. Despite

the problems of finding matching speakers. Despite the problems of a bass performance which could kindly be described as fruity, or more damningly, as woolly and indistinct. The energy was always in the right place, so rhythmically it worked, but the edges of the notes were always wanting greater precision, a fact cruelly exposed by the arrival of the Lavardin IT. Having both the 30s and the IT on hand has proved the perfect precursor to the arrival of the JA100s. The solid state amp shows only too clearly exactly what the 30s don't (and do) do.

Fire up the 100s and you'll notice two things immediately. They can't match the sheer mid-band presence of the 30s, but the bass is way, way better.



The midrange is only to be expected. Not only did the 80s suffer a similar shortfall, but the 30s are running with single-ended inputs as opposed to the balanced connections on the 100s. Now I know it's dangerous to generalise, but my experience, and particularly where the Nordost cables are concerned, is that balanced connection leads to a more defined but dynamically constricted sound. And this is exactly what I was hearing. The 100s had greater mid-band control and focus, positioning instruments within the orchestral soundscape with an almost uncanny ease and precision. At the same time, your seat moved from row B with the 30s, all the way back to row H.

What I'm trying to get across here is that this is neither better nor worse. It's different. You could describe it as more studied, almost academic, in comparison to the verve and elan of the smaller amp, but that actually highlights the danger of such comparisons. Short term ABA listening will produce a strong

preference one way or the other, depending on your taste and choice of programme material. But sit back and simply listen, so that you can ignore the superficial differences dictated by the dimensional and dynamic changes, and you'll start to recognise the essential character of this amplifier, and how it builds on the strengths of the older model. The 100 is designed as a universal device, useable in most situations. As such, it dispenses with the spectacular mid-range pyrotechnics of the 30 in favour of a far more balanced and broad-band performance. But don't think for a moment that it sacrifices the outstandingly natural harmonic envelope which sets all the Jadis designs apart. It is polluted with none of the fake warmth (bottom end of the older models aside) or glow that infests so many valve amps. It allows acoustic instruments to bloom with a rich complexity of colour. The tonal differentiation of individual instruments, even those closely related like violin and viola, clarinet and oboe, is accomplished with ease, whether it's a string quartet or a full orchestra. Listen to the Britten *Nocturne* (Speakers Corner SXL2189) and hear how plainly the Jadis amps separate the French and English horns, and how central their individual character and sonority are to their specific passages. It will also bring home what lamentable standards of harmonic accuracy we are prepared to accept from most hi-fi. The same is true of backing vocals, the JA100s revealing not just harmonies that other amps leave totally buried, but the numbers and arrangement of the singers.

Add the kind of sure footed rhythmic stance (if not the last ounce of solid-state type bass transparency) that seems to come naturally to a good valve amp working well, and music starts to breathe and swell with an easy, organic sense of pace. The sophisticated patchwork that makes up Lloyd Cole's *Mainstream* (Polydor LCLP 3) seems to fall effortlessly into place, the

► rhythmic halts providing just the gap for that perfect guitar fill to get things moving again. The 100's pull the same trick with the Macy Gray track 'I Try' (*On How Life Is Epic* 494423 2), really making its fractured structure work, whilst underpinning it with the dynamic coherence to let the song build, and the musical insight to revel in the complex multi-tracking of the choruses.

I used a variety of speakers, and they all benefited from the top to bottom dynamic and musical coherence of the JA100. It's bass goes deep, but never becomes disjointed (unless you ask much too much of it, a la NHT 2.9s), and at the same time it possesses a power and sense of texture that is way beyond any

of the company's older designs. Music on the 100s is wonderfully shaded and of a piece. You can have as much insight as you like, but it never, ever comes at the expense of the performance as a whole. If you want bass that has the same sort of weighty solidity (and mobility) as a marble statue, look elsewhere. If you want etched treble or a mile wide soundstage you'll be disappointed. In short, this amp isn't about hi-fi. But if you want an amplifier to reproduce the original musical event, as a believable whole, portrayed in an accurate, natural and coherent soundstage, and if you want to be able to choose from a wide range of well matching loudspeakers,

then the JA100 fits the bill.

Like all the best hi-fi, this Jadis amp doesn't have blow your socks off impressiveness to turn a customer's head. At this price it assumes a more considered and sophisticated approach from its listeners. It assumes that a potential purchaser will be a music



lover, and that they'll therefore recognise the JA100 as a special product, one that manages to retain the essence and balance of the live event. You never feel that this amp is clinging to or imposing itself on the music.

Instead, recordings simply flow with a pace and breadth that's all their own. You don't hear it working, and consequently, you don't question what it does. It's a lot less intrusive than most hi-fi, and doesn't feel the need to constantly remind you how much you paid for it. The JA100 is enough. It's powerful enough, transparent enough, dynamic enough and (quietly and not at all obviously) impressive enough. It's also outstandingly musically satisfying.

In a world apparently obsessed with trophy products, there are a lot of affluent hi-fi aficionados who can list the string of ever changing (and ever more expensive) products that they've owned, rather like a race horse owner lists a bloodline. But with horses and hi-fi,

there's no guarantee that high price translates to high performance. It seems ludicrous, given the cost of the JA100, to talk about value for money, but let's remember two things: the price of the competition, and the fact that many prospective buyers will overlook it on the basis of its modest power and matching price-tag. Those enlightened enough to take a listen could finally find themselves at the end of a path which makes the yellow brick road look like a piece of value engineering. Yes, the 100s are expensive, but they are what expensive hi-fi should be about. Mind you, for those who just have to spend more, there's always the 250s. I'd love to hear these run with a single-ended input. In fact, I suspect that the day I get to hear a pair of suitably wired 50s is the day my venerable 30s might depart. Frustrated music lover: with a lot of expensive hi-fi? Check this out. Enough is definitely enough. ➤+

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Output Topology	Ultra-Linear Push-Pull
Valve Complement/	1 x ECC82
Channel	1 x ECC83
	2 x EL84
	2 x Matched Pairs of KT90
Input Sensitivity	1.45V
Input Impedance	>100kOhms
Dimensions (WxHxD)	260 x 230 x 580mm
Weight	Loacs!
Price	£5419.00 each

Distributor:

Absolute Sounds
Tel. (44)(0)181-971-3909
Fax. (44)(0)181-879-7962
E-mail. info@absolutesounds.com
Net. www.absolutesounds.com

Manufacturer:

Jadis S.A.R.L.
Tel. (33)468-786330
Fax. (33)468-788515
E-mail. jadis@jadis-electronics.com
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The GRAAF GM 20 OTL Power Amplifier

By Chris Binns

Damn! Whilst in the process of dreaming, designing and building power amplifiers I have always had an image in my head of this beautifully proportioned product with a finish to die for, and here it was sitting on a table in my living room. The trouble was, it was not my product. It was the Graaf. Sure, I'd seen them at shows and in magazines, but never this close. And guess what? It looks as good in the flesh as it does in the pictures. Manufactured in Italy, it has the same sleek lines that so many products which emanate from that part of the world seem to possess - from coffee percolators through to cars. And guess what? A paint finish to die for. Not really suprising when you consider that the spraying is undertaken by the same people who spray Ferrari's.

As I'm sure you have gathered by now, the world of OTL amplification is not always a straightforward one. Apart from the problems revolving around the matching of loudspeakers, it has to be said that historically the development of this particular topology has been interrupted with more displays of pyrotechnics than most. Anyone remember the Futtermans? But the rewards can be worth it. The valve, and in particular the triode, can be a particularly linear amplification device, and free from

the shadow of the output transformer can reveal it's true colors (or lack of them) with little hindrance.

There is something of a heritage behind the GM20. The man behind the company is Giovanni Mariani, and it would seem that his interest in valves has been a lifelong one. How many people do you know that have their own museum dedicated to their obsession?



It would also appear that OTL design has been something of a passion. The '20 has a big brother, the GM 200 which has been in production for 15 years, so his knowledge stems from direct experience - the best kind. It seems that the desire to build a smaller version of this beast had been in place for quite some time, but it was the emergence of the 6C33 tube from Russia that sparked the design into realisation. If ever a valve was crying out for OTL use then this was it. With an anode load of just 100 ohms,

the output from the cathode is low enough to feed straight to a pair of loudspeakers with just a single pair of devices, i.e. you don't need loads in parallel to get the impedance down.

On the top of the chassis at the rear is the (beautifully) encased mains transformer, flanked either side by the smoothing capacitors, while at the front are the four big triodes. And for once, justice is done by the term power tubes - the monster 6C33's look like overgrown, base-less KT88's, and have more nipples than a playboy magazine. They also produce enormous amounts of heat; hence the provision

of a cage which fits neatly over the two 'handles' at either side. Needless to say it is finished to the same high standard as all the other metalwork. The remainder of the valve compliment comprises two EF184 RF triodes and an ECC88 /6DJ8 per channel for voltage and phase splitting duties.

Back panel connections consist of balanced and unbalanced inputs utilising XLR's and phono's respectively, a small link being inserted into the XLR for the latter mode of operation. High quality (but uninsulated) WBT binding posts are fitted. Removing the bottom plate reveals a single, very high quality printed circuit board on which



▶ everything is mounted bar the mains transformer, and if that doesn't inspire confidence, rest assured, it is a substantial 5mm thick. Construction and layout are first class, and a good example of the attention to detail is the provision of both instructions and test points for biasing the output stage actually on the board. Whilst on the subject, valve life should be long - each 6C33 has an anode capable of dissipating a hundred watts, and so is considerably under-run in this design.

The circuit configuration is decoupled throughout, so not only is the GM20 OTL, it is OCL as well, meaning no capacitors in the signal path at all. From what I can see, the topology is symmetrical, and the output stage is some sort of a bridge arrangement - there is nothing conventional here. There is also a bridging kit available to convert the GM20 into a mono amplifier capable of sixty watts, although into what impedance I don't know. But it's something I will try given half a chance.

The importer also supplied a preamplifier, the GM13.5 B11 (£3950.00) for use with the GM20. Considerably more expensive, the price falls into place when you realise that it is also designed for use with the GM200. Here is not the place to go into great detail about this unit, except to say that it shares the same elegance and visual flair as the power amp. I used it extensively with the GM20 as it enabled me to use the power amp's balanced inputs. Trouble free in operation, the only minor quirk I discovered was when I accidentally hit the active / passive control while the music was playing. This is easily done, as this is a touch sensitive switch, and all I can say is, thank God I wasn't



using a 200-watt amplifier, as the resultant jump in volume could have taken the speakers out. Needless to say the Quads didn't find it funny. Some form of status indication as to whether in active or passive mode would also be useful.

In use, the same considerations apply to the GM20 as the SAP. Clearly, relatively efficient loudspeakers with a kind load impedance were the order of the day. However, a little experimentation showed that the GRAFF was not quite as power shy as its paper specification would suggest.



Not that this is a muscle bound heavyweight you understand, but there were no problems achieving respectable levels with the ESL57's for example, which were the first speakers I tried. The rest of the system was as normal, with cabling duties alternating between Chord co. and,

occasionally, Nordost SPM (I'm reluctant to become too reliant on the latter's considerable charms.)

I know that two amplifiers of a particular genre are hardly representative of the breed, but there was more than a passing resemblance in the character of the sound from the GRAFF with the SAP. With string music there was again a tremendous sense of intimacy with the music which I found very seductive; likewise vocals were presented with almost frightening accuracy, particularly when they have been recorded with no additional reverb. A good example of this was Sam Brown's 1988 album - *Stop!* (AMA5195) where her husky vocals were presented with amazing detail and chilling reality. I always feel that it is a brave move to record vocal tracks with no reverb whatsoever - but sometimes the gamble pays off. The kind of communication available from a system such as this makes it a very personal experience.

Although the GRAFF was doing a great job with the Quads, I felt it was time to try something a little more conventional in the way of loudspeakers.

Although on paper the GM20 was actually slightly lower powered than the SAP, in practice it seemed capable of generating higher levels. But I still needed something relatively kind impedance wise with a degree of efficiency. Phone the editor..... Who came over with a pair of Audioplan Kontrast 2's. These beautifully engineered loudspeakers have

▶ always been a firm favorite of mine since their Mk 11 inception - a classic case of what you see is what you don't get. In other words don't judge them until you have heard them with the right system. Which just happened to be in my living room at the time.

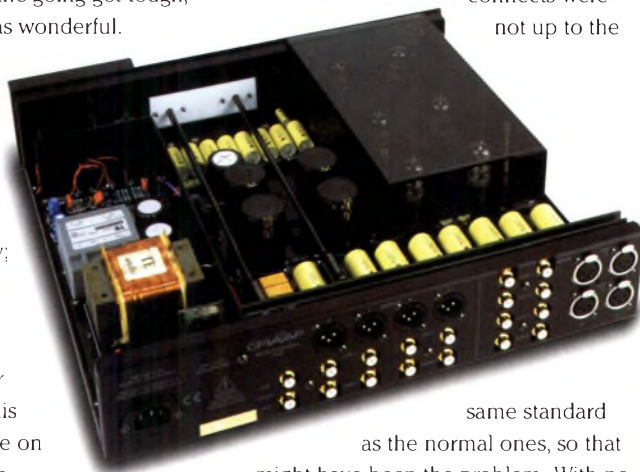
The GRAAF poured its heart out. The bass end was not the tightest I have heard, and would occasionally tumble over itself when the going got tough, but the music was wonderful.

If you can imagine a really cold, crisp night outside, sitting by a real fire and feeling well, cosy; that sets the scenario. I was playing John Martyn's *Solid Air* (ilps 9226) and his cotton wool voice on the title track was wrapping itself around me, more warming inside than a good malt whisky.

Orchestral music was reproduced well, again with that sense of musical communication. In my quest for digging up obscure contemporary English composers I came across the Nimbus recording of William Mathias' *Oboe Concerto* (N15343) and like a lot of these discs it has a warm and evocative sound with a rich ambience. The GM20 managed to convey this accurately, but without losing the detail of the solo instrument. My normal system occasionally has a tendency to allow the ambience to overtake the music, swallowing some of its energy and definition.

As I had the GM13.5 B11 pre-amp to try with the GM20, I thought it would be worth hooking it up. I had been warned that it took a long time to warm up, so I had it plugged in ready to go. Using the balanced connections there was certainly some benefits

to the sound quality in terms of presentation; for example images had a little more depth to them, but I felt the sound to be a little 'soft', almost lazy - particularly with the electrostatics. The definition to instruments that had been razor sharp was now a little bit smeared, but hey you gain some, you lose some. I must admit though that my balanced inter-connects were not up to the



same standard as the normal ones, so that might have been the problem. With no clear cut preference, the results will be system and listener dependent so suck it and see.

Is it time to make comparisons? Fortunately, this is not that kind of review, so I don't have to. But if push came to shove, I would say that the GRAAF didn't achieve the same magic that the SAP did with the electrostatics, but then it's a different beast entirely. Apart from anything else, the SAP's an integrated amplifier, and it redefines the term 'picky' when it comes to system matching. Where the GM20 scores is in its ability to be a real world OTL amplifier. It has the muscle (comparatively) to make loudspeaker matching almost straightforward. No, forget the 'almost' if my experiences with the quads and the Audioplans are anything to go by. The sound is exactly what I hoped it would be, with a definite sense of being nearer to the music, and that must be a good thing.

To sum up, I have presented OTL amplification of something of

a compromise in terms of system matching, but the benefits are there to be heard. Where the GM20 really scores is that it presents those benefits in a real world product, capable of working with quite a wide range of reasonably sensitive loudspeakers. If you are looking for mammoth bass at high levels then you will be disappointed - that is not what this product is about. But if the idea of OTL technology and what it can do appeals to you, I can think of no better starting point. And at the asking price I think that makes it something of a bargain. ▶+

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Inputs	1pr RCA phono 1pr Balanced XLR
Outputs	WBT Binding Posts
Valve Complement	2 x EF184 2 x ECC88/6DJ8 4 x 6C33
Input Sensitivity	600mV
Power Output	20W/ch into 8ohms
Dimensions (WxHxD)	350x215x440mm
Weight	22Kg
Price	£2950.00

Distributor:

U.K.D.
Tel. (44)(0)1753-652669
Fax. (44)(0)1753-654531
E-mail. nick@ukd.co.uk
Net. www.ukd.co.uk

Manufacturer:

GRAAF S.r.l
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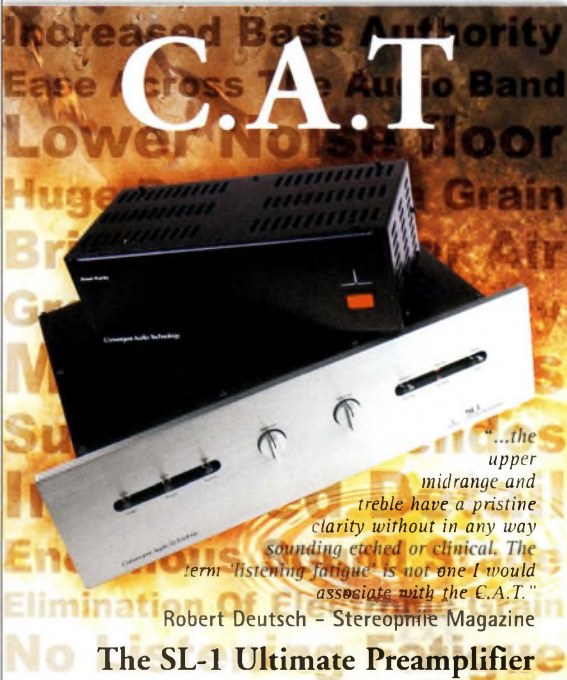
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No

...the upper midrange and treble have a pristine clarity without in any way sounding etched or clinical. The term "listening fatigue" is not one I would associate with the C.A.T."

Robert Deutsch - Stereophile Magazine

The SL-1 Ultimate Preamplifier



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Building the Beast

Modern times at Cyrus

Cyrus products have always had a slightly ambiguous relationship with their parent company, Mission. Whilst the speaker brand has competed aggressively in the most crowded of hi-fi market places, supported by substantial marketing efforts and a huge and constantly changing range of product, each seemingly with more to offer than its predecessor, the electronics brand has ploughed a separate and entirely different furrow. Whereas the Mission speakers, which could reasonably be described as all box and drivers (often giving an impression of 'the more the merrier'), have become firm budget favourites, the Cyrus products adopted a compact, minimalist, and all together more serious approach, aimed firmly at the audiophile listener. The problem is that the disparity in marketing budget combined with advertising hyperbole and Mission's occasional forays into the higher price levels has blurred the distinction. Until now.

Recent events at Verity group might have further marginalised the Cyrus brand. After all, they recently acquired Quad, Wharfdale and Roksan, just to further confuse matters. In fact, this was part of a strategy to turn those failing companies around and revitalise them through the



application of centralised design and purchasing, all co-ordinated through the auspices of a single entity, V Labs. At the same time, Verity itself was overtaken by the potential of its investment in the NXT flat panel speaker technology. Renamed NXT group, it has sold on Quad, Roksan, Wharfdale, and surprisingly, Mission loudspeakers as well, leaving Cyrus all on its own, satellite to a 500 million pound parent. Meanwhile, many of its senior managers have been added to the NXT team, along with much of the design expertise that went to make up V Labs. What remains is a new management team and the audiophile element of V Labs, keen to stamp their personality on a new range of products. The first fruits of their labours are the Q24/96 upgrade for the DAD3 CD player, and of course, the Cyrus 7 amplifier.

What makes the 7 so fascinating

is the way in which it represents the product of both a new design team and a maturing technology. History has turned full circle. The story really began something over fifteen years ago with a compact and costly shoe box of an amplifier, the Mission 778 which in turn begat the Cyrus 1 and 2 (the decision was taken early to separate the speaker

and electronics brands). Since then, the amplifiers have evolved into a complete range of modular electronics, and the production techniques have developed too, to such an extent that the Cyrus products represent a model example of what goes into a range of modern hi-fi. Let's take a closer look.

The production facility itself is surprisingly small, reflecting the fact that it relies on external contractors to supply the boards and sub-assemblies that are combined to create each product. This really means the circuit boards. The number of companies that wind their own transformers or produce their own metalwork are very few and far between. There are arguments both ways when it comes to stuffing boards. Doing it in-house gives you tighter control over the process itself. On the other hand, as Cyrus are quick to point out, the





modular approach to construction (as well as system building) is critical to the cost effectiveness of the process. With a tooling cost of around £200,000, it would be impossible to justify such an expensive component for each model. By making the component universal it makes the approach viable, bringing the benefits of mechanical integrity, feel, fit and finish to the whole range. You only have to look at other ranges to see manufacturers adopting a similar modular approach to their more conventional casework. What sets the Cyrus apart is the dramatic nature of the casting itself, and the way it acts as a monocoque onto which all the other parts bolt, rather like a car.

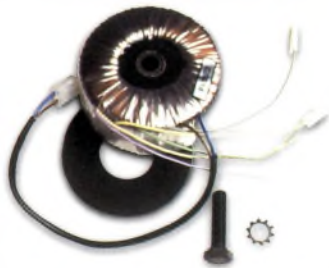


▶ benefit of using external contractors means that you can gain the benefits of technological advances without having to face (and amortise) the investment costs, which makes considerable sense when you are

The first stage of the production process is the inspection and construction of the sub-assemblies. In the case of the 7 that's the front panel with its buttons, volume control and the micro-

processor to carry out their commands, and the rear panel with all the appropriate labelling. These are then combined with the unit's casework and toroidal transformer, which bolts directly to the casting, separated by a circular neoprene pad. Next comes the main PCB which arrived at the inspection station as a single board along with the front panel control circuit. Those are separated, and the main board is then checked to ensure that the surface mount components are properly placed, of the correct type, and come from the correct manufacturer. This is then passed to the assembly line where it is married up with the chassis and transformer. The final stage of assembly is to power the unit up and set the various standard voltage values within the circuit.

Each unit is accompanied by a card which lists the jobs that need to be carried out, so that they can be ticked off. Each stage in the



dealing with a relatively small volume, specialist product. The down-side is that you need to be right on top of your inspection and quality control procedures, which is a time consuming business. As with most things hi-fi, the bottom line is that it's not what you do but the way that you do it that counts. Both approaches can work, as long as you do them right.

The real heart of the Cyrus range isn't so much worn on its sleeve, but is the sleeve itself. Each and every product is built into the same pressure die-cast chassis, a common moulding which carries all the fixing, heat-sinking and locating hardware for the transformers, boards and front and rear panels that make up each individual model in the range. This



process also checks the stages before. Also carried on the card is the identity of the software used in the amp, the PCB batch number and the week in which the unit was produced, so that any batch or component problems that emerge can be traced right through to



▶

▶ individual units. These cards are retained after the products leave the factory, acting as a permanent production record.

Once a unit has been fully assembled (all but its base plate), it is ready for testing. This involves a menu driven, computer regulated process which uses a single multi-way 'brick' to connect the entire range of inputs and outputs to the purpose built test station. The computer is then able to cycle through all the amplifier's various functions, diagnosing any problems that might emerge. Obviously, there's a separate 'brick' and test programme for each different product. Units that fail to meet spec are examined on the line by test engineers to further ensure that the problems are isolated rather than contagious. Having passed muster, a unit finally gets its base plate, complete with adjustable rear feet for levelling, and goes off to soak test.

Cyrus go to great lengths to ensure that the products that they produce are as consistent as they can make them.



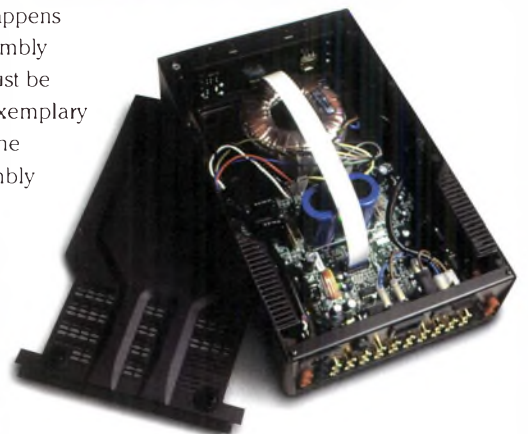
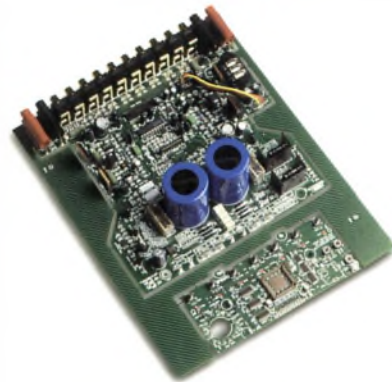
Contractors wishing to change the specification of any component must submit test examples for exhaustive listening before any modifications are passed to the line. Likewise, carefully regulated listening tests are carried out on random samples to ensure that they



really do sound the same. After all, what is the purpose of spending months on the final voicing of your products if the ones that people buy don't sound the way they should.

As I mentioned to you with, the Cyrus products are just a highly detailed

example of what happens on most hi-fi assembly lines. But what must be mentioned is the exemplary care that goes into the inspection and assembly of each component part. Looking at rejected casework it's often impossible to detect the offending blemish. In fact, the paintwork is so carefully applied that it looks almost like a plastic finish. Until you



pick it up!

Back at the main office we were treated to another surprise. A limited run of CD, amp and tuner systems in a silver finish. Strictly a one off the 300 sets will go for export, and they look really special. Whilst they don't herald a weakening of the Henry Ford approach to aesthetic diversity, they do signal a series of new Projects which will use the silver finish. First up will be a modular CD player/amp with room for a tuner module as well.

For the main range, expect a new digital pre-amplifier and surround processor, and also a stand mounted speaker project which embodies that distinctly different Cyrus touch. New management and the technological and financial backing of a massive parent make these exciting times for Cyrus. The poor relation is about to spread its wings.





CYRUS

Green power indicator light

Power button

MUTE PHONES

Small circular button

CD

TU

AV

AU1

AU2

TP1

TP2

Large volume knob with green indicator light

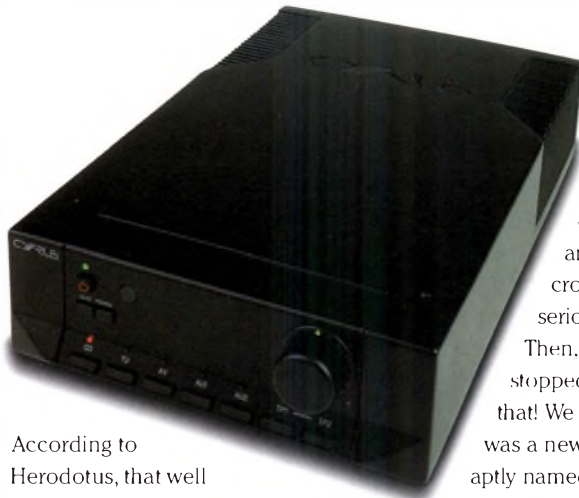
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CYRUS

Fully regulated intelligent power supply

The Cyrus 7 Amplifier

by Pete Christie



According to Herodotus, that well known hi-fi aficionado and "Father of History", somewhere between 590 and 530 BC, a bloke called Cyrus the Great (Kurush in the original Persian) founded the Persian Empire, subdued the Greek cities of Asia Minor, conquered the Babylonians, the Lydians and a bunch called the Medes, died in battle and thus passed into ancient history.

Somewhere between then and now, a Huntingdonshire electronics company called Mission introduced me to a novel little amplifier, which they called the Cyrus 1, a budget amp retailing at a mere £250.00 that proved very popular with the punters. The imaginatively named Cyrus 2 swiftly followed, a better sounding big brother with more power and a novel up-grade path: the now legendary PSX add-on DC power supply. Being the same physical proportions as the Cyrus 2, these two items placed side by side would take up the same amount of space as a normal, full-size lump of hi-fi amplifier, and would set you back approximately £380.00 plus £275.00.

They would also provide you with jolly good sound. The original budget Cyrus amplifier had now crossed into the realms of serious hi-fi.

Then, in 1993, Mission stopped making it. Just like that! We were told that there was a new model on its way, aptly named (yes, you guessed it) the Cyrus 3. After a year or so, it finally arrived. By now it was February 3rd 1994, and we were presented with a far more sophisticated-looking, £500 successor. Gone was the horizontal rear panel, which though easy to get at, was always a dust-trap and eventually led to 'crackly' connection problems. Gone was the early matt grey paint-job, and the later black finish, replaced by a glossy gunmetal colour.

The diminutive size remained, and the philosophy of system components was extended, with a product range based on the Cyrus 3 casework, which would include a CD player, Tuner, Power Amplifier, and the now improved PSX-R power supply, which could be bolted on to just about everything else except the tuner.

And so it continued, growing and improving and getting more expensive, with things like the AV Master home cinema processor, various add-on bits to the CD player (like the Q-DAC),

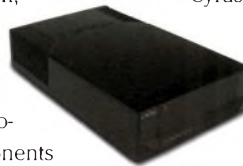
monobloc power amps, pre-amps etc., etc. And all the time, the Cyrus 3 (latterly the Cyrus 3i) was the foundation stone for a complete sonic building. This philosophy was furthered with the "system remote control" facility. This allowed you to connect any amount of Cyrus bits together (not unlike a lot of musical "Lego" bricks) and control the whole shooting match with one, sensible remote control, imaginatively named 'The Commander'.

Now we have the Cyrus 7. So what happened to the Cyrus 4, 5, and 6 then? Well, I can tell you that there will shortly be a Cyrus 5 Amplifier - a budget version of the 7. But as far as the Cyrus 4 or 6 are concerned, your guess is as good as mine.

The Cyrus 7 looks just like a Cyrus 3 (or 3i), or any other bit of Cyrus kit. It's the same size and shape, and the same almost black colour. The front panel is only marginally different - it just says 7 instead of 3.

I suppose that begs the question, is it 4 better?

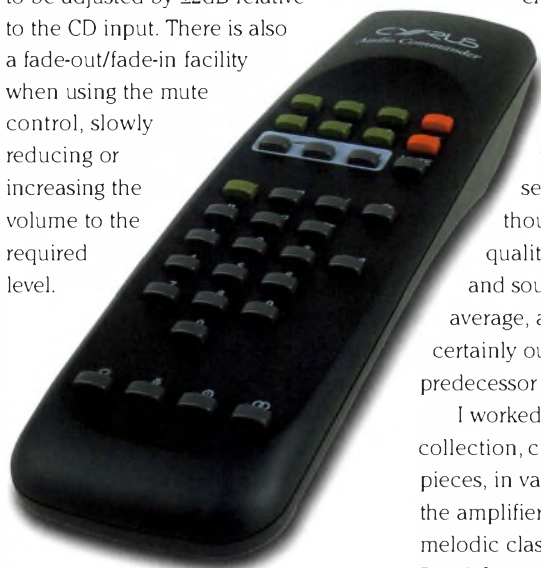
To answer that, I need to take a look at its predecessor. The Cyrus 3i was a pretty good amplifier. It was certainly small, neat and stylish, and whilst never setting my personal audio taste buds a-quiver, it was honest enough to satisfy a lot of people's audio requirements. On its own it did the job fairly well, but only really took off when a PSX-R power supply was added. In fact, everyone who tried



▶ the PSX-R on a “try it at home” basis, bought one. I must be honest; I was intrigued to see if the 60 Watts per channel Cyrus 7 came from the same mould.

Cyrus assured me that the unit supplied to me was fully run-in, so I took it home, plugged it into my system, and let it play to itself for a week (just to be sure). I used my trusty Trichord Genesis CD and a Nordost Solar Wind interconnect, and I connected my Rogers LS3/5a's with their usual van den Hul CS122. I also plugged in my Quad FM4 Tuner using a Chord Company Chameleon interconnect.

Cyrus have added a few interesting touches to the 7. It is a fairly common niggle that components within a system can have varying output levels. My Quad FM4 for example, is a lot quieter than my CD player. Therefore I have to remember to adjust the volume control of the amplifier when switching sources to compensate for this small, but annoying ‘miss-match’. Not too much of a problem switching to the tuner; more of one when you switch back to the CD player. The Cyrus 7 has a neat function entitled Programmable Input Sensitivity, which enables the sensitivity of all the inputs to be adjusted by $\pm 2\text{dB}$ relative to the CD input. There is also a fade-out/fade-in facility when using the mute control, slowly reducing or increasing the volume to the required level.



Having cursed previous generations of Cyrus equipment for the consummate skill with which their feet refused to stay stuck in place, this new amp has not only (so far) kept its feet securely adhered to its bottom, but better still, the back pair are adjustable, enabling some degree of levelling! This is important if they expect you to stack up a whole system of identical boxes, side by side.

To review any Cyrus product in isolation is only doing half a job. It should be remembered that it is designed as part of a Cyrus System. I have therefore split the review into two parts - the Cyrus 7 alone, and also with the PSX-R Power Supply. Listening was within the context of my own system components at home. (I hear rumours that this review is only examining the most basic elements in the system. The full monte comes later.)

I began with one of my favourite Annie Lennox albums - *Medusa* (RCA 74321331632), and the song ‘Thin Line Between Love and Hate’. This is a superbly crafted rendition of an all-time classic - a song that accurately portrays the timeless inevitability of sweet revenge. The craft of Steve Lipson's production is such that the menace builds and builds to a truly splendid climax. The Cyrus handled everything fairly well, giving an honest, workman-like performance. The crucial underlying bass line seemed perhaps a tad polite, though it didn't lack tonal quality or texture. Separation and soundstage were above average, and the Cyrus 7 was certainly out-performing its predecessor in these areas.

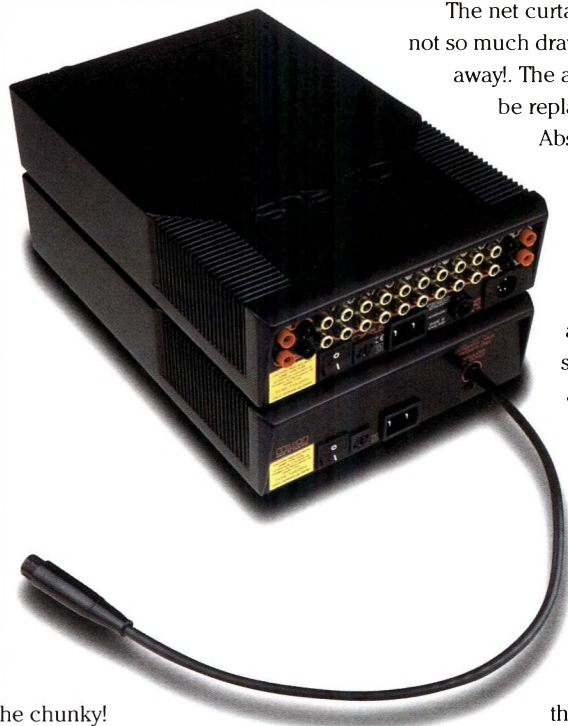
I worked my way through my CD collection, choosing several awkward pieces, in varying styles to really test the amplifier to the full. On simple, melodic classical pieces such as the Ravel *String Quartet in F major*

(Emerson String Quartet DG445 509-2), I found the counter-melodies of the first and second violins and depth of feeling provided by the cello almost totally convincing - almost. The sharp, spiky, and definitely boozy ‘El Salon Mexico’ from Copland (*Fanfare*, Decca 448 261-2, Detroit Symphony Orchestra/Antal Dorati), was delivered with suitable atmosphere, and I found myself rather enjoying the impressive dynamics and speed of the amplifier. The overall musicality was more than proved on Vaughan Williams' *Fantasia On A Theme By Thomas Tallis* (Academy of St. Martins in the Fields/Marriner, Philips 442 427-2), with swirling strings and haunting English lyricism.

In short, the Cyrus 7, is a significantly superior sonic tool to the Cyrus 3i. The design team has succeeded in bringing a novel and original model bang up to date, and should be very pleased with their handiwork. The overall build and sound quality is certainly well worth the £700.00 outlay, though I couldn't help feeling at times that the headroom was a bit restrained. There was an element of “niceness” about the sound which wasn't always appropriate. It felt as though there was a very fine net curtain across the sonic window, and the effect of this was to rob the music of immediacy and impact, softening the emotional content. As a result the amp didn't totally grab me and make me want to keep on listening. Plenty of definition and detail, and if transparency is your thing then look no further. But it comes at the expense of a lightish balance, and musical involvement and authority can suffer slightly as a result. You pay your money, you take your choice.

In use, a few operational niggles also emerged. I don't much care for the rear panel. To be blunt, it's full! In an area half the size of a conventional 17" wide amp, the 7 manages to have no less than two complete sets of loudspeaker outlets, ten pairs of ▶

▶ RCA phono sockets, a PSX-R connection socket, a headphone socket, a power inlet, a mains fuse holder, and a power on/off switch. If it was necessary to actually connect all this lot I could imagine it getting very cramped back there, especially if your choice of interconnects tends towards



the chunky!

And why go to the trouble of printing the identities of the phono inputs upside down, so as to enable easy identification from above, and then cover the whole lot with the rear end of the casing. This is a demonstrators' nightmare! OK, this may not be a problem to most owners, as they would only have to plug things in once or twice, so perhaps I'm being "picky". It's also the price you pay for the cute as a button size and shape of the amp, but it's definitely approaching saturation point. Why have they supplied two sets of loudspeaker outlets (BFA Sockets)? Perhaps a single pair on each side might have alleviated the congestion a bit! As it stands, the 7 is definitely more suited to the straight line music lover with two or three sources, rather than the home

entertainment complete-ist who is going to connect up everything including the Nintendo.

Then I added the PSX-R Power Supply

Ignore my sonic quibbles!

The net curtain I mentioned was not so much drawn back, as ripped away!. The acronym PSX-R should be replaced by Turbo-Charge!

Absolutely everything got a lot better, - and it wasn't bad before.

The whole sound thing received an almighty kick up the arse. The soundstage, separation, musicality and tonal atmosphere were enormously extended. And so was the sense of musical purpose.

Returning to Annie Lennox, the bass line lost all its politeness and now growled

threateningly, giving a

wonderful air of menace to the song. It got so threatening, that at one point, I seriously worried about the possibility that my poor old LS3/5a's wouldn't be able to cope. They did - just!

That depth of feeling provided by the cello in the Ravel string quartet was now very convincing. It shimmered and snarled with every nuance of the performance being allowed through the system. The Copland became far more real with the additional depth provided by this curious little box of tricks. As for the Vaughan Williams, the music swept around as if blown on the wind. Lovely!

This in a nutshell sums up the raison d'être of the Cyrus philosophy. You start with something good, then improve as and when you want, or as far as your budget will allow. £700.00

buys you a damn fine amplifier. It's small, superbly designed and built, and more than holds its head up with the competition. Add a PSX-R at a further £350.00, and you have just over a grands' worth of money very well spent. Even with the external supply it still sits in the open fast and detailed category, (as opposed to the 'warm and cuddly', or 'big and beefy') The sonic building is starting to take shape, and the options are there for easy upgrading of either amplification or source components.

And it's quite an upgrade path! It is possible to gang the 7 with a power amp, both with PSX-Rs (obviously)! Add to this a dAD3/Q24 CD Player (with PSX-R), hook the lot up to a suitable pair of loudspeakers and you may not have quite enough power to conquer Babylon, but you'll certainly subdue your neighbours and give the Greeks advance notice of your intentions. Now, if you go for a Cyrus aca7 pre-amp and a pair of the stonkingly powerful 150W per channel apa7 power amps, all I can say is: "Babylon beware!"



