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Editorial

Finding Us

Judging from the calls we receive, most readers' biggest problem with hi-fi+ is finding it! Whilst it's nice to know that you like the mag so much, it's no good if you can't get hold of it. Thankfully things should be improving dramatically, with Issue 4 going nationwide, and Issue 5 achieving widespread highstreet distribution. What that means is that it's stocked at all major branches of W.H.Smiths, John Menzies etc. If you can't find it, then please ask in your local shop. They might have sold out, or it might not be on their stock profile, but either way they can order it for you. And that applies to every newsagent in the country. Our distributor is Lakeside (or Disticor in the US), so feel free to hassle your local supplier - you'll be doing us all a favour. Finally, a number of hi-fi shops also stock the magazine (a recommendation in itself, if you are still searching for a decent dealer) and we'll be listing those as of the next Issue.

E-mailing Us

I'm also getting an increasing number of enquiries regarding contact by e-mail. So far I've resisted opening an e-mail address because we simply don't have the time to support such a volume of correspondence properly - and people get seriously shirty if they don't get prompt replies to electronic mail. But what I am doing is opening a message only "post box" associated with the Web Site. You won't get answers, but at least you won't have to buy stamps either. As soon as I have an address I'll let you know, otherwise, check out the Web at www.hifiplus.com.

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Music+

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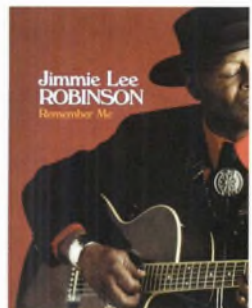
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Playing The System

by Roy Gregory

"Well, now I'm really confused!" said Alice to the White Rabbit. "There's so much to choose from, and I just don't know where to start." They were sitting in a rather fine tea-rooms, surrounded by mountains of cakes, pastries and confections of every description.

The Rabbit, a regular visitor who knew exactly what he wanted, which was to order exactly what he wanted, hid his exasperation. "Especially difficult when nothing is exactly what it seems" he observed. "You could try the menus I suppose. The custard slice is highly recommended." And he closed his own extensive bill of fare with a rather ostentatious flourish.

Alice looked at the menu before her, only to be confronted by a description of the custard slice that mentioned a "glutinous middle and overly sweet topping, sat on a greasy base". One to be avoided seemed to be the tenor of the piece.

"They don't think much of it here. Are you sure you've got the same menu as me?" she asked.

"Of course not," replied the Rabbit. "What do you think this is, a greasy spoon? I'll have you know they have at least a dozen different menus here."

"All for the same food?"

"Of course it's all for the same food, child. Don't be so obtuse."

"So why are they all different? Why don't they agree on what's good to eat and what isn't?" asked Alice, feeling even more confused than she was before.

"Oh, that will be the tasters. They're so frightfully important you see, and busy, busy, busy. If you had to produce a whole new menu every month you'd be busy too. It's hardly surprising that sometimes they only get to sniff a cake in passing, and as for the whole question of sauces and accompaniments, hot cold or tepid, Tea Cakes, cream, ice-cream, whipped-cream or", and the rabbit winced, "spray cream, they just don't have the time. So sometimes a cake goes unnoticed, or they don't fully appreciate the virtues of a tart. Maybe it's just not their kind of thing. Decisions, decisions, decisions. They must make them and get on. They don't have time to consider the consequences."

"But why do they have to produce a new menu every month?" asked Alice. "Why don't they take a little longer?"

"Money, m'dear, money. Money and influence. If they don't produce a new menu every month then they don't get paid, and they aren't so important. And importance is what the tasters live for. They're all in competition you see."

"But that must be awfully hard

on the cooks, having to produce all those new recipes in such a short time."

"Oh, they're not all new. Some of them just have different coloured icing or an extra ingredient in the filling, just to keep us interested. But you are absolutely right. I wouldn't fancy being a cook. The politics they have to put up with!"

"Politics?" said Alice, realising for the first time just how strange this place really was. "What have politics got to do with cooking?"

"Everything, m'dear, everything. You see, the tasters are so important that the cooks try extra hard not to upset them, but it's not always easy. If you give one taster the first portion of a new cake, then you'll often upset another. (They all think they should be first!) And then the pay's so bad that quite often a taster will expect a whole cake to do what he wants with, when really all he needs is a mouth full. Then some tasters offer to 'help' the cooks. You know how it goes. 'This cake is almost perfect, it just needs a certain something to make it the best I've ever tasted. You know, if I wracked my brains I'm sure I could put my finger on it - for a small consultancy fee, of course. But then it would be worth it for my recommendation alone.' What can the cook say? If he agrees he has to pay, and if

▶ he doesn't you can be sure that he'll pay in kind, every time that taster lays his hands on one of his recipes. No, I'm afraid to say that if you read a critical description of one of the dishes in a menu, it's probably got more to do with the taster sharpening his knives in public (or recovering from a particularly violent bout of indigestion) than it has to do with the way the food actually tastes.

whiskers in what (for him) amounted to a fulsome display of emotion. She chose her next words carefully.

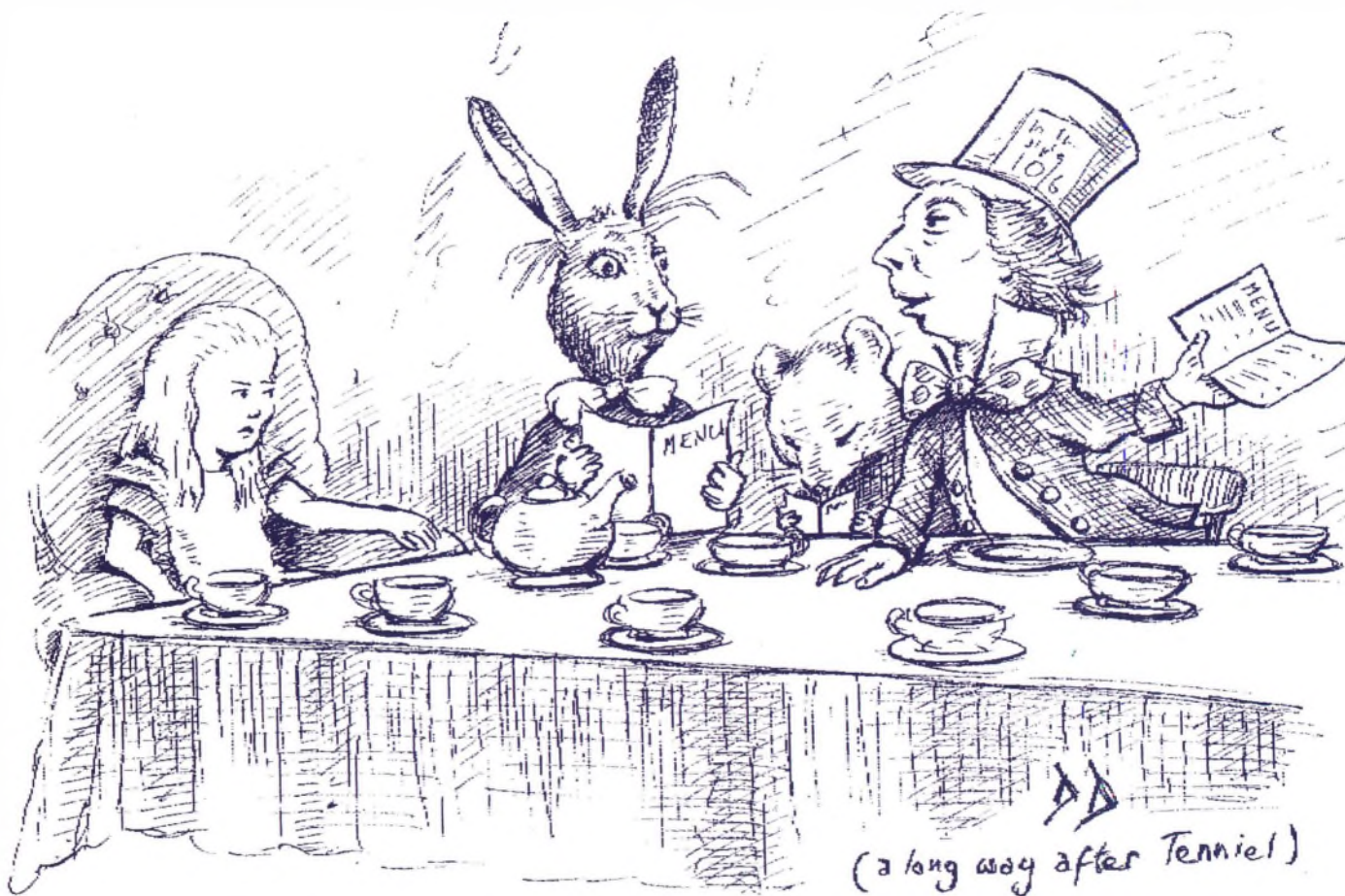
"But if everything you say is true, who made the tasters so important, and why do you bother with menu's at all?"

The rabbit almost exploded.

"I know you're new here, but do you really have to play the fool. Who made the tasters so important?

In one of those moments of clarity that strikes you when you're an outsider in a strange place she suddenly realised that if she asked the question she'd be making the rabbit explain something that he found it easier to ignore. And then he might get really angry.

Alice shut the menu in front of her, and the other half dozen on the table and looked at the rabbit, who



(a long way after Tenniel)

"Personally, I think that £100 DVD player from Tesco sounds quite tasty"

Either he didn't have the time to really appreciate it, or he had a score to settle. I mean, there are one or two pretty poor cooks about, and everyone has the odd off day, but a good cook knows whether his cakes are up to scratch."

Alice was silent for a moment while the rabbit twitched his

We did! Why bother with menus? Without them, how would we know what to eat?" And with that the subject was clearly closed.

She wanted to ask why the cooks put up with it, and why the people in the tea shop paid any attention to the menus at all, but somehow she knew the rabbit wouldn't discuss it.

returned her stare with a distinctly frigid air. Stacking them neatly in the stand provided, she started to put on her coat.

"You know what?" she said. "I really think I'd rather go to Burger King."



Speaker's Corner

by Paul Messenger

The second digital revolution is upon us, and it looks like representing a sea change in our traditional view of formats and standards, ushering in a new age of unparalleled flexibility - or leaving us all stranded halfway up (or down) the tower of Babel.

The first digital revolution was back in the 1980s, most obviously with the introduction of Compact Disc, but DAT (digital audio tape) and NICAM TV sound (near-instantaneous companding and multiplexing, if memory serves me correctly, and since you didn't ask!) are equally applicable examples, of digital formats which in many ways set out to emulate their analogue predecessors.

The Compact Disc is conceptually a compact version of the 12-inch vinyl LP, with a number of obvious advantages. It's smaller, lighter (and hence cheaper to ship), and has several convenience advantages over vinyl. It plays for an hour plus, rather than around 40 minutes, you don't need to get up and turn it over halfway through, and you can skip accurately through tracks by remote control.

This mathematical approach to music storage might not have won universal approval from the audiophile community ('*reductio ad absurdum*' is a phrase that springs to mind), but the banishment of background noise and various forms of distortion, and the relative immunity of the discs from small surface defects all led to CD replacing the LP as the majority medium of choice. QED.

It wasn't long before the computer guys got in on the act, and started using the medium for their own non-audio purposes. I've got a whole pile of quite unplayable CD-lookalikes here now, allegedly carrying things called JPEG files (which provides a handy free source of empty jewel cases to replace breakages).

Computers read JPEG files, and can play CDs too, provided you've got all the right bits and can figure out how to fly the thing. From a hi-fi component's perspective, computers are of course an alien species, whose very existence is predicated on being able to do lots of different things indifferently, rather than any one thing superbly well. (The computer's evolutionary analogue ancestor was of course the Black & Decker drill, for which you could buy a vast range of attachments to perform all sorts of tasks, each of which was done far better by a specific power tool dedicated to that particular job.)

I digress, but the new digital formats which are just coming on stream are all resolutely rooted in a computer mindset, where flexibility is king, and excellence no longer seems to be a major priority. That's certainly the case with the new digital broadcast media - radio (DAB) or television - where the whole point seems to be to squeeze in as many programme alternatives as one can get away with, because more quantity invariably means less quality.

A bit of me holds out some hope that the new 'high band' formats, whether DVD-Audio and/or SACD, will

offer real world improvements, but the more cynical side of me worries that we could end up submerged under a sea of options which could leave everybody (or at any rate yours truly) very confused.

The latter possibility seems all the more likely after I attended a press conference at the Bristol hi-fi show, where Meridian supremo Bob Stuart was discussing the frustrating delays in launching DVD-Audio. The need to develop and implement a new copy protection system is likely to take until the Autumn, so a year 2000 launch is still on the cards.

Bob made the very valid point that this would give the music business a chance to build up some pre-launch inventory prior to the hardware becoming available, which sounds like a very good idea to me. DVD-Video had a vast ready made collection of feature movies, just waiting to be dumped onto disc, but the same cannot be said of high resolution, multi-channel music programming. Indeed, one of the more difficult decisions facing the music business right now is figuring out how best to use DVD-Audio's prodigious data capabilities.

Bob's other point was that the launch delay gave a little more time to check the interoperability of the different DVD-Audio variations. (We're back onto flexibility again, because that's one of the key features of the format.) I already knew that there would be several different flavours of DVD-Audio, but was genuinely shocked when Bob mentioned



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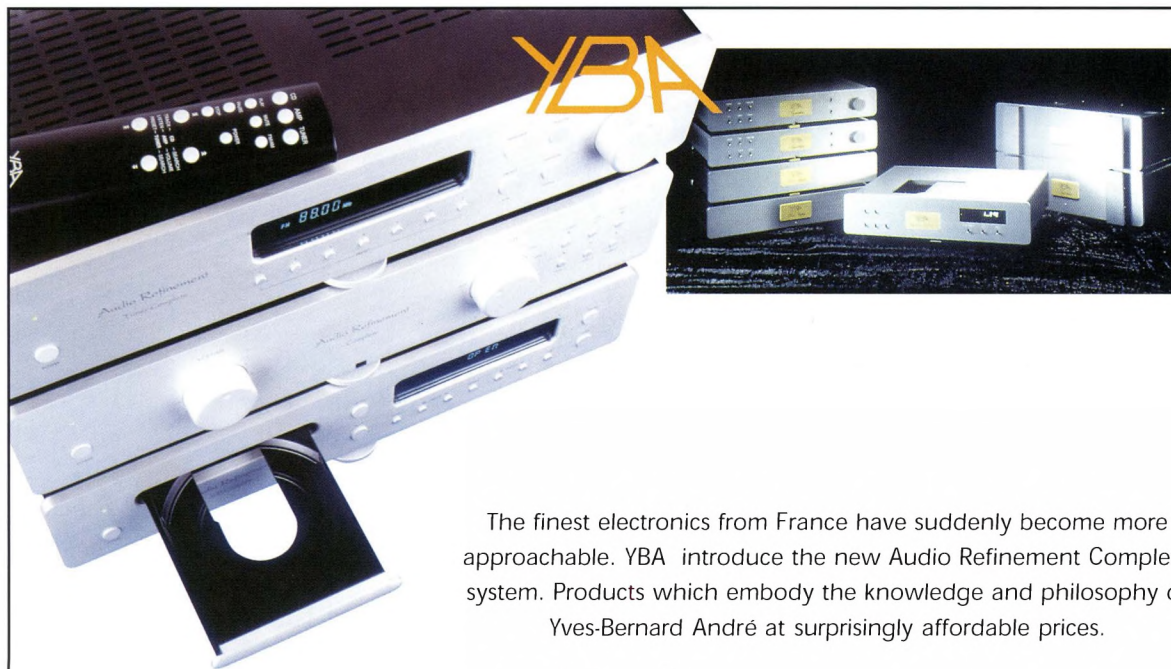
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Jonathan Scull, *Stereophile*, volume 21 no. 4.

L I G N E

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▶ that, in theory at least, the DVD-Audio spec permitted no fewer than 2,840!

That sounds faintly absurd, if you ask me, but it's maybe just the sort of absurdity that's likely to come out of an attempt to get more than forty different companies of all different sizes and interests to agree on a set of standards. I guess when you perm all the possible combinations of sampling rates, numbers of channels, video and data options and so forth, you're going to end up with a pretty big numbers. I just hope they'll figure a simple way of showing us what's on each particular disc, and give us easy access to any options.

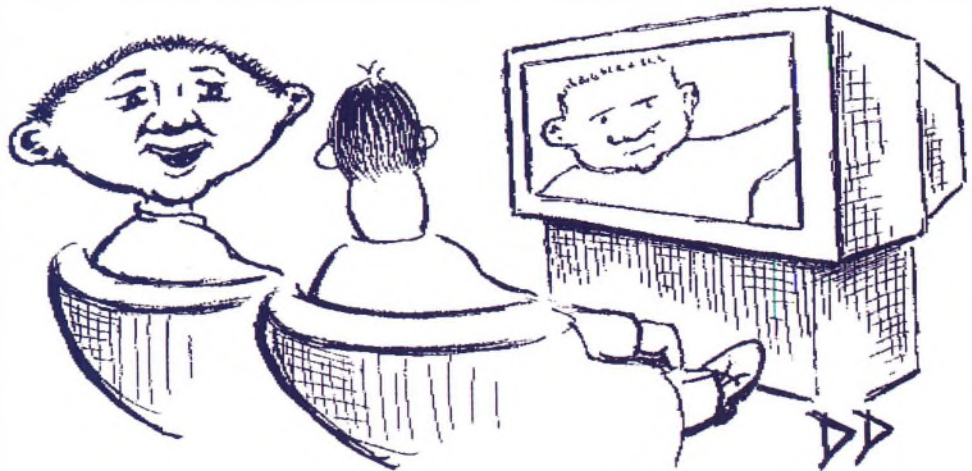
Hope, yes; expect, no, as the latter are too often thwarted. Just look at the whole farrago surrounding the pathetic attempts to manage the transition from our traditional 4x3-shape television pictures to the new(er) 16x9-shape widescreen tellys.

I like widescreen TV pictures. They're great for movies, and help make the television medium more involving. I've therefore been using 16x9 sets for many years now - though they've spent nearly all that time operating in 4x3 mode.

Although widescreen TVs first started appearing ten years ago, for various complex reasons there was no true widescreen programming available in Britain. (Without going into complex whys and wherefores, true widescreen uses so-called 'anamorphic' picture processing, which horizontally compresses the picture at the source, and then decompresses it to restore correct geometry at the receiver.)

That changed two years ago, when

the first MPEG digital TV sources arrived, first with movies on DVD-Video discs, and then with digital broadcasting. MPEG supports anamorphic widescreen, and ON-digital purports to supply widescreen programming: the black box has a switch (buried well down in the menus) which lets you choose



"...looks fine to me!"

between delivering widescreen or 4x3 pictures, and you're supposed to set this according to the screen shape of your TV set.

The good news is that there's actually quite a lot of widescreen material being broadcast via ON-digital - not just movies but also quite a good proportion of regular recent general entertainment programming, though 4x3 remains the comfortable majority.

In an ideal world, once you set the box to 16x9, ALL the pictures it delivers should be anamorphically processed, so you can just leave your 16x9 set switched to full widescreen mode, and all the pictures, whether 4x3 or 16x9, will come out with the correct on-screen geometry.

Sadly, this isn't an ideal world. Instead of 'squash' processing ALL the source material, the broadcasters keep switching between unprocessed 4x3

images and processed 16x9 pictures. Leave the TV set in full widescreen mode and you'll find all the 4x3 programming horribly stretched.

There are two options. When a broadcast changes between normal and widescreen mode, a switching signal is sent to the set. The trouble is, every set I've tried only auto-switches

between full widescreen mode, and some irritatingly distorted alternative which stretches the edges to fill up the screen width. There's no straight 16x9-to-4x3 option. The only way I can preserve true geometric accuracy is to keep fiddling with the 'aspect' button, trying to find the two correct settings while cycling through six options.

Since I don't like distorted pictures, I got bored after a couple of weeks faffing around with the switch, and now just use the widescreen feature on special occasions. Widescreen would be nice, if only it was properly implemented.

The whole widescreen farce is a perfect illustration of the sort of things that can go wrong when format flexibility is misapplied. Hopefully, when it finally gets here, DVD-Audio will avoid similar pitfalls and remain simple and transparent (not to mention undistorted) to the listener. ▶+

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"Waiting Around To Die"

by Wilfried Kress

Wilfried Kress is Editor /Publisher of the German Magazine Hi-fi and records, and one of that country's most respected audio commentators. In this second in a series of co-operative columns, he raises some central issues that affect the very future of enhanced digital formats.

They've might be coming later than expected, but they could still run you down: the side-effects from the digitalisation of the audio industry. Whilst for years the term "typically digital" referred to sound quality, these "digital artefacts" are of a completely different nature. No sooner has the sonic quality risen to an acceptable level, than we find ourselves buried in debates about data formats, interfaces, compatibility and copy protection.

"Software drives hardware" – as the rise and rise of Bill Gates proves. Intel and Microsoft have demonstrated how a co-operative industry can systematically evoke and satisfy the desire for ever-increasing program complexity and PC power. On the other hand, the audio industry projects quite a different picture after the debacle surrounding the gristly issue of DVD copy-protection: confusion and indecision are widespread, and customers no longer know what they should – or even can – actually buy. It's a bizarre situation: the technological hordes have indicated the potential successor technologies to CD systems; the corresponding products are already in the warehouses, but the software faction is stuck in a quagmire. This is no coincidence. Just the result of the Record Companies' paranoid fear of digital copying. Even now, media companies estimate that the "market" for illegal copies is now third largest in the world after the USA and Japan – and it's on the rise.

The video scene suffers from the same fears. In Japan, Pioneer already have a DVD recorder on the market,

and according to recent reports have sold an impressive 30,000 units in the first four weeks. The barely credible peak of ultra-modern high-tech recording of sound and picture: but it cannot record digitally. Of course it could, but it's not allowed to – not yet.

The example of DVD teaches software enterprises that absolute copy protection does not exist and probably never will. Someone or other will crack the code, even if it's just for fun; or to use the technology for Linux, like the young Norwegian who has just left Matsushita et al in such pitiful disarray.

And no doubt the instructions and data for cracking the copy-protection code will soon be available on the internet, as even hackers need some kind of trophy to mark their success. That scares the software producers, and their knee-jerk response is even more frightening. The example of the analogue-recording DVD recorder speaks volumes, and the absence of digital outputs on SACD players is equally suggestive. Are we heading for a scenario in which the digital output from modern players will not supply high resolution data, just the age-old CD standard with 16 bit wordlength and 44.1 KiloHertz sampling rate? This possibility might not see the world's audiophiles on the march, but it could easily result in a near unanimous decision to boycott the new formats.

If we must have digital, then it must be without limitation. The prevention of data reproduction would signal the end for digital amplifiers like the Tact Millenium, and the evolution of pre-amplifiers into purely digital machines

would come to a grinding halt. The same goes for corrective processors like the SigTech Timefield, which goes at spatial problems on a digital level, and digital equalisers. In short, the great strength of digital technology, its precise signal processing, would be lost – and with it a whole area for technical advances in high fidelity audio.

Is this likely to kindle the desire for new equipment? Hardly, since potential high technology purchasers aren't going to be impressed by a product with castrated future potential. In any case, this clientele is not the sort to stick a "home burned" disc into the player. By their very nature, hi-fi and music enthusiasts require not only the data, but all the paraphernalia of an album: the corresponding cover, booklet and that all-important collector's feeling of owning an original.

At the other end of the quality scale, this sort of data restriction will also be counterproductive. Presumably the majority of copiers are satisfied with (the accessible) CD quality, and for them, the MP3 format does it just as well. How many MP3 users are going to pay a premium for a higher resolution format or the discs that go with it?

If high-resolution digital formats are going to succeed, and that means sell, in quantity, along with the associated software, the copy-code issue will have to be abandoned. Such a decision is, after all, only a recognition of the inevitable failure of that technology. The only acceptable path for high quality audio reproduction is pedal to the metal – free travel on the data highway, and as soon as possible. ▶+

Sounds of Music

No Compromise

Having said that, buying hi-fi is always a compromise - the only way to the total truth is to have the performing artists in your own living room. Not too easy in most cases. **At Sounds Of Music however, it is our continual aim to compromise as little as possible** as our extensive ranges will confirm. What you hear in the showroom does not always offer the same performance at home and that is where **our superb one months home trial system** and extensive range really comes into its own.

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New Style SimAudio Products

In the last issue, CB gave the SimAudio Moon i5 integrated amplifier from Canada an enthusiastic reception. He also took a hearty dislike to its large gold badge, and the minimal facilities offered by the supplied remote, a situation which left the user unable to access certain functions, such as the balance control.

It seems he was not alone. A combination of confusion and a change in company policy has rectified matters. The confusion relates to the remote. Apparently the importer inadvertently received/supplied the budget remote intended for use with the company's cheapest Celeste PW - 5000 integrated amp. They were unaware of this and were thus unable to correct matters before press date. You can imagine the consternation in Quebec when the review

replaced the sleek, extruded aluminium multi-function remote intended for the whole Moon range with a four button plastic 'cheapie'. The real remote has more buttons than a pearly child's coat, and yes, it lets you set the balance. It is supplied as standard and not as a cost option.

The change in company policy is to do with the badge and finish of the product. The i5, along with the rest of the Moon

range, will now be labelled accordingly. At the same time, the large gold 'belt buckle' has been replaced by a smaller, square, silver badge which is off-set nicely by the now standard black finish. (Grey and Silver finishes are still available to special order.)

The end result of these changes is that the i5 is now both better looking and even better value than we first thought. Excellent!!



Rega Announce "New" Planar 3

Rega have announced the appearance of a new version of the venerable Planar 3 turntable, a product which, arm aside, has remained essentially unchanged for twenty odd years. But in what must be the biggest budget analogue story since the release of the RB300, the old girl is getting a makeover. But not just yet. The new models won't be available until the middle of April.

The changes concern the motor and plinth and relate to the more expensive Planar 25 (reviewed in Issue5). The major alteration is the adoption of a rigidly mounted motor in

place of the older model's fabled O ring suspension, relying on a small but sophisticated power supply to eliminate vibration. This should result in improved speed stability and greater clarity. At the same time, the solid plinth has been revised, using a lighter, stiffer material and a bevelled edge to keep the styling in synch with the more expensive models.

Reportedly, the sonic benefits are extremely obvious - but then they would say that wouldn't they. Suffice to say, I don't think Rega would institute changes in an extremely successful and popular product unless they were

confident of the outcome. But the really good news is yet to come. The motor upgrade will be available to owners of existing turntables as a retro-fittable kit for around £100. The price of the new Planar 3 should remain the same, and so do the dolly mixture finishes. Result.

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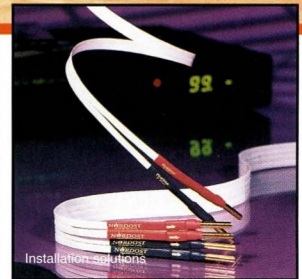
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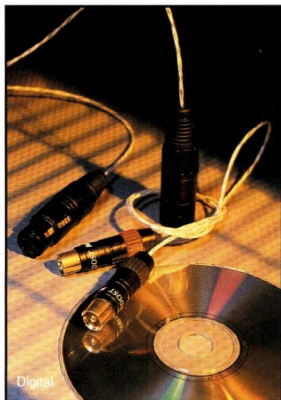
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The Bristol Show

by Rcy Gregory

Given the constantly shifting location of the Penta/Ramada/Novotel show in September, Bristol has become the most stable date in the show calendar. That, combined with it falling on the coattails of the Las Vegas CES, has given it a constantly increasing prominence, and each year figures for both trade and public attendance have steadily increased, more and more companies choosing it as the venue to introduce new products and ventures to the UK. This year was no exception, and the large number of enthusiastic visitors certainly repaid that confidence.

Every show seems to have a feel or theme, and Bristol Year Zero was no exception. Two product categories seemed to crop up again and again; lifestyle systems and loudspeakers. All in one systems seeking to combine compact good looks with

decent sound quality were the order of the day, with Cyrus announcing the Quattro CD/Radio/Amp (all in a standard Cyrus size box) and the most extravagant offering coming from TAG-McLaren in the shape of the Aphrodite - £3000 should it take your fancy.

Bose have been doing this thing longer than most, and offered their own approach, but leading the field has to be Nakamichi. Their SoundSpace range contains everything from a three piece clock radio (the three 165mm square by 57mm high chassis contain left and right speakers and a sub woofer; clock readouts and separate alarm times and levels for left and right; a choice of CD or Radio sources) to a free standing DVD multi-player based surround system with active stereo subs and satellites that are motorised so that they can be driven up and



Meridian DSP8000



TAG-McLaren Aphrodite

down inside their columns to optimise their height. All from the remote of course. The slightly less over the top SoundSpace 10 offers the same multi-play DVD system and seven active speakers in a £5000 package which looks like giving B&O a seriously hard time. After all the remote gizmos and motorised loading systems cassette decks seem pretty mundane, but the continuing existence of both two and three head machines from Nakamichi is welcome news for

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▶ those who still eschew the various digital recording formats.

But it was the loudspeaker front that provided the real surprises. Meridian were showing the new DSP8000, a £27000 flagship which seriously raises the ante in the multi-channel music stakes. The DSP6000 has been showing its age, despite regular updates, and whilst the 8000 employs a similar two part construction, it sports dramatically curved new lines which bring it bang up to date. Used in a five channel surround set-up with DSP5500s at the rear, and fed with a 24bit/96K signal from the comprehensive (or should that be incomprehensible?) array of options provided by the 800 series DVD player and control electronics, this was the most convincing argument for five channel music recording I've heard to date.

O'heocha speakers made it to these shores, with striking floorstanding or stand-mounted designs based on substantial aluminium extrusions. The polished or brushed surfaces combined with pale wood baffles created the kind of clean, modern lines I normally associate with Scandinavian design or the Frankfurt show, and it was a real pleasure to see a new company with such beautifully finished products. Reviews are scheduled, so we'll soon discover whether the sound is as impressive as the appearance.

The Beauhorn Virtuosos were making a wonderfully natural sound, driven by a Nottingham Analogue/ClearAudio moving-magnet front end and some Pure Music bespoke valve amplification. Visually I still have a problem with any speaker that looks like its drive unit has been

stabbed with a giant bog brush, but the musical results were hard to argue with. We'll see what PM makes of longer exposure.

Quad are finally in production with the new electrostatics, but don't even ask about the waiting list. Meanwhile, UKD are offering an interesting alternative in the elegant shape of the Final hybrids, another product slated for future attention. PMC have been making quite an impact recently with their range of tried and tested studio monitors. Dynamic they are, but attractive they're not. Until now, with the arrival of the FBI floorstander, a design which combines their established engineering approach with a slim front baffle, chamfered edges and real wood veneer to create a product which no longer looks like a candidate for instantaneous domestic veto. Driven by the top of the line Rotel CD player and sleek silver Bryston electronics the sound was clean, fast and tight as you'd expect. Put these behind a curtain and I bet no one would twig that they were listening to a transmission line with an aluminium dome tweeter. Prodigious bass extension is combined with a sense of speed and control that belies the compact dimensions. Impressive stuff.

Which brings me to the biggest surprise of all. Neat Acoustics are well known for their highly regarded two-way compacts. The original Petite says it all really. So imagine my reaction when confronted by a pair of six foot towers with more drivers than London Transport. Okay, so I'm exaggerating,

but eight drivers a side is still a big step up from two. Despite the apparent complexity, the Ultimatum MF2 is conceptually simple. It's a two and a half way design with five forward facing drivers arranged in a symmetrical D'Appolito array. The outer 166mm drivers are isobarically loaded, whilst the inner pair have individual infinite baffles. Tweeter is the respected (ubiquitous?) Focal inverted dome titanium oxide unit. Finally, there is an upward firing EMIT ribbon supertweeter. Despite the number of drivers cross-overs are first order or mechanical, and employ high quality elements such as Hovland film and foil capacitors, and air cored inductors. Efficiency is around the 90dB mark and impedance is quoted at 8 Ohms, with a 4.7 Ohm minimum. The sound was coherent and precise with good low-level dynamics and speed, so it looks like the Neat boys have succeeded in extending the performance of their smaller models to a wider bandwidth design. At £7000 with finish to order, this looks like an interesting addition to the serious speaker ranks in the UK.

Elsewhere, Samuel Johnson Audio made their public debut with a range of beautifully presented £2000 a box electronics. They currently have a DAC, line stage and 50w/ch power amp, with a CD transport to follow. Myriad finish options; superb fit, finish and attention to detail; perspex wrapped display units; sumptuous literature. The whole thing combined to create a seriously serious impression. Even without the worlds sexiest remote control and the colour matched promotional yo-yos I think you'd reach the conclusion that here's a company that's up for the long haul. I don't want to pre-empt the review scheduled for the next issue so I'll confine myself to the observation that they lavish the same care and professionalism on the product internals as they do on everything else. ▶



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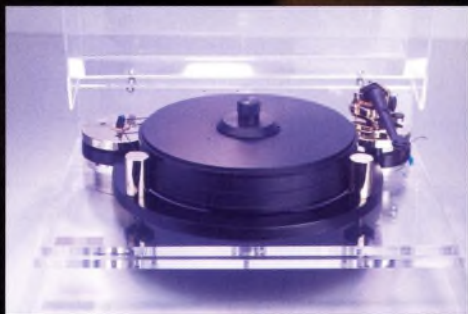
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by Jason Hector

I like the Bristol HiFi show. It may be smaller than London (wherever it is held), but it's also friendlier and more welcoming, and still manages to attract a decent cross section of manufacturers. There's less of the real exotica, but in some ways that makes it more relevant. What struck me most about this year's show was the quality of the sound coming from many of the rooms. Nothing actually knocked my socks off, but there were plenty of opportunities to sit and enjoy decent sound (which makes a dramatic contrast to Novotel!).

My particular highlights were the Naim demonstration of passive DBL loudspeakers driven by the new NAP500 amplifier. Here was a very good system with effortless power and great delicacy. I never thought that DBLs could sound this good. The big 15" woofer obviously benefits from the formidable grip of the new amp.

The professional outfit PMC continue their assault on the hi-fi industry with some excellent sounding loudspeakers driven by Briston amps. As usual Tom Baron was prepared to

play anything at any level, and in the process forced me to examine one of my technological assumptions. Here were some transmission line speakers delivering good timing. As Tom gleefully pointed out "it's just a case of doing it right".

Morgan Audio demonstrated some wonderful electronics with outstanding build quality at a very low price. This system was working so well (provided you sat down) that it was hard to believe the cost. I was disappointed to learn that DD had already grabbed them for review!

At last year's London show one of the few good demonstrations I heard featured the KEF Reference 3-2s, and at Bristol they once again sounded great driven by Naim electronics; fantastic

imaging and a very fast, open sound quality. After this dem I wouldn't hesitate to recommend these speakers to a Naim owner.

The monster Wilson-Benesch / Chord system sounded ridiculously neutral and it took me a couple of tracks to adjust (!), but once I had, the vinyl sound from the baby WB Circle was extremely enjoyable. Unfortunately the digital source left something (well, loads really) to be desired. As usual, the Pear Audio demonstration sounded majestic, especially considering the confines of the room. No surprises there, but one manufacturer who sprung out unannounced was Sugden. Their Masterclass electronics were producing a beguiling sound through ART speakers. ➤



Naim NAP 500

▶ They should be worth watching (and a listen).

Naim had NAP500s everywhere, driving NBLs and DBLs. The bigger speakers seem to have enjoyed a resurgence of popularity, stimulated by the NBL's arrival. After all, if you're going to spend six grand, what's eight and a half? Fellow UK heavyweight Arcam were showing the new FMJ range, and as a contented John Dawson explained, his biggest problem is meeting the demand. Having been



mightily impressed by the Alpha 9's potential, once you get its support right, I'm intrigued to see what a constrained layer base, heavier casework and an extra power supply can do for the recipe.

The cable wars took an interesting turn, with "young upstarts" True Colours Industries taking on Nordost at their own comparative demonstration game. Especially interesting as the two rooms were right next door to each other, and TCI had chosen Nordost's SPM as their Aunt Sally! Whilst their demonstration lacked the finesse of ▶

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► Maestro Lars, it's wonderful to see people getting out there and actively demonstrating their products, rather than simply relying on marketing BS. More please. Meanwhile, away from the ballyhoo, the Chord Company were quietly taking over the world, with their new Anthem interconnects making the most of their striking plaited construction to draw attention to themselves in an impressive number of systems. About 20% of the show on a rough count!

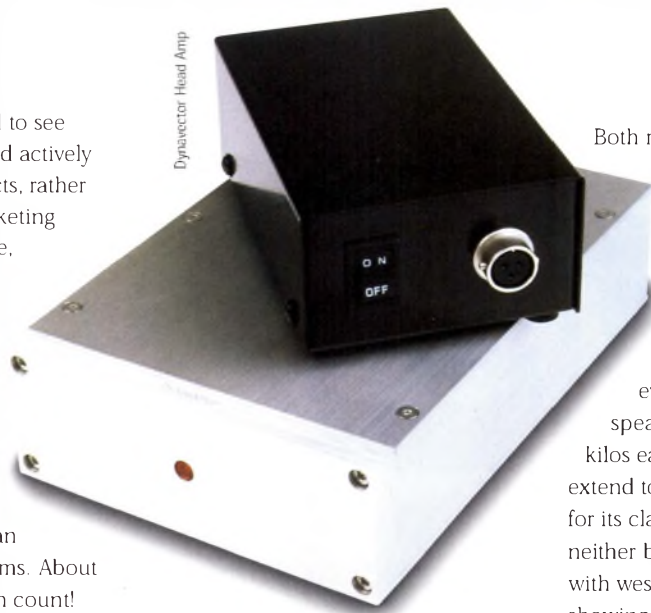
Which finally brings me to my "Best Sound At Show" rosettes. In no particular order, the systems I enjoyed the most were as follows:

Anvil Audio were making wonderfully musical sounds with a Meracus/Audio Physic system not a million miles away from the one we reviewed in Issue 4. A better amp and the slightly cheaper Tempo speakers were used, with the excellent Yamamura-Churchill cables and accessories, to create a system that was dynamic and transparent at the same time that it was natural and relaxed. This was the only system firing across the room, and its sense of space and

Dynavector Dr T XV1



openness was dramatically superior to the competition. If you look at the interview with Audio Physic designer Joachim Gerhard that accompanies the Step review in this Issue, then you'll read more about his set-up rationale and technique. The results are certainly impressive.



Pear Audio are another company who can be relied on to soothe a troubled brow, and once again they didn't disappoint. The Well Tempered Reference turntable was used with the new Dynavector Dr T XV-1 (£2500) cartridge, to drive two separate Dynavector phono sections, one amplifying from MC to MM level, the second from MM to line. This unusual arrangement was necessary in order to accommodate a new £1500 head amp designed to maximise available output from moving coils. A reworking of a legendary and little heard Tominari design, I can't wait to try it. Dynavector supplied the rest of the amplification which drove a pair of Shahinian Hawks. Whilst this little lot adds up to quite a price, it was an oasis of musical calm amidst the bedlam. Devoid of strain, the music was allowed to breath and flow despite the small room.

Audio Synergy were making wonderful sounds with Sugden Masterclass electronics driving Acoustic Reproduction Technology loudspeakers, a new product from Derek Dunlop of Systemdeck fame.

Both ranges embody a battleship approach to design and construction, the Masterclass amps offering a standard of build, casework and a size more commonly associated with transatlantic imports, whilst even the basic ART ST-ONE speakers (£2000) weigh in at 55 kilos each. Thankfully that didn't extend to the sound which was notable for its clarity and delicacy. Ironically, neither brand is exactly brimming over with west country dealers, but on this showing, enlightened retailers would be well advised to put that right. (The grapevine tells me that this is already under way!)

Finally, a special mention for the Roksan Kandy electronics driving ROK-1 speakers. Lively, open and engaging, this was super sound at seriously budget prices. And all those colours too. This new range could seriously shake up the Arcam/Rega/Rotel status quo.



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Hi Fi World



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If you build it will they .com?

Hi-Fi on the Net - glorious revolution or accident waiting to happen?

by Roy Gregory

You can't turn on a television these days without some sanctimonious idiot telling you that if you aren't on the internet then pretty soon you won't have a life. Personally, I often find the opposite to be true. In fact, hype aside, the net remains a largely unknown quantity as far as business is concerned. Yes it's useful, but its applications are far from universal, and thankfully, no matter what the ads say, it's not about to replace life as we know it.

In practice, the one thing that the internet has proved is that if you give a million monkeys a million typewriters, you don't get the works of Shakespeare. The pearls of wisdom are buried deep in a morass of pure drivel. And why is no-one discussing the downsides. I guess money talks, and let's not forget that a lot of people have got very rich from creating and maintaining the net. Our antipodean cousins have a saying, and it's apposite: the only free cheese is in the mousetrap. With that in mind let's take a look at the pluses and minuses of the internet, as far as hi-fi goes.

The real benefit of the net to the man in the street is the access it allows him to information. If the manufacturer of his expensive imported CD player decides to offer a software upgrade, then he has access to that information as soon as it appears on the company's web-site. (Note the term access. Access to and knowledge of are not the same thing.) Relying on the print media he has to wait for a press release to reach which ever magazine he reads, and then rely on that magazine to print it.

If it's a heavy news month it might get held over, and in the meantime it could get lost or an editor might decide it's not important. About the best time lag you can expect on a news release is something approaching eight weeks. That means that companies get them out early, and very often availability date, details and even the cost of a



product can all change in the intervening months. If a company is diligent in updating its site, then it should be the premium source of accurate and up to date information about its products. This is certainly true of hi-fi equipment, but leaps to a whole new level when it comes to software, and whilst that means CDs or LPs at present, it's not beyond current technology for our imaginary customer to download his CD player's new decoding algorithm directly from the web.

If we include e-mail into the equation then things get really interesting. Any manufacturer with a decent customer data base will be able to contact owners of a given model with update information and the like. Yes, you can do this by mail,

but in a world where the producers of esoteric hi-fi are increasingly having to rely on an international customer base, the cost, time and accuracy benefits of e-mail are pretty obvious. Less obvious is the reverse advantage. Because e-mail can be time managed (you can choose when you deal with it), it actually creates a situation where designers and manufacturers are able to enter into a far more direct form of communication with their customers. If a designer answers the phone all day, no new products will ever appear. However, budgeting an hour at the end of the day to reply to e-mails is entirely possible. It's also productive because the designer gets first hand input regarding existing problems and customer concerns.

So far so good. The web should give you greater access to the people who build your equipment and keep you up to date with any developments. "Mr Jones, your amp has been repaired; there's an update for your speaker; we're holding a factory open day...." You get the picture. It also improves communication between manufacturers and dealers/distributors, which should also be beneficial. The problem of course is that at the end of the day, the web is just a tool, and someone has to pick it up and want to use it. Even then it ain't going to transform that company. If they are going to lose the product that you send back for repair, being connected to the web isn't going to stop them doing it. Yes, you can chase them a little more closely, but if

they lose your product what are the chances of someone actually responding to the e-mail on time? In communication and information terms, the web has enormous potential. How much of that potential is realised depends on the same people we have been relying on anyway. Expecting them to suddenly become models of organisation and masters of the electronic universe is unrealistic to say the least. Someone who never gets their news letter out on time isn't going to be a whole lot better when it comes to updating a web-site! What we will see is a more gradual increase in the use of electronic media as younger companies and younger personnel, more familiar with the technology, permeate the industry. Even in a high tech occupation it's hard to teach an old dog new tricks. What the web does is give him less of an opportunity to fart and blame it on somebody else.

Conversely, if we have to work at the benefits, the downsides flourish all by themselves. By far the most obvious of these is the encouragement to grey import foreign product. Whilst ready access to prices in a product's home market might keep distributors honest, just as often price disparity reflects a poorly structured export price list on the part of the manufacturer. In particular, many US companies are so disinterested in events beyond their borders that international distributors end up trying to work on a margin little different from the US dealers. Add a UK dealer margin and prices start to look not just uncompetitive, but a downright rip-off. The problem is, you can't always tell who's doing the ripping.