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Input Sensitivity (50W/8 Ohm)	200mV
Frequency Response (-3dB)	4Hz - 90kHz
Signal to Noise (A WTD)	102dBA
Power Outputs 8 Ohms	60W
THD + N (Pre-Amp) 1kHz	<0.002%
THD + N (1kHz, 2/3 power)	<0.003%
Dimensions (W x H x D)	215 x 75 x 365mm
Weight	4.6Kg (Cyrus 7)
Price	Cyrus 7 £700
	PSX-R £350

Manufacturer:

Cyrus Electronics

Tel. (44)(0)1480-451777

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Net. www.mission-cyrus.com

Wilson benesch

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Doug Brady Hi Fi

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JMLabs Mini Utopia

by Chris Thomas

Over the past year I have enjoyed some great listening courtesy of some superb speakers from Revell and Naim. I must admit though that, after these, the JMLabs Mini Utopia initially came as a bit of a shock. If you had asked me, after a few hours listening, if I could live with these speakers I would have said no. Now, some six weeks later, I would say yes – absolutely. So what has changed? The Revels are fast, lean, tight and somewhat cool. The Naim NBLs are also fast, musically very communicative and perform with controlled authority. As a result I have enjoyed some real edge-of-the-seat listening with great tension, drama and a lot of fun. Then along come these JMLabs speakers and suddenly the system sounds slower, far more laid back, looser, fatter and less dynamic. In truth, they were a bit boring. The major problem was that their own optional stands had received a mortal blow in transit and during the wait for replacements I had to find them suitable supports. And with only a handful of stands immediately to hand, it was perhaps not surprising that I initially got it so spectacularly wrong.

The beautifully built Mini-Utopia is the smallest of the range of four Utopia models from the French JMLabs. Founded in Saint-Etienne by Jacques Mahul in 1980, the company also design and build the Focal range of drivers and have, over recent years, become prominently involved with in-car systems, which alone account for 22% of the company's turnover. This is

one of the few loudspeaker producers around who manufacture the whole of the loudspeaker i.e. cabinet, drivers and crossover themselves. The advantages are obvious, and each of the Utopia models are built to satisfy different needs and pockets, and to drive anything from a small room right up to a very large one, courtesy of the Grand Utopia, a 5' 9", 409 LB monster of a loudspeaker.



Although the Mini-Utopia is stand-mounted it is not a particularly small speaker and uses two 6.5-inch bass/midrange drivers cleverly arranged in a bass reflex configuration. The whole of the Utopia range

incorporates Focal's patented "W" sandwich technology where the cone of the driver is fabricated from a laminate of two layers of fiberglass and a closed-cell rigid foam inner layer. For the Mini Utopia, each of these drive units is mounted in their own black lacquered box on a small and very rigid baffle either side of the central tweeter. In effect this gives the cabinet three separate sub-enclosures with the reflex porting for the bass/mid drivers elegantly achieved through slits either side of the isolated tweeter housing. The cabinets of the twin drivers are symmetrically arranged around the tweeter firing at an inward angle to create a point source. The tweeter itself is a 0.75-inch Ti-oxide inverted dome with a 2-inch Neodymium magnet, a version of which is used in the superb Wilson speakers. This too has its own enclosure and is mounted on a baffle of Tuari, which is a Brazilian hardwood. Only single wired connections are provided via some hefty WBT connectors while the sensitivity of the speakers is 91.5dB.

As with all serious loudspeakers, resonance control has clearly been a priority, and not only is each individual enclosure heavily braced and damped internally, but the Anigre-veneered side panels add mass and hence additional damping to the structure. Unusually, the Utopia range all come with curved clip-in covers, again beautifully made from Tuari hardwood, that cover the

► entire front of the speaker when not in use. I was undecided whether I found these très chic or très naff, but after getting into fitting them when the system was dormant I decided I do like the look of them. They certainly offer the expensive drive units excellent protection from a child's prodding finger or an inquisitive pet's paw. I decided they were très Gallic.

But back to that first couple of days and the subtext of this review, which became the search for the right stand. The optional Utopia stands are a black lacquer and wood pedestal type, with large top and bottom plates. They are spiked and have metal mounting indents for the speaker's bottom

facing removable spikes. I had some pedestal stands to hand but the top plate was not big enough to accommodate the larger than normal base of the speaker. I managed a good level of stability nevertheless. The results though were disappointingly soggy. The Mini Utopias have really excellent bass extension for their size, but it was loose and unfocused, and though there seemed to be a lot happening in the mid-band it was all rather confused. The top end however gave me real cause for optimism. It was amazingly open, enormously textural and totally, and I mean totally, free from any hardness. It was time to try a stand from the opposite end of the spectrum. The stand that Target produce for the Wilson Cub is a murderously heavy and solid thing indeed, and when filled with sand it takes two able-bodied men to manoeuvre it into position. Now the top plate was of adequate size and the overall stability of the speaker was



rock-like, but it only took a very small amount of listening to realise that this was one of the very worst matches of stand and speaker I have ever heard. The bass was now ridiculously compressed, all the extension had gone and the midrange began doing extremely odd things, the most alarming being the transformation of a

tight horn section into a herd of Kazoo. Freaky stuff indeed, but purely an incompatibility problem and no reflection on the Target stands, which do a fine job with the Cubs. The grapevine suggested that a low-mass open framed design was required and while discussing this with

Roy Gregory his encyclopaedic memory recalled a stand he had seen at a

recent Hi-Fi show. Acoustic Solutions were contacted and I managed to borrow a pair (thanks Gregory). These are low mass and skeletal, being made from small diameter tubing with square section bracing and outrigger feet, and are usually to be found supporting AS's own speaker, the much smaller Eight. They have no top plate just 4 small carbon tips to mount the speaker upon.

Sitting atop these the Mini Utopia suddenly found its voice. My previous criticisms were mostly blown away in an instant. If I had been blindfolded I would have sworn that I was listening to a different speaker. Now there was real verve, speed and depth to the sound. The bass was now much more pitch coherent, flowing and understandable. And there was of course, that tweeter. If you have ever heard a speaker with the tweeter disconnected you will know how radical its contribution is. The tweeter's performance in fact defines the quality of the speaker, and this Focal unit is absolutely out of the top drawer. Its performance is so refined that it can

seem slightly soft initially, but I believe this is down to its complete transparency and total lack of compressive effects. It never bites unless told to and this, together with its textural and tonal richness, gives the Mini Utopias a real feeling of class. Steve Khan is an interestingly unconventional guitar player who takes an oblique view of melody and chord structure. He plays thoughtful and somewhat unexpected guitar lines, chopping them with short chord variations, all with his own chiming, flanged sound. On *Headline* (Polydor 517-690-2) he fronts a three-piece band with the occasional percussionist.

I have always felt that a guitar, bass and drum line-up has a real purity to it. With only one real chordal instrument there is acres of space, and that means that there is plenty of room for the musician's imaginations to wander. The price is that it also leaves no place to hide. Khan has always used drummers who are exceptional cymbal players to drive and add salt or sherbet to his music, and on this disc the JMLabs were in their element. The tonal variations and subtle shadings all around the top of the drum kit, the lazy shifts of rhythmic emphasis and the essential understanding that you can feel between the musicians, it's all opened up by that tweeter as it draws a finely etched musical picture for you. Small ensemble playing is all about musical relationships and their recording should be sympathetic to this. The JMLabs spread a soundstage, as broad as it is tall, right across the room, and seem to hang the instruments in mid-air, several feet either side or behind the speakers. There is very little projection forward of the speakers and into the room. Instead the presentation is a little recessed, throughout the dynamic range, though there is lots of ambient space between the instruments and a vivid sense of life and dynamics to the playing.

By the time the repaired

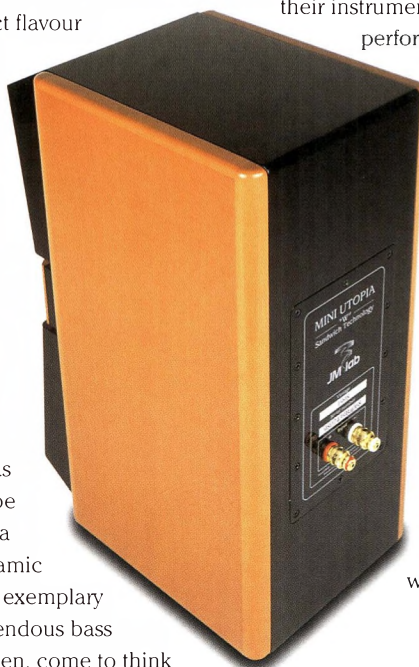
► dedicated supports had arrived I had got the speaker sounding quite superb on the Acoustic Solutions stands and, in doing so, learnt a few things about them. Magnifique though the tweeter is, the Mini Utopia does have a tendency to beam high frequencies and this means that the presentation does not fully knit unless you are sitting squarely between them. That means that you've got to pay minute attention to its toe-in. They like to be as far away from walls as possible and even then there is undoubtedly a touch of looseness and a hint of boxiness in the lower bass. The A.S stands do not offer quite the same level of low-end extension or articulation as the JMLabs models though they are, to my ears, certainly better in other respects. They open the speakers up somewhat, giving them greater freedom and a midband full of fine detail and dynamism that brings life and colour to pianos, brass, horns and strings, plus a generally improved sense of rhythmic vitality and movement. They also image quite, quite differently, and I think this may be due to their small physical profile which does not form a secondary baffle under the loudspeaker and avoids the confusing reflections that a more massive stand produces. In comparison the JMLabs pedestals offer a fine all round balance and perhaps look better with their matching finish, but I prefer the musical abilities of the A.S models.

I have heard speakers that do individual things better than the Mini Utopias and many that seem more technically accomplished. But music is about emotion and I have heard very few that are as engaging and rewarding to listen to for such long periods. Their generally laid-back portrayals of recordings, superb overall resolution and those small musical insights they offer are seductive and have been drawing me back to the system day after day. They need great care when it comes to matching equipment though,

as their distinct flavour carries certain requirements (as does all equipment with real potential). I would avoid using them with amplification or a source that could be described as over-smooth, as they seem to be crying out for a powerful, dynamic amplifier with exemplary grip and tremendous bass control. But then, come to think of it, what doesn't? I used them with both Naim and Spectral amplification, with my Naim CDS 11 as a source and was very happy with the results from both. I still have reservations about their lower bass performance, especially when they are being driven at high levels, as it can drag and smear the tempo somewhat. Personally I would trade that last ounce of extension for an extra degree of tautness, but I am sure that things are not that simple. I must also concede that there may well be a speaker stand out there that cures this completely. But, in particular, I have been really drawn by their tonality, which I know is not a particularly fashionable area of concern these days. I want to be able to hear the resonance of the wood of a fine violin in the hands of a great player, or the metallic sheen and pure warmth of a quality cymbal. I love it when the plectrum or finger technique of a great acoustic guitarist is used expressively to voice and shape a note from metal vibrating against superb quality tonewoods.

In guitar playing circles I am known as a tone-freak but for me, it is feeling this "contact" with the musicians and

their instruments that elevates the performance of a system bringing it so much nearer to reality. I like the Mini-Utopia. In fact I like them a lot, and at \$4000 excluding stands I think that they will find many admirers. I also like the way they work with the Acoustic Solutions stands though I do not claim that this is their definitive support. Dealer recommendations would be invaluable. ➤



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

JMLABS MINI UTOPIA.

Impedance (nominal)	8ohms
Sensitivity	91.5dB
Size (HxWxD)	600x485x670mm
Weight	27Kg
Finishes	centre- black lacquer sides- natural Anigre veneer tweeter baffle- solid Tuari See dealer for alternatives

Prices:

Speaker	£4000
Stands	£500

Distributor

Sound Image U.K Ltd,
Tel. 0181 255 6868
Fax 0181 2556869

Manufacturer

JMLab Focal Group
Net. www.jmlab.focal.tm.fr

Acoustic Solutions

8 Stands £189
Tel. (44)(0)1245-600567
Fax. (44)(0)1245-600568
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Clearlight Audio Recovery Turntable

by Roy Gregory

As digital, after ten years in the driving seat, finally comes of age (or at last begins to perform to acceptable standards), it would be reasonable to assume that turntable design would have atrophied, or at least stagnated. It is after all a mature technology that is well past its peak application. But the death of analogue innovation is a long way off yet, and whilst the shrinking market has led to smaller and smaller production totals, the challenge of improving digital performance has simply provided a spur to those who still believe. There is no shortage of new and innovative turntable designs (as well as a few resurrections!) as we shall see in the next issue. Meanwhile, and by way of an introduction, let's jump the gun with Clearlight's Recovery.

The basic problem facing every turntable designer is easily understood. It is at once conceptually simple and mechanically complex. One wag once summed it up perfectly; all a record player has to do is be quiet and turn at the right speed. This bald statement of fact, so simple on the surface, both reveals and hides the central conundrum. The pick-up, be it moving-magnet, moving coil or a porcupine quill connected to an exponentially sensitive measurer of vibration. To turn the record at a constant speed the designer needs close coupling between the motor and platter. But at

the same time he (or she) needs to isolate the record/stylus interface from extraneous vibration - just like the ones you get from an electric motor. Or the outside world. Or any two bits of metal moving relative to each other. Or a stylus tracking a record groove. It's hard to credit the number of ways in which designers have sought to balance the conflicting requirements of speed stability and the isolation of the stylus from internal and external interference. And those are only the relatively successful attempts that



actually saw the light of day. Just think of all those design studies and unfinished DIY projects lurking in sheds across the developed world.

Not surprisingly, a couple of approaches have pulled ahead of the field. On the one hand there are those who rely on mass and rigidity to provide the necessary coupling/de-coupling. On the other are the lightweight, suspended off-spring of the classic Acoustic Research design. Then of course there's the various hybrids strung in between. At a quick

glance you could be forgiven for placing the Recovery firmly in the latter group: suspended, a/c synchronous motor and belt drive. But that would be to overlook the considerable structural innovation concealed beneath that severe, Teutonic exterior. For this is a Clearlight product, and that means RDC. For all those who arrived late, now would be a really good time to look at the various RDC reviews in Issues 2 and 3, but the short version is that RDC, or Resonance Damping Compound, is a complex epoxy based material that can be used to control the path of mechanical energy, and hence the emergence of structural resonance. The magic material crops up all over the Recovery.

Let's start with the split plinth. Each section comprises two MDF boards, each of which has a spiral groove cut into its face, and filled with RDC. This eliminates parallel surfaces within the boards, breaking up the critical resonance caused by panel flexure. The two 'spiralled' boards are then bonded face to face, so that the spirals turn in opposite directions, the glue providing the damping in a constrained layer sandwich (exactly like the top board of the RDC rack reviewed in Issue 4, and a configuration which is becoming more and more common in a hi-fi context, especially loudspeaker



► cabinets). Thus, each piece of the plinth is designed to absorb and dissipate energy without developing a single fundamental resonance. The two sections are separated from each other by fifteen small Sorbothane pads. The base supports the motor on a substantial RDC mounting designed to channel vibration down into the plinth rather than along the belt, the top plate (or sub-chassis) supports the bearing, platter and tonearm. The whole lot sits on three adjustable feet made of, you guessed it, RDC.

The next most obvious element of the whole is the massive platter. 60mm deep and 340mm in diameter, it extends some 20mm beyond each side of the record, the bevelled edges allowing you to retrieve your discs without any difficulty. The platter itself is machined from acrylic, and contains two concentric rings of RDC. The profile, with the bulk of the material at the periphery is designed to prevent ringing, and mates extremely closely to the substantial aluminium sub-platter, the underside of which is also machined out and loaded with RDC. The top surface of the platter is rebated to accept the grey mat, which is actually compressed cork, mirroring the random structure of the RDC. The mass of the platter is centred in the same plane as the top of the bearing, in order to minimise teeter.

The bearing itself is most unusual. Eschewing fashion, it is a standing rather than an inverted design. The well is sunk in a block of RDC and has two cuts placed perpendicular to the belt. These extend to about a third of the shaft depth and I suspect that they are intended to prevent the bearing acting as a Helmholtz resonator. After all, a cracked glass won't ring. The shaft is hollow, and again stuffed with RDC. It runs on a ceramic ball, lubricated by Garrard's specially developed low temperature oil. The entire dynamic assembly is

designed to revolve, rather like a gyroscope, sitting on the ball and only occasionally brushing the sides of the sleeve, which are themselves slightly sprung by the slots. Sound improbable? Think of holding a spinning bicycle wheel by one of its wheel nuts, and how stable it is. The 'record weight' is the last part of the equation. Despite appearances, the circular block of RDC is designed to further damp the bearing, not the record at all.



Not surprisingly, the armboard is also RDC, designed to provide a resonance free exit path for energy, out of the tonearm and into the chassis. Currently available in SME and Graham cuts, a Rega board (possibly incorporating VTA adjustment) is on the way, but the two tier construction and ease with which RDC can be machined means that it should be possible, in theory at least, to accommodate almost any arm. The final thing about the Recovery is its completeness. Both the lid and external power supply are included in the price, so there are no expensive 'options' to consider.

The Clearlight's design brief is an oldy but a goody; nothing added, nothing taken away. This is not a turntable that attempts to enhance or manipulate the signal in search of 'musical' performance, in the style of the LP12, or to a lesser extent the VPI

TNT. As such it provides an interesting sonic contrast to the resident ClearAudio Reference. There's also a pretty sharp contrast in design approach between the suck it and see rigidity of the Reference and the theoretically rigorous Recovery. And whilst I'm not equipped to challenge Clearlight's theoretical explanation, it does seem to equate remarkably closely to what I hear. Take the 'stabilised' main bearing as an example. The Recovery is unusually susceptible to levelling. Slight variation from absolute level can be

immediately heard as compression of both the dynamic range and tonal palette. The music takes on a greyish character and loses its vitality. All of which is entirely consistent with increased contact between the bearing shaft and the jaws of the sleeve, and hence, increased levels of mechanical vibration.

In practise, the Recovery is a model of neutrality, a term so debased by its application to products with a subtractive (as opposed to additive) nature that I hesitate to use it. Unfortunately, too many of those designs succeeded in subtracting the life and purpose from the music, leaving it thin and emasculated, much admired (in certain quarters), but ultimately little loved. The Recovery neither removes the music's sense of purpose, nor smears and redistributes its essential energy. What is there is what you get, which means it makes the most of what ever music you choose to play. In this sense it has the same rejuvenating capabilities as The Groove phono stage (Issue 4), bringing record after record up all engaging and new. In this regard it belongs in an elite group alongside The Groove and the ClearAudio Reference. But whilst the latter wears its clarity and dynamics very much on its sleeve, the Recovery is a more understated and less flashy performer. Its performance is

▶ based on dynamic and rhythmic coherence combined with low level resolution that allows for both the music's harmonic development, and its inherent vibrance. The detail and clarity are there, unimpeded by unwanted and unsightly added weight, they just don't leap out at you. Instead they remain an integral part of the coherent whole.

These unforced dynamics and rhythmic integrity are the hallmarks of RDC products. They bring with them a natural



sense of pace that allows music to breath. Take 'Wholly humble Heart' from the Martin Stephenson album *Gladsome Humour and Blue* (Kitchenware KWLP 8). With its heavy, thudding bass and staccato instrumentation, any kind of excess baggage down below slows progress to a trudge, as well as robbing the music of vital dynamic impact. The Recovery allows the music to pulse, giving the choppy guitars an insistent quality that highlights the superb vocal phrasing. Yes you can hear the studio effects, selectively applied for texture. And yes the opening drum flurry will have you diving for cover if you're not expecting it. But the quality of the performance, and the quality of the song is what really comes across. With the Recovery the music always comes first.

There is absolutely no shortage of bass weight where appropriate. Both the bass alone, and the ensemble crescendos in the Dvorak *C Major String Quintet* (AAA Edition Phoenix

EPH 02) will serve as salutary reminders of just how efficiently a musical instrument turns effort into musical energy. In comparison to the ClearAudio Reference/TQI combination, the Recovery is the rhythmically more expressive performer, losing out in terms of absolute air and transparency. But this is mainly down to the tonearm selected. The SME 309 supplied on the deck cannot match the TQI in these regards. Changing to the Graham 2.0 narrows the gap significantly, bringing with it (at a price) increased midrange delicacy and a lighter touch with more texture in the bass, as well as greater top end extension. In other words, the turntable is the next best thing to sonically invisible, simply reflecting the character of the accompanying tonearm.

(Incidentally, Clearlight also supplied a replacement RDC head shell for the 309 which is designed to help mechanical interfacing with metal bodied cartridges or less than optimum armboards. I will report separately.)

Used on the RDC rack, whose top plate it matches exactly, the Recovery really will sound like your tonearm of choice. But more than that, it also has the uncanny knack of getting the last drop of performance out of its partnering pieces. The SME 309 still shows its characteristically heavy bass, and taught, controlled mid-band, but the Recovery extracts more life from this arm than any other turntable I've tried. Its performance is totally unlike the dark, brooding results that you get from a VPI, or to a lesser extent, the Michell turntables. Likewise it brings out the open balance and tactile bass of the Graham, without making the listener suffer the clinical quality that can afflict this arm.

The Recovery acts as a package, maximising the performance of a tonearm whilst minimising the interface

problems. Its stability makes it a perfect partner for uni-pivot or parallel tracking designs, and the straight-in cable connection not only makes dressing a thing of the past, but encourages the owner to employ a decent bit of wire. The whole turntable is a model of fuss-free practicality, a fact welcomed by Victoria who remains phobic about the TQI tonearm.

The Recovery is a beautifully balanced and self contained whole. I can't wait to try it with the immensely musical Incognito/Rega RB300, whilst its partnership with The Groove remains a tantalising prospect, held in abeyance until supply catches up with the editorial demand. In the meantime, it stands as a daunting benchmark for next Issue's group of record players. All the turntable I need? I rather think it is.



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Drive Type	Thorens Belt
Speed Adjustment	Electronic, 33 and 45 RPM Dealer Adjustable
Dimensions (WxHxD)	540 x 180 x 450mm
Finish	Piano Black
Lid	Yes - Lift Off
Price	£3345-00

Distributor:

Loricraft Audio
Tel/Fax: (44)(0)1488-72267
Works Tel: (44)(0)1488-71307

Manufacturer:

Clearlight Audio
Vertrieb GmbH
Tullastrasse 35
D77652 Offenburg
Germany
Tel: (49)(0)781-970-9991
Fax: (49)(0)781-970-9993



WOODHEADED STUDIO
MERIDIAN 506
24-bit CD Player

MERIDIAN 506

Open

Display

Off

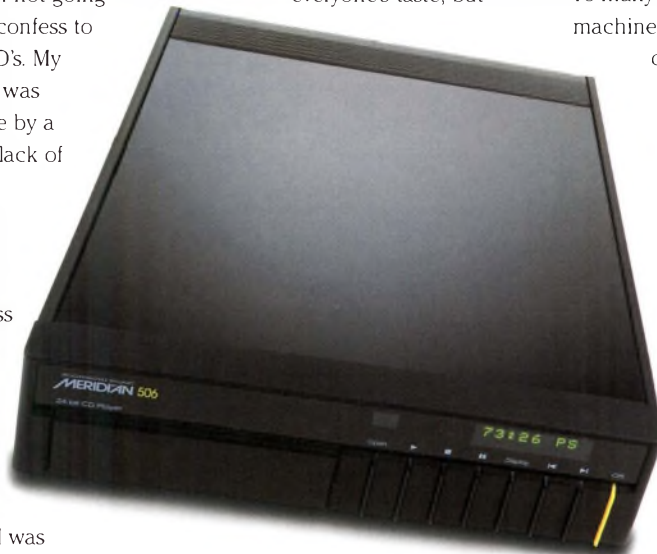
Meridian 506/24 CD Player

by Chris Binns

Time is a funny thing. It's been sixteen years since compact disc was unleashed on the world and quickly established itself as the dominant medium for recorded music. Vinyl was pushed into territory occupied by specialist consumers, flat earth type hi-fi nuts and, in the eyes of the general public, plain weirdo's. I am not going to get nostalgic, but I will confess to being a late starter with CD's. My acquisition of a CD player was eventually forced upon me by a combination of the acute lack of new releases on vinyl and increasing pressure from visitors clutching bags full of clattering plastic boxes.

You can probably guess what's coming next... To me, CD technology in its infancy certainly did not live up to its promise of pure, perfect sound forever. Quite the opposite in fact. As far as I was concerned the sooner it died, the better. Things have greatly improved, but as a bystander (or more accurately someone who was unwilling to part with loads of cash for technology that didn't stand still for a minute) it was interesting to observe the changes that were occurring, and those innovators responsible for them. One such individual is Bob Stuart who is half of the Boothroyd Stuart team at the core of Meridian, a company which has never been far from the cutting edge. Boothroyd and Stuart were responsible for some ground breaking amplifier designs, in the form of the original Cambridge P40 and the Lecson range,

before coming up with the Meridian 100 series components over twenty years ago. All of these products had one thing in common; their innovative electronic design by Bob Stuart coupled with distinctive good looks courtesy of Allen Boothroyd. Lecson amplification may not have been to everyone's taste, but



in my opinion it has yet to be equalled in terms of functional elegance, although all Meridian equipment has an impressive sense of style. In a world full of bland and some-times ugly hi-fi equipment, it feels like a breath of fresh air.

The relevance of all of this is that Meridian were one of the first companies to look at compact disc technology from an audiophile viewpoint. They recognised that at that stage of its development the new format was not living up to its claims, a state of affairs they thought they could improve. In fact to my knowledge they were the first to take

this line. Shortly after the appearance of the Philips CD 101 player, Meridian announced their intentions to move things forward by using this machine as the foundation on which to build their own interpretation of what compact disc could achieve. This resulted in the production of the MCD. To many people this was the first machine to give an indication that this digital technology could really achieve true musicality. Needless to say a lot of these players were sold. The availability of an 'audiophile' CD player opened the floodgates. Overnight, analogue gurus became digital experts expounding dubious theories as to why compact disc didn't fully deliver in terms of musical satisfaction and how this could best be redressed. Suddenly we were surrounded by tweaked CD players, and even

companies that had so far condemned digital audio outright, began to bend to commercial pressure and clamber reluctantly onto the bandwagon.

But Boothroyd Stuart led the way. They used their belief in, and accumulated knowledge of, the digital process to produce not only a stream of successful CD players but also complete digital systems. If that's not nailing your colours to the mast I don't know what is. Something of an injustice in my view then, that their systems approach has been seen by some die-hard audiophiles to



► veer away from the specialist market. In other countries Meridian have a reputation akin to that of B&O. Well so what? Just because their hi-fi is good looking and they believe in the complete system approach doesn't mean that they are incapable of producing some seriously good stand-alone items, their 506 and 508 CD players being a good case in point.

Although the 506 has been in production for nearly six years, during that time it has been updated from 16 bits to 20 and now, in its latest incarnation, boasts 24bits. The more expensive 508 has been running at this standard for two years. (It is indicative of the pace of technological advancement that Meridian are now able to offer this in a machine of half the price.) The CD transport and laser mechanisms have also benefited from an update.

For those of you unfamiliar with Meridian CD players, the 506 is a beautifully constructed compact box continuing the Boothroyd / Stuart tradition of elegant visual design. All the main function switches, with the exception of mains power, are on the right of the front panel. Basic operations provided are play, pause, stop, track selection, display and standby. The display switch offers the usual timing modes plus a defeat function for the real purist. To the left of the main controls and the display above them, is the CD drawer which differs from that on most other front loading machines because the whole transport mechanism slides in and out. Meridian claim that this offers superior stability and along with a proprietary clamping arrangement it ensures greater mechanical integrity. In practice this leads to lower jitter and thus the error correction systems are engaged less frequently than normal, promising a more accurate data stream.

Tucked away to the rear of the unit is the mains on/off switch, its relative inaccessibility reflecting the fact that the machine is intended to be powered up at all times. Standby mode maintains power to essential circuitry when the player is not in use. A digital output is fitted alongside the analogue outputs, which are unbalanced, and there is a DIN socket for the communication buss which allows the 506 to command or be commanded when used in conjunction with other Meridian components.

The transport and laser mechanism are still of Philips origin, incorporating the latest three beam laser. Signal decoding is carried



out by a 24 bit dual differential delta sigma digital to analogue converter. This feeds the output stage comprised of discrete components in a class A configuration, as opposed to the more common op-amps.

Originally supplied with a very basic remote control, the 506 now comes with the table top MSR remote. This provides additional functions such as phase inversion, direct numerical track access and track search. As a full Meridian AV system can be controlled by this unit, only a few of the buttons are applicable to the CD player.

Two minor quirks of operation.

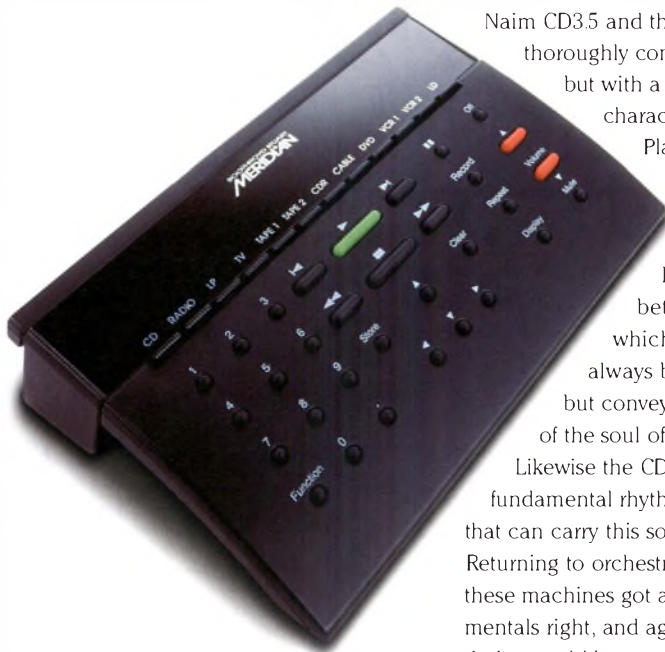
Unusually, the 506 does not read the disc when it is loaded but leaves this until you press play. This has the sometimes irritating side effect that it takes longer than normal for a disc to start. Something I find more annoying is that fast forwarding or reversing through a track mutes the output, so you only have the display to indicate where you are on the CD. This is a real pain with a 74 minute disc with just two tracks; finding a particular passage of music can be a tedious process. This trait is not peculiar to this model, as all Meridian CD players behave like this.

The brand new review sample was allowed to run in over a few days. As I have been using a 508.24 in my main listening system for some considerable time, substituting the 506 presented no cultural or technical problems. For the next two weeks it was used as my main source for CD and I avoided making comparisons with other machines during this period.

However, family resemblance is strong. The Meridian CD players have always exhibited a very friendly and welcoming sound.

Listener fatigue does not really seem to occur, which is a real attribute where CD reproduction is concerned.

During the time I spent with this machine I listened to many contrasting types of music. The Meridian certainly made all of them enjoyable, but the way in which it conveys music leads to a distinct preference in material. To characterise this, the 506 has a rather laid back approach to its musical delivery. It is notable for a very smooth top end which seems to tail off with no hint of glassiness or sibilance, and creates air around individual instruments and voices. Percussion, strings and, particularly female voices, benefit from this quality. The midrange has a similar character which helps with placement of instruments in the orchestra; there ►



Naim CD3.5 and the Helios 1, both thoroughly competent players but with a totally different character to the 506.

Playing Moloko on the Helios 1, the impact is frightening. It hits you straight between the eyes which might not always be comfortable but conveys far more of the soul of the music.

Likewise the CD3.5 has the sort of fundamental rhythmic capabilities that can carry this sort of music. Returning to orchestral music, both these machines got all the fundamentals right, and again the musical timing could be superior to the 506, but I feel that the performance is too 'in your face'. I find it difficult to listen to an orchestra which seems to be sitting on top of me.

Overall I feel this presents something of a dilemma. On the one hand the 506.24 excels at portraying more gentle music in a fashion that is both relaxing and rewarding, and I found listening to orchestral music a wholly seductive experience. On the other hand, when it came to playing music with a harder edge I missed the excitement of a player such as the Naim.

One thing that I have learnt whilst listening to many different machines is that quite often the advertised technical advantages, such as extra bits, do not necessarily improve the performance. Change it, yes; but not always for the better. My recollections of the older 506 are of a competent all round performer. The machine didn't draw attention to itself and, while it was not devastating in any particular area, just got on with the job of making music enjoyable. In doing this it proved superior to many of its competitors. Now that the 24 bit 506 is available it provides an interesting comparison.

Yes it is better in some areas, and in terms of resolution and depth of image leaves the earlier 506 way behind.

Yet I do feel that this refinement is at the expense of some of the rhythmic and dynamic qualities that seemed to give the original 506 more 'bounce'.

In conclusion I don't necessarily think that the 506.24 is a better machine than its predecessor. The balance of qualities that made the 506.20 so successful has been shifted. The 24 bit machine is capable of a euphoric performance, and being musically very satisfying, providing your musical taste is laid back. I expect a good, well balanced system to show little or no preference for musical material. In other words I want the maximum enjoyment from whatever I choose to play. Unfortunately, I found the Meridian was leading me to tailor my choices to suit its delivery. The 506.24 is fine machine but it is not impartial. This is something any prospective purchaser will need to bear in mind.



► is wonderful depth and even a hint of acoustic boundaries that many CD players seem to miss. It is at the bottom end of the frequency spectrum that this character is not quite so attractive. With orchestral music it is still used to good effect, and drama and tension in performances such as Martinu's *Piano Concerto No.2* is conveyed well. The darkness at the beginning of the third movement is chilling. Listening to the Bartok *Violin Sonatas* is wonderful on a machine like the 506. There are a lot of CD players where the sound can become strident and irritating as they focus too closely on the solo violin and give very little clue to the surrounding space.

Where the 506 falls down is in reproducing more rhythmic music. Drums and percussion can sometime lack bite and impact, and it is here that the laid back temperament can seem to lack energy, robbing some music of excitement. A good example of this is the Moloko album *I am not a doctor* which is almost entirely drum and bass – without the dynamic impetus it becomes almost meaningless.

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TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Mechanism	Three-beam laser
Conversion	Dual differential 24 bit delta sigma
Outputs Analogue:	2V fixed, class A
	Digital: co-axial, optical
Dimensions	88x321x32mm
Weight	6.4kg
Price	£1195-00

Manufacturer:

Meridian Audio Ltd
Stonehill
Huntingdon
Cambridgeshire
PE18-6ED
Tel. 0044(0)-1480-434334
Fax. 0044(0)-1480-43294£
Net. www.meridian-audio.com

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Basic Instinct.

The NHT Model 2.9 Loudspeaker

by Roy Gregory

There's two things that strike you as soon as you clap eyes on this loudspeaker; "That's an awful lot of speaker for the money" and "I've never seen a speaker which uses conventional drivers and looks quite like that". Which ever way you cut it, the NHT floor-standers are distinctly different, and whilst I'd hesitate to use the term 'odd', the ones that arrived for review are very narrow, very deep, very big and very black. In fact, they look more like standing stones from Salisbury Plain than Californian speakers, an impression enhanced by the amount of time we all spent grovelling at their feet.

Look a little further and you'll notice some superficial similarities to the new Naim NBL in the positioning of the sideways firing bass driver. In fact, the NHTs pre-date that speaker by some margin; their spiritual forebears are the AR9 and 90, or even the pioneering designs of Roy Allison. Their unusual shape is a direct result of form following function, and simply the most obvious incarnation of NHT's stated philosophy of giving their customers more music for their money. I know, a lot of people have made that claim, and in an industry which is becoming increasingly marketing lead it is easy to be cynical. However, in this case the claim actually holds some water. Like, for example, a genuine flagship model that lands the right side of £3K (-3dB at 23 Hz, pair matched to 0.3dB, each cabinet weighing 123lbs). I know that the numbers don't actually prove anything, but believe me,

I wouldn't be wasting my time if the performance wasn't there to match.

NHT (which stands for Now Here This) started out by re-examining loudspeaker construction from first principles on a cost/benefit basis. This "Back to Basics" philosophy means that each element had to justify its price on performance grounds. Is it more cost effective to invest money in designing drivers with engineered roll-offs, or spend it on fancy crossover components to combine off the shelf units without doing too much damage to the signal? You get the idea. And given that approach, the opportunity of getting something for nothing was just too good to ignore, which is how they arrived at their chosen bass loading, and the unusual shape of their speakers.

By placing the bass driver close to a wall, you double its acoustic output at low frequencies. Close to the floor, double it again. Add a third surface, like a very deep baffle and you can double it again. That's in a perfect world. In practise, the gains will depend on the precise positioning of the driver amongst other things. In reality, as far as this speaker, the one below the flagship Model 3.3, goes, the result is a -3dB point of 26Hz from a single, long-throw 10 inch bass driver per side. That's bass, especially from a speaker this size. You also get the far

from incidental advantage of a very closely defined (for which read predictable) coupling between the speaker's bass output and the room that it's driving. In other words, you are creating a design from which the customer has a better chance of actually realising the performance potential.

The downside to all this is the potential effect of early reflections

on the mid-range. To help combat this the 2.9 is a true four way speaker, with the front firing 6 1/2 inch unit extending down to 100Hz. You might even consider it as a three-way with a sub-woofer, in conceptual terms at least. All the drivers (actually supplied by SEAS and Tonagen) are designed by NHT and make full use of natural mechanical roll-offs to keep the cross-over as simple as possible. And whilst the dome tweeter

uses an Aluminium

diaphragm, the other drivers all use polypropylene cones, which further improves the overall coherence of the sound. And whilst the 2.9 can't match the precision of the 3.3, careful quality control keeps pair matching within 2dB, which is exceptional given the speaker's price and bandwidth.

Which finally brings us to that cabinet. The long side walls are



dictated by the bass loading, and so too is that baffle. In order to define the relationship between the bass driver and its boundaries, the speaker needs to be set perpendicular to the wall, thus no toe in. But by toeing the baffle in instead, NHT gain additional benefits. As well as better focus and room interaction, the traditional reasons to toe a speaker in, the angled baffle means that there is no parallel surface behind the drivers to reflect energy directly back at and through them. The long side panels also get the midrange drivers a good long way away from early reflections off the back wall. Side wall reflections at higher frequencies are further diminished by the foam strips on the baffles.

The cabinet itself is made from inch thick MDF, with careful bracing and sub enclosures. At 78lbs each, and with nothing to get hold of, this is one ornery speaker to move about. Finish is in high gloss laminate laminate which helps stiffen the panels, as well as being practical, attractive and cost effective.

Set-up is straight forward, albeit time consuming, as long as you follow the manufacturer's advice. The 2.9s should be placed about five inches from the back wall (more if it's stud), with the tweeters two thirds as far apart as you are from them. In other words, if you are nine feet from the baffles then place the tweeters six feet apart. The ratio is defined by the pre angled baffles, but once again it means you know where to start.

Then the religious experience starts - at least in terms of bowing and scraping. With this much bass on tap, tiny movements make a big difference. You have to shift the speakers back and forward about a centimetre at a time until you optimise bass balance and midrange clarity. And you need to



keep them both an identical distance from the back wall. This is tape measure time. Lateral movements, similarly small, will fine tune treble focus and midrange body. The narrow cabinets are fitted with out-riggers and cones to increase their stability. Don't even think about trying to set these up with the cones in place. When you are happy with the overall balance you can

install them, carefully levelling the speaker at the same time. From level, you may want to play with the fore and aft angle a little, as the ideal tweeter axis is

both narrow and critical. If you sit above it the treble becomes thin and a shade detached. Whilst all this might sound complicated, at least you know what you are aiming for. It just involves a bit of heaving and grovelling. Is it worth the trouble? Oh yes.

Efficiency of 87dB/w and a 6ohm impedance, dipping to a 3.1ohm minimum, suggests that solid state is the way to go here, and certainly, the kind of valve amps that will handle the 2.9s are way more expensive than the speaker. You need a serious amp. Or at least one with some serious grunt. Most of my listening was done with the Lavardin mono-blocks which proved to be ideal.

As if to prove the point, a brief flirtation with the Jadis JA100s, whilst

never less than interesting, left me aware that neither half of the partnership was really working to its full potential. Sadly, the Rotel RB991 departed for CT before the speakers arrived, but with hindsight it could well be the perfect budget match. Bi-wiring terminals are provided, but the NHTs are remarkably unfussy when it comes to cables, and the real significance of the terminals is to allow bi-amping, for which the company offer a range of suitable low frequency amp-lification. More on that subject at a later date. I'm interested in what the 2.9s do all on their tod.

Let's get the niggles out of the way first. I found that I needed to frig the vertical angle of the speaker baffles to get the tweeter axis right. Not a problem as long as the cones have got a reasonable amount of adjustment. They haven't. And my floor is pretty flat. The average British floorboard is only going to exacerbate the problem. Fortunately I had some nice long spikes in my toolbox which served to jack the front of the speakers up to just the right height, but be warned - American speakers, American threads. Not your common or garden M6 then! Nor did I ever get what I'd call an expansive stereo image from the 2.9s. Endless shuffling eventually produced something which resembled a band rather than an orgy, but only just.

The problems with both the tweeter axis and the image could well be down to my room, and the fact that I was listening distinctly near field - about eight feet. The point here is not that the speakers won't image, but that they didn't in my room. You'll have to try them at home, but something tells me that they'd open out much more at ten to twelve feet. The rigid cabinets do a good job of disappearing, and their depth gets the tweeter and midrange drivers well away from the wall. It's really more a case of creating the necessary space between the speakers. And that means



▶ retreating a bit.

Final bugbear was a slight greyness to the tonal palette. It was consistent from bass right up to the upper mid, which stops it being intrusive, but it's tempting to point a suspicious finger at the cone material. Mild in nature, it suggests you should avoid amps that lean too heavily towards a dry balance.

So, having dealt with the practicalities I can finally get to what this speaker is all about. Having Fun!

The "Back to Basics" design approach is mirrored in the uncomplicated musical communication of the NHTs. A quick check list of the 2.9s virtues would include its exceptional bandwidth, structural and rhythmic integrity, coherence and dynamic wallop. And it likes to go loud. The layered soundscapes created by William Orbit for *Ray Of Light* are effortlessly reconstructed, sucking the listener into their complex texture while the beat propels the track with its solid energy. The bass is awfully deep and hard as you like, providing a stability and bottom to the sound that escapes most hi-fi.

This suggests that these are party speakers, and party we definitely did (sad middle-aged person on over-energetic nostalgia trip!). But you'd be wrong to pigeon hole them as loud and proud. The 2.9s party because they are fundamentally spot on. They get the basics right, and that means they are equally happy playing anything. Once you get past the stage of thrashing all your loudest, dirtiest and down right baddest tracks (whether they come from Cameo or Camille Saint-Saens), you begin to appreciate just how deep these speakers dig. They have an almost uncanny ability to tease out the

strands, the internal relationships, within the music. The formal interplay of a Beethoven string quartet, or the rigid patterns of the Chopin *Etudes*, the explicit structural and rhythmic analysis of the 2.9s allows the listener easy access to even the densest pieces. And now that you know what's going on, you can actually sit back and appreciate it. You know, enjoy the music. You remember that.

This sense of musical and structural integrity runs through everything the NHTs do. They focus on the musical whole, the individual instruments considered in terms of what they



contribute to that whole. If you want to analyse an individual player's technique or instrument then there are better speakers out there, but if you want to understand the music in its entirety, then these are the tools for the job. The 2.9s are a timely reminder that hi-fi spends all together too much time on the minutiae, to the detriment of the music en masse. They bring an infectious directness to a performance which has an awful lot to do with the immediacy of real people playing real instruments, and the effortless way you can follow all the different instrumental strands when music is played live. They don't have the micro dynamic and harmonic intimacy of some speakers, but that doesn't stop them bringing recordings to life.

What with their amplification requirements, near wall siting and rhythmic integrity these have got to be a natural for Naim systems haven't they? An NBL on the cheap for all those people who don't get on with SBLs. Well yes, I can see the NHTs working really well in that context, but again, it would be a mistake to paste on the label and think that that was the whole story. Any system that will provide the

necessary drive and rhythmic integrity is going to work (a factor which saw the demise of one highly touted line stage). Rhythmically explicit means that it's clear when the system isn't! Rotel, Densen, Dynavector - take your pick. Get it right and the sheer presence and heft available can hardly fail to get you moving. The volume creeps inexorably up, not in search of missing dynamics, but just to get more of what these speakers do. No matter what electronics they use, NHT owners will all have one thing in common; they'll have a lot of fun. And unlike cream cakes, drugs or alcohol, this indulgence suffers no nasty side effects.

This is certainly one of the most down-right enjoyable speakers I've had at home, and at a few pence under £2000, definitely one of the most cost effective too. Better spikes (and possibly better outriggers too), and a different listening room, and I could be seriously tempted. Putting the visceral ahead of the academic, it's a an awful lot of speaker (and music) for the money. And let's face it, you can never have too much fun. ➤+

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

System Type:	4-way Infinite Baffle
Drive Units:	1" Aluminium Dome 4" Polypropylene Upper-mid. 61mm Polypropylene Lower-mid 10" Long-throw Polypropylene Bass
Bandwidth:	26Hz - 26KHz ±3dB
Sensitivity:	87dB/W
Impedance:	6ohms nominal (3.1 min)
Power Handling:	250W/Ch
Dimensions (HxWxD)	1000x177.5x546mm
Weight:	35.5 kilos each
Finishes:	High Gloss laminate, Black or Mahogany.
Price:	£2000

Distributor:
Recoton
Tel. 01367 252 605
Fax. 01367 252 614

Manufacturer:
Now Hear This (NHT)
Fax. (00)1-707-747-1252
Net. www.nhthifi.com



PUSH TO MUTE

L5

monitor

mute

input

volume

Sim Audio Model i5 Integrated Amplifier

by Chris Binns

'Are you sure I can't blow anything up?' As I left, she was clutching a remote control with a distinctly troubled look on her face. I couldn't blame her. I had not bothered with the normal written instructions for the seemingly simple task of listening to music while I was away: Switch this on first, and then the power amplifiers, but whatever you do don't move this switch unless this one is in position A ...

I have always said that as soon as the main music system became unapproachable to anyone but myself, there was a problem. Oh, really?! The living room has become a laboratory. Amplifiers bereft of casework, equipment perched precariously on cones, with interconnects stretched across burning valves with enough voltage to fry an elephant. Get real – frankly a breathalyser test should be mandatory before entering the room. So I can understand a degree of trepidation. But not this time. Press play and turn up the volume. Hell, I was more worried that she'd forget to feed the cats than blow up the hi-fi. When I returned a few days later it was obvious that my reassurances had been taken to heart – I could hear strains of Miles Davis as I turned into the drive.

I can't think of a better way of introducing the Sim Audio i5 amplifier. It's compact, integrated, and gets on with the job with the minimum of fuss,

and doesn't require, and I quote "written instructions and nerves of steel to use it." The line level i5 is not much bigger than an LP sleeve and just three inches deep. The main casework has two beautiful curved heatsinks on either side with a pillar



at each corner, terminated with adjustable gold-plated cones for feet (which, to avoid scratching, are removable if you so desire). The substantial front panel has a silver grey finish and the whole thing is well put together, feeling reassuringly solid. The controls are minimal. Four small push buttons offer the basic functions of on/standby, monitor, mute, and input selection, while the display switch allows you to switch off the LEDs - there is a suggestion that this might improve sound quality. While they are on, the functioning input is displayed until the volume setting is altered, whereupon the left and right levels are numerically shown as a figure between one and fifty. The large volume control nearly

dominates the front panel – I say nearly because it is outshone, in every sense of the word, by one of the most hideous name badges I have ever come across. This is probably the first thing that you will notice upon unpacking the unit. Your next reaction is likely to be a) reach for the RayBans, b) reach for the sick bucket, or c) the black paint. I could include an option d) but maybe it would be too unkind and only applicable if you wear a medallion together with an oversized gold belt buckle. Am I going over the top? Maybe. But I feel that it degrades the image of what would otherwise be a great looking amp.

The rear panel sports the usual gold-plated input socketry, and a single pair of CE approved insulated binding posts that will thankfully accept two sets of 4mm plugs. Alongside this is the mains on/off switch, which, being relegated to the rear panel, strongly suggests that the unit should remain powered up at all times. A tape output is provided, and it's worth noting that input four can be configured to bypass the volume control, making it suitable for use with home theatre set-ups.

Internally, there are some nice touches to separate construction from run-of-the-mill products. The toroidal mains transformer is mechanically decoupled from the main chassis to minimise vibrational interference, and the two PCBs are substantial military specification items. The smaller



► PCB is located behind the front panel and carries all the control functions, while all audio circuitry is on the main board. There is evidence of quality component selection, and these (I quote from the informative instruction manual) "have been chosen for their ability to work marvellously well together". How nice. Input switching is carried out by high quality relays, while the volume level is electronically controlled by utilising a digital optical encoder, i.e. no potentiometer in the signal path. There is a single pair of plastic Motorola complementary output devices per channel, and internal wiring is minimal. The little that there is uses "slow-rolled Teflon insulated OFC". Mmm.

I couldn't really glean much more about the circuitry from the visual inspection, but again the manual provides some interesting, if slightly misleading information. There is talk of fully balanced circuitry and no global feedback in the design, yet there are no balanced inputs, and by and large no feedback tends to suggest soggy bass with lots of distortion, which is certainly not the case. Either something got lost in the translation, or there's something pretty clever going on. But who cares? Who reads instruction manuals anyway?

Supplied with the i5 is a small remote controlled unit offering the basic functions of power, input selection and volume up/down. That's fine, but it was frustrating to have no control over the balance on either the amp or the remote. I'm sure I'd never use it, but it just niggled to have the channel level displayed so clearly, yet not be able to access it. To do that, you have to purchase the fully-equipped luxury remote. At £225, one hell of a luxury. To be fair this unit will then control a CD player as well – providing it is RC-5 (i.e. Phillips type) compatible. That's pretty tough if you own a Sony.

As I mentioned earlier, the Sim Audio quickly ingratiated itself to the non-hifi members of the household. To maximise the impact, I removed the various preamps, power supplies and monoblocks with the jungle of wiring that constitutes my "working system", and thus attained the most



domestically acceptable situation in my living room for a long time. It took me a while to get used to all the space... just a CD player, the turntable, the Iso and the i5. Cabling was Chord Company Anthem and doubled up Odyssey. The visual discontinuity was also exaggerated because I suppose I was expecting the i5 to sound like a small-ish solid state amp. It did – to begin with. A quick listen before I went away gave me no reason to think otherwise. Sure it sounded nice, but nothing that special. While I was away, somebody had obviously been feeding it steroids. When I returned, this



diminutive little amp was dictating the form to the Primary monitors with such authority that I seriously wondered whether the editor had been sneaking around with an extra power amp.

That evening I really wasn't in the

mood to play games. This small amplifier had snuck in through the back door and quietly (or maybe not) made friends while I was away. It obviously needed putting in its place. From the luxury of the settee (I do like remote controls ...) I lined up an array of music specifically designed to upset little amps, ranging from bass-heavy soul music through to Mahler's ninth. The i5 emerged no worse for wear, a little like Terminator 2 after having been filled with bullets. No blood, sweat or tears. Bass drive and impact were excellent – really taut and with plenty of control and rhythmic drive. High volume levels did not seem to be a problem, the heat sinks failing to betray the

considerable currents unleashed by the output stage within.

The i5 had an air of confidence about it, and its performance in other areas were of similar quality to the bass. For example, snare drums and rim shots had a satisfying snap to them, again conveying great sense of rhythm, particularly with modern music. Percussion sounds were portrayed very convincingly, making this amplifier no slouch with material requiring precision and impact. I have to admit it, I was impressed. The i5 had certainly earned its right to be taken seriously in my system and so I lived with it for the next few weeks, trying all sorts of different music through it.

The qualities that made listening to more modern music so enjoyable were not so evident with orchestral music. The i5 did a grand job with larger orchestral works, but with smaller scale string music which perhaps requires somewhat different attributes, it was not quite so successful. Imaging was fine, with good precision and positioning from left to right, but the depth of the soundstage was a little shallow. With a string quartet this gave rise to somewhat less intimacy than I was used to, and it was some-

► times difficult to assess the acoustic environment in which the performance was recorded. Music which I had traditionally regarded as being passionate sometimes took on a slightly mechanical feel – a good example of this is the English composer Gerald Finzi's suite *Love's Labours Lost*. The Nimbus recording is rich and evocative and whilst the performance is sensitive where necessary, the i5 reduced the emotional content of this music. On the other hand, vocals were reproduced well, and when things got musically complicated, the organised approach of the i5 kept things in check. In other words there was little tendency for the sound to get muddled or confused.

The only other minor area of concern is possibly the absolute bass extension. Having described the bass performance as being taut and with great impact, I wondered whether this might possibly have been at the expense of some very low, in fact almost subsonic information. Apparent more with vinyl than with CD, I sometimes noticed a slight loss of presence with orchestral percussion and plucked double bass, as if it were somehow not being conveyed with the correct and palpable sense of weight. This is a trick that a lot of systems have employed whereby removing the (mostly) rubbish at extreme low frequencies offers a bandwidth-limited but dynamic bass performance. One other thing I noticed was that the i5 tended to make you listen to music somewhat louder than I am used to. This could be that its rhythmic presentation is so good that you just want more of it, but my feeling is that, compared to the Primary valve amplifiers which I normally use, there was something missing at lower volume levels. Perhaps music wasn't flowing or communicating quite as freely.

But let's not get too close here. I'm paid to observe differences and

make comparisons. And in this case I'm comparing the i5 to well into five figures worth of electrical impracticality. No, it doesn't have the absolute sense of fluidity that some exotic and rare valve amplification does. Or the bass excavational capabilities of a pair of 250watt mono-blocks.



Elsewhere in this issue I review two amplifiers that represent something of the extreme outer edge of hi-fi products. In some areas, such as the presentation of tonal colours and lush deep sound stages, they can leave an amplifier such as the i5 sounding a little, well, ordinary. As long as you use them with the right speakers, of course. You could probably find an amplifier that has a slightly better bass extension, whilst still maintaining the i5's sense of rhythmic impact. But that's not what this amp is about. What the i5 does so convincingly is hold the middle ground. It's pretty good at everything, and in many ways this could also prove to be its downfall. When people choose an amplifier, they quite often go for one particular attribute, for example imaging. That's fair enough. Hey, maybe you listen exclusively to Peruvian nose-pipe music. I'm sure you'll be very happy. But for a lot of us, our hi-fi systems have to cope with a vast array of different music, and the ability to play most types well as opposed to one type exceptionally well is, I feel, very important.

The strength of the i5 lies in its ability to remain unflappable under almost any conditions that are likely to be thrown at it, regardless of musical

taste or volume levels. It will drive most real world loudspeakers to genuinely high levels without stress, offering a thoroughly musical and enjoyable performance while it does it. But above all, this small, discrete box is so unfussy to use, and just so good at getting on with the job, one could seriously question the need for pre-amps, power supplies and the monstrous mono-blocks I normally use. Not to mention the exotic and expensive interconnects that go with them. Nor a paranoid girlfriend who doesn't listen to music as much as she would like. What more can I say? ➤

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Inputs	4 x Line + Tape
Outputs	Tape + Pre
Connections	4mm Binding Posts
Rated Output:	
(8ohms)	70watts/ch
(4ohms)	110watts/ch
Bandwidth	-3dB/65KHz
Damping Factor	>150
Dimensions (HxWxD)	100x432x394mm
Weight	11.4Kg
Price	£2250

Distributor:

Ultimate Sonics

Tel/Fax. (44)(0)181-699-2446

E-mail. senanu@ultimate-sonics.com

Manufacturer:

SimAudio

3275 First St

Unit 1, St-Hubert

Quebec J3Y-8Y6

Canada

Tel. (1)450-445-0032

Fax. (1)450-445-6626

E-mail. info@simaudic.com



YBA Spécial and Intégré α CD Players

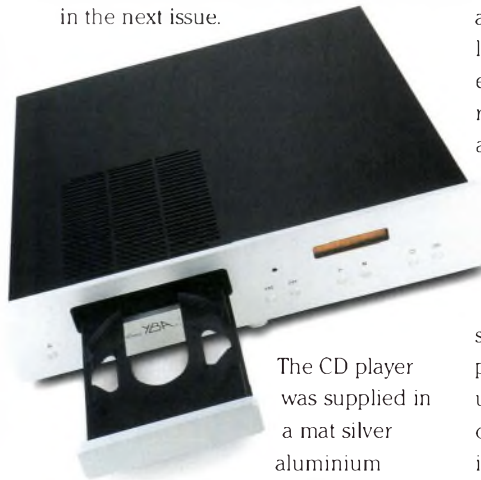
A little something blue from France

by Dave Davies

YBA, should for some bizarre reason you not have heard of the company before, stands for its owner and chief designer, Yves Bernard Andre. In his early years he was responsible for the design of much of the Goldmund electronics range before setting up his own business in '86 with his wife who is now responsible for running Phlox Electronique, the manufacturing arm of YBA. Yes, you've guessed it, YBA is a French business. Not only do YBA design and manufacture their products but unusually, for his premium products, Yves Bernard designs and manufactures many of his own components: Resistors, capacitors and double-core transformers are examples, and even the input and output socketry is YBA manufactured. Unusual attention is also paid to critical path components, which are hand soldered. A principal YBA philosophy is to maximise signal purity by minimising the number of electrical parts and circuit stages. The overall goal, according to YBA literature expresses what hi fi is (or should be) about anyway: to 'reproduce music as faithfully as possible... applying absolute criteria which are always valid and independent of fads, allowing one to forget technical issues and appreciate the music for itself.' So, if Yves Bernard has carried this philosophy through to his products this should be a highly musical experience. Let's see.

Intégré α CD Player

This front-loading player is pleasingly simple in appearance and is designed to provide a good physical and sonic match with the integrated Intégré amplifier that it was initially auditioned through. Coupled to my Ruark Paladins and over the course of the review using Audioplan and then Nordost Blue Heaven cable sets, the amp and CD player proved to be an excellent sonic match, each playing to the strengths of the other product. The amp, which on this fairly brief showing has proved itself to be highly capable, will be covered in more detail in the next issue.



The CD player was supplied in a mat silver aluminium finish (it's also available in black), and with the creamy yellow back-lit display and scripted product name, there's a touch of the seventies about its appearance. I found this helped set it apart from the competition, making it highly attractive. The warm glow of the

display made a pleasant break from the wall of black I'm normally confronted with. With a drawer open button far left, six more buttons are ranged right; control, skip, play, pause, stop and search functions. Inside the lid of what is a fairly substantial and clearly well constructed package, the player sports a double transformer and utilises the patented YBA blue laser mechanism. This uses both a conventional laser diode and an active blue laser diode. The technology takes account of 'stochastic resonance', a term commonly used in biology, astronomy and physics, where random noise is used to increase signals of low amplitude. The theory is that the blue laser bathes the CD, which makes it easier for the conventional red laser to read the signal. YBA claim that when applied correctly this technology will allow more information to pass through the system with less reliance on error correction.

I don't see much scientific data to support this in their material, so we'll have to judge it purely on performance. A TEAC transport is used, and the DAC is an 18-bit, 4 times oversampling system. The audio board is the same as the more expensive YBA CD 3a.

The back panel sports nothing but a pair of gold plated phono sockets along with switchable coaxial (SPDIF) and optical outputs. A three-pin mains socket allows for alternative leads to be used if preferred. I happily used the supplied YBA cable throughout. ▶

▶ As an indication of the attention to detail that YBA apply, the handbook stresses the importance of correct mains cable orientation, and they even supply a screwdriver mains tester to ensure the 'hot' cable is correctly positioned.

The player sits on three metal feet and YBA recommend that it's not sited on a glass shelf. Since I use wood shelves along with various isolation platforms, this wasn't an issue and the player was placed directly on my Quadraspire rack. The standard feet proved to do a good job of isolating the player, but a little experimentation later showed that the already excellent performance could be taken a notch higher in terms of dynamics, bass response and definition by using the extraordinary little Clearlight cones (see Issue 3 for more information). The supplied remote is a bit ugly; a plain, functional oblong, although I tend to expect this nowadays, noticing only those few remotes that break with the 'generic' norm. As expected, it is perfectly efficient in use.

As if to prove the YBA philosophy and to coin a cliché, the very first adjective that struck me about this player within but a few bars of the opening CD was 'musical'. And so it proved throughout the weeks that I've enjoyed its use. Although it's a very even handed beast, the particular quality that helped it shine is its ability to convey the timing that's so essential to making a musical performance involving. Even CD's that I'd previously not rated particularly highly (step forward and take a bow 'Café Blue') took on a new life. Tracks like the daft multi-tracked 'Wood is a Pleasant Thing to Think About' were captured with a clarity and impact that made me sit up and take notice. 'Inchworm', which I'd previously dismissed as plain boring was now driven by well-defined

double bass that held the performance together and drove it forward. Barber's vocals were superbly projected and the pattering percussion came across with precision, punch and clarity. Staging and imaging too were exceptionally good. A little more 'forward' than I'm used to with my usual Meridian, but every musician was precisely placed within a beautifully defined acoustic space. It certainly helped me see (hear) 'Café Blue' anew and although it'll never make any desert island selection of mine, I am able to appreciate and enjoy the performance much more than has been the case with any previous player.

Richard Thompson is a musician who I have absolutely no problem appreciating. I love the music in his new album *Mock Tudor* (Capitol 7243 498860 25), finding it a real return to top form but had found the recording a bit clinical, bright and lacking in body compared to some of his earlier stuff. This certainly wasn't the feel when I saw him performing the same material with a fine band at the Festival Hall in October. From the startling impact as 'Cooksferry Queen' kicked in, my pulse was immediately set racing, the Intégré putting me right back in row C. And the involvement didn't let up until the album closed. The drive and visceral impact of Dave Mattack's percussion, the weight of Danny Thompson's double bass and the stinging attack of Thompson's vocals and stunning guitar work came remarkably close to the live experience. On gentler numbers like 'Dry my Tears and Move On' which is driven by a simple bass line, the YBA wrings the last drop of emotion from the song.

I dug out that old reviewers (note to Roy: please no jokes about 'old reviewers!'), sonic and musical favourite *La Folia* (Harmonia Mundi 90 1050),

which with its carefully measured tempi underpinning its increasingly manic performance, relies more than most on timing to keep everything from descending into chaos.. I apologise if this is getting repetitive, but again the YBA did a fine job. The pace that's so essential to this disk was all there along with the correct characteristics of the many and (ever so) varied range of musical and not so musical instruments. Even though I knew it was coming, I was surprised at the dynamic attack when the percussion instruments are abruptly struck at the end of 'Principalis pro-folia'.

So far I had been using the Intégré with the matching YBA Intégré amp. It was now time to hook it up to my own amp: Michell Orca line stage and a pair of Stereo Alecto's. Pending the dissolution of my overdraft (New Years Resolution 421B), I've been using my somewhat elderly Meridian 506-2 for CD replay. The YBA has finally helped convince me that it's time I moved the overdraft radically up the priority list. With the Intégré in place and using my usual Audioplan cables, CD reproduction is now much, much closer to LP. In comparison with the Meridian, the YBA has significantly more grip and control, almost as though I were using much more powerful amps. This also helps ameliorate the slightly loose bass of the Ruarks. All the virtues that had been there via the Intégré amp were intact and then some! With the much larger and wide ranging (and more expensive) amps, headroom had significantly improved and the music was able to breathe more easily. Not that it had felt noticeably constrained before. On Dave Grusin's excellent *Two For The Road – The Music of Henry Mancini* (GRP 98652), the sheer clout as the big band kicks in on 'Peter Gunn' brought an immediate smile to my face. This inane grin was maintained throughout the album whether in the punchier numbers or in



gentler, more laid-back tracks like 'Dreamsville'. The latter has a vocal by Diana Krall that redefines gorgeous and sexy. This intimate communication is a quality that has become synonymous with the YBA player the more I've used it. It has a way of keeping the tonal, rhythmic and dynamic elements of the music in perfect proportion.

The CD Intégré consistently managed to 'dig in' and extract the essence from recordings that makes the experience live, wringing the emotion rather than just the notes from every performance. This is a price point with no shortage of excellent contenders, and in danger of sinking under the weight of new arrivals. But for the moment at least, the YBA sits at the top of my personal list.

However, like many other manufacturers, YBA offer a series of models that can each be upgraded. Do you get a sniff of the Intégré's excellence from its junior brother?

Spécial CD Player

Pretty much identical in appearance, the Special is significantly cheaper. A major difference is that this doesn't use the blue laser and if anything is evidence for the effectiveness of the technique then this is it. The Spécial is not a bad player at all. It does everything

very competently, but the problem is that in another highly competitive price band it's nothing special. Timing and dynamic range in particular suffer in comparison with the Intégré. Lateral imaging is fine but stage depth is a bit restricted, and it has a distinctly truncated bandwidth. Take for example 'Too Rich For My Blood' from Patricia Barber's *Café Blue*, which opens with a sliding double bass line. On

the Intégré you can almost feel the bass strings under Michael Arnpol's fingers as the note descends and Barber's vocal kicks in. You are immediately involved with

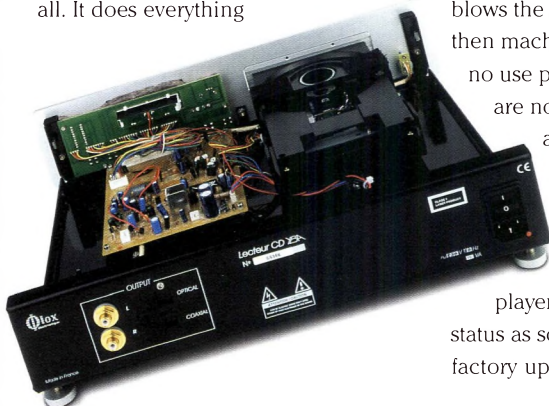
the performance right through to the effortless soaring notes and heavily struck percussion and cymbal clashes at it's close. On the Spécial the opening bass line is all there, but it sounds somewhat monotone, and doesn't draw you into the vocal entry in the same way. The whole thing sounds that bit looser, less controlled and rather two dimensional. At the close of the number the percussion lacks resonance, coming over as relatively dull thuds and sounding less integrated with the whole performance.

Richard Thompson's 'Cooksferry Queen' was distinctly lacklustre, and my pulse just didn't quicken as it had with the Intégré's drive and authority. I could go on but in short, the Intégré blows the Special out of the water and then machine guns any survivors. It's no use pretending: the two players are not just streets but continents apart in musical terms.

Overall the Spécial's prime virtue is that it provides a comparatively cheap entry point from which the player can be upgraded to Intégré status as soon as funds allow. This factory upgrade costs £450, not much

more than the price difference between the two models. However, I'd have thought that since the cost differential is (at least in terms of hi-fi expenditure) relatively small, and the performance gap is so massive, anyone having the two demonstrated will immediately go for the pricier model and hang the expense. I know I would!

I've heard CD players with greater powers of resolution. I've heard players that are more capable of creating convincing staging, not that the Intégré is a slouch in either of these areas. But with the possible exception of the much more expensive Copland, I've not heard a player at or near this price band that is so immediately and consistently musically involving. Hats off to M. Andre and his blue laser.



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Intégré a CD Player

Lasers:	390nm (red) 790nm (blue)
DAC Type	Multi-bit (18 bit, 4xoversampling)
Frequency response:	8-2000Hz +1dB -2dB
Power consumption	15VA
Total harmonic	<0.03% distortion: (1 kHz)
Dimensions (HxWxD):	90x430x328
Weight:	4.5Kg
Prices:	Intégré: £ 1,095 Spécial: £ 675
Factory upgrade, Spécial to Intégré:	£450

Importer:

Sound Image UK Ltd.
Tel. (44)(0)181-255- 6868
Fax. (44)(0)181-255-6869

Manufacturer:

PHLOX Electronique
BP-12
F-91440 Bures-Sur-Yvette
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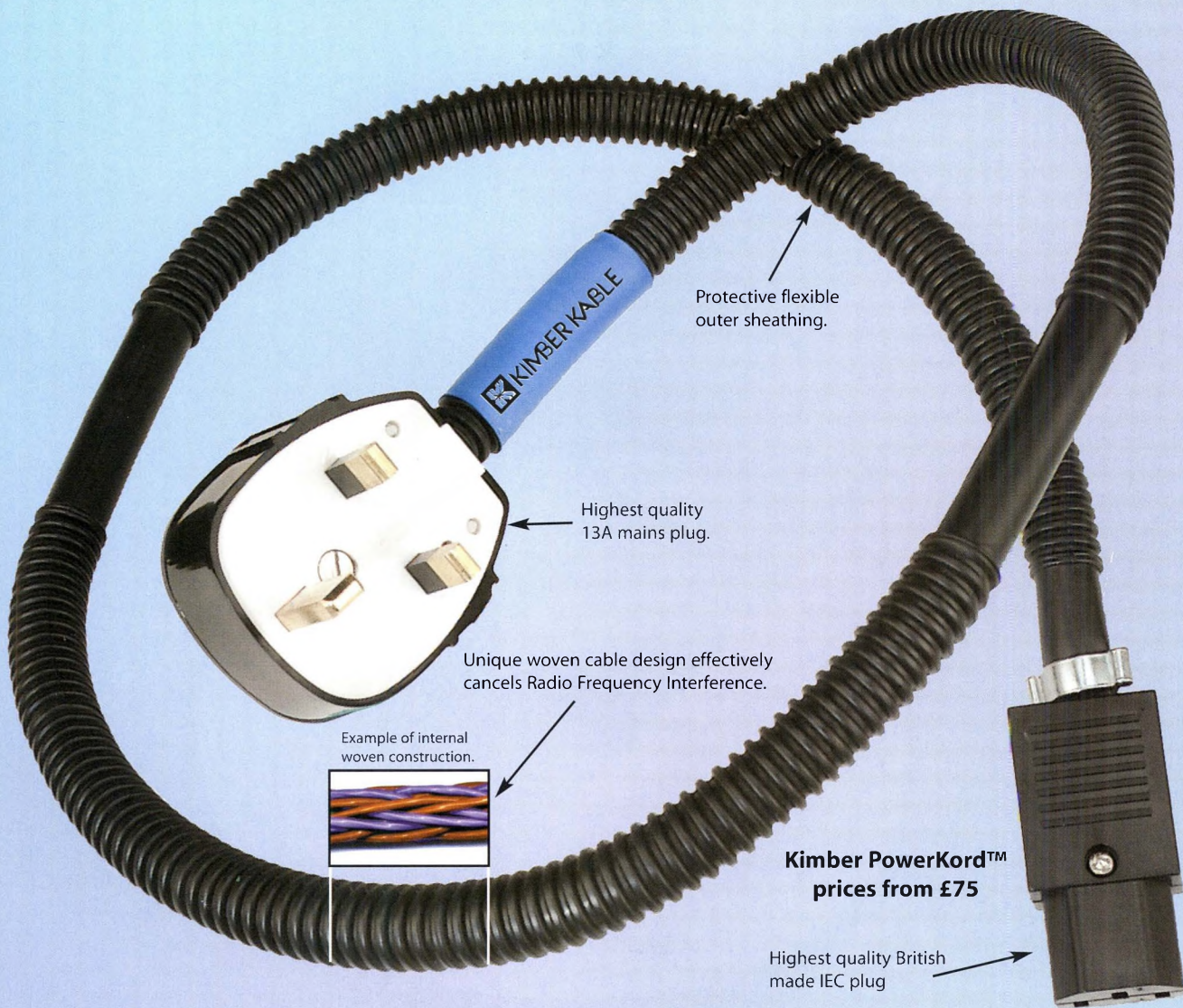


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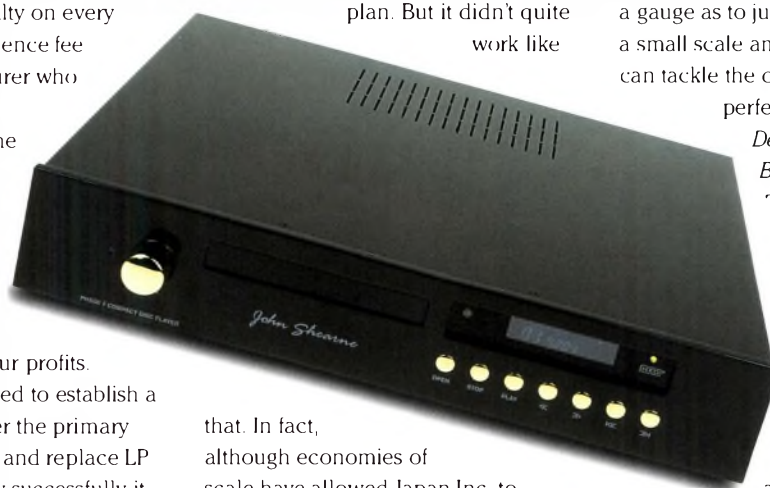
Shearne Audio Phase 7 CD Player

by Roy Gregory

One of the important driving forces behind the advent of the CD medium was the technological colonisation of music storage and retrieval. Both the LP record and the mechanical devices to replay it had stubbornly resisted all attempts by the emerging electronics conglomerates to enter the market. It wasn't so much that they didn't claim the same market share that they did on cassettes, cassette players or amplifiers; they didn't really have a market share at all. The cassette format allowed Philips a royalty on every tape cassette and a licence fee from every manufacturer who wanted to use the transport, as well as the opportunity to build and sell product themselves. What's known as a win-win situation. Even your competition are contributing to your profits. CD was always intended to establish a similar hegemony over the primary music storage format, and replace LP at the same time. How successfully it achieved this is best appreciated by the acrimonious struggle over control of the new digital formats, seen as CD's ultimate successor. Whilst the debate might appear to be between competing technology on the grounds of performance, it's actually about who pays how much to whom, and what for.

What has all this to do with the Phase 7 CD player? In seeking to

control the storage format and its replay electronics, the major manufacturers also sought to marginalise the smaller, specialist hi-fi companies that dominated the quality hi-fi market, creating a product category in which they could, at best, compete at a disadvantage. Cottage industry amplifier manufacturers, already excluded from the cassette deck market, would be further hemmed in, incapable of producing matching CD players. Or so went the plan. But it didn't quite work like



that. In fact, although economies of scale have allowed Japan Inc. to dominate the bottom end of the CD player market, the replay hardware has proved incredibly susceptible to modification and implementation. The assumption was that the chipset was everything, essentially reducing performance to number crunching, and that as customised chipsets were beyond the means of any but the largest companies, boutique solutions would no longer apply. Wrong!

It quickly became apparent that the chipset was only one element in an incredibly complex process. It might all be in one box, but the CD player constituted a whole host of separate stages, each open to modification in itself, in its power supply arrangements, its mechanical grounding, and so on almost ad infinitum.

The Shearne Audio Phase 7 is a good example of exactly this approach. As such it provides us with a gauge as to just how successfully a small scale amplifier manufacturer can tackle the digital beast. It's a

perfect case of *The Audio Designer's Digital Cook Book* in action.

The Phase 7 certainly shops around for its parts. The transport is based on a Sanyo laser sled with its associated display and control board.

This was chosen for its solid construction and the low emission levels of its display and control circuitry. Shearne make no attempt to rewrite the control software, thus making this choice critical. The whole transport section is run from its own power transformer. A second, larger transformer is used to power the DAC section and master clock, mounted on a single large PCB. Power from both transformers travels via a secondary supply board which



► provides rectification and smoothing, as well as allowing the owner the option of adding a more sophisticated external supply at a later date. A nine-pin D-type connector allows for the connection, but even in standard form the main transformer has separate windings for the digital and analogue sections of the DAC board.

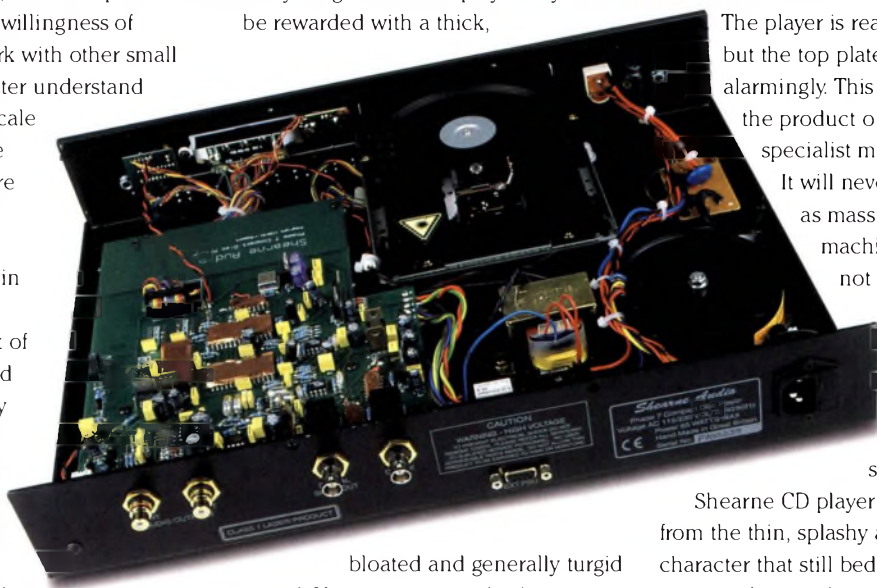
The master clock used is derived from Trichord's Clock 2, whilst the digital filter is the Pacific Microsonics PMD100 HDCD chip. Both these critical elements come from within the specialist industry, and their presence demonstrates the willingness of companies to work with other small suppliers who better understand their needs and scale of operations. The converter chips are from National Panasonic, 20 bit devices arranged in a complimentary circuit, the output of which is converted to single-ended by an Analogue Devices OP-42 op-amp. This passes the signal to a high quality low-pass filter, and finally to the Class A output buffer stage, based on Shearne's own Phase 6 pre-amp.

Outputs are provided for left and right audio via phono sockets, and digital via BNC. There's also a clock output for use with a future Shearne onboard DAC.

With this plethora of internal stages (which is par for the CD course) it's hardly surprising that active designers have found scope for their skills. The Phase 7 chooses to address particular areas of sonic concern, separating the digital and analogue power supplies, providing a low-jitter master clock and what is fast becoming accepted as the best available filter chip. At the same

time it uses an essentially unmodified transport assembly, and accepts the risks of induced jitter from the control software and display. You can't do everything, especially not if you are building to a price. So designing a CD player is in fact, exactly the same problem of balancing your compromises as designing any other product. What makes the Phase 7 so interesting is the skill which Shearne have displayed in doing just that with their amplifiers.