So say you buy a product from the States. You might stand to save some money, but not as much as you might think by the time you've paid VAT, duty and shipping. You'll also be buying blind if the product isn't distributed in this country. If it is, a lot of people will go and listen at a UK dealer first. This

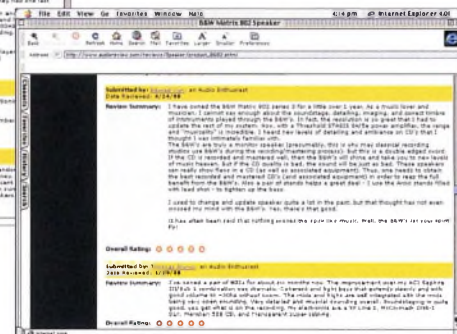
will waste that dealer's time (and cost him money), and if enough people do it he'll go out of business. Which means that next time you want him to help you out (probably about the time your imported product is failing to deliver the goods) he won't be there.



And don't think he isn't going to know what you did. Hi-fi is a very small world, and these things have a way of coming out.

Once your product arrives you will discover the meaning of the term 'on your own'. No help with set-up (which means you probably won't be getting the best out of it), no UK guarantee, and no guarantee that you will have got a UK specified model, even if the voltage is correct (My favourite grey importing story concerns the idiots who bought 'cheap' Koetsu cartridges in the far-east, not realising that they used a totally different suspension designed to accommodate the higher temperatures and humidity of their intended market place. They ended up with rather less than they bargained

for.) And if it goes wrong? Don't expect a local dealer or distributor to touch it with a barge pole, even if you haven't already put them out of business. In most cases, grey importing represents the worst kind of short-termism. It just simply doesn't make sense. It also actively damages the dealer/distributor network that we all rely on. If you choose to live by the sword, you'll almost certainly die by it.



But these are well worn arguments, and the internet just encourages more people to discover why grey importing is a bad idea. What really worries me is when people cross the line from looking for information from known or recognised sources, and start seeking advice and opinion. The problem is that you simply have no way of knowing who you are dealing with and what that person's credentials or agenda are. Those sites are open to abuse from manufacturers and individuals with over developed egos. And that's just for starters. Let's look at an example.

www.naim-audio.com

An Interview with Paul Stephenson of Naim Audio

by Roy Gregory

Naim Audio operate one of the most active web-sites in the UK industry, offering both straight information about the company and its products, and a forum for the free exchange of information on matters audio. I spoke to Managing Director Paul Stephenson about the company's experience on the Web, and what he feels their presence there does for their customers.

market and the way in which people are responding to our products. And it's a source that we never had before.

I think originally that we saw it as a simple case of branding; having a Naim presence up there. But it has developed into something far more useful and interactive than that, and it has done it far more quickly than we expected.

RG. What benefits do you feel it offers your customers and users that weren't available to them before?

PS. It gives them really close contact with us and helps create a Naim family feel. Before people could get there, but

it was a far more complicated and long winded process. They would pick up a bit of literature about a product that they may or may not be interested in, that a dealer may or may not have remembered to put out, and that we may or may not have remembered to print. Maybe they saw product

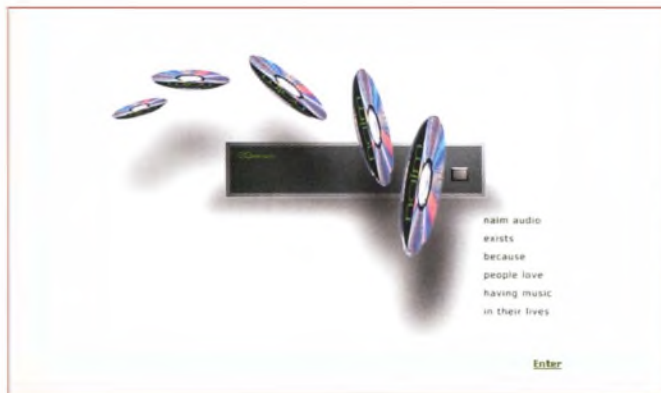
at a dealer, or read about it in a magazine, or heard about it from a friend. It was all a bit haphazard. Now, within minutes of hearing about Naim they can be on our web-site getting the background behind the company, they can access specific product information, listen to some music, and they can talk directly to thousands of other Naim owners. ▶

RG. How long ago did you start the Naim web-site?

PS.

About four years ago now. Almost immediately we were logging a couple of thousand hits a month, but that was really the hardcore Naim fans. In the beginning, the Web had already started and Naim, like a lot of other people, felt that this was an excellent opportunity to provide an information source in support of our dealer network. That's how it started, and by and large it's been extremely successful.

This is one of the least appreciated aspects of running an active web-site. It generates a massive amount of information and feedback about our customers and market. So I can look at the 30,000 hits that we received in



RG. What's the hit rate now?

PS. In a single month, let's look at the period October '99, we had 30,000 hits making 400,000 page requests. And you can add to that the Forum which handles around 30,000 posts a year.

October and I can tell where they've come from, what they're interested in or concerned about, what time they're calling, what browser they use, the list goes on. So in demographic terms the site is an invaluable source of information to us when it comes to analysing and understanding the



RG. How important a part of your site is the forum?

PS. It's very, very important. In fact, I think we were the first hi-fi manufacturer to open one. We were surprised that no one else had done it. But then I don't believe that a lot of companies are actually interested in what their customers have to say. We are, and we want to talk to them. When you plough your own furrow in the way that we do, it's possible to convince yourself that you are a brilliant company making all the right decisions, and you plough on regardless. The forum provides us with a reality check, and that is really, really important.

RG. How heavily do you have to police it?

PS. I think it's quite interesting that on the very rare occasions that we have policed the forum, it has create a furore amongst the readers and contributors. Generally it polices itself, and generally people are pretty respectful. We've only really got heavy with foul language, racism, stuff like that. But someone here is looking at the forum every day and if something untoward happens then we have the ultimate power of the delete button. We try not to use it, and we would certainly never use it to tailor the content of the forum or to stop someone slagging off one of our products. It is more there to protect against personal offence or people being unnecessarily abusive, which unfortunately happens occasionally.

RG. What about technical accuracy?

PS. Obviously if somebody suggests something that is wrong on technical grounds, like using a product with an incompatible power supply, then we



will step in to correct that, but that's not what the forum is really about. How many customers can ring up and get through to the MD of a company, or even get a personal response to a fax. The fact that Julian (Vereker) was on the forum most days was an unbelievable opportunity for our customers and users to talk to the guy that started it all.



two more facets of that process. Of course if you rely entirely on the magazines for your marketing then that would change things a lot.

RG. Do you think that the existence of your site, and the web in general, has changed or is going to change your relationship with the specialist hi-fi press?

PS. I don't really think so. We might see the journalists actually looking at manufacturer web sites and getting much more accurate information as a result, so maybe we'll see fewer errors in their pages, and a better educated press. Whilst we can provide information about Naim Audio and our products, and we can do that much more quickly and accurately than the print media, they will always have an over-arching function, tying together information into a picture that represents the industry and market as a whole. The general as opposed to the particular. I think that ultimately, people will always look to the specialist magazines as a way of pursuing their interests.

We are not that reliant on the press anyway. It's all a case of getting your point across, and we do that via advertising, our dealer network, shows. The web and the magazines are just

RG. How heavy a commitment is the web-site in terms of time and effort?

PS. What's happening is that the working patterns are changing. We hardly ever get letters anymore so although we've seen a huge increase in the amount of time we spend on electronic mail, it's time that we've won back from paper correspondence. People spend far more time on-line now, whether it's answering customer queries or talking to our distributors, so that it has just become incorporated into our daily routine.

RG. Overall, do you see the Web as beneficial to your company.

PS. Absolutely, both as a resource for us to use for communication with distributors, dealers and customers, and as a source of direct feedback from those people. I think that the reality check that it provides is vital, as is the direct feedback it provides regarding our customers wishes and wants, and the service that they've received in the market place. It helps us to do a much better job.

RG. Have you ever regretted establishing the web-site?

PS. Never.



www.fqmag.co.uk

The realities of Internet publishing

by Eric Braithwaite

Editor of FQ online magazine

If we are to believe the likes of Bill Gates of Microsoft and the gurus of Wired and the NASDAQ, the Internet is the future and print is past it. The future, however, has a knack of being decidedly unpredictable. If you were to believe the science fiction of the last fifty years, we should all by now be living in a society powered by 'clean' nuclear energy, each of us with our own individual spaceships, all of us with umpteen hours of leisure time while tedious things like work are all performed by robots. Oh yeah?

It's worth remembering that about the only thing Arthur C. Clarke successfully predicted was a geostationary satellite. Where, in the science fiction of the last hundred years was the stealth bomber, the microwave oven, the laptop computer, the mobile phone, the Compact Disc, or the Internet? At the moment we are going through exactly the same process as the science fiction writers of the 1950's, merely predicting an exponential growth of what is already in front of our eyes. But is what is in front of the eyes of the Internet gurus any more real than H.G. Wells' *Time Machine*?

In some ways, not. This may come oddly from someone who is involved in Internet publishing, but the Internet is a decidedly primitive place, compared to print publishing. Few of its supposed

advantages are in fact anything of the kind. Yes, it is possible to download esoteric information in seconds; but it can take hours to find it. As a quick test of the relative abilities of print and the Internet, just see how long it takes to search an on-line help file to find out how to configure



Microsoft Explorer as opposed to flicking through 400 pages of a book. The on-line help system is linear and goes from one subject to another; the human eye will spot an essential word in a fraction of a second in a page of 350 words.

Someone once likened searching for information on the Net as equivalent to knowing a single line on a single page in a book and looking for it through all the shelves in the British Library at midnight with the lights out.

There is indeed, as the proponents of the internet insist, an awful lot of information out there, but as any philosopher worth his or her salt should be telling them, an increase in knowledge has, sadly, never yet in human history equated with an increase

in wisdom. Nor have Wars noticeably diminished in numbers, frequency or devastation over the last millennium, however much we congratulate ourselves on our increasing cleverness.

So, having established credentials of scepticism about the medium, why publish on the Net? A simpleton's answer would, of course, be that it is at the moment the only way to suddenly

become worth millions without having to bother about the usual commercial imperatives of either manufacturing something or making a profit out of doing it. But, despite the hysteria largely generated in the USA, this is pretty rare. Nor is the reason for adopting the Net purely altruistic. Although the gurus make much of the

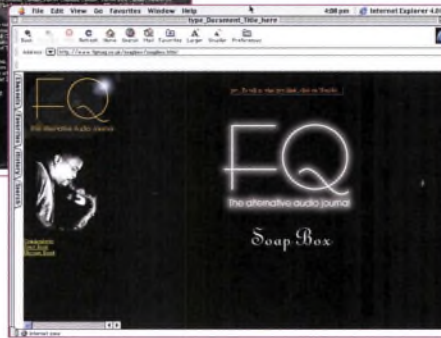
notion that the Internet is 'free', in fact it is nothing of the kind. To access it involves computers, software, modems and telephone lines, all of which have to be paid for; to publish on it involves computers, software, modems, telephone lines and people's time and expertise. The only difference between the costs of publishing in print and on the internet is simply that the internet does not present a hefty bill for paper and ink at the end of every month, which must be paid before the next issue comes out. Payment for services can always be deferred.

The essential difference is the two medium's potentiality. Imagine, for example, instead of reading about the sound quality of an amplifier and the subtle differences between the way

one reproduces a piece of music against another, if you could actually hear it and understand exactly what the reviewer meant? Imagine, instead of seeing a two-dimensional photograph of a CD player, you could press the buttons with your mouse, see how the display worked, take the lid off, even place it in your own 'virtual' listening room to see how it looked with your decor or fitted with the rest of your hi-fi. Some of this is possible now; most of it will be possible relatively soon.

However, whether we hi-fi buffs will see it is another matter. Developing this kind of content is costly in time and has to be paid for somehow. For the last twenty years, public interest in what might be called 'serious' hi-fi has diminished to the point at which it has become a relatively low-scale hobby. Few hi-fi publications around the world can manage half the circulation they did in the seventies, and the probability is that 'serious' hi-fi is destined to become the hobby of amateurs and in all likelihood fewer of those than there are fly fishermen. As the market continues to diminish, then the budgets available for publicising it decrease as well. This shortfall affects print and internet publishers alike.

This is going to have some curious effects, which are more likely to impact on the Internet than on print. Hi-Fi magazines are an established outlet for publicity and information. Print, despite the average Briton's distrust of journalists (who always come at the bottom of the trustworthiness polls below politicians and just above estate agents), intrinsically possesses an air of



authority that Internet companies have to spend a fortune on advertising to attain. Yet print magazines are least well-placed to take advantage of it. No publisher has yet worked out how to persuade surfers to pay the equivalent for a magazine on-line that they would in a newsagent. Publish the same content simultaneously, and who will buy the print magazine? How then will the journalists be paid? It is one of the sad curses of the Net that only the porn sites successfully part punters from their credit cards. It is a matter of availability and consumer demand: good old-fashioned tooth-and-claw capitalism.

The answer, from the Internet publisher's point of view, is e-commerce, since this is likely to provide the only significant income. (We will ignore the alternatives of paid advertorial or paid for 'product



placement' which is evident in various places on the Net and in print publishing, but is for most honest journalists - no, that is not an oxymoron - repugnant.) It raises, however, some difficult issues. Hi-fi buyers need to feel the width and see the quality; buying a B&W Nautilus simply on the basis of a photograph on the Net would be like buying a house from a Littlewoods catalogue. (This, of course, is where technological innovation

on the Internet will score when it can provide some inkling of the "look, feel and hear" qualities we hinted at above.) And manufacturers are reluctant to displace bricks and mortar dealers, although both JVC and Sony have announced they are to begin selling on-line. Unpopular as this view may be, with smaller domestic markets and an impulse to globalisation in hi-fi sales as in everything else, the next few years are likely, hype discounted, to see basic purchases made increasingly via the Internet - and, obviously, I hope via authoritative internet magazines like the one I edit - with dealers effectively becoming more akin to a "hi-fi gallery" linked to net retailers, where interested buyers go, not to buy, but to touch the width and feel the quality. This scenario is already emerging in the States.

And where does this leave the hi-fi press? Despite the idea of the 'electronic book', the Gutenberg galaxy has survived for half a millennium so far,

and shows no signs of being superseded yet. After all, paper is portable, convenient, doesn't need batteries and, apart from at 451 degrees Fahrenheit, is practically indestructible. Is the future all-electronic? Go ask a science-fiction writer. None of the rest of us know either. ➤

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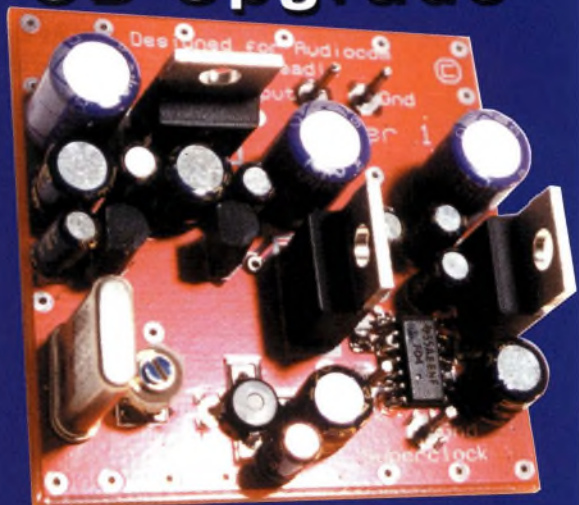
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High-End Record Players

by Roy Gregory

It seems faintly ironic that, just as CD comes under attack from new formats promising to deliver on Digital's tarnished claims, there has been a resurgence of interest in the vinyl record. CD established itself far more quickly and completely than either the pundits suggested or its performance merited. But let's not ignore the part played by the records themselves in this process. When CD first raised its ugly head, record quality was at an all time low. Thin in form, thin in sound and with noisy surfaces, early eighties LPs pushed disgruntled listeners into Digital's open arms.

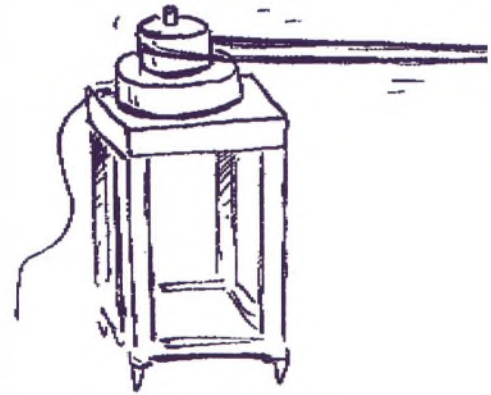
Of course, some of us never broke the habit in the first place. But increasingly, music lovers are turning back to vinyl in search of satisfying reproduction. Whether it's the derivative nature of modern pop music that is driving younger listeners back to their parents' LPs who can say, but there are an awful lot of people buying their first turntable. In fact, in some ways analogue addicts have never had it so good. Today's record buying public are faced with a huge array of cheap second hand vinyl, while the explosion in audiophile re-issues means that really good 180 gram pressings are now available for little more than the price of a premium CD. In fact, re-issues have been so successful that even the record companies are getting involved, with major retrospective 180 gram vinyl series from both EMI and WEA. Meanwhile, BMG have an exclusive agreement for audiophile issues with

Speakers Corner, and a steadily increasing number of current releases from all sources are once again available on vinyl. We might not have the new records that they had in the sixties, but we've got great re-issues and our record players are better than ever before. With that in mind it seems like high time to take a proper look at high-end turntables and what goes into them.

Unlike an amplifier or DAC, a gramophone is an exercise in pure micro-engineering. With the stylus and the groove it traces being measured in microns, we are relying on microscopic amounts of vibrational energy to generate an electrical output from the cartridge. To trace the development of high quality record replay is to follow the path of energy management as designers sought to isolate this fragile mechanical interface from spurious vibrations that would alter or "colour" the signal.

Any successful record player needs to deal with two forms of undesirable energy. Firstly, the stylus, as it traces the groove will make the record itself vibrate. This is unavoidable, and left to itself, much of that energy will eventually find its way back to the stylus, causing distortion. The classic demonstration of this is to use a record player with two arms. While one arm plays the music, listen to the other running round the unmodulated inner groove. You will clearly hear a distorted and muddled rendition of the tune being played by the other arm! A successful design will dissipate this

energy in some way, normally into the platter. The way a turntable approaches this problem is one of the critical choices facing a designer. Our group of four decks offer four distinctly different approaches. The Amazon adopts the currently favoured solution of an acrylic platter to which the record is clamped. This material offers an ideal impedance match to the vinyl of the record itself, thus easing this energy transfer. The Garrard, not

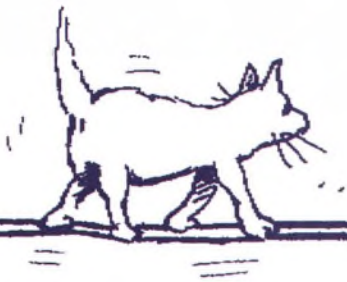


surprisingly, offers a more historical perspective and uses a disruptive mat, designed to present a broadband energy path, free from dominant resonance. It's a variation on the felt theme used by everyone from Acoustic Research onwards.

The Avid and the DNM/Reson decks break the mould. The Avid employs a deliberately reflective platter surface and seeks to channel energy down the main bearing spindle, which has been specifically designed for the purpose. ▶

▶ The DNM/Reson Rota developed its own mat system and concentrates on preventing evacuated energy re-entering the system. That mat has gone onto wider usage as the Ringmat, and as we will see, offers an option to users of other decks.

One of the great arguments used in support of disc clamping is the fact that Lacquers are clamped when they are cut, and thus clamping the record is a closer replication of that process. In fact, this is a red herring. Lacquers are vacuum clamped, but both the lacquer itself and the cutting lathes platter are physically so different from a record on a turntable platter as to render the comparison meaningless.



The benefits of clamping a record must be seen in terms of treating warps and in closer coupling to the platter. Vacuum clamping is the most effective form, but any implementation must stand or fall on its own merits, devoid of spurious comparison to record cutting techniques.

The second source of unwanted energy interfering with the stylus groove interface is the outside world: energy that is transmitted back to the stylus through the record player's structure. Thus the platter, record and stylus/tonerarm must all be isolated in some way, from the rest of the plinth. This is normally done through the use of a suspension or some form of mechanical filtering. Which brings us to one of the great compromises in turntable design - the motor. To achieve good speed stability the

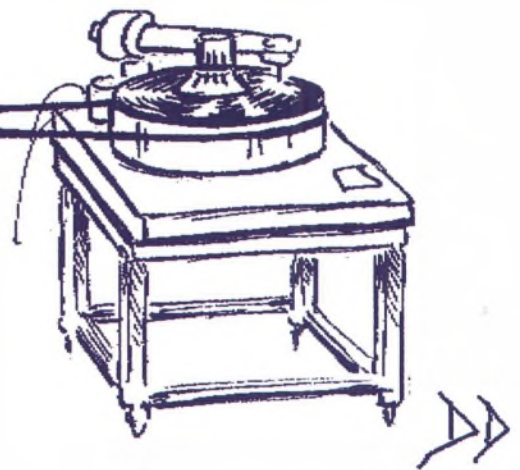
motor should be intimately coupled to the platter. Unfortunately, most motors vibrate like a jelly on a spin dryer, making this impossible. Using a belt to transfer energy from a separated motor is the most common solution, but the implications for speed stability are horrendous relative to a noisy but far more accurate direct drive, or even a belt drive from a motor that is fixed relative to the platter.

Historically we find two distinct design paths. Most common are "suspended" designs that isolate the sensitive platter, tonearm and cartridge from the noisy motor by floating them on a separate suspended section. In doing so they allow the belt driven platter to move relative to the motor and thus risk poor speed stability. These originated with the AR turntable and developed through the

LP12 to the likes of the Versa Dynamics, Goldmund Reference and VPI TNT. There have also been various forks in this road, most notably the ultra light-weight Pink Triangle and the multiple motor Voyd. Of the turntables under review, all except the idler drive Garrard employ a suspension between the motor and a belt driven platter. All of them also seek improved speed stability through greater control over suspension excursion. In fact, the polymer suspension of the Amazon is all but solid.

To a large extent, the success of any turntable can be discussed in terms of these three issues; platter termination, isolation and drive system. It is the responses of the

designer to these questions that define his products. They also define the sound of those products. The design and manufacture of a turntable is a monumentally complex task. Discussing the Rota with Denis Morecroft he described it as the most compromised of all the products that he's worked on. He was alluding to the scope for further improvement, and the fact that if they hadn't frozen the design they could still be developing it now. And whilst this points to the massive, untapped potential that remains in analogue replay systems, it also highlights another aspect of turntables. The person designing a turntable is confronted by certain irreconcilable conflicts. The only solution is compromise. Just where



you choose to make those compromises will define that products strengths and weaknesses, and the permutations are endless.

Does the no-compromise turntable exist? The nearest I've ever come to it was the £65000 Rockport Technologies Sirius III. That gives you some idea of the cost of solving these apparently simple problems. And even the design of the Sirius is open to question. What about the high lateral moving mass of its air-bearing tonearm? There really is no such thing as no-compromise. ▶+



Avid Acutus Turntable

by Jimmy Hughes

Some subjects are so personal, so controversial, they're almost beyond discussion. Religion, Sex, Politics, Money, to name only four. Oh, and Turntables. Who'd have thought the mechanics of spinning a chunk of black plastic at 33 1/3 rpm could create such passion and debate?

But it does, it does! Here's one branch of engineering and design where there seem to be more ways of skinning a cat than there are cats to skin; each of them different, each of them valid.

The Avid Acutus is no exception. Designer Conrad Mas' uncompromising approach has produced a turntable that's essentially neutral, accurate, and truthful. Whether or not one likes it is almost beside the point – the aim was not to make pleasant sounds. However, subjective views aside, no one could fail to admire and respect the thought and attention to detail that's gone into every aspect of the design. Conrad started from scratch to produce his own, unique solution. His goal? The Truth; nothing more, nothing less.

It's important to understand this. The Acutus has not been tweaked to sound pleasing, involving, or entertaining – though that isn't to say it can't be any of these things. Primarily, it was designed to reproduce what's on your records; for better for worse, for richer for poorer, for as long as ye both shall live. Amen.

This approach is more unusual than you might think. Although all equipment designers strive for accuracy, most bend the rules a bit to achieve a certain kind of sound – their idea of what constitutes the truth. Alas, in the world of hi-fi, accuracy is elusive. It's easy to define; nothing added, nothing taken away – that's



where the phrase High Fidelity came from. But how do you measure what's gained and lost? Where's the reference point? Speaking personally, I'm uneasy with 'accuracy' as a measure of absolute sound quality; I prefer the term authenticity. The question is – what do you want? An accurate sound that's absolutely truthful even if, sometimes, it isn't very nice? Or something that sounds authentic and believable, even if not (in the strictest sense) absolutely accurate?

The polished chrome Acutus came with an SME 5 tonearm into which I

fitted a Transfiguration Spirit 2 cartridge. Phono stage was my regular Audiolab 8000PPA. First impressions were of a tight, sharp, lucid, and precisely focussed sound without an ounce of spare flesh anywhere. Detail was staggering, and if performance were judged solely on how much could be heard the score would have to be ten out of ten.

Sorry, make that 12 out of 10.

Yet something was missing. Overall, the musical presentation seemed slightly stiff and constrained. Clarity and control were beyond reproach, but for my taste the music lacked grace and charm.

The head was impressed, but the heart remained unmoved. Toes weren't tapping . . .

Stereo soundstaging was unerringly precise; lateral placement of voices and instruments couldn't be faulted for solidity and stability. Yet images were perhaps a shade less holographic in terms of depth and three dimensional projection than is possible. Everything was there, but the music never quite blossomed or burgeoned into life. Somehow, the total seemed less than the sum of the parts . . .

A couple of days passed with feelings still mixed, so I switched phono stages to the Michell Delphini. Immediately, a different side of the Acutus emerged; the exceptional clarity and detail was still present, but now the music sounded more fluid and subtly-shaded.



► The presentation was still precise and tightly focussed, but voices and instruments had more space around them and the music felt more relaxed and natural. Timing was better too, with rhythms more solidly portrayed.

I knew from past experience that the Audiolab phono stage could sound – well, a bit Audiolab-ish; clean, precise, tonally neutral, but slightly cool and emotionally reserved. The 8000PPA is a very revealing component, and that's good from a reviewing standpoint. But, in tandem with the Acutus, things went to extremes. Rather than blame The Audiolab or the Avid, I think it's best to say the two simply don't gel as a combination – they're too similar to compliment one-another.

With the Delphini, the Acutus started making music, impressing time and again with its amazing analysis, its vividness and lucidity. At times, it was almost like x-raying the music, such as the clarity. It lays bare things like miking technique and depth-layering of voices and instruments. The Acutus is a very revealing turntable. And also, perhaps inevitably, sometimes an unforgiving one. Because the sound is so pared away, there's none of the comforting richness and warmth you find with other turntables. The Acutus shines a bright clear light on whatever LP you choose to play, and results aren't always predictable.

Some records I played sounded far better than expected, yet others disappointed – you'd hear all the seams and joins. At worst, the Acutus can be a little too revealing, highlighting what's wrong with a recording rather than what's right with it. However, at

best, the presentation was impressively lucid and very sharply focused. Buy an Acutus and you've a whole new record collection to listen to – guaranteed. You'll discover new things on discs you thought you knew backwards. The ride itself may not always be a comfortable one – you can love it one minute, hate it the next – but it's never boring!

You'd expect a turntable with a massive 10kg platter, high-torque motor, and rigid platter/LP interface, to produce clean tight bass. And true to form the Acutus' bottom-end is resolutely solid. Indeed, the low-frequencies had the kind of firmness and control one associates with CD. Very impressive! Nevertheless, I sometimes missed the mixture of warmth, weight and breadth that characterises good analogue bass. In my view, good LP bass is often more natural and realistic (authentic), than tight clean (accurate?) CD bass.

Acoustic double bass, for example, should sound fat and round rather than lean and mean; one needs to sense the size of the instrument and its woody resonant

warmth. Naturally, judgements about bass quality – tightness, control, depth – are very personal, and also quite system-dependant. But on a direct A/B comparison I'll wager the Acutus is likely to sound leaner and firmer than most of its peers. It's down to close-tolerance engineering and firmly clamping the record to a solid platter.

Typically, Avid have gone to extremes here, using a bonded polymer surface for the turntable 'mat', while raising the brass centre of the main bearing so it sits slightly proud of the platter and makes hard contact with the LP itself. The clamp firmly presses

the centre of the record to the main bearing, then bears down on the circumference of the record label and literally flattens the disc onto the platter. This clamping arrangement gives the Acutus much of its sonic signature, imparting superb

The Acutus employs a powerful French Crouzet AC synchronous 24 pole motor, completely rebuilt by Avid, that produces a massive 130mN of torque – over ten times more powerful than many similar turntable motors. You can gauge its power when the deck is switched on; the massive 10kg platter is up to speed almost immediately. Engineering tolerances are so close, there's no need for fine speed adjustment – the Acutus is spot-on.

The platter runs on an inverted tapered through-hardened stainless-steel bearing shaft that's topped by a tungsten carbide ball. This runs in a sapphire cup jewel set in a brass housing. The designer claims this arrangement ensures exceptional concentricity and ultra-low bearing noise. Sintered bronze bushes, with a clearance of just 3/10ths of a thou, ensure long-term lubrication – a problem with all inverted bearing turntables.

The massive 50mm thick platter is machined from a solid aluminum billet, dynamically balanced, and fitted with a polymer resin mat that's slightly softer than the vinyl used for LP records. This polymer is actually clear, but being bonded to a black anodized disc gives it dark grey appearance. The sub-chassis is a substantial alloy casting, with deep V grooves for extra rigidity, and the three spring turrets that support it are generously proportioned. One excellent aspect of the suspension is the complete lack of speed variation when the whole thing oscillates up and down.

Setting up is simple and straightforward. And once you've set it up, that's it – no further tweaking is necessary! Alignment shouldn't drift; therefore performance will be consistent over extended usage. Many high-end turntables are temperamental, but not this one.



▷ firmness and solidity to the music. On the right material, results are deeply impressive, no question. One of the great strengths of this turntable is its clean accurate soundstaging. Instruments and voices are placed with pin-point precision. Alas, there's a downside. At worst, this precision takes over, making the music sound constrained – as though voices and instruments were held in a vice-like grip, unable to breathe. Some listeners like this kind of super-clean, super-tight musical presentation, and who am I to argue? But to me it's missing the deceptively easy warmth and smooth flowing naturalness of good live acoustic sound.

The clamp is an integral part of the Acutus' design. And while it's not written on tablets of stone that you have to use it, the raised bit near the centre spindle prevents LPs from lying flat on the platter unless clamped. However, it's possible to circumvent the clamp by using a QR Development's Ringmat. Subjectively, I felt this worked very well with the Acutus, and, were I lucky enough to own this amazing turntable, that's how I'd use it – with



a Shun Mook record weight replacing the clamp. To my ears (and with my system) this combination created the best compromise between naturalness and ease on the one hand, and focus and precision on the other. Which is right? Who knows! But with this deck you can have it both ways. Used as

supplied, the Acutus has the tightest most focussed sound imaginable. If it's too controlled for your taste (or for some recordings), it's comparatively easy to introduce a little extra 'give' without excessively compromising clarity and solidity. 'Nuff said!



Two minor niggles with the clamp: it struggles to flatten thick, 180g discs unless you really torque it down, and it can scuff record labels (I ended up using a thin paper disc to protect them).

Build quality is stunning, and the deck is beautifully finished. It looks and feels expensive without being vulgar, yet there are no unwarranted excesses. Everything's there for a reason: if you talk to the designer he can justify even the tiniest detail.

The sprung suspension ensures excellent isolation, and the clever balanced spring arrangement virtually eliminates yaw. Having the three O rings around the turntable circumference helps damp-out horizontal movement, reducing speed fluctuations. This helps create rock-like speed stability. Of course, having a massive 10kg platter helps, as does an incredibly powerful motor and state-of-the-art power supply. Listening to the Acutus imparts feelings of certainty; precise, solid, unflappable, it sounds as though nothing short of an earthquake could upset its equilibrium.

When it comes to subjective judgements about sound quality and musical presentation, chances are

the Acutus will polarise opinions. You'll either think it's the most incredible turntable you've ever heard, or you'll find it cold, analytical, and distinctly uninviting. It's even possible, depending on mood and recording, you'll fluctuate between these two extremes – I know I did.

Yet at the same time, there's something addictive about its exceptional clarity and lucidity – it's definitely a turntable that grows on you.

Classic analogue – warm, friendly, 'romantic' – it isn't.

But, Conrad Mas wasn't after soothing noises. Whose to say his uncompromising approach hasn't got closer to the truth than any previous turntable? I liked it more and more as time went on, and had I five grand to spare, I'd definitely go for one. Alas, I haven't – but I understand there's a scaled-down version available for about £1400. Now that could be very interesting . . .



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Speeds:	33 and 45
User Adjustable:	No
Lid:	No, soft cover supplied.
Arm Compatibility:	9" only, Gimbal bearings preferred.
Dimensions (WxHxD):	450 x 215 x 390mm
Weight:	21.3 Kg
Finishes:	Black with Plain Chrome. Polished Chrome or Gold Hardware
Price - motor unit:	£4000, £5000 or £6500 respectively

Manufacturer:

Avid
Tel/Fax (44)(0)1525-717487
E-mail: info@avidhifi.co.uk
Net: www.avidhifi.co.uk



AMAZON

Amazon Model 1 Turntable

by Roy Gregory

The Amazon turntables hail from Germany, and if the Model 1 looks familiar, it's because it bears an uncanny resemblance to its compatriot, the Clearlight Audio Recovery reviewed in the last issue. In fact, the similarities are more than just skin deep, but then so are the differences. Although these two turntables share certain features, other fundamental aspects of their design are almost diametrically opposed. As such the two together form a fascinating insight into the accepted wisdom and creative tensions that dominate German turntable design at present.

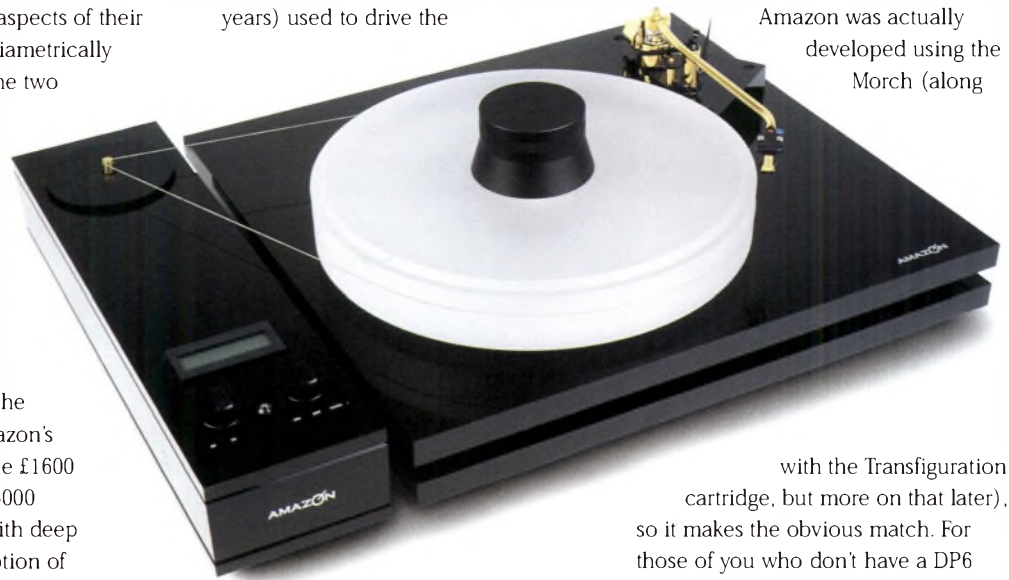
The Model 1 is the middle deck in Amazon's range, flanked by the £1600 Model 2, and the £5000 Reference. Those with deep pockets have the option of upgrading the £2500 Model 1 to full Reference status if the fancy takes them. The decks are based on a sandwich plinth and deep acrylic platter, which is what gives them their resemblance to the Recovery. But in this instance the filling is a variation on the Sorbothane theme, and the slabs are solid acrylic. The oversize platter is also solid acrylic (although the Reference uses a composite acrylic/titanium mix). The whole assembly sits on, and is levelled by, three M8 spikes. The main bearing is an inverted design, running with a

ceramic ball, and the deck is supplied with a substantial record weight. Where things get really interesting though, is the drive system.

The motor is mounted in a separate, rectangular chassis the same depth as the deck. Nothing too unusual in that, except that the separate section also contains the lead/acid cells (guaranteed for five years) used to drive the

which drives the platter via a stretchy cotton thread. Despite its fragile feel, the 'belt' is actually surprisingly resilient. In fact, you'll probably lose it before you wear it out. The grubby off-white colour seems to blend with what ever you put it down on.

The deck arrived fitted with the familiar (to me) Morch DP6 tonearm. Walrus import this too, but the Amazon was actually developed using the Morch (along



turntable. That's right, the Amazon is a battery powered deck, which along with the Final Music amps (Issue 2) means that Walrus can supply a complete system devoid of the evils of the mains supply. The controls provide speed switching and on/off/charge options, along with an LCD readout of battery status. Once the level drops to around 6 volts, its time to whip out the plug top charger unit and hook it up to the turntable's flying XLR. Leave it overnight and hey presto, off you go again. Not surprisingly the motor is a DC type,

with the Transfiguration cartridge, but more on that later), so it makes the obvious match. For those of you who don't have a DP6 sitting on the shelf, a brief description is in order. DP stands for dual pivot, and differentiates this arm from the company's uni-pivot model. The vertical bearings are a pair of sapphire knife edges, positioned at the top of the arm 'barrel'. To the top of the barrel is screwed the removable arm wand, whose interchangeability allows you to not only run more than one cartridge, but to select a wand of optimum mass from the four options available. Morch are clearly serious about maximising the performance potential of your cartridge. The low ▶

▶ slung counter-weight is a composite design, again assembled from the four supplied weights, thus ensuring that you can position it as close to the pivot as possible, while adjustment of the left-hand knife edge allows you to adjust for azimuth. In fact, the only real oversight is the card protractor printed on the back of the carton. Given the DP6's unusually short off-set distance of 212mm some form of decent universal protractor is essential. I used the ClearAudio Alignment Gauge, but if my DP6 was in regular use with more than one cartridge I'd be sorely tempted to invest in a purpose etched Wallytractor from the states. Cueing height and rate can be adjusted, and the spring bias arrangement is simplicity itself. VTA is down to the old allen bolt through the mounting collar, which is my one real beef, but considered against the arm's immaculate finish and construction, and a standard price of £800, it seems downright churlish to grumble. This particular piece of audio artistry can be ordered in either black or chrome if you find the Gold a little ostentatious, while the optional Precision armwand supplied pushes the price up to £910. Which ever way you cut it, the Morch DP6 is a serious bargain, and UP4s are even cheaper!

Setting-up the turntable is child's play. Simply provide a large, level surface and place the two elements next to each other, separated by a 5mm gap. Total area required is 59 x 45cm, but as the feet are inset, the actual footprint is only 50 x 34cm. Fortunately the Model 1 arrived with its spikes installed. If this isn't the case, make sure you get the dealer to do it for you, as it looks like a long and laborious task. Walrus supplied seven Art Q-dampers to place between the deck and the rack top, although this

was more to protect the surface than for sonic reasons. Changing them for brass discs made a difference, but nothing to write home (or here) about. The only other consideration is the ceramic ball used in the main bearing. This means that you should never, ever move the deck around with the platter installed. It also suggests you should be careful when placing the substantial record weight. Don't go dropping it into position.



From the first moment that you hear the stylus in the groove, you'll hear the principle characteristic of the Amazon. This turntable is loud. In fact, doing comparisons between two decks, using the same cartridge, the difference was so obvious as to send me reaching for the volume control, only to remember that I'd purposely left it undisturbed. Listen longer and you'll realise that the effect is due to a combination of factors: the deck exhibits excellent dynamic range whilst enjoying exceptionally quiet, grain free backgrounds. This makes the dynamics all the more apparent, along with record rumble and tape hiss. But notice, the key word here is apparent, not intrusive. Like I said at the start, the Model 1 lets you hear into lead-in grooves like no other, but as soon as the music starts they're gone. Of course, they're always there, on all record players, but the Amazon casts such an acquisitive eye across the musical

landscape that they get dragged into view.

By now you'll have realised that clarity is the Model 1's middle name. It is bold and confident, and above all transparent. Acoustic space is never in doubt, to the extent that listening to the Barber *Violin Concerto* (Reference Recordings RR-45) you can clearly hear the floor beneath and wall behind the basses, instruments which now sound real and part of the orchestra, where so many turntables invert that space, making them sound detached and distant. The Amazon's music is quick and uncluttered, and seamless top to bottom. That special quality it lends the air around instruments is consistent from flutes and cymbals right down to the musical nether

regions. Bass guitar, be it on 'Forest Fire' (Lloyd Cole and the Commotions *Rattlesnakes* Polydor LCLP1) or Led Zeppelin's *BBC Sessions* (Atlantic 83061-1) is deep and taut, with perfectly apparent pitch and rhythmic impetus. None of that flabby, loose stringed thudding that meanders around the bottom end of some systems. The playing is clear, and so is its relationship to the music. And bear in mind that in the case of the Zeppelin discs, we're talking less than wonderful recordings. For all its clarity and insight, the Model 1 doesn't dismantle poor recordings for the hell of it. It simply does its best to let you hear and make the most of what's on the record.

This bass performance is all the more impressive if you've ever heard the DP6 on other decks. Whilst its lower registers were always precise and tactile, they could also sound light and a little lazy. In fact, when people have asked me about the arm I've ▶

▶ tended to describe its overall balance as gentle. Not on the Amazon. Developing the turntable in concert with the arm has lifted the latter's performance to new heights. The sound I've described is the sound of both together, and it's a powerful combination.

Which leads me to the last part of that puzzle. As I mentioned earlier, the Transfiguration cartridges also figured in the development process, but I was unable to get hold of one within the review period. Instead I used my own ClearAudio Accurate as well as various cartridges in transit. With

all of them, to a greater or lesser extent, I noticed the same effect. The Amazon/Morch combination seems to favour the fundamental elements of notes at the expense of their harmonics and decay, almost as if it favours drama at the expense of finesse. Playing the Martzy *Kreutzer* (Coup d'Archet COUP 003 – a fabulous performance which, if you haven't got the message already, everybody should own – even if you buy it on CD!) the violinist's power and dynamism are manifest, as is the percussive nature of the piano, but the performance takes on a slightly frantic quality. Gone is Martzy's fabulous poise and control, typified by her leaving of notes to decay into pauses, before – Bang! there goes the next phrase. It also nibbles away at the extraordinary understanding between the two players. Does it diminish the performance? In absolute terms it must do, but bear in mind that alternative decks will lose in the areas of dynamic range and attack, undermining it in other ways.

The other factor which contributes to this effect is that whilst the dynamics are definitely wide, they also lack the last ounce of control and discrimination. Full on tracks like 'Forest Fire' just keep going, suffering

none of the compression that I hear from other similarly priced tables, but the precision of the step between ff and fff is again found wanting. It's these characteristics which bring the Transfigurations to mind. They are exactly the areas in which those cartridges excel, whilst their exceptional depth of image would step the Model I back from Row B to nearer Row G. I suspect that their fabulous tonal insight and dynamic discrimination would fill out the Amazon/Morch's virtues to near perfection, whilst the record player's sheer wallop would really bring them

to life. If you want more control you might try an SME arm (the deck's got dynamics to burn) but I can't help feeling that you'll diminish the whole.

robbing it of some of that sparkle and energy. The outstandingly good (and seriously underrated) Dynavector Te-Ketora would also be a viable alternative, but the same sum/whole caveats apply.