With this player, set-up is everything. Plonk and play and you'll be rewarded with a thick,



bloated and generally turgid sound. You can get past this but you need to make the effort. The first step is to run the player in thoroughly. Even demonstration units will continue to improve over a couple of weeks. Secondly, you need to recognise that the Phase 7 has an inherently warm, even slightly heavy balance. Unfortunately, a lot of racks and cables accentuate this by way of compensation for the deficiencies of the herd. That's what you have to guard against. Crisp and clean is the order of the day, and I finally settled on Nordost's aluminium Pulsar Points (preferred to Titanium!), and SPM interconnects over the normally superior Quattro Fils. The evidence is clear. The Shearne doesn't need any

help at the bottom end. In fact, it's one of the few components that benefits from a straight glass shelf, and PC tells me that the Solar Wind interconnect also works wonders, at a rather more affordable price.

Styling is Shearne, which means that you get a choice of black or blue marbled front-panels, with gold or silver knobs on (if you'll pardon the expression). Personally I find it rather cluttered, the rotary power switch looking like a bit of an after-thought, but it makes more sense in the context of the other Shearne electronics. The player is reassuringly heavy, but the top plate clanks alarmingly. This is, unmistakably, the product of a small, specialist manufacturer.

It will never be as slick as mass produced machinery, but that's not why you buy it. You buy it for its sound. By now it should be obvious that sonically the

Shearne CD player is a long way from the thin, splashy and disjointed character that still bedevils too many mass market machines. Get it working properly and the Phase 7 will reward you with an intimate, tactile and communicative view of the music; one that's full of warmth and body, solidity and presence without aggression. Players like the Helios 1 or Naim CD3.5/Flatcap can give you a tauter and more vital performance, but they will struggle to match the Shearne's tonal and spatial sophistication. It may not have the dynamic impact of some machines, the musical shock value if you like, but its performance is immensely stable and driven by the kind of contained power that I normally associate with steam-rollers, or other similarly solid but mobile objects. ►

▶ Playing 'Wade In The Water' (Eva Cassidy *Eva By Heart* Blix St G2-10047), the Phase 7 takes what is already a wonderfully pure voice and wraps it in warmth. Where some players can leave it exposed, even clinical, the Shearne fills it with humanity and harmonic complexity.

The acoustic guitar is similarly solid and rich, the plucked strings having a tactile weight a million miles from the leading edge fizz that so often gets served up. And the muted trumpet is absolutely spot on. The whole song, despite its relative complexity is a single, spacious but coherent event, full of subtlety and meaning.

In fact, play any half decent acoustic recording and the Shearne will have you purring with the sheer pleasure of its gorgeously warm and natural tonality. We even managed to sit through half a dozen tracks from *The Weavers Reunion At Carnegie Hall* (Analogue Productions APFCD 005). Sonically spectacular, the sheer naturalness of the presentation sucked you into a wonderful performance of what is, otherwise, music I wouldn't choose to listen to for pleasure from one year to the next. And scale isn't an issue either. 'The Testament of Freedom' (*Testament* RR-49CD) comes across loud and clear, with tremendous volume to the soundstage, and great power to the crescendos. The bass drum's weight is particularly impressive.

And the warmth doesn't clog things up. The Phase 7 is extremely expressive, both rhythmically and in its shaping and timing of notes. The scale and rhythmic complexity of *Flood* (Jocelyn Pook, Virgin 72438 81502 8) is beautifully preserved, as are the vocal subtleties, and the speed and rapidly shifting patterns of Zakir Hussain's *Tabla* (*Making Music* ECM 1349) hold no fears. There's no congestion on

even these rapid percussive sprays.

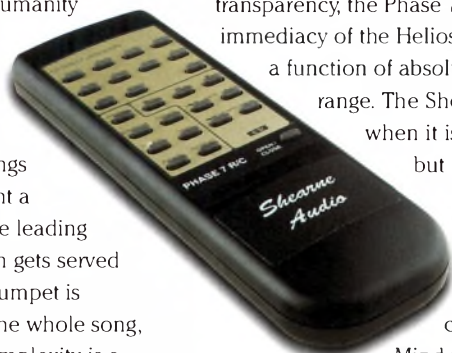
What there is, however, is a softening of the dynamic impact. As I said earlier, players like the Helios 1 have more bite and attack than the Shearne. This is partly a function of transparency, the Phase 7 lacking the immediacy of the Helios, and partly a function of absolute dynamic range. The Shearne jumps when it is supposed to, but it doesn't jump quite as fast or far as some of the slim-line competition.

Mind you, when it arrives you know all about it. That bass drum on the *Testament* might not be the crispest, but boy has it got wallop. And texture. And pitch. It actually sounds like a damned great drum, rather than some sort of explosive belch. The Phase 7 isn't an overtly detailed machine, but that's because it actually uses its information so coherently, rather than simply firing it at the listener. If the key to CD performance is arranging the available detail so that it makes a recognisable whole, then the Shearne is well on the road to success. Its obvious concerns with a richly realistic tonality and long term listenability set it apart

from the crowd, and its success in addressing them more than justifies Shearne's confidence in their ability to compete in this crowded and competitive market.

How important is that slight softening? Well, musically and rhythmically it doesn't interfere. And as I have said already, the Shearne has no trouble holding your attention. So it's going to depend on the music you listen to, your particular priorities and the system you use. If you listen to an exclusive diet of hardcore dance or heavy metal, then you can definitely do better (and for less money). Likewise if your system leans to the warm and cuddly, and your speakers sound like they ate all the pies, then there are better alternatives. But with good clean solid-state electronics (no passive pre-amps please!) and the right cabling and care, then the 7 will give you excellent results on anything with the slightest regard for realistic instruments and levels. Just don't expect it to grab you by the throat and shake you.

Listening to the Phase 7 alongside the Rega Jupiter/Io/Silver Shadow combination, Victoria was moved to comment that "the Rega kicks you in the butt, while the Shearne strokes it better". I couldn't have put it better myself. ▶+



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Decoding Type	20 bit	Manufacturer:
Digital Filter	Pacific Microsonics	Shearne Audio
	HDCD	P.O.Box 22
Outputs - Analogue	Phono	Stevenage
- Digital	BNC	Herts
- Master Clock	BNC	SG2-8HF
Output Level	2.0V	United Kingdom
Dimensions (WxHxD)	434 x 80 x 370mm	Tel. (44)(0)1438-740953
Weight	7.5Kg	Fax. (44)(0)1438-221690
Finishes	Black/Gold	
	Blue Marble/Silver	
Price	£1500	



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A killer performance? Michell Orca Line Stage

by Dave Davies

The Michell Orca is a totally new design which effectively replaces the old Argo and Argo HR. These have done sterling service for around nine years now, and although they were (and are) still fine beasts, they are beginning to feel a little long in the tooth. Like all of Michell's newly revised electronics line-up, the Orca is intended to deliver 'high-end' performance at a reasonable price.

The Orca in keeping with Michell design philosophy is distinctly 'different'. From the front, the Orca forms a squashed pyramid with the 'points' rounded off. The fascia is in chunky gloss black acrylic with a massive volume control in the centre of smaller source and input selectors. The controls, which have hubcap like silver inserts, feel much more solid and slick in operation than the somewhat home-crafted feel of the Argo. The casing is in bright silver yacht grade stainless steel, and the whole unit looks and feels several light years away from the old units in terms of design and build quality. Gone is that (however unfair) 'will it break down today' feel I always had when using the Argo, to be replaced with a refreshing peace of mind. Round the back, the Orca has a full complement of solidly mounted, chunky gold plated phono sockets with two outputs

allowing for bi-amping (natch!). And hidden away inside is a seriously butch motorised volume pot - a response to all those Argo users who appreciated the sound of the old dual concentric



Sfernice, but hated its horribly imprecise channel matching.

Also totally new is the power supply. In place of the old substantial toroid in a shoe box Hera, is a sculpted case, at about half its size, again looking stylish in acrylic and stainless steel. The design focuses on filtering and hf noise reduction and should prove a big improvement over the Hera although if you must, the Orca can be purchased with a simple off-the-shelf plug-top transformer for approximately \$400 less. This would enable you to upgrade to the beefier dedicated supply at a later date. This

'entry' option wasn't reviewed, the supplied unit being used with the full dedicated power supply from scratch.

Although I used the Orca with my ISO/ HERA, Michell have also developed a complete new family of Delphini phono stages. These are upgradeable from a basic stereo version comparably priced to the ISO, via an external supply option,



through to the full-monty of a 4 box dual mono/ dual supply beast. More of this in a later edition.

Having conducted a 'first impressions' review at the time I covered the new Alecto power amp (Issue 3), I've now been able to

▶ evaluate the Orca for an extended period using it as my regular line stage over the past couple of months. Hooked up via Audioplan cables to my Stereo Alecto's, Gyro Dec/ ISO, Ruark Paladins and a variety of CD players, it's fitted seamlessly into the system. A measure of its quality is that I'm



pushed to ascribe any particular character to the Orca; it's simply got on with the job reliably, transparently and enjoyably. Compared with the Argo and Argo HR it has less grain whilst enhancing most of those pretty fine performers attributes, particularly in the areas of openness speed and transparency. My 'between reviews' line stage is a humble Meridian 501 which, whilst it's fine value for money and performs (still) at somewhat above its price band, is clearly no match for the much more expensive Michell. Compared with the Meridian you would expect the Orca to offer a significant improvement in performance. The Orca however removes not just veils, but great heavy velvet curtains from the soundstage. More open, but much more detailed and faster, it helps give much more insight into each musical performance without compromising the rather magical mid-band of the Alecto's a jot.

On the CD of Copland's *Appalachian Spring* (Everest EVC 9003), the orchestra (LSO/ Suskind) is much more 'there' than with the

Meridian, the layering of the string section, the lightly dancing woodwinds and solid underpinning brass are more real with no sense of smear or grain. Just clear, natural music beautifully conveyed. Punchier stuff like Nick Cave and The Bad Seeds splendid 'Red Right Hand' from *Best of* (CDMUTEL4), places Cave centre

stage, a couple of feet in front of the speakers with a suitably cavernous (no pun intended) space behind him. Drum

thwacks punch out seemingly several feet behind the rear wall, and the whole thing just reeks of its 'spaghetti western from hell'

atmosphere. In short, the emotion and not just the musical notes was coming through untrammelled. My old favourite Blue Nile track 'Over The Hillside' from *Hats* (Linn LKHCD2) came across equally well, with the plaintive vocals particularly well caught, along with the steely percussion, and somewhat processed but still effective acoustic.

On radio broadcasts from my (admittedly) cheapo Denon tuner, the Orca also helped me get the best results. Voices were reproduced naturally, without undue chestiness or sibilance, and music whether Radio 3 or Andy Kershaw on Radio 1, came across with enough conviction for me to realise just what a bargain the TU 260 really is.

The Orca, whilst it brought the best from both CD and tuner, even cassette tape, really shone with LP playback. Given Michell's heritage,

I guess this should be no surprise, but even through my relatively modest and slightly long in the tooth Michell ISO/ HERA, the Orca just loved LP's. Staging gained in height, width and depth and the performers became markedly more three-dimensional. Both information retrieval and speed were further enhanced over what was already an excellent performance. These qualities showed themselves over album after album and whatever I played from Dvorak quintets, hard-bop jazz, raucous R&B c/o Etta James, The Watsons, Mahler symphonies, god help me, even to the Bonzo Dog Band!

From the moment that the stylus set down in the groove of 'Over The Hillside' the extra weight, presence and authority was palpable. Of course, despite the outstanding advances in CD replay over the last few years, I am still regularly surprised by what vinyl can achieve. But this was special! The 3-dimensionality of



the sound shifted the whole system up a gear. The bass could now be felt rather than just heard and stage width, height and depth had all improved. The sound was also markedly less 'processed' sounding, and the last few drops of emotion were wrung from Buchanan's vocals.

Jazz, the music I probably listen to most, was the next obvious

▶ choice. *Coleman Hawkins's Alive At The Village Gate* (Verve/ Classic Records V6-8509) is a fine, musical and sonic performance. The Orca managed to give the opening track 'All The Things You Are' even more conviction than I'm used to. It gave it the sort of warmth that I'm constantly reminded of when I attend a live gig. A warmth that until you adjust seems 'wrong'; until you kick yourself and realise that this is the quality of real live sound. A warmth, coupled with no loss of other detail across the sound spectrum and with dynamic swings that kick in as and when with natural ease. Throughout the album, the Orca helped sustain the 'Village Gate moves to small listening room in Winchester' feeling. Right down to Major Holley's bizarre bass n' singing work on 'Joshua Fit The Battle Of Jericho', to the breathy tones of Hawkins' tenor sax, and to the entirely natural audience applause at the close. Fine, fine stuff with the Orca doing precisely what it should and getting out of the way of the music!

On gentler material like the Julian Bream and Cremona Quartet, *Boccherini guitar quintet* (RCA SB 6772), the fluidity and expression of Bream's playing, the flow of the quartets strings and the attack as Bream strums out the louder sections are entirely natural. Another case of the Orca quietly getting on with the job.

And the quality has held up regardless of what I've thrown at it. The Orca won't paper over the cracks on less good recordings, but it will help bring the best from them. A case in point is Albert King's *Thursday Night In San Francisco* (Stax 032) an out-standing live gig which unfortunately suffers from a slightly bright and one dimensional recording, at least in my re-mastered, re-pressed copy. The Orca doesn't

disguise the recordings failings but the searing power of his playing is allowed to rise above it with sufficient clarity and musical conviction that the negatives are easily forgotten and the old 'air guitar' is rapidly brought into play.

As if to complement the distinctive style of the Orca, you get the world's sexiest volume-only remote. A small (7cm-diameter) black aluminium disk that fits neatly into the palm of your hand. It's as much sculptural as functional and is so tactile that I often find myself just enjoying holding it whether I plan to alter the volume or



not. And even more sadly, sometimes when the system's not even switched on! Unlike the slab like OEM devices from most other manufacturers, I've actually enjoyed using this remote. Stranger still, despite it being less than half the size of my other remotes, I've not lost this one once. I suppose this says something about perceived value!

Having now had the privilege of using the Orca regularly for over two months I am confident that Michell have developed a worthy successor to the Argo. It's performed unflappably whatever the source and whatever I've thrown at it, and it looks great too. But have Michell also achieved their goal of 'affordable high-end'? Let's put it this way: I have to find \$1,600 and fast. This baby isn't going back!



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Orca Line Stage

Line level inputs:	4 + Tape
Input impedance:	100Kohms- all inputs
Frequency response:	<1Hz to 110KHz
Tape Outputs:	2
Main Outputs:	2
Gain:	+6dB
Channel matching:	<0.5dB
Output impedance:	33ohms
Distortion:	<0.005%
Dimensions (WxHxD)	320x90x240mm
Weight:	3027gm

Power Supply Unit

Transformer VA rating:	160VA low noise toroidal
Output voltage:	0V - +22Vdc, 0V - -22Vdc
Dimensions (WxHxD)	160x65x240mm
Weight:	-3380gm

Prices

Orca with dedicated power supply unit:	£1,650
Orca with optional in-line transformer:	£1,259
Upgrade to dedicated power supply unit:	£399

Manufacturer.

J A Michell Engineering Ltd.
Tel: (44)(0)181-953-0771
Fax: (44)(0)181-207-4688



Rega Planar 25 Turntable

by Paul Messenger

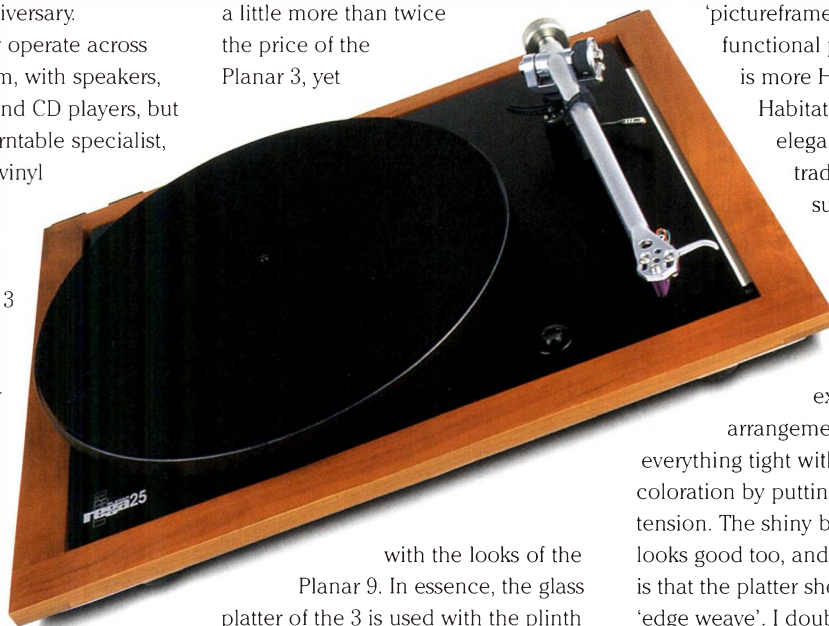
I have a soft spot for companies which know what they're doing and pursue those objectives consistently over the long haul. Rega is just such an operation, and has become a beacon of stability and longevity in the hi-fi business over more than a quarter of a century. Indeed, this £619 Planar 25 turntable, launched in 1998, was so named in recognition of the company's 25th anniversary.

Rega might now operate across the full hi-fi spectrum, with speakers, amplifiers, a tuner and CD players, but it started out as a turntable specialist, and has stuck to its vinyl replay guns through thick and thin. The near-budget price Planar 2 and Planar 3 turntables (£224, £289 respectively), on which the Planar 25 is substantially based, actually go all the way back to the 1970s, and haven't changed a great deal since those days, though performance was considerably improved when Rega developed its own tone-arms in the mid-1980s.

In the mid-1990s, the company came up with the Planar 9, an altogether more expensive turntable at £1,698, featuring an exotic aluminium oxide platter and an elaborate outboard motor power supply, plus a natty line in real wood trim around the plinth. This left an enormous gap

between the Planar 3 and Planar 9, which marketing logic suggests was waiting to be filled. Rega has never been particularly marketing oriented, but some of its overseas distributors are, so the company took its time figuring out the best way to 'trickle down' the lessons learned with the 9 to a less expensive model.

The result is the Planar 25, a little more than twice the price of the Planar 3, yet



with the looks of the Planar 9. In essence, the glass platter of the 3 is used with the plinth and motor-mount of the 9, and with a built-in power supply that's much less elaborate than the 9's outboard affair, but which goes much further down the motor-smoothing road than the 3 has ever attempted.

The tone-arm here is the RB600, which essentially slots in between the RB300 of the 3 and the RB900 used by the 9. It's actually closer to a '900 than a '300, featuring the polished 'silver' (aluminium powder coat) finish, the small high density (tungsten) counter-

weight, and chunky Klutz low-capacitance cables fitted with classy Neutrik phono plugs. Bearings are essentially similar to the '300, but to higher tolerances.

Aesthetically I'm still very fond of the Planar 3's form-follows-function simplicity - especially in our sample's bright lemon yellow finish (£20extra)!

The P25's slim-line real wood 'pictureframe' around the functional part of the plinth is more Harrods than Habitat, and should sit elegantly in more traditionally furnished surroundings. This isn't simply screwed onto the plinth proper, but is fixed using an expanding collar arrangement: which holds everything tight without introducing coloration by putting the frame under tension. The shiny bright tone-arm looks good too, and my only criticism is that the platter showed a slight 'edge weave'. I doubt this will effect performance, and it probably wouldn't have been noticed at all had the turntable not been mounted a little above seated eye level.

Operationally all is very simple and straightforward, but having struggled with a suspended-subchassis turntable with unipivot tone-arm and no cueing for more than a decade, I found the Planar 25's totally solid and predictable stability quite disconcerting at first! The turntable starts up smoothly, with none of the 'motor slap' of the

▶ Planar 3. That said, the arm cueing lift was set a little low (especially when I decided to change the cartridge), and nothing in the rather skimpy manual told me about the almost invisible little 1mm Allen grub-screw. I also find the fingerlift on the RB arms rather tricky to use, because it rides rather close to the disc surface for my (admittedly large) forefinger. Both 33 and 45 rpm speeds are available, but to effect a change it's necessary to lift off the platter and manually shift the O-ring drive belt from one pulley to the other.

Reviewing products alone and in isolation is not terribly helpful, as it fails to provide any real context. Accordingly, we arranged to borrow a Planar 3 at the same time as the Planar 25, and both were fitted with Rega Elys cartridges. Most of the listening was done using Naim amplification (NAC52 and two NAP135) and Naim NBL loudspeakers, a system which is well out of the price class of either record deck, but which has such exceptional bandwidth and dynamic range that it reveals the capabilities of the turntables, and the differences between them, very clearly indeed.

Although I do use a Planar 9 from time to time, it's been many years since I tried out the relatively humble Planar 3. The whole caboodle costs only a third of the price of the Linn Arkiv B cartridge fitted to my regular record player, so my first reaction wasn't too positive. By absolute, high-end type standards the Planar 3 is rather limited in bandwidth, dynamic range and punch, and all round transparency. But it does all the basics rather well, and knows how to carry a tune, so that the experience always remains enjoyable, even though the depth of analysis and vividness of expression is somewhat limited.

I spun my way through a number of favourite discs, and the Planar 3

continued to keep the faith, more or less, though its bottom end did sound a little thickened and detached, in a way that might not suit a system with

ultimate extension too; timing seems good, though it wasn't always easy to distinguish the tonality of different bass instruments.

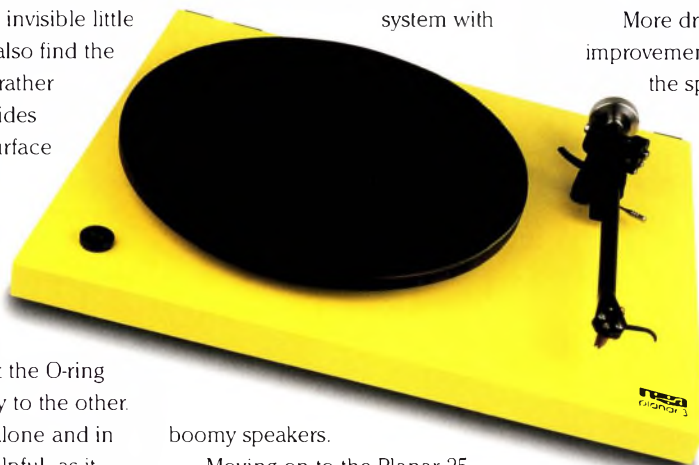
More dramatic still was the improvements at the other end of the spectrum. The top end is brighter, cleaner and altogether more open sounding than the P3, even though both use the same platter, motor and cartridge - presumably a lot of it comes down to the reduced tone-arm cable capacitance.

I liked the extra mid and top end delicacy and subtlety of the P25 a lot, but still found it rather

boomy speakers.

Moving on to the Planar 25 changed the sound quite dramatically. At first I missed the somewhat 'bouncy' quality of the 3, but it was also immediately obvious that the 25 was delivering a lot more detail, and lower coloration too. That 'bonky' bass was considerably cleaner here, with fine

lacking in bandwidth, dynamics and dynamic range. I suspected that the moving-magnet cartridge might be a limiting factor in the system performance (though to be fair Naim's MM input probably doesn't match ▶



TURNTABLE DESIGN - THE REGA APPROACH

'Keep it Simple' is a Rega maxim which has stood the company in good stead down the years, ensuring that their turntables ship around the globe and still perform with good long term consistency, and without requiring too much set-up skill and effort from the dealer - essential for a budget component which doesn't carry a hefty profit at retail.

Instead of taking the suspended subchassis approach (used by AR, Thorens and Linn, to name but three), Rega opts for a simpler, solid plinth approach. This doesn't offer the same degree of isolation from either environmental vibrations or (more importantly) those generated by the stator part of the motor. But it does lend itself to long term set-up stability and predictability - tricky and important parameters like belt tension are much easier to maintain at the correct value, for example. For best results, some sort of wall-mounted shelf support is therefore generally recommended.

Since both the turntable itself and the tone-arm are close-coupled to the same plinth on which the motor is mounted, control of motor vibration is critical. Belt drive provides some decoupling between motor generator, drive pulley and sub-platter on all Rega models. The Planar 2 or 3 motors are simply suspended on an O-ring, to provide effective mechanical decoupling from the plinth, while just two capacitors are used to help smooth out the motor 'cogging'.

By using more complex electronics in the motor drive, as in the Planar 25 (and to a much greater extent in the P9), it's possible to create a drive waveform which 'tunes out' the motor vibration to a considerable extent. The motor can then be mounted more rigidly to the plinth, avoiding the slightly 'clunky' start up behaviour of the cheaper models, and again making set-up more predictable.

► the performance of its MC stage either), and therefore decided I ought to substitute my regular low-output moving-coil, the aforementioned Linn Arkiv B. I'm not advocating fitting \$600 turntables with \$1200 cartridges, but wanted to see what the Planar 25 could really do.

The all round improvement was immediately obvious, suggesting that the record player is well up to accommodating a high quality MC cartridge, should the rest of the system warrant such a device. Certainly it brought a welcome extra authority to the proceedings, with enhanced dynamic expression and range, and better instrumental separation.

At the same time, it was clear enough that the 25 does fall significantly short of genuine high end performance. My Planar 9 is equipped with a Naim ARO tonearm base, so I couldn't make a true comparison of like with like, but it's nevertheless pretty obvious that the Planar 25 isn't really in the same league as the 9. It simply doesn't deliver the same degree of weight and authority, or the same mid-band dynamic range and vigour.

But like the Planar 3, it always preserves a good overall balance. The 25 focuses one's attention on the midband, which makes good sense as that's where the most important information is found, while keeping good control of what's going on at both extremes, so that everything stays seamless and coherent. On balance it does favour the more delicate forms of music, such as acoustic and classical, over the sort of bass rich material delivered by the likes of Leftfield and Massive Attack, but this is fundamentally an all-rounder which does good justice to whatever musical diet you put it on.

Arguably even more than loudspeakers, turntable design is all about choosing a good balance between a whole selection of often conflicting variables, all of which have

an influence on the final sound quality. Rega's success down the years owes much to its ability to pick the right compromise, not just in terms of sound quality but also in



the more general criteria such as useability and long term consistency.

I don't regard the Planar 25 as the last word in analogue replay - that isn't the design intention. (Those seeking Rega's tilt at the High End should check out the altogether superior Planar 9.) Rather it's an entirely logical upgrade over the 2 and 3, in both styling and sound quality. One of the best tonearms around comes as part of the package, while the plinth and motor drive improvements bring in more detail at both extremes of the audio band, making the music more interesting and (where appropriate) the acoustic context more convincing. Ultimately it falls short of the Planar 9's dynamic capabilities, but can nevertheless do justice to high class cartridges, and offers a low-fuss solution to record replay at a very competitive price. With the renewed interest in vinyl, especially amongst younger listeners buying or upgrading

first systems, the Planar 25 seems set to establish the same mid-market dominance that its siblings enjoy in the budget sector. ►+

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Speeds:	33.3, 45 rpm
Dimensions (HxWxD):	id down 12.5x45x36cm id up 41x45x43cm
Finish:	black, rosewood, cherry, maple trim options
Price:	£619 (excluding cartridge)

Manufacturer:

Rega Research Ltd.,
119 Park Street,
Westcliffe on Sea,
Essex SS0 7PD.
Tel. (44)(0)1702-333071
Fax. (44)(0)1702-432427



ROTEL
POWER ALPHESS
RB-981

PROTECTION

POWER



Rotel RB 991 Power Amplifier

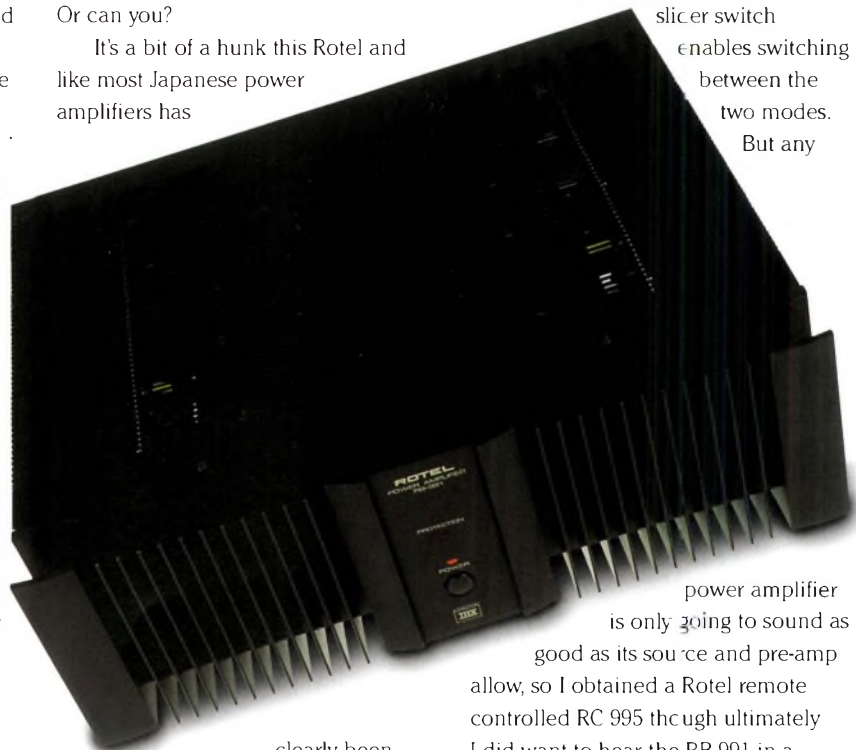
by Chris Thomas

If power outputs were any guide to the quality of an amplifier then the Rotel RB 991 would be a hands down winner every time. This £600 device can, according to the manufacturer's specifications, deliver a thundering 200 watts into 8 ohms. Compare this to a British power amp like the Naim NAP 140, which costs £793 yet produces a mere 45 watts. Is this a misleading and unfair comparison? Of course it is. Japanese Hi-fi manufacturers produce a component for each price point every few years and were among the first in the business to offer complete one-make systems. They have huge dealer networks and this "cover all bases" marketing strategy has remained essentially the same for decades.

Naim Audio is a specialist manufacturer and their great success has been based on the fact that discerning customers seek out their equipment because it sounds better than their competitors. Essentially though they both make products designed to do the same job. And the Japanese rarely produce a bad amplifier especially in the integrated budget market where, due to their production techniques, they make amplifiers of quite amazing value. When I worked in retail we sold hundreds of baby Rotel amplifiers, CD players and tuners and I can't remember one dissatisfied customer or any returns for repairs, so I have a historical respect and confidence in

their products. But I must admit that if someone asked my recommendation for a power amplifier Rotel would not be the first name on my lips. So when Roy asked me if I would like to get to know the Rotel RB-991 and told me that it was a 200-watt powerhouse that cost only £600 I was intrigued. After all you can never have too much power. Or can you?

It's a bit of a hunk this Rotel and like most Japanese power amplifiers has



clearly been designed to mimic that "professional" look of something you might see rack-mounted in a recording studio. Its outwardly macho appearance owes much to its solid build quality and bulk. The front panel

is formed from two sets of large heat-sink fins incorporating carrying handles, centered by a panel bearing the protection warning lights and the on/off switch. At the rear are a sensibly sized pair of speaker connections (binding posts or 4mm plugs) and the option of balanced (XLR) or unbalanced (RCA) inputs. A small

slicer switch enables switching between the two modes. But any

power amplifier is only going to sound as good as its source and pre-amp allow, so I obtained a Rotel remote controlled RC 995 though ultimately I did want to hear the RB-991 in a broader setting. This preamp is a very comprehensive device facility-wise, having just about every input you could ever need, including a moving-coil phono stage, but more importantly for me was the ability to drive both ▶

► the balanced and unbalanced inputs of the power amp.

Cabling can be a huge variable too so I decided to experiment, and have used the Rotels with speaker cables from Naim, Chord Company, Nordost (Blue Heaven) and Spectral /MIT. Interconnects were balanced Blue Heaven and Descadel Silver, and unbalanced Spectral/MIT and a pair of Chord Company Cobras. I don't think that the Rotel works as well with the Nordost as it does with a foursquare quality copper cable like the Naim NAC A5. Similarly, the Blue Heaven is not the ideal interconnect as, like the speaker cable, they made the amp sound too edgy, taut and mechanical. The Spectral/MIT unbalanced leads were very good, but I settled on the more reasonably priced Cobras and the Descadel to listen to its balanced operation. The inclusion of balanced inputs is a good move by Rotel as it enables the amp to use longer lengths of cable without signal loss. They are also marginally quieter inputs than the unbalanced ones. This might also come in handy for AV use, a situation the RB-991 is obviously intended for judging by the LucasFilm THX logo on the front panel.

Normal practice would be to assemble a system around the Rotel of appropriately priced components, but this tends to expose limitations elsewhere, and what starts out being a review of an amp ends up, for obvious reasons, as a system review. I really wanted to hear what this amplifier could do, so I decided to press both the Naim CDS 11 CD player and the JMLabs Mini-Utopias into action as these would throw a magnifying glass over it's performance. Also passing through my hands was a Naim NAC 62/NAP 140 which I figured would make an interesting flip-side comparison.

This Rotel combination is yet another amplifier that sounds really awful from a cold start-up, so I gave it a full 48 hours before sitting down for a serious listen.

I know that preconceptions are dangerous but unavoidable things, and when any of us sit and listen to a piece of equipment for the first time, we all have them. I expected the Rotel to be powerful and fast but brash. I got the first bit right but there was no brashness, no brittle top end, just a rather well balanced and almost gentle power delivery. Really powerful amplifiers let you know of their strength, even at low listening-levels,



with their ease and feeling of muscularity and the Rotel manages this very well. It has a feeling of weight and presence, always letting you know that, at the twist of a wrist, there is enough power in hand to be scary. At low levels its character is tight and controlled. It is certainly a little tonally colourless but still incisive and to the point. On Joe Sample's *Ashes To Ashes* CD (WB 7599-26318-2) the Rotel was very good at controlling the tempo of the rhythm

section. The drum and bass patterns on top of which Sample floats his piano melodies were sharp and percussive. Omar Hakim on drums and Marcus Miller on bass are a formidable foundation for any band as they are so tightly interlocked. The bass drum is the anchor here and Miller stays in sight of it at all times, occasionally wandering to nudge the song into a different area that Sample picks up on and embellishes. Like all truly great combinations these two bring a feeling of life and progression to this music as if the compositions have an unstoppable metronomic progression to

them. This is the "feel" and I like the way the Rotel deals with it. Where it falls down is that it tends to draw the bass drum and guitar together and make one instrument out of them and at times, especially when the full band is playing, it is hard to get an ear between the two. Also there is a tendency to thin the piano out by accentuating the front edge of the note, leaving it over-percussive and tonally flat. Again, though this happens mostly when the instrumentation is dense, it is sometimes hard to believe that you are listening to a full size grand piano. Similarly the small horn section arrangements are easier to follow ►

▶ than to understand, as the amplifier cannot quite manage to convince you that you are listening to different air-driven instruments blowing as a section.

The more expensive the system, the worse it deals with the music of Jimi Hendrix. Every time I listen to Hendrix on expensive equipment I'm disappointed. The clinical way in which so many of these systems dissect and compartmentalise the music, sanitising it as they go, is exactly the opposite of what Jimi was all about. When you listen to his music with that crystal clarity that a top system inevitably has, you can hear everything, but what they all seem to miss out on is just the sheer power and electricity that surrounded Jimi's playing. Standing in front of a wall of Jim Marshall's 100 watt amplifiers, all turned up to number 11, with a Stratocaster in your hand and a Cry Baby Wah-Wah pedal under your Cuban-heeled snakeskin boot is not a quiet or low-distortion environment. Equipment in the Sixties was rough and noisy but to the point, rather like Jimi Hendrix. Expensive systems are not raw or edgy enough to engulf you in that electrically charged excitement, and all you really learn from listening to them is that Jimi played out of tune for most of the time and that is definitely missing the point. The power and forthright delivery of these Rotel amplifiers made *Electric Ladyland* (MCAD 10895) come alive. Advancing the volume control with gay abandon bought a taste of Hendrix into my living room. On this disc, the Rotel's lack of that final degree of sophistication was a positive boon as the guitar, forever hovering on the edge of terminal feedback, wailed and screamed at Jimi's command. Mitch Mitchell's manic flailing on the drums, somehow working with and against the song really carries a resonance of days past. Unfortunately neither this system nor any other really made any sense of what Noel Redding was doing with his

bass guitar. Hendrix said he was there because of his hairstyle and I think that comes across.

Another CD to give systems a headache, though for very different reasons, is Joni Mitchell's *Taming The Tiger* (Reprise 9362-46451-2). It is as if Joni has recorded an album and then thrown away the majority of the instrumental tracks, stripping it to what she considers to be the essential bones. It is a challenging collection of songs with a totally elusive rhythmic element. Tempos and timing seem to float around the music and often, with nothing to hang onto, the songs seem to wander before Joni snatches them up with a vocal phrase or an upward, chugging stroke of her right hand across the strings of her guitar. This is difficult material indeed and showed that the Rotel lacks the subtlety required to make it truly understandable. The individual vocals and instruments are all dealt with quite nicely in isolation but stringing all the elements together into a series of songs or performances was beyond it. I pressed the NAC 62/NAP 140 into action and musically I was listening to a different CD. Here was a more tactile and complete performance. The gossamer-thin rhythmic threads that tie the songs together were immediately so much more accessible and, although the songs still wander, and sometimes seem to stop still altogether, the Naim shows a much greater empathy to the music than the Rotel.

I removed the RC-995 preamplifier and replaced it with the Spectral DMC-12. This is just about as unlikely a partnership as you are likely to find, but it did isolate the power amplifier and removed the sonic influence of the pre. Now, when driven by an amplifier of the Spectral's class the RB-991 sung with an altogether more convincing voice. Tonally it was easier on the ear and less "pinched". It seemed that, having cleared its throat it was rather enjoying the enormous increase in

detail it was receiving, and it gained strength in every department, particularly low level detail where it was surprisingly good. It got me thinking that if I was buying the pre/power of my dreams and just did not have all the money available then, rather than buy what I could afford and never be happy with it anyway, I might well consider buying just the preamplifier and hooking it into the Rotel. Then when I could afford the power amp I could relegate the Rotel to an AV situation or just sell it. Just a thought!

Generally speaking the Rotel is a hard amplifier to criticise when the price is taken into consideration. It has enormous power but this is not at too great a cost to its sound quality. I wonder though, in practice, how many people are really going to need this kind of wattage. I personally would opt for the lower powered but musically more satisfying Naim combo, but the Rotel does most things well and some things very well. For £600 I would have to say that it is something of a bargain. ▶+

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Power Output	200 watts/ channel – 8ohms
Connections (input)	unbalanced RCA – balanced XLR
Speaker Impedance	4 ohms minimum
Input Sensitivity	1.5 volts
Input Impedance	32 k ohms
Weight	15.5Kg
Dimensions(WxHxD)	121x440x385mm
Price	£600

Distributor

Gamepath Ltd
Tel. (44)(0)1908-317707
Fax. (44)(0)1908-322704
Net. www.rotel.com



The Real Deal

Indigo 1 Playback Monitors

by Pete Christie

Having picked my way through sub-£200.00 hi-fi gems in previous issues, I'm turning my attention to a pair of loudspeakers which, though not exactly "budget", in my opinion represent a stunning "sounds for pounds" alternative to the current, better-known stars in the £300.00 - £400.00 range.

Why is it that every now and then, something catches your eye, and you instinctively know that you are going to like it? It doesn't matter what it is. You simply know that it is special and that you have to find out more about it.