The Amazon/Morch combination is an exceptional player, and if I've spent time on its musical weak spots it is only because its strengths are so impressive. It is a powerful argument for closed systems, and I suspect that the inclusion of the preferred cartridge would create an even more substantial whole from the sum of its parts. I also suspect that the Reference, with its gemstone ball, composite platter, screw down clamp, better motor and Aramid belt attacks exactly these areas. I'm particularly attached to the overtones and harmonic structures of acoustic instruments, and I choose my systems accordingly. With a less discriminating window, and a taste for musical drama, choosing the Amazon would be a no-brainer. In fact, despite the weaknesses I perceive, I'd still choose it over the dynamically challenged competition.

Its drive, clarity, transparency and rhythmic integrity make for an imposing and thoroughly enjoyable performance, and one that I've lived with quite happily. Make no mistake. This is an excellent record player which earns its criticism precisely because of that excellence. So it's not perfect. What is? £5000 for a Reference anybody. ▶+



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Amazon Model I Turntable

Speeds	33 and 45
Dimensions (WxHxD)	59 x 19.5 x 45cm
Alternative Armboards	Yes, various
Lid	No
Finish	Black Acrylic
Price	£2500

Morch DP6 Tonearm

Effective Length	230mm
Effective Mass	Variable (3.8-14.8g)
Offset	212mm
Mounting	Single Hole 20mm
Tonearm Cable	Removable, Din Connector
Finishes	Gold, Black or Chrome
Price	£800
	£910 with Precision Arm Wand

Distributor:

Walrus Systems
Tel. (44)(0)207-724-7224
E-mail info@walrus.co.uk
Net. www.walrus.co.uk

Manufacturers:

Amazon Audio Components
Tannenstrasse 48
63128 Dietzenbach
Germany

H.H.Morch
Skovvej 16
2820 Gentofte
Denmark



The Garrard 501 Turntable

by Jimmy Hughes

You know you're getting old when people mention reviews you wrote, and you can't even recall the product - let alone what you said about it. So it was with some embarrassment that I learned I'd already reviewed the Garrard 501 - some fifteen years ago. A World Scoop even *Hi-Fi News* would be proud of. Like Maurice Chevalier - 'I Remember It Well'.

Actually, I do remember it - albeit somewhat hazily. Garrard had been bought by a Brazilian concern called Gradiente, and (some time in the mid '80s) members of the original management and design team wanted to convince their South American owners to proceed with a new high-end turntable design. Garrard approached me to write a private review of a prototype suspended sub-chassis, belt-drive deck provisionally dubbed '501'. Jimmy was God in those days. Well, sort of. So, getting the nod from me was the first step. Such was the power of my enthusiastic endorsement, the turntable was never seen or heard of ever again... Evidently the Boys from Brazil felt the high-end turntable market had no future.

Meanwhile, fifteen years on, what we have in the present 501 is not a finished version of the early deck I originally wrote about, but something altogether more interesting; the turntable Garrard might have made had they remained true to their heritage. An idler-driven model that

follows in the footsteps of the illustrious 301 and 401 models.

If playing LPs is partly about nostalgia, then the 501 is a magnificent High Altar of almost baroque grandiloquence. It's an inspiring sight. Finished in white and maroon, it looks



superb - especially when you add a black and gold SME V (although the large and stable plinth makes the deck ideal for either longer arms or uni-pivots). I challenge you not to be impressed. Glance underneath, and you'll be even more taken; the engineering and finish are fabulous - not a word I use lightly.

If a turntable like the Avid Acutus represents a sleek stripped-down racing car, the 501 is a vintage Bentley - a dignified and spacious vehicle, built for comfort and enjoyment rather than speed. When you play an original Klemperer Columbia LP of Beethoven, or perhaps an old Miles Davis album, there's a palpable sense of being in touch with the past as stylus touches groove.

Miles (and Klemperer) were still

alive when that record was pressed. And, it's as though a part of them still lives-on in the grooves. Somehow, through a mysterious alchemy no one can explain, their special magic is recreated once again by the miracle we call the gramophone.

By comparison, CD only re-constitutes; LP re-creates.

This has nothing to do with accurate sound. Undoubtedly, CD is truer to the original mastertape, and of course it's blessedly free of faults like surface noise and peak level distortion. But accuracy isn't authenticity.

And LP with all its maddening limitations and imperfections is gloriously authentic. A Bentley might not be the fastest way to travel, but it's unquestionably stylish, fun, and cool. Being correct isn't the same as being right.

The 501 is capable of matching the best racing car turntables when it comes to clarity, detail, and dynamics. Indeed, its smoothness and refinement are perhaps misleading; the 501 can rock and roll with aplomb - it just isn't 'obvious' about it. The ride is so comfortable, you hardly realise how fast you're going...

First impressions were of a warm, clean, open, and well-balanced musical presentation. Partnered by an SME series V arm and Ortofon MC-30 Supreme, there was something effortlessly right about the 501. There was little or no acclimatisation period; it was more like meeting an old friend.

The general presentation

► seemed beautifully subtle and finely shaded, yet clearly shaped and sinewy too; muscular without being heavy or leaden. Background noise was very low, and there was a master-tape like firmness and stability, both in terms of soundstaging and pitch definition. Very impressive! At the same time the tonal balance was natural and musical. All in all, clean effortless sound - as though reproducing records this well was the easiest thing in the world.

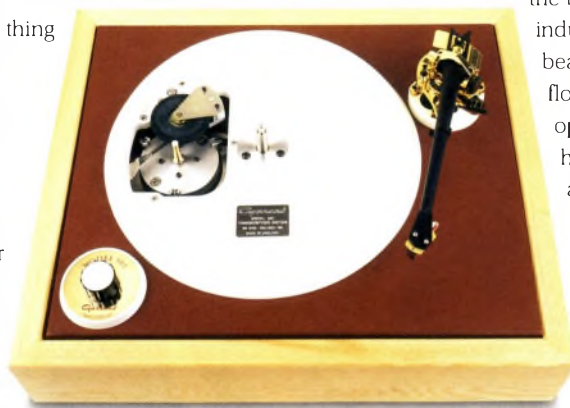
This for me sums up the 501. It's superbly detailed and focussed, yet at the same time relaxed and natural. It engages your interest musically without making things like 'dynamics' or 'soundstaging' the central issue. The best hi-fi, in my view, sounds unobtrusive; you're simply aware of the music and the performance, not the equipment. It's art that conceals art. And the 501 is a prime example.

Back in the sixties, when all anyone asked of a turntable was that it revolved at the correct speed and did not rumble, the old idler-driven 301 and 401 found themselves at a slight disadvantage compared to their belt-driven counterparts. The firm coupling between motor and platter, via a hard rubber idler wheel, meant that a degree of transmitted motor noise was virtually impossible to eliminate.

For single-channel reproduction, using true mono pickups that weren't sensitive to vertical

movement, idler drive was fine; rumble (as low frequency noise was dubbed) simply didn't exist because mono cartridges did not read it. With rumble being an out-of-phase vertical signal, mono pickups (only able to read lateral movement) cancelled out such noise. The introduction of stereo LPs in 1958 changed all that...

Suddenly, pickups were sensitive to



vertical as well as lateral movement, and this opened a whole can of worms so far as centre bearing noise and motor vibration were concerned. It also placed considerably greater demands on the standard of LP surfaces, and the quality of vinyl used. Even today, using the best stereo equipment and records, you can hear the noise floor drop when you switch from stereo to mono.

Speaking as a former Garrard 401 user back in the early '70s, I found this turntable a big improvement over my original Garrard AP-75 in terms of rumble. But even so, it still wasn't completely silent - there was always a slight drone in the background.

For this reason I eventually replaced my 401 with a Transcriptor Hydraulic Reference - though in retrospect (lower noise aside) this was hardly an upgrade.

Privately, I'd have said it was virtually impossible to eliminate transmitted motor noise with an idler-drive turntable. All motors vibrate, and

the small engine used in the 301/401 is certainly no exception. Given this, some noise would seem to be unavoidable. But, with the new 501, the impossible seems to have been achieved; any noise is so far below the residual background of even quiet pressings, it's to all intents and purposes been eliminated.

How? Well, it's partly down to the beautiful handbuilt 501 4-pole induction motor and its special 'air bearing' design, which has the shaft floating free of its thrust pad once operating speed is reached. The high-precision idler wheel is another major factor. And of course the superb plinth in which the 501 is housed helps too. Half the problem with the original 301 and 401 was the lack of a really good solid plinth in which to put it.

The result? A clean quiet background free of extraneous low frequency noise. LP surface noise is very low too, and the music emerges from an almost inky-black silent background. Dynamic range is wide and there's an impressive swing between loud and soft with no sense of compression. At the same time the presentation isn't forward or in your face; dynamics are properly terraced, giving the music a realistic sense of impact and scale.

The idler wheel offers superb 'drive', and makes sure every ounce of torque is transferred from motor to platter. However, because there's no filtration in the transmission system (unlike 'lossy' belt drive decks), motor and power supply quality are clearly very important. Hence the care taken over the 501's two box power supply - surely one of the biggest and most elaborate ever offered for a domestic turntable.

Interestingly, the designers have gone for something called a Wien Bridge - a special kind of circuit that offers a number of benefits,



▶ including fine-speed adjustment over a very wide range. Like the 301 and 401, the 501 runs at 33, 45, and 78rpm, and thus lends itself to archiving and record transcription - recalling the 1950s and 1960s when high-class record players were known as Transcription Turntables.

However, unlike the 301/401 in which the different speeds were obtained by running the idler wheel up or down a stepped pulley, the 501's power supply changes speed by altering the frequency fed to the motor. For those playing shellac '78s' that might well have been recorded at a whole range of different speeds, the 501 is ideal. Loricraft provide a battery powered strobe light and disc to set speeds correctly, as the 501 has dispensed with the 401's strobe edge platter. However, for those not wishing to bother, there's a 'reference' setting that gives the correct speed.

Being large and conventionally styled, the 501 is a joy to use. The plinth offers support when cueing the tonearm by hand, and there's plenty of space on the motor board for peripherals like record cleaning pads and a stylus cleaning brush. The provision of a nice stout hinged lid protects the deck from dust and prying fingers; very welcome.

My review 501 came with a fairly thin cork mat that produced a good balance between liveliness on the one hand and control on the other. I also used the QR Developments Ringmat with very good results, and this would be my choice, with a Shun Mook Record Weight. The makers do not mind record clamps or weights being used, but point out that the centre spindle is perhaps slightly on the short side for some clamps to grip.

I have to say - I didn't manage to listen to the 501 very much. Which isn't to say I didn't play a lot of music on it! Rather, it was difficult to concentrate on the technicalities - the 'hi-fi' things like detail, dynamics, soundstaging, and suchlike. Not because the 501 lacks in these areas, but simply because they were very much in second or third place behind the music itself.

Overall, I found the 501 produced a very transparent and vivid yet self-effacing sound; it never obtruded over the music; never distracted you with its own brilliance or dexterity. Like I said earlier, the ride was fast yet deceptively comfortable and effortless.

Memory loss aside, my 'forgetting' the old never-to-be prototype 501 was perhaps a way of blotting out the sadness felt at the premature death of a potentially great turntable that sadly never was. How many enthusiasts from the '50s, '60s, and '70s cut their hi-fi teeth on Garrard turntables? Most, I'd guess.

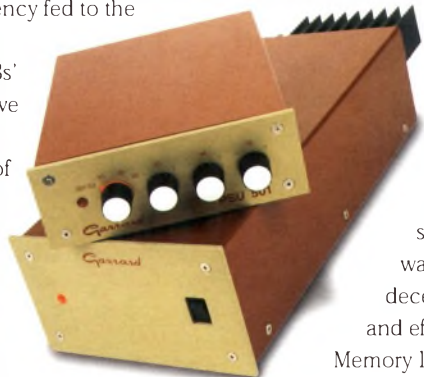
That's why the present 501 is a minor miracle. For Nigel and Terry of Loricraft to resurrect the 501 is a tale so unlikely and improbable it could only be true. They've brought to virtual perfection a turntable designed back in '50s, building on its strengths while minimising its weaknesses.

Perhaps I'm in danger of overdoing the romance bit here. After all, the cynical might see the whole 501 project as commercial opportunism, pure and simple, by two gifted engineer/businessmen. But I'm not so sure. Having heard Terry and Nigel's tale, I'm reminded of a story I once read of some steam railway enthusiasts who, against truly impossible odds, restored to full working order a

magnificent old Engine that was otherwise fit only for the scrapyard.

Likewise, the 501; who'd have thought after the demise of Garrard (not to mention the demise of the LP) we'd witness the birth of a major new turntable from one of the great names of hi-fi's golden era? Moreover, one that builds on the foundations of two great Garrard turntables of the past, and brings the design to perfection. If that isn't the stuff of romance, I don't know what is.

So that's what you're buying when you purchase a 501; something unique and special, something lovingly hand-built. Something that gives value in an increasingly plastic throwaway world. As old Ralph West said in his 1965 *Hi-Fi News* review of the 401 - The man who buys a 301 or 401 does so secure in the knowledge that it will last a lifetime. And while West expressed reservations about some aspects of the 401, I'm sure he would've been thrilled and delighted by the new 501. It's an investment - an investment that guarantees musical dividends of the highest order.



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Speeds:	33, 45, 78, all user variable.
Tonearm:	Up to 12"
Lid:	Supplied
Strobe:	Supplied
Dimensions (WxHxD):	540 x 180 x 460 mm 625mm wide if using 12" arm
Weight:	Motor Unit - 25kg PSU - 16.5kg
Finishes:	Plinth - Ash, Oak, Walnut Top Plate - Maroon Other wood and top plate options available to special order
Price:	£7000 incl. SME Series 5 tone arm.

Manufacturer: Loricraft Audio
Tel: (44)(0)1488-71307
Fax: (44)(0)1488-72267
E-mail: terry@garrard501.com
Net: www.garrard501.com





rota

rota

DNM/Reson Rota 1

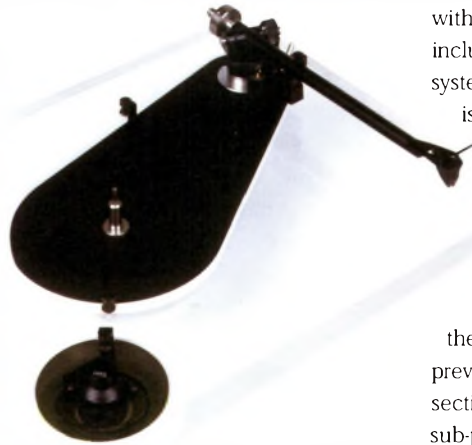
by Roy Gregory

In a market increasingly dominated by massive design, the Rota 1, in true DNM style, sails resolutely into the face of fashion. At first glance it could be mistaken for an acrylic Rega Planar 3, so you could be forgiven for wondering why it costs ten times the price of the budget benchmark. But then, DNM have never sought to impress through the conspicuous consumption of materials. Their engineering has always been remarkable for its elegance, rather than its resemblance to the Forth road bridge, so the value is in the details. The Rota turntable is no different – or rather it's very different, if you get my drift.

Denis Morecroft has always placed resolution at the top of his personal agenda, and in turntable terms, that means the blackest musical background you can achieve. Which in turn dictates minimum extraneous stylus deflection, and therefore minimum disturbance of the suspension. Further investigation identified the motor as the root of considerable evil, small speed variations caused by loading of the drive system exciting the suspension, whose movement in turn caused subtle speed variation in a never ending cycle of micro instability. This is aggravated in the situation where a light-weight motor drives a heavy platter assembly. The motor can't slow the platter (it's not supposed to!) so it ends up displacing it laterally. On the other hand, if the motor is closely

coupled then the belt will drive it out of synchronicity, massively increasing the vibration it causes. The Rota is designed to overcome this conundrum.

But first it's necessary to slaughter another sacred cow; the closed mechanical loop. The notion that the platter, bearing, tonearm and



cartridge can form a single rigid structure is at the heart of suspended turntable lore. It suggests that converting lateral movement into vertical motion renders it innocuous. However, it will still cause stylus displacement. What is more, everything's relative, especially rigidity. By mounting something rigidly you actually creates the conditions it needs to resonate (just think of a ruler clamped at one end only), which makes true rigidity almost impossible to achieve.

Once you reject the acceptability of vertical motion, and therefore

suspension systems and 'rigid' structures which rely on it, suddenly all the rules change.

The Rota assumes that vertical excitation, if it is eliminated from the drive/suspension, is essentially limited to structure borne energy, which can be controlled by mounting the deck carefully. To that end, the deck comes with a choice of floor or wall stands included in the price. The suspension system can then be dedicated to isolating the record/stylus interface from lateral motion, especially that provoked by the drive system. To achieve this, the motor is mounted compliantly, the rubber bush furthest from the platter being slightly stiffer to prevent the motor canting. The round section belt then drives the lightweight sub-platter, which is in turn compliantly mounted to the main platter via three O rings. The belt has a slightly tacky surface to allow even lower tension and resultant side loading of the platter assembly. Any speed variation



emanating from the motor is converted to rotational energy by the very light plastic sub-platter which is free to move eccentrically in the horizontal plane. The O rings act as a filter, preventing the uneven drive reaching the platter and displacing the stylus (and of course, vice versa). Thus, although the sub-platter can be



▶ laterally displaced, it continues to drive the main platter smoothly. The motor itself is an ultra high quality item built in Switzerland, as is the two speed pulley. This, and the finalisation and finishing of the main bearing constitute the main design input from the Swiss end of the DNM/Reson operation. (They're also responsible for manufacturing the deck, including the superb perspex work. The lid is a work of art!)



The motor is driven from a simple external supply which relies on its impedance matching to the electrical load to prevent asynchronicity. Again, this represents the minimalist approach in an area where most designers rely on complex synthesised supplies.

The platter assembly and tonearm are supported on a low-mass composite wood sub-chassis which is rebated into the acrylic top-plate. The composite structure contributes long term stability rather than lighter weight, which is ensured by the materials chosen.

The whole assembly hangs from three more rubber bushes, similar to the ones suspending the motor. Their compliance varies, and depends on their position and load. Beneath the sub-chassis are attached two counter-weights, one below the main bearing, the other below the arm. These are mass balanced to the platter assembly and arm respectively, and place the centre of gravity of the suspended mass in the same plane as the drive belt. The narrow waists on the bushes are also placed in that plane, and hence their greatest flexibility.



The result is a stable horizontal compliance, with no tendency to rock or topple.

The main bearing is an unusual inverted design, running on a tiny ruby ball. It was created by Peter Walker, who also helped with the mechanical design of the RB300 for Rega. The top of the bearing post is derived from a single 3mm roller from a large diameter roller bearing.

Produced in their millions, tolerances are beyond the capabilities of any small manufacturer. This is

seated in a 10mm shaft which handles the side load, although, once the platter is spinning, and with no side loading from the belt (decoupled by the sub platter), this should be absolutely minimal. The bearing is treated with a special surface coating, all except the tip. This repels the special oil,

forcing it up to the contact point, where it is circulated by the heat generated by the bearing's operation. Highly sophisticated, the oil technology is derived from the Swiss clock industry, and should run trouble free for years.

The Reta arm supplied on the Rota 1 is clearly based on the Rega, however in this instance it is rewired with solid core internal wiring and a DNM shielded arm lead (with a plastic base plug of course). A large screw in the rear of the counterweight stub is designed to provide fine adjustment of tracking force across about 0.3g.

The arm base itself is fitted with a collar on which it rests, but which also allows for VTA adjustment (and no it won't work on other decks). In fact, the arm on the Rota simply rests on a paper washer which provides a controlled, lossy interface. Whilst this might seem like heresy, bear in mind the renewed popularity of fluid damped unipivot tonearms, and designs such as the Well Tempered turntables.

The Rota 1 package also includes the Etile cartridge, a Goldring built, DNM specced £450 moving-coil. Output is pretty healthy, and set-up straight

forward, other than the incredibly fiddly requirement for nuts as well as bolts.

The cheaper MMs are threaded, so

what about the MCs? The final element in the equation is the Ringmat record support, which was developed by DNM for the Rota before it took on a life of its own.

The theory is that the minimal contact

between record and mat enables a controlled egress of energy, which can't then find its way back. The cork ring is effectively suspended between two other rings on the mat's underside and this allows the surface to ripple, dissipating energy.

The Rota 1 represents a record replay system in the fullest sense. Every element from the stand to the motor, the record mat to the suspension bushes, has been specified for its function as part of the whole. A virtually metal free whole, tonearm aside, in true DNM fashion. The whole kit and caboodle costs £3100, which places it in some fairly serious company. However, the completeness of the vision should give it an edge.

In use the Rota 1 is amazingly crisp and dynamic. Stable and focussed, ▶



▶ the music absolutely bounces with life and energy. In fact the whole sound is surprisingly big for a turntable of such slight dimensions and minimal weight. Much of this is down to its transparency and resolution, qualities in which it excels, and which combined with the dynamics make for a vivid (and highly enjoyable) listening experience. And if soundstage boundaries are less obvious than they can be, the spread and separation of instruments within the stage is crystal clear. Where I part company with the Rota's presentation is in the way it handles overtones, harmonics and decay.



Let's look at an example: the Argenta/Yepes recording of the Rodrigo *Concierto de Aranjuez* from the Alto Argenta box-set. The opening of the Adagio rests on Yepes' repeated stately strumming which sets the tone before the emergence of the main theme. With the Rota, the guitar's decay is truncated and homogenised, an effect which alters the opening bars from a constant, rippling pulse, giving them a slightly insistent, expectant quality. Almost as if the soloist can't wait to get onto the interesting bit. And when the melody does start, the notes are beautifully shaped, but lack some of the richness and variation that comes from the player's manipulation of the decay.

Does this destroy the music? Absolutely not. Does it intrude? Not in any aggravating way. Does it affect the feel and style of the performance? Definitely. It's almost as if the Rota takes a distinct decision to place the timing and energy of the performance ahead of its internal artistry – which might be exactly what you prefer. There's no

right or wrong here. It's more a question of style or musical taste.

Let's look at it from the other extreme. Big band arrangements rely on the ability of the various members of the band to hit the right note at exactly the right time, and that means in unison. In April 1958, Roulette Records gave Count Basie and fifteen other musicians two days to cut an LP. The result was *Chairman of the Board* (SRCP3008) and it's become something of a classic. Popping it on the Rota,

I was immediately rewarded with the sound of a really tight band in full swing. The Count's understated piano kept things moving and the brass tuttis absolutely ripped. Great music, great performance – both the band and the record player. In fact I went back and enjoyed it again – and again.

And there's the rub. You can't have your cake and eat it, at least not for £3100. The Rota doesn't warp the musical event, it just looks at it from a particular perspective. In fact, its performance in the all important areas of coherence, tonal and temporal, is exemplary. The greater levels of harmonic discrimination that matter to me are less relevant on modern studio recordings and other non acoustic music. They may well be less important to you as well, in which case the Rota 1 becomes a very attractive proposition. There is also a Rota 2 which comes with a more expensive arm and the £1300 Lexe cartridge (the 1 can be upgraded) and this should extend the performance in this area. As I had a Lexe in the house I took the opportunity to substitute it for the Etile and sure enough, a smoother and rather more subtle performance resulted. Enough to make me think that it's the arm that's the prime culprit.

As delivered, the Rota 1 is a

fascinating and impressive turntable. Its strengths are considerable, and so is the musical enjoyment it can provide. In true DNM fashion it looks less expensively impressive than it is, but don't underestimate the completeness of either its vision or its execution. Mixing and matching the various elements that comprise a record player is not for the faint-hearted or inexperienced. The Rota is both neat and complete, and as such it virtually guarantees to deliver its full potential every time. To start chopping in other cartridges in order to level the playing field would be to miss the point. The Rota is a system, and yes, the whole is very much more than the sum of the parts. Bring on the Rota 2!



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Speeds:	33 and 45, manually shifted
Tonearm:	Supplied
Cartridge:	Supplied
Lid:	Lift Off
Support:	Floor or Wall Stand supplied
Output Level:	0.5mV
Loading:	100 Ohms
Dimensions (WxHxD)	425 x 580 x 360mm
Finish:	Clear Acrylic, Black Stand
Price	£3100

Distributor

Virtual Reality Audio Systems
Tel. (44)(0)1277-227355
Fax. (44)(0)1277-224103
E-mail. info@virtualr.demon.co.uk

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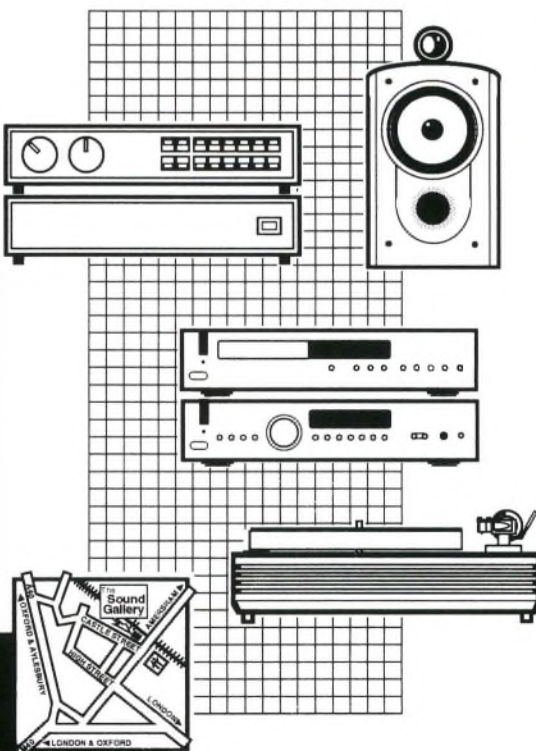
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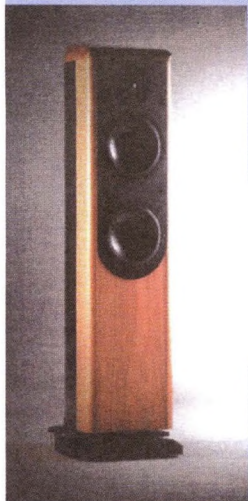
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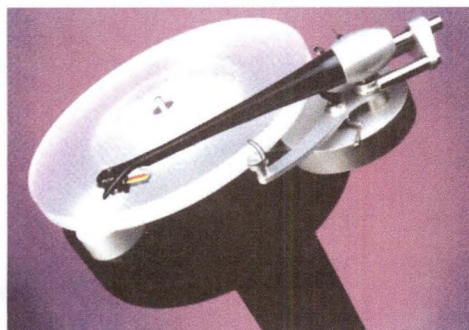
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The Cartridge Man Music Maker

by Roy Gregory

The moving-coil pick-up cartridge enjoys almost total dominance as the transducer of choice for analogue aficionados. If you are going to spend more than £150 on your needle, then chances are it will be a moving-coil. Which is all the more surprising when you consider the inherent weaknesses of the breed, chief of which is their paltry output level. In fact, you have to buy a whole extra amplification stage (or even two) in order to connect them to a system which is on perfectly polite speaking terms with your CD player. Never mind, the customer is always right. So much so that virtually every serious cartridge on the planet operates by waggling bits of wire next to damn great magnets.

Look at the £600 price range and there's no shortage of excellent cartridges to choose from. Topping the list are the Lyra Lydian Beta, the ClearAudio Sigma and the absolute bargain Dynavector DV17D2 (a real contender, especially at its £450 price-tag!). However, there is an alternative. And, shock horror, it's a moving magnet. In fact, it's related to the last line of real alternatives, the Moving Iron designs of Joe Grado. In fact it looks just like a Grado. Not the current coffin shaped wooden bodied range, but the older plastic bodied models of yore. And

like them, it's a Moving Iron design. Moving Iron? The greatest single advantage enjoyed by moving coils is the low mass of their coil assemblies relative to the heavy magnets joined to the cantilevers of the opposition. Moving Iron (or Magnetic Flux) cartridges are a refinement on the moving magnet theme, in which both the magnet and coils are fixed, the field being interrupted by a small soft-iron collar on the end of the cantilever. This assembly is lighter than a magnet, although not as light as coils.



It was invented by Grado, who continue using it to this day. The fact that they also hold patents on the moving-coil principle is perhaps worthy of reflection.

Our Grado look-alike goes under the confident moniker of the Music Maker and is supplied by the Cartridge Man, purveyor of fine analogue accessories and a rather excellent

stylus re-tipping service. Its familial resemblance is no accident as the structural mouldings and some internal parts are in fact produced by Grado to the Cartridge Man's specification. However, the all important cantilever and complex line contact tip are all his own work. One important difference is that the stylus assembly is no longer removable. One thing that (unfortunately) remains the same is the minute black on black mouldings for channel identification. Colour code the pins, please!! The only other foible is the necessity for nuts and bolts to fix it to the headshell. Tapped cartridge bodies are a real source of joy, don't you find?

With the beast installed and aligned, particularly easy due to the unfashionably long cantilever, you'll need to fine tune the tracking force to the specified 1.58g. Well, what

do you expect when the man makes a supremely accurate Digital Stylus Balance. VTA wants to be level, or possibly just a hair down at the tail, depending on the balance of your system, but what makes a much greater difference is the capacitive loading you apply. Unusually these days, the Pass Aleph-Ono allows for such adjustments and I found that a setting of 100pf gave a far more even balance than the slightly ragged top end experienced at 400pf. Watch ▶

► out for heavy arm leads, or standard interconnects pressed into service. I ran the Music Maker in three different arms: an SME 309, a Morch DP6 with the yellow arm-tube and the ClearAudio/Souther TQI. Slightly against expectations it was in the latter that it really thrived, the extra phase coherence and timing integrity of the linear tracking tonearm proving the perfect complement to the cartridge's energetic performance. Apparently, the design was inspired by the Grado Signature range, and I have very fond memories of both an 8 and 10, so we were definitely off to a good start.

This cartridge is all about substance and energy. The first thing you'll notice is the solidity and presence it has compared to almost all moving-coil cartridges. There's a sense of unstoppable momentum to music, a sure footed solidity to instruments which comes in part from the excellent tracking (despite the low downforce), and in part from the healthy output. The Music Maker enjoys between ten and twenty times the output of most moving-coils, which makes for a pretty robust signal. Fed directly into the MM input you also dispense with the extra gain and circuitry that comes from the MC stage, and in a lot of cases, the expense too. For anyone using a valve pre-amp like a Conrad-Johnson or early ARC, this cartridge is mana from heaven. Likewise anybody with a mid-range solid-state integrated amp where the MM stage normally shows a clean pair of heels to a poorly executed MC stage. Why? Because MC stages are difficult and costly to get right at the best of times. Working with valves it's near to impossible because of the signal and noise levels involved, while designers faced with a tight budget in the highly competitive solid-state integrated market would rather spend the money where they know it will get used.

The downside is, that compared to

top-flight coils, the Music Maker lacks a degree of apparent focus and transparency. I use the term 'apparent' because this is where we enter the war-zone between consensus and the last advocates of moving-magnet type technology. These inhabitants of the last analogue Alamo point out, with some justification, that moving-coil cartridges suffer from a generic thinness and rising high treble. This is down to the difficulty of adequately amplifying their minute output, and the difficulty of controlling their tip resonance. On top of this, anybody who has ever heard a Dynavector XXI with its switchable flux-dumper both in and out of circuit will know that this clever piece of technology, which helps ensure linear flux density within a moving-coil cartridge's magnetic field, has a profound effect on its sound. Sans damper, the top-end is quick, peaky, etched and splashy. Flick the switch and everything is much better behaved, and above all, more natural. And only Dynavector coils use this technology.

In other words, the pared away tonality and spot-lit soundstage of the genus moving-coil is an aberration from reality. It might be very nice but it is still an aberration – and therefore has no place in hi-fi reproduction. So say the Iron Brigade.

I wouldn't go that far. I'd say the differences are rather like the ones between electrostatic and dynamic speaker systems. As a result we tend to shape a system to match our preferences – and the transducers play a big part in that. The Music Maker is a reassuringly solid and tonally very well behaved cartridge. My ClearAudio Accurate opens up vistas of space in comparison, and costs nearly six times the price! The Lydian Beta or DV17D2 will sound quicker, a little sharper if you like, but neither has the Music Maker's boundless enthusiasm for music. Play a string quartet and you revel

in the rich solidity of its string tone; play some Basie and you'll love its bounce and dynamic wallop. Well recorded drums have a depth and driving power which combine with the tactile bass guitar to give rhythm sections new authority and stature. It's this drive and energy which I find diluted in the latest Grados, although I haven't heard the top rated low-output version.

This is not a product to list under hi-fi spectacular. The Music Maker doesn't give you a fancy box or fancy bodywork. You can buy something that looks damned nearly identical for a fraction of its price. But then it's not a trophy product for the fashion conscious. It's a carefully considered attempt to supply the most natural possible performance for a reasonable price. Being used to hearing vastly expensive moving coils in a system tailored to their balance, the Music Maker never left me feeling short-changed. I was too busy enjoying its life and vitality. Never was a product so aptly named; never was an alternative so welcome. ►+

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Cartridge Type	Moving Iron
Cartridge Weight	6g
Compliance	<30cu
Output	4.0mV
Cantilever	Duralumin
Stylus	Extended Line
	Contact
Tracking Force	1.58g
Price	£575.00

Manufacturer

The Cartridge Man
88 Southbridge Rd
Croydon
Surrey
CR0-1AF
United Kingdom
Tel/Fax: (44)(0)208-688-6565

The Einstein Tubaphon TU3 M-C Phono Cartridge

by Chris Binns

"How much?!" . . . Closely followed by several expletives . . . That's the phrase most often used by people when you tell them the price of a good pick-up cartridge. Assuming, of course, that they are not into long playing records and live in the digital age.

A CD player or an amplifier at sixteen hundred pounds can at least seem to represent some obvious, concrete value for money, in that there is something to show for it; but a pick-up cartridge? Oh, and of course you need a turntable and arm as well.

To make matters worse, the Tubaphon TU3 doesn't even look like a marvel of costly miniature engineering, as it has no body as such and bears more resemblance to a surgical implant for Robocop than a refined transducer for extracting music from records. Emanating from Germany (where else with a name like that?) the engineering is based on an EMT design, a company which have long been associated with broadcast technology and has produced cartridges and transcription units for years.

There are five models in total in the Tubaphon range based around variations on the TU2 and TU3, the TU2 with fine line stylus, the TU2S with van den Hul tip, and then the TU2 black,

which is a special model without loading components. The TU3 is the same basic cartridge but with selected windings and a boron cantilever. Available in two versions, one with the fine line stylus and the other with a rather special (and more expensive)



sapphire stylus, which could prove interesting, as traditionally, sapphire tips wore more quickly than their diamond brethren. To further complicate the issue, the range is available with either a conventional pin arrangement on the back of the cartridge, or flying leads terminated in receptacles for direct connection to the pins in a headshell, as in the Linn or SME designs for example.

Construction of the device is what you would call 'open' or nude; there is no casework to speak of, making handling right out of the box a delicate affair. The actual generator system is fixed directly to the aluminium chassis, and consists of a soft iron magnet assembly with a cross coil copper

wound structure, much in the fashion of the legendary Ortofon SPU. Unusually the chassis is die cast rather than milled.

The manufacturer claims that sonic benefits arise from this approach, presumably as a result of the reduced stress on the crystalline structure of the metal. One disadvantage of this is that the paint does not adhere to it well and tends to fall away as soon as you screw the cartridge in. The chassis is not tapped, so nuts are necessary, presenting another hazard due to the perilously strong magnetic field around that area, so be wary with tools and I would strongly recommend non magnetic mounting hardware. The sample I had for review was the TU-3 with the fine line stylus.

Tracking force is a hefty 2.3 grams, which might be a source of some concern for those with treasured archive material or who are



▶ paranoid about record wear. In my experience, it is far more important that a cartridge is tracking securely rather than the ultimate stylus pressure. Damn it, I have records that have survived school common rooms, student parties and a Decca London gold with no obvious signs of wear. The output of this particular TU-3 is specified as 0.21 mV, which is seriously low. I can't credit this figure as I'm getting way more level than that, so gain shouldn't be a problem. The loading is specified at 100 ohms.

Almost straight from the box the TU3 excelled itself by sounding confident and sure footed even before I had done any running in or fine adjustment.

Cartridges, much like loudspeakers, are electromechanical devices with moving parts held by some form of suspension; the compliance of which will change after some use. As a consequence I would expect running in to be crucial and, as a result, fine adjustments normally have to wait. Strangely enough, unlike most other cartridges I have tried, the Tubaphon didn't actually change that much during running in. Having settled with the tracking weight at about 2.5 grams and the VTA slightly tail down, further adjustment yielded only minor changes, mostly with the tonality. This suited me just fine, as without spilling all the beans, I had one of those 'can it get any better?' type experiences quite early on, and was more than happy to leave things well alone.

The mechanical adjustments out of the way, I played with the electrical loading of the cartridge. The recommended 100 ohms sounded just fine but in my system I found an optimum value of 470, which to my ears yielded a little more air in the midrange without compromising the authority of the sound. And there was real authority. It started at the bottom by laying the foundations in such a

fashion that everything else sat perfectly on top. The bass had just the right amount of attack and weight but without arriving in disjointed slabs, thus maintaining integration with everything else. The midrange had a similar quality to it whereby snare drums came across with an incisive snap, creating tremendous impact, but there was also great space and delicacy there as well. The top end was fast and exciting but by no means bright or abrasive; maybe it doesn't quite have the extension of say a Lyra which can sometimes convey the impression of no upper limit, but what is there was full bodied with plenty of detail, and very, very natural.


The TU3 is not perhaps the most neutral cartridge I have used, I think probably one of the top end Ortofons might claim that accolade. By comparison, the character of the Tubaphon tends toward full bodied in the midrange. Acoustic instruments were portrayed with a solid and palpable quality that was totally convincing, but to focus on this would be doing it an injustice. The strength of the TU3 lay in the coherence of the sound it produced and I found it totally involving whatever the material.

Musical examples . . . where do I begin? I listened to a lot of music with the Tubaphon and sometimes felt like I was feeding an addiction, but here are a few memorable highlights. Vaughan Williams' *Pastoral symphony* – the second movement begins with a romantic horn solo after which the strings come in with the melody – the TU3 provided the most convincing detail of the instruments while conveying the subdued atmosphere beautifully. Haunting. So much so, that I had to play the whole thing from beginning to end.

Talk Talk – *The colour of spring* – power, emotion, and a couple of the most spine tingling guitar solo's ever. What the TU3 did here was propel the music along with such dynamics that

the result was awesome. I am not embarrassed to admit that on several early mornings I played a couple of tracks very loudly before I went to work. You can imagine how popular that made me.

Debussy – *Preludes*. An EMI recording with a young pianist, Yuri Egorov. There have been many great renditions of Debussy's piano works but this performance manages both supreme sensitivity and fiery passion where required. That's exactly what the Tubaphon did while reproducing it, with an even piano sound from top to bottom.

The conclusion? You probably don't need one by now, but just in case you do, I will sum up my feelings for the Tubaphon TU3. It sometimes comes as a complete blow round the head just how much difference the cartridge can make to a record playing system; the TU3 knocked me to the floor. It is the most enjoyable cartridge I have used to date. If you value vinyl replay to the extent of spending this sort of money on a cartridge, and have the turntable and arm to accommodate it I think the Tubaphon is a bargain – it's that good. I want one. Badly. 

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Cartridge type:	Moving coil
Cantilever material:	Boron
Stylus type:	Fine line
Output voltage:	210 μ V
Recommended loading:	100 ohms
Tracking force:	2 – 3 grams
Price:	£1600

Distributor

Midland Audio Exchange
Tel/Fax. (44)(0)1562-822236
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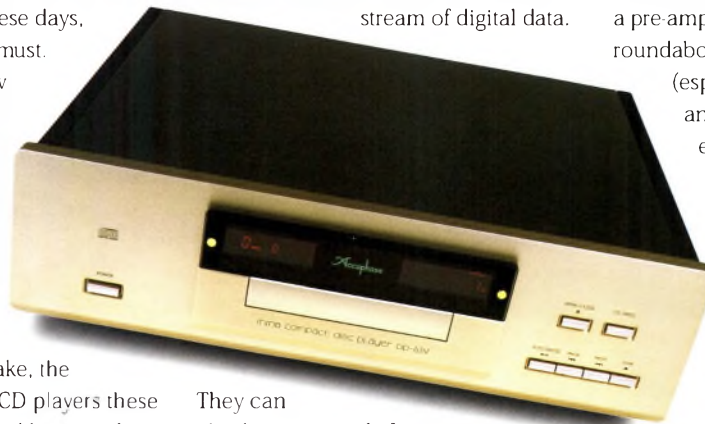
by Chris Thomas

Despite the hype, did anyone really believe that Compact Disc was going to offer anything approaching "perfect" sound quality? It has only been the last half-dozen years that has seen CD achieve anything like sonic parity with analogue, and there are still plenty of people who believe that for sheer musical enjoyment a turntable tramples the silver disc firmly underfoot. But with the almost total unavailability of regular new vinyl and the appalling quality of the recycled bin-liners they seem to use to make records these days, a CD player remains a must.

At least, it is until a new format or a variation on an existing one gains enough momentum to have record company bosses salivating over another back catalogue bonanza.

But, make no mistake, the quality available from CD players these days is getting better and better right across the board. Those serious enough about their music will realise that this is quite easily the sort of money a complete top-quality record player can cost, so there are plenty of people around who are prepared to spend this kind of cash to scale the heights of digital nirvana. The problem is that these devices have as much variability sound-wise as their analogue counterparts, and finding the right player still involves booking a demonstration, taking a few discs along and trusting in the competence of the dealer to extract the best

sound from each machine. This is not so straightforward as it sounds. CD players, as a breed, are no more perfect than record players. But their biggest differences are perhaps not to be found in the areas of timing and pitch which plague turntables, but in the flavour and shape of their presentation, and the very different way they deal with dynamics. Plus of course they must not sound like they're doing what they're doing, which is reconstructing music from a stream of digital data.



They can also be notoriously fussy when it comes to power-up times and, like turntables, very responsive to the surface they are mounted on.

Accuphase have been making expensive electronics for as long as I can remember and though they have never had an enormous following in this country they are a company which have always commanded respect. Mention Accuphase products and someone will always bring up their bombproof build quality and superlative finish, though few seem to have actually heard much of the equipment. We thought it was about

time we dipped into the Accuphase catalogue and we emerged with a very interesting single-box CD player called the DP-65V. In fact it is a lot more than just a CD player and can be configured as a transport, separate processor or, with certain limitations, a preamplifier. In much the same way as the excellent Mark Levinson No39, the DP-65V offers control of the output level through balanced or single ended connection, which can be used to drive a power amplifier directly without the need for a pre-amp. There are swings and roundabouts to this approach

(especially if you still use vinyl), and while you gain by eliminating the pre-amp's circuitry, you risk losing its clout and solidity. It's all down to the care with which it's implemented. Where the No39 incorporates an analogue volume control which can be switched out of circuit completely, leaving a line level output, the

attenuator used in the Accuphase works in the digital domain and is always operational (similar to the one in the Wadia 860x). At the rear are two expansion bays and these can be retro-fitted with a number of different input/output cards expanding the units versatility somewhat. I recently heard that there is even a pair of option boards available to load a moving coil cartridge. In fact, the Accuphase is conceptually closer to the Wadia machine than anything else, acting as a combined CD player and control ▶

▶ unit. It may lack the 860's versatility and future proofing, but it also loses half of its price tag along the way.

So the DP-65V is a versatile machine, and a beautifully made one at that. Take a peek inside. You will seldom see any audio component laid out and built to this quality. The large gold anodised front panel is a model of both tranquillity and simplicity, with only the transport controls and CD/Processor switching included. The slide-out disc tray closes with the finality of a Mercedes door, and the twin displays glow a subdued orange either side of the illuminated blue Accuphase logo. To add a bit of Ying and Yang to the equation the calm of the machine is counterbalanced by the remote control, which has a touch of chaos about it. This unimpressive unit is either not big enough or has too many buttons (34 in all), I'm not sure which. Problem is, all the buttons are exactly the same size, and that size is small. It has, in all fairness, to cope with a number of features including a comprehensive indexing system, repeat plays of selected parts of the disc, input selection, output level etc. But why can't the major transport controls, those you use all the time, be larger, mounted separately from the other function buttons and laid out in a more intuitive fashion? It is somewhat surprising that the remote seems such an afterthought as the simple functionality of the machine is so well thought out, the one exception being that the track number display is far too small to read from across a reasonable sized room, day or night. I am quite content not to be able to read the timer readouts, but the track number itself should always be legible,



and that on the Accuphase isn't. It could do with being three times its present size.

Slotting the machine into my home system as a straight replacement for my Naim CDS11 it was apparent from the opening chords of Jeff Beck's *Who Else!* CD (Epic 493042 2) that the 65V was going to offer a different view of the world. Where the Naim pushes the lead instrument into the room and brings you face to face with the motion of the music the Accuphase is a more restrained act altogether. It offers a more multi-layered and almost introspective view of the recording that takes a bit of getting used to. A bit like moving from a front row seat to one about 15 rows back. Always evident though is a noticeably broad bandwidth and that feeling of control, detail, stability and weight that makes it easy to recognise that you are listening to an expensive CD player. Add an almost arrogant sense of ease and superb clarity to the equation and you are getting close to what the 65V is all about. This machine is nigh unflappable, regardless of what you are asking it to play. It breezes through disc after disc of wildly varying music of many different origins and vastly differing instrumentation without showing any particular preferences. Back to Jeff Beck and the track entitled 'Hip-Notica', a track built around a "feel" created by the drum rhythms and specifically where the snare beat is dropped in. Put the beat in the more obvious spot and you change the whole nature of the track. Where it sits should make the song sit up and

give the rhythm and the melody an offset point. Somehow the Accuphase just seems to lack that degree of bounce and rhythmic edge that drives the music along, the snare push never really leaps out and grabs you, sucking you into the momentum. If you search for the reason why, it becomes difficult to pinpoint exactly what is happening here. The 65V has such an excellent technical performance but sometimes, not always, you are just longing for that extra sense of communication from the music that allows that rare but addictive sense of involvement and insight.

George Duke's latest offering *After Hours* (WB 47079 2) contains 11 mood pieces, sparingly arranged and recorded with just a sprinkling of that slick ambient gloss so unique to American multi-track studios. The 65V revelled in this album. Its extraordinary ability to superimpose layer after layer of recorded information one upon the other allows your ear virtually unlimited access to the instruments because there is so much uncrowded space and such a black silence between them. The Fender Rhodes and



Wurlitzer are almost vintage by electric piano standards and they feature on much of the album as close-miked lead instruments. I really like the intimacy of the Fender Rhodes and the Accuphase captures the unique features of its character. That extraordinary percussive "glop" to the attack of each note and that chiming, shimmering sustain with its overall breathy quality. It's always a good sign when a piece of audio sheds new light on a piece of music or even just opens your ears to some other possibilities within the song. The 65V's expansive perspectives allows you to actually sit and delaminate the recording if that's your thing, peeling layer after layer of the studio process ▶

▶ away all the way to the rhythm track. It shows *After Hours* to be a far more involved and dense album than it first appears, with numerous tiny musical embellishments from percussion to piano chord inversions that run just under the main body of the compositions. These shadow tracks are often used for texture or filling to increase the body of the sound but unravelling them is fun as they give up nuggets of truth about how the track is built.

If I have a criticism of the 65V it would be that the music sometimes doesn't have quite the rhythmic liquidity that it should. Timing wise it is excellent but on Fourplay's *4* (WB 46921 2) and the track 'Rio Rush', drummer Harvey Mason sits the whole number on the bass drum which, at the same time as having an ongoing conversation with the bass, is always pushing, pushing. And though the Accuphase has startling clarity and a sense of precision, it never quite managed to really convey the sheer drive, power and anticipation of the piece in quite the same way as I am used to. This is not a speed thing at all, more

a question of emphasis. It certainly never seemed as marked once I switched from the JM Labs Mini-Utopia to the Mezzo Utopia with its closer, more intimate nature and much more powerful delivery. And to be fair to the Accuphase, it shares these characteristics with any number of players on the market. It is also, like other players, quite responsive to where it is sited. For the first couple of weeks I was using the 65V on a metal equipment rack with glass shelves and it suffered the "glare" that glass sometimes brings. So I substituted it for

a marble shelf and got some decent all-round improvements, but nothing earth shattering. It was when I put it on a three-legged aluminium and MDF unit from Aavik that it began to really sing. The bass, always good on the Accuphase, shed a bit of weight but added a lot of speed. It was now cleaner, better delineated and was enjoying far more dynamic freedom. In fact the whole sound had much more pleasing air of life and vitality about it. I've been around too long to draw any hard and fast conclusions in terms of definitive recommendations. Different systems and tastes are the variants in the equation here. Experiment for yourselves.

The Accuphase DP-65V costs £3995 which, when you consider its overall qualities is quite reasonable. Very few players have the combination of this level of build and sound quality, and the long and trouble free life

that goes with them. Although

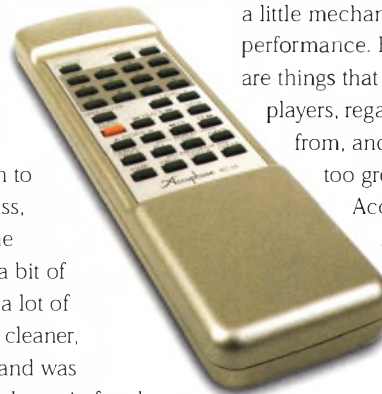
I have heard better sounding CD players, they have all been more expensive.

It has a conservative nature to its sound that I could describe

as being "safe" though others might well see it as neutrality. I would not necessarily argue with that view, but I would say that it has as distinct a flavour, in its own way, as either the Naim CDS11 or the Mark Levinson N0 39, and these are two of the best players I have heard. It can sound slightly impersonal and even a little

matter-of-fact at times, and it certainly leans towards being a mite processed in its overall presentation and a little mechanical in its rhythmic performance. But, I say again, these are things that the vast majority of CD players, regardless of price, suffer from, and shouldn't be taken as too great a criticism.

Accuphase should do something about that remote-control unit though, as it really has no place being supplied with a player of this class or price. I think the 65V will find a broad appeal, and should be heard by anyone in the market for a player in this price range, especially if you find the digital control functions appealing. And don't forget there are several other single and twin box players in the Accuphase catalogue, plus a great tuner. But that's for another review.



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Digital Filter	20-bit, 8 times over-sampling
Digital Inputs	1 x Optical 1 x Coaxial
Digital Outputs	1 x Optical 1 x Coaxial
Analogue Outputs	1 pair unbalanced (RCA) 1 pair balanced (XLR)
(Plus optional in and outputs – See text.)	
Output Voltage	Variable - max. 2.5 volts (RCA and XLR)
Dimensions (HxWxD)	150 x 475 x 393 mm
Weight	39 lbs.
Price	£3995

Distributor

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The Einstein Rohren CD Player

by Chris Binns

Typical. It's been around ten years since I last had this dilemma, and it used to make me uncomfortable then, but now . . . let me just say that it's been compounded by having to review a number of tasty phono cartridges – and the Einstein cd player. In the same issue for God's sake. Why am I whinging? Because when I went into a music shop in Bristol to get a copy of an eagerly awaited new album, the helpful man behind the counter casually remarked that they also had it on vinyl. I say helpful, but I'm sure he had no idea of the effect that his words had on me – I was in a state of apoplexy all the way home. Several times I nearly swung the car around to exchange the CD I had purchased for the lavishly packaged double LP.

Why was I so irritated? Like many people (JMH included, judging by the content of his column in the last issue) I have reached a sort of stalemate situation in the balance between CD and vinyl in my music collection. Anyone who wanted to know about my musical tastes for the last decade would be far better off looking at my CD collection than anything else. Sure, I've been making the most of the massive amounts of second-hand vinyl around, and thoroughly enjoying it. But I had long ago resigned myself to the fact that to carry on buying music I

would (somewhat grudgingly) have to use compact disc. Apart from anything else, the advent of companies such as Naxos has considerably brightened the horizon in terms of lowering the price of discs, and they've recorded a lot of great music, which has been a real encouragement.



So, much as I lament not being able to buy the music I want (readily) on vinyl, and yes, all things being equal I still think it sounds ultimately more satisfying, I have got used to buying music on CD and enjoying it. My system is now fairly well balanced between the two formats, with almost equal attention divided between them. To be offered a choice of format with a new recording completely threw me . . . and bearing in mind what I have just said it would seem surprising that I opted for the CD. But hey! I had a disc player whose name is subtitled "the last record player" at home.

Presumably this is alluding to it having an analogue-esque performance, but it sounds a bit foreboding to me because a) it is definitely not a record player and, b) the marketplace for turntables

is, to the best of my knowledge, alive and kicking. Either way, the Einstein is something of a statement, both visually and in its design concept.

Right out of the box (actually including the box; the packing crate is more like a relic from the Titanic, complete with hinges and latches – a real little treasure chest) this CD player is different. Visually striking, the Einstein is a fairly large and very solid machine. The metal work and layout is reminiscent of traditional valve equipment, which is hardly surprising as

Einstein also manufacture tube pre and power amps. This unit sports no fewer than four ECC88/6DJ8 valves at the rear of the chassis, and in between the two pairs sits a chromed cap concealing a toroidal transformer. Forward of these is the (top loading) CD compartment; the substantial hinged lid opens to reveal the mechanism and a magnetic puck which has to be placed on top of the CD. It's very magnetic, and somewhat difficult to use because of it – as soon as you get near the disc it tends to be ferociously grabbed, but not always in the right place, making disc loading a bit fiddly . . . particularly if you've been at the scotch.

The front panel is something of a dichotomy, managing to seem simultaneously austere and slightly art nouveau decadent. It's definitely striking, and likely to polarise



▶ opinion. Personally the jury's still out. One by product of the curved front panel is an extremely deep display window, which gives a very narrow viewing, and more importantly, remote operation angle. The large knobs are the only manual controls, and have a stiff and rather indistinct action. I felt like I was going to break them, and their whole feel should be a lot more positive. The end result was a total reliance on the comprehensive remote control, which includes functions for the matching pre-amp, hence the comments about the narrow reading angle. The handset itself is a neat and well laid out unit, but no less prone to getting lost for all that.

Rear panel connections are much as you would expect, with high quality balanced and unbalanced connections available, and a co-axial digital output. Mains connection is standard IEC and the power switch is at the back indicating a preference for being left on, which is what I did.

So, what's with the valves? I haven't got a clue, as the information supplied with the player is in German and I'm not going to embarrass myself by giving you my interpretation of it. The four valves are mounted on a separate isolation board to minimise structure borne vibration, and constitute a properly engineered analogue output stage. These are not just a token addition, an idea that some other manufacturers have been seen to employ. Stuff a valve in there and it's bound to sound analogue isn't it? Yeah, right. The player offers a low output impedance of 50 ohms, and there are separate mains transformers for the analogue and digital circuitry. The only other technical observation I could make is the choice of laser assembly – a Sony type common to

many budget CD players. If that coloured my judgement I couldn't have been more wrong.

Observing the usual running-in etiquette, I installed the Einstein intomy system and left it playing for a while to settle down. Signal connections were made utilising the unbalanced outputs, as I don't at the moment have the facility for balanced operation, and, I'm still not convinced that it is always superior over conventional connection. My first listening session was definitely not review orientated: I was tired and not in the mood to be analytical. I just wanted to listen to some music. If there is anybody out there who believes that music cannot be therapeutic, you should see me before and after listening to certain pieces; on this occasion I knew



exactly what I wanted to hear to calm a rather anxious mood, and it did, very successfully. To the extent that I was still listening four hours later, at five in the morning – a feat not normally managed without some recourse to vinyl. I eventually went to

bed suitably impressed by what the Einstein had just done, and made a mental note to do some detailed evaluation the next day.

As it turned out, it was several days before I had the opportunity to listen to the system again.

As I had a knowledgeable friend staying who was quite

happy to indulge in a bit of a session; we stocked the fridge with beer, lit the fire and settled down for an enjoyable evening. Apart from anything else, I was eager to get a second opinion. Controls aside, the only other problem I encountered was that the machine seemed to be very unforgiving of less than perfect discs.

Maybe I have been lucky so far, but I have never had a problem playing any of my discs, until it came to using the Einstein. On a couple of occasions the music was marred with an irritating ticking, and once it ploughed through a whole symphony in an impressive 35 seconds, producing the most hideous noise as it did so. Alarmed, I would inspect the disc to find a tiny amount of muck on it, but obviously enough to upset the mechanism; this would seem to be a sensitive player. I wonder whether the strength of the magnet in the puck, so strong as to make careful placement difficult, might be contributing.

So far, my experience with CD players has tended to divide them ▶

► in to two camps. On the one hand, you have the highly dynamic, in your face type of player, where music is presented in an extremely bold fashion, and instruments such as snare drums leap out of the loudspeakers with an incisive snap. The other type comes with the more laid back approach where everything is relaxed and easy going, with great depth and rather more atmosphere. The former lends urgency to anything vaguely rock and pop orientated, but can make more gentle music, for example a string quartet, a frustratingly muscle bound experience, making the dynamics of the musical performance seem totally artificial and unnatural. The reverse is true of the second type. Music which requires a degree of rhythmic snap to it can sound dead and lacklustre, whereas orchestral music acquires a scale and grace that makes for a much more satisfying and believable experience. The effect of these different approaches was so distinct that at one point, auditioning a couple of CD players for personal use, I seriously felt that only by having both could I do justice to the entire musical repertoire.

The Einstein seemed to tread the tightrope between these two extremes, getting the balance just right. It portrayed rock music with pace and power; drums and bass were suitably impressive where necessary, while individual instruments and voices had a convincing sense of presence, air and clarity about them. Wheel on a full orchestra and this translated into real authority, while solo instruments had a wonderfully wholesome quality, especially Cello. Vaughan Williams overture *The Poisoned Kiss* on Chandos is a rich and evocative recording, and I felt that the Einstein got right to the heart of the interpretation. The image didn't

have the depth that, say the Meridian 508 can exhibit, but nor did it have the slightly vague presentation that sometimes haunts that player. A little less romantic? Possibly. But the compensation was best described by a friend of mine who, after listening to both these machines hit the nail squarely on the head by describing the Einstein as fundamentally more organic.

What the Einstein provided was access to the music being played. Often a weakness with CD, musical communication is right to the



fore with this player.

On several occasions I found myself listening to tracks that I'd previously filed under uninteresting. Take the music of Sir Arthur Bliss – some of it I find engaging, and some a little too much like hard work. With the Einstein I found myself listening to pieces that had previously considered inaccessible.

Other types of music benefited in the same way. The *Paris Concert* by Keith Jarrett is a solo recording up to ECM's normal high standards, marred only by the character of the piano – a typical Yamaha, it's rather thin sounding compared to a Steinway. (They've always been the artist's preference, right back to the days of the *Cologne concert* in the late 70s.) However, the Einstein made the most of this material, rendering the performance with the utmost

emotion, and again navigating through the 'difficult bits' which normally succumb to the skip button.

Having been forced in the past to choose between players from fundamentally different camps, I have to say that the Einstein is the most complete player that I've ever lived with. As such, it both provides a more satisfying experience from CD, and a possible solution for those who find it wanting compared to LP. Whether it does so by clever manipulation or genuine advancement of the technology remains to be seen. That question can only be answered with longer exposure to the product, and more technical information, but that doesn't diminish the Einstein's achievement. At this rate I can stop agonising over the competing formats and simply worry about the music. Maybe there's something in that "last record player" appellation. The Einstein may not sound like a turntable, but it's a strong enough performer to stand beside one. ►+

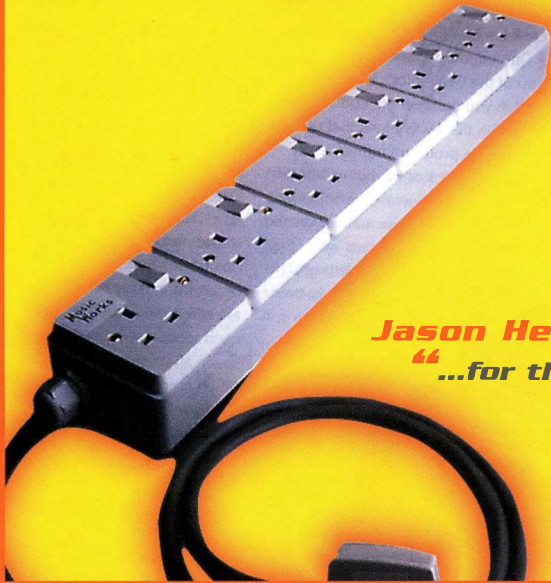
TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Mechanism:	Sony top loading
Outputs:	1 pair unbalanced (RCA) 1 pair balanced (XLR) 1 digital (RCA)
Output level:	2 Volts
Dimensions (WxHxD):	430 x 140 x 400 mm
Weight:	10.5 kg
Price:	£2,700

Distributor

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Aavik ZX-4 Titanium Rack

by Rcy Gregory

There I was, just getting used to the very real benefits of suspended equipment racks (a la Seismic Stand), and even coming to terms with the cost (which is generally of the four figure variety), when along comes the inimitable Lars Kristensen who gleefully kicks over the apple cart. Lars you see, lives a double life. As Dr Jekyll (or Mr Hyde, if you manufacture cables) he is Maestro Lars, Nordost's king of the comparative cable dem, whilst his alter ego, plain Lars, designs and manufactures the rather fine Aavik audio furniture in Denmark. But part of the Aavik furniture line consists of those excellent little Pulsar Points, aluminium isolation feet which cost £50 for four. Unless that is, you feel like lashing out £300 for a set in solid titanium. And yes, as reported in Issue 2, the titanium variety sound richer, more dynamic and altogether more solid than the aluminium ones.

Here we go again, I can hear you thinking. Fine, they might sound a bit better in titanium, but six times the price? Well let's start by looking at another industry that uses these materials. The cheapest bicycle frames are made of steel, and a really good, mass-produced example can be had for around £250. A similar, top of the line mainstream aluminium frame, built from exotic alloy, will set you back about £500. Titanium frames start at nearly a grand for plain straight gauge pipes, with more exotic swaged

or butted constructions coming in at over 2K! Limited production runs play their part, but what really affects the price is not, as most people assume, the rarity of the material (quite a bit of Russia and about half of Western Australia are made out of it).



but the difficulty of machining and welding it. Now consider how simple a bicycle frame is, and the fact that titanium tube is relatively easy to come by, and you'll quickly conclude just what a cast-iron bitch this material is to work with. And it's the machining that really takes the biscuit. Titanium destroys cutting heads. Which is why shaping Pulsar Points from solid billet is a costly and time consuming business. In fact, only a

certified audio lunatic would try it. But that's Lars . . .

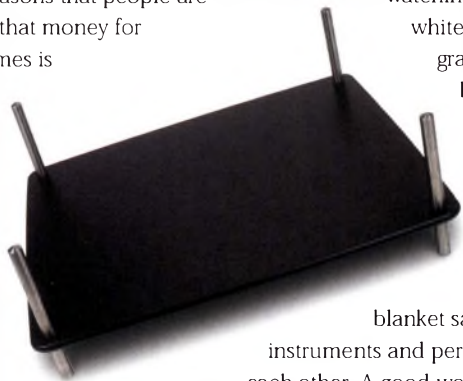
So, I guess there was a certain inevitability to what came next. With that beady eyed, maniacal grin plastered all over his face (he was on the phone but I could just hear it was there), the Danish demon calmly announced that he was building titanium racks. And not just the hardware (feet and fixings), but whole racks with solid titanium uprights. The truly mad hold a certain fascination, so who am I to fight it. Sure Lars, you can bring me one of your racks to play with. I wish he hadn't!

Aavik's ZX series racks are extraordinarily simple in design. Large, chamfered MDF shelves are stacked up using solid metal spacers, made from aluminium or, now, titanium. These spacers come in two parts which thread together through a hole in the shelf, sticking out about 6.5cm below and 14.5cm above each surface, to form a solid rod. The top surface of each rod is machined into a shallow cone. The bottom has a corresponding, but slightly shallower cup, thus ensuring point contact when the shelves are stacked. The bottom centimetre or so is in the form of a beautifully executed threaded insert, which allows for levelling and the elimination of any rocking. To assemble the rack you simply



▶ place the large conical feet on the floor and stack the shelves on top (the top surface has finished caps instead of extensions). Nothing could be simpler, and speaking as somebody who spends too much of his time with his head shoved behind a hi-fi rack, system set-up is a joy; place a layer; load on the equipment; connect the cables; place the next layer. This is great. The bad news – no, make that really bad news, is the price – £900 a shelf! This is serious dosh, and absolutely not for the man in the street. But what this is about is investigating the influence of support on hi-fi equipment, so selflessly, and in the name of sonic progress, I forced myself to continue.

And now for the first surprise. With the rack fully laden, push the front corner horizontally and the whole structure will rock back a couple of inches. Not the brick on a cushion of jelly wobble of an air suspended rack, but a flexible, twisting motion. This rack may be built with solid legs, but rigid it isn't. Hardly surprising when you consider that one of the reasons that people are willing to pay all that money for titanium bike frames is that they are so comfortable! If you are expecting something with the structural characteristics of a granite block then think again. Of course, this isn't necessarily an issue unless you intend to put a turntable on the top shelf. That will depend on the deck, it's suspension and how steady your hands are.



I didn't have too much trouble with either the ClearAudio Reference or the Clearlight Recovery, but anything with a nervous disposition (like an LP12 or Pink) is best avoided, as is hand cueing!

Moving the system from a respected steel rack to the Aavik titanium rack was a salutary experience. No great surprise, given my growing regard for wooden or non-ferrous structures, but I wasn't ready for the magnitude of the change.

And bear in mind that most systems are happily(?) sat on steel structures. Compared to the lightweight steel rack, music from the Aavik blossomed into an explosion of colour and energy. Listening with the ZX makes you realise just how compressed and flat the colour balance of most steel furniture is. It's not exactly like

watching black and white, more that grainy, washed out blur that I associate with childhood Wimbledon finals. It's flat and dull, with a

blanket sameness that lets instruments and performers run into each other. A good wooden rack like the RDC goes a long way to sorting this out, painting with bolder colours and separating in time and space. But even that doesn't prepare you for the sheer life and vibrance, the tumbling joyous

energy that pours forth from the Aavik rack. The transformation in dynamic range is simply staggering.

More hype from a jaded hack looking to fill pages? Consider this. The arrival of the ZX rack coincided with the Morgan Audio components reviewed in this issue. Lars is itching to do his thing, so I set him running with the baby Morgan system (total cost, including an extra power-amp, under £2500). He starts off with the separates sat on the Titanium rack, all except the CD player which is sat on an aluminium top section. We work our way up through the Nordost cable range, complete with updated versions of several older designs, and by now the assembled throng is getting seriously impressed by the hidden

depths contained in these mid price electronics. We get so excited with the cables that we've forgotten all about the rack. Until that is, Lars (with that beady eyed,



maniacal grin) swaps the aluminium top shelf under the CD for the titanium version. The sudden leap in dynamic wallop, weight and sheer presence is literally unbelievable. We have to do the swap again before it really begins to sink in. Poor old Graham from Morgan Audio nearly falls off the sofa. He's in shell-shock. He's NEVER heard his babies sound like THIS!! We are listening to a seriously impressive (and expensive) system in which the electronics account for a little over £2K – and that includes a tuner! Go figure.

And this is a far from isolated example. It doesn't matter what you put on the rack, the benefits are always the same. Absolute presence and authority, combined with a natural eruption of instrumental tone. In the same way ▶

▶ that the titanium Pulsar Points reveal whole layers of harmonic and micro-dynamic information, the titanium rack puts flesh on the musical bones. But it's real flesh with texture and shape, sinews, pores and the odd blemish, and all the more human as a result. Drums become complex beasts, with a skin and body (and sometimes a sandbag), and a voice rather than just a dull thud. Vocalists become more than just a voice, but a character, and an amalgam of experiences, bitter and sweet, which have led them to where they are. Strings attack and buzz, and woodwinds breath. And music becomes a living, pulsing, organic thing. Angry or sad; happy, funny or mellow; grand, pompous or awe-inspiring; maybe just down-right dirty.

Johanna Martzy used to break fiddles, such was the power of her bowing. With the Pass Aleph-P and Ono on the Aavik, along with the JA30s, you can really begin to appreciate that power in the Coup d'Archet *Kreutzer Sonata*. From the violent pizzicato of the opening movement right through to the closing notes of the Finale, the music has a poise and imperious swagger that lifts it away from questions of technique or style, and simply wraps you into its layered structure. The performers' innate ability to balance the vastly differing powers of the instruments at their finger tips, so beautifully captured by the recording, is preserved perfectly intact. The dramatic left hand of pianist Jean Antonietti spars with, and rises to meet Martzy's flying fiddle, but never overwhelms it. This challenging music is laid bare, in all its glory, and with a drama and tension that few hi-fi

systems approach.

The magic is in the details, the way each instrument, no matter how small its part, takes on a microcosmic life and vitality. Martzy's gentle plucking in the Fiocco *Allegro* is a model of perfectly pitched and spaced notes. The descending bass line that underpins the break in Janis Ian's 'Bright Lights And Promises' has a

wonderfully deep elastic throb to it. You can almost picture the heavy strings vibrating, beating the air around them. Pile

those subtleties on top of each other and you build an ultimately far more convincing picture. It's a sonic structure that is too solidly anchored to have the attractive free floating quality that you get with a Townshend rack, but it still stands away from the speakers. In that respect, lovers of electrostatic speakers might well prefer the airborne option, for there's nothing ethereal about the sound of the Aavik. This is all about micro-dynamics building into macro-dynamics. If (nearly) all hi-fi systems are dynamically constricted, then the titanium rack does its level best to make sure that you get what they're capable of. It can't accelerate a system, but it sure as hell maintains its energy levels.

The Aavik titanium rack cuts right to the heart of what separates reproduced music from the live event. Its gains are in exactly the areas that people pursue with ever more expensive electronics with so little success. It's contribution is fundamental, and comes without any of the dynamic softening or image wander that it reveals in suspended units. At close to £4K it isn't cheap, but let's put that in perspective. I know

plenty of people who would be only to happy to get this kind of upgrade from a new pre-power combination at two or three times this price. What this means is that anybody dropping five figures on a hi-fi system should be giving this rack some serious consideration. For the rest of us, it pushes equipment support way up the agenda from 'afterthought' to 'essential element in realising your equipment's potential'. Why do I get the feeling that this is only the tip of a rather large ice-berg. But then the Titanic was made of steel.

People think that being a hi-fi journalist is a dream job, but like I said, I sacrifice myself in the name of human endeavour. Such a hard life, you might think, getting to play with all this exotic and expensive equipment. Well let me tell you, it can be bloody hard when they come and take it away!



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Materials	Titanium Uprights MDF Shelves
Shelf Spacing	14 or 21cm as standard (others to order)
Finishes	Black, Cherry, Beech
Price	£900 / shelf

UK Distributor

CSE
Tel. (44)(0)1423-359054
Fax. (44)(0)1423-359058
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Manufacturer

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KEF Reference Model Three-Two

Rcy Gregory

Speaker review? Odds on it's either going to feature prodigious bottom end or some sexy new high frequency driver. Whilst the industry and its customers remain obsessed with frequency extremes, people are forgetting that it's the mid-band that contains the vast majority of the musical information. Sure, the bass and treble are important, but it's how they join to the mid-range that really matters. Despite its size and complexity, here we have a speaker which is all about the parts creating a coherent whole. Don't be fooled by that muscular exterior, a sensitive heart beats within.

This story starts over 15 years ago, with a new model that marked a radical change of direction for KEF. The 104.2 replaced the venerable 104AB with a then extremely unusual, slim (but boxy) floor standing enclosure containing no fewer than five drive units. With it came the flying baffle, coupled cavity bass loading, easy four ohm load and, above all, the efficiency that has characterised every floorstanding KEF Reference speaker until the appearance of the Maidstone. At a time when loudspeakers with pretensions to seriousness rated around 86dB, the 104.2s offered an almost unheard of 92! And remember,



this was well before AV was even a twinkle in the Eastern sky, or triodes made the biggest comeback since Lazarus. The 104.2 was so far ahead of its time it was like Jesse Owens in a lycra skin suit, and on the whole, people simply didn't know what to make of it. The final ingredient arrived with the 105.3, an even bigger floorstander which added the now familiar Uni-Q coincident driver to the 104 recipe. Here was a speaker with a thumping great box that traded bass extension for efficiency at a time when most other designers seemed intent on squeezing ever more woof out of progressively smaller cabinets. And I loved it! With 20 watts of JA30 on tap it was just what the doctor ordered. Taut, lean and fast, the 105.3 was devoid of the cuddly warmth that passes for bass in rather too many mini-monitors. It was, and still is, one of the most critically analytical speakers that I've ever used, and you know what they say; garbage in, garbage out. Hang it on the end of the mismatched hotch-potch of kit found in most dem rooms and you'll discover just how bad expensive equipment can sound. And as the hi-fi trade is just as likely to shoot the messenger as any other group of megalomaniac autocrats (just kidding guys), the 105.3 was never the

success it should have been. Instead, its insights were ignored, along with system set-up, and the music got trampled in the rush to shift more fashionable boxes. KEF were forced to think again.

Convinced of the correctness of their basic approach, they remodelled the Reference range, softening the bluff exteriors with heavy radiusing and adding a hefty slice of warmth to the bottom end, making the speakers far more system friendly and domestically acceptable. But whilst the new models One, Two, Three and Four were a great success in the A/V market, in hi-fi terms, and particularly in smaller listening rooms, they'd rather over-egged the pudding. Which brings us, finally, to the leaner, meaner Reference Model Three-Two.

But before we plunge ahead, let's take a moment to appreciate the foundation principles on which all these speakers rest. I guess we might as well start at the bottom: **Coupled Cavity Bass Loading.** This uses a pair of 8" bass drivers, each reflex loaded by its own sub enclosure, to drive a central, damped chamber which in turn, drives the room through the large diameter port in the speaker's flying baffle. Sounds complicated I know, but just think of a driver at each end of the box, squeezing the air between them. Properly engineered this should lead to excellent low frequency efficiency combined with a very rapid roll-off. In the Three-Two, overall system efficiency is quoted as 91dB, with the -3dB point at 40Hz and the -6dB point at 25Hz. You see what I mean. The opposing drivers are ▶

▶ linked by a massive extruded aluminium force cancelling rod, which goes a long way to reducing the influence of cabinet vibration on the sound. Even 40mm Load Despite abandoning Conjugate Load Matching, the Three-Two continues to offer a fairly benign four ohm load. Giving the driving amplifier slightly more to get its teeth into improves compatibility with Naim electronics, amongst others.

Wide Dynamics

The combination of easy drive, four ohm loading (twice the amplifier power) and good efficiency should improve overall dynamic range.

Decoupled Mid/Treble Baffle

The flying baffle enables the designer to physically separate the midrange drivers from the bass cabinet, reducing inter-modulation distortion and mid-range smearing.

Uni-Q Technology

The Uni-Q driver not only provides a coincident source across the upper octaves, the flare of its mid-range driver acoustically couples the tweeter output to the room, ensuring controlled dispersion characteristics from around 200 Hz upwards. Even the bass port mimics the effective diameter of the mid-range drivers. Thus, despite the fact that the Three-Two is a five driver, four way system, it should also be surprisingly coherent.

The Three-Two adds a couple of refinements to the original recipe. It retains the cast polymer base of the Three (which can be mass loaded if desired) but finally adds longer spikes to take account of the thick, gold-



plated cosmetic feet that lock them in place.

Better than the inadequate items that appeared on the Three and 105.3, they could still do with beefing up to M8, especially on a speaker of this size. It also gets a much needed new finish option, the beautiful Albina Burr of the review pair. Very nice.

But the most important change (from the 105.3) is hidden away. A reversible plug positioned inside the bass leg positive terminal of the cross-over allows the owner to alter the low frequency contour to

compensate for near wall placement, making the speaker far more tolerant of the kind of small listening rooms which afflict so many British listeners, without compromising the performance in larger rooms (eg. in the all-important USA). Because the coupled cavity rolls-off at around 160 Hz, which happens to coincide with the point at which rear boundary reinforcement starts to cancel, simply dropping the output from the bottom end by 1.5dB provides a simple, but remarkably effective compensation for bottom-end boom. In my admittedly well behaved room, the undoctored Three-Twos sit 57cm from the rear wall.

Reverse the plugs and I can push them back to within 20cm without the bass getting its knickers in a twist. Stage depth suffers a bit,

but otherwise the speaker adapts extremely well to such unfamiliar territory.

The Three-Twos replaced the really rather excellent little Indigo Model 1s, a speaker which on price grounds should offer little or no competition. But in practice, the limited performance envelope of a decent small speaker confers certain advantages when you compare it to its larger brethren; just consider the Linn Kan. But not in this case. The KEFs were immediately and obviously superior in every respect (including sheer fun, and that's going some where the Indigos are concerned). Sure, the extra bandwidth was pretty apparent, along with the enhanced scale that goes with it, but it was the sudden improvement in natural tonality and easy dynamics that really grabbed my attention. The gentle switchback piano and double-bass arpeggios of 'Do Nothin' Till You Hear From Me' (*This One's For Blanton*

Analogue Productions CAPJ

015) had a wonderful aplomb to their passage, sure footed and surely paced, effortlessly descending to the lower registers and back with out any sense of strain or slurring. The Duke's stabbed opening was just where it should be, as was the graceful transition to his flowing melodic lines. And I only put it on to check the positioning and bass linearity of the set-up.

When a speaker breathes new life into a familiar musical work horse, you know that it's doing something pretty fundamental right. In this case it has to do with the top to bottom coherence of the speaker system. ▶



▶ This coherence, which is so vital to a musically convincing performance, is one of the main advantages enjoyed by two-way designs (at the price of limited bandwidth). What KEF have achieved is a four-way design which matches the coherence of the best two-ways, whilst adding a healthy combination of efficiency and bottom-end extension. In reality the KEFs don't go as low as their size might suggest, but you need to balance that against the ease of drive. The physically smaller NHT 2.9s go deeper, but at the price of electrical requirements which would make an awful lot of amplifiers quail. I got superb results from the Three-Twos with the little Canary valve integrated, whilst most of my listening was done with the JA30s. All 20 watts of them.

The combination of coherence and scale puts a sense of performance right at the top of the KEF's list of attributes. Add to that the immediacy and vibrance that comes with more efficient designs, and you end up with a speaker that communicates very directly indeed. At the same time, its natural tonal balance and well behaved tweeter stop it being aggressive or wearing. The end result is a sound that's big and packed with life and presence. What the recording does with it is, of course, another matter. The Groovenote recording *Here's To Ben* (GRV1001) is an audiophile tour de force. As a recording of small ensemble jazz it's hard to fault. The performance is another matter. I'm afraid that pop singer Jacintha, whilst she has a beautiful voice, simply doesn't cut it as an interpreter of these jazz standards. Okay, so my views might not accord with other writers, including some who work on this magazine, but just compare Jacintha to Betty Carter or

Ella with the Three-Twos, and you'll see where I'm coming from. The range, emotion and power of either of the older performers transcends the limitations of their recordings. The spectacular clarity of the Groovenote only exposes the performance as a pale and unconvincing alternative. The KEFs don't punish bad recordings, they just punish bad music.

What the Groovenote did reveal was the Three-Two's one consistent weakness. No matter what equipment I partnered them with, I found that the



excellent separation and focus across the front of the stage didn't extend back. They didn't lack stage depth, it was just that they lost snap and transparency the further back you go. This isn't an effect I've ever suffered before, and both KEF and I are at a loss to explain it. Whether it's limited to my environment I can't say, so you'd best check it out for yourself. Whilst I was aware of it, I can't say that it interfered with my musical enjoyment to any great extent, so I think this one's a personal call.

The KEF's life and impressive scale make it a natural for the kind of

intimate recordings that go with jazz and acoustic rock or pop. The out and out head-banger should probably look elsewhere, but everything from violin sonatas up to complex studio rock and full orchestral pieces are handled with an easy grace. The Three-Twos can get nasty when they need to, but they really are the consummate all-rounder, playing and letting you enjoy whatever you throw at them. That makes them an excellent choice for straight stereo use, but I have to say (reluctantly, because some people will see it as a slur) that they are a God-send for the listener who wants to combine a high quality two channel set-up with an ultra refined A/V system. Used with an all Uni-Q surround package and a really good sub-woofer, the results would be seriously impressive. Me? I stick to stereo, and despite a collection of much more expensive alternatives, I'll be sorry to see the elegant KEFs depart. ▶+

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	4-way, 5-driver.
Bass loading:	Twin interport, twin coupled cavity.
Drivers -	
HF:	25mm Soft Dome
MF:	160mm polyprop cone
LMF:	160mm polyprop cone
LF:	2 x 200mm pulp cone
Bandwidth:	40Hz - 20kHz ± 3dB
Impedance:	4 Ohm
Sensitivity:	91dB
Dimensions (WxHxD):	283 x 1137 x 401mm
Weight:	35kg
Finishes:	Standard - Black, Cherry, Rosent Premium - Albina Burr, Rosetta Burr
Price:	£2250 - £2750

Manufacturer:

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Cary 805 50w SE Monos	£3900	£8500
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YBA Intégré DT integrated amplifier

Petite and Punchy

by Dave Davies

The diminutive YBA Intégré with its slim profile and unobtrusive design, provides a neat route to near high end sound for those like me, whose wallets haven't kept pace with their increasing girth. With prices starting with the single transformer model at £1,090, the Intégré is available in several configurations. The review model is the 'DT' option. That's not delirium tremens of course, but dual transformer. This is designed to help improve both staging and dynamics by increasing the current capability. Rated at a relatively modest 50 watts into 8 ohms (90 watts into 4 ohms), this is no real measure of the amp's capabilities, for which read on. Moving magnet and moving coil phono stages are also optional extras, as is remote control. Owners of older Intégré amps can have them upgraded as required via the dealer or the importer, so flexibility is very much the order of the day here.

The Intégré is a relatively plain, slim box available in matt silver aluminium or (as an option at additional cost) in black. Sporting just two selector knobs, record and play, and a single volume control, the layout but for the slightly obtrusive YBA logo, is pleasantly uncluttered. As you'd expect there are no balance or tone controls. There are the usual 5 line inputs:

CD, tuner, video, tape, aux, with phono should you opt for it, bringing the total to six. Excellent, solidly mounted phono sockets grace the back panel as do chunky bi-wireable speaker sockets. Another indication of the experienced hand behind this design is the exceptionally ergonomic lay-out of the back panel, with decent spacing between the speaker sockets which meant that for once I had no problem accommodating my hefty Audioplan cables. The amp sits on three metal feet, which whilst they're essentially fine, and did a good job of isolating the amp, I found they could be further improved upon. I replaced them with what are fast becoming essential accessories for me, a set of Clearlight RDC cones. These had the effect of 'cleaning up' the soundstage and removing a thin veil from what was already a pretty open performance. YBA recommend that the amp is not placed on a glass shelf, so I didn't.

Not especially cheap at £1395 in its DT version (with remote but sans phono stage), the amplifier is clearly a quality product. Its fine build quality is much in evidence, and there's a good, solid feel to the controls. Like the recently reviewed Intégré CD player, the amp gains a lot, particularly with regard to its circuit layout, from its more powerful and more expensive YBA siblings:

the shortest possible signal paths, symmetrical layout and high quality, often YBA manufactured, componentry are key to the design. The record and function selector switches, for example, minimise the signal path by having extended shafts that go right back to the input board vertically mounted at the rear.

The whole chassis is designed to combine strength and rigidity, coupled with the simplicity that comes from its 'less is more' signal path and componentry approach. Whilst the review amp was well run-in, the Intégré clearly needs a good warm-up time to come 'on song'. Half an hour at least and preferably a full hour is required before it loosens up sufficiently to give of anything like its best. I'd recommend that YBA's guidelines are followed, and that the amp is left permanently on unless it's to be left unused for an extended period.

Having become used to 3 boxes of Michell amplification driving my Ruark Paladins, I was fascinated to see how this little beast would cope. Years ago I owned what I still feel is one of Krell's best products, the original KSA 50 amp. For those very few who haven't seen one, it was for its time a colossal lump and as hard to ignore physically as it was sonically. Whilst I found



► its bloated form something of a problem, it did deliver the goods musically. In particular it grabbed most speakers by the scruff of the neck and tightly controlled them, bringing the best from even some fairly ordinary products. Well, the little YBA at around an eighth of the size of the American behemoth, does a remarkably similar job. My Ruarks have suddenly lost a good deal of their Achilles heel, a somewhat loose low end, and tightened up remarkably. Better yet, the YBA has achieved it without compromising any of their virtues of panel like mid-range and top end. A fine start.

On Arvo Part's *Fratres* (Naxos 8.553750), the second piece for violin, strings and percussion opens with the solo violin playing arpeggios which are soon backed by a soft drone from the string section, punctuated at intervals by sombre bass drum notes. The Intégré allowed this piece to come across with absolute conviction. The violin tone is beautifully captured, and the sense of fingers and the bow flying across strings, the deep resonance of the percussion, the hushed tone of the massed strings and the sense of a cavernous acoustic space, all come across convincingly. Importantly, the carefully measured pace of this piece, which with less capable equipment could be compromised, remained perfectly in tact. Emotionally involvement would be a fair description of what the little Intégré was delivering.

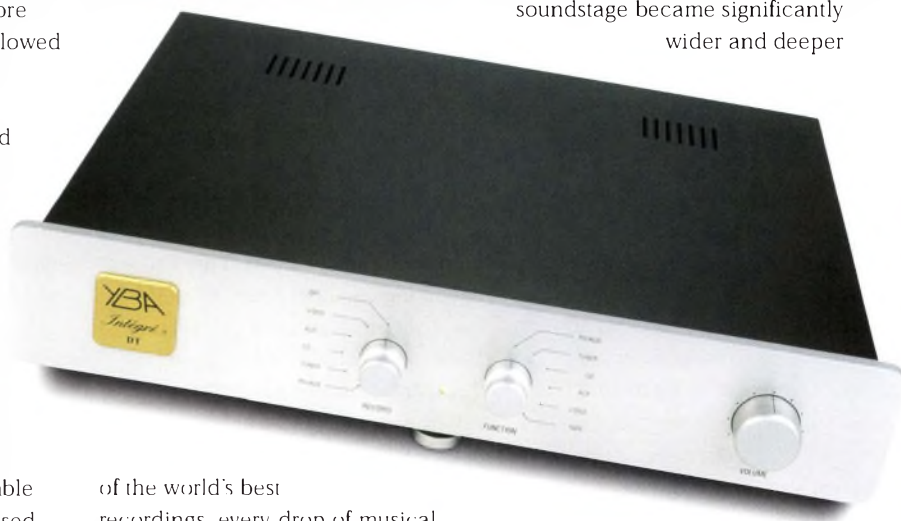
'Let's Call The Whole Thing Off' from the very fine MFSL (rest in peace) re-issue of *Ella and Louis Again* comes across crisply, with layers of detail appearing in the mono mix. Percussion sits neatly behind the two singers driving

things forward. Fitzgerald and Armstrong have warmth and presence, with good image height, and given that it's mono, are placed precisely centre stage! The slightly rosy glow that I'd become used to with this recording had been stripped away and been replaced with, well, reality. What was already a pretty convincing musical performance was now even more so. Time and again, CDs like this one, put on for just one track ended up being played through to the end.