Take the Indigo range of loudspeakers for example. I was wandering through the labyrinthine corridors of the Hammer-smith Novotel at the last Hi-Fi show of the twentieth century when I encountered them. I was chatting to an acquaintance who shall be referred to as "hello Cloyve 'ere" (to maintain his anonymity), when he asked me what I thought of a new range of speakers he was involved with. I turned around and was confronted with some of the best looking, small loudspeakers I had ever seen.

I like blue. I like blue and white. So loudspeakers that sport a dusky blue front baffle with a splendidly

shining white drive unit are obviously going to appeal to me. I was looking at two pairs of stand mounting loudspeakers, the Indigo 1 and larger Indigo 3, and a rather attractive home cinema centre channel speaker called the Indigo 2.

"Want to hear them?" he invited. "Not here!" I replied, "but you can bring them with you next time you visit." A few weeks passed, and the speakers were

The drive unit and tweeter are mounted conventionally - the 25mm titanium tweeter being above the stunningly white 130mm LF driver. The bevelling of the front face is pronounced, though entirely suitable, with equal amounts of cherry and blue fascia in evidence. A small (35mm) front port situated above and to the right of the driver, and a discrete silver logo, finish off what is an

exceedingly attractive loudspeaker. Physically, the Indigo 1 is not as small as some book-shelf speakers currently available, though personally I find the proportions

aesthetically satisfying.

So, who are these Indigo people and what are they up to? The name was completely unknown to me until the 1999 Hi-Fi show. This is not surprising as the company was only formed in early '99 and is therefore a complete new entity in the market place. The team includes a man called Ken Docherty who spent a fair deal of time on the design teams of loudspeaker manufacturers Mission and Tannoy. The changing face of "home entertainment" with the



duly delivered and left on loan for appraisal.

Closer inspection on home territory proved even more impressive. The design and finish of the Indigo 1's certainly stands up to close scrutiny. The cabinet is covered in a real cherry wood veneer, the front baffle is a beautiful, velvety indigo blue.

▶ huge increase in popularity of DVD, Internet and computer generated sound, home studio and digital television prompted a fresh look at designing a speaker which would satisfy a wider range of applications than the conventional Hi-Fi loudspeaker. That is why all three products currently available (Indigo 1, 2, and 3!) share several features to ensure compatibility with all the possible uses to which they may be put.

For a start, they are fully magnetically shielded, and extremely inert, which means that they can be placed in some very strange places and still perform very well – like next to a television set in the corner of a room. Now this may not seem important to anyone whose room is designed around the Hi-Fi (like me!). However, I can assure you that it is becoming increasingly apparent that to the vast majority of people I deal with in my day job, that when you cram a PC, a play-station, a TV, video, and the associated sonic hardware into an average sized living room (oh yes, don't forget the furniture), a loudspeaker that has a degree of positional flexibility is a positive godsend! It is only a relatively small amount of people who can afford the luxury of having their cinema sound systems set up in the optimum positions, in the real world, it just don't happen!

Indigo don't actually describe their loudspeakers as loudspeakers – they are “playback monitors” – hence the title of this piece. This is not just a fancy use of jargon, it is more a statement of fact. The product brochure describes the Indigo 1 as a serious studio monitor for the home. This would suggest a speaker that tells more of the sonic truth than stamping its own identity on the overall sound of the system.

As I use Rogers LS3/5a's at home, and consider them to be the finest small monitor in the universe (I'm not biased!), I was keen to test these blue and white things out.

My first test was carried out by accident. I was actually auditioning a pair of quite different loudspeakers with my colleagues in the emporium at which we are employed, using the Densen B300/200 & 400 pre, power amps and CD player. I was not best pleased. Neither was anyone else. I won't mention any names, but as the units on test retailed at well over



£1000.00 a pair, we felt that they should have been a tad more impressive! As life was fairly peaceful at the time, we continued trying pairs of loud-speakers to see which ones sounded most acceptable, until someone mentioned the Indigo 1's. Bearing in mind that the budget had been set at around £1000.00, I wasn't sure that it would be fair to put a pair of £330.00 speakers up against such superior competition, but I eventually

conceded to the demands of the assembled crew.

What happened next was quite off-putting. Having been concentrating on listening for drama and excitement we were confronted with something quite different. The description that best springs to mind would be “relaxed”. This may seem a cop-out, and may give you the impression that the Indigo 1's could appear somewhat bland or sleepy. This would be totally unfair and more importantly, incorrect. With prolonged listening, it soon became clear that all the information was there, but that the speakers were delivering it calmly and naturally.

Treble was clear and lucid, the midrange was detailed, expressive and sweet, and the bass was focused, deep and tuneful. It was obvious that these were the sort of speakers that you could play all day without succumbing to listening fatigue.

There were no nasty edges in the higher treble, especially on stabbing horn pieces such as in “Penguins” from the Lyle Lovett album *I Love Everybody*. A definite “must” to check out treble trouble. The intro is a smacking snare drum and full horn section with a tight, funky bass guitar growling in the depths. Through a bright pair of speakers, don't be surprised when blood spouts from your ears. Through anything cuddly, timing, presence and excitement can be non-existent. With the Indigo 1's, all the information was delivered accurately enough to be picked out, instrument by instrument, across the whole sound spectrum, without the sound either taking your head off or losing impact and drama.

So I took them home to give them an in-depth session. The system I used was a Helios 2 CD Player, Shearne Audio Phase 2 Amplifier, Nordost Solar Wind interconnects ▶

▶ and van den Hul speaker cable. I mounted the speakers on Soundcare “SuperSpikes” atop stone speaker stands.

After a suitable warm-up period I started where I left off, and returned to the Lyle Lovett track. It was almost identical to the audition in the shop. The “life” of the song flowing into the room with the same relaxed feel.

A current favourite test track in my collection is “Thin Line Between Love and Hate” by Annie Lennox on the album *Medusa* (RCA BMG 74321331362). The production requires a vehicle capable of maintaining the underlying menace provided by the bass guitar line. The Indigos do just that. They don’t get in the way of anything, they just let it through.

A similar result was achieved with “Break Your Heart” by Natalie Merchant on the album *Ophelia* (Warner 7559-62196-2). Stunning production with the soft and silky vocals of Ms. Merchant, and the superb centre stage trumpet of Chris Botti. This track proved beyond doubt the ability of the Indigo 1’s to present a totally coherent soundstage.

The only problem I encountered was a slight but noticeable resonance on the Janis Ian song “When Angels Cry” from the album *Revenge* (Grapevine GRACD 301). An extremely spare but intense song using only acoustic guitar and vocal. The simplest recording I used proves the most troublesome! About 15 seconds into the song a slightly over-recorded note on the vocal track (D flat I think) caused the offending “buzz”. This was minimal, and only noticeable at a fairly high volume. At normal listening levels, I didn’t spot it, and anyway, I was enjoying the performance so much, I didn’t really care.

There’s a song on the Crosby Stills and Nash re-mixed compilation album *Carry On* (Atlantic 7567-80487-2) called “Find the Cost of Freedom”.


It’s the last track on the album and consists of a guitar and simple single vocal line (sung by Stephen Stills), which is repeated by the same line repeated without the guitar, but in full harmony. It’s very short, but incredibly powerful. The Indigos once again proved more than capable of delivering the goods!

I dipped into some classical music and gave the system a crack at *Fantasia On A Theme By Thomas Tallis* by Vaughan Williams (Academy of St. Martin in the Fields, Sir Neville Marriner Philips 442 427-2). Once again these “playback monitors” allowed the rich and vibrant strings to flood the room with sound.

As I previously mentioned, I had these loudspeakers in my system at home for quite a while, and I used them for every kind of music I have in my (and my kids’) collection. Put on Rock and Roll and they do: Kid Creole and the Coconuts – no problem: Frank Sinatra – swinging! And all the time, they manage to maintain a long-term, listener-friendly tonal quality which avoids ear-pain – even with some of my eldest sons’ home-made dance tracks produced in his recording studio upstairs (It used to be called a bedroom!), using a totally sub-standard Personal Computer and copied onto a cheap and disgustingly bad quality Ghetto Blaster.

Which, I suppose, is what the men at Indigo were aiming for. A superbly attractive Hi-Fi loudspeaker that is not only a studio monitor, but also a surround-sound home cinema speaker that sounds good wherever you position it. It works close against a back wall, it works against a side wall. It is not a Jack-of-all-trades. It’s better than that. It will make a lot of friends if it is demonstrated correctly, and if people take the time to listen to it properly – i.e. over a long period. I don’t think they will ever knock anyone out in a quick head-to-head

comparison with another speaker. That’s the preserve of more “impressive” sounding designs whose exaggeration becomes more and more obvious the longer you listen.

The Indigo 1 Playback Monitors are stunningly attractive, very well made and honest loudspeakers. They aren’t flash or “zingy”, and they don’t flood the room with gigantic, window throbbing bass. What they do is let the music out calmly, enjoyably, easily, and for £330.00, very affordably. 

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Recommended Amplifier Power	30-100W
Sensitivity 2.83v @ 1m	88dB
Frequency Response 2.83v @ 1m	48Hz - 20kHz
Nominal Impedance	8 ohm
Bass-Mid Driver	130mm laminated cone, shielded
Tweeter	25mm Titanium Dome, Neodymium Magnet
Dimensions (HxWxD)	270x200x270mm
Price	£330.00

Information

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Statmat

by Dave Ayers

Here we have Ringmat Developments take on optimising CD replay. However, where the turntable mats are all about vibration control, the CD version is meant to deal with the effects of static on a CD. Now it's well known that electric charges can bend light waves, and thus could result in reading errors. The Statmat is made from a conductive film covered in patterns made from conductive ink. The patterns are claimed to disperse the static build-up in the most effective manner possible.

Feeling extremely cruel, I first tried 'Selling Jesus' by Skunk Anansie from their first album. This is an extremely loud, almost thrash metal track with lots of heavy guitars. I've been quite disappointed with the rhythmic reproduction of this track recently. The emphasis is supposed to be heavily on the first beat of the bar, but it just wasn't happening. Using the Statmat really set things to rights, and the effect wasn't subtle. So far so (very) good. Time to be less mean and use something less electric, 'Dance The Night Away' by the Mavericks. Listening without the Statmat, the brass was punchy but edgy, and some of the individual instruments were unrecognisable in the mix. Adding the mat and trying again wrought several improvements, firstly the brass was smoothed off, yet given slightly more attack, secondly the various emerged from the mix and became far more recognisable, especially the congas and the piano, both of which gained timbre and decay. Finally the whole soundstage seemed more open and natural.

Moving on to 'Since The Kids' from the Peter Hammill album *This*, I wanted to see how the Statmat would deal with a very simple recording of vocal and piano. Once again, using the mat



improved the sound in a number of ways, especially in terms of the attack of the piano notes. Without the mat, every note was slightly edgy and brittle, and the shading between light and heavy playing was ill defined. With the mat in play the weighting of notes was far clearer, and each hammer hit with a clean true tone. Both impact and decay were much more natural, and Hammill's tonal inflections were also greatly improved. But there was one point which really stood out. In the middle of the song, everything stops, and Hammill plays a simple single note melody. Without the mat, the struck notes sounded like they were distorting through my system, but with the mat not only was this effect almost totally removed, but also you could discern the remaining piano strings 'singing along' with the played note - fascinating.

Despite all the above, the biggest difference I heard was when listening to the Richard Thompson album *Mock Tudor* reviewed last month. The track 'Uninhabited Man' has a big soundstage underpinned with some very deep plucked double bass from Danny

Thompson. Add multi-tracked acoustic guitars and Thompson's voice and you have a complex mix that has the ability to fool most systems. With the mat added to the system the soundstage instantly grew in depth and width, and the bass become deeper and clearer. The shape and the tone of the various guitars became much easier to determine, the sibilance on Thompson's voice was much more natural, and the overall rhythm became much more coherent. On this track the differences with and without the mat were so easy to hear I couldn't believe it. Frankly it was like moving up two CD players in a company's range. Emperor's new clothes? Not according to my lodger who was dragged in for a second opinion. The Statmat makes a very real and musically worthwhile difference in my system.

Bear in mind that the Statmat will have a residual effect. It takes time for a disc to re-charge, so for ABA listening you need to actually have two identical discs, one to use with the mat and one without. Do I think the Statmat is worthwhile? £20 for a bit of cellophane puts perceived value on the low side all the time you are using your eyes, but once you use your ears questions of value will simply evaporate. I'm buying this one, so I guess that confirms it. However, its effect and the manufacturers claims for it, have set me thinking on the whole issue of static and CDs. More next time.

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Pearl Valve Coolers

by Roy Gregory

I've been using Pearl Valve Coolers on my Jadis JA30s since I first came across them getting on for ten years ago. For the uninitiated, a Pearl cooler is a concertina sleeve constructed from sheet copper which slips over an audio valve, acting as a heat sink. The copper fins are perforated with horizontal slots to improve airflow, and the whole thing acts as an extremely efficient chimney. (If you want to know how efficient then Pearl can supply you with reams of data on the subject. The theory of course, is that the sleeve allows the valve to run at a lower temperature, leading to longer tube life and greater reliability. But there's more to it than just that.

Along with the cooler you get a pair of stout rubber O rings which are used to clamp it in place (Useful Tip: put the rings over the cooler and then slip it over the valve - it's a lot easier!). The sleeve now also acts as a damper, reducing microphony and improving sound quality. And they work. You should notice a very real improvement in transparency, focus, low level information and dynamic range once you've installed the coolers. Do they improve the reliability and longevity of your valves? Well, nothing has blown up and I'm still running the same Platinum Grade Gold Aero ECC82s and 83s as I was when the coolers were first installed. And they still sound much better than the stock items currently supplied with the JA100s. Given the price, that's a real relief. As regards the output tubes that's harder to gauge, but the EL34s seem to be lasting a lot longer than I'd expect as well.

Downsides? Apart from the fact that they hide the pretty glowing bottles,



not much that I can mention. Me, I kind of like the Fritz Lang look. You need to check the space around your valves to make sure that there's enough room for the coolers. Pearl suggest that you can interlock the fins, rather like cogs. Don't. To do so you need to dispense with the O rings, and the coolers end up rattling against the tube, adding to the microphony rather than damping it. In short, it'll make your amp sound worse. Also, if you've got non parallel sided tubes then the O rings have a tendency to roll down to the narrow end under their own tension. The new Sovtek KT88 springs to mind. Finally, you need to order the right sizes. Pearl produce coolers in a whole host of dimensions, so it's worth taking a little trouble over getting things right. That aside it's a case of fit and forget.

In fact, it's so easy to forget about the Pearls that the only thing that prompted me to write this piece, was the arrival through the post of a quartet

of "improved" models for ECC83 sized valves. As this includes just about every low-level signal or driver valve used in audio electronics, that makes it very interesting indeed. I only use the coolers on my power amps, but experimentation suggests that they are every bit as effective on pre-amps. The "improvement" comes in the shape of a woven carbon fibre sleeve that fits between the cooler and the valve, improving the mechanical coupling.

Replacing the old-style coolers on the 30s with the be-stocking variety produced a further subtle, but worthwhile benefit. Subtle in terms of putting your finger on it, far from subtle in terms of simply identifying it. Greater transparency, and an increase in the air and space around and between performers, produced a noticeable increase in presence. At the same time, a further improvement in low level dynamics made instruments more vibrant and real. How big was the margin of difference? You didn't need to resort to ABA comparisons. The benefits were clearly () apparent, to the extent that Victoria commented on the improvement when she arrived home that evening. They're also the kind of changes that can be readily masked in a system wanting in the areas of resolution and low level dynamics, so if you fit Pearl coolers and don't hear a difference then either your valves are immune to vibration, or it's time to take a close look at your system and its set-up. And remember, I got these results simply upgrading half of the coolers on otherwise fully pearled amps. The comparison between



► un-Cooled tubes and the same valves with their modesty in tact, running in the Graaf 13.5B, was absolutely huge, and out of all proportion with the costs involved.

The carbon socks are available separately, but only come in ECC83 or EL84 sizes. Presumably, although carbon fibre is a good conductor of heat (remember all those bright red brake shoes on Formula 1 cars), using it with the larger power tubes compromises the cooling effect. Personally, I'm much more interested in the immediate sonic benefits than the

possible increase in valve life, so I'm keen to try socking my EL34s too. Perhaps Pearl will give us the choice?

Pearl Coolers are one of the most cost-effective and sensible upgrades on offer to valve users. After all, if you don't like the results you simply take them off. At a cost of £7.00 each for the small size, including sock, and £9 for the EL84 size or larger ("Gee! Do you s'pose they do them for 845s?"), you need to be running a power station before the cost becomes prohibitive. If you already use the standard coolers, you can get socks for around £2.50

each. And yes I did try the socks on their own, and no they aren't nearly as good as the sock/cooler combination.

I love these things. Cost effective and no-nonsense, they even have empirical data to back them up. Unlike too many things in hi-fi, buying these is an absolute no-brainer.

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Incognito Rega Tonearm Rewiring Kit

by Roy Gregory

In the last issue I marvelled at the comprehensive instructions and simplicity of installation offered by a new DIY re-wiring kit for the Rega RB300 tonearm. The Incognito kit makes what is normally a source of immense frustration, if not abject humiliation ("I told you you should never have undone those two little screws!"), into a life affirming boost to your self esteem. In one fell swoop it demonstrates your mastery of all things audio. Chuckle modestly as the unbelievers (wife, friends, family) are struck dumb by your effortless prowess (and effortless is the word). Forget all those great ideas that somehow turned sour. Read the instructions, use the tools supplied, and twenty minutes later you'll be master of all you survey. Well, a really professional looking re-wired Rega tonearm at least. Now the nightmares will stop. Now the time that you redecorated the lounge with egg cartons can finally be laid to rest. And the really great thing is the way the Incognito kit doesn't just perform as therapy for the audio insecure. It actually improves the sound of your

system as well! (It even fits the 250, but it's slightly more fiddly to install, so you might want to do that one in private, or Moth will do it for you for £13.)

Newly doctored RB300 clutched to my breast, I travelled hot-foot to local dealer Phonography for a bit of listening. Where better to start than with a Rega Planar 3? I thought to myself. After all, if the rewired arm can improve things in the carefully balanced but otherwise modest context of the Planar 3, what could it do on a better deck? Phil duly provided the necessary (one Rega turntable and a pair of Super Bias cartridges) and we were ready to rock. With both arms loaded and the adjustments set, we could swap the complete assembly in a minute or two, allowing sensible ABA comparisons.

For anybody who missed the last issue, a brief resume is probably a good idea. What the Incognito kit does is replace the collection of disparate wiring that comes as standard inside and outside a Rega tonearm, with a purpose designed Cardas arm lead which runs uninterrupted conductors

from the cartridge tags to the phono plugs (both sets of connectors are also significantly improved). At £115, just the hardware involved makes it look like a bargain. How big a bargain you won't realise until you listen to it.

I started with the standard 300 and the Shawn Colvin track 'Another Long One' (*Steady On* CBS466142-1), chosen for its disjointed rhythm and phrasing. The voice was nicely solid and placed well forward, but the guitar and percussion didn't really gel to create a recognisable pattern to the opening bars, lacking immediacy as well as attack. Swapping to the Incognito RB300 caused something of a double take. We listened to the track again, we looked at each other, and Phil said "Well, it's certainly different..."

That's what happens sometimes. The difference between the two versions is so huge that you lose the goalposts; the cues that you are holding from the first version simply don't correspond to the second. The only answer is to repeat the process, only this time round you are ready for the change, so you don't get thrown by its ►

▶ sheer magnitude and you can begin to concentrate on the detail. Much frantic swapping of arms later, and the pattern began to emerge. The shock factor here was the treatment of the voice. It was so central to the presentation of the standard RB300 that the rest of the rather sparse introduction was ranged back and behind it, receding spatially and musically into the background. Not with the incognito. Here everything fell back into balance. The voice might have lost the sheer presence (thickness?) that it had on the 300, but now it was correctly positioned above and slightly behind the guitar. But what also emerged was a whole soundstage of percussion and backing instruments, especially once the song reached its chorus. The awkward jangle of guitar and unconventional percussive sounds (baking trays, anyone?) that opens the track and defines its edgy, irritable quality, locked together, making sense, and all the more expressive for the increased attack and harmonic development on offer. And while the voice had retreated in prominence, it too was far more focused, naturally detailed and expressive, taking on the acid twist that is so essential to the constructive bitterness of the lyric.

This sense of musical coherence and communication is exactly the intangible quality that turns hi-fi into music, and the Incognito-ed arm has it in spades. Rockin' Jimmy and the Brothers of the Night's great album *By the Light of the Moon* (Sonet Records SNTF857) is a living, breathing example of a great pub/club band at work. Imagine the blues equivalent of The Commitments with a smaller cast (and only one backing singer!). These guys know how to play, and know how to have a good time. Using 'Stand Back' as a starting point, the RB300 was nicely solid, the voice big and central again, and the rock steady rhythm section pounded out the beat. Good and propulsive, the whole thing was ultimately a little clumsy and

mechanical. The Incognito-ed arm made the whole thing click. The greater balance, top and bottom extension, dynamic range and clarity allowed the band's excellence to shine. This lot have served their dues on the road, and the relaxed confidence of their playing, the sure footed way in which they play off of each other is suddenly apparent. There's a real chemistry and excitement to the music, contained in the minute details that bind the performance together and which are delivered intact by the wiring upgrade. There's a much greater tonal range on offer, and much better instrumental subtlety. The meandering lead guitar line is absolutely nailed down by the rhythm section. Everything is crisper and cleaner, the precise pitch and placement of the backing vocals is spot on.

Now, if you reckon that sounds like a fundamental improvement then you'd be right. The incognito re-wire kit lifts the Rega's performance to undreamed of levels. It cures the lumpy, tucked under bass, and it cures the splashy treble and mid-prominent balance. But then I always figured that you'd get the hi-fi benefits. What I wasn't ready for was the level of musical improvement. By trying the arm on the Planar 3 I was confident that we'd settle the 'different as opposed to better' debate once and for all, by giving the RB300 the advantage of home turf. What we got was the aural equivalent of Spurs sticking five past the Arsenal at Highbury. Which is kind of scary.

If the RB300 rendered mid-priced arms redundant, leaving a void



between £150 and \$550, the Incognito-ed arm threatens anything up to a thousand pounds (and possibly beyond). This is an area which I'll have to investigate, but for the meantime, I'm still amazed by the performance of the re-wired arm on the Planar 3. For anyone using an RB300 (or even 600 or 900) arm, the incognito kit should be placed right at the top of your wants list. If you are using it as a stop-gap on an expensive deck, then it advances to the status of 'Immediate Purchase'

Records have always offered the maximum musical value in the face of a whole host of digital competitors. All of a sudden you can get an even greater return for a lot less money. If the Rega arm was one of the bargains of a century now gone, then the Incognito re-wire kit dusts it off and sets it up for the one that's just arrived.

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The Cartridge Man Digital Levelling Gauge

by Roy Gregory

In some ways I guess this should be considered as the companion piece to Len Gregory's (no relation) excellent Electronic Stylus Balance. Built into a similar plastic cylinder, though slimmer and a bit taller, the Digital Levelling Gauge is a substitute for a standard spirit level. At £200 make that an expensive substitute. Why bother, when conventional spirit levels are both cheap and effective?

The answer to that is consistency. The digital readout, accurate to 0.1 of a degree, and using tiny arrows to indicate the 'high-side' in each direction, eliminates judgement from the equation. You know, those ticklish decisions as to when the bubble is exactly centred. It also eliminates viewing angle variations and parallax distortions. In use it has equalled or bettered the results I've achieved with the variety of levels that I normally use. It also has another and less obvious



use. Some speakers such as the NHT 2.9s and AudioPhysic Steps, require a degree of tilt adjustment. The digital read-out provides a precise measure of angle, not just level, meaning that you can match things precisely.

The only real downside is the

weight of the Levelling Gauge. Although it has a central hole in its base to sit over a turntable spindle, at 8ozs/250g it's too heavy to use with a lightweight, sprung sub-chassis turntable like an LP12 or a Pink. I wonder if Len could trim the weight to 180g?

At £200 the Levelling gauge is probably too pricey for all but the most dedicated audiophiles, despite a host of alternative uses around the house. But how about being able to borrow one? With its combination of accuracy and compact dimensions, this is a must for dealers, and therefore presumably, their better customers.

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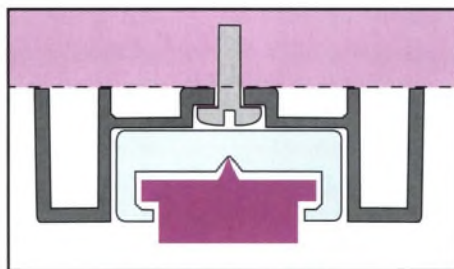
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Soundcare Superspikes

by Pete Christie


Here's something that is worth mentioning. A chap recently wandered into the shop and asked if I was interested in trying out some speaker and equipment isolation spike kits from a Scandinavian company he was representing. Experience has taught me never to say no to any offer for anything - no matter how strange.

Having long championed the cause of equipment and loudspeaker isolation for improving sound quality, and also having experienced the



opposition (usually from 'er indoors, and along the lines of "making holes in my carpet/floor etc.") the design improvements offered by Soundcare were immediately obvious. The cup

and cone spiking assembly which, on paper, offers the appropriate sonic decoupling with the advantage of total surface protection, is shrouded in an outer case, making it look just like one of those chunky feet so beloved of Japanese equipment manufacturers.

What is even more cunning is that the set designed for electronics has the ability to replace the existing equipment feet by means of simply unscrewing the originals, and screwing the isolators back in their 

place. Marvellous! There are also smaller feet available for stand mount or shelf mount speakers, and screw-in replacement feet for floorstanders, which are available in every thread size you are likely to come across. Internally they look rather like a Nordost Pulsar Point, but the cosmetic shroud keeps the top section captive, making them rather easier to position.

I took two sets of Spike 2 (£20/pack) and a pack of Superspikes (£35) home and tried them out. The Spike 2's were inserted under my LS3/5a's (which normally sit atop Stands Unique carbon fibre Isolators)

without any detrimental effects - which means that they were obviously pretty good. The Superspikes were first bolted on the bottom of a Trichord Genesis CD Player, and then a Helios 2 CD Player. With the Genesis, the improvement in sound was immediate, with a noticeable tighter focus to the bass and greater overall clarity. I'm also getting ecstatic noises from the owner of a very large pair of floorstanding speakers, so the benefits seem to be reasonably universal as long as you don't interfere with a built in isolation system. Placing the Superspikes under the Helios 2 was actually detrimental because it short circuited the player's

own mechanical ground.

This is only a taster due to shortage of time, but first impressions are extremely positive, and I will be investigating further. In the meantime, if you want the sonic benefits of mechanical isolation without altering the appearance of your equipment or damaging the surface it sits on, then the Soundcare products are just about the only worthwhile and affordable game in town.

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MusicHound Jazz

My shelves are groaning with various jazz reference books: The Rough Guide, The Penguin Guide, The Listeners Guide to Jazz, you name it, I've got it. Until now, none has provided a really comprehensive selection of available recordings along with an intelligent appraisal system. When hunting for a particular recording or requiring a potted biography of a particular artist or band I have frequently searched through the lot, and just as frequently have given up with either half the story or worse no story at all. Now, in a single volume I've found a publication that comes closer than all these titles to answering my need.

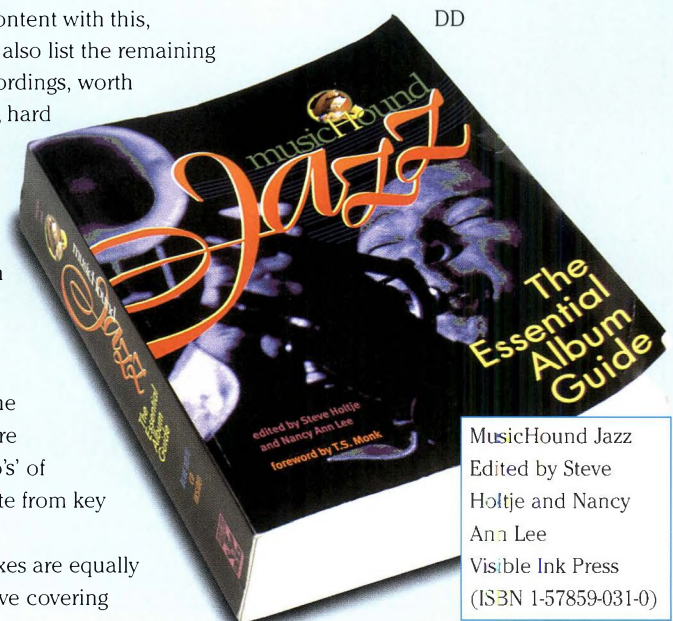
In a brick-thick paperback, MusicHound offers facts, recording reviews and potted biographies of nearly 1,300 artists. And, although it's a US title, it has the most comprehensive selections of all available recordings I've encountered. The rating system which uses bones (yes bones!) ranges from woof! for a real stinker to five bones for the select few

'perfect' albums.

This alone would be a pretty useful guide, but MusicHound gild the lily with some particularly intelligent additions. Each artist review offers not only a brief biography but has their recordings categorised by a top 'what to buy' section. This is followed by 'what to buy next' and even 'what to avoid'. Not content with this, MusicHound also list the remaining available recordings, worth searching for, hard to find and out of print gems, and crucial influences on and from the artists work. Sidebars throughout the volume feature 'monster solo's' of particular note from key recordings.

The indexes are equally comprehensive covering

compilation albums, jazz themed books, magazines and newsletters, web sites, even (US) jazz festivals. As the final icing on the cake, the book is issued with a free Blue Note jazz sampler. All this for £19.99! What are you waiting for, dust off that Christmas book token now! ▶+



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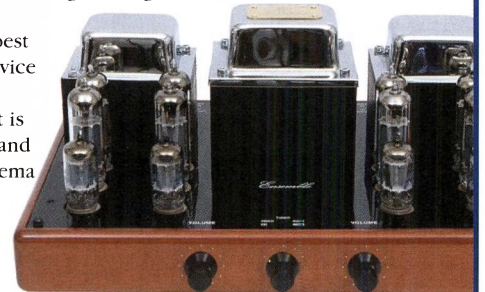
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IGGY POP

by Jon Maple

For many a superannuated punk approaching a time of life when hormone-replacement therapy becomes a viable option, Iggy Pop is, was and ever shall be *The Man, The Don, The Veritable Godfather of Punk. The Ig.*

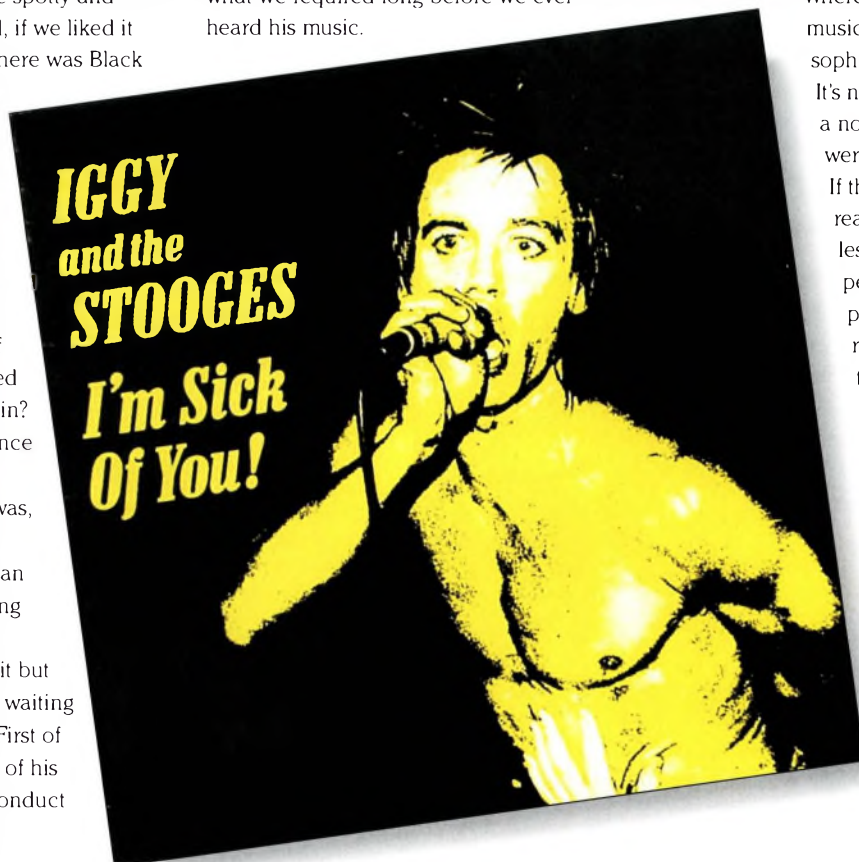
We first read of his antics in the pages of an awe-struck NME at that time in the early seventies when The Eagles and Crosby, Stills & Nash set the tone for the rock music of America. Sweetly harmonic, post-hippie soft rock was no way to express the existential angst of the spotty and rebellious. In England, if we liked it heavy - and we did - there was Black Sabbath, Hawkwind, Led Zeppelin and all those other guys who were away with the fairies. But, we asked ourselves, what emotional catharsis can possibly be achieved via a type of music that was inspired by the novels of Tolkein? Where was the relevance to our lives in these escapist fantasies? It was, to use the South Park idiom, nothing less than a bunch of tree-hugging hippie crap.

We did not know it but we were a generation waiting for punk to happen. First of all came The Ig. Tales of his outrageous onstage conduct

held within them the first whiff of revolution. Stripped to the waist, smeared in peanut butter or boiling candle-wax, rolling in broken glass, bleeding for, then walking on the upraised hands of, his audience, here was inspiration incarnate. A corpse-white James Brown with added self-destruction. Wild, bestial, a drug-fuelled Dionysus, vomiting over the front row when the heroin kicked in. If there was one performer up for Rock'n'Roll Suicide Live On Stage it was he. We knew Iggy was exactly what we required long before we ever heard his music.

When those first Iggy & The Stooges LPs began to filter across the Atlantic and we got our sweaty mitts on them there was a glorious sense of confirmation. "Well, it's 1969 OK/All across the USA/Another year for me and you/Another year with nothing to do." It was 1971 or 2 by then, but the lyrics spoke to us, and we knew what they were saying. We played the albums to our friends, those guitar practising obsessives, lovers of Clapton, Santana and McLaughlin, and gratifyingly, they were horrified.

Where's the musician-ship, the sophistication? It's nothing but a noise! We were so pleased. If that was the reaction of our less enlightened peers, then our parents would really revile this stuff. ▶



▶ James Newell Osterberg Jr was born in 1947 in Muskegon, Michigan and was brought up in a trailer park in Ann Arbor, a University town near Detroit. He was by no means the archetypal trailer trash however, his mother was a manager at Bendix Aerospace while James Newell Senior was a schoolteacher. It seems they just liked trailers. Later Iggy would mythologise his upbringing, thus, in the song 'Head On The Kerb': "Well, I was born in a trailer camp/Days were cold, nights were damp/Incubator baby I was half-alive/I hadda eat a lot of shit and jive..."

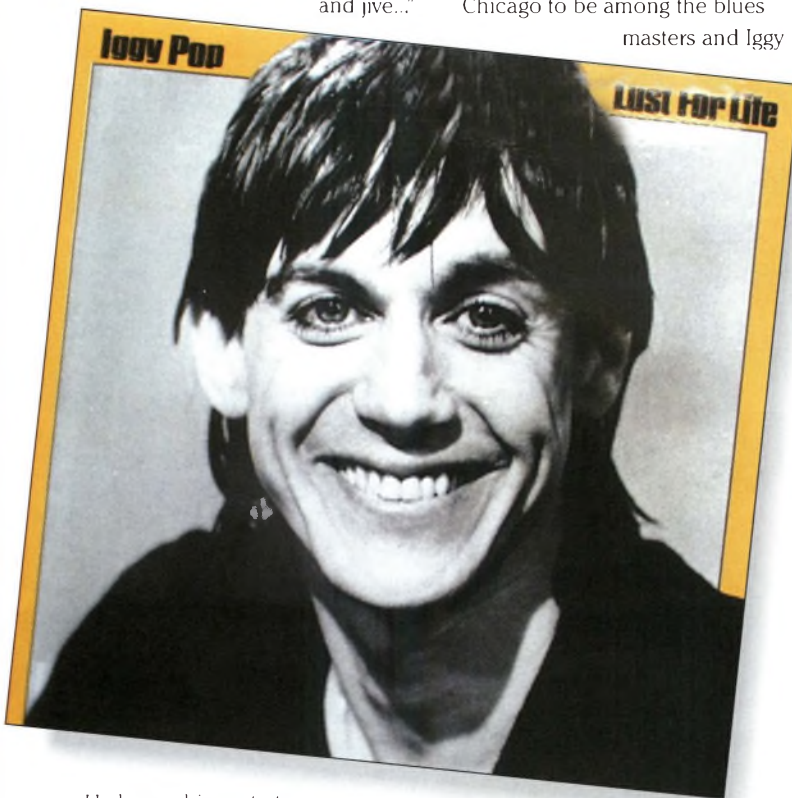
They broke up in 1965 citing "musical differences". Iggy then went to the University of Michigan to study Anthropology but - and here he was taking a classic path to rock'n'roll oblivion - dropped out in his first year and went to work in a record shop. At eighteen he joined The Prime Movers, "an effete, bohemian, intellectual [white] blues band of 26 and 27 year olds" who needed a drummer. Ron Asheton (later a Stooge) played bass for a while but was deemed "too rock'n'rolly" and soon got kicked out. They went to Chicago to be among the blues masters and Iggy

Midwest" he said in a 1986 Dutch TV documentary, "What was this life all about? Basically, it was no fun and nothing to do. So I wrote about that."

An instrumental band, The Psychedelic Stooges, was formed with Ron Asheton and his brother Scott. Iggy played Hawaiian guitar, Fender piano, vacuum cleaner, food-blender and an instrument of his own invention called the Jim-o-phone. Ron and Scott played bass and drums respectively. It was, according to Wayne Kramer of The MC5, "tremendously abstract and avant-garde." In early '68, Ron switched to guitar, Dave Alexander joined on bass and Iggy, having marvelled at the legendary performances of Jim Morrison, decided he would sing.

After a series of gigs with The MC5 the two bands were signed to Elektra. The Stooges shortened their name and were put into a New York studio, The Hit Factory to record their debut album with John Cale (ex-Velvet Underground) as producer.

This seems, with hindsight, an extraordinarily fortuitous coupling. Cale who had already contributed much to one of the most influential bands of the decade, left his indelible Welsh fairy dust all over *The Stooges* (Elektra). It is most evident on side one. After opening with the above quoted statement of intent-cum-ode to boredom, '1969', we are into one of the most enduring songs of Iggy's career. 'Now I Wanna Be Your Dog' a sordid tale of sadomasochistic bestiality, is set to a riff which is a fuzzed-up parody of that used in Pink Floyd's 'Interstellar Overdrive'. The ironic juxtaposition of the base, subhuman lust of the lyric with otherworldly psychedelia of the riff seems to be a typically Calesian concept. But the third track is the most obviously Cale-inspired; indeed, if it wasn't for Iggy's snot-laden Detroit drawl, the 10-minute viola-led drone-epic 'We Will Fall' could almost have been a Velvet Underground number. Side Two is more characteristic of ▶



He began his route to rock'n'roll godhead by taking up the drums while in the fourth grade at school. At age 15 he formed and drummed with The Iguanas and was first nicknamed Iggy. The band won a talent competition and played small local gigs. They cut a single; 1,000 copies pressed and rare as rocking-horse shit, it was a cover of Bo Diddley's 'Mona' paired with an original, 'I Don't Know Why'.

played occasional drums for such luminaries as JB Hutto. After eight months he came to the realisation that only black guys could play the blues. So he headed home to Detroit with the intention of forming his own group and making music that was as different as possible from anything else then happening. "I wanted to make songs about how we were living in the

► The Stooges as we have come to know and love them. The classic, oft-covered - most tellingly by The Sex Pistols - 'No Fun' is a Louie-Louie-style meat-headed two-chorder. Over the primitivist thrashings of the band, Iggy's doleful intonation rises into a sneer of disgust, "Well, maybe go out/An' maybe stay home/An' maybe call Mom on the telephone/ Well, c'mon, well, c'mon, No Fun". In songs that follow like 'Real Cool Time' and 'Little Doll', two and three-chord riffs of a studied imbecility are fuzzily dissembled while Iggy gives succinct commentary on the quotidian desires of lost Midwestern youth.

It was punk rock in the flesh and about eight years ahead of its time. Needless to say, it was hardly a commercial proposition. Critical acclaim came slowly, too. 17 years after its release, Barney Hoskyns wrote of The Stooges LP in the NME "...rarely has so much intelligence been invested in something so exquisitely moronic" The influence of the album, though widespread, is most clear in the work of The Ramones. Its worth asking whether the New York punk legends would have had the vision to write 'Now I Wanna Sniff Some Glue' or 'Beat on The Brat (With a Baseball Bat)' without having had The Stooges as pathfinders.

The band garnered some press interest, touring with The MC5 in promotion of their debut, and Iggy's

demented performances began to feed his reputation as the consummate wild man of rock.

Elektra, who were after a top ten hit, gave the band another chance. For their second LP, The Stooges turned down various record company-approved commercial producers in

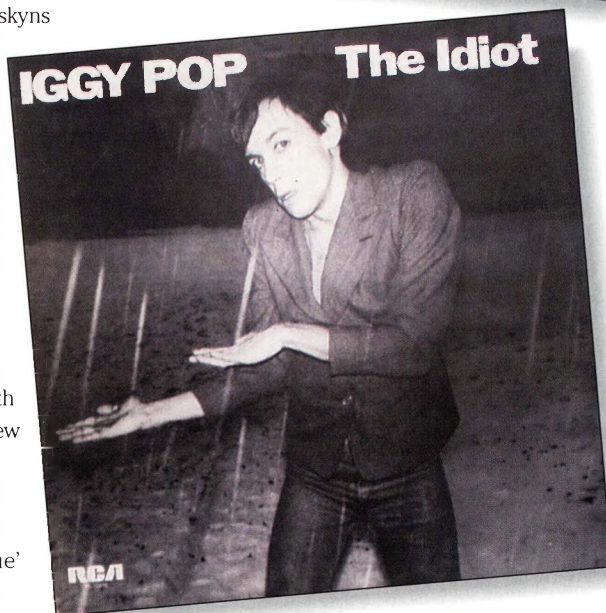
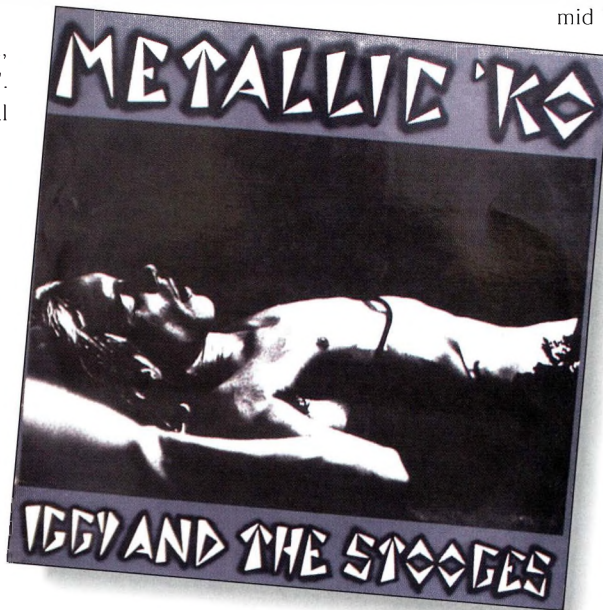
an ensemble whose members were at the time listening to the avant-garde jazz of John Coltrane, Archie Shepp, Pharoah Sanders and Sun Ra. The resultant recording is something just as new and alien as its predecessor, but wholly different in style. Purportedly representative of the band's live set in mid 1970, it is a cocaine-fuelled jazz-

rock, of ear-splitting free-blown sax above rhythms and guitar riffs which strut and grind. Iggy tears his vocal performance out of its erstwhile faux-moronic drawl and into a thing of extraordinary ferocity and passion. "I been dirt...an' I don't care/I been hurt... an' I don't care" he howls, and it is as authentic a cry of pain as those of the blues masters he so admired.

Then came a time of drug addiction, alcoholism and confusion within the ranks of the Stooges. Among other upsets, Dave Alexander was sacked, Steve

Mackay took his sax and left. James Williamson was brought in on guitar and Ron Asheton returned to his old job as bass player. Elektra dropped the Stooges and Iggy, sick with heroin addiction, quit the quickly disintegrating band in search of detoxification and a cure. A prolonged course of methadone treatment was undertaken.

Later that year Iggy met David Bowie at a party at Max's Kansas City in New York and a close personal and professional friendship was begun. In due course, Iggy signed to Bowie's manager Tony Defries' Mainman company and thence to CBS/Columbia. He was dispatched, with Bowie and James Williams - and eventually the Asheton brothers too - to London to prepare and record what would eventually become the near-mythical *Raw Power* LP. As has been well documented, the originally released mix of *Iggy & The Stooges*: ►



favour of Don Galluci who was responsible for The Kingsmen's seminal version of Richard Berry's Louie Louie. *Funhouse* (Elektra 42055) was recorded in Los Angeles. Sax-player Steve Mackay was added to

▶ *Raw Power* (CBS 65586) was a sorry thing. But despite the virtual absence of bass and drums - you somehow know they're there, it's just that you can't actually hear them - it was still a scarily powerful album. In order to hear its full glory you will need the 20-bit digitally remastered version remixed by Iggy and released on CD and 180g vinyl in 1996 (Columbia/Legacy 485176 20).

The record blazes away at you with some of the most intense, violent and energetic rock'n'roll ever to have come out of a studio. Williamson's guitar playing transformed the Stooges into a tight, explosive unit and Iggy was truly "...a street walking cheetah with a heart fulla napalm". Guitarist and vocalist compete to see which can express vitriolic savagery the most profoundly and by the end of the desperate, nihilistic 'Death Trip', they have been forced to call it a draw. Other highlights of agonised catharsis include 'Your Pretty Face Is Going To Hell', 'Search & Destroy' and the eponymous 'Raw Power', in which the listener is nearly bludgeoned to death such is the weight of the performance. An album of the utmost splendour. The world would be a better place if certain young punk pretenders - no names, no pack drill - were to be tied down, regularly forced to experience it, and then asked if they don't feel ashamed.

Raw Power was to all intents and purposes the last "official" Iggy & The Stooges album. More songs were written, however and many have seen the light of day on a sequence of semi-official releases of studio rehearsals like *Rubber Legs* (Fanclub/New Rose FC 037) and *I'm Sick of You!* (Line Records LILP 400093J). Among these is the extraordinary 'Cock In My Pocket' a hard rocking tune which includes the gloriously dubious line "Got my cock in my pocket and its pokin' up thru my pants/Cause I just wanna fuck and I don't want no romance". There was also the passionate, strangely commercial

love song 'Johanna' which would be a highlight of Iggy Pop & James Williamson's *Kill City* LP (Radar Rad 2). This independent album, released by Williamson against Iggy's expressed wishes, was what should have been The Stooges fourth. In it we hear an attempt to gain commercial recognition. Gone is the hardcore attitude to be replaced by a sound which approaches that of the 70s rock mainstream and brings to mind those other Bowie proteges Mott The Hoople.

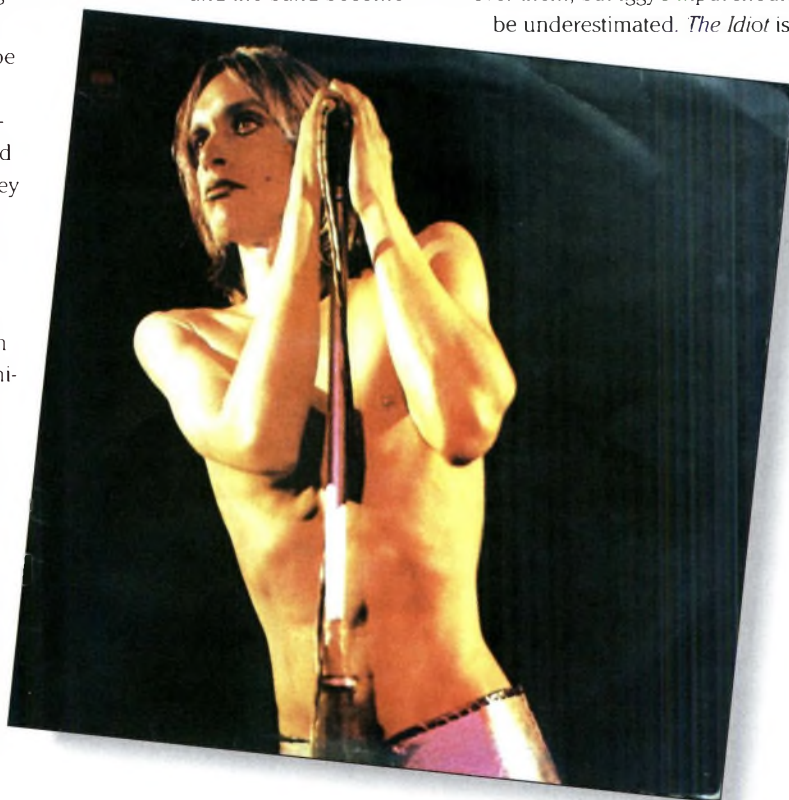
Now the Stooges had done their bit towards the history of rock'n'roll it was symbolically right that they should crash and burn..

A fine documentary of a rock band in the final stages of maniacal dissolution can be found on the release, *Iggy & The Stooges: Metallic K.O.* (Skydog/Jungle FREUD CD 70). This is a live recording - and a poor one at that - of the Stooges last ever show which took place at The Michigan Palace, Detroit in February '74. During the course of events Iggy and the band become

embroiled in a violent fracas with the local Hell's Angels - you can hear the beer bottles breaking against the guitar strings - until the point where it really kicks off and Iggy is knocked cold by a meaty biker fist. The cover depicts him "lying in state" just before he recovered sufficiently to play 'Louie Louie' as some kind of last testament.

Iggy spent a year in a turmoil of pills, booze and derangement before turning himself in for psychiatric attention at a Los Angeles institution. One of his few hospital visitors was a cocaine addicted and generally screwed-up David Bowie. The fateful reacquaintance would eventually result in Iggy's big comeback, two fine solo albums, and a surprisingly lengthy career.

The Idiot (RCA PL 12275) and *Lust For Life* (RCA PL 12488) which soon followed, investigated between them a wide range of emotional moods and territories which replaced or built upon the fundamental bile and venom of yore. Musically you can hear Bowie all over them, but Iggy's input should not be underestimated. *The Idiot* is ▶



▶ a remarkable exercise in studied miserabilism - on a par with Lou Reed's *Berlin*, and the album *Low* which was to be Bowie's next project.

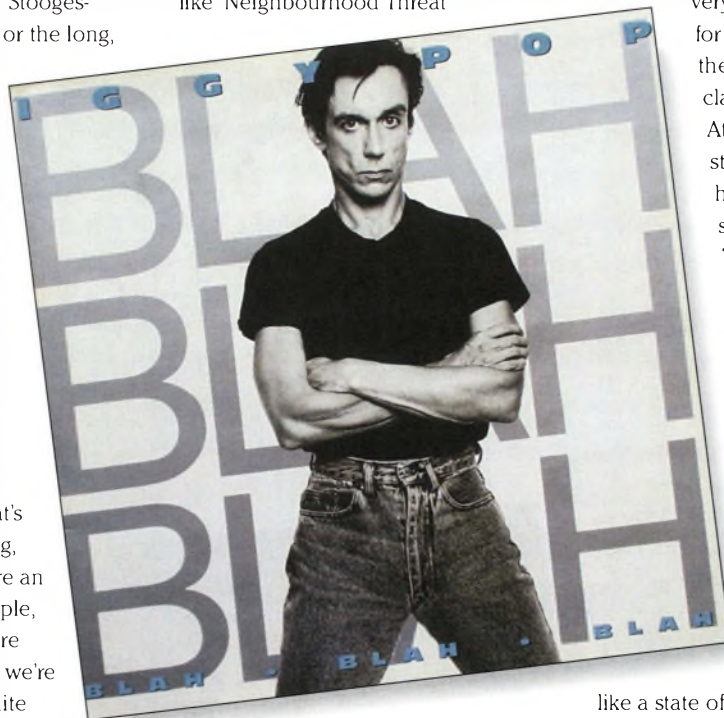
With perhaps the exception of New York art-punks Suicide, synthesised or 'electro' music was, in '76/'77, largely in the hands of space cadets like Tangerine Dream. Bowie and Iggy brought a dour, down-to-earth, urban sensibility to bear on their analogue synth treatments. The dirge-like industrial grooves of the Stooges-eulogy 'Dum-Dum Boys' or the long, mechanical dystopia represented by 'Mass Production' paved the way for acts like Nine Inch Nails, Revco, Ministry and the entire U.S. 'industrial dance' movement from which they sprang. 'Nightclubbing' is one of the high points.

In a lobotomised, empty monotone Iggy' drawls: "Nightclubbing, we're nightclubbing/We're what's happening/Nightclubbing, we're nightclubbing/We're an ice-machine/We see people, brand new people/They're something to see/ When we're nightclubbing, Bright white clubbing/Oh isn't it wild?"

As a critique of vacuous, cocaine-driven nightlife this seems even more valid now than when it was first recorded.

Lust For Life as you might assume, was altogether more life-affirming. Its title track was popularised as the theme for the film *Trainspotting* and it's pounding, aspirational drumbeats may occasionally be heard accompanying TV adverts for Japanese saloon cars and the like. Whether the lyrical imagery - concerning "hypnotising chickens" or "Beating my brains with liquor and drugs" - is quite in keeping with the middle-management image

required is open to question, but there it is. 'The Passenger' - another popular if somewhat literal-minded car advert soundtrack - must be Iggy Pop's commercial crowning glory and the song for which he is known by one and all. A relatively lightweight piece, the song is one of the classics of the pop repertoire. It can only be a matter of time before some boy band takes it to the top of the charts and in doing so, destroys it forever. With other gems like 'Neighbourhood Threat'



and the ode to an O.D. that is 'Turn Blue' Iggy continues to record life as he finds it, 'dirty realism' and all. "I saw my baby, she was turning blue/I knew that soon, her young life was through..." The music, powered by the avant-garde guitar-strangling of Carlos Alomar is a techno/rock hybrid of great fluidity and charm, filled with pop hook lines and trenchant atmospherics.

The three official Stooges albums - *The Stooges*, *Funhouse* and *Raw Power* taken with *The Idiot* and *Lust For Life* are the five absolute essentials of the Iggy Pop canon. There have been many releases since, some of them highly

respectable like the punky *Soldier*, the calmer, more measured, *New Values*, the techno/pop *Blah-Blah-Blah* or the hard-rocking, Sex Pistol Steve Jones-featuring, *Instinct*. There have been some turkeys too, though not that many considering the Pop longevity. Among those to be given a wide berth are the ill-conceived *Party* and the vaguely embarrassing *Brick by Brick*. The overlong double-album *American Caesar* has its moments and at the

very least is worth hearing for Iggy's latest update of the timeless garage punk classic 'Louie-Louie'.

At the age of fifty-three Iggy still manages to maintain his credibility as a rock star and elder statesman. There is now a personal dignity to the man who we thought had lost it forever when his role in life was screaming 'Now I Wanna Be Your Dog' and crawling on all-fours covered in a 50/50 admixture of stomach-bile and peanut butter for our entertainment.

He seems to have achieved something

like a state of grace. This former wild man - who with Keith Richards and Lou Reed, was the early-70s bookies-favourite for the next great rock'n'roll death - has neither burned out nor faded away. It would come as no surprise - after his lovingly crooned cover of Louie Armstrong's "We Have All The Time In The World" (on *Shaken & Stirred*, The Dave Arnold James Bond Project) to find the great man turning into an effective Sinatra or Tony Bennett for the 21st century. After the sterling service Iggy Pop has selflessly given to the cause - and history - of rock'n'roll, only the churlish would hold such a career move against him.



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








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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.



Ben Harper and the Innocent Criminals

Burn to shine

724384815110  

Going by the cover you could be forgiven for thinking Ben Harper produces whiny whistling soundtracks for spaghetti westerns, but you'd be wrong. The opening track might be appropriate, but the rest of this album draws on wider influences, right back across 20th century music. Whilst most of the album could be described as good honest rocky grunge, don't miss out on the shades of blues, country and even twenties swing that crop up on the acoustic ballads. Songs vary in complexity, simple and stripped through to many layered recordings, but it is the consistently high quality of the recordings and arrangements that pulls it all together and creates a wonderful listen.


Lyrics may not be uplifting, but are satisfying and honest, while Mr. Harper's voice is also a strong attribute. Expressive and capable of real emotion, he frequently pushes it to the limit. Ben Harper is also an excellent guitarist, adept with both the acoustic and electric forms, and the music is a great showcase for his talents. The guitar rests centre stage while the rest of the band (bassist, drummer and percussionist) back it up with some fine, engaging rhythms. This is an album that deserves great success. If you are only going to buy one LP this month, make it this one.

JH



Various

Buffy The Vampire Slayer

COLUMBIA 496 633-2 

Teen idol and object of desire for middle-aged men around the planet, Sarah Michelle Geller, (Buffy), begins her fourth season as our eponymous High School slayer of the undead in this stylish Emmy Award winning series, that has reached cult viewing status through solid characterisation and a gradual darkening of its mood. A suitably red-blooded soundtrack was a natural commercial spin-off.

Track beyond the show's high-kicking signature tune by Nerf Herder, and the obligatory injection of some crucial cuts including Garbage, Temptation Waits; Hepburn's catchy 'Quit', and a pulsating 'Transylvanian Concubine' from Rasputina, has its rewards. There's a fashionably fast 'n' loose feel to the West Coast sound, with a rocking 'Devil You Know' (Face to Face), and colourful transfusions of acoustic-pop from bands like Alison Krauss Et Union Station on 'It Doesn't Matter' and the brilliantly-named Bif Naked's performance of 'Lucky'. Deep and meaningful its not. But that's the beauty of glossy Trans-Atlantic entertainment - you don't need to think to enjoy it! Thematically, Patricia Joseph's steady hand holds this production together, while an above-average digital recording never leaves any unsightly blemishes, even when electronic instruments and edgy vocals bite down hard.

RP





The Charlatans

Us and Us Only

MCA60069

If you are a Charlatans fan, buy and enjoy. If you aren't; buy, enjoy and you will be a fan afterwards! The Charlatans prove with this release that they can write some excellent songs. It has taken them a fair time to reach this level, but like fine wine age has improved the band. Never the biggest or most hyped group in the world, they have been protected from the worst excesses of the marketing driven 90's music scene, and this has allowed them to plough their own furrow. They're still wearing their influences on their sleeves (very Stones, quite Beatles, Dylan in places, especially the tracks with a mouth organ!). Vocal delivery varies with the songs, shifting with each influence, and you can almost imagine a gigantic shadowy images of the appropriate mentor(s) looming behind the band, like a back-projected image behind a stage set. The album is just the right length at a time where overkill is the norm. There are no fillers here, and each track is there for a reason, standing on its own merits. The new keyboardist has gelled with the rest of the band, preserving the tight feel, while the production is very good, making the album sound direct and intimate, almost like listening in on a jam session. Fabulous melodies, good tuneful sing-along tracks, and probably the best Charlatans album yet.

JH



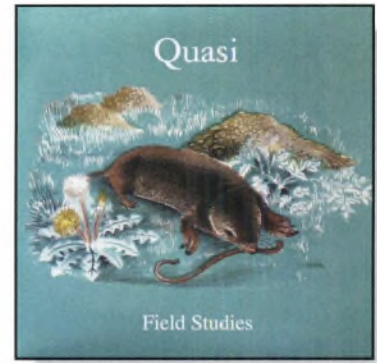
Various Artists

Pillows & Prayers

Cherry Red Records CD MRED 41

Famously proclaiming "Pay No More Than 99p" on its jacket, Cherry Red's ground-breaking compilation of its 1984 roster has resurfaced as a mid-price CD. Originally released on LP, picture disc and cassette, Mike Always' impressive collection of leftfield signings features electro pop acts like Thomas Leer and The Passage, alongside club bands Five Or Six and Eyeless In Gaza. Together with the singer/songwriter based groups Marine Girls and Everything But The Girl (solo numbers by Ben Watt and Tracey Thorn included) as well as songs by Kevin Coyne and The Misunderstood (who were plucked from a previous age), they create a unique atmosphere. Its strength is its diversity. Post-punk influenced talent on the very verge of success, but, as yet, untainted by the inevitable make over. Improbably low production values - fresh-faced lyrics - honest arrangements - rough-edged musicianship and an element of weirdness chemically combine to create a caustic solution that cuts to the core on tracks like the acoustic simplicity and haunted vocals of 'My Face Is On Fire' (Felt). Ben and Tracey's early collaboration, 'On My Mind' offers a memorable insight for the new generation of EBG fans. *Pillows and Prayers*, though often imitated, remains an unconquered bastion of that Independent music era.

RP



Quasi

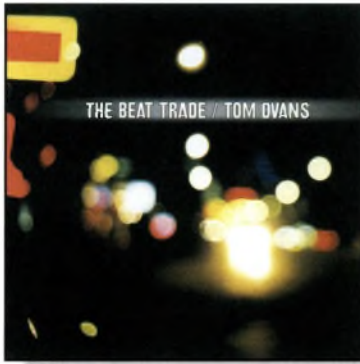
Field Studies

Domino Records WIGLP 69

Put simply, Quasi are Ben Folds Five meets Elliot Smith with beards. They have Ben Folds Five's astonishment at the disappointing world, and a similar style of melody and percussive piano, added to a hint of the apathetic and melancholy feel in Elliot Smith's work. But to all of this Quasi add in a hefty slug of grunge. I'm not saying that they aren't original, rather that they have their own take on existing styles. The melodies are there own, and very beautiful. They are more wistful than Smith and less cynical than Ben Folds Five. Their lyrics give the impression that a small change could really make things better. The songs are crafted with strength and integrity, and built on simple layers of drums, keyboards and guitars. The complexity comes from the lyrics which are poetic and allegorical whilst remaining emotionally deadpan. Things get rockier as the album progresses and for my money this music is their best. It plays a pleasing counterpoint to the steady state lyrics. Recording is basic and the most charitable thing I can say is that it gets it into the room! If you like the guys mentioned above you will like this. If Quasi translates as "sort of", then I think you'll get the picture. Well worth a look.

JH





Tom Ovans

The Beat Trade

FLOATING WORLD FW004 (CD)

Casting a jaundiced eye across a dark American underbelly, *The Beat Trade* draws blood from Tom Ovans' own genuine working-class credentials to frame a tactile, unsavoury series of despair-soaked images. Those growling vocal chords chisel out austere, unsentimental lyrics, as his bone-bleached acoustic guitar and bluesy harmonica eerily pick over a dozen emotionally-taught songs. Make no mistake, Ovans' folk / R & B style is not easy listening - even a tender ballad, 'Just To Be With You' has the warmth of its mandolin and guitar accompaniment leached by a contrastingly sombre delivery of lines like, "I've been through these cities / You know I've been working so hard / But I aint looking for no pity / Just some wings for my heart". And that's as optimistic as it gets! The recording, made at Congress House in Austin, Texas, benefits from superb clarity. At the outset, Mark Hallman spotlights Ovans. He's in your face and at you with a cracked voice, sparse acoustic playing, and soundbox beat, that's shadowed by the immaculate bass and guitar chord sequences of Randy McCullough and Rob McEntee. 'The Monkey's Have Landed', 'Salvation' and 'Tell Me Babe' are great examples of an intense song and pure sound combining to mete out all this hopelessness.

RP



Anthony Gomes Band

Blues in Technicolor

Urban Electric UE 1109 (CD)

Gomes won the 'Best unsigned blues act in Chicago' which resulted in him signing a contract with Urban Electric Records, and *Blues in Technicolor* his debut album. And a fine piece of work it is too. Opener 'Blues in Technicolor' showcases Gomes' Freddie King style playing to great effect, although traces of Clapton can be heard later on in the song. 'Gonna Have a Party' sees him really letting rip with some ferocious rock-tinged soloing, whilst 'Bad Luck Child' powers along on a heavy Texas shuffle. 'Outta the Cathouse' cuts a mean funky groove, but the real standout track has to be 'Misery for Company', a gorgeous slow blues number with the sweetest of playing and particularly fine vocals, Gomes' singing at times reminiscent of Andrew Strong from *The Commitments*. Although he displays plenty of blues authenticity, Gomes definitely leans towards a rock feel, especially on 'Wolf in my Henhouse', where the ghost of Hendrix pays a visit to his stratocaster. There's plenty of evidence on *Blues in Technicolor* to suggest that Anthony Gomes can become one of the next generation of blues superstars. He's got talent in abundance and is easily as good as Jonny Lang and Kenny Wayne Shepherd - let's hope he gets the breaks his talent so richly deserves.

DH



Tom Cochrane

Mad Mad World

Pablo Nevada CDP 7 97723 (CD)

Tom Cochrane is a rocker in the vein of Bob Seger and Bryan Adams who has a following of fanatical proportions in his native Canada. A more global success was achieved with the release of this album, the insanely catchy 'Life is a Highway' becoming a massive hit in the USA. *Mad Mad World* is a fine balance of commercial rock and harder edged songs, along with some tender acoustic moments, like the beautiful 'The Secret is to Know When to Stop' and the string laden 'All the King's men'. However, the best song is the tragic 'Get Back Up', an all too familiar story of the destructive powers of narcotics, with Cochrane's lyrics harrowing and very poignant ("I put you in the tub babe/with five big pounds of ice/ if you don't get back up/ I don't know what I'll do"). The guitar solo on 'Get Back Up' attacks the senses with a ferocity and fury befitting the tragedy of the situation and introduces the world to a new guitar god in the shape of the unusually named Mladen. The album also features Mickey Curry and Keith Scott from Bryan Adams' band, along with sterling production from Joe Hardy. If Bryan Adams circa *Reckless* is your kind of rock, then go and track this little gem down - you can't fail to be impressed.

AH





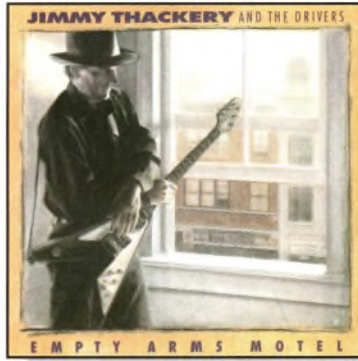
Cathy Bonner

Letter to America

Rideout Records RDEPR 097

I know very little about Cathy Bonner, apart from the fact that she comes from Ireland and went to Memphis to record *Letter to America*, which is her second album. However, what becomes abundantly clear after listening to this fine record is how supremely gifted a songwriter and singer she is. Equal parts folk and country, Bonner writes songs about loving, leaving and self-discovery, singing them in a voice of quite dazzling purity. Highlights are plenty. 'Gasoline' kicks in on a moody, bluesy slide guitar, followed by gently strummed acoustics, with Bonner's startling voice unfolding the story of a man on the run from a broken romance who gets in his car and stops for nothing but gasoline. The acoustic 'Strong Love' is a simple song about the uplifting powers of being in love, Bonner's voice soaring above the lyrics with delicious ease, whilst 'Magazine' observes how the press have made us more interested in image rather than content, describing in fine detail the lengths that some people will go to achieve their 15 minutes of fame. ("Laura takes her clothes off, what more can she do / a photograph can make her famous, so how could she refuse"). *Letter to America* contains 10 beautifully penned, moving observations on everyday life and heralds the arrival of a fresh and exciting new talent on the folk/country scene – it's well worthy of your attention.

AH



Jimmy Thackery and the Drivers

Empty Arms Motel

Blind Pig BPCD 5001

For 13 years Jimmy Thackery plied his trade with Washington DC's Nighthawks – one of America's hardest working and toughest blues bands. He left to form his own band The Assassins, where he stayed for a further 6 years. *Empty Arms Motel* marked his debut as a solo artist and still stands today as a defining moment in contemporary electric blues. It has some of the most incendiary guitar playing ever heard, proving without doubt that Thackery is 'up there' with any of the world's greatest names, past and present. Jimmy's version of BB King's 'Paying the Cost to be the Boss' is so good you'll end up playing it 6 times before moving on to track 2, an absolutely smoking and superfast cover of Stevie Ray's 'Rude Mood'. Texas shuffles like 'Getting Tired of Waiting' (one of two originals) sit comfortably alongside harder edged numbers like Lowell Fulson's 'Honey Hush' and Hendrix' 'Red House', Thackery's playing on the latter being particularly impressive. Jimmy Thackery has released 5 solo albums for US blues label Blind Pig now and they have all been of a high standard, but if you want to hear a defining moment in the history of electric blues go out and buy this album – it's quite simply 45 minutes of the finest blues ever made.

AH



Captain Beefheart & His Magic Band

The Mirror Man Sessions

BMG/BUDDHA RECORDS 74321 691742

Rereleased, resequenced, amended and generally enlarged upon, this is an educated guess by the "new" Buddha Records as to how the Captain's troubled second LP – originally intended as a double – might have been had the "old" Buddha Records not ballsed it up in 1963. *Mirror Man* was arguably the second least commercial – after the ineffable *Trout Mask Replica* – of the great man's works. It consisted of three long semi-improvisations recorded live in the studio, and one song proper, the eight-minute 'Kandy Korn'. 'Tarotplane' (19 minutes), '25th Century Quaker' (10 minutes) and 'Mirror Man' (16 minutes) each seem to be a variation on the equation, "Howlin' Wolf and The House Rockers ÷ LSD = Captain Beefheart & His Magic Band". They take an amped-up country blues riff, repeat it endlessly through subtle rhythmic and harmonic shifts while Beefheart extemporises cacophonous honk'n'-squeal free-jazz on something called a shinei (which sounds like a soprano sax), distorted blues harp and dense neo-beat poetry. The musicianship – with the possible exception of Beefheart's primitivist/expressionist blowing – is superb. The best of the fine added material, including a new version of 'Beetle Bones and Smokin' Stones', is 'Gimme Dat Farp Boy' which takes the above M.O. and distills it into an intense blast of howling psychedelic blues. Godlike.

JM





The Flying Burrito Brothers

The Guilded Place Of Sin & Burrito DeLuxe

ATM ReMasterpeices 540 704-2 

It may be hard, but try not to allow the fact that they invented the rightly much-abused genre 'country-rock' to put you off. (You can hardly blame them for Shania Twain). These two LPs - gathered together for your convenience and listening pleasure on the one CD - have much to recommend them, not least an object lesson in quality songwriting. The late Gram Parsons - troubled alcoholic genius and drug-buddy of Keith Richards - is the guiding light here, and it was with the Burritos he did much of his best work. *The Gilded Palace of Sin* is the one which really stands out. Its an album of visionary depth which melds torch song, R'n'B/gospel, and old school C&TW into a sound which was then unique, even if it has long since been dissipated by The Eagles, Poco and the usual suspects. Classic cuts include the exquisite 'Sin City', an apocalyptic ballad in which "A gold-plated door on the 31st floor/ Won't keep out the Lord's burnin' rain" the lachrymose 'Dark End of the Street' and the frankly weird talking country blues 'Hippie Boy'. *Burrito Deluxe* is weaker and features much up tempo country boogie. It is, however, worthwhile for its gloriously maudlin cover of the Jagger/Richards weepie 'Wild Horses'.

JM



Paula Cole Band

Amen

IMAGO / WARNER BROS 9362-47490-2 


Recorded over a three month period last year at Globe Studios in New York, Cole's keenly awaited follow up to *This Fire* has nine heart-felt songs, each breathing deeply with the fervour of a zealot, rather than the temperate lip serving acquiescence of the acolyte suggested by the album's title. Yes, *Amen* is a more spiritual examination of the demons that plague urban existence - be they drive-by killings, 'Be Somebody', or a grubby descent into ghetto-life for 'La Tonya' - but significantly Cole draws optimism from these bleakest of moments. Her message (in an age that's overcrowded with ideology) is reinforced, contrasted and complemented by mood-setting arrangements and clever orchestration. A great pop opener, 'I Believe in Love', is not the usual chocolate-box tale of romance that sweetens the hard realities amongst some soft-centres. Nor is the concluding, 'God is Watching', conventional. It could have been an interventionist plea, but instead stresses a need for humanity to recognise and heal wounds that have divided individuals, communities and nations. The "Higher Presence" is a neutral, detached observer. Superb band members Jay Bellerose (drums), Tony Levin (bass), and Kevin Barry (electric and acoustic guitar), rally to these powerfully seductive vocals that continually fire surprises.

RP



Captain Beefheart & His Magic Band

Safe As Milk

BMG/Buddha 74321 691752. 

Hats off to the "new" Buddha Records for the long overdue re-release of Beefheart's first two albums, *Mirror Man* (reviewed elsewhere in these pages) and this, his outstanding debut. The last couple of years have seen an upsurge in what, for want of a better term, might be called art-blues. The founding father of this approach was of course the Captain. On *Safe As Milk* ('67) he was abetted for the first and only time by the 20 year old prodigy Ry Cooder whose role, apart from his excellent guitar work, was "to translate the Captain's wilder notions to the rest of the band and generally act as musical director". The result is a surprisingly accessible series of psychedelic R'n'B tunes laden with hook lines to the point where they are almost, but not quite, pop songs. Lighter works like the eccentric doo-wop stylings of 'I'm Glad' and 'Call On Me' provide relief between intense, densely arranged, exotic art-rock masterpieces such as 'Zig Zag Wanderer', 'Dropout Boogie' and the amazing 'Electricity'. Hypnotic bottleneck guitar lines and strange, lurching tempos form the basis for that massive, unearthly roar to vent its surreal spleen. Highly influential, *Safe As Milk* remains a fine, breathtakingly original album.

JM





Whistler

Whistler

WUJLP1087  


Whistler, the artist, painted dreamy views of the Thames which somehow always manage to remind you that there's something unpleasant lurking behind the fog, or floating just under the surface. The Whistler sound is dominated (if that's the right word) by the female vocalist. She has one of those soft and dreamy voices which gets close to sending me into palpitations. The other two band members provide the musical support, although given the simplicity of the songs, often just voice and guitar, they must take it in turns. A light touch that contrasts with distinctly heavy lyrical subject matter. Everything from the frustration of the retarded and attempted suicides, through to the general malais of 90's life. This album feels like an easy listen at first, but it's the juxtaposition of the light music with those lyrics that keep you intrigued. It's maturity highlights the differences between bubble-gum Pop and serious music. With a Whistler song the participants in the drama are located firmly in the real world, with all of the trouble and problems that entails. Production further emphasises the vocal performance, and with such small forces on show, the overall results are excellent. If Granny still sends you record tokens, win her approval by redeeming them against this. She'd love it. You can understand every word.

JH



Howlin' Wolf

His Best

CHESS 329 375-2 MCD 09375 
32 bit digitally re-mastered.


A collection of Chester "Howlin' Wolf" Burnett's singles from 1951-64, *His Best* is the apt title even though he was never known to have made a bad record. Broadly speaking, the Wolf was part of a roots movement - embodied by Chess Records - which sought to wrest post war African-American music away from the smooth operators; so-called Sepia Sinatras like Nat King Cole, whose urbane supper club blues then prevailed. These twenty tracks, just over half of them written by Willie Dixon, the remainder by Burnett himself, have a deep significance in the history of rock'n'roll. Covered by and an influence on both the mainstream - Elvis, The Stones, The Beatles, Clapton et al - and more rarefied talents like Captain Beefheart and Tom Waits, this was the kind of music which, among its many other feats, jump-started the 1960s and the English invasion of America. The voice, THAT voice, a bestial roar, a force of nature, bellowing and moaning out lyrics of paranoia, lust, violence and lost-love over clanking, minimal, guitar riffs and a lunging, swaying beat. "An' Fish-heads fill the air/ Be slug-juice everywhere/We gonna pitch a Wang-Dang-Doodle/All night long." And so, in all likelihood, will you.

JM



Tori Amos

To Venus And Back

7567-83242-2 

To Venus And Back is the latest album from Tori Amos. A double-disc, the second CD is a "bonus" live collection. I am an unashamed Tori Amos fan and would have bought [this](#) whatever a review said, but how good is it? Inevitably with a record [like](#) this, you can't help but compare it with the artist's [previous](#) work and in Tori Amos' case it had a pretty hard act to follow. If you don't know ([where have you been?](#)) Amos is capable of writing haunting lyrical work and amazingly catchy [songs](#) in her own style, (and what a style it is, Kate Bush-esque with an extra side order of [weird](#)). She usually uses a piano as an accompaniment to her strong, sometimes piercing, voice. The [weirdness](#) was particularly prevalent in [her](#) last album *Boys for Pele*, where unfortunately her talents were submerged in new ideas [including](#) strong rhythms that resulted in a [disjointed](#) whole. This album is darker but benefits from some superb melody and an integration of those [deas](#). Inceed I am happy to report that it is an excellent outing, good for Tori Amos fans and those yet to [discover](#) her work. Inceed, with the [bonus](#) CD this could be the best way to try her [music](#).

JH



Perfect Blue

The twisted fascination of Lloyd Cole's soul.

by Reuben Parry

Last June's Polygram release *Lloyd Cole - The Collection* was as generous as it was welcome. A twenty-track disc (running to some 76 mins) reprises the solo years and a heyday fronting the Commotions. There are also new songs: 'Fool You Are' and 'That Boy' (both Cole/Clark collaborations) which confirm the sparkle's still there. Hopefully, they will herald a full blown return to the studio - five years is far too long an absence for a performer of Cole's calibre. From 'Perfect Skin' to 'Like Lovers Do', this compilation distils the unmistakable essence of his work: moody, self-deprecating, casually intelligent guitar-based pop, with classic moments of overstatement, understatement and exquisite irony. Pointedly, opening out the CD liner reveals a pock-marked silhouette, and a wry sense of humour. Eighteen of those older tracks are mirrored by eighteen shots. Most have missed their target altogether; a few penetrate its concentric rings, and none have hit the bull's-eye. But then when has ability ever been a prerequisite for commercial success in the music business?

Back in 1984 prospects must have seemed very different... Ink barely dry on a Polydor recording contract; 'Perfect Skin' riding high in the U.K. Singles Chart, and a debut LP close to release (*Rattlesnakes*) that NME was later to name among its Top Fifty Albums of the decade. Yet two years earlier The Commotions (formed

while Lloyd Cole was studying philosophy at Glasgow University) were a large soul band. Organically, they evolved into this quintet of brooding, pale-skinned, angry young men, a group which included bassist Lawrence Donegan, drummer Stephen Irvine, guitarist Neil Clark and keyboardist Blair Cowan. However, it was the unique vocals and uncommonly literate quality of Cole's songwriting that really attracted the record label. Quite a contrast to today's procession of identikit, papier mâché bands-stuck together with kiddie glue and decorated in poster-paint - whose forgettable CDs appear with alarming regularity - Five, B*witched, Travis, and S Club 7 to name a few.