On David Lindley and Hani Nasar's *Playing Even Better* (UTCD 002 – you'll have to hunt for this 'official bootleg', it was even out of stock at Amazon), the stinging tones of Lindley's bottleneck guitar as 'The Meatman' opens are perfectly captured. Hani Nasar's conga work has plenty of weight and attack and although this isn't one

first track. A sure sign that something was right.

A fine piece of music and a favourite demo track, Hugh Masekela's 'Stimela (the Coal Train)' (from *Hope* Worldly Music T200-2), offered a chance for the YBA to showcase another of its strengths – imaging. Vocals were precisely placed and each performer occupied a tangible and rounded space. Stage depth and height were well captured and the sense of real musicians performing on stage was effortlessly conveyed. Changing speakers to the little Audio Physic Steps and replaying this same track proved that none of these qualities were due to any unusual synergy with my Ruarks. A wealth of additional detail was revealed (the Ruarks whilst very beguiling, are not the highest resolution devices out there), and the already pretty convincing soundstage became significantly wider and deeper



of the world's best recordings, every drop of musical enjoyment is wrung from the experience. Lindley's unique, love 'em or hate 'em vocals come across clearly, and not a double entendre is missed. (A meatman's got no preference if it's well done, or rare or lean..). The YBA also shone in its ability to put dig into the essential rhythm and timing of the music, and convey it with authority. My foot was tapping along within two bars of the

without losing the precise placement and solidity of each musician. From Masekela's creamy trumpet playing, to the startling vocal whoops that punctuate the number, it was a treat throughout. The YBA doesn't stint in its dynamic attack or in its power delivery. The gradually rising dynamic pace of this number is carried with conviction and there is absolutely no sense of strain



► or things being held back during crescendo's. Imaging was also a strong point, with each player very clearly delineated both vertically and horizontally - stage depth was very convincingly portrayed. And importantly images held their place very firmly, moving around the stage only when the musicians were clearly doing so, adding a great deal to the sense of reality. Great stuff!

Moving to a different source and firing up my humble Denon TU260L tuner, the YBA again excelled at the precise placement of performers, whether in music, drama or documentary, with no hint of added sibilance or chestiness on vocals. Music, at least where the station justified it, was highly enjoyable with no undue emphasis across the range, and all the compelling qualities of the amp intact. Hell, even tapes I made up for the car carried a chunk of these qualities. I can't vouch for the YBA phono stage since the unit was supplied without one, but a relatively brief session playing records via my Michell ISO quickly proved that the amps capabilities were not restricted to CD. The usual strengths of vinyl -

more natural and rounded vocals, larger, more realistically scaled imaging, the music 'breathing' that bit easier - were all realised with no untoward emphasis of vinyl's Achilles heel - surface noise.

Sure, the YBA doesn't have quite the finesse of some costlier equipment; it can seem a little forward, sometimes showing a tad of midrange emphasis on some material, and the extreme bass is very slightly curtailed, contributing partly to its punchy character. This proved to be nothing but beneficial with my Paladins and was equally happy with the more evenly tuned Audio Physic Steps, so I have no reason to fear matching it with just about any speaker in a complementary price range. The main and overriding virtue of the Intégré, however, is its musicality. The way that it can immediately involve you, drawing you into the performance within the first few bars. As a result this relatively straight-forward review has taken about three times longer than anticipated simply because I've been listening to the music and not 'working'. And to prove the point, at no time during the review period did I miss my bi-amped Michell set up. Sure, this has more clout, is a little more capable of

resolving musical detail and is more open. But the YBA Intégré is such a beguiling little bugger that these points weren't so important when compared with the way that the YBA could make each performance so completely involving. Not only that, but for a time I seriously started questioning whether I really needed a whole rackful of amp when the little Intégré could get so close. Of course the rackful won out in the end, but if I was any more pushed for space I'd have absolutely no hesitation, it'd be YBA for me.

Petite, punchy and proud, the YBA Intégré is a winner!



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Inputs:	5 x Line, Phono Optional
Outputs:	1 x Tape
Output Power:	50 W/ch - 8 Ohms 90 W/ch - 4 Ohms
Damping factor:	>300 at 100HZ
Dimensions (WxHxD):	430 x 73 x 360mm
Weight:	9 Kg
Prices:	
Single transformer:	£1090.00
Double transformer:	£1395.00
Phono stage - MM:	£95.00
- MC:	£250.00
Remote control:	£140.00
Price as auditioned:	£1535.00

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The Canary Audio CA608 Integrated amplifier

by Chris Binns

I suppose it was my own fault, really. I had just spent a considerable amount of time listening to low powered amplification in the form of the two OTL designs I reviewed last issue, and the whole process had pressed home just how particular one had to be when it came to loudspeaker matching. Far less of a problem than it could have been ten years ago, at least there is now a reasonable choice of high efficiency loudspeakers available to partner with low powered amplification. That's assuming your prepared to accept the inevitable compromises that go with the territory, be it size or limited bass extension. If you don't, but still fancy the idea of valve amplification a brief glance will show you that the market is not what it used to be. Which doesn't alter the fact that I should have known better than to moan about it.

Before the current fascination for all things single ended, when push pull was not the technological pariah that it is now, there were a reasonable number of real world valve amplifiers around that offered power outputs in the region of, say 30 to 50 watts or so. Encouraged by a healthy market in second hand classic equipment such as the Leaks and Radfords that were available, manufacturers saw a need for more contemporary designs aimed at those people who didn't want to track down a piece of second hand

equipment and then have it overhauled. A good example of this was the Woodside STA25; a company who started off by overhauling original Radford units, and then, with Arthur Radfords blessing put the unit back into production, re-engineered for the eighties.



But the market has shifted. There are still plenty of manufacturers producing heavyweight valve power amplifiers of a hundred watts and more, with a suitable price tag to match, but it would appear that there's something of a void between these and the esoteric world of low power triodes, many of which seem to tote equally heavyweight price tags. I recall a conversation with a manufacturer of medium price valve amplification in which he lamented the fact that unless you built single ended triode designs these days, you would go out of business. He did.

Therefore after discussing this state of affairs with various people including the editor, I was pleasantly surprised

by the arrival of the Canary CA-608 amplifier. It neatly fills that mid-price, mid-power vacuum I have just outlined, offering a real world output of forty watts per channel. (that's four zero to 300B users) and thus considerably widening the scope for partnering loudspeakers.

Canary Audio are a relatively small company situated in California, right in the heart of silicon valley as it happens. No wonder then, that they specialise in manufacturing valve equipment. Ha! How many times do you reckon they get their trash bin turned over? The CA608 is the baby of a range that includes pre and power amps, and looking at their web page, this is a company whose heart lies firmly with thermionic technology.

The CA608 is a substantial unit with a decidedly chunky feel and appearance, off-set by a deep blue-grey anodised finish on the front panel. This alleviates what could be a rather industrial look, but only just. There are just three controls, volume, mains on off and an input selector for the four line inputs. There is also a Blue power on indicator. On the back panel, socketry is more or less what you would expect, with gold plated phono inputs and substantial binding posts for both four and eight-ohm tapings on the output transformer. One minor grumble, there is no tape output which I found a bit of an inconvenience as I had promised to make lots of ▶

▶ tapes for someone the night the Canary turned up. This is very much a power-amp with switchable inputs in the style of the Lavardin IT, rather than a full-on integrated.

Internally, the Canary is built to a high standard, with all components bar the custom wound transformers mounted on a single substantial printed circuit board, with evidence of selected high quality components, and the minimal wiring very neatly laid out. This kind of care and attention to detail certainly inspires confidence, and the Canary's insides have the sort of sensible, uncluttered feel that suggests that these people know what they're about.

The output stage is built around a pair of EL34's per channel, running in ultra-linear mode with cathode bias to provide the forty watts or so. The great advantage of a cathode bias arrangement (as opposed to fixed bias) is that no adjustment is necessary when replacing output valves, although the use of closely matched pairs becomes more important. Driver and phase splitting duties are performed by a 6SN7 double triode and there is a single 12AX7A, which is shared between the channels for voltage amplification. This brings us up to a total of seven valves, which is hardly a lot for an integrated amplifier, but means that the circuit is essentially quite simple; in practical terms this means a short signal path with a minimal amount of components and the sonic benefits that go with it, providing of course that it's up to the job.

I think it's worth saying that right from the word go this little amplifier endeared itself by behaving impeccably. There were no clicks, thumps or strange quirks, which was something of a relief with the madness of cartridge reviewing going on. There

is also something reassuring about the simplicity of an integrated design. Jumping in at the deep end, I rather unkindly 'dumped' the Canary straight into my system with no regard to speaker matching, or anything else for that matter. On the four-ohm tapping, results were surprisingly good into the power hungry Primary monitors, and although not a match made in heaven, I was able to raise some fairly reasonable levels without too much audible distress.

A short evening session with this line up enabled me to play enough music to get some measure of what the CA608 was about. With more gentle



music, results were beginning to sound very promising, but with anything more demanding there was, not surprisingly a lack of drive and dynamic range.

Fortunately, I still had the Audioplan Kontrasts to hand after the OTL sessions, and these were pressed into service with the Canary. After a little experimentation I discovered that although the Kontrasts are a relatively benign 8 ohm load, the overall sound was better using the 4 ohm tap of the amplifier, particularly when it came to control at the bottom end. Not that this is surprising; although one might lose a bit of loudness capability the lower output impedance presented will keep a firmer grip on the loudspeakers and is often the preferred option.

My first impression with this

combination was of a lively and communicative quality that made music fun to listen to. With the Einstein CD player and the Tubaphon cartridge on my turntable the Canary was in some illustrious company, but it didn't let the side down. Far from it in fact. I spent quite a while listening to this system, and played a wide variety of music from Bartok to the Pixies, and although there were criticisms to be made, I always felt that the Canary was doing a great job of letting the music through.

The CA608 does have something of, dare I say it, a valve sound to it. Or rather, what people have come to associate with thermionic amplification. It does not have the razor sharp definition that some solid state designs can achieve, nor the precision and taughtness in the bass that one associates with more powerful products. But what it does have is a remarkably fluid mid range that seems to encourage musical communication, and that makes listening very rewarding. Rhythmically it might not have a carved from solid bass to drive the rhythm section, but it gets the low frequencies in the right place and at the right time, so everything hangs together.

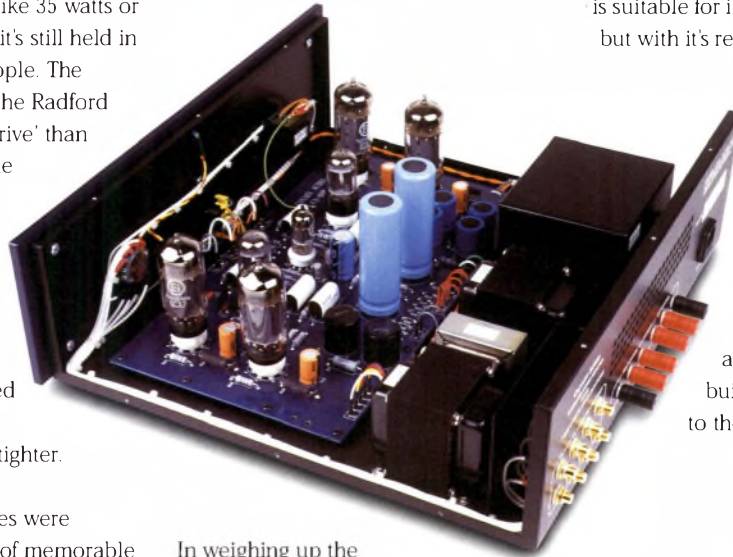
Would it be insulting to suggest that the Canary sounds a little bit old fashioned? Not, I think if I qualify that by suggesting that it reminds me of the Leak Stereo 60 power amplifier. Their attributes are much the same. We know that more modern technology can provide better results in some 'hi fi' respects, but musically speaking, both these amps can still cut the mustard. There are actually further similarities, as by recollection, both the Leak Stereo 20 and the 60 used a circuit topology not so dissimilar to the Canary, but don't quote me on that. ▶

► I happened to have an original and recently re-valved Radford STA25 in the house, and thought it might make an interesting comparison, so I hooked it up to the Primary Line Stage. Although conservatively rated at 25 watts per channel, it too uses EL34's, and in practice manages more like 35 watts or so. Alongside the Leaks, it's still held in high regard by many people. The results were interesting; the Radford had a greater sense of 'drive' than the Canary, but lacked the communicative quality that made listening so enjoyable. I have a sneaking suspicion that this is down to the biasing arrangement of the Radford which is fixed as opposed to cathode, and does tend to sound tighter. But at what cost?

The Canary's attributes were highlighted on a couple of memorable occasions. As a celebration of their 2000th release in the UK, Naxos chose to issue a recording of Elgar's *Symphony no.3*, in which the composers sketches have been elaborated on by Anthony Payne to create a possible version of this unfinished work. It is a great recording, and listening to it through the Canary was a rewarding experience. The dynamics of the music were rendered with a realism that let the music flow from the loudspeakers in really convincing fashion. JMH reviewed this disc enthusiastically in Issue 5, and the Canary made me understand why.

I am undergoing a nostalgic trip through the back catalogue of Little Feat at the moment, and although the Canary didn't manage the kind of impact that I am used to, it still made listening to such albums as the last record album very enjoyable and quite addictive. But even more successful in sonic terms was a recording of Mark Hollis, ex-frontman from the band Talk Talk. Entirely acoustic and very

introverted, this difficult music was conveyed in just the right, almost personal fashion that allows it to succeed and prove rewarding. The Canary's unobstructed ease was spot-on. With a lot of other amplifiers this music just doesn't happen.



In weighing up the strengths and weaknesses of the Canary CA608 there are a few things I should remind you of. I don't think comparing it to the likes of the Leak or Radford is unrealistic. If you look at how much you would have to pay for a good example of one of these amps, and bear in mind that you will have to find a suitable pre amp to partner it, the Canary begins to look like pretty good value for money. Not to mention the price of a good interconnect. Then there's the fact that it provided several months of totally fuss-free music. Real music, from really fuss-free valve amplification. How refreshing. How unusual.

Dispensing with the anacrophilia, how does the Canary stand in the market for £1500 integrated amplifiers? Compared to its solid state counterparts, it ain't no powerhouse, and it will be beaten on drive and slam by many. But matching or bettering that elusive communicative quality that makes the CA608 so enjoyable could prove difficult unless,

of course you look to the cheaper single-ended designs, such as Unison Research. Then we're back to our original problem of finding loudspeakers that can perform realistically with single figure power outputs. Not that I suggest the Canary is suitable for inefficient loudspeakers, but with its relatively healthy output it offers a vastly increased number of sensible partners. A mid-priced middleweight, the Canary CA608 could provide a solution to many people's needs in terms of amplification – it's a well-built and welcome addition to the market. ►+

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Rated output:	40 watts RMS per channel
Input sensitivity:	1.0 volts for full output
Input impedance:	100 kohms
THD:	0.5%
Damping factor:	10
Power consumption:	265 watts
Valve compliment:	4 x EL34 2 x 6SN7 1 x 12AX7
Dimensions (WxDxH):	480 x 152 x 500 mm
Weight:	28kg
Price:	£1495-00

Distributor:

Audio Connoisseurs
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audio physik
No loss of fine detail

Audio Physic Step

by Dave Davies

Audio Physic is an intriguing company. Started in '85, and based in the heart of Germany, they have over the years, built up a very credible family of speakers stretching from the baby of the family and subject of this review, the Step, to the Medea and new top of the line reference, the Cherubin. Common to the family is a refreshing quality and integrity in design and construction, as is a particular aspect of performance that helps to set them apart: staging. They all seem to possess an uncanny ability to recreate realistically scaled acoustic environments, and to place correctly proportioned performers within those environments in a particularly convincing way. Having been very impressed by the Audio Physic Virgos (see my review for issue 4), I was intrigued to see how their little brothers, the Steps would perform.

The baby brothers measure a puny 330mm (H) x 140mm (W) x 230mm (D). Nor are they especially heavy at 5Kg apiece. Ideally the Steps should be purchased with their dedicated stands – Audio Physic maintain that no other stand will do the job as well, and given the very particular way in which they position the speaker, I have every reason to believe them. These stands are a welded steel tripod construction which are designed to support the speakers at the optimum angle to provide proper time alignment. Each speaker rests on a single large vertical spike. It then leans against two much smaller horizontal spikes which support the back panel, whilst a horizontal M6 bolt locks everything rigidly in place. The spikes make

contact with metal inserts to provide a firm contact surface and protect the wood veneer. The stands are specifically designed to match the speaker's weight, whilst transmitting energy far quicker than the cabinets, thus dissipating it. The tension in the large spike can be used to tune the complete assembly for best performance. Unfortunately, even

lock the cat up, sit back and enjoy! A not particularly aesthetic tip that I tried was to add a bit of independent mass to the speaker stand bases by placing a compact but heavy book on each (thank you Rembrandt Etchings and Hogarth Engravings). This stabilised the stands removing the fear of imminent destruction by hurtling feline without noticeably compromising performance.



with the base spikes in place, the whole thing is very top heavy.

Although given their relative instability, it might be tempting to try alternative speaker stands, I'd strongly recommend sticking with the Audio Physic models. They really do seem to bring the best from the speakers. And until Audio Physic find a solution to make them steadier on the ground,

Thankfully it should also prove to be a very short-term solution since Audio

Physic is now considering a fix for the problem. Judging by the elegance of the rest of the design, I have no doubt that once developed, this will handle the job with aplomb and

▶ both the cat and I can breathe a sigh of relief!

Not especially efficient at 84dBW, I found absolutely no problem with driving the Steps with either the 50 watt YBA Integre or the little Morgan Audio Deva. Like their big brothers, the speakers are solidly constructed and beautifully finished. The review samples were well veneered in cherry, on the base, top and sides. Real (?) black ash is the other standard veneer option. No speaker grilles are supplied, although they are available to order. Having said that, anybody prepared to accede to the Steps' rapacious demands for space is hardly going to be bothered by their bare baffles. Also like the Virgo's, the Steps have no truck with bi-wiring, and but a single pair of sockets are available on each. This is partly because the Steps have been designed with 'lifestyle' in mind and less cable is frankly more attractive than the weighty spaghetti that commonly hangs from bi-wired speakers. It's also due to very careful design, majoring on low inductivity and minimal components in the signal path, which minimises or eliminates any real benefit. Bi-wiring just isn't a necessity.

Despite their tiny dimensions, the Steps require all the care and attention to set-up that more obviously demanding bigger beasts such as the Virgo's require. Preferring Audioplan Musicable to Nordost Blue Heaven, possibly because of the extra warmth and low end grunt that the Audioplan can impart, and hooked up to the YBA Integre amp and my Copland CDA289



CD player. I could start positioning the speakers. Without reference to the fairly explicit set up manual, the

obvious and room friendliest position for the diminutive and apparently undemanding little beasts would be a couple of feet out from the rear wall, but no more. Forget it. If they're to work at anything approaching their best, the tiny suckers demand a disproportionate amount of space. Three feet? Nope. OK then, four. Again nope. In my room the buggers worked at their peak a full 7 feet from the rear wall and well clear of the side walls. The set up manual is in fact very helpful, and Audio Physic is very specific about optimum placement to minimise room effects and maximise performance. They recommend that the

speakers are ideally placed some 2.5 – 3.5m apart and minimally toed in, crossing some 0.5 – 1m behind the listener's head with the listener's back close to the wall. In my listening room this actually placed them more than half way into the room, widely spaced, firing almost straight ahead and seemingly almost touching distance from the sofa. A bizarre looking arrangement to say the least but in hi-fi, like so many things, looks really aren't the whole story.

Popping a favourite CD into the Copland, and with the speakers in roughly the recommended position, from the first notes of 'Stimela (The Coal Train)' from Hugh Masekela, a truly cavernous acoustic space was immediately evident, extending from slightly forward of the lateral plane of the speakers, way back to a foot or two behind the rear wall. The effect was

extraordinary. For once the speakers really did disappear. And this was before I'd even completed the set up process.

The Steps are easily the equals of their bigger brothers in this respect, and like them, the imaging wasn't bounded by the outside edges of the speakers but could extend a foot or two outside them. Images within this soundstage weren't initially as precise as they could be, but following the set-up instructions I rotated just one speaker whilst playing a mono track to fine-tune the focus. It quickly became clear that absolute symmetry in the starting position of each speaker in relation to the other was very important, the tiniest inconsistency being immediately obvious. I rapidly learned that it was useless using my back wall to judge precise distances, finding that it slopes a good four inches from left to right (cheap Victorian building). When very carefully set up the outstanding staging remains, with rock solid imagery within the multi-layered space. Thankfully the imaging is not too forward, after all much as I like Masekela's music, with this oh so close speaker positioning I really wouldn't want him in my lap. (Of course Diana Krall might be a different issue).

Aside from the exceptional staging abilities, the Steps also displayed a very natural tonal balance across the musical spectrum, with very good resolution. The timbre of the sliding electric bass notes, and the warmth and passion of the singing in 'Stimela' was totally convincing. This was coupled with a clear sense of each component in the drum kit, set way back in the stage, and just how it was being played, making the experience so much more real and enjoyable. Their timing ability too is up there with the best in their price range, making sense of each piece, and contributing to easy and immediate involvement.

Whilst the Steps demonstrated an exceptional ability across the range. ▶

▶ they don't attempt to produce bass notes outside their capability. They can however summon an extraordinary amount of grunt when it suits them: there was very little sense of listening to a 'small' speaker as the crescendo's in 'Stimela' kicked in. They will comfortably take almost anything you care to throw at them – there was just a hint of strain on one or two pieces I tried. Nothing too obvious – the Steps are nothing if not highly refined – but for example they were just a tad uncomfortable with the ludicrously demanding *Thin Red Line* soundtrack (RCA 09026 63382 2). This wasn't so much that they couldn't cope, it's simply that the scale of the opening piece, 'The Coral Atoll', lacked the necessary subsonic foundation and scale that are required to really get it across. The Steps did a fine job of conveying the menacing lower strings and percussion, and manfully attempted to get the whole of this huge piece into the room, a Herculean task that was just a little beyond them (and to be honest, it was unfair of me to chuck at them).

However, on 99% of the material I chose to bung on the Copland, and this included the slightly less demanding parts of *Thin Red Line*, the little Steps ate it up and spat it out with conviction. From Miles Davis' gorgeous 'Circle' from the Japanese Sony Mastersound CD of *Miles Smiles* (SRCS 9114), where the breathy muted tone of Davis' horn, and the delicacy of Tony Williams' brush and cymbal work are caught to perfection, to the other extreme of David Lindley and Hani Naser's *Live in Tokyo, Playing Real Good* (UTCD001 if you can find it). The stinging bottleneck guitar, crisp percussion work and audience vibe are all tangible, and the sense of air around each performer, along with the hushed atmosphere punctuated by whoops of appreciation and applause, transported me to the gig. Who needs multi-channel?!

Classical pieces were equally well handled. The excellent Naxos recording of Ferde Grofe's *Grand Canyon Suite* (8.559007) proved a good demonstrator of their capabilities. As expected, the hall ambience (The Wessex Hall, Poole Arts Centre in this case) was tangible. Importantly for this piece, the cascade of orchestral colours as the Suite progresses were portrayed with great flair. The tonal qualities of each instrument shone forth whether in 'Sunrise' where the orchestra slowly builds from gently played chords with soft woodwind and percussion, slowly mounting to a triumphant fanfare. Or in the closing movement 'Cloudburst' with its convincing evocation of an approaching, violently breaking and receding storm. This movement for me helped to summarise the capabilities of The Steps. The convincing hall acoustic, with notes realistically decaying in a large space, the tonal 'colour' of each instrument, and the qualities of ensemble playing along with the sheer bite and clout as the storm breaks: Tympani and cymbals rolling and crashing at the back of the stage. Layered strings belting out, and the weight and attack of the brass. The sense of awe as the storm passes (complete with wind machine), is real. And as the movement ends your emotions are 'up there' too. It's really this quality – musical involvement – that the Steps successfully deliver. They do it because everything else about them is so right – the acoustic space, the dynamic performance, the even-handed tonal balance, the timing -- that you don't have to worry about any of these elements. Because all this seems so 'right' you are simply drawn into the music. There's nothing left to get in the way.

By now you'll have gathered that I really enjoyed the Steps. However, one nagging doubt remains. More of a philosophical question than a criticism, it certainly didn't interfere

with my listening, but I kept wondering how the Steps (and Virgos) manage to produce this awesome soundstage from every single recording that I played. No big problem. After all, the Steps didn't exaggerate this effect to the extent that a chamber group was playing the Wembley Arena. The acoustic environments always felt believable, it's just that there could be a touch of the rose coloured glasses in this one aspect of their performance that may be at one remove from the original recording, however beguiling the effect. There's no denying that their extraordinary performance in this respect, coupled with an essentially neutral response across the audio spectrum, was highly involving and musically satisfying. It certainly added to the sense of lucid clarity and immediacy that they brought to music. All the Audio Physic speakers seem to have this ability to create the sense and impression of real musicians stood in front of you. It's just that in the odd moments between seriously enjoying the effect, I occasionally wonder exactly how they achieve it!



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Power Handling:	60W
Impedance:	4W
Frequency range:	60Hz-25Hz (-3dB)
Sensitivity:	84dB/ 1W (1m)
Standard finishes:	Cherry, Black Ash
Dimensions (WxHxD)	140 x 330 x 230mm
Weight:	5kg
Price per pair:	£999
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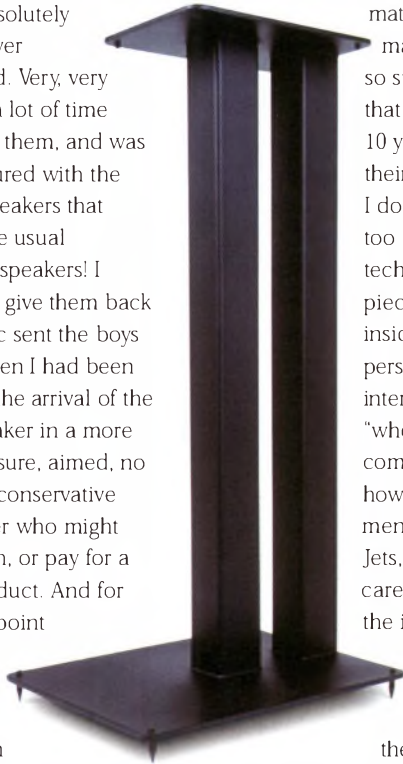


Elac CL82 MK ii

Pete Christie

Anyone who read my review of the Elac CL310 Jet (see issue 3, Nov 99), would have absolutely no doubts whatsoever that I was impressed. Very, very impressed. I spent a lot of time experimenting with them, and was completely enamoured with the end result. Small speakers that were unaware of the usual limitations of small speakers! I (regrettably) had to give them back after Dave from Elac sent the boys round, and since then I had been looking forward to the arrival of the CL82's. A small speaker in a more conventional enclosure, aimed, no doubt, at the more conservative British hi-fi customer who might not want to live with, or pay for a silver "lifestyle" product. And for £400.00, at a price-point more likely to tempt a pocket-conscious punter.

The information supplied to me by ELAC describes the CL82 mk. ii as the smallest of their compact range of speakers. I, on the other hand, would not call them small. Measuring 330 h x 200 w x 270 d (13" x 8" x 11"), they are a fairly "chunky" box. The pair I was supplied with had an "alder" finish – a bit darker than cherry, and certainly attractive. Removing the front, full-length black grille reveals a whopping 6" diameter silver aluminium sandwich "Madonna's Bra-Cup" long throw bass driver surmounted by a silver mesh covered 1" tweeter. Distinctive or what? ELAC build their own drivers – unlike the majority of speaker manufacturers,



and this enables a high degree of quality control and component matching to be maintained. ELAC are so sure of the quality that they give a 10, yes 10 year warranty on all their loudspeakers. I don't want to spend too long on the technical bits and pieces hidden away inside the box – I'm personally more interested in the audible "whole" rather than the component parts! I will however take the time to mention that as with the Jets, the CL82's are as carefully put together on the inside as they are on the outside. This is adeptly demonstrated by the crossover design.

There are two entirely separate ones in each speaker – one for the treble and one for the bass. Fairly obvious, though by no means an industry norm. The cabinet itself is very rigid, and the back panel is fitted with good quality gold-plated bi-wire terminals. There is a rear bass port measuring 2" in diameter.

So much for the aesthetics, what do they sound like?

Well, I'm prepared to hold my hand up and admit to falling into a well-used trap that can and does mislead a lot of reviewers. In fact, I failed – miserably. I made the basic mistake of reviewing "out of context"

Let me explain.

I took the speakers home and hooked them up to a Shearne Audio Phase 2 (£700.00) integrated amplifier with the front end being a Helios 2 (£1000.00) CD player, using a Nordost Solar Wind (£80.00) interconnect, and van den Hul CS122 (£13.50/metre) speaker cable. Both the CD and amplifier were attached to a Chord Company "Clearway" (£200.00) mains filter, and for good measure, all cables and compact discs were given a clean off with the highly-effective "Eco-3" fluid.

I loaded up Joni Mitchell's 'Night Ride Home' from the album of the same name (Geffen 9 24302 2), pressed play, sat back and prepared myself to be impressed. Wrong!!! The first bar of acoustic guitar nearly cut by head off, the vocal was sibilant enough to slice cheese at fifty paces, and when the bass guitar came in, the walls shook so hard I thought the chimney pot was going to come off. My 14 year-old son came downstairs and informed me that excessive noise pollution could be construed as child abuse, and that if I wasn't careful, he'd have no option but to phone Child Line. My wife threatened divorce unless I "stopped making that awful racket".

I turned it off.

I put on a fairly innocuous, lightweight recording of a Debussy piano etude, and it frightened the life out of me.

I turned it off.

I sat down and considered the possibilities with a hefty helping of amber nectar and tried to



▶ be objective.

Turning to the supplied info from ELAC, I "read the instructions" – something that I never do. I mean, who does? Now, somewhere it had something about set-up and listening. Oh yes – it says here "not to be taken lightly"

"Not to be taken lightly"? – who are they trying to kid? After that performance, I'd rather not take them at all!

It continued – "...please try one or two alternatives." What, like Anadin, Mogodon, or just euthanasia?

Then I focused on what I was supposed to be doing. I was auditioning a pair of £400.00 loudspeakers from a company who I know manufacture the highest quality components and take a great deal of pride in their products. There is absolutely no chance that they are going to deliver anything so wantonly sub-standard. I must be doing something wrong.

I was.

The CL82's are not designed to be put in a system that should have loudspeakers costing 3 times as much. Tone it down Pete, get a grip on reality!

So I did.

I dispensed with the CD player, and selected my good old Quad FM4 tuner – soft and seductive. Connected to the Shearne Phase 2 with a Chord Chameleon interconnect, I tuned in to Radio 2. Immediately, things started making sense, and the treble came back from being a suitable cat deterrent into being almost normal. In fact it was immensely "listenable" and sweet, if a little detached. The bass was still worrying the foundations, so I found something soft to bung up the bass ports with. Unfortunately, I didn't

have any purpose-made foam rubber things in the house, so I used my imagination and put yesterdays socks in the holes. Voila! Control, rich warmth, tonality and scale, albeit with a slightly strange smell. I didn't care – I was enjoying myself

It was at this stage that there was a polite knock at the door. Sensing trouble, I tentatively opened it to be confronted with Brian the milkman who'd arrived for his money. "Sorry Pete," he said. "I didn't know you had someone in – I heard voices, I can come back later." I looked at the now empty room and realised that he had been hearing the Radio 4 discussion and it had sounded so real from



outside, he'd assumed I was having an argument with Frank Dobson and Ken Livingstone! Now that is impressive!

I then tried all the channels on the radio. Radio 3 was (as always) super. A Shostakovich piece I believe. Local radio was belting out Born In The USA from Bruce Springsteen, and the room was rocking (should that be socking?). I don't care, it sounded fresh and lively. Classic FM which usually sounds a bit "squished", was more than acceptable with a recording of Dvorak's *New World*. All in all, things sounded a whole lot better, and far

more convincing.

The instructions had mentioned that good quality budget amps and CD players were OK to use with the CL82's, and that quality mid-priced components were preferable. Right then! I decided that I would take them back to the hi-fi emporium (where I am to be found during the hours of daylight), and get stuck in with some equipment that would fit the job description more accurately than the gear I use at home.

First up, I connected a Rotel RA931 mk ii amplifier (c. £175.00) to a Marantz CD5000 (c. £200.00) using QED Qnex 2 interconnects and Qudos bi-wire speaker cable, mounting the

speakers on Foundation

speaker stands.

What happened next was very strange! Nothing seemed to make any sort of sense. I played a selection of discs that were lying around the dem room and in each case, the information supplied by the speakers was oddly disjointed and fragmented with what can only be

described as holes

between the different frequencies in both instruments and vocals.

This was obviously not working, so I gave in and tried the combination of an Arcam Alpha 7R amplifier (c. £350.00) and the Rotel RCD 951 CD player (c. £350.00) (staying with the QED cables) – a close approximation to the equipment intimated by the supplied literature from ELAC. As if by magic, everything fell into place – it was as if the musical mists had cleared, and at last, I was beginning to see the tonal trees from the foggy forest!

I had been playing one of the ▶

▶ many "sampler" cd's we use: The *Fi/Analogue Productions Sampler*, with the track 'Blood Song' by Nancy Bryan (from the album *Lay Me Down*, Analogue Productions APO-2002). Now, I don't like this song. I don't think much of the singer either. In fact, I try not to think of her at all. A better example of musical whinging you would be hard put to find. *Lay Me Down?* – I wish someone would! All that personal preference stuff taken into account, I have to admit that it is a superbly produced piece, and the ELAC's never put a foot wrong. The music was articulate and presented with a superb clarity without giving the merest hint of the previous fizzy, pain inducing top-end.

On to the next track on the album: Janis Ian's 'Breaking Silence' from the album of the same name (Analogue Productions APP 027 (vinyl) & CAPP 027 (gold CD)). A bit more of a ballsy and dynamic piece with an involving rhythm track and superbly centralised lead vocal line. It was this track which really showed off the CL82's sense of timing, and their ability to let the music flow straight through the mechanical bits! Shades of the ELAC Jets here, I believe.

I let the CD play on, and listened to 'Poinciana' from an album entitled *Sounds Unheard Of* (Analogue Productions APR 3009). This piece could best be described as someone trying to play a guitar (quite sensibly) in a shop that sells percussion instruments, while someone else runs around and hits various "bangy" things, in a vague and random fashion. It works though! There are all sorts of strange sounds coming out of places in the soundstage where, in a lot of equipment, the places don't even exist!

Just for a laugh, I bunged on *Now*




That's What I Call Music? 44 (which I stole from my kids), and played what I can honestly say is quite possibly one of my favourite pieces of "fun" music. The superb 'Up And Down' by that renowned combo The Venga Boys! At this point, Karl, my trusty colleague left the room screaming. I didn't care. I just cranked up the volume and sat back in amazement at the amount of wallop that the CL82's were providing. And without a hint of any nasty distortion in the bass, or anywhere else for that matter!

Next up came *Chants d'Auvergne*, Kiri te Kanawa and the English Chamber Orchestra conducted by Jeffrey Tate (Decca 410 004-2). An absolute gem of a recording with an absolute gem of a performance from all concerned. Track 2, 'Bailero', and the CL82's showed me a subtlety I wasn't expecting, bearing in mind it was following the awesome power of the mighty Venga Boys. But subtle they were, and the delicacy and feeling of the piece softly seeped into the room, whilst at all times maintaining a spacious and totally coherent soundstage.

So what do I think of the ELAC

CL82's? Well, they are certainly not speakers to be trifled with. They can exhibit all the finesse and delicacy you would want, or they won't. They can give you as much powerful, focused bass power as any self-respecting dance freak could demand, or they won't. They will reproduce lyrically swirling top-end strings, or they'll force blood out of your ears! It all depends on how you deal with them. It's definitely all about matching. What I can say is that after boxing them up for return, my perseverance with them was more than rewarded with the final result – and I thoroughly recommend you to try them out.

If your system is made up of £300.00 (ish) components, you won't regret it.

Just one thing though; I seem to be missing a pair of socks... 

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Frequency Range	40Hz – 23KHz
Sensitivity	90dB/2.83V/m
Impedance	4 Ohm (nominal)
Bass Driver	180mm composite cone
Tweeter	HT25 metal dome
Dimensions (WxHxD)	200 x 330 x 270mm
Net Weight	8.3Kg
Finishes	Alder or Black
Price	£400.00/pair
Warranty	10 Years

Sennheiser UK Ltd
3 Century Point
Halifax Rd
High Wycombe
Bucks
HP12-3SL
Tel. (44)(0)1494-551551
Fax. (44)(0)1494-551550

Elac Phonosysteme GmbH
Tel. (49)(0)431-6477415
Fax. (49)(0)431-682101
Web. www.elac.com
E-mail. ELAC-Phonosysteme@t-online.de



deva integrated

volume
listen
mute
record

deva tuner

select
store
stereo/mono
switch
function
memory

deva cd player

play
next
stop
open
close
w/e

Morgan Audio Deva System

Dave Davies

A well established British hi fi manufacturer producing very design-friendly components that are both fuss-free in operation and offer a great deal of quality sound per pound? I'll bet the last name to come to your mind, if ever, would be Morgan Audio. Despite spending far too long each month immersed in industry press, the name was certainly new to me. And yet here's a company that's been thriving in export markets, principally Germany and Taiwan, for nearly ten years. So successful has the export business been that it was only with last year's launch of the Deva range that Morgan Audio decided it was finally time to take that bold step and enter the UK market.

Morgan isn't a company who likes to rush products to market. The amp was some three years and the CD player two years in development, prior to their export launch almost a year ago. The system is designed with (deep intake of breath) 'lifestyle' in mind. It's certainly compact, and with full remote capabilities likely to fit seamlessly into even the smallest (well the second smallest anyway, since it's not designed for bathroom use) UK room.

My first impressions on unpacking the diminutive Deva amp were that here was a highly credible product: solidly (very solidly) built with a blue/grey gunmetal finish aluminium front panel, surprisingly heavy with chunky casework and well laid out back panel populated with the full complement of rigidly mounted gold plated phono plugs. The top plate carries extensive ventilation holes so it

looked like this was a product that may run hot. The CD player and tuner were similarly weighty and well built.

In fact the amp circuitry is not a million miles away from valve circuitry, with a class A driver, a regulated single rail power supply driven by output capacitors with the gain structure nearly all at the pre-amp stage rather than in the power amp.

Morgan has striven for an inherent sound quality that (within the amps price band) is very faithful to instrumental timbre. Output power into 8W is a very precisely specified 47W. Six inputs are catered for and a phono card, which Morgan will configure to your gain and loading specification is supplied as standard. Sadly, the amp arrived sans phono card and one could not be obtained in time for review. The small amount of record listening was therefore carried out via my trusty Michell ISO.

Key to the amp's design, and unusual at this price point, is a high degree of flexibility.

Two power amplifiers are close to launch – in fact they should be available by the time you read this – one allowing a doubling up of the integrated amps power stage, the other a more powerful option with a much larger transformer. To make the most of these an optional active crossover card is available. This can be installed in either the integrated amp or a power

amp, effectively replacing the speakers' internal crossover and allowing active drive. The slopes and turnover points are adjustable, and a small degree of filtering via a 4-stage equaliser is also available via this card.

Another option from Morgan is an equalisation card. This allows fine adjustment of frequencies, somewhat like the old Quad slope filter, across four treble and four bass ranges. Whilst it could be used as a standard, if slightly sophisticated tone control, I suspect this will be of most use in tailoring the systems response to its particular environment. Adjustments can all be carried out from the standard system remote.

The CD player's design is also a little unusual. Eschewing developments over the last decade or so, Morgan has used the original Philips 16 bit DAC. They have done so because they believe that correctly used, in other words with excellent filtering and audio stages, it still sounds best. There is no over-sampling and Morgan has applied their own discrete filtering stages. No op-amps are used in the circuit. The digital and analogue circuits have their own power supplies and the latest generation of Philips mechanism is used. Incidentally, the loading speed of this drawer mechanism even makes the speedy Helios 1 look like a sleepy tortoise. This is by some margin the fastest loader I've encountered. It whips the



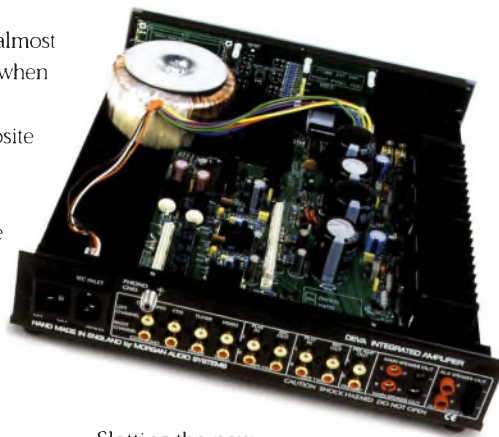
▶ disk so fast into the chassis that I almost felt tempted to don a cricket box when opening the machine, a certain inclination of the hips in the opposite direction certainly felt prudent.

The tuner is a slightly more conventional beast, with discrete analogue audio output stages, offering FM, Medium and Long Wave with auto or manual tuning, along with the ability to pre-set up to 20 FM stations.

With regard to the 'lifestyle' aspects of the system, I think Morgan have done an excellent job. The fascias are uncluttered with neat vertical rows of six control buttons on each product, and all key system functions available from the supplied system remote. The Morgan logo is discreetly applied vertically on the left of each fascia. In fact so clean is their design that each component at first glance looks almost identical to its siblings; buttons in the same position, ditto display cut-outs and logo's. With their small size, understated gunmetal finish, clean fascias and just right, not too bright displays, the Deva system oozes class. A small remote handles all functions and proved perfectly capable in operation with reasonable range, although this is hardly a challenge in my 12 x 16' listening room. The system certainly looks and feels much more expensive than its well under a grand per component price tag, and will have a very high appeal factor on dealers shelves, standing out against the dull black or cluttered chrome of the competition and begging for audition.

Sitting on a Quadraspire rack and hooked up to Ruark Paladins with Nordost Blue Heaven cabling throughout, it was finally time to see if the Deva System could sound anything like as good as it looked.

The amp needs a little warm up time, but as it should be left on anyway, this shouldn't be a problem.



Slotting the new Steely Dan album *Two Against Nature* (Giant 74321 62190 2), it was immediately apparent that the Deva could deliver much more than first impressions might suggest. Belying its diminutive dimensions, a big, solid soundstage opened up. Becker and Fagen's vocals were well projected and the backing vocals were correctly positioned behind the lead duo. There was a very slightly brittle top end adding a touch too much tizz to cymbals, balanced by rather gorgeous bass warmth, somewhat reminiscent of a valve amp, slightly soft but with good control and plenty of slam when required. The complex rhythms were handled with ease, and the essential timbre of each instrument in the mix, from muted horns to timbales, just seemed right. The soundstage, whilst it was generous was not as wide, high or deep as my (much) bigger system delivers, but was surprisingly spacious and convincing given such a modest looking set-up. But the real stars of the show were the musical dynamics. The sound could really explode when the recording demanded it. An extraordinary display at the price.

Moving to *The Capitol Sessions* (Naim cd025), Charlie Haden's opening double bass solo, which becomes a

solid walking bass line to underpin Mike Melvoin's piano on the track 'Blues for Leroy', has plenty of weight and drive. Details like Haden's fingers squeaking across the strings come across cleanly, adding that essential touch of realism. The piano is equally well conveyed with its percussive nature to the fore in this very natural recording. Bill Henderson's vocals in the next track 'Living Without You' made me start as they entered: that 'someone else in the room' feeling that means the system's essentially right. That dynamic coherence again.