Rattlesnakes' arrival was one of those very special moments you remember everything about - even the minutiae. After fifteen years I can still

recall buying my first copy at Pet Sounds in Sunderland for the princely sum of £4.79.

On the surface it could mistakenly be regarded as a straightforward collection of ten love songs. But that wouldn't explain why this is such a pivotal LP. Underneath, Cole resuscitates a tired, well-worn subject-matter by tackling the complexity of emotion with lyrics that daringly balance on a knife-edge. Unapologetically clever, his articulate and acutely felt lines teeter between genius and pretentiousness. All the songs are supercharged with oblique throw away references to art, literature, philosophy and film that would ordinarily open them up to accusations of elitism or snobbery. Allusions to Norman Mailer ('Are You Ready To Be Heartbroken'), Jules et Jim ('Speedboat'), Truman Capote ('Four Flights Up') or Simone de

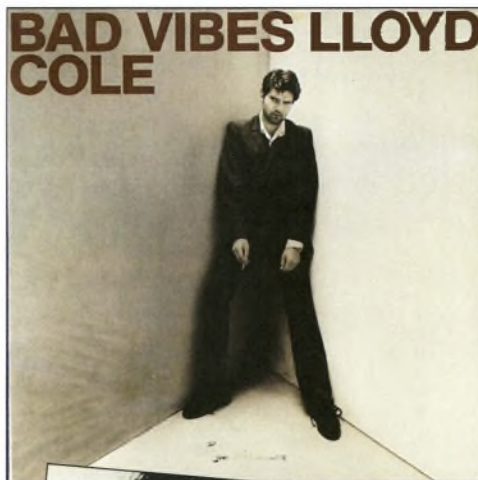
Beauvoir serve their purpose - freshening up themes - placing fine images alongside the mundane - extracting wit and subtlety from the lyric, they all hit the mark. A favourite example is the more obvious simile near the end of the title track where, "She looks like Eva Marie Saint in *On the Waterfront*" is followed with a lyric of exquisite simplicity, "Her heart...heart's like crazy paving, upside down and back-to-front". Marrying ▶



► the topsy-turvy, unpredictable feelings of love to this cinematic image triggers a chain reaction of associations with Elia Kazan's multi-oscar winning 1954 film - be they monochrome photography, the compelling intensity of Brando's performance, method acting in general or a stylised Fifties look - the potential meanings unleashed are only limited by an audience's imagination. The effect of these richly textured lyrics is heightened by uncomplicated, tight and tuneful guitar and keyboard arrangements.

The litmus test for a remarkable debut album is of course the next release and these often pale in comparison. But that was not the case with an ironically titled *Easy Pieces* which quickly followed in 1985. On, what was another antidote to the New Romantic movement, the band, unfazed by a slicker production from the hit-making Clive Langer and Alan Winstanley team, again play solid, unprepossessing straight men to Cole's lyrical drama queen. A formula that was beginning to make significant trans-Atlantic inroads through airplay of singles like 'Lost Weekend' and 'Brand New Friend' on the alternative radio stations. Support vocalists, and Gary Barnacle (brass) join string arranger Anne Dudley (she also featured on *Rattlesnakes*), but Lloyd Cole remains our focal point. You continue to hang on every word as his distinctive, elongated lines or rapid, frequently breathless, clipped phrases this time offer fewer of those obvious allusions (though Bolan and the Beatles are mentioned) and instead concentrate on opening emotional floodgates nearer home with some jarring everyday images:

"Jane is fine, always fine.
We're unhappy most of the time.
We don't talk. We don't fight.
I'm just tired - She's way past caring.
So we drink Spanish wine.



We tell lies, we're killing time.
And we feel fine - Well what's
the crime?"
(Why I Love Country Music)

or the magnificent dissection of adolescent loneliness and desire:

"Ugly children with
poor complexions.
And greasy hair, receiving
no concession.
And its a heartless world.
And its a thoughtless,
heartless world...
Oh James! Oh you're
a terrible child.
Hide yourself away.....

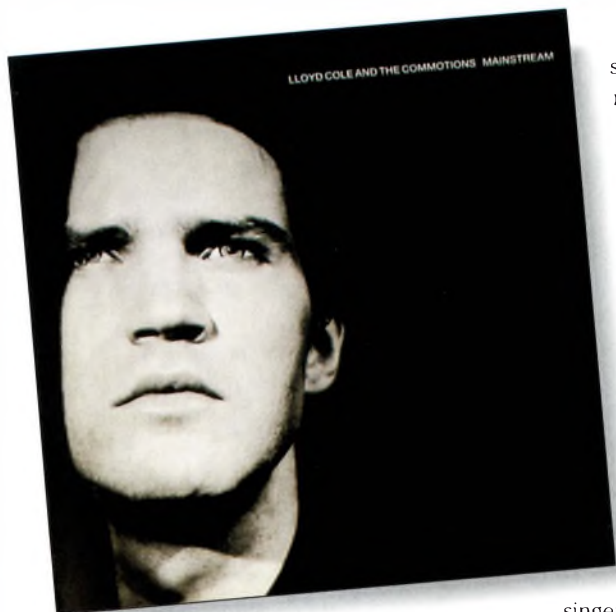
You swear she really is
the best thing

that you have ever seen
But your heart is in the
wrong place,
cover your face
And despair yourself away....
And in the morning
when you wake,
Nothing will have changed".
(James)

Poignant, striking lyrics, dignified by slow tempos, which paradoxically have a greater intensity because of the gentle, contrasting cadences in Cole's delivery. Tremendous, thoughtful music making. There were the inevitable appearances on Top of the Pops, a bored-looking band going through the motions. Yet live, in concert, they were not to be missed. My mate, Ali, tells of the disappointment in having tickets for a truly awful Curiosity Killed The Cat gig when on that same night, just down the road, The Commotions (supported by the Bible), were playing

Newcastle University. Heading home (while her groupie friends proved that The Cats were more entertaining off stage than on) she passed by a venue where Lloyd and Co. were still raising the roof. Next day The Commotions had glowing reviews. Reports of Curiosity Killed The Cat's performances are probably best left to the private diaries of the ladies in question.

Another finely wrought recording, *Mainstream* - the last with The Commotions - was released in 1987. Brimming with confidence and deft arrangements (featuring the lap steel guitar of Tommy Willis on '29'; John Hassell (trumpet) and Tracy Thorn (vocals) in 'Big Snake' and Fraser Speirs' harmonica for Sean Penn Blues') its a strong album that gives ►



successful writer and Cole moved to New York (quite a departure from the salubrious surroundings of his home town, Buxton) to pursue a solo career. A self-titled debut LP was cut in 1990. Ex-Commotion Blair Cowan was the only familiar face, but Cole astutely aligned himself with old Lou Reed protagonists, session drummer Fred Maher and guitarist Robert Quine, as well as an up-and-coming

singer/songwriter, Matthew

Sweet, on bass. Stylistically, this album played it safe. With a Stateside audience in mind the allusions were toned right down, the pace picked up and the numbers like 'Sweetheart' and 'I Hate To See You Baby Doing That Stuff' rocked. Typically imploring vocals and a stronger beat worked quite well together, though Lloyd Cole "The Rocker" is a bit stilted and clearly more comfortable with the Commotionesque 'Loveless', 'Ice Cream Girl' and 'No Blue Skies'.

'91 was another busy year: guesting for an eponymously-titled Nicky Holland release, strumming the odd chord on Matthew

Sweet's record, *Girlfriend*, and contributing harmonica, vocals and guitar-work for a Leonard Cohen tribute, *I'm Your Fan* - none of which prepare you for artistic shifts found on the next two Cole LPs, *Don't Get Weird on Me, Babe* (1991) and *Bad Vibes* (1993).

A New York Winter spent in the recording studio produced an ambitious second solo disc - though "solo" is not strictly accurate. The principals remain unchanged and their relaxed interplay is partly responsible for the intimate feel of languid, modern-day cabaret music cut for side-one. Paul Buckmaster (known for his work with the Stones and Elton John) also makes a telling contribution.

His orchestration, including luscious horn and string arrangements, sweetens songs like 'Half Of Everything' (which explores a "divide it down the middle" culture in broken relationships) and the piquant textures of 'Man Enough'.

Angling in from an altogether different direction, Cole's earlier difficulties are put behind him as side-two elbows its way ahead with Maher/Quine influenced light rock. Helped by richer compositional tones, (that were absent from the previous album), *Don't Get Weird On Me, Babe* employs more effective percussion and Hammond mixes to flesh out 'Tell You Sister', 'Pay For It', 'The One You Never Had' and single release 'She's A Girl And I'm A Man', where his lead vocals now no longer seem over-exposed. Self-belief returned, an assured performance signals a growing empathy among band members and - completing the picture - Paul Hardiman's eloquent engineering transparently reveals it all.

Once again Cole theatrically tested himself, his fans and the reviewers on the

► few clues to the group's impending demise. An airy rock style, foot-tapping momentum and more accessible lyrics (though a deliberate capitalisation of malcontent for the song 'mister Malcontent' may allude to the character type often found in Jacobite dramas) combined with bright, catchy melodies on tracks like 'My Bag' and 'From The Hip' even momentarily distract from Cole's affecting singing, which still never misses, in spite of the cleverness.

The coffin lid was secured tightly down and the band bowed out with a valedictory compilation, *Lloyd Cole and The Commotions 1984 - 1989*, where the sleeve note small print closes R.I.P. Its a well-chosen retrospective containing four tracks from each of the three albums, but real interest lies in the inclusion of two non-LP B-Sides, 'You Will Never Be No Good' and 'Her Last Fling'.

The Commotions went their separate ways. Stephen Irvine and Neil Clark resurfaced in 1990 as an anonymous group, *Bloomsday*. Lawrence Donegan became a



▶ experimental *Bad Vibes*. His characteristic flair for cinematically expanding the few telling details about a woman or a relationship into vivid, panoramic imagery, here, diversely touches upon electronics and psychedelia. A series of acoustic club dates preceded this album whose U.K. release was accompanied by critical acclaim. However, in the States, *Bad Vibes* still struggled to find distribution and it wasn't until the summer of 1994 that RYKODISC put their faith behind Cole, releasing their version with two additional tracks: 'For The



Pleasure of Your Company' and '4 M.B.'. The press loved it. Billboard, on June 11th 1994, declared "Modern rock outfits should take note of this strong set". While, in true soundbite fashion, the San Fransico Guardian reminded the Bay area that "Cole's melodies and voice have the magnetic pull of a one night stand"!!! It also marked the return to a wry, ironic sense of humour that extended beyond the LP's title to embrace a laconic 'So You'd Like To Save The World', psychedelic opener 'Morning Is Broken', and a tasty Lennon-pastiche 'Love You So What'.

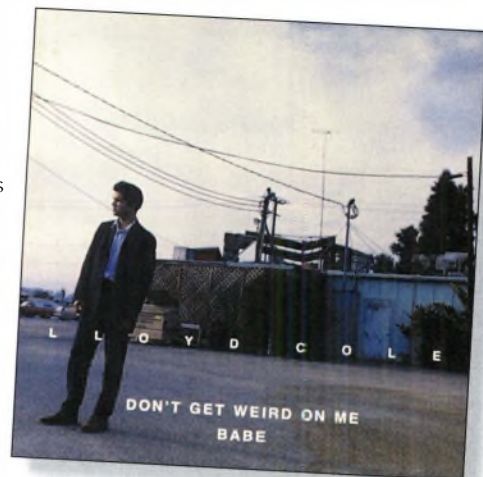
Having established credentials as an impassioned rocker, Cole then stood it all on its head in his last album to date, proper, the 1995 *Love Story*, a reunion with Commotions guitarist, Neil Clark, and the sound had come

full circle. As Cole says: "My goal this time was to sit down and write a quintessential Lloyd Cole record. For the last five or six years, I've been seeing how many things I can try my hand at, things I don't normally do. Now I've come back to the attitude I started making records with - and to what people might have liked about me in the first place". *Love Story* also reflects Lloyd Cole, the person. Now a married Manhattan family man,

this album kick starts with a fatherly, 'Trigger Happy'. What that tough New York crew of Maher, Quine and Sweet made of this is discernible when you listen to their understated protest registered in 'Be There', where an underlying guitar noise scars the otherwise lovely vocal textures. But a contented home life is never allowed to emasculate this CD. Healthy melancholia (strongly reminiscent of those halcyon days back in the 1980s) permeates the

second track, 'Sentimental Fool', and later on with 'Unhappy Song'. The recording, too, as for *Bad Vibes*, is very good - and it needs to be, because an apparently endless cast list on *Love Story* includes the Duke Quartet and a host of backing singers. Mike Glossop seamlessly mixes and matches this disparate group, and even convinces with the unexpected Latin strains of an elegant 'Love Ruins Everything' - a perceptive ballad with fine lyrics.

After a three year hiatus, Lloyd Cole's long time admirers among the good and the great hadn't forgotten him. Peter and Bobby Farrelly, the co-directors of *There's Something About Mary*, originally wanted no less than seven songs for their 1998 soundtrack, but they had to finally settle for just one - 'Margo's Waltz' - taken from the torch



songs on *Don't Get Weird On Me, Babe*. Without this compromise, who knows, perhaps the film's success would have rubbed off and lead to a resurgence of interest in all things Cole. As it stands, we at least have *The Collection* and an intriguing prospect presented by those two new songs. ➤+

LLOYD COLE & THE COMMOTIONS Album Discography

Rattlesnakes	POLYDOR 1984	7
Easy Pieces	POLYDOR 1985	7
Mainstream	POLYDOR 1987	7
Lloyd Cole & The Commotions 1984 -1989	POLYDOR 1989	6
Lloyd Cole	POLYDOR 1990	5
Don't Get Weird On Me, Babe	POLYDOR 1991	4
Bad Vibes	POLYGRAM 1993	4
Love Story	MERCLIFY 1995	
Lloyd Cole - The Collection	POLYGRAM 1998	



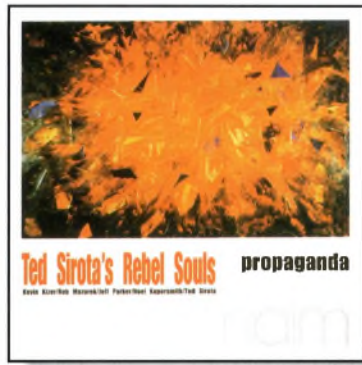
The Ginger Baker Trio

Going Back Home

Atlantic B2652-2 


I make no apology for including this '94 release – it's taken me a while to track it down. I finally found it at Amazon.com. The trio includes Charlie Haden on bass and the great Bill Frissell on electric guitar and what a noise they make. Three virtuosos having a great time. Baker's rock solid, shall we say 'forceful' drumming holds things together with Frissell's amazingly inventive guitar work soaring above Haden's dancing bass lines. It's an album that'll have you turning the volume control 'til you can feel the percussion, then sitting back with an inane grin on your face. It's such a good-time experience that it provides an instant lift whenever I play it and whatever mood I start listening in. Right now with oncoming flu symptoms, it's got me smiling and tapping my feet. There's not a weak track on the album. The energy levels throughout are extraordinary from the open 'Rambler' through to Baker's closing number 'East Timor'. The latter politically charged piece is the one sombre note and is particularly powerful. It also has the added benefit of re-introducing Baker's spoken vocals. 'Pressed Rat Et Warthog' anyone? Superb, warm full blooded recording with lots of impact, air and clarity, I can't recommend this release highly enough. To quote the sleeve notes: 'Rarely do improvising musicians of this quality get the opportunity to share a real musical adventure together.' Track it down now!

DD



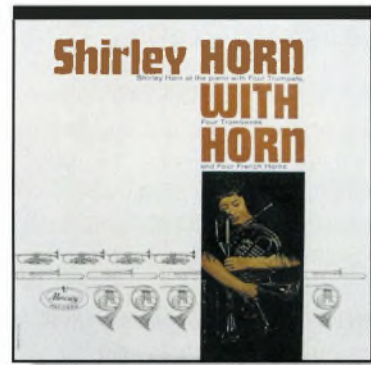
Ted Sirota's Rebel Souls

Propaganda

Naim CD 036 


I came across this band on the recent Naim sampler and wanted to hear more. That track, 'Geronimo's Free' is a heady mix of reggae, ska and jazz influences the like of which I hadn't heard before. What could the rest of the album be like? Well, nothing has quite the sprightly bounce of that number. The remaining tracks are more 'straight-ahead' jazz influenced. Appropriately given that it's his band, Sirota drives each piece with particularly crisp and effective drumming. It's his work coupled with some nice free ranging horns that give the album its distinctive edge and flavour. There's nothing too demanding here, just a very nicely played set from a talented bunch of musicians. If that feels unduly derogatory, I don't intend it. Just because it's undemanding doesn't mean that it's not highly enjoyable. Although the feel is pretty laid back throughout, the band do catch fire on at least one more occasion; the percussion driven 'La Danse de Janvier' where they all have a chance to stretch out, and sound all the better for it. I certainly feel that this band is strongest when the pace is hotter. More tracks like 'Geronimo's Free' and 'La Danse' please!

DD



Shirley Horn

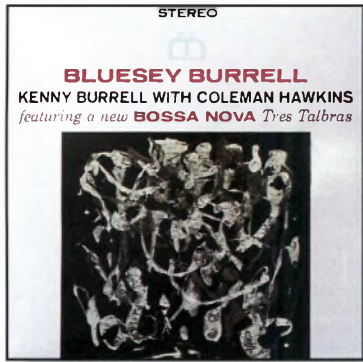
Shirley Horn With Horn

Alto / Mercury SR 60835 

Subtitled 'Shirley Horn at the piano with four trumpets, four trombones and four French horns', this album pairs Horn with The Quincy Jones Orchestra. It's a collection of fine standards ranging from 'On The Street Where You Live' to 'Wee Small Hours'. Arrangements are shared between Quincy Jones, Billy Byers, Thad Jones and Don Sebesky. Like Ella Fitzgerald, although I wouldn't pretend that the two are of quite the same calibre, Horn is a great emotional interpreter of songs. She is particularly strong in slower ballads, the first evidence of which comes with 'That Old Black Magic' which with its gentle Bossa Nova arrangement re-defines 'seductive'. On more up-beat numbers she's also no slouch, 'The Great City' where she's backed by weighty brass from the tuba section and a propulsive bass line really kicks home. 'Let Me Love You' has a fine Billy Byers arrangement that is redolent of '60's New York. At least the '60's New York I'm familiar with from film and TV. Highly evocative stuff and again a great, sexy vocal from Horn. 'Wee Small Hours' closes the album and almost matches Sinatra's performance in its indigo intensity. Slow, burning and soulful with mournful, breathy vocals it's easily the album's standout number. A fine album, and a fine introduction to Shirley Horn. Oh, and a good sleeve design too. What are you waiting for?

DD





Kenny Burrell with Coleman Hawkins

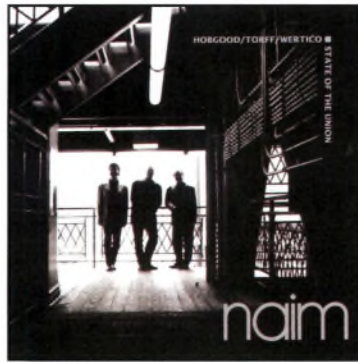
Bluesy Burrell

Alto AA019 **180g**

Originally issued on the splendidly named 'Moodsville' label, the band features the great Coleman Hawkins on four of its seven cuts. Ray Barretto adds congas to four tracks including the opening Bossa Nova 'Tres Talbras' and the remainder of the band are Hawkins regular rhythm section. The album title is a little misleading in that this is much more than a collection of blues themes, ranging further and wider with the blues as merely a starting point. Taking in the aforementioned Bossa Nova, there are also a couple of fine ballads, in particular 'I Thought About You' with some ravishing breathy playing from Hawkins. 'Montano Blues' includes one of my favourite Major Holeys bowed bass and singing solos, and some fine interplay between Hawkins and Burrell. Burrell is his usual fluid, cool and remarkably consistent self, whether soloing or providing sympathetic support for the other players. In fact the whole album reeks of 'cool' and is a solid well played set that will bear much repeated listening. The recording is fine, a tad lacking in depth but very natural, with each player well captured. My pressing, unusually for Alto, had a few right channel clicks and pops throughout which I hope is a 'one-off'.

DD

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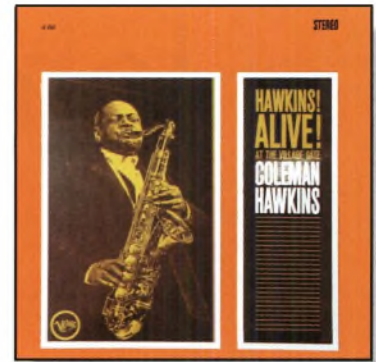
Hobgood/ Torff/ Wertico

State of the Union

Naim CD 038 **CD**

Another find from the recent Naim sampler, this trio impressed me with the delicacy of their playing, coupled with great sound quality. The album opens with gently brushed cymbals, sliding double bass lines and delicate piano work before kicking into a gently rolling groove in 'Don't Look Back'. The soft jazz mood is sustained through the second track but just as you're being lulled into a pleasantly soporific state, 'State of the Union' kicks in with some mighty discordant playing before again settling back into a dreamy groove. There's some particularly beautiful piano playing from Laurence Hobgood on this track, sounding at times a little like Keith Jarrett, at others like Bill Evans, but mostly like himself(!). The same pattern follows through the CD, lot's of delicate, and quite beautiful playing interspersed with just enough discord to keep you alert. The first really fast number doesn't appear 'til a particularly frantic take on 'How About You' where the band prove they're just as capable of handling high-octane stuff as the late night music elsewhere. Mid way through the album, the pace changes again with 'Calling Song' which features temple bells, and an Airto like array of percussion from Paul Wertico. Fine playing also from Brian Torff on bass; just listen to his tour de force in 'Willow Weep For Me'. In fact very fine playing from all three throughout.

DD



Coleman Hawkins

Hawkins Alive At The Village Gate

Verve V6-8509 (Classic Records re-issue) **180g**

Recorded in '62, Hawkins backed by Tommy Flanagan (piano), Major Holley (Bass) and Ed Locke (drums), this is one of his very best live sets. Opening with 'All The things You Are' at a faster than usual tempo (Hawkins always insisted that there is a right tempo for every ballad, but never implied that there was just one tempo), his playing is incendiary from the outset. My favourite of this set of four extended numbers is the band's interpretation of the old spiritual 'Joshua Fit the Battle Of Jericho'. This is partly because it's such an unusual choice for a jazz treatment, with its jerky theme, but mostly because the band makes such a fine job of it. Hawkins' second solo in particular, which includes an Arabic influenced flurry of notes before returning more conventionally to the main theme, is superb. Flanagan gives a fine solo but of particular note is Holley singing along in accompaniment to his bowed bass. A strange but strangely wonderful sound. Throughout it's never quite clear whether the bard intends the theme seriously or is enjoying a richly rewarding piss-take on the original. But that doesn't stop it being highly enjoyable. Sound quality is good, a little compressed at the top end but favouring the warm tones of Hawkins' sax. The 180g pressing is exemplary.

DD

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John Coltrane

He was particular about his eggs

by Dave Davies

The title is a quote from Coltrane's cousin Mary (later to be immortalised by a number written in her name), who grew up with him in North Carolina and then Maryland. Looking back on those childhood days, this is the key thing she remembered about him. The world would come to know him as one of the giants of jazz. Way up there with Armstrong, Parker and Davis in his importance and far reaching influence on the development of the music.

Born in '26 Coltrane was initially taught the clarinet by his father, and later moved to alto sax. In the mid '40's he worked in the bands of King Kolax and Joe Webb, and in '47 joined Eddie 'Cleanhead' Vinson's band, where he finally moved to tenor sax. He later played with many more bands including Johnny Hodges, Jimmy Smith, and the bandleader he cut his



first record with, Dizzy Gillespie.

Coltrane first came to real public attention in Miles Davis' great '55 quintet where he provided a balance to Davis' spare, reticent style. Once, famously, Coltrane told Davis that when immersed in a solo, he just didn't know how to stop. 'Try taking the saxophone out of your mouth' Davis suggested. Later their musical styles began to diverge with Davis fast

moving away from be-bop whilst Coltrane had begun digging deeper into it. By now he had also become heavily drug dependent and, proving too unreliable, was dismissed from Davis' band. Returning home to Philadelphia, Coltrane managed to both kick his habit and undergo some-thing of a spiritual awakening. He returned to New York and joined Thelonius Monk's quartet, where at the Five

Spot his reputation as a fine and original soloist was further enhanced, proving himself to be one of the very few players capable of improvising around Monk's angular themes. In '56 Coltrane, who by now had attracted the nickname 'Trane', also began leading his own band. In '57 as a 'one-off' for Blue Note whilst he was contracted to Prestige, he recorded his first truly influential album *Blue Train*. Four of the five numbers on the album were his



The Heavyweight Champion: The Complete Atlantic Recordings

Atlantic Jazz/ Rhino

If you can find it on vinyl this is the set to have. Covering 'Trane's most accessible music on 13 nicely pressed 150g albums, including a double album of outtakes, the LP version has (I think) officially been deleted, but a search could well reward you with a copy.

The (7) CD version (I know this is 'Vinyl Hold Out' but if all else fails.), is still available at least via Amazon.com. It was a difficult choice, all are strong and rewarding, but I've selected just three albums from the set for review:



Giant Steps

Originally released in 1960, this album helped revolutionise the way that jazz sax was played. In particular the title track, named after the loping bass line, with its challenging chord progression and crowded choruses. The album was the first full set of Coltrane composed numbers. The recording quality is a little dry and lacking in presence. Bass is also a tad lightweight but much of the essential fine detail is well captured from Art Taylor's cymbal work through to the subtleties of Trane's breakneck playing in fast numbers like 'Countdown'.

After 40 years the music still sounds fresh and pulse quickening. Most numbers are taken at quite a lick, although when the pace slows as in the beautiful 'Naima' (named after Trane's wife), the melodicism that underlies even Trane's most frantic playing is brought to the surface in the most tender and sensual way. For me, the main thing about Trane's playing in this album, and across all his major work, is its sheer muscularity. Playing which on the one hand challenged the accepted norms of its time, and on the other is executed with such authority, such ballsiness and emotional clout, that it feels beyond criticism.



Coltrane Plays the Blues

Recorded in 1960, this comprises relatively straight-ahead blues blowing sessions with Trane swapping between tenor, and on two of the six tracks, soprano sax. Trane always responded well to blues progressions, and his enjoyment in playing these numbers is palpable. Opening with 'Blues to Elvin' Trane delivers some of his most straight ahead soloing of the period, almost as though the innovations he'd delivered since the late fifties had still to happen. This is entirely right for the number which works just fine. 'Blues to

Bechet' is the first number on soprano and Trane is accompanied by just bass and drums. His playing although rooted in the blues idiom begins to really take flight here. On 'Blues to You', Trane back on tenor, extends his improvisation further still in a lightning fast flurry of notes. Side two features three equally strong numbers with outstanding playing throughout. Take particular note of Elvin Jones' drumming on 'Mr Syms' and 'Mr Knight'. Its dexterity and intense empathy with Trane's playing is just stunning. Recording quality is fine, a tiny bit lightweight, but clean, detailed and well staged.



My Favourite Things

Released in 1961 the almost 14 minute title track became an immediate hit, pushing both modal jazz and the until then overlooked soprano sax into the popular charts. It became something of a benchmark for improvisation and re-invention by Trane in concert over the years, leaving this original version seeming short in comparison. Aside from the title track, the entire album is comprised of standards encompassing numbers by Gershwin and Cole Porter. Ah, but that title track. I've lost count of the number of times I've played this album, but each time Trane's soprano kicks in after the first few bars seems as surprising and fresh as the first hearing. And as the familiar tune is slowly deconstructed and re-built the intellectual and emotional kick remains as

strong as ever. McCoy Tyner's piano playing is also extraordinarily good on this number, but then the whole band is as tight as my mother in laws purse throughout. Tyner rather than following the Rodgers and Hammerstein chords, substitutes a repeated vamp on top of which Trane solos. I guess the only problem with this album is that the title track is so strong, so ground breaking, that the rest of the numbers have a touch of the 'also ran' about them. Certainly none are as strong as the opening number although 'Summertime', this time with Trane back on tenor, is given a pretty thorough working over. The recording quality is a little more open than Giant Steps 'breathing' more easily and better conveying the flow of the music. Staging also gains a little depth.



Lush Life

DCC Compact Classics LPZ 2032

Recorded in mono between '57 and '58 and originally issued on Prestige, this isn't one of Trane's best albums but is pretty fine stuff nonetheless. In many ways it's less challenging than his more famous recordings, more relaxed and maybe more immediately enjoyable. Side one features three numbers – 'Like Someone In Love', 'I Love You', and 'Trane's Slow Blues' with just bass and drum support, although this apparent innovation later proved to be due to the pianist not turning up for the gig. Side two adds piano (Red Garland) and trumpet (Donald Byrd on just the title track) to flesh out the band for 'Lush Life' and 'I Hear a Rhapsody'. The album is packed with powerful playing from Trane but although the music is secondary to both 'Giant Steps' and 'My Favourite Things' the sound quality on this excellent DCC 180G pressing is streets ahead. Without recourse to the 'rare as hens teeth'

original it's difficult to judge how well this recording has benefited from the DCC treatment, but despite (or perhaps because of) being a mono recording, it blows the other two away in terms of punch and clarity. Clearly staging isn't a factor here although within the confines of the mono image, there's plenty of depth. There's also a solidity to the sound that's slightly lacking in the two 'Heavyweight Champion' pressings, from Louis Hayes brushwork to the percussive attack of Garlands playing, and the bite of Byrds trumpet, it's all that bit more real. The title ballad taken, at a suitably slow pace and opening with bowed bass from Paul Chambers, is once again the standout number, with superb soloing from the whole band. I'm a sucker for this number in (nearly) all its many interpretations, but this is my favourite instrumental version. Oh, and it's got a great cover shot too!



Afro Blue Impressions

Pablo Live – Alto re-pressing AE 005

Recorded over 1962 as Trane performed his first European tour as a band leader, this double set captures Trane in between his relatively straight ahead early style and the free jazz blowing of his later years. And what a fine album it is. Covering a good selection of Trane standards from 'Naima', 'Cousin Mary', 'Afro Blue' to 'Chasing the Train' there's some incendiary playing here from a band that have been stunning to have experienced live.

The slightly variable recording quality is a shade distant in places, but this may well accurately reflect the venue. However, as with

all Trane's better music (and that's a massive body of work), you're drawn straight into the performance and the finer nuances of recording quality just don't matter. Alto have done their usual fine job with the pressings which are both suitably flat and near silent between tracks. To make my happiness complete, the set includes a faster paced 21 minute version of 'My Favourite Things'. My 19 year old daughter walked through the listening room as I was playing this track and commented 'They're making a mess of that tune Dad'. Au contraire Zoe. Au contraire.

own compositions, and most, including the title track and 'Lazy Bird' have become classics.

In '58 Trane rejoined Davis as part of his sextet, where he participated in the creation of two of the finest jazz albums ever made, *Milestones* and what many regard as the finest jazz album bar none, *Kind of Blue*.

In late '58 Trane moved from Prestige to Atlantic Records, and this with the appearance of *Giant Steps*, marked his recognition as a true great. This highly successful album in which he effectively summarised and finalised be-bop, allowed him to leave Davis' band in '60 and further develop his own ideas. A whole string of great albums for Atlantic included *Coltrane Jazz* and a personal favourite of mine, the aptly titled *My Favourite Things*. This includes the ground-breaking 13 minute long title track in which Trane,

playing soprano, deconstructs and re-builds the familiar tune. It became a theme that he would return to time and time again. In '61 Trane moved from Atlantic to Impulse where he was to push the boundaries even further, taking greater risks than ever before. *Africa Brass*, *Live at the Village Vanguard*, *Ballads* and the Johnny Hartman collaboration all come from his first few years with Impulse. Then, in '64 came *A Love Supreme*, for many Trane's greatest album, and certainly his most spiritual. It sold well enough to influence a generation of rock fans (myself included), opening them to whole new worlds of sound.

From '65 Trane moved further into the realms of free jazz making ever



more intense recordings such as *Ascension*, which whilst it enthralled his hard-core listeners, alienated a good number of his more main-stream fans. Pharoah Sanders and Alice

Coltrane (Trane's second wife) became regular band members, the latter replacing McCoy Tyner on piano. Trane died of liver cancer in '67. Aged just 40 he had consistently fought against complacency and forged his own path to create and constantly develop his own unique music. Who knows where, had he lived longer, his music may have led. He is still venerated and imitated by players throughout the world. His music will live forever.



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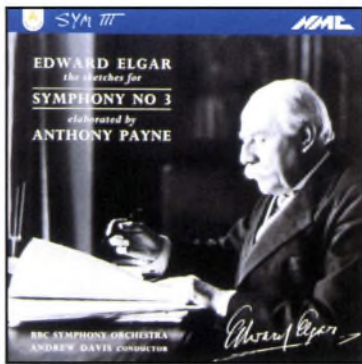
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Elgar, Symphony No 3
(completed Anthony Payne)

BBC Symphony Orchestra
Andrew Davis

MMC DO-53 (CD)

When Elgar died in 1934, he left over 130 pages of sketches intended for a third symphony. The existence of these sketches has long been known; however, the generally expressed view was that they were far too fragmentary to be worked into a convincing whole. Also, hadn't Elgar just a few months before his death, implored close friend Billy Reed to burn the sketches so that no one could 'tinker' with them? The full fascinating story of how composer Anthony Payne came to elaborate Elgar's sketches into a four movement symphony lasting almost an hour is recounted in the booklet - and in a talk on a companion CD to the above issue. Suffice it to say that Payne has worked minor miracles here, creating a work that sounds like mature Elgar. It's far, far better than any of the laughable attempts to recreate the unfinished finale of Bruckner's ninth symphony, though no one's saying that what's being offered here is truly Elgar's third - only an insight into what might've been had Elgar lived. Nevertheless, the meat and potatoes - Elgar's material - is arresting and powerful, and Payne has fashioned it into a convincing edifice that stands repeated listening. It's handsomely played by the BBC SO under Andrew Davis, and MMC's recording is full-bodied and sonorous, with good clarity and detail despite some dense scoring. A fascinating issue!

JMH

RECORDING
MUSIC



Glazunov
Symphonies 1 and 4

Moscow Symphony Orchestra
Alexander Anissimov

Naxos 8.55356 (CD)

Naxos are in the process of recording the complete orchestral works of Alexander Glazunov - a worthy enterprise, albeit one that will inevitably unearth music of little or no merit. Glazunov had remarkable facility as a composer; his ear for sonority was legendary, his technique absolute. Yet some of his scores seems to have been written on auto-pilot; almost all the ingredients for writing truly memorable music were his, except perhaps the gift of melody. Yet if any works of his escape these generalisations it's the two symphonies coupled here. The first symphony - a student work, written when the composer was just 16 - is a wonderful piece; fresh, imaginative, and loveable. The fourth symphony dates from 1893 and marks a big advance on the first symphony - the lovely yearning 'oriental' theme in the long first movement evokes the nostalgic romanticism of Borodin, while the lively second movement owes something to the Tchaikovsky of *Swan Lake* yet is pure Glazunov. The finale opens with a rich luscious theme, tricking the listener into thinking it's the start of a slow movement. But the pace soon quickens, and Glazunov steers the work to an exciting colourful conclusion. The performance under Alexander Anissimov is committed and well-played, while the Naxos recording is clear and more than acceptable, if slightly lacking in tonal body.

JMH

RECORDING
MUSIC



Handel
Concerti grossi Op 6

I Musici de Montreal
Yuli Turovsky

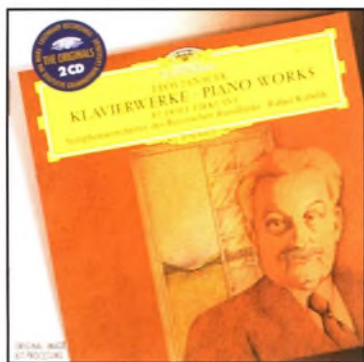
Chandos 9004/5/6 (CD)

One unfortunate by-product of the revolution in performing and recording old music on instruments of the composer's period is the way it's made much baroque repertoire 'off limits' for orchestras who still play on modern instruments. Yet, as these highly accomplished and very enjoyable accounts of Handel's *Op 6* show, there's more to the successful performance of baroque music than using historically correct forces. Things like style and enthusiasm count for much, and in any case Handel's robust full-bodied Saxon demeanour isn't always well-served by performers who scale down his imperious rhetoric. Not that I Musici de Montreal play this music in a heavy old-fashioned style. Their performances are keen and lively, with clean incisive string playing and minimal vibrato. Turovsky uses strings throughout, omitting the optional wind parts added to several of the concertos, and captures the rich cosmopolitan ambience of these aristocratic works - something many 'authentic' performances fail to do for all their academic correctness. Tempi are well judged; for the most part not too fast, but nicely sprung rhythmically with an attractive Handelian swagger. It sounds as though the players are challenged and excited by the music and are enjoying playing it. What more can one ask for? Chandos provide sharp clean sound that's lucid and detailed with good clarity and presence.

JMH

RECORDING
MUSIC





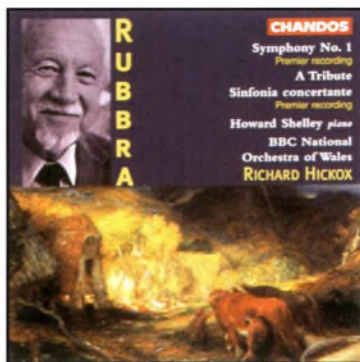
Janacek
Works for solo piano and piano
and orchestra,
Kubelik, Bavarian Radio SO
Furkusny (pno)

449 764-2



The piano is not an instrument one readily associates with Janacek, and these two CDs contain almost all the music he wrote for this instrument. Yet his piano works contain some of his most intimate and private music, especially the deeply personal *On the Overgrown Path*. The main work here, it confronts the raw feelings and emotions occasioned by the death of the composer's daughter at the age of 21. This isn't a smooth beautifully-crafted response to death, as in Mahler's *Kindertotenlieder*, but something altogether tougher and closer to the bone, drafted in language that's terse and aphoristic. As a boy of five, Firkusny met Janacek and later studied with him. His insight into the music is compelling; the subtle colouring and articulation of dynamics creates an almost speech-like narrative where every note is important. I'd previously heard *On the Overgrown Path* in other interpretations without being able to understand the music. But with Firkusny everything suddenly made sense. The other music is played with similar insight, and sounds absolutely authoritative – though works like the *Concertina* for piano and chamber orchestra nonetheless emerge tough and angular, in Janacek's best take-it-or-leave-it style! The early '70s recordings are clear and bright, with only a slightly clanging piano tone to complain of. The original LPs were notoriously difficult to reproduce, and these CDs sound smoother and cleaner.