Lyle Lovett's 'Church' from his classic *Joshua Judges Ruth* (MCAD 10475) was next to hit the fast loading drawer. (I was getting quite blasé by now and could even stand quite close whilst loading CD's). The gospel singing came across just fine with good stage depth and natural sounding handclaps, with the correct slap and decay. Lovett's vocals were projected forward and held their position centre stage, with the choir ranged in an arc behind him. The bass drove along well with appropriate snap and punch, and the percussion, although perhaps a little lightweight with just a touch of that treble tizz showing up on cymbals, was pretty impressive. The amp showed no hint of running out of steam as this track swelled to its climax, and the solidity and sheer passion of the gospel soloists as they emoted, backed by syncopated clapping from the choir, was really something.

Copland's *An Outdoor Overture* (RR 22CD), demonstrated that the Deva system could handle pretty much any type of music with aplomb. String tone was good, bass drums boomed out, and the orchestral spread was both wide and deep. There was just that very slight hint of tizz at ▶



► the extreme top end, this time evident on triangle. So slight was this that I hesitate to mention it since it was hardly a problem and certainly didn't hamper my musical enjoyment. That enjoyment was what the Deva system was able to deliver in spades, whatever the type of music. A few brief forays with records via my Michell ISO showed that the essential character of the system remained intact whatever the medium. The miniscule amp could pump out high dB's when required with absolutely no hint of stress, remaining clean and even paced to the point where my speakers were showing signs of impending collapse. Whilst the system isn't the most capable retriever of fine detail, it does a splendid job at the asking price. Its structural and dynamic capabilities make it a particularly communicative and involving performer.

The tuner is broadly comparable to the amp and CD in overall quality. Not quite sharing their extraordinary price/performance ratio perhaps, £600 whilst not an outrageous sum is relatively expensive for a tuner and there are many strong and less expensive contenders. It does however perform very well, cleanly reproducing both speech and music with no undue emphasis across the spectrum.

It picked up FM signals well in my average reception area, and was at least listenable on the 'also ran' Medium and Long Wave frequencies. I'm fairly sure that anyone opting for the amp and CD who also wants radio will plump for the matching tuner. It might be slightly bettered by the competition, but it is a solid and dependable performer and, let's face it, looks great when stacked in line with the other gear. What was that about lifestyle?

Having lived for a while with the system as a whole, I felt it would be

useful to sample the amp separately to gain an impression of its stand-alone capabilities. Hooking up my Copland CDA 289, which at something like four times the size of the amp looked as out of place as Anne Widdecombe in an Amsterdam window, I loaded up the Steely Dan album. Ah! Now it was immediately clear who the real star of the system was. The little amp is a killer. The top end was extraordinarily smooth, the bass had cleaned up without losing its beguiling warmth. I did feel that extreme bass was slightly rolled off but this presented no real problem musically, and in fact helped contribute to the bass punch when required. Resolution of fine detail had also improved and vocals were better projected and more three-dimensional. Of course, since the Copland CD player costs about the same price as the entire Deva system, I'd be pretty upset if it didn't show a radical improvement. A brief foray with the AudioPhysic Steps showed that the amp could drive these little speakers with aplomb, and detail resolution and staging were now further improved, thoroughly trashing my Ruarks. The exercise proved that Morgan Audio have designed a little cracker of an amp, which given its performance and flexibility is offered at a near

giveaway price. I'm only sorry that I wasn't able to hear the phono board, and I look forward

to hearing the new power amps.

Whilst I'm bowled over by the amp I should be careful not to belittle the CD and tuner. The CD in particular

offers a performance that's fully commensurate with its price, and the tuner is also a highly capable performer. The system works well as a unit with no single piece letting the side down. It looks a million dollars, is entirely trouble free in operation and will make absolutely minimal demands on space. Nor does it cost a fortune. Ugly bunch of expensive and ill-matched separates, anyone? The Deva lets you have your cake and eat it. ►+

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Amplifier

Inputs:	6 x Line (Optional MM/MC)
Outputs:	Tape and Pre-out
Input Sensitivity:	700mV for full output
Input Impedance:	20 Kohms
Output Power:	47w into 8 ohms
Weight:	8kg
Price:	£650

CD Player

Outputs:	1 x Analogue, 1 x Digital (phono)
Output Level:	1.4mV maximum
DAC:	16bit, no over-sampling
Chipset:	Philips TDA 1543
Weight:	6.5kg
Price:	£700

Tuner

Wavebands:	FM, LW, MW
FM Sensitivity:	1.1microV for 26dB S/N (mono) 45 microV for 50dB S/N (stereo)
Output Level:	950mV
Weight:	5kg
Price:	£600

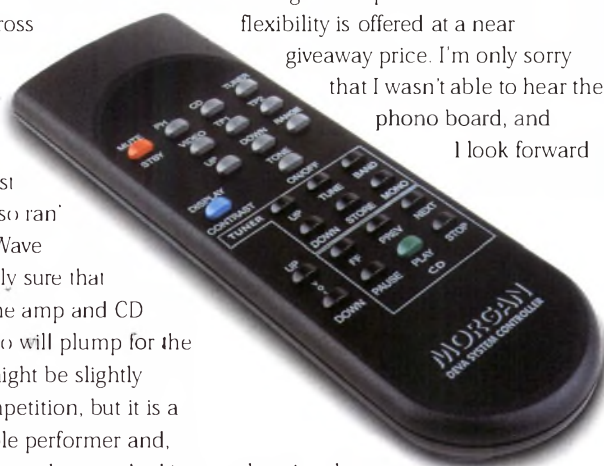
Dimensions (WxHxD): 325 x 80 x 320mm each

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Planet

88:88
88:88
88:88



planar 2

Rega Starter System

by Paul Messenger

A complete two-source hi-fi system priced at around £1,300 is not the sort of reviewing task that normally comes my way. Although it will undoubtedly do me some good to be exposed to the sort of hi-fi equipment that normal people buy, I have to admit I don't really have the experience to put this neat little Rega package into a proper market context.

The new £255/pair Ara loudspeaker is no problem. I do loads of loudspeakers, and have only just finished reviewing, comparing and contrasting a dozen speakers in more or less the same price zone as this little miniature. However, it's a long time since I've played around with any budget integrated amplifiers like the £298 Big Brio, or mid-price CD players like the distinctive £475 Planet. Happily, the final component is rather more familiar, the long-standing £224 Planar 2 vinyl turntable (fitted with £42 Bias cartridge), which must be heading towards its thirtieth birthday soon.

Add in a few pounds for Rega speaker leads (£1.98/m), £29 for the remote handset (which only operates the CD player here), select speaker stands and support furniture to taste, plug in all the bits and you're away, more or less. Don't overlook Rega's excellent and wonderfully simple support frame for wall-mounting

their turntables. It really does get the best out of them by minimising external interference.

They also used to make an excellent set of wall brackets for the Kyte, although these may no longer be appropriate for the rear ported Ara. Check with your Rega dealer. There's a little bit more to it than that, but only a little, as it takes about five minutes to fettle the turntable for



action, but for maybe £1,400 all told you've got yourself a very nice looking 'real' hi-fi system from a specialist brand with a proven pedigree.

Let's take a look at the individual components in a little more detail. The Planar 2 turntable goes right back to the beginning of Rega in the early 1970s. It remains as valid today as it did then, and will probably continue for as long as black vinyl carries on spinning. It's been through some changes, to be sure, and will doubtless

go through more as long as there's vinyl available to play, but the core of this essentially very simple design has stayed consistent throughout.

Regular readers may recall that the last issue contained a review of the Planar 25, which included reference to a Planar 3. The Planar 2 is what you might call a 'beefed down' version of the 3. It costs £65 less than the 3, and is the least

expensive turntable in the Rega range (was there ever a

Planar 1? I think we should be told!). Inevitably, therefore, much of the engineering content is pared to a minimum, though certain critical components, such as the turntable

main bearing and the tonearm bearings, maintain very close engineering tolerances.

The laminated wood-derived plinth (which provides the virtual mechanical earth for a 'solid' turntable such as this) is less substantial than that used in the 3, and less shiny too, while the tonearm has been simplified, with no spring-and-dial assistance in setting downforce, just a simple counterbalance. Familiar Rega features like the glass platter, felt mat and single-casting tonearm tube/headshell are all present, and speed change between 33 and 45rpm is effected by lifting off the platter and moving the drive belt to the other drive pulley.

Those who read last issue's



▶ review of the P25 may recall a discussion of motor mounting, and how one of the P25's innovations is a rigid mounting fed from a more elaborate power supply. A similar if simpler change is just going into production on the Planar 3, though at present this Planar 2 will continue to use the O-ring motor decoupling which has served well enough for a quarter century (so you'll still hear the occasional, harmless start-up 'clonk').

With its heart very much in vinyl, Rega left it very late to introduce a CD player to its model line-up. Reviving a name used for one of the company's very earliest turntable designs, the Planet finally appeared in 1997. It's a striking looking player, built into Rega's ultra slim 'clam-shell' cast alloy casework and incorporating a top-loading mechanism. A particularly neat trick is the way the (manual) lid is executed, a double hinge arrangement carrying the cover backwards as well as up. Close tolerancing allows the puck to be an integral part of the lid and come into operation automatically. You can't stack other equipment directly on top of a Planet of course, but the mechanism allows the player to be used in an equipment rack with shelves spaced 15cm or so apart.

All things being equal, a top-loading mechanism ought to offer greater mechanical integrity, the Sony-sourced disc drive being mounted rigidly within the case, while the whole unit stands on four anti-shock feet with controlled decoupling. Having collaborated initially with Burr Brown on the D-to-A conversion, Rega has developed its own digital filtering implementation, by working from an analogue perspective.



The requirements for the filter were first defined in the analogue domain, and then the digital equivalent was created.

In the Rega tradition, operational simplicity takes precedence over the feature count, with just 'play', 'stop' and 'track skip' on the machine itself, with a limited (but entirely adequate) amount of status information on a small red-lit display. The usual selection of other options like track programming, scan-search, display options etc are available via the hand-set. A fully isolated S/PDIF electrical digital output is available on a phono socket, alongside the fixed level left and right channel analogue phono sockets.

The Big Brio has evolved out of Rega's original Brio budget amplifier. This current version has new output transistors and a larger transformer and is housed in similar 'full size' clam-shell cast casework as the Planet, though the LED indicators here are, perversely, green.

Simplicity is again the keynote, inside and out, so the controls consist of just two large knobs, selecting input and volume, plus a pushbutton on/off switch. Rated at 35W/channel, the circuitry is a long established, tried and tested application, with less

feedback and therefore higher measured distortion levels than most marketplace rivals – a decision Rega made quite deliberately in the interests of sound quality. Most of the distortion consists of innocuous second harmonic components anyway. There are five inputs all told, including a rather basic phono stage for vinyl replay, plus one tape output (but no monitoring override). There's no remote control on this base model in the range: Rega has looked into the various ways of implementing remote control, and has come to the



conclusion that the cheap ways of doing this involve unacceptable compromises, so the feature is only found on more expensive Rega amps.

The Ara loudspeaker is the direct descendant of the Kyte, similarly tiny in box and main driver size, but

► tidied up cosmetically and now with a conventional cylindrical port mounted in the rear panel, instead of the Kyte's front panel triangle. Cosmetically it looks a lot neater than before, with 'soft' radiused front edges, rebated drive units, and real wood veneer on all faces bar the back. Irrespective of performance, you won't find many real wood speakers on the market for less.

The main driver is Rega's familiar five-incher, with a classy cast frame, a small (90mm diameter) paper cone, and a pole-piece extension to smooth the response at the top of its operating range. The tweeter is a high quality 19mm soft dome device, and a single pair of socket/binder terminals is fitted.

Even with reflex port assistance, such a small driver (and enclosure) is bound to have restricted low bass output and absolute loudness capability. Small boxes do, however, keep box coloration to a minimum (less surface area to generate unwanted vibrations), and small drivers have the advantage over larger alternatives at the top of their working range – where the ear is actually much more sensitive.

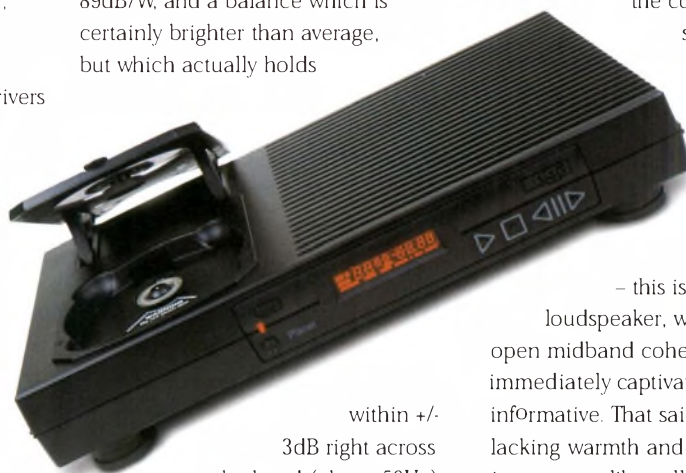
Even the bass limitations aren't necessarily such a problem. A pair of speakers this size, mounted close to a wall, will actually give quite decent output down to around 50Hz, because of the way the room modes and nearby boundaries reinforce the low frequencies, especially if the room itself is not too large. There's still no way such a small speaker will reproduce genuinely low (ie sub-50Hz) bass, and the overall balance is still definitely on the thin and dry side of neutral. But very low bass has less to do with the

fundamentals of actual musical instruments, and more to do with recovering ambience, and a 'dry' character is



arguably preferable to a thick and heavy balance that muddies up the crucial midband information.

I took my usual in-room measurements on the Aras, and these reveal a decent sensitivity of around 89dB/W, and a balance which is certainly brighter than average, but which actually holds



within +/- 3dB right across the band (above 50Hz).

That said, output is definitely rather stronger above 500Hz than through the bass and lower midband, and the upper mid and presence bands could be smoother.

I do have a couple of minor niggles with the system as a whole. The first is cosmetic: the illumination on the

Planet is all red, while the LEDs on the Big Brio are green. I suppose it helps you find the right one in the dark, but

I for one would prefer if they matched each other. (Rega colour code their amps, so you need the top-price Mira to get red LEDs.) The second point concerns the tonearm lead-out wires, which are terminated in red and black plugs, whereas the Brio inputs are white/red colour coded.

This is an illogical mismatch in components which are expected to be used together. To make matters worse, the cartridge had been wired in reverse, further adding to the confusion. Easily sorted out, but it does rather underline the value of colour coding the cartridge pins, a luxury Rega have decided to forego.

I was just finishing a group test on budget loudspeakers when the Rega system arrived, so it was natural enough to simply hook up the Aras to my normal system, to get a handle on them while my memories of

the competition were still fresh, and while I was rigging up the rest of the system. By any standards – relative or absolute – this is a corking little

loudspeaker, with a marvellously open midband coherence that's immediately captivating and highly informative. That said, it's also rather lacking warmth and richness, so that instruments like cellos and bass guitars are lacking in 'body', and some might find the whole effect just a little cold and clinical.

However, there's no denying that this is a superb sounding speaker for its size, and one that's well able to reveal the subtleties of far more expensive equipment than the rest of the

▶ system assembled here. Listening to the Aras, driven from the 'full monte' Naim system I normally use, was a salutary reminder that the speakers are usually the least critical component in the chain, and are usually just as good as the sources and amplification allows them to be.

One thing's for certain, they deserve to be placed on as good a pair of stands as you can afford. My regular 'reference' stands are Kudos S100s (now available again, courtesy Neat Acoustics), but these are actually more expensive than the Aras, so hardly a likely real world partnership. After talking this over with the editor, I dug out a pair of Atacama SE24s, which have been a favourite budget stand for a long time.

The trouble is, they didn't really seem to suit the little Regas, and lost so much information through the bass region in particular that I felt I couldn't trust my judgement any more. I didn't have any other 'budget' stands to hand, so I went back to the Kudos'. If you're thinking of going for this system, do spend a little time checking out the speaker stand alternatives available at your dealer. Further discussion with RG revealed some confusion. I didn't mention Atacama by name, and he thought the SE24s were a target open frame stand, and on reflection, that would have been a far more sensible match.

Although I did use relatively expensive speaker stands for most of the time, no such luxury was afforded the other components. I simply drafted in a venerable Sound Organisation stack, as something entirely appropriate to the budget nature of the rest of the system. In fact, turntable aside, the Rega designs are purposely (and successfully) engineered to minimise the impact of supports. A

very sensible precaution given their budget pricing.

Changing over from a five-figure system to the complete Rega combination was, as one might expect, a bit of

a culture shock. In fact, the Rega system has a great deal of charm, but it did take a little time to get accustomed to a

substantial reduction in the bandwidth, dynamic range and sheer bottom end drive that I'd become accustomed to.

The first impression (always important) was of a sound which did lose out a bit at the bandwidth extremes, but which handled the midrange very capably indeed, with excellent timing throughout, and a truly 'direct coupled' simplicity and eagerness through the voice and presence regions. In some respects I was reminded of classic budget valve amp designs, like Leak Stereo 20s and Rogers HG88s!

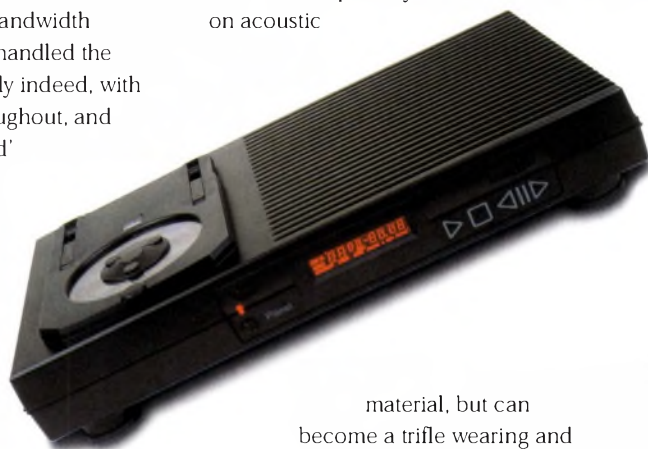
I gave myself a few days of acclimatisation, and started to enjoy the system a great deal. It might not be the last word in dynamic range and subtlety, but the important bits are handled very well indeed, and it does a first class job of communicating the essential musical messages, without getting too distracted by the cosmetics of its presentation.

Its limitations are certainly less obvious when the material isn't too demanding, and I therefore found it very satisfactory with radio and TV sources. The Planar 2 and Planet both did the business most effectively, though there's a major disparity between the 'effective' input

sensitivities of the two sources. With the CD player operating, I was getting maximum useable output at somewhere around '10-to' or '5-to' on the volume control; with vinyl the same stage was reached with the volume knob round at 10 or a quarter past.

Much more significant is a marked contrast in the tonal balances of the two sources. The CD player tends to emphasise the upper midband and presence, and since both the amp and speakers share a similar overall character, the combination of all three can get a bit too forward and in-your-face for comfort on some recordings.

This gives excellent texture and fine detail, especially on acoustic



material, but can become a trifle wearing and glaring if you play the system at highish levels for long periods (partly, it must be said, because of the poor inherent quality of many commercial recordings). And because the midband is a bit forward, the bottom and top ends tend to be slightly under-emphasised, reducing the impression of scale somewhat.

The vinyl source, in contrast, has much less relative presence energy, sounds relatively laid back and is consequently altogether more comfortable when the system is being played loud. The venerable P2 seems sweeter, more delicate and extended at the top end of the band, and a bit looser and sloppier in the bass, characteristics which felicitously complement rather than reinforce ▶

▶ the characters of the amp and speakers, and make for a more relaxing overall experience than the CD player gives. At the same time, the Planet has a precision and stability you won't find with the vinyl player.

While I find myself coming to the conclusion that this system slightly favours vinyl over CD, the bottom line is that it's a fine communicator with



an exceptionally high 'fun factor' whatever the source. The thread of consistency that makes the whole much more than the mere sum of the parts is that it 'direct couples' the vital, dynamic and coherent midband straight to your ears, in such a way as to make it easy to get into even strange and unfamiliar forms of music. And that, after all, is what this whole hi-fi game ought to be about. ▶

Starting Out, Stepping Up

by Jason Hector

This Rega Research system is designed to be a minimum fuss entry level into "proper" HiFi. As such it needs to be complete, clear and fuss free. The aim has to be for the manufacturer to make the basic choices, supplying the buyer with a packaged system solution.

This Rega does, but being Rega they go a stage further. This is just about the only serious one-make system on the market to include a proper record player option. And let's not forget the Radio, Rega's tuner. Short of a tape deck or other recording medium the Rega offers everything you need for a start in "proper hi-fi".

The system's appearance is certainly coherent, and it goes beyond simply being black. Each unit is well finished and clearly functional, and



while beauty is in the eye of the beholder, I really like the way it looks, and just as importantly, feels. The amp, in its cast clamshell case, is solid and inspires confidence, and the top loading mechanism of the Planet CD player is a work of art. The new boys in the system are the loudspeakers and I am pleased to say that they don't let the side down with a very good quality wood veneer. The Planar 2 is evergreen (in black!),

and redefines functional simplicity. Apart from fitting the cartridge (which should be done by the dealer) it's nearly as simple to set-up as a CD player. There's nothing here to frighten the uninitiated.

My aim with this review is to give a second opinion on the merits of the system; how it sounds, its strengths and weaknesses, and whether upgrading elements such as the cables should be considered as a cost-effective option.

Starting with the excellently designed and executed Planet CD player and the latest Tori Amos album, I settled back to listen. The first thing that strikes you is the quickness of this little system, and the way it locks to the rhythms and melody in a song. ▶

▶ going straight for the hooks to produce an energetic and engaging sound. Vocals are well presented and pushed forward from the rest of the music, allowing Tori's voice full rein and space. Unfortunately this disc also showed up the weaknesses of the system, with the powerful sound losing both scale and drama and becoming confused when the songs built toward their complex climax.

A switch to the more relaxed Simon and Garfunkel (*'America' Bookends* MFSL UDCD732)



brought a smile to my face. This system sounds best with this sort of simple, natural recording but loses it a touch with busy layered productions (like the Tori Amos disc), revealing the trade off between the structure of the music and the resolution of the detail. At this price you can't have both, and Rega have put structure top of their list of priorities, rhythmic and melodic

shape in front of sheer detail.

Feeding the system Zakir Hussain's *Making Music* (ECM1349 831544-2), another disc that suits its strengths but was still challenging, you gained a good sense of space from the sparse recording. The guitar notes were well formed and evolved in time, each one having a discernible beginning and end with no excess overhang or

premature truncation.

Again the system provided good communication of the essence of the music, with a very natural sound quality that preserved the complex rhythms and dynamic shadings.

So how did the record player fare in this system? With the Planar 2 sporting a Bias cartridge Ben Harper and the Innocent Criminals were cued up. The first thing to strike me was the fuller and heavier sound of the record spinner which added texture, detail and immediacy to the performance. The first track on the Ben Harper album *'Alone'* is, as the name implies, an impassioned cry against the harsh reality of loneliness,

and is one of those tracks that can really grab you right between the ears! The Rega system made a good stab at it although I knew how powerful this track could be. I guess in a case like this ignorance is bliss. Don't get the wrong idea here, the Planar 2 was even more capable than the Planet in grabbing the rhythms and cutting straight to the heart of the music. On lighter tracks it bounced along, always able to demonstrate that all-important "foot-tapping" factor, and was always enjoyable, which is something some systems costing many times the Rega price struggle to achieve.

So what improvements can be wrought with a few simple and cost-effective upgrades? First up was a change in the speaker cable, out went the Rega cable (£2.79/m) and in came that perennial, Naim NACA5 (£6/m). This sort of price hike is about right in this system context, any more and the question of upgrading one of the boxes starts to figure. With the NACA5 in place there was a substantial leap forward in sound quality. The bass benefited greatly from the lift NACA5 can give, injecting the performance with increased momentum and drive. Now Ben Harper's exhortations were propelled into the room with more feeling, and the dynamic range limitations were much less apparent. Basically the whole sound got a whole lot bigger.

Back to the Planet and the Tori Amos CD. Oh, so it was bass that was missing. "Bloody hell" said the editor! The whole feel of this track was completely changed. Much more explicit and controlled, the bass now allowed the menace of the Tori Amos track to come across. Were there any negatives in the cable change? Well the sound was slightly shut in compared to before but was better in every other way. What little it lost in air, it more than made up for in weight, scale, poise, control. ▶

► dynamic range . . . need I go on? This isn't an upgrade it's a necessity. Only the truly skint should settle for a cheaper cable. The difference is that big.

The next attempted improvement was the addition of a Chord company Siren (£68) interconnect cable between the Planet and the Brio.

The resulting sound was a definite improvement with a, wait for the over-used description, veil, there it is, being removed from the sound. The result was a great deal of extra texture in the instruments and voices.

The top end was extended and gained air and more detail, although the treble did become a little spitty, and sibilance was exaggerated. Nice to have the positives, but that treble could become irritating.

Reluctantly I resorted to the next model up the Chord range, the Chameleon, which at £89 is enough to give the budget conscious buyer serious pause for thought. I could have looked for an alternative outside the Chord range, but I didn't for two reasons: the Chord cables have always worked well with the NACA5, and the vast majority of Rega dealers stock them. There's no point in me recommending a Musical Pipedreams Basso Profundo interconnect if it means going to a different dealer to get it. Dumb in the context of this system, dumb in the context of any system.

With the Chameleon duly installed, the treble was far sweeter, and if it wasn't as obviously detailed, it was certainly better integrated. The overall balance of the sound was back in place, and the music flowed out that bit easier. The total dynamic range of the system was extended again, removing effort from the music. This interconnect with the NACA5 was

the best combination, and well worth the extra outlay. 'Trans-Am' from the Neil Young album *Sleeps With Angels* (Reprise 9362-45749-2) proved the point. That voice was instantly recognisable, while the whole song had a sense of contained power.



a latent menace that dripped from the atmosphere. This depth, scale and impact would have been well beyond the original set-up. And it's not just cosmetic. It made the song really work.

So has this system succeeded in its aim of being a no fuss entry to real high fidelity music reproduction in the home? Simply put, the answer is yes, and for both records and CD's, it really is a case of "My First HiFi", and I don't mean that in a negative fashion. As I said earlier this system is always capable of presenting music to the listener in a highly enjoyable and satisfying manner, and encourages extended listening. Working in a purposely limited bandwidth helps here, as the system only has to work in a defined envelope, never attempting anything it can't achieve, and so never becoming offensive. The sound quality was easily improved with some very cost-effective upgrades which seemed to directly attack the identified weaknesses of the system, and further underlines the excellent quality of the basic elements. What is less obvious is the long-term value built into

a system like this. The one stop shopping approach means that the products ensure a degree of aesthetic and electrical compatibility. But it goes further than that. Want an upgrade? A Planar 3 will slot right in, and your dealer is bound to offer a generous trade-in on the 2. More powerful amp, or one with remote control? The only difference your wife, parents, significant other will notice is the different shade of LEDs. And the same logic applies to the trade-in. This might be the bottom rung on a ladder, but at least it is a ladder, and that's important.

All in all this is an extremely capable system, delivering excellent musical enjoyment for the minimum outlay and hassle, and it has reaffirmed for me just how good a music making device a Rega Planar 2 is, and what Rega as a company bring to value engineering. They don't build down to a price, . . . they just sort of squeeze into it. ➤

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Rega Planar 2 Turntable	£224
Rega Bias Cartridge	£42
Rega Planet CD Player	£475
Rega Remote Control	£29
Rega Big Brio Amplifier	£289
Rega Ara Speakers	£255
Chord Chameleon Interconnect	£89/1m pr.
Naim NACA5 Speaker Cable	£6/m

Manufacturer:

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

See page 106 for stockists.

WHERE TO BUY IT – REGIONAL REGA DEALER LIST

London

The Cornflake Shop	37, Windmill Street, London W1P 1HH	Tel. 0171 631 0472	Ad. Pg. 123
Walrus Systems	11, New Quebec Street, London W1H 7DD	Tel. 0171 724 7224	Ad. Pg. 22
Martin Kleiser	109 Chiswick High Road, Chiswick London W4 2ED 278 High St, Uxbridge, Middlesex, London UB8 1LQ	Tel. 0181 400 5555 Tel. 01895 465444	
Infidelity	9, High St, Hampton Wick, Surrey KT1 4DA	Tel. 0181 943 3530	Ad. Pg. 123
Thomas Heinitz	35, Moscow Rd, Bayswater, London W2 4AH	Tel. 0171 229 2077	Ad. Pg. 74
Billy Vee Sound Systems	248, Lee High Rd, Lewisham, London SE13 5PL	Tel. 0181 318 5755	Ad. Pg. 74
Oranges and Lemons	61 - 63, Webbs Rd, London SW11 6RX	Tel. 0171 924 2040	Ad. Pg. 85

The Home Counties

The Audio File	27, Hockerill St, Bishops stortford, Herts, CM23 2DH	Tel. 01279 506576	
Sound Gallery	65, castle st, high Wycombe, Bucks, HP13 6RN	Tel. 01494 531682	Ad. Pg. 50
Northwood Audio	98, Cambridge St, Aylesbury, Bucks HP20 1BA	Tel. 01296 428790	
Radlett Audio	9, Holywell Hill, St Albans, Herts AL1 1EO	Tel. 01727 855577	Ad. Pg. 107

The North

Acoustica	17, Hoole Rd, Chester, Cheshire CH2 3NH	Tel. 01244 344227	Ad. Pg. 7
Audio Counsel	12 Shaw Rd, Oldham, Cheshire OL1 3LQ 14, Stockport Rd, Cheadle, Cheshire SK8 2AA	Tel. 0161 633 2602 Tel. 0161 428 7887	Ad. Pg. 50 Ad. Pg. 50
Audio Images	284, Glossop Rd, Sheffield, South Yorkshire S10 2HS	Tel. 01142 737893	Ad. Pg. 123
Hi-Fi Showrooms	12a, west Street, Congleton CW12 1SR	Tel. 01260 280017	
The Sound Organisation	2, Gillygate, York, North Yorkshire YO31 7EQ	Tel. 01904 627108	
Zen Audio	35, George Street, Hull, East Yorkshire HU1 3BA	Tel. 01482 587397	
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Griffin Audio	94, Bristol Street, Birmingham, West Midlands B5 7AH	Tel. 0121 692 1359	
Frank Harvey Hi-Fi	163 Medieval Spon St, Coventry CV1 3BB	Tel. 01203 525200	
New Audio Frontiers	43, Granby Street, Loughborough, Leicestershire LE11 3DU	Tel. 01509 264002	Ad. Pg. 65
Midland Audio Exchange	181, Franche Rd, Kidderminster, Worcs DY11 5AD	Tel. 01562 822236	Ad. Pg. 65

The South East

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Soundcraft	40, High Street, Ashford, Kent TN26 8TE	Tel. 01233-624441	Ad. Pg. 74

East Anglia

Basically Sound	The Old School, School Rd, Bracon Ash, Nr Norwich, NR14 8HG	Tel. 01508 570829	
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The South Coast

Jeffries Hi-Fi	69, London Rd, Brighton, East Sussex BN1 4SE 29 London Rd, Portsmouth, Hants PO2 0BH	Tel. 01273 609431 Tel. 023 9266 3604	Ad. Pg. 51 Ad. pg. 51
The Powerplant	66-67, Upper North Street, Brighton, East Sussex BN1 3FL	Tel. 01273 775978	
Phonography	2 Star Lane, Ringwood, Hants BH24 1AL	Tel. 01425 461230	

The South West

Mike Manning Audio	110, Middle Street, Yeovil, Somerset BA20 1NE 54, Bridge Street, Taunton, Somerset TA1 1UD	Tel. 01935 479361 Tel. 01823 326688	Ad. Pg. 75 Ad. Pg. 75
Radford Hi-Fi	10, Gloucester Road, Bishopston, Bristol BF7 8AE 12, James Street West, Bath, BA1 2BX	Tel. 01179 441010 Tel. 01225 446245	

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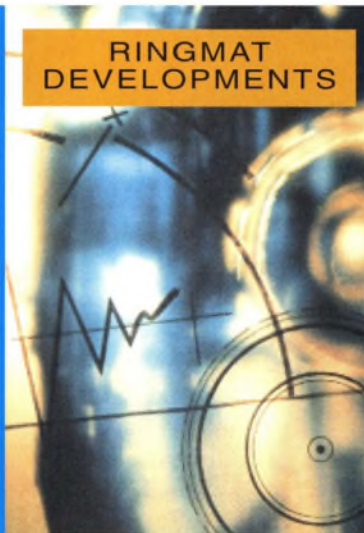
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Incognito Rega VTA Fixer

by Rcy Gregory

The history of the RB300 tonearm is littered with failed attempts to correct its one major shortcoming. The lack of any kind of sensible VTA adjustment has been a pain in the neck of turntable manufacturers (who fit it as an OEM item) and end users alike. And through it all, nothing has disturbed the beatific smile, the buddha like calm of Mr Gandy. Rega have resolutely refused to acknowledge the issue, and the various "solutions" from other manufacturers have tended to be both clunky and operationally dubious, whilst some have ended up costing more than the arm itself.

So, I guess that having got so excited about the performance of the Incognito Rega re-wiring kit, I shouldn't be surprised that their next little project is an RB300 VTA solution - one of such staggering simplicity and operational elegance that you wonder why nobody thought of it before. It consists of a small aluminium sleeve, internally threaded, that you screw onto the threaded base of the Rega arm. At the top of the sleeve is a flange machined into a hex shape 34mm across. With the sleeve screwed up flush against the shoulder of the arm base, drop the arm into the mounting hole in the armboard. Turn the hex headed flange on the

sleeve clockwise (effectively undoing it) and, lo and behold, the arm rises. Once you've set the required VTA you simply tighten the base nut as normal. And it's even available in colours as well as black, just in case your mates miss it, smuggling up

against your black armboard

To describe this whole process as simple undermines its elegance. No modification of the arm or deck should be necessary as Rega specify a 23mm mounting hole for the RB300 despite the arm base only being 21mm in diameter.

In fact, the sleeve actually centres the arm more accurately. Having said that it's worth checking this point with whoever built your turntable, as I couldn't persuade the sleeve to fit a Gyro armboard. You might need to have the board drilled out slightly, or swapped.

Downsides?

The VTA Fixer raises the base of the arm by the thickness of the flange (about 1.5mm), and obviously it can't be used to lower the arm, not that I can see that ever being required. The only other problem is the depth of the sleeve, which limits its use to armboards at least 18mm thick, and its range of adjustment to about 9mm.

A shorter sleeve would improve both limitations, and I believe the matter is under investigation (obviously the length of the thread will effect the strength of the joint between the arm and sleeve, and hence how tight you can set the base nut).

In use, the VTA Fixer is a joy. All you need is a 34mm spanner, which I found, courtesy of Campagnolo in my bicycle tool kit. Its nice thin profile made it the perfect match for the flange, easily fitting under the armrest and counter-weight. Tweak the spanner and adjust the VTA in nice, repeatable increments. Nothing could be simpler. Just make sure that you loosen the base nut first. The asking price of £25 might seem like a lot for such a dinky bit of aluminium, but the hex flange means that it has to be machined from solid. Besides, every alternative I've ever seen barely functions and costs even more. Me? I think it's a steal.

Price: £25

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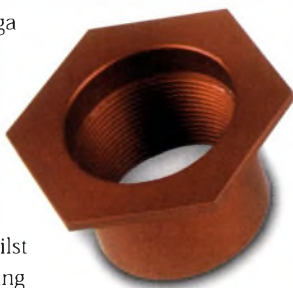
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Cartridge Man Digital Level Or ...The Leveller - Part 2

by Roy Gregory

In the last issue I wrote about the Cartridge Man Digital Level, welcoming its performance if not the price-tag. Well, since then, two things have happened. No it hasn't got any cheaper! But I have received a production version, rather than the final prototype that I reviewed, and I've been using it - lots.

But first things first. The final production unit is actually quite a bit shorter than my original sample, and more importantly, it's lighter. Under 200g in fact, which makes it only a little heavier than an audiophile pressing. (If Len could shave it down to 180g that would be absolutely perfect, although I understand that this is extremely unlikely, so don't hold your breath.) With its shorter stature it actually feels more solid, and now represents a reassuring fist full. And whilst I still couldn't recommend its use on the likes of Pink Triangles, it's certainly now much more compatible with suspended decks than I originally suggested. The finish is a bit nicer too, but that's beside the point

The real revelation has been the rapidity with which this apparent luxury has become an indispensable part of my tool kit. The magazine production cycle means that every two months it's a case of all change in the Gregory listening room. The system is ripped down, the



racks pulled out, the corners hoovered and the cables cleaned. And if I'm feeling especially virtuous then the mains plugs get a once over too. Then the whole lot needs to be put back together, incorporating whatever new bits and pieces the new issue demands. With racks, speakers, turntables and sub-shelves all requiring precise levelling, the Digital Level is a God-send. Whilst it initially takes a little getting used to, you soon get the hang of it. The problem lies in the fact that the arrows that indicate the "high-side" are positioned around the periphery of the display area, rather than next to the digital readouts. The front-to-back slope readout is nearest the user, but the arrow indicating that the far side of the object is raised

is on the far side of the display, with the left-right read-out between it and the relevant numbers. It's surprising how confusing this can be at first, although as I said, you get used to it pretty quickly. Once you get the hang of it, it is simple, repeatable and totally failsafe.

As I said in the first piece I wrote, I think the Digital Level is the ideal tool for a dealer. Now I'd go further and say that for anyone who takes the job seriously then it's essential equipment. Anyone selling and installing expensive equipment should definitely have one, and that's not just turntables. Loudspeakers and CD players would be obvious beneficiaries, but I actually like to get everything level. Likewise, anyone who does their own set-up should consider it too. And I haven't even started on all the other uses such a compact and easily read level can be put to. This thing is a DIYers delight! Expensive?

Yes, but then the best normally is.

Price: £200

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The Charge Of The Static Brigade

by Dave Ayers

Right then you 'orrible lot, get your cases in order and listen up. Now then my little silver lovelies, I've been hearing some nasty rumours about you. In fact I hear you're all a bunch of layabouts, totally static to be precise. You Boy (George)! Get yourself under that tap and don't come out till you're prepared to perform properly. And as for you Mr Richard 'Smarty Pants' Thompson, don't think all that finger twiddling cuts any ice with me, go over there and sit on that plastic mat, and if you still don't behave I'll be over with the electric cattle prod in a minute. And you, yes you with the horn section, you think you're some kind of maverick don't you, well it won't wash here, but this spray will – so get to it.

Barking mad? Well that certainly how I felt when I embarked on this little comparative test, but perhaps I should start from the beginning. It all began when I was visiting the Vienna High-end '99 show. During the course of a system demonstration by Phonosophie, I was surprised to find that the sound of the system was much enhanced after the disc was placed under a running water tap and then dried. Although I was not familiar with the system, I could clearly hear an increase in the size of the sound stage, a reduction in 'digital harshness' and an overall improvement in rhythmic integrity. At this stage I should point out that I had no idea until after I had heard the improvements what it was that had actually been done to the system, or rather the disc. As I explained in the last

issue, a static charge on a CD can affect the focusing of the laser, and clearly the water trick was effectively grounding the CD, and dispersing the charge. Later experimentation at home showed this effect to be repeatable and demonstrable to others.

It also showed that the effect would wear off during the course of a CD, leading me to believe that the very act of playing a CD causes static build up. Now, there is no way that this magazine is going to endorse the practice of running water over all your CDs, mainly because any flawed CD could suffer from oxidation problems if water got inside, not to mention that the label printing may suffer over time. Having said that, it's clear that the whole issue of CD static deserves looking at. A quick conflag with 'R Ed' and we had a plan of action;

get together a number of anti-static products and see what their effect would be, singly and cumulatively. A bit of further head scratching and we had a short list of suspects: ordinary tap water, the Ringmat Developments Statmat, the Zerostat 3 anti-static pistol, and the Nordost ECO 3 spray. I started with the Statmat, just to establish both the principle and a baseline, the findings appearing in Issue 5. This article should be treated as a follow on from that review.

For those with short memories, or those who did not read issue 5, there now follows a short recap of the plot so far: I liked the effect of the Statmat so much that I now use it all the time. Or in more detail: using the Statmat wrought improvements in all areas of CD sourced music; particularly in rhythmic integrity and emphasis, in reducing perceived distortion, in opening up the sound stage and improving detail resolution. In fact, on many occasions it was like a two step upgrade to the CD player. (What I didn't mention in the original article is that I use a Trichord CD transport and DAC, and that the transport is based on one of the Pioneer models, complete with stable platter mechanism. This type of mechanism is like a CD sized turntable, on which the CD sits, silver side up, and is read from above.

In this type of player the Statmat sits upside down on the platter, sandwiched between it and the CD. I had no chance to try it out on a conventional mechanism, but since then 'R Ed' has experimented further, and discovered that

the effect is as great if not greater in conventional transports.)

So back to the matter in hand, and how to perform this test. Not being blessed with multiple copies of each CD, I needed to formulate a plan that would allow me to try out the different combinations on each of the test CDs. As anyone who has ever been accidentally zapped by another person in a room with a nylon carpet can tell you, a pretty strong charge can be built up simply by shuffling and scuffing one's feet on ►



▶ the carpet. This technique also works to recharge the CD after each test, as was confirmed by listening. Unfortunately for the experiment, the ECO 3 treatment cannot be reversed in this way, and so care was taken to ensure that for each CD the other products were tested first. The discs used were the same as for the previous review, and various combinations of treatments were used to see if the effects (if any) were cumulative. The Statmat was used as a reference due to my familiarity, and the fact that I still have the original notes from before.

The first product in this test is a clear liquid and comes at little or no cost in your average household tap. Application is by running the water over the surface of the CD direct from the tap. This effectively grounds any static on the surface of the CD, but of course leaves droplets which need removing. I found that a soft cloth or tissue, used radially as with CD cleaning fluid would safely remove these.

The Statmat reminded me of something when I was using it before, but I couldn't put my finger on it. Then it came to me, it's a bit like an overgrown version of those fish made out of plastic film that you used to get in Christmas crackers when I was a kid, the ones that used to curl up when placed in the palm of your hand. It's also just as light, and somewhat prone to waft away into some inaccessible gap between your equipment when you remove your CD from the transport. Whilst a complete failure on the perceived value for money front, in the sound for pound equation I don't think I've come across anything better. Simply place it on (or in my case under) your CD, ensuring it is the right way up, and press play.

Anyone who has been interested in hi-fi since the vinyl heyday will be familiar with the Zerostat anti-static

pistol. Not intended for use on CDs at all, its raison d'être is to neutralise static from the surface of LPs, a job that it performs remarkably effectively. So we thought, if it works for vinyl, then why not for CDs. An absolute doddle to use, simply point and shoot remembering to zap both sides and not to get your pinky too close to the charged needle in the nozzle - it bites.

Lastly we have the Nordost ECO 3 anti-static spray. This product is intended for use on cables, and both cleans and removes static from their jackets (I have to admit that I had a quick squirt on my digital interconnect while 'RED' wasn't looking, and I was impressed, but I digress). In use here, the product is applied by squirting a little onto a tissue, and wiping over the label side of the CD (it also works on LP labels - if you're feeling brave). Note, only the label side not the playing side, something that I discovered to my cost when I first used it. I have no idea if continued use of the fluid could damage the printing, but there were no untoward effects during the review period.

So with my CD collection quaking in its boots, wondering what torture I was about to inflict on it, I started to listen. What quickly became apparent was that all of the products produced the same effects as described in last issue's review, albeit to varying degrees - presumably reflecting their effectiveness. There was a clear

pecking order, and some of the products produced a cumulative effect when used together. Water had the least and shortest overall effect. Next came the Zerostat, followed by ECO 3. (Where are ECOs 1 and 2 Joe?) The clear winner was the Statmat. The Oscar for the best combination goes to the Statmat and the Zerostat, although using the ECO 3 as well as the other two added a final

polish to the sound. Watering a CD and then using the Statmat showed no real improvement over the Statmat alone (which was strange considering the Zerostat/ Statmat worked so well together).

So what can we conclude from this. Well, there must be many of you who already own a Zerostat, and a few who have ECO 3, so why not try them out. If you like the effect then you should definitely try the Statmat as well. For the reader with none of the above the Statmat is the place to start, although once you discover the deleterious effects of static, don't be surprised to discover yourself ECO 3-ing your cables and zapping your LPs. The bottom line is simple. None of these tweaks is expensive and they all produce worthwhile and repeatable results out of all proportion to their cost. Do I really need to spell it out?

Statmat £19.95

Zerostat £30.00

Both supplied by:

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Nordost ECO 3 £19.95

Nordost (UK) Ltd

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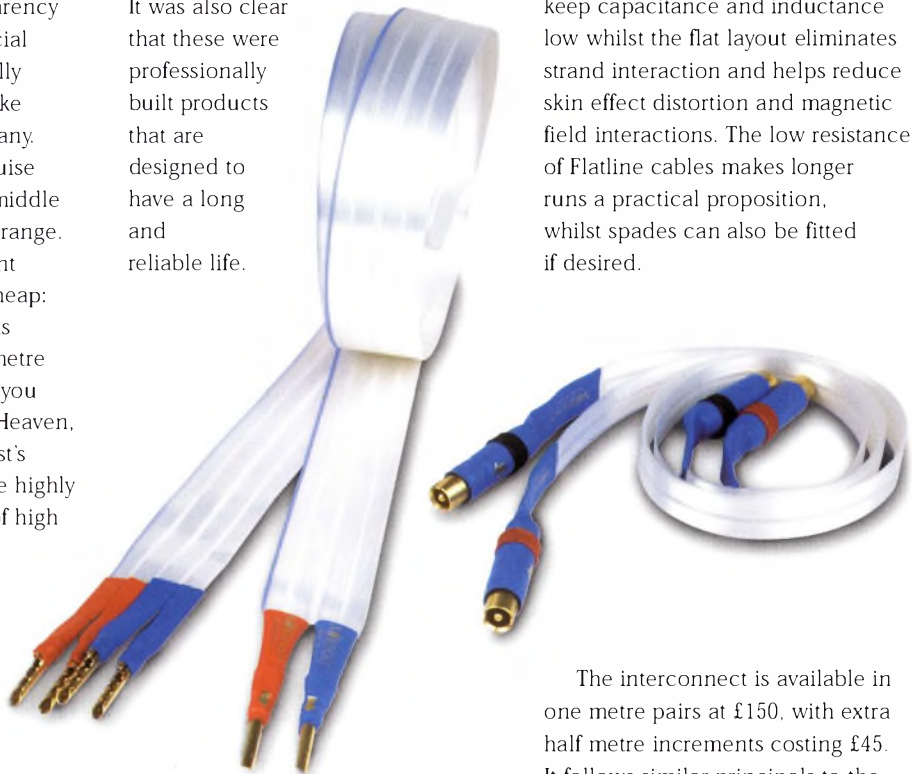
Nordost Blue Heaven Cable Audio Nirvana?

by Dave Davies

Nordost's 'high end' cables such as SPM and Quattro Fil have quickly gained an enviable reputation for startling performance, particularly with regard to overall transparency and speed. Those rather special products come with an equally special price tag that will make them but an aspiration for many. Blue Heaven (in its mark 2 guise since August '99) sits in the middle of the Nordost Flatline cable range. Let's not assume for a moment though that that means it's cheap: a metre interconnect set costs around £150, whilst a three metre set of speaker cables will set you back £462. This places Blue Heaven, which remains one of Nordost's most popular products, in the highly competitive middle ground of high performance cables.

The first thing that struck me on unpacking the cables was their sheer quality. Clearly well constructed with the recommended orientation well marked, the speaker cables sport Nordost preferred low-mass 'Z' plugs whilst the interconnect is fitted with Neutrik gold RCAs. Both plugs formed an immediate, tight and fuss free connection. The flat cable

construction is attractive and compared to the weighty silver coloured Audioplan hose I normally use, is exceedingly room friendly. It was also clear that these were professionally built products that are designed to have a long and reliable life.



This is borne out by the limited lifetime warranty offered by Nordost.

The speaker cable is constructed of 72 OFC conductor strands, each plated with 50 microns of silver.

Importantly, each conductor is ultrasonically cleaned to remove any contamination before being encapsulated in Teflon. This process helps keep capacitance and inductance low whilst the flat layout eliminates strand interaction and helps reduce skin effect distortion and magnetic field interactions. The low resistance of Flatline cables makes longer runs a practical proposition, whilst spades can also be fitted if desired.

The interconnect is available in one metre pairs at £150, with extra half metre increments costing £45. It follows similar principals to the speaker cable but with only 30 silver plated OFC conductors. Din terminations are also available, or at extra cost, balanced XLR connections.

So, how would the Blue

Heaven sound? Hooked up to the little Morgan Audio Deva amp, CD and to my Ruark Paladins, there was an immediate and obvious difference over my usual (and somewhat more expensive) Audioplan MusiCable. The prime virtues of the latter are a good level of transparency and speed, coupled with excellent bass definition, weight and staging. The Blue Heaven takes a quite different approach. From the first notes its qualities were obvious: detail retrieval, air and speed were improved and the soundstage was a little more open and forward. On the negative side bass was a tad lighter and slightly less well defined. It was clearly a cable from the Nordost stable, showing many of the qualities of its bigger brothers, in particular it's remarkable dynamic range and discrimination.

On Lyle Lovetts 'North Dakota' (from *Joshua Judges Ruth* MCAD 10475) there was an immediate increase in definition and fine detail. Little instrumental subtleties like the way the cymbal was being struck, the sound of Lovett's fingers on his acoustic guitar strings, the decay as each note died and the delicacy of the piano work were more obvious – I didn't have to dig for them in the mix. This I think was brought about by a combination of increased clarity and sheer dynamism. Lovett and Rickie Lee Jones' vocals were more precisely defined and stable. Stage depth was a little wider than with the Audioplan but not as deep, the vocals were projected 2-3 feet forward of the speaker plane, with stage depth that felt much more bounded by the rear wall than with the Audioplans. Bass was deep and reasonably well defined but not as powerful or harmonically rounded. This was hardly a problem – just a sign of a different approach.

Moving to the new Steely Dan Album *Tivo Against Nature* the Nordost cable came into it's own.

The slightly lighter bass balance made the most of the punchy production and the layers of detail in the complex mix were very clearly laid out. From the breathy backing choruses where every word was clearly defined, to the snap of the leading edge of driving bass notes and precise sound of the muted horns backing 'What A Shame About Me'. Here I felt that the Nordost had a definite edge over the Audioplan which whilst it did a fine job with the album felt that crucial bit slower and less well defined. Given that the Audioplan is some 20% more expensive than the Nordost, this was a creditable performance.

On classical material the qualities of the Nordost also shone through, although the advantage here was slightly less clear cut. Solo violin tone was very well captured, the splendidly natural sounding Fone recording of the *Violins of Cremona* with Salvatore Accardo (Fone 94 F 04 CD), sounded, well, splendidly natural. With lots of airy acoustic and a lovely tone, each string was seemingly clearly differentiated as the bow danced over it. Massed strings too, in orchestral pieces such as the Intermezzo from Mascagni's 'L'Amico Fritz' (Fone 93 F 10 CD) were well captured and the effect as the applause bursts out at the end of this live recording puts you there in the concert hall. The applause itself has no trace of that metallic harshness that can highlight failings in lesser cables, a sure sign that things were right. The Audioplan cable also did a fine job with these pieces, adding a touch more warmth and a further degree of realism, but it was a close run thing between the two. The Audioplan ultimately wins out because of its uncanny ability to trace a melodic line.

In summary my Audioplan MusiCable is more 3D and 'solid',

making performers that bit more tangible. It has an innately organic quality that favours acoustic recordings and instruments. It has more bass grunt and offers a deeper soundstage, but Blue Heaven is a very credible alternative, offering a different viewpoint that happens to be cheaper too! The Nordost cable has a touch more delicacy, and makes you much more aware of the finer dynamic nuances of a recording. If it had just a little more bass grunt I'd be very sorely tempted. As it stands it poses a very real challenge to my more expensive cable bettering it in terms of speed and overall transparency. It's also heart-warming to know that a good proportion of the more costly Nordost 'big brother' cables performance is available at a relatively modest cost. If you are planning to purchase cables in, or anywhere near this price range (up as well as down!) Nordost Blue Heaven is strongly recommended for audition. ➤+

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Blue Heaven Rev II Loudspeaker Cable

Price: £462.95 per terminated 3 metre pair.
£58.95 per half metre stereo increment.

Blue Heaven Interconnect Cable

Price: £149.95 per terminated metre pair.
£44.95 per half metre stereo increment.
Din plugs available at same price, Balanced XLR + £29.95.

Manufacturer:

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Speaker Cones

by Roy Gregory

There seems to be a whole section of the hi-fi buying public who reject anything that “can’t be proved”. In fact, they don’t just reject it, the mere mention of “subjective differences” produces steam from their ears. The assumption seems to be that most of the industry, and journalists in particular, have nothing better to do than devise new ways to separate fools from their money.

Now, whilst a healthy degree of scepticism is essential armour in a world increasingly dominated by marketing hype, I think that we need to be careful not to throw the baby out with the bath water. There are plenty of accepted practices in hi-fi for which explanations are sketchy at best. In fact, personally I find the pseudo science that people resort to in order to justify clearly audible effects far more disturbing than the effects themselves. Why can’t we just accept that there’s an awful lot we don’t know or understand. As long as someone isn’t asking you to spend huge sums of money on pure faith, where’s the problem. If you can hear a difference then there is a difference,



wherever it comes from. (I always remember the cyclist Greg Lemond, lying second in the Tour, being interviewed before the final stage, a time trial into Paris. The reporter asked him whether he thought his new-fangled aerodynamic bike made a difference. “Well” says Greg, “I think it might, so I’d hate to be without it.” He then rode off to catch Laurent Fignon, winning the Tour by the narrowest margin ever. I reckon his tweaks improved his enjoyment, even if they didn’t improve his performance.

And hey, now everybody rides aerodynamic bikes. At least they did until the UCI banned them!)

Which is why in Issue 1, when we set-up RP’s system, there was a section in the article entitled ‘Free, Freaky and Hard to Explain’. It listed a number of tweaks which cost little or nothing, but can offer significant benefits. One of these was placing cones or spikes on top of your speakers. At the time I explained that whilst it seemed like the worst kind of jiggery pokery, in fact it was a fairly widely recognised phenomenon, with at least one manufacturer producing a device specifically designed for the job. Since then I’ve done some further investigation, with interesting results.

Basically, the long and the short of it is that you can hear the effect of placing an aluminium cone on top of your speakers. So, does it matter where you put it, or how many you use? And can you hear differences between different cones or materials? The quick answer is yes to all of the above, but let’s start at the beginning.

Most of you will have a spare cone or two lying around. If not I’m sure you can borrow some. Ideally ►

▶ you'll need four. Play a short piece of music a couple of times to familiarise yourself with it, and then place a cone on the front inside edge of each speaker. Play the short extract again and you should hear a sweeter and better integrated top end, with a noticeable lift in energy and detail levels. I used 'At Seventeen' from the Janis Ian album *Between The Lines*, and experienced much clearer vocals, without the slight sibilance than often mars the start of words. The voice was better focused, and the percussion behind and to the left of her was better defined, with air around it and proper decay. Her guitar also had a richer, more solid tone. These are not subtle differences. If you don't hear anything, go back to no cones, and then try them on the outer front edges. If you still hear nothing then you can have a good laugh at my expense and all it's cost you is some time.

If you did hear a change, then there's more to be had. Next add a second pair of cones diagonally opposite the first. You should hear further improvements. Swap the cones to the opposite corners and you'll hear a thinner and rather dead sound. At least that's what I get. The problem is that orientation can vary with speaker and room, so you need to play. Totem, who manufacture the Tuning Beak dedicated speaker top device actually suggest that you start the other way round, but the bottom line here is that first you need to hear a difference; then you can worry about fine tuning it.

Amongst my selection of aluminium cones, tall worked better than

short, and the complex Pulsar Points worked best of all. Tall brass cones were better still, producing a really obvious and worthwhile change for the better. Which pretty much exhausted the spares box (I didn't try RDC or carbon cones). So, I asked myself, assuming you are convinced of the benefits, what's the best answer if cost is no object?

The Totem Beaks were the obvious starting point. These cost £69.95 a pair, and are solid aluminium 'bullets', with a profiled cavity in the underside which the manufacturer claims has a profound effect on performance. They are also taller

than any of my cones, and



share curved surfaces in common with the Pulsar Points, although whether that's significant

Lord only knows. Totem also claim readily measurable benefits from the Beaks (between one and 2.5dB differences, depending on circumstances) and listening to them I can well believe it. These are significantly more effective than the brass cones, with a warmer balance, better low level detail and instrumental decay, and a greater sense of life to the performance. Clearly Totem know a thing or two about all this. Four Beaks add up to \$140, which is not

an insignificant amount of money. Are they worth it? Compared to no cones at all, they clearly make a worthwhile improvement, and you could spend more money for less real benefit very easily. The reason for this is that the Beaks help bring a performance to life, filling in the nuances and expressive details that so many systems let slip. If you're not prepared to start putting cones on your speakers then you'll find it hard to recover those losses elsewhere in the system. The problem of course is that in value for money terms there are massively undermined by the very creditable efforts of plain alloy tip-toes. They may not be as good, but if you already own them then they don't cost a bean.

Following my salutary experience with the Aavik titanium rack it seemed only sensible to try titanium Pulsar Points. Yes, they're even better than the Beaks, but at £300 for four, they're even less cost effective.

So what should you do? Definitely experiment with what you've got around the place, and if you like what you hear, and the rest of the system is sorted, then don't feel bad about spending some money on fine tuning. On the other hand, you could simply bask in the satisfaction of recycling a few redundant accessories. And it's guaranteed to upset all your empiricist mates - not to mention the in-laws.

Totem Acoustic Beaks £69.95

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Audio synergy Ltd

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Manufacturer:

Totem Acoustic

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Hutter Isolation Platform One

by Jason Hector

Following on from my extremely positive experiences with the Hutter Racktime series of support furniture I was looking forward to trying out yet another add on to this flexible system, the Platform One isolation shelf. Mind you, after my mixed findings with the Cetech carbon fibre board I was a little apprehensive.

The board is constructed within a wooden frame with the actual shelf made of a Torlyte-like structure which is pliable to the touch, the surface bends under heavy finger pressure. The shelf has tapped inserts in its underside for three spikes, and surface protectors are supplied to go under them. You wouldn't want to mark the finish Hutter achieves on the rest of the range, and the sideboard is more than your life is worth! The Platform One I was testing was finished in a black coloured veneer and sported the Hutter logo in silver on the right hand front edge; very minimalist and capable of disappearing visually, so score one for domestic harmony.

As to performance, well my experiences with the Cetech were pretty much mirrored by the Hutter in my home system. Placing the Platform One in turn between the LP12, Naim NAC82 and NAP250, and a Racktime shelf I gained a pretty good feel for the changes in sound quality produced by the Platform One. Initial impressions were positive no matter what equipment it was under, but after swapping back and forth I found I preferred the musical presentation in my system without the board in place. This was very clear-cut with the LP12 and the 82 but less so with the 250. Here I was more ambivalent, and the gains and



losses were closer to being balanced out. All in all the results in my Naim system were similar to those with the Cetech platform; plenty of traditional "HiFi" enhancements but the balance and musical integrity of the system was lost. The bass output seemed to be tighter, but the weight and depth were missing, and the timing coherence was also compromised. Noise was reduced and this resulted in quieter backgrounds with seemingly more detail present, but the balance through the midrange and treble was lost. Treble output was too high and the system sounded a little harsh and fatiguing. The information had always been there, it just hadn't been in your face.

After the disappointment with the performance in my own (very particular) system, a second set of gear was pushed into service, this time not using Hutter tables. Indeed, the support in this case was less Hi-Fi and more furniture. With this system only improvements were heard with the Platform One. Under a Rega Planar 3 clarity was increased to new levels, much more detail was present, whilst the improved communication of the musical message was welcome. Timing was enhanced through a reduction in overhang and smear and notes were allowed the liberty of stopping and

starting when intended. The system had taken a leap forward in its ability to generate a performance in the room. If the presentation had to be dissected, useful gains in bass extension were observed along with a reduction in the noise floor, and it gained transparency through the midrange and into the treble. All good convincing stuff. Next onto the platform was my old Musical Fidelity CDT CD player. The valve output stage in this, along with a pretty grotty transport, make it very microphonic, so it was no surprise when the Isolation platform produced similar improvements to those experienced with the Rega. Again the biggest gain was the amount of detail retrieved, the old "Oh, I couldn't hear that before" experience, but this time the the balance was intact and the system held your attention on the music.

After the poor performance in my system using the Hutter Isolation Platform One in a more normal domestic environment proved to be an education, so if your system is by necessity resting on or in non-specialist furniture, or if you just require some extra clarity in the presentation, these supports could be just the post-millennial tonic your system needs.

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Music USA - The Rough Guide

by Andrew Hobbs

Picture the scene. You're a huge music fan (let's face it , you must be – you bought a copy of this magazine) and you've decided to do a tour of the USA, taking in major cities like New York, Los Angeles, Memphis, Chicago etc. Whilst you're there you have a burning desire to sample the delights of each city's musical heritage, including live venues, museums and , most importantly, their record stores. The only trouble is, how do you go about finding where all the best places are?

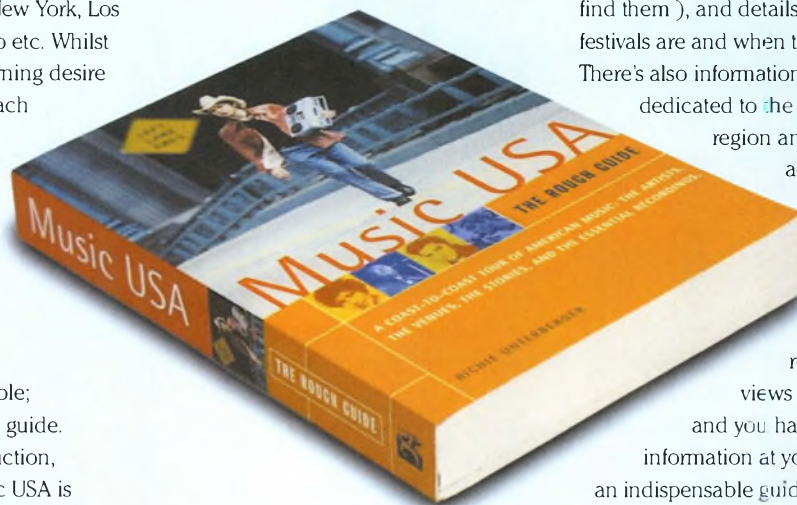
The answer is very simple; buy a copy of this splendid guide.

As it says in the introduction, "The Rough Guide to Music USA is a guide to the most important and interesting varieties of American popular music, from the acoustic folk of Appalachia to today's rock and rap."

Music USA has 23 chapters, each one a detailed study of the musical cultures of a region or city, taking into account venues, festivals, radio stations, record stores and museums.

The detailed information that author Richie Unterberger has unearthed for this gem of a book is really quite dazzling. For instance, the chapter on New York contains almost two pages dedicated to places to go for live music, complete with addresses, telephone numbers, web-sites and the musical categories covered by each

club. The same level of eye-catching detail is given to the record stores, with Unterberger even dishing the dirt on



levels of staff helpfulness. He had this to say about Revolution on 45W 8th ST; "it must have the most uninterested staff... of any offbeat record retailer anywhere".

On top of all the store, festival and venue breakdowns, each section gives a detailed background into how certain styles of music can be attributed to particular regions. For instance, in the case of Mississippi, it's the delta blues, the author describing it as "...by far the most influential form of rural blues, its eerie, sometimes demonic power is unmatched by other American acoustic music..."

Also featured in the book's 486

pages are many reviews of essential albums by important and influential regional artists, breakdowns on radio stations (what they play and where to find them), and details of where the festivals are and when they take place. There's also information on museums dedicated to the music of the region and names,

addresses and web-sites for all relevant publications and fanzines. Add in book reviews, interviews and biographies and you have a wealth of information at your fingertips and an indispensable guide to all things musical in the good ol' US of A.

Music USA is the latest in a series of 'Rough Guide' music reference titles. All are worthy of a place on your bookshelf but this one is particularly valuable, and with a retail price of just £14.99 represents outstanding value for money.

Right, I'm off to book my flight.....



Music USA - the rough guide
by Richie Unterberger

Price: £14.99
ISBN 1-85828-421-X

Woody Guthrie

Great Historical Bum, Shakespeare in Overalls

by Jon Maple

We seem to be having a folk revival at the moment. Not a big, hyped-up, meaningful folk revival like the one that came out of post-war New York - the one that brought us Dylan, Ochs, Baez and the rest of those celebrated demigods who (arguably) changed the world. But nevertheless, a folk revival of sorts is upon us. Listen to the radio, watch TV ads and you can hear the blues coming at you once again. Its not a worthy thing like its 50s/60s predecessor; its not filled with significance and moment. Its a post-modern revival of "sounds", atmospheric and chord progressions - ancient colourings from the vast palette of history - rather than anything deeper. We are in a world where a techno producer called Moby can release a dance album spliced with funky up samples of 75 year old field recordings of blues and folk singers. We are also

in a world where a rapper called Jay-Z can bring us hit records constructed from looped samples from the musical *Oliver*, so just about anything goes.

The fact that the affecting music of veteran blues stylist RL Burnside is given a hiphop mix and used to sell cars on TV, or that hippy-punk-folk maestro Beck's weird distorted blues is currently accompanying an advert for NatWest bank, is accepted without a raised eyebrow. Of course the symbolism clashes horribly (the music of the working man - as was - harnessed to the treadmill of international corporatism), but what can you do? Resistance would seem to be useless. Woody Guthrie - his belated, posthumous "lifetime's achievement" Grammy notwithstanding - must be turning in his grave. (I speak figuratively - he was cremated and his ashes

dust-blown across Coney Island.)

Looking down from the lofty heights of the early 21st century it is easy enough to smirk while we imagine the effect Woody Guthrie must have had on those 1940s & 50s collegiate folk-zealots with their gleaming teeth and fairisle sweaters, their pristine harmonies and butter-wouldn't melt vocalising, when his songs blew through New York from the dusty Midwest.

He had authenticity. A small, wiry, carefree, travelling man who never took his boots off, a smelly human jukebox - a repository of songs handed down through the ages - a charmer, the folkies couldn't believe their luck. Pioneer folk academic Alan Lomax offered the following introduction on one of his Library of Congress Archival recordings:

"Woody is, I guess, about



▶ thirty years old from the looks of him but he's seen more in those thirty years than most men see before they're seventy. He hasn't sat in a warm house or a warm office. He's interested in looking out. He's gone into the world and he's looked at the faces of hungry

they appeared to be. It was a place of the spirit, where authenticity in song and manner, in being, was of the highest value..."

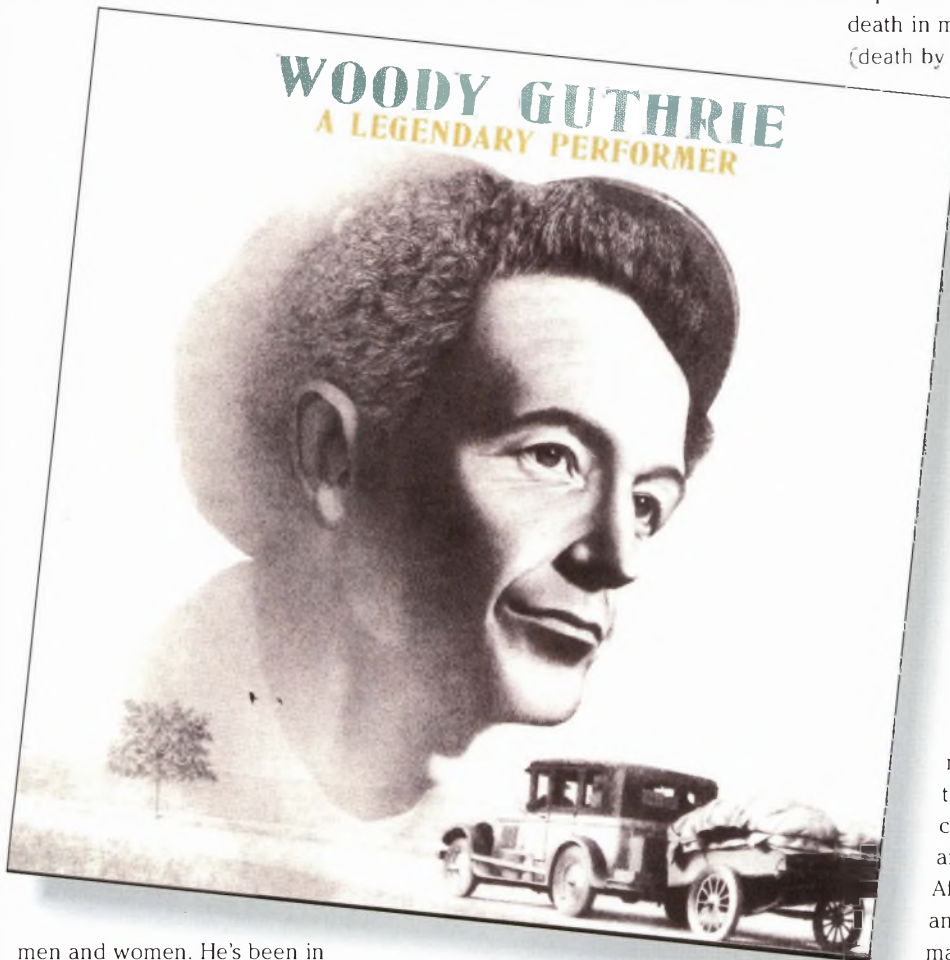
A place where a man like Woody would be worshipped. The black irony of the matter was, that by this time, when "This Land is Your Land" had become the

filled with tragedy almost to the level of Classical drama.

Woodrow Wilson Guthrie was born on July 14, 1912 in Okemah, Oklahoma into a pioneer family. His father was variously a court clerk, a local politician and land speculator who went bust in the Depression. His sister was burnt to death in mysterious circumstances (death by fire among his nearest

and dearest became a recurring coincidence - or was it?) and his mother, who was suspected of the fire, was institutionalised with the Huntingdon's Chorea which eventually killed her. Woody was a school truant who hung around with tramps and hobos, a wanderer and a loner. He took up the harmonica then later the guitar and fiddle and took pleasure in fitting old tunes with new words. He was a passable musician and singer but these talents were nothing compared to his skill and artistry as a wordsmith. After his mother's death and the failure of the old man's business, Woody lit out for Pampa, Texas to stay

with his fiddle-playing uncle. Occasionally he made small-time radio broadcasts with The Corncob Trio. His first great song came in 1935 inspired by an apocalyptic dust storm which hit that year. 'So Long Its Beer: Good To Know You' (aka 'Dusty Old Dust') and the other 'Dustbowl Ballads' which followed like 'Talking Dustbowl Blues', 'Dust Bowl Refugee', 'Dust Can't Kill Me' and the glorious



men and women. He's been in hobo jungles. He's performed on picket lines. He's sung his way through every bar and saloon between Oklahoma and California..."

The folk revival which later sprang forth from such enthusiasms - as Griel Marcus wrote in his fine work of Dylanology, *Invisible Republic* (Picador) - was "an arena of native tradition and national metaphor, of self discovery and self-invention. Here one sought and expected to take people as

alternative American national anthem and Dylan and all the others were copying him, Woody was in a terminal state, cloistered in a New York mental hospital with the rare, inherited, degenerative condition Huntingdon's Chorea. His motor skills were gone, he couldn't speak, and he certainly couldn't play a guitar anymore.

However, Woody's life - like that of many an heroic figure - seemed

▶ 'Dust Pneumonia Blues' were a trenchant critique of the plight of the Okies.

As catalogued in Steinbeck's *The Grapes Of Wrath*, these poor dirt farmers, refugees from the drought-stricken Oklahoma "dustbowl" were flooding the roads west. They were heading for the "Promised Land" of Texas and California in search of a basic living. Guthrie's commentary showed a typical wry humour - "Down in Texas my gal fainted in the rain/ Down in Texas my gal fainted in the rain/Had to throw a bucket of sand in her face just to bring her back again" (*Dust Pneumonia Blues*) - but an angry political vision was never far from the surface: "Rich man took my home and drove me from my door/And I ain't got no home in this world anymore." (*I Ain't Got No Home*).

Woody sometimes called himself a communist, and indeed wrote regular columns - 'Woody Sez' among them - for the *People's World* and *Daily Worker* newspapers. "I ain't a communist necessarily - but I been in the red all my life", he would write. Another typical line - complete with characteristically eccentric spelling - was "...you know, a policeman will jest stand there an let a banker rob a farmer, or a finance man rob a workin man. But if a farmer robs a banker - you wood have a hole dern army of cops out a shootin at him. Robbery is a chapter in etiquette."

But for all his Capitalist-baiting and red flag-waving, Woody was more a Christian socialist than a proper commie. He saw Christ - as evinced in the *Sermon on the Mount* - as a revolutionary leader as much as a spiritual figure, and wrote a number of religious, or quasi-religious lyrics. Perhaps the most telling of his attitude was the song 'Jesus Christ' :

"He went to the sick and he went to the poor/He went to the hungry and the lame/Said that the poor would one day win the world/ So they laid Jesus Christ in his grave.....This song was written in New York City/Of rich men and preachers and slaves/And if Jesus would have preached what he preached in Galilee then they'd lay Jesus Christ in his grave."

Woody hoboed around the Midwest for two years, sometimes - in classic folk-mythological fashion - riding the trains as a railroad bum. He collected and developed a wide repertoire of blues, Appalachian ballads, cowboy songs, hymns and dance tunes on his travels and in due course reached Los Angeles where, in 1937, he settled for a while.

Woody met up with his cousin, the cowboy singer Jack Guthrie and the two of them played together and co-wrote the country standard 'Oklahoma Hills'. Woody sang on regular radio shows for KFVD and played benefit concerts for a variety of left wing causes. His guitar memorably carried the slogan 'THIS MACHINE KILLS FASCISTS'.

Woody's growing fame and notoriety led to his making a vivid impression on the intellectual New York folk scene to which he gravitated in 1940. He played and recorded with the venerable folk/blues giant Huddie Ledbetter (Leadbelly) - who embarrassingly always referred to him as "Mister Woody" - and Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee. Some of these recordings, like the sexual-metaphor-laden *Keep Your Skillet Good And Greasy* and the dope anthem *Take A Whiff On Me* are loudly acoustic prototype rock'n'roll. Mandolin, banjo and guitar thrash away, forcefully rhythmical, while Blind Sonny's mouth-harp keens and honks and makes like a train,

and Woody yells, "Well I'm going down town, gonna get me a jug o' brandy/Gonna give it all to Mandy...Keep her skillet good 'n'greasy all night long". (One wonders if Ian Dury's *Billaricay Dickie* owes anything to this at all).

Alan Lomax took Woody to Washington DC where they made many hours of recordings of his songs and stories for The Library of Congress Archive. Among them were the *The Dust Bowl Ballads* which were released as an album by Victor. Back in New York he did many radio shows often aided and abetted by Leadbelly and the young, intense folk musician Pete Seeger.

In 1941 came a project which in today's eco-aware times would appear somewhat ill-advised for a 'protest singer'. Woody was commissioned to write a song-cycle in celebration of the new hydroelectric power projects of the Pacific Northwest. He seemed to treat it as an audio equivalent to a Soviet Realist painting of man taming nature for the good of the workers. Dams and other vast construction projects held a special symbolic place in mid century Socialism. As Guthrie himself put it on the back cover of the *Columbia River Collection* (Topic 12T448): "...I made up twenty-six songs about the Columbia and about the dam and about the men, and these songs were recorded by the Department of the Interior, Bonneville Power Administration out in Portland. The records were played at all sorts and sizes of meetings where people bought bonds to bring power lines over the fields and hills to their own little places. Electricity to milk the cows, kiss the maid, shoe the old mare, light up the saloon, the chili-joint window, the schools and churches along the way; to run the factories turning out



▶ manganese, chrome, bauxite, aluminium and steel."

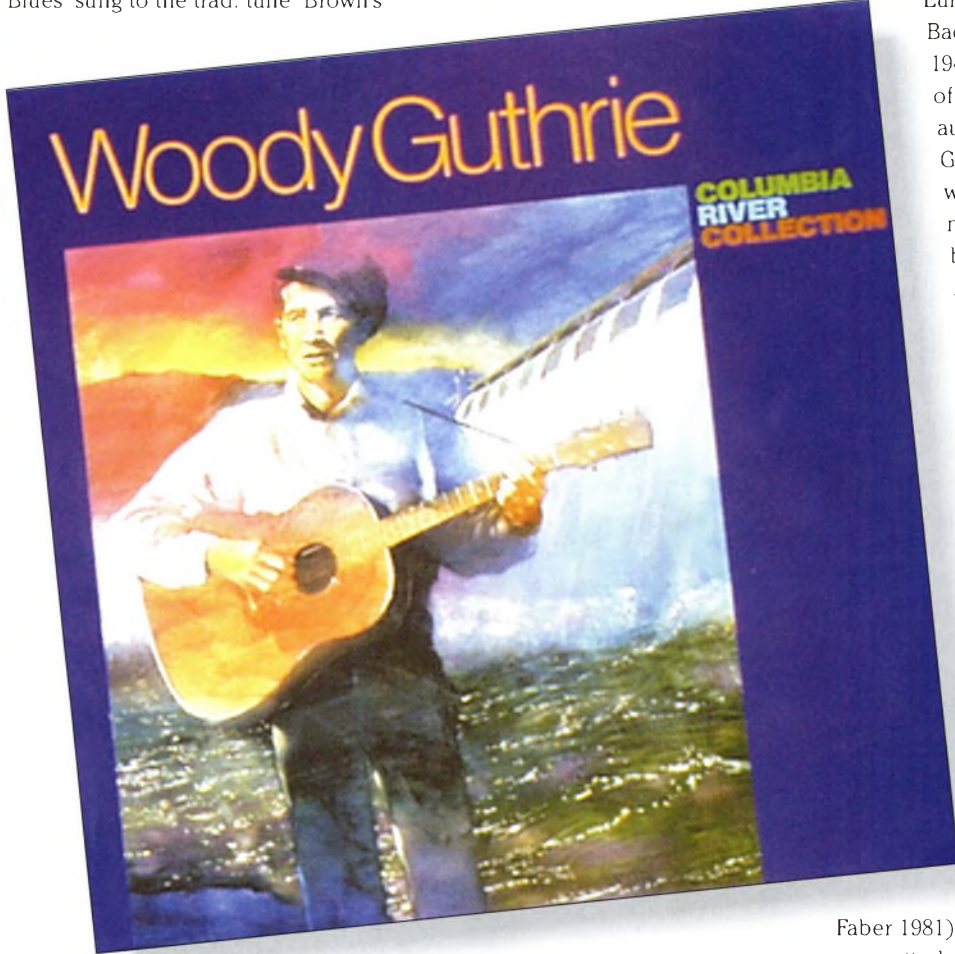
If you can put up with a recording which sounds as if it were made outdoors during a blizzard, there are some classic examples of Woody's art on this LP. 'Jackhammer Blues' sung to the trad. tune 'Brown's

retitled as 'The Biggest Thing That Man Has Ever Done'. (Alan Stern, a later Almanac Singers colleague of Guthrie's wrote a parody of this after being mocked by Woody once too often: "My name is Woody Guthrie, the great hysterical

the tenor of the times, Woody and the other Singers were then banned from network radio. So Woody went to sea with the merchant marine, surviving torpedoes and bombs on the Atlantic convcys, and visiting wartime Britain and southern Europe.

Back in New York in 1943 the publication of his somewhat inaccurate autobiography *Bound For Glory* garnered him a widespread reputation. His next recordings were made by and for producer Moe Asch (founder of the Folkways Label) the following year. Some of these came out on Folkways and some made an appearance on the Stinson label. In 1946 came an album of simple and highly effective children's songs including the well-known 'Car-Car' and 'Daddy's Taking Us To The Zoo Tomorrow'. Joe Klein, in his brilliant, exhaustive, biography of Guthrie, *A Life* (Faber &

Faber 1981) wrote: "They were utterly artless songs... truly children's songs...written as children might write them, without much of the condescension inherent in songs composed for children by adults. They were so simple, in fact, that many adults didn't understand them; a number of Woody's friends thought they were boring and trite (though they were grateful when he'd spend hours serenading their children), and **were** disappointed that the great political activist was wasting so much time writing things like: 'I put my dolly's dress on/I



Ferry Blues' is a powerful stomper, the highly poetic 'Columbia's Waters' (to the tune of Jimmie Rodger's 'Muleskinner Blues') is fine, as is 'Pastures of Plenty'. Bizarrely, this hymn to the migrant workers is adapted to the tune of the murder ballad 'Pretty Polly' as recorded by Woody's forbear, the folksinger, coal miner and union organiser Dock Boggs. Among other delights here is a version of the annoying boasting song 'The Great Historical Bum',

bum/Highly saturated in whiskey, rye and rum/I wrote a million pages, but never read a one/And that's about the biggest thing that Guthrie's ever done.").

Back East Guthrie and Seeger formed The Almanac Singers with Millard Lampell and Lee Hays and a sometime cast of thousands. The group toured the country then returned to live together commune-style in a Greenwich Village apartment house. Inevitably given their communist associations and

▶ put my dolly's pants on/
I put my dolly's hat on/And she looks
like this..."

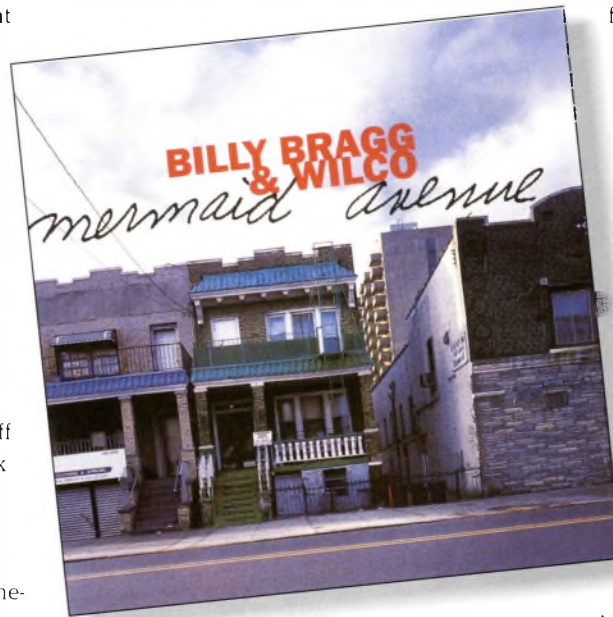
This kind of soft-hearted approach was by no means apparent in his live performances at the time. Folk-singer Oscar Brand told Klien: "Going on after Woody was like attending your own wake. He would test the audience. If he thought they weren't attentive enough, he'd start playing the wrong chords...or just not change chords at all...often he was just mad at the audience. He'd go right up to the front of the stage and sing an incredibly bawdy verse and stare this wild stare and make everyone very tense and uncomfortable. Sometimes he came close to being booted off stage; a couple of times I think he was."

One of Guthrie's last great songs came to him in 1948 inspired by the death of a plane-load of Mexican immigrant workers. Dolly Parton popularised 'Plane Wreck At Los Gatos (Deportees)' with her momentous version on the hit album *9 to 5* in 1980.

The Weavers had hits with his songs like 'So Long It's Been Good To Know You' in the 50s but by then Woody's career was effectively over. In 1952 Huntington's Chorea was diagnosed, and with occasional respites Woody spent most of the final fifteen years of his life in hospital. As Woody declined physically his reputation as one of the country's greatest songwriters increased. Bob Dylan visited him at his sickbed and, as the folk-boom gathered momentum, everyone seemed to be playing his songs. In 1964 Elektra released a three-volume compilation of his deathless Library of Congress recordings

and the Guthrie legend grew.

"This Land Is Your Land' became a universally recognised song. Though originally written as a Marxist counterblast to Irving Berlin's 'God Bless America', it was taken up by all and sundry - Peter Paul & Mary, Bing Crosby, Tex Ritter, Connie Francis,



Country Joe MacDonald & The Fish, Glenn Campbell, Bruce Springsteen and many others recorded versions. George McGovern - with the blithe lack of irony only an American politician can muster - even used it for the theme song to his 1972 Presidential election campaign.

Scroll forward to the present and thirty three years after his death we find Woody Guthrie the recipient of a Grammy award for Lifetime Achievement. This somewhat overdue recognition was no doubt partly a result of Billy Bragg & Wilco's 1998 album *Mermaid Avenue* (Elektra 7559-62204-2). Bragg's sleeve notes tell the story thus: "Mermaid Avenue is the name of the street in Coney Island, Brooklyn that was home to Woody Guthrie and his wife...in the years that followed

World War II...Despite the fact that his recording career was more or less over by 1947 he carried on writing songs until he became too ill to hold a pencil. When he died in 1967 the tunes that he had dreamt up for these hundreds of unrecorded songs, tunes he had carried in his head all his life, were lost forever. Woody's daughter Nora Guthrie approached me...with the idea of writing some new music to accompany these lost songs..."

The results are very interesting, occasionally of a high quality and well worth checking out. Mermaid Avenue is no masterpiece but there are some fine collaborations here. For the most part, Bragg and his American "alt. country" co-workers have stuck to the plot by writing

- or perhaps, adapting - traditional sounding tunes to accompany the lyrics. Shanties and Irish-style airs abound - a particular success being Natalie Merchant's guest vocal on the haunting 'Birds and Ships'. 'Way Over Yonder In The Minor Key' for its part, has the hooks and the depth to be a minor latterday Guthrie classic. The record is compromised slightly by an apparent over-eagerness to lapse into generic sub-Bob Dylan & The Band/Basement Tapes-type folk-rock riffing, presumably when all else has failed. However, it seems to me that anyone still carrying a torch for the "Shakespeare in overalls" and "Dean of American Folk Music", that is Woody Guthrie, is still carrying a torch for the mass of humanity. And in these hard and cynical times, "the masses" need all the help they can get.



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









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-  HDCD
-  XRCD
-  Double Disc
-  MD
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-  150g LP
-  180g LP
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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.



Martin Stephenson

Sweet Misdemeanour

DEMON RECORDS FIEND CD 770 

Sweet Misdemeanour features fourteen songs that for whatever reasons (be they artistic or commercial) did not fit comfortably into the album releases before 1995. Relaxed organic guitar sessions reuniting former Daintees Anthony Dunn, Paul Handyside and drummer Greg Drysdale are enriched by six-string specialist Joe Guillen. His slick vintage Gretsch guitar work graces all but three acoustic Stephenson solo numbers: 'South Wind', 'Hold Me, Love Me' and 'Smokey Mokes'. Guillen's brilliance effortlessly traverses a variety of styles: leading the rootsy rockabilly in 'Can't Find The Doorknob', sparking the rock and roll on 'Ball of Fire', providing the pedal steel support in an opening country, 'Mavrick Waltz', and crossing the tracks to embrace Cuban rhythms with such panache that Martin (on the title-song liner notes) affectionately says "He's a twat - I've always wished I could play like that!" A simple studio recording (using an old analogue desk) touchingly captures these moments cleanly and clearly on two inch tape. Consequently, this CD has the feel and freedom of an intimate live set, which places it at the heart of Martin's belief that we should be social with music. A must for any fan who wants deeper understanding of an extraordinary musician.

RP

Supplier: Cherished Record Co.