JMH

RECORDING
MUSIC

Rubbra
Symphony No 1, A Tribute,
Sinfonia Concertante*
BBC NSO of Wales, Hickox
Howard Shelley, piano*

Chandos CHAN 9538



I'm old enough to remember the days when Classical music was routinely referred to as Serious music – something that probably sounds quite fearsome in these days of Soundbites and short attention spans. Certainly, Rubbra wrote 'serious' music; there's no small-talk, no chit-chat. Even when the tone lightens (as in the second movement of the first symphony – here receiving its first recording, incidentally) there's no mistaking the seriousness of purpose behind the music. Not that 'serious' in Rubbra's case means heavy or pompous. Rather, one is engaged by cogent musical argument and powerful rhetoric, as though the composer were engaged in a robust war of words. The symphony was completed in 1937 when Rubbra was 34, and it sounds remarkably assured and mature for one so young. *The Sinfonia Concertante* for piano and orchestra was begun slightly before the symphony, but not finished until the early 1940s. Again, it's a big-boned serious work that makes a lasting impression – it's brooding power and weighty introspection contrasting sharply with passages of great energy. Music reflects the age in which it was written, and it's clear both works were composed in anxious uneasy times. The performances are first-rate, and the Chandos recording sounds clean and well-balanced, but not too resonant, allowing detail to tell without difficulty. Some nice deep bass too, especially in the *Sinfonia Concertante*

JMH

RECORDING
MUSIC

Sibelius
The Tempest, suites
1 and 2. The Oceanides
Helsinki Philharmonic
Leif Segerstam

Ondine ODE 9142



More richly atmospheric Sibelius from Leif Segerstam and the excellent Helsinki Philharmonic. The works on this CD might not be among the most popular by this composer, but that says more about public taste than the quality of the music! *The Oceanides*, for example, is a very unusual and original piece written when Sibelius was almost 50 years old and at the height of his powers – a work whose inexorable organic growth looks forward to late masterpieces like *Tapiola* and the *Seventh Symphony*. *The Tempest* is later still, and contains music that veers between brooding introspection, verdant freshness, coy sentimentality, and unrestrained good spirits – qualities well caught in this new recording. The conductor's liking for measured tempi, and Ondine's burnished highly detailed sound, ensures that everything is heard clearly. Segerstam made an earlier (1991) recording of the first *Tempest* suite for Chandos with the Danish radio symphony orchestra, but good as that was this new Ondine sounds even better; full-bodied and powerful, with excellent deep bass. The disc ends with a stately sonorous account of the tone-poem *Vigilrite and Sunrise*; another highly original score that no one but Sibelius could have written. State of the art sound – colourful, detailed, and 'big' like the best analogue!

JMH

RECORDING
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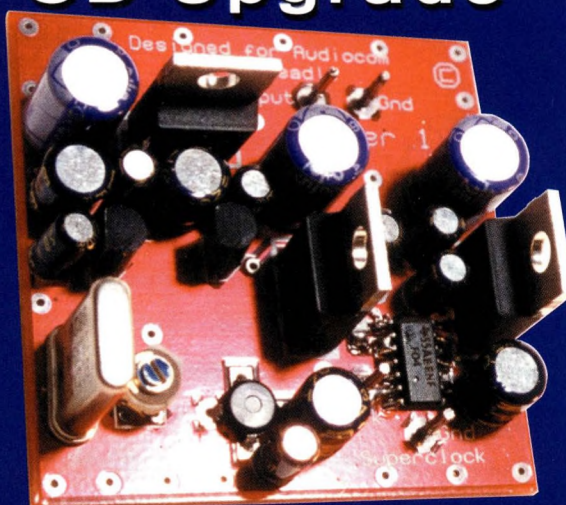
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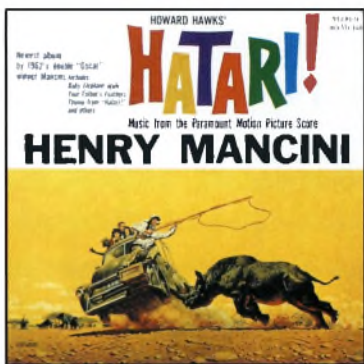
Henry Mancini & His Orchestra

Breakfast at Tiffany's

ARS RCA LSP-2362 **180g** **2**

Last year's 75th anniversary of the birth of Hollywood arranger-composer-conductor, Henry Mancini, has passed by largely unnoticed. And yet the lightweight nostalgia of the films he worked on remains as popular as ever. Blake Edwards' impossibly sanitised version of call girl Holly Golightly is as good a starting point as any. Gingerly toe-dipping the murky waters of sexual liberation with a soundtrack that's suitably lightweight and easy on the ear, Mancini's score has twelve episodic encounters that work best as the dreamy, soft-focus, companion piece to a visual dimension up there on the screen. Obviously, Johnny Mercer's sugar-sweet 'Moon River', with its massed strings and ethereal voices is reason enough to add this record to your collection, but don't discount the hidden pleasures of a track like 'Mr. Yunioshi'; where Larry Bunker's vibraphone and the plucky banjo playing of Bob Bain uncover what surely has to be a subtle musical allusion to the oldest profession, as they tease out strains of 'Money. That's What I Want'. Jazzy band numbers, including 'The Big Blow Out', are a fine vehicle for the talented session players, who all benefit from a consistently accurate and nicely balanced recording, while, for the voyeurs amongst us, there is always Howell Conant's deliciously iconic cover shot of Audrey Hepburn to dwell upon.

RP



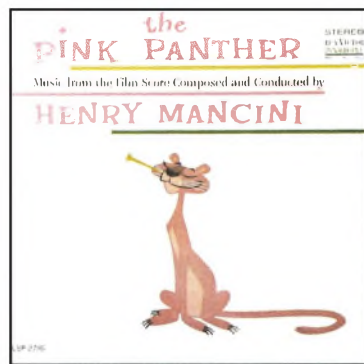
Henry Mancini & His Orchestra

Hatari!

ARS RCA LSP-2559 **180g** **1**

Whereas the Oscar-winning *Breakfast at Tiffany's* trades on a degree of realism, *Hatari!* is a shameless hussy that will give plenty of thrills to anyone who wants to push their system to its limits. Put aside, for one moment, conventional musical values and contemplate 'The Sounds of Hatari'. This convocation underscores (in a very big way) the film's opening sequence - a pursuit of the furious rhino shown on the sleeve. Shelly Manne and the other five percussionists indulge in a wildly rhythmic beat as tom-toms, bass and snare drums are sporadically pierced by a colourful use of maracas, rice shakers, bamboo sticks and castanets. Momentum is sustained through judicious piano and tuba arrangements that help draw the listener headlong towards a final flourish of trumpets and skins. The farthest reaches of an immense soundstage are explored, and I could not help thinking how much this track reminded me of the *Sounds Unheard Of!* LP (APR 3009). Both records offer adroitly crafted showpieces, but with *The Sounds of Hatari* you get the wallop from a small orchestra instead of the Shelly Manne / Jack Marshall duo. The salon numbers and dubious humour of the other tracks wears pretty thin, but what the reissue disc does guarantee is fine musicianship backed up by a superb recording.

RP



Henry Mancini & His Orchestra

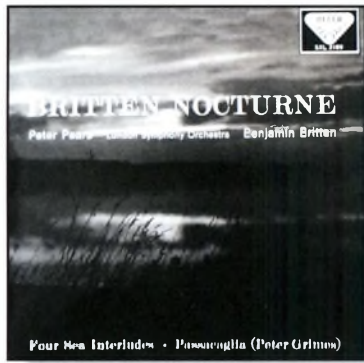
The Pink Panther

ARS RCA LSP-2795 **180g** **1**

With the coolest of opening tracks Plas Johnson's sax solo has left an indelible pink paw print on my psyche, courtesy of cartoons from my formative years. The Pink Panther does not share superdisc status with Mancini's original African excursion because original pressings employed the Dynagroove cutting process. Now, ARS have returned to the analogue masters which prove that Jim Malloy's engineering was at least the equal of that found on *Hatari!* Musically? Well, Panthers can stretch tolerances to the limit. But in amongst the anachronisms like 'Something For Sellars' lurks the odd gem. Take 'Royal Blue' where, the melody is picked out by Sheldon's muted trumpet, forward and to the right of centre-stage. Jimmy Rowles' piano intro provides a counterpoint out on the left. String instruments spread across the middle of the recording in warm waves and Manne keeps a respectfully cool beat going in the background. Wistful trumpet notes alternate with those from the piano until the ivories fade... to be replaced in time and space by haunting images cast by Johnson's saxophone - beautifully atmospheric. Clearly, the three Mancini LPs present something of a dichotomy - nostalgia or anachronism? It's a fine dividing line. But Sixties kitsch should always be served this way - on vinyl.

RP





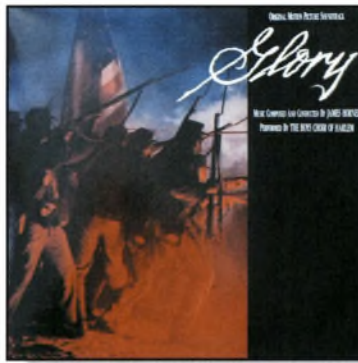
**Benjamin Britten, Nocturne,
Four Sea Interludes, Passacaglia**

Peter Pears, Britten, LSO, OROH

Decca (Speakers Corner) SXL 2189 **180g** **2**

Composers conducting their own works don't always produce the best results, however, Britten is an exception, and the series of recordings he made for Decca, especially those with his life-partner, the tenor Peter Pears, are sonically and musically outstanding. Pears, not surprisingly, has an almost intuitive grasp of Britten's strange amalgam of gloom, drama and hope, moving vibrantly and effortlessly between moods. This disc combines the *Nocturne* with the *Four Sea Interludes* and the *Pasacaglia* from Britten's first opera, *Peter Grimes*. Whilst the original opera box set is still fairly easy to find, it's also fairly daunting as an introduction to Britten's 'difficult' vocal music. That makes this disc especially welcome. The sparse orchestration of the *Nocturne* for strings and seven obligato instruments makes for dramatic musical colours and shadings, beautifully balanced by Pears. The recording is absolutely first rate (although the larger orchestral forces of the *Interludes* present a greater range of moods albeit with less convincing dynamics). Pears voice is rich and nicely separated, and the tonal range of the wind instruments is near perfect. The infamous timpani solo thunders impressively. If you've always steered clear of Britten's operas, then treat this as a perfect primer.

RG
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Horner

Glory OST

Classic Records VR91329 **180g** **CD**

When you consider the scale of the slaughter in the American Civil War, a war in which the power and accuracy of small-arms for ever outgrew the dated tactics of line, column and volley fire, and where the sheer volume of fire was so great that the field of Gettysburg is littered with 'twins', bullets that collided and fused in mid air, its power in the American collective consciousness is hardly surprising. The emancipation of the slaves and the peculiar ferocity of a nation practising on itself only adds to that power. *Glory* cuts straight to the heart of the matter, following the struggle to raise, equip and train the first black regiment in the Union Army, in the shadow of its eventual destruction in a hopeless assault on Fort Wagner. Horner takes no chances, and like so many film composers before him, liberally ransacks the American tradition, blending Copland with the fife and drum of the infantry line to produce hauntingly evocative and brooding music. And for once he succeeds in treading the tightrope between bombast and the cloying sentimentality that pollute so many modern film scores. The recording helps, with only the congealed violins and soprano voices to betray its digital origins, while the 180g pressing adds weight, warmth and an appropriate sense of authority.

RG
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**Puccini
Operatic Arias**

Tullio Serafin, Philharmonia
Orchestra, Maria Callas, Soprano

TESTAMENT/COLUMBIA 33CX 1204 **180g** **2**

In its day this 1954 selection of arias from *Manon Lescaut*, *Madama Butterfly*, *La Boheme*, *Suor Angelica*, *Gianni Schicchi* and *Turandot* was a controversial record. Her first ever recital disc is Maria Callas to the core with Puccini, Serafin and the Philharmonia Orchestra serving as worthy hand-maidens to the Goddess. At the height of her drawing power, yet having already relinquished the heavier Wagnerian roles in the opera house, she brilliantly delivers a remarkable range to handle the music of *Liu* and *Turandot*. Dramatic, intelligent and individual: every phrase is awash with colour and meaning. Yes, there are occasional moments of dubious intonation and stridence, and a muscular Mimi will not convince the purists, but these are minor criticisms of little consequence to the overall impact of these impassioned and atmospheric interpretations. The engineer's dutifully spotlight Callas and, although the age of this recording reveals some low-level hiss and tape deterioration, it does not distract from the magnificence of 'In questa reggia' (*Turandot*) or the unexpected vision and freshness brought to those well-worn *Butterfly* arias 'Con onor muore' and 'Un bel di vedremo'. The beautifully sweet 'O mio babbino caro' (*Gianni Schicchi*) is worth the entry price alone to this versatile display of a diva's art.

RP
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Pomp & Pipes

Frederick Fennell, Dallas Wind Symphony. Paul Riedo, organ.

REFERENCE RECORDINGS RR-58

Undisputed heavy-weight champion of Wind Bands since his early Mercury days leading the Eastman Wind Ensemble, Frederick Fennell is an extraordinary figure. His performances of music in the band tradition are universally acclaimed, and "definitive" is not too strong a description for many of the Cozart-Fine collaborations and later Telarc releases that pre-date this Indian Summer at Reference Recordings. Here, a generous and diverse selection of works by Karg-Elert, Reed, Gigout, Wills, Grainger, Dupre, Nelson, Widor and Weinberger are subtitled "Powerful Music for Organ, Winds, Brass & Percussion", and (like the Rutter *Requiem*) superbly engineered by Keith O. Johnson at the Meyerson Centre. Favourite moments include an evocative Nordic study, 'The Vikings' (Wills), with its self-styled classic British brass band arrangements augmented by additional bass tubas, soprano cornets, euphoniums, trumpets and percussion to give it balls. Ron Nelson's joyous and unbelievably liberated 'Pebble Beach Sojourn' sparkles in a typically irreverent American fashion, while traditionalists will applaud the intensity of Dupre's Verdun tribute: 'Poem Heroique', as well as the seriousness of 'Lord, Save Thy People' (Widor) and an uplifting 'Polka and Fugue' (Weinberger) with its romantic swinging themes and essential, rock-solid notes sustained by the excellent resident organist, Paul Riedo.

RP

www.vivante.co.uk



Jacintha

Here's to Ben

GROOVE NOTE GRV 1001-1

Former Classic Records guru Ying Tan is a fine judge of talent when he hears it, and the unanticipated, yet seamless, transition of Singapore-based pop vocalist Jacintha to pure jazz in this tribute for the late saxophonist, Ben Webster, is a tremendous coup for his newly-founded Groove Note label. She uncannily combines discipline, technique, emotion and old-fashioned loveliness - breezing through nine safe standards which include 'Georgia On My Mind', 'Tenderly', 'How Long Has This Been Going On?', 'Stardust', 'Pennies From Heaven' and 'Danny Boy'. Jacintha, supported by a combo graced by the likes of Billie Holiday sax man, Teddy Edwards, and those well-matched stalwarts Kei Akogi (piano) Derek Oles (bass) and Larance Marable (drums), is superbly captured in a live to 2-track pure analogue recording, mastered by the excellent Bernie Grundman. Her voice, immediate and rich, has wonderful resonance in a plaintive rendition of 'Tenderly', but possesses the dexterity and fullness to pick up the mood with George and Ira Gershwin's swinging 'Our Love Is Here To Stay'. Nit-picking? Well, this choice of repertoire could have been expanded to incorporate more imaginative numbers, but the inclusion of a twelve-inch single version of 'The Look Of Love' / 'Danny Boy' is a compensatory bonus.

RP

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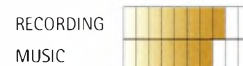
Ahmed Jamal

Ahmed Jamal's Alhambra

Alto 005

Jamal is one of the most important and influential pianists in modern jazz. A major influence on the music of Miles Davis who was so taken with his style that he even asked his own pianist of the time, Red Garland, to try and sound like Jamal. Recorded in '61, the inaugural year of Jamal's Chicago club, this album is one of those classic jazz recordings that on the right system is capable of putting you there. Jamal heads a trio with Israel Crosby on bass and Vernell Fournier on drums and from the closely recorded audience applause prior to the first notes of 'We Kiss a Shadow' this is a 'front row' treat. Very crisply recorded, with the percussive effects of Jamal's keyboard work particularly well captured, the playing on this set of standards is much more open and freer than most of Jamal's studio work. Many numbers are taken at an unusually fast pace. In particular 'Love for Sale' which though it's still highly enjoyable has an upbeat flavour that's totally at odds with its theme. This is the exception though, since all the other numbers are much more in keeping with this treatment, from 'Broadway' to a nicely evocative 'Snowfall'. When Jamal slows the pace a little, as in my favourite number on the album 'Willow Weep For Me', the music moves up a notch and becomes that bit more powerful and effective.

DD





Frank Sinatra

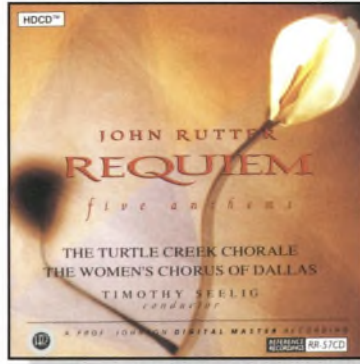
The Voice

Columbia (Classic Records) CL 743 **180g**

There's been no shortage of Sinatra re-issues, but with this one Classic have hit pay-dirt. This early "six-eye" collection showcases Francis Albert at his best, and combined with Classic's exemplary cutting and pressing standards, and a stellar running order, what more could you ask for? Well, someone should of got shot of that appalling piece of schmaltz 'Over The Rainbow'. Not only is this the nastiest, most sickly sweet arrangement that I've heard in years, but the recording is absolutely ghastly. Thankfully it's an aberration (albeit a fairly major one), and the rest of the album is a class apart. This is Sinatra the world weary lover, showing just what he can do with a collection of standards: 'Try a Little Tenderness', 'These foolish Things', 'Fools Rush In', 'That Old black Magic', 'I Don't Know Why' and 'She's funny That Way' just to name a few. The recordings, as with any collection, are variable, but tend to the excellent side of good. The performances of course, are peerless. If you are only going to buy one Sinatra album...

RG

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Rutter
Requiem

Timothy Seelig, The Turtle Creek Chorale, Dallas Women's Chorus

Reference Recordings RR-57 **HD** **1**

Notoriously difficult to record well, expansive choral works have generally been viewed with antipathy by the audiophile labels. Reference is an exception to that rule, and their incomparable HDCD of John Rutter's sensitive and thoughtful valedictory composition is brilliantly staged and engineered. A Faure inspired *Requiem*, where the combined voices (over three hundred in total from the two choirs) search out an optimistic and ultimately comforting message for humanity with music of exquisite beauty, has the familiar resonances of *Psalms 23, 130* and *The Book of Common Prayer* at its core. I doubt whether a performance on this scale will ever again be recorded with such a sympathetic acoustic. Remarkable translucency and the capacity to reveal the most delicate harmonic details - even the subtle shading of accompanying harp, cello, oboe, clarinet and flutes - are amongst its impressive list of credentials. Wonderful, emotionally-charged singing of an uncommon quality, too, for the five smaller sacred pieces that sandwich the main choral work. The highlight of these has to be the little known, *A Gaelic Blessing*, which Rutter here sets to music for the first time. An exceptional CD, but now very difficult to find on vinyl - the LP being down to the very dregs.

RP

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Illinois Jacquet with Kenny Burrell

Desert Winds

Alto AA014 **180g**

Tenor Saxophonist Jacquet first made his name in Lionel Hampton's band in the '40's when, famously, he recorded a honking 64-bar solo for the single 'Flying Home'. On this album, Jacquet is partnered with Kenny Burrell, Guitar, Wendell Marshall, bass, Tommy Flanagan, piano, Ray Lucas, drums and unusually by a Latin percussionist, Willie Rodriguez. This line-up had not worked together as a regular group and the sessions took a while to gel. Rodriguez who had a great sense of humour but very little hair received a 'complaint' about the glare from his head. The ice was broken when he explained that he would have worn his toupé but didn't want to compromise the studio acoustics. Clearly neither the acoustics or the band integrity were compromised because this is a very tight, well-recorded set. For me it's marred a little only on one track, 'Blues For the early Bird' where a degree of rock 'n roll influence has crept into Burrell's playing which probably sounded very contemporary at the time but somewhat dated now. Strangely, the standout number is atypical of Jacquet's style. 'You're my Thrill' is a gorgeous take on this slow ballad, and alone is worth the price of admission. That it's surrounded by fine takes of a number of standards including 'Lester Leaps In' and the title track, is a bonus. Excellent if slightly dry recording and the usual fine Alto pressing.

DD

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Korean Vinyl

by Jimmy Hughes

Classical music lovers who still listen to LPs have limited opportunities to buy new records - unless it's expensive audiophile 'replica' editions pressed on 180g vinyl. So it's nice to welcome the unexpected arrival of LPs from the Polygram classical labels - Decca, Deutsche Grammophon, and Philips - pressed in Korea. Apparently the idea had been to sell the LPs in Korea as a mail order subscription edition. The series was launched in the early '80s, but faltered (presumably) because of the introduction of Compact Disc.

The LPs are pressed in Korea from original metalwork supplied by Polygram, so there's no re-cutting from copies of the original master tapes. This means that sound quality should be comparable to the European product - though all record companies periodically re-cut their LP titles and therefore some variation in sound (for better or worse) must be expected when comparing LPs pressed in different countries and at different times.

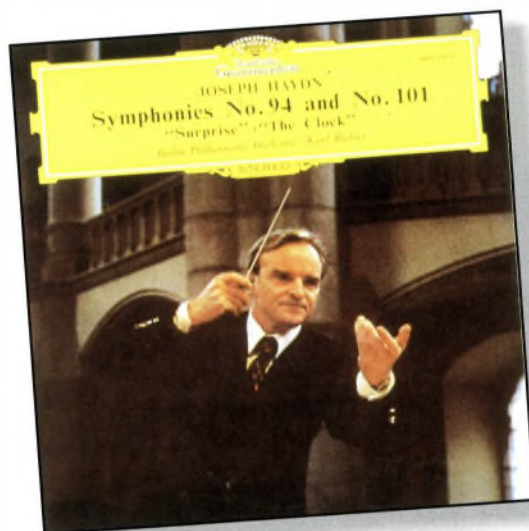
Korean pressing quality is generally good, though not faultless, and you shouldn't expect 180g Audiophile surface quietness or flatness from these LPs. I'd describe the pressing standard as similar to a good UK Polygram LP from the '70s. LP labels are titled in English, but there are no sleeve notes. But what makes them especially attractive is the price. At \$6 a disc they are a perfectly viable

alternative to buying second-hand, which is why I'm writing about them here.

For this article I want to concentrate on The World of Great Classics - a series of 50LPs taken from the Deutsche Grammophon catalogue. The records are available individually, but originally they were grouped in handsome boxes each containing 10LPs. You can even buy the complete set for £250. The first box consists of symphonies from Haydn and Mozart, through to Beethoven and Schubert, finishing with Tchaikovsky and Dvorak.

The set begins with Karl Richter's spirited, committed accounts of *Haydn's Surprise (94)* and *Clock (101)* symphonies with the Berlin Philharmonic - a well regarded LP in its day, and one of the few symphonic recordings made by this baroque specialist. The sound is sharp and lean, but a little acidic in climaxes (as were many DG recordings from the '60s) albeit very listenable. 2864 070 01

Karl Bohm's Berlin Philharmonic set of the late Mozart symphonies was something of a benchmark in the '60s and '70s, and his coupling of *Symphonies 40* and *41* was a very famous LP - one you'd see in every record shop no matter what other versions were stocked. The playing is weighty and serious; big band Mozart



in the best sense, and the sound is clear if a little acidic like the Haydn. 2864 070 02.

Taped at the beginning of the '60s, Herbert von Karajan's integral cycle of the Beethoven symphonies with the Berlin Philharmonic was a landmark set. The playing was fiery yet refined, and very powerful. Highlights included a trenchant inspired *Eroica* (2864 070 03), a white-hot *Fifth* (here cut on a single LP side and coupled with a brooding Schubert *Unfinished* 2864 070 04), and an incandescent *Ninth* on one LP (2864 070 06). For the *Pastoral* symphony, Karl Bohm's outstanding Vienna Philharmonic version has been chosen - there is no finer overall performance, and the 1970 recording still sounds good (2864 070 05) The Karajan recordings sound nicely bright and open.

One of the attractions of The



► World of Great Classics series is the use of original DG artwork, including the famous cartouche. But in a number of cases the covers have been changed. For example, Karajan's 1964 Berlioz *Symphonie Fantastique* has been issued - but with the cover illustration from his later 1975 performance! No matter; the earlier account remains something of a classic, blending refinement with passion, and it still sounds impressive. 2864 070 07.

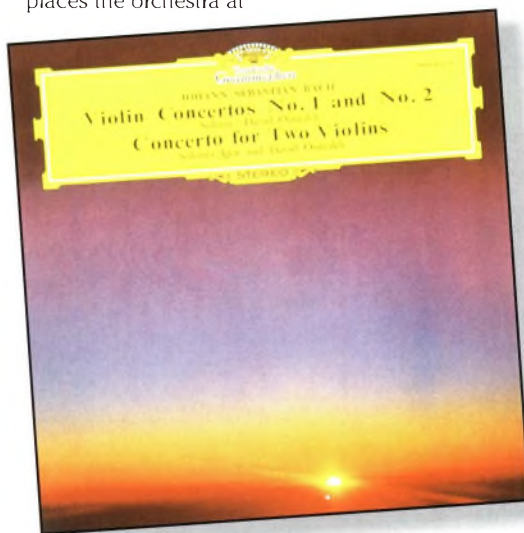
Also famous is Karajan's 1964 cycle of the Brahms symphonies. The first symphony was something of a Karajan speciality, though some found the playing of the Berlin Philharmonic a little too refined for this rugged and at times craggy music. The upper strings remain a shade acidic, but this is more down to the original recording than the new LP transfer, which simply reflects the kind of sound DG were getting at this particular period. 2864 070 08.

Another hybrid cover disguises Karajan's early '60s Tchaikovsky *Fatigue* symphony, making it look at first glance like Mravinsky's legendary DG Leningrad performance. The *Fatigue* was one of Karajan's favourite works; he recorded it something like six times. He approached the work with a mixture of control and unbridled passion - a combination that creates a performance of great contrasts and drama. Decent sound too. 2864 070 09.

Dvorak's *New World* symphony was another work that fascinated Karajan, and his 1964 Berlin account for DG enjoyed a long and distinguished life at full-price on LP. The orchestral playing is sumptuous and very refined, without being lazy or self-regarding - the 'calls to attention' during the introduction are as disciplined as you could ever wish to hear, yet phrasing remains flexible and warm. The sound is a little 'light' in balance on side one, but side two is

very full-blooded and detailed. 2864 070 10.

The second World of Great Classics box concentrates on concertos, and kicks off with Karajan's surprisingly successful and imaginatively directed Vivaldi *Four Seasons*. The Berlin Philharmonic are suitably scaled down for the occasion, and concert-master Michel Schwalbe is an excellent soloist. The recording places the orchestra at



a distance, and Karajan keeps dynamic levels low in order to allow plenty of space to expand where necessary. An interesting disc! 2864 071 11.

At the height of the Cold War in the early '60s, a handful of Russian artists made recordings in the West - among them this set of the Bach *Violin Concertos* with David Oistrakh and his son Igor. The playing is rich and warm, though not overly Romantic, and the sound is beautifully sweet and open; one of the best DG's of the early '60s. At the recent Novotel Hi-Fi Show this LP was a great success with several equipment distributors. 2864 071 12.

The coupling of Mozart's *Clarinet Concerto* and the *Concerto for Flute and Harp* brings together the main works from two separate DG LPs from the early '60s. Soloist Karl Leister's account of the *Clarinet Concerto* is

smooth and refined, helped by a plush recording and rich support from the Berlin Philharmonic. The *Concerto for Flute and Harp*, with Karlheinz Zoller and Nicanor Zabaleta respectively, sounds more articulate and transparent - musically and technically. 2864 071 13.

Wilhem Kempff's early '60s set of the five Beethoven *Piano Concertos* with Ferdinand Leitner and the Berlin Philharmonic was a Standard Recommendation for the best part of 20 years, and the cycle was crowned with a vivid and articulate account of the *Emperor* concerto. Others have dug deeper, but Kempff's playing radiates joy and the pleasure of making music, and has stood the test of time. The recording still sounds clear and well-balanced. 2864 071 14.

For a man who recorded prolifically, Herbert von Karajan made comparatively few concerto discs. The reason? He was very particular about soloists! However, one violinist who gained his unstinting admiration was the French virtuoso Christian Ferras.

In the mid-'60s Karajan and Ferras recorded the concertos of Beethoven, Brahms, Tchaikovsky, and Sibelius - and the Beethoven and Brahms are both included in the present edition.

In each case the orchestral playing is refined and aristocratic, and Ferras matches his accompanist with playing of poise and beauty. True, Ferras' intonation is not quite as secure as Anne Sophie Mutter's (she recorded both works with Karajan as a teenager some fifteen years later), but there are some very impressive moments nonetheless. Beethoven; 2864 071 15; Brahms 2864 071 17.

Given the emphasis on mainstream masterpieces, the

inclusion of 'cello concertos by Saint-Saens and Lalo is unexpected - but very welcome! - as both works are tuneful and attractive. Pierre Fournier was one of DG's main artists in the '60s and '70s, and he recorded a sizeable chunk of the cello repertoire. For the Lalo and Saint-Saens concertos he was accompanied by Jean Martinon and the Orchestre Lamoureux, who make a very French sound. The recording is vivid but a bit thin and 'stringy'. 2864 071 16.

Staying with Fournier, perhaps his best concerto disc was with George Szell (making his one and only DG appearance) in the Dvorak *Cello Concerto*. The performance is vivid and impassioned, and the Berlin Philharmonic play with great clarity and precision for Szell - as did all orchestras! The sound is vivid too, with a forward placement for the soloist. A classic. 2864 071 20.

When recordings of Soviet pianist Sviatoslav Richter began to appear in the West in the late '50s, his playing caused a sensation. Apparently Karajan heard one of the tapes circulating and at short notice arranged a recording of the Tchaikovsky concerto that has since become legendary. Richter had a formidable technique, yet his playing was thoughtful and searching rather than brash and extrovert.

In the Tchaikovsky concerto, so often used (abused) as a vehicle for empty virtuoso displays, Richter and Karajan treat the work with great respect. The resulting performance is highly musical and at the same time brilliant, without being showy or vulgar. DG's early '60s recording is clear and open, with good clarity and detail. 2864 071 18.

Nathan Milstein was in his late '60s and hadn't made any new recordings for some time when DG gave him a contract. The first fruit was an LP coupling the Tchaikovsky and

Mendelssohn concertos, with Claudio Abbado conducting the Vienna Philharmonic - a disc DG thought highly enough of to reissue on LP in the Speakers Corner 1998 anniversary edition *The Violinists*. Milstein's playing is warm and flexible, and he brings plenty of personality to these great concertos. The sound is



good early '70s DG, though side one is rather long and as a consequence cutting levels are slightly lower than usual. 2864 071 19.

The third World of Great Classics box features orchestral music, and begins with an interesting compilation that brings together Bach's second orchestral *Suite* (Karl Richter), brief extracts from Handel's *Water Music* (Rafael Kubelik), and Mozart's *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik* (Ferenc Fricsay). The Bach and Handel are played in the Grand Manner, quite different to what we'd expect today from historically aware groups playing on period instruments! Fricsay's *Nachtmusik* is lithe but full-blooded, and sounds well for its age - as do the other recordings. 2864 072 21.

Overtures is another compilation, with sleeve art originally used for Rafael Kubelik's LP of Mendelssohn's *Midsummer Night's Dream* music - though Kubelik himself features on only one of the six tracks; a nicely atmospheric account of Weber's *Der*

Freischutz overture. Karl Bohm gets things off to a good start with the overture to Mozart's *Magic Flute*, and pops up a bit later with Wagner's *Flying Dutchman* overture. Tullio Serafin contributes a racy *Barber of Seville*, and the disc finishes with Louis Fremaux conducting the overture to Ambrose Thomas' *Mignon* and Borodin's *Polovtsian Dances* from *Prince Igor* - not an overture, but delightful tuneful music. Sound varies, but is always acceptable. 2864 072 22.

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▶ World of Great Classics series is the use of original DG artwork, including the famous cartouche. But in a number of cases the covers have been changed. For example, Karajan's 1964 Berlioz *Symphonie Fantastique* has been issued - but with the cover illustration from his later 1975 performance! No matter; the earlier account remains something of a classic, blending refinement with passion, and it still sounds impressive. 2864 070 07.

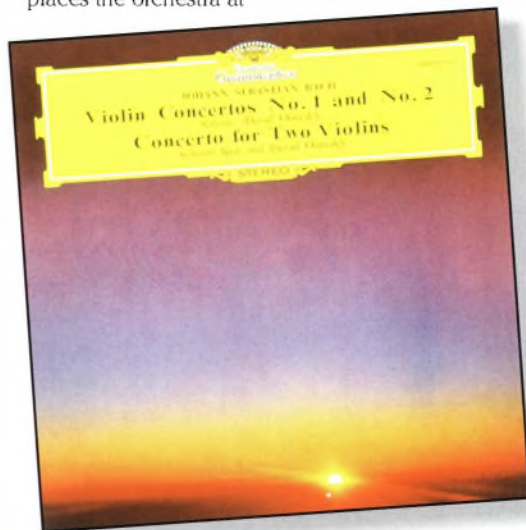
Also famous is Karajan's 1964 cycle of the Brahms symphonies. The first symphony was something of a Karajan speciality, though some found the playing of the Berlin Philharmonic a little too refined for this rugged and at times craggy music. The upper strings remain a shade acidic, but this is more down to the original recording than the new LP transfer, which simply reflects the kind of sound DG were getting at this particular period. 2864 070 08.

Another hybrid cover disguises Karajan's early '60s Tchaikovsky *Pathétique* symphony, making it look at first glance like Mravinsky's legendary DG Leningrad performance. The *Pathétique* was one of Karajan's favourite works; he recorded it something like six times. He approached the work with a mixture of control and unbridled passion - a combination that creates a performance of great contrasts and drama. Decent sound too. 2864 070 09.

Dvorak's *New World* symphony was another work that fascinated Karajan, and his 1964 Berlin account for DG enjoyed a long and distinguished life at full-price on LP. The orchestral playing is sumptuous and very refined, without being lazy or self-regarding - the 'calls to attention' during the introduction are as disciplined as you could every wish to hear, yet phrasing remains flexible and warm. The sound is a little 'light' in balance on side one, but side two is

very full-blooded and detailed. 2864 070 10.

The second World of Great Classics box concentrates on concertos, and kicks off with Karajan's surprisingly successful and imaginatively directed Vivaldi *Four Seasons*. The Berlin Philharmonic are suitably scaled down for the occasion, and concertmaster Michel Schwalbe is an excellent soloist. The recording places the orchestra at



a distance, and Karajan keeps dynamic levels low in order to allow plenty of space to expand where necessary. An interesting disc! 2864 071 11.

At the height of the Cold War in the early '60s, a handful of Russian artists made recordings in the West - among them this set of the Bach *Violin Concertos* with David Oistrakh and his son Igor. The playing is rich and warm, though not overly Romantic, and the sound is beautifully sweet and open; one of the best DG's of the early '60s. At the recent Novotel Hi-Fi Show this LP was a great success with several equipment distributors. 2864 071 12.

The coupling of Mozart's *Clarinet Concerto* and the *Concerto for Flute and Harp* brings together the main works from two separate DG LPs from the early '60s. Soloist Karl Leister's account of the *Clarinet Concerto* is

smooth and refined, helped by a plush recording and rich support from the Berlin Philharmonic. The *Concerto for Flute and Harp*, with Karlheinz Zoller and Nicanor Zabaleta respectively, sounds more articulate and transparent - musically and technically. 2864 071 13.

Wilhem Kempff's early '60s set of the five Beethoven *Piano Concertos* with Ferdinand Leitner and the Berlin Philharmonic was a Standard Recommendation for the best part of 20 years, and the cycle was crowned with a vivid and articulate account of the *Emperor* concerto. Others have dug deeper, but Kempff's playing radiates joy and the pleasure of making music, and has stood the test of time. The recording still sounds clear and well-balanced. 2864 071 14.

For a mar. who recorded prolifically, Herbert von Karajan made comparatively few concerto discs. The reason? He was very particular about soloists! However, one violinist who gained his unstinting admiration was the French virtuoso Christian Ferras.

In the mid-'60s Karajan and Ferras recorded the concertos of Beethoven, Brahms, Tchaikovsky, and Sibelius - and the Beethoven and Brahms are both included in the present edition.

In each case the orchestral playing is refined and aristocratic, and Ferras matches his accompanist with playing of poise and beauty. True, Ferras' intonation is not quite as secure as Anne Sophie Mutter's (she recorded both works with Karajan as a teenager some fifteen years later), but there are some very impressive moments nonetheless. Beethoven; 2864 071 15: Brahms 2864 071 17.

Given the emphasis on mainstream masterpieces, the

▶ inclusion of 'cello concertos by Saint-Saens and Lalo is unexpected - but very welcome! - as both works are tuneful and attractive. Pierre Fournier was one of DG's main artists in the '60s and '70s, and he recorded a sizeable chunk of the cello repertoire. For the Lalo and Saint-Saens concertos he was accompanied by Jean Martinon and the Orchestre Lamoureux, who make a very French sound. The recording is vivid but a bit thin and 'stringy'. 2864 071 16.

Staying with Fournier, perhaps his best concerto disc was with George Szell (making his one and only DG appearance) in the Dvorak *Cello Concerto*. The performance is vivid and impassioned, and the Berlin Philharmonic play with great clarity and precision for Szell - as did all orchestras! The sound is vivid too, with a forward placement for the soloist. A classic. 2864 071 20.

When recordings of Soviet pianist Sviatoslav Richter began to appear in the West in the late '50s, his playing caused a sensation. Apparently Karajan heard one of the tapes circulating and at short notice arranged a recording of the Tchaikovsky concerto that has since become legendary. Richter had a formidable technique, yet his playing was thoughtful and searching rather than brash and extrovert.

In the Tchaikovsky concerto, so often used (abused) as a vehicle for empty virtuoso displays, Richter and Karajan treat the work with great respect. The resulting performance is highly musical and at the same time brilliant, without being showy or vulgar. DG's early '60s recording is clear and open, with good clarity and detail. 2864 071 18.

Nathan Milstein was in his late '60s and hadn't made any new recordings for some time when DG gave him a contract. The first fruit was an LP coupling the Tchaikovsky and

Mendelssohn concertos, with Claudio Abbado conducting the Vienna Philharmonic - a disc DG thought highly enough of to reissue on LP in the Speakers Corner 1998 anniversary edition *The Violinists*. Milstein's playing is warm and flexible, and he brings plenty of personality to these great concertos. The sound is



good early '70s DG, though side one is rather long and as a consequence cutting levels are slightly lower than usual. 2864 071 19.

The third World of Great Classics box features orchestral music, and begins with an interesting compilation that brings together Bach's second orchestral *Suite* (Karl Richter), brief extracts from Handel's *Water Music* (Rafael Kubelik), and Mozart's *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik* (Ferenc Fricsay). The Bach and Handel are played in the Grand Manner; quite different to what we'd expect today from historically aware groups playing on period instruments! Fricsay's *Nachtmusik* is lithe but full-blooded, and sounds well for its age - as do the other recordings. 2864 072 21.

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