Primal Scream

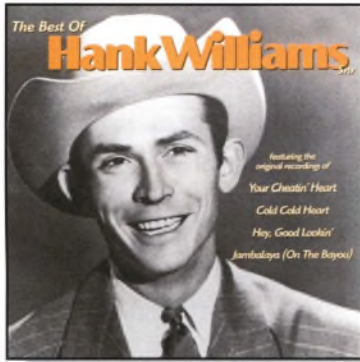
Exterminator

Creation CRECD239 

Anyone with the good sense to release a single and open an album with a song entitled, 'Kill All Hippies' gets my vote before I've even heard it. As a statement of punk rock intent it cannot be bettered. This album is punk in spirit if not in form or practise. Gillespie and the lads have turned their hand, once again, to the dance floor and proved that, for a rock'n'roll band, they sure know how to do digital hardcore. Aided and abetted by such contemporary production luminaries as The Chemical Brothers, Kevin Shields (of noise masters My Bloody Valentine) and The Automator (aka Dr Octagon), The Scream take a variety of approaches, all dark in tone, most of them banging. Mood changes are apparent only in the long, skewed free jazz episodes - redolent of Sun Ra, though somewhat less joyous - which occasionally break into the four-to-the-floor Prodigyesque hardcore beats. Lyrically, *Exterminator* is an old school protest album, railing against such anarchist targets as 'global militarism' and 'the military industrial complex', causes which haven't been covered in song form since the folk revival (or at least since The Clash broke up). We can only hope that The Scream kick start a polemical renaissance in these benighted corporate times.

JM





Hank Williams

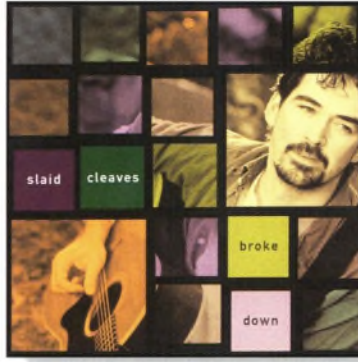
The Best of

(Spectrum 554 381-2)

If you need an introduction to one of the presiding geniuses and household deities of American songwriting you could do far worse than this "cheapo" (circa £6) compilation. It's country music, friends, and country music of the highest calibre. Direct, conversational, raw; simple but effective.

Between 1948 and '53 Williams dominated the country charts with twenty-seven hit records, twenty of which may be heard here. Cover versions of his material by such as Tony Bennett (with a smoothly crooned 'Cold, Cold Heart'), Frankie Laine (a proto-rock'n'roll 'Hey, Good Lookin') and The Carpenters (a sweetly harmonised 'Jambalaya (On The Bayou)') have sold many millions. The altogether more earthy originals are here replete with moaning steel-guitar, keening country fiddle and archaic western harmonies. Alongside his famously posthumous releases, 'Kaw-Liga' and 'Your Cheatin' Heart' are miserabilist classics like 'I'm So Lonesome I Could Cry', 'Love Sick Blues' and 'Long Gone Lonesome Blues' and the wittily philosophical 'I'll Never Get Out Of This World Alive'. Considering he was a legendarily unreliable alcoholic addicted to painkilling drugs who died at the age 29 - actually, even without considering that - Ole Hank done purty good. A sound investment for all you saddle tramps out there.

JM



Slaid Cleaves

Broke Down

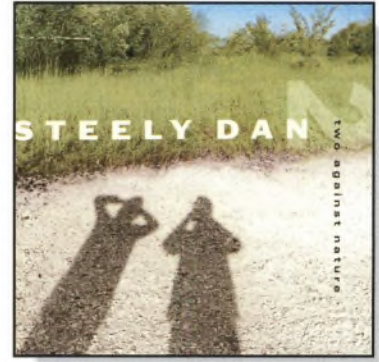
CRS/Philo 1225

New name, great record. I've never heard of Slaid Cleaves, but like it says on the sleeve "Anybody who has the nerve to drive a Dodge Dart Sport is worth a listen". I don't know what a Dodge Dart Sport is either, but the sentiment somehow sums up the music on this disc. This is country, and we're on familiar ground; loss, loneliness and domestic disaster. The tunes and playing seem familiar too, but just when you think that you know where that chord progression's headed, it'll up and surprise you. Country, yes, but with a twist. Melodies that constantly trick and beguile, rhythms that stop just when you expect them to start, a two line coda after the final chords, this music is full of surprises.

Add that inventiveness to a great voice and beautifully arranged yet sparse backing, and you've got my record of the year so far, helped by a crystal clear recording that avoids the swamping reverb of so much country slush. The lyrical cleverness is a little bit Squeeze, while the vocals and playing are a bit Chris Isaak, but the results are all Slaid Cleaves.

This boy should go far.

RG



Steely Dan

Two Against Nature

Giant records 9 24719-2

Twenty years. That surely must be the longest period between albums in the world... ever. But those converted to the music of Steely Dan have been waiting patiently with rumours of Walter Becker and Donald fagen back in the studio together and the odd solo album for comfort. Has it been worth it?

All the trademarks are there with a collection of wry and cynical songs performed by Becker and Fagen with the usual team of top session men, although without the brilliant guitar work of Larry Carlton. Polished to perfection in a style that was perfected on *Gaucho* and the solo albums, perseverance pays off as they seem to give a little more with each listen.

The songs are good, as always, but are so "produced" that they can come over as cold and lifeless...a direction that the duo's production has been taking for a long time. Listening to this album I wonder if it they have gone too far, as sometimes the effect can be clinical in the extreme, and the lack of warmth tends to strangle any emotion that was there in the song writing. So there you have it - the faithful will regard it as an offering from heaven and talk about it for the next twenty years, while those who felt that Steely Dan were just too sophisticated for there own good will remain unconverted.

CB





Merz

Eponymous

EMI 495500-2

After a friends recommendation and an intriguing outing on Jules Hollands' *Later* programme I had to give this record by Merz a try. Were my sometimes dodgy first instincts firing on all cylinders or was I to be disappointed? Well the sheer existence of this review tells you it must have been good, and in fact it is very good. Fusing some dancy beats with thoughtful lyrics has been attempted before, and sometimes successfully. Add Merz to the success list; in fact put them near the top. The backing music consists of synth driven bass acting as percussion, but it is what comes between this and the Finlay Quaye-like vocal which is unusual; strings, pianos, guitars and brass have an outing, and it all works. The acoustic instruments are wonderfully evocative and are played out at about half the speed of the underlying rythms with real feeling. But this is to describe only half of this album, the rest is more traditional but equally fine. The songs are a little bit Reggae, a little bit Ska, and a whole lot Merz, with the lyrics wistful and uplifting. A fine first album of great maturity, a must buy.

JH



Nanci Griffith

Blue Roses From The Moon

ELEKTRA 62015-1

From early country pickings to folkabilly. Through gentle, intelligent rock and, most recently, with orchestral arrangements, the Grammy award winning Nanci Griffith has never allowed Texas prairie grass to grow beneath a song. Here, kindred musical spirits, including past and present members of her Blue Moon band, are joined by the Crickets and Darius Rucker's rich baritone on a live studio recording, that is full of first takes and virtually no overdubs as four well-chosen covers and ten honest, deeply personal Griffith originals of varying moods are featured. An upbeat opener, 'Everything Coming Up Roses', is followed by the intensity of 'Two For The Road' and, just a few tracks later, an emotional 'Saint Teresa Of Avila' tells of a childhood friend's suicide. They all, perhaps somewhat surprisingly, sit comfortably alongside duets like 'Gulf Coast Highway' (Rucker) and a boisterous version of 'I Fought The Law' (Sonny Curtis) that shows terrific passion as it rocks to the stick work of three drummers, including J. I. Allison. Without doubt they are sympathetically captured by Don Gehman's neatly packaged recording. His earlier Tracy Chapman, R.E.M. and John Mellencamp productions have helped to make *Blue Roses*, in every sense, a nicely judged set and a pleasure to find on vinyl.

RP

Supplier: Cherished Record Co



Spearmint

A Week Away

nitBACK

Spearmint are a new band and with this fine album they are set to establish themselves in the front line of imaginative British rock, and as that's a little lacking at present this all for the good. Spearmint have recorded some super catchy tune and melody led rock songs which are enthused with great excitement and joi-de-vivre. The bulk of their music is electric guitar driven, usually with a quite fast pace, although the slower songs are poignant and they aren't afraid to combine tempos in a song, allowing evolution of pace to reflect the story in the lyrics. These are delivered by a male lead singer (with the interesting first name of Shirley, what were his parents on?) belting out tracks which are kept short and sweet, interspersed with often humorous snippets of spoken commentary. These lyrics are written either singly by Shirley or in collaboration with other band members and are perhaps best described as earthy and easy to connect with. If I had to compare this band to anybody else it would be Pulp. Both bands share that common touch with melody and lyrics, and most importantly an ability to create a really catchy hook.

JH





Peter Himmelman

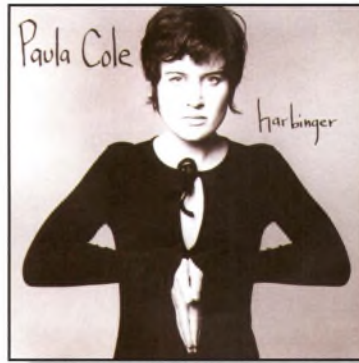
Stage Diving

Plump 6903 -2

Regular readers of this magazine will already know of my appreciation for this hugely talented artist (check out the review of *Flown This Acid World* in issue 3). His studio albums are all of the highest calibre and well worth checking out, but it's on stage in an intimate club like New York's Bottom Line where Himmelman really works his magic. He is a true master of spontaneity and improvisation – for instance, when he asks the audience for a subject he can sing about someone shouts out "steak!", so he launches in to an hilarious tune about the romantic qualities of a slab of beef!!

Stage Diving features beautiful renditions of some of Peter's best loved songs, including 'Impermanent Things' and the heart-warming 'Raina'. Also featured is stage favourite 'Woman With the Strength of 10,000 Men', a true story of a woman paralysed from Lou Gehrig's Disease who can only communicate through a machine hooked up to her eyebrow. Since writing the song Suzanne has passed away, adding more emotional weight to an already supercharged subject matter. It's rare to hear a live album that really makes you wish you had been there - Stage Diving is one such animal.

AH



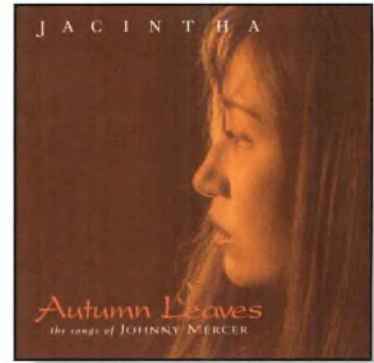
Paula Cole

Harbinger

IMAGO/WARNER 9362-46041-2

A notable single release, 'I Am So Ordinary', drawing upon romantic entanglements and low personal self-esteem, fuelled the flames of the first of Paula's high-octane discs, but these were all too soon doused by an untimely collapse of Imago's distribution deal with BMG. Although Warner re-released *Harbinger* a year later, in 1995, they could not rekindle an immediate commercial success from its ashes. For that we must look to the superb songwriting, vocals and recording of her follow-up album, *This Fire*, which was reviewed some months back in Issue 4 of *Hi-Fi +*. *Harbinger*, beautifully crafted, may not quite be the finished article, but it is (as the title suggests) close to those qualities. Full of slick string arrangements that flesh out the emotional impact of songs like 'Our Revenge' and 'Chiaroscuro', Paula's lyrics denounce modern-day demons (ostensibly racism) but ultimately fail to exorcise them, thus falling short. Despite this absence of solutions, the probing writing generously extends to 58 minutes, and these fourteen well-recorded mixes from Kevin Killen help make a pervasive and persuasive pop-rock album framed around a famously versatile and attractive voice.

RP



Jacintha

Autumn Leaves
- the songs of Johnny Mercer

Groove Note GRV2006-2

Following her highly successful Ben Webster set it was natural for Groove Note to follow it with another 'great'. This time though it's a songwriter, and few come better than Mercer. The album is stuffed with standards from 'Autumn Leaves' and 'One for my Baby', to 'Moon River', most of them associated with equally great singers, whether Sinatra, or Fitzgerald. A tall order then.

Backed by the same quartet as on *Here's To Ben* I feel that Jacintha has matured a little since that first album. Her voice is more expressive and she sounds more relaxed. Strongest in the slower, softer numbers ('Skylark' is given a lovely reading) the standout track is 'Autumn Leaves'. Jacintha sings the original French intro and first verse, and if this doesn't get your pulse quickening you'd better consult an undertaker. This is followed by a lengthy and beautifully played instrumental interlude before she rejoins with the more familiar English lyrics. Whilst I wouldn't categorise Jacintha with the likes of Fitzgerald or Holiday (let's keep a sense of proportion here), this is lovely stuff, and for me it's a big improvement on her first release.

The recording is to the usual high Groove Note standard.

DD

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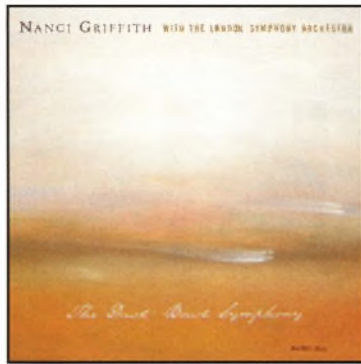
Emmylou Harris

Elite Hotel

Reprise 7599-27246-2

Emmylou's stunning voice was first heard on Gram Parson's *Grievous Angel*, a pioneering album that basically opened the door for country rock supergroups like The Eagles. After Gram's tragic suicide, Emmylou continued as a solo artist, releasing her celebrated debut album *Pieces Of The Sky* in 1975 and then unleashing this wonderful work a year later. For *Elite Hotel* Emmylou assembled some of America's finest musicians, including Elvis Presley's guitarist James Burton, Rodney Crowell, 'Eagle' Bernie Leadon and red hot pianist Glen D. Hardin. Hardin plays a lovely rolling piano lead on Buck Owens' 'Together Again', the perfect backdrop to Emmylou's breathtaking soprano, while the ever dependable James Burton plays what must rank as one of the simplest but greatest solos ever on Rodney Crowell's 'Til I Gain Control Again'. Emmylou has never been one to stick to Nashville's annoying habit of producing 'country by numbers', and she proves the point on *Elite Hotel* by covering The Beatles 'Here, There and Everywhere', managing to improve on the original and even scoring a hit single in the UK, almost unheard of for a country artist in 1976. The only small gripe I have with *Elite Hotel* is the recording which is a little on the flat side. Definitive digital remaster please, Warner Bros.

AH



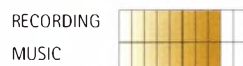
Nanci Griffith

The Dust Bowl Symphony

ELEKTRA 7559-62418-2

Ambitiously combining the elegance, orchestral colour and presence of the London Symphony with the intuitiveness and personality of her own Blue Moon players has revitalised over a dozen of Nanci's best-loved songs in this translucent Abbey Road recording that expertly out distances any potential trip-hazards to be found in a reworking of familiar material. It is a retrospective which not only retraces artistic experiences over a twenty-year career but is (as the title suggests) one that also evokes and celebrates the sentiment and fondest childhood memories she still possesses for the West Texas panhandle. On stunning, richly textured, arrangements of old friends like 'Trouble In The Fields' and 'These Days In An Open Book', or even in the Celtic-flavoured 'It's A Hard Life Wherever You Go', Nanci delicately builds upon those distinctive, intimate qualities that have always been at the core of her musical persona. Although this remains a very different Nanci Griffith album, with obvious vocal maturity, it is not Nanci Griffith reborn. She simply continues to move forward the perceived boundaries of her country-folk origins. As the final chord fades and the dust settles on this latest release, I just wonder now what surprises her U.K. tour in May will hold in store.

RP



Chris Isaak

Forever Blue

Reprise 9362-45845-2

Sales of this 1995 album have recently taken a serious up-turn, thanks to the album's opening track 'Baby's Done a Bad Bad Thing' featuring heavily in Stanley Kubrick's much hyped *Eyes Wide Shut*. That song, good as it is, isn't really indicative of the mood of the rest of this masterpiece. Isaak had not long lost the love of his life when he recorded *Forever Blue*, which resulted in him writing some of the most gut-wrenching and heartfelt songs of his career. The pain is there for all to hear in the gentle country of 'Don't Leave Me On My Own' and the immensely moving 'Things Go Wrong', surely one of the saddest songs ever written. The tempo does shift on 'Goin' Nowhere', Isaak adding some mean and angry guitar to the somewhat caustic lyrics, but the sombre mood returns with 'Change Your Mind', a sparse lament with minimal instrumentation and a glorious vocal from Isaak. The spirit of the late, great Roy Orbison regularly surfaces in Isaak's singing, none more so than on 'Shadows In A Mirror' and the ultra sad 'The End of Everything'. He is fondly remembered for the hit 'Wicked Game' and rightly so, but Isaak's no one-hit wonder. Anyone who has ever been the victim of unrequited love will understand where Isaak was coming from when he recorded *Forever Blue*, for this reviewer one of the greatest albums ever made.

AH





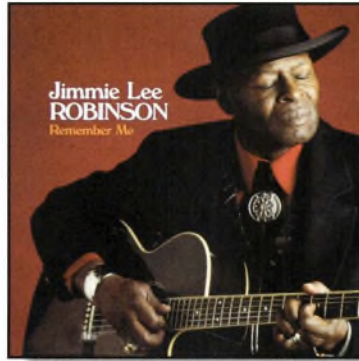
Dock Boggs

His Folkways Years 1963-1968.

(Smithsonian Folkways SF 40108) 

What we have here is an elderly bespectacled cove with a weird voice and a five-string bar jo, but you mustn't let that put you off; in Dock Boggs we find one of the fundamental root-stocks of rock'n'roll. This expansive - 2 hours and 22 minutes-worth - set of fifty songs is an awesome thing indeed. Originally released on three Folkways LPs these recordings would be a major influence on such diverse poetic songwriters as Bob Dylan, Gram Parsons, Bruce Springsteen and Nick Cave. *His Folkways Years* is a well-spring of songs; murder ballads, blues, bluegrass, mountain music, spirituals, whose themes are as old as the Kill Devil Hills. Boggs, a Kentucky coal-miner and union organiser, was "discovered" twice in his life. First by Brunswick for whom he recorded twelve songs between 1927 and 1929 and secondly during the folk boom of the early sixties. Dock was already an old man when he recorded these pieces and there is a desolate, fractured, ghostly quality to the performances which speaks volumes before you even get to the lyrics of such spine chillers as 'Oh, Death', 'Pretty Polly' or 'Old Joe's Barroom'. "Who would ever shake hands with Dock Boggs", wrote Greil Marcus in *Invisible Republic*, "who sounds as if his bones are coming through his skin every time he opens his mouth?"

JM



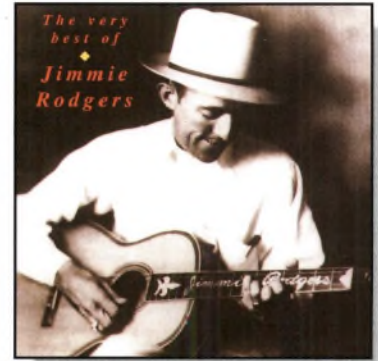
Jimmie Lee Robinson

Remember Me

ANALOGUE PRODUCTIONS APO 2006  


Sparse, dignified arrangements from a time-served Chicago blues man authentically tap into the unspoiled riches of a Maxwell Street tradition that has moulded careers since the Great Depression. Robinson began playing there back in '42 and his deep, powerful voice on 'Boss Man' or 'Wait For Me' cannily illustrates the value of living through such turbulent times. Having immersed himself in the blues for over half a Century, Jimmie Lee, casually working the strings of a Washburn acoustic guitar, is a priceless connection to those days - a link that will only be severed as the last breath leaves a generation of musicians. Never over-burdened by the melancholy of all those experiences, always searching out subtle and resourceful methods to colour a song - be it a throat-clearing croak, guttural rasp, spur-jangling beat, gently overpitched phrase, or whistled tune - Robinson discharges a level of creative energy that belies his sixty nine years. The two-track recording of these eleven songs effortlessly matches every twist and turn in their delivery through a carefully miked solution. It even picks out and runs with the humour on 'The Boll Weevil' when lesser productions might not have kept pace. Delightful.

RP



Jimmie Rodgers

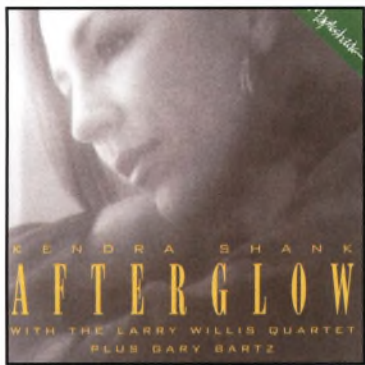
The Very Best Of

(Camden 74321 535852) 

Among Jimmie Rodgers soubriquets are The Father of Country, America's Blue Yodeller and The Singing Brakeman. He didn't so much invent the blue yodel as bring it to the attention of the poor masses, while inspiring such greats as Hank Williams and Merle Haggard. He cut his first record in 1927 and six years and a hundred songs later died - in classic poetic fashion of tuberculosis - just short of his 36th birthday. The blue yodel is an odd combination of 12-bar blues and traditional yodelling which can be traced from the mountainous areas of Europe via the trail yells - yippee eye ay - of cowboys, and the work chants of chain gangs. He also incorporated - on such numbers as 'Train Whistle Blues' and 'The Brakeman's Blues' - an atmospheric and fiendish-sounding vocal approximation of a steam whistle. Besides the blues based material there are trail songs, parlour ballads, and trad folk tunes among these 22 songs. Well-known, oft-covered classics like 'Muleskinner Blues', 'In The Jailhouse Now' and 'Frankie & Johnny' here rub shoulders with more obscure yet equally fine material. 'Gambling Barroom Blues', for example is an excellent version of 'St James Infirmary Blues' while 'TB Blues' is a maudlin masterpiece. £5.99, and cheap at twice the price.

JM





Kendra Shank

Afterglow

Mapleshade 02132

Singer-guitarist Kendra Shank has had a lengthy apprenticeship, much of it in France (she considers Paris her second home), and has recently performed at jazz festivals and clubs around the world. Shirley Horne introduced her to Mapleshade and I'm glad she did because this is a lovely set. Mostly because she has a warm, very pure voice with plenty of expression, but also because she's sensitively backed by some fine musicians including Larry Willis (piano) and Gary Bartz (Alto sax). To add icing to what's already a pretty rich cake, Kendra clearly has an ear for a good song since the numbers here include songs by Elvis Costello, Jobim and Holiday alongside a single composition of her own, the snappy 'Paris Bossa' which holds its own in pretty distinguished company. She sounds particularly beguiling whilst singing in French as she does in 'Tes Yeaux Bemol' where she's sensitively accompanied by Willis. And to top it all Mapleshade have delivered another excellent, open, recording. Staging is excellent with plenty of depth and the whole thing is simply unfussy and natural.

What are you waiting for?

DD

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Clifford Brown All Stars

EmArcy

MG 36102 Alto

Recorded in '54, two years before Brown's death, this album comprises just two numbers; 'Autumn In New York' which clocks in at an impressive 21.40, and a relatively short take on 'Caravan' at 15.17. Brown leads an exceptional band featuring Max Roach on drums and Herb Geller on alto, with Walter Benton on tenor, Kenny Drew piano, and Mr 'You Get More Bounce' himself, Curtis Counce on bass. With this quality of band the 'All Star' epithet is for once appropriate and their familiarity with each other, and with the standards concerned, means that they could stretch out to great effect. 'Caravan' steams ahead with barely a pause for breath, driven along by really propulsive percussion from Roach. All the band members get plenty of soloing in, and very fine stuff it all is. Brown's fluid lines coupled with Roach's frenetic drumming really stand out although it seems churlish to call out anyone from such a fine band effort. 'Autumn In New York', taken at a much slower pace, is like a long cool bath after the heat of 'Caravan', and again features great work from the whole band.

The (mono) recording is fine. Cymbals are a little splashy but there's plenty of detail, presence and punch in this dynamic recording.

DD

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Guilherme Vergueiro & Carlos dos Santos

Espiritu

Naim cd041

Recorded in August '99 at the Mad Hatter Studios in L.A. Naim state that this is 'Sensual music from sunny Latin climes', and what do you know, it is! With Carlos dos Santos on acoustic guitar and Guilherme Vergueiro on piano, this is a gentle laid-back set. The interplay between the two is a joy to the ear and the standard of playing is very high throughout. And whilst 'relaxed' might be a term coined specifically to suit this music, it's not muzak. Far from it. An inherent rhythmic feel holds it together and the melodies are subtly realised. At no time did I feel that the lack of additional musicians was a problem. And curiously, whilst most of the numbers are taken at a gentle pace, the overall feel is uplifting: Summer comes early to Winchester, pass me that Pina Colada. The recording is among Naim's best efforts delivering proper body and character to each instrument along with lots of fine audible 'clues' like Vergueiro singing along under his breathe as he plays which makes the experience all the more real and enjoyable.

DD

Supplier: NAIM





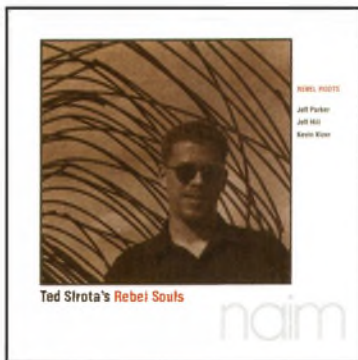
Patricia Barber

Companion

Blue Note 7243 5 22963 2 3 

I quite liked Barber's breakthrough album *Café Blue* but still had a few doubts feeling that there was a touch of the Emperors clothes about the adulation that was heaped on her at the time. This album, recorded live at The Green Mill, Chicago, is another matter. It's much less clever, more straight-ahead and all the better for it. Barber, accompanied by a very capable quartet, in particular Michael Arnpol on bass, breezes through seven numbers in a short 43 minutes. Opening with her take on the old Sonny & Cher number 'The Beat Goes On' Barber quickly takes ownership, giving the song a much more contemporary feel, accompanied by a driving bass line from Arnpol and her own tasty Hammond B3 work, plus finger snaps and audience clapping that's very nearly in time. The rest of the set comprises a Bill Withers number ('Use Me'), four Barber compositions and a lengthy closing take on 'Black Magic Woman' which only lacks the flair of a Peter Green or Carlos Santana to really bring it to life. The recording, in what sounds like a small venue is very good, warm, weighty with plenty of detail. For anyone seeking an introduction to Barber's work, start here!

DD

www.vivante.co.ukRECORDING
MUSIC

Ted Sirota's Rebel Souls

Rebel Roots

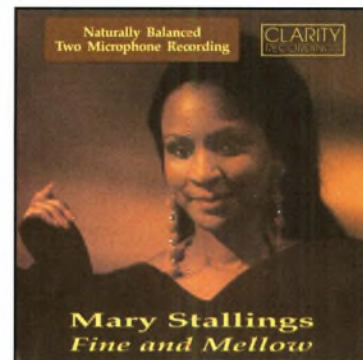
Naim cd014 

Having been introduced to this band via their second CD, it seemed logical to investigate their first release for Naim. This set, recorded in '96 is a more even paced affair than *Propaganda*. Covering 10 numbers including modern jazz classics like Rollin's 'East Broadway Rundown' and Monk's 'Brilliant Corners', the album is something of a homage to free jazz. Don't run away though, that's not to say that it's a melody free set. In fact although there's a good quota of free blowing, it's always within a tight groove and the music flows beautifully. The set includes four numbers from the band's guitarist Jeff Parker one of which, the gentle, rolling 'Wait' is a standout track with some particularly lovely sax work from Kevin Kizer set against strong bass lines from Jeff Hill, with rim shots from Sirota setting the pace. Just as well recorded as their earlier album with Sirota's drum kit very well captured, the acoustic of the recording venue, Goodspeed Recital Hall, Chicago, comes across really well. The album was recorded in two short days. As a result there's a 'live' feel to the set that makes it much more enjoyable than most studio fare.

Highly recommended.

DD

Supplier: Naim

RECORDING
MUSIC

Mary Stallings

Fine & Mellow

Clarity Recordings CCD 1C01 

I'd not heard of Mary Stallings before receiving this CD for review. A quick thumb through my trusty MusicHound Jazz Guide told me that I still have a lot to learn, citing one of her albums (*Spectrum* if you must know) as one of the best albums of the '90's.

It turns out she's been performing since the early '60's singing with bands ranging from Louis Jordan, Earl Hines, and Dizzy Gillespie to Basie. I'm very glad to have finally been introduced to her because this is an excellent album, ranging through a set of standards, from Holiday's 'Fine and Mellow' to 'For All We Know'. Backed by a quartet comprising Jeff Chambers on bass, Noel Jewkes on sax, clarinet and flute, Merrill Hoover on piano and the delightfully named Gaylord Birch on drums, the whole band is in great form. Laid back, cool and knowing this is a treat from start to finish.

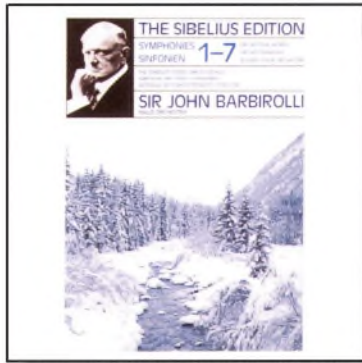
The recording is spacious, with plenty of character conveyed in Stallings voice. Sax tones are suitably breathy, and the percussion crisp and dynamic.

What a treat it is to discover a new artist. I shall now start hunting out her other recordings.

DD

Supplier: Aanvil Audio

RECORDING
MUSIC



SIBELIUS
Symphonies 1-7; Tone Poems, etc

Halle orchestra
Sir John Barbirolli

EMI CMS 5 67299-2

Throughout a long conducting career, Sir John Barbirolli programmed the symphonies of Sibelius. And did so, moreover, at a time when the composer was still something of a minority interest with audiences. These five CDs gather together all the stereo recordings he made with the Halle for EMI, taped over approximately four years - from January 1966 to May 1970. The sound, despite two venues, three producers and four different engineers, is pretty consistent - bright, open, sharp, with that rasping craggy brass tone that was very much an EMI trademark at that time. Barbirolli plays the music *Con Amore*, tempi are for the most part slower than usual, and phrasing is deliberate and considered. Alas, the Halle was not a world-class orchestra at that time, and the playing isn't, yet what's lacking in polish is made for in spirit, and in every bar one senses orchestra and conductor engaging with the music and giving it their best shot. There's plenty of excitement in these performances, and throughout you can hear the conductor's meticulous care in unifying the direction of the string bowing. It gives a very solid homogenous sound, with powerful penetrating tone - sample the big tune for massed violins in the second symphony's first movement - disc 3, track 1 at 1m 27s.

JMH



J S BACH
The Well-Tempered Clavier Books 1 and 2
Rosalyn Tureck (piano)

DG 463 305-2

The perils of buying mail order! I ordered this set thinking it must be a new recording - a follow-up to Tureck's recent DG 2CD set of Bach's *Goldberg Variations*. Wrong! It's her Stone Age 1953 mono MCA set, (issued on Brunswick in the UK and long since deleted on LP) newly remastered by DG for this release. Musically the playing has worn well, and it strikes the ear as surprisingly modern - no Romantic excesses, just the music played with taste, clarity and respect. It makes one wonder how Tureck would tackle the '48' today - and why DG didn't take the opportunity to make a new recording with her in good modern sound? Unfortunately the engineering on the old set is very dated. The piano tone is pale, flaky and lacking in firmness, and there are patches of break-up during peak passages. Pitch stability is pretty good, though judging by the odd dropout it sounds like the original mastertapes may not have been stored correctly. I've a couple of the original Brunswick LPs in my collection, and found the vinyl piano tone richer and more widely shaded dynamically. A fascinating musical document and well worth hearing. But listeners should sample the quality before paying top price.

JMH



BEETHOVEN
Piano Concertos 1 - 5

Alfred Brendel, VPO,
Sir Simon Rattle

Philips 462 781-2

Given the constant re-recording of standard repertoire, groans of *Not Again!* could be excused at the issue of yet another set of Brendel's Beethoven *Piano Concertos*. The more so since this is Brendel's fourth complete recording of the works. One could easily assume this great pianist simply has nothing new to say about the music. Understandable, but wrong - totally wrong. Far from being routine, this is easily the most intense and vital Beethoven Brendel has given us. The playing is cultured and assured, yet passionate and incisive. Speaking personally, I find it hard to respond to these works as I once did - the freshness has long since been eroded by over-exposure. Which is why this new Brendel/Rattle set is so remarkable, it has you listening with new ears, experiencing something of the joy and excitement felt when hearing this wonderful music for the first time. Yet these are very much mainstream performances, without tricks or showmanship. What makes the experience so involving is the keen intelligence that informs every bar; a palpable tension that's exiting and exhilarating, making the music sound fresh and alive. Phrasing is supple and articulate, rhythms sharply pointed and crisply turned. The recordings sound very clean and tonally natural and clarity is excellent. Strongly recommended - especially to the jaded!

JMH





MAHLER Symphony no 6

Atlanta SO,
Yoel Levi

Telarc CD -80444

This is a mightily impressive performance - weighty, powerful, inexorable, yet sensitive and beautifully shaped. It resonates in the mind long after the disc has ended. Which is how it should be, of course. This music should (must!) leave you feeling skewered - unable to listen to anything for a while. *Mahler 6* on one CD is good value, but alas there's a caveat. The disc runs for about 78 minutes and tempi are for the most part fairly measured. Which means the first movement repeat is missing - had it been included the performance would've exceeded 80 minutes and needed a second CD. That aside there's little to grumble over. Levi (and the Telarc engineers) are scrupulous over balance, and this allows lots of detail to tell without obvious microphone spotlighting. Textures are open and transparent without noticeable manipulation. Indeed, the sound is notable for its smoothness and integration, though some might wish for a brighter treble. Typically Telarc, soundstaging is big, spacious, and wide-ranging, with a massive bottom-end. The Hammer blows in the finale are awesome - though purist Levi omits the third which Mahler deleted out of superstition. But, on a big system the effect is undeniably impressive. By the way, Levi follows convention and places the Scherzo second.

JMH



RACHMANINOV Piano concertos 2 and 3 Ashkenazy, MPO. /Kondrashin LSO/Fistoulari

Decca 'Legends' 466 375-2

On LP, Ashkenazy's early '60s accounts of Rachmaninov's *Second* and *Third piano concertos* were pretty much standard recommendation for ten or fifteen years, earning the tag 'classic'. Hearing them again, one is impressed by the dexterity of the pianist's finger work, and his cool, at times almost understated approach to these hothouse works. Rachmaninov's reputation as a great composer is much more secure today than it was in the early 1960s when these two recordings were made, and listening one senses the pianist trying to clarify the structural integrity and coherence of the music, rather than wallowing in its emotional richness and sweep. The end of the third concerto, which can get rather messy and out of hand, is kept on a tight leash, and Decca's engineering (Wilkie twiddling the knobs) ensures every detail can be heard. In this new 24bit/96kHz remastered transfer, the sound has greater sonority and depth than Decca's previous issue on Ovation. Tape hiss is lower too, and the music sounds slightly louder with greater presence. Ashkenazy went on to re-record both concertos several times, and his interpretations grew freer, richer, and more colourful. But these original performances - serious and meticulous - have a special magic all of their own

JMH



SMETANA Ma Vlast (My Country)

VPO,
Rafael Kubelik

Speakers Corner/Decca SXJ 2064-5

The Czech conductor Rafael Kubelik had an extraordinary relationship with Smetana's patriotic cycle of symphonic poems collectively known as *Ma Vlast*. He made something like five complete recordings of the work, and this one for Decca (taped in 1958) was his second - and his first stereo version. Alas, the sonics were never quite up to Decca's very best standards; the soundstage is cramped and lacking in range, with an over-full bottom-erd, and there isn't the clarity and impact that characterises the finest early stereo recordings. This new Speakers Corner 180g LP transfer is basically a good one, and sounds quite full-bodied, avoiding the shrill thinness of early Decca transfers - though some pitch instability remains. Surfaces are clean and quiet, giving the recording every assistance. If the sound still disappoints slightly, it's down to limitations in the original master tapes rather than a lack of care taken over remastering. Kubelik's *Ma Vlast* is spirited and feisty - a performance of passion and panache. Of his various accounts, I still prefer the 1971 DG version with the Boston symphony. The DG sound isn't flawless either, incidentally, but can impress on a good system. Meanwhile, his 1958 Decca deserves a hearing.

JMH



VINYL HOLD-OUT

By Reuben Rarry

Speakers Corner Records - speaking your language?

One of the longest standing, and certainly one of the most prolific audiophile labels, Speakers Corner sprang from unlikely roots. Founded back in the early Eighties, the Company catered for the needs of PA/Disco and DIY speaker builders. It wasn't until the mid eighties that it changed direction and took on domestic hi-fi sales. Today, while the Speakers Corner Hi-Fi Studio still represents a large slice of annual turnover, its core business is now the Record Division and its tie-up with Polygram and Universal.

Like any re-issue house, its strength rests in its licensing agreements. In the same way that Classic Records will forever be linked in the public consciousness with RCA Living Stereo, Speakers Corner are synonymous with the Decca SXL 2000s. In fact they've released recordings from a whole host of source catalogues: Philips, Verve, A&M, Deram, MPS and DGG for example, but it's the Deccas that form the cornerstone of their range.

Talk with Kai Seemann (the main man at Speakers Corner) and it soon becomes apparent that he has a tremendous love of music, and a firm

belief in the historical significance of the recordings released by his Company. What began as an idle flight-of-fancy..... "Manufacturing records was an idea from a lazy summer afternoon in the Hi-Fi Studio" has evolved into a million pound enterprise with distributors in over thirty countries. I asked Kai how he came to settle upon the famous English label. "It was a choice between the big three - RCA, MERCURY and DECCA. On practical grounds DECCA won out because Polygram Group (the license holders) were based nearby, only 100 kilometres away."

Protracted negotiations between 1992 and 1994 were only satisfactorily concluded after a personal intervention by the then DECCA president, Roland Kommerell, who recognised that perhaps there was still a future for vinyl. An exclusive deal was signed and a steady flow of replica discs followed. Kai sets great store in the development of these organic relationships that have helped to establish and hone their reputation over the years. Recordings made in Europe are handled by Pallas in Diepholz, Germany, while the lacquers



from American mastertapes remain Stateside, and travel to Los Angeles and RTI. This sense of continuity extends to the balance engineers. An old DECCA hand, Tony Hawkins, cuts the SXL lacquers in London. More recent DGG Hanover LPs are the preserve of Willem Makkee. This stable arrangement ensures that everybody involved understands exactly what's required, allowing Speakers Corner to rely completely on their expertise with the cutting process. Another example is their close working relationship with Universal, who selected the DGG ▶

▶ tapes for the Violinists, Pianists and Composers collections - also producing, in-house, the sumptuous accompanying booklets. No other license holder has become as involved in audiophile re-releases.

Having, during the past fifteen years, mercilessly hunted down all manner of desirable records, and in that time come nowhere close to getting a complete set of DECCAs in my sights, makes reissues of SXL 2000 and 6000 series LPs a mouth-watering prospect. Doubling up on favourite performances and plugging gaps in the collection raised fundamental questions. Would time, an element of neglect and the inevitable deterioration in the tapes adversely effect sound quality? Could the re-mastering engineers seamlessly mend any imperfections? And, importantly, how does their finished article compare to a Wide-Band, or even a second generation Narrow-Band DECCA?

Unquestionably, these replica discs appear identical. Artwork, sleeve notes, liners and labels have been thoroughly researched. Where the copyright owners no longer possessed them, collectors were contacted or auctions searched, ensuring faithful reproduction of the minutia. Cosmetically, only the stamper marks and heaviness of vinyl betray their youth. But, when you sit back and prepare to do an obligatory A/B comparison between, say, a forty two year old "blueback" 1E/2E pressing of *Petrushka* (SXL 2011) and its most recent incarnation, there are certain things that you should take into account. Firstly, unblemished or unplayed DECCAs are extremely rare. Secondly, certain early SXL 2000s had to be compressed to accommodate equipment of the day simply because the energy present on those tapes was too great. So, what we have here is a swings and roundabouts situation where the re-issues will suffer the

inevitable results of tape degradation, but gain the benefits from improved cutter electronics and headroom. Thirdly, original LPs were cut on vinyl that was closer to 140grams in weight rather than to-day's fashionable 180gram industry standard. The lighter material is, from a production point of view, significantly easier to engineer. So, while the re-master, made of pristine virgin vinyl, is click, pop and groove damage free (placing it ahead of many an original) there is a sonic difference dictated by the very weight of the record itself.

Generally speaking, though it is not always the case, I have found heavier re-issues to be darker-sounding. A likelihood of subtle tonal



shade variations between records from different eras should be borne in mind when comparative listening is undertaken. It's a difference, not necessarily an influence for better or worse. Mind you, 180g seems to be about the upper limit, with quite a few of the Mo-Fi 200gm pressings sounding positively turgid (*The Fantasy Film World of Bernard Herrmann*, a 1974 Decca PHASE 4 recording, for example).

My only gripe where Speakers Corner are concerned is neither acoustic or performance orientated, but instead can be directed at some of the less inspired music chosen for release when there were still so many

uncommon and truly great DECCA tapes in the archives. This is an outcome of a decision allowing feedback from its distributors to partly dictate the choice of future remasters. The complete *Nutcracker* SXL 2092/3 and *Swan Lake* SXL 2107/8 ballets, (even under Ansermet's baton), or *Suppe* and *Rossini Overtures* SXL 2174-2266, and a release of Willi Boskovsky's *Filharmonic Ball* SXL 2198 (that could have been any of a dozen Strauss albums), do not throw me into convulsions of ecstasy. Personally, ahead of these, I would have targeted an orgasmic Tchaikovsky *Violin Concerto* with Argenta and Campoli SXL 2029, or the equally amusing Prokofiev *Violin Concertos* (Ansermet, Ricci) that were first heard under an American DECCA LONDON banner CS 6059 and, later, on our budget Eclipse label.

However, that tends to get brushed aside by the inexorable flood of new titles, appearing on a monthly basis. With legendary collectibles from Argenta and Ansermet, supported by the likes of Monteux, Gamba, Maag and Kondrashin, featuring in the catalogue, there are plenty of highs to compensate for the few "why on earth did they do that?"s. So many in fact, that buying them all is probably out of the question, so here are some (entirely personal) recommendations.

Monteux and anything French is irresistible. Ravel's *Daphnis et Chloe* is a record that should be near the top of your wants list. It was Monteux who conducted its very first performance back in 1912. His sensuous, atmospheric and elegant reading on SXL 2164 delivers that marvellous connection to roots in a Ballet Russe debut. Enchanting Royal Opera House Chorus and LSO players are vividly captured - perfectly in keeping with the delightful, impressionistic, compositional textures. ▶

▶ Avoiding obvious Argenta recommendations like a colourful *España SXL 2020* or solid *Symphonie Fantastique SXL 2009* is never easy, but it does leave another cross-channel work, Debussy's *Images for Orchestra*,



at our disposal. Musically, the loveliness of *Gigues*, *Iberia* and *Rondes de Printemps* sell themselves. The FFSS London recording CS 6013 (undoubtedly staged with an American "ear" in mind) is more

direct than most English DECCAs. Loads of instrumental detail, separation and a big soundstage, yet less warmth from the engineering, are its dominant characteristics. Being a U.S. only release makes an original find in this country extremely unlikely and, with so few stereo Argenta recordings, this is an LP to cherish.

Argenta's mentor, the prolific Ernest Ansermet and his Orchestre de la Suisse Romande, is heavily represented in the catalogue. Any of over a dozen Speakers Corner transfers could be selected, yet I've gone for SXL 2243 because the maestro brilliantly juggles the endemic Spanish flair of Albeniz and a natural restraint buried within a work originally composed for piano. The brash filler to *Iberia* is Turina's meticulously presented *Danzas Fantasticas*. Wallop, incandescence and tasty woodwind and strings make comparison to a Wide-Band unnecessary.

Mozart's *Sinfonia Concertante* SXL 6088, unusually for DECCA, unites the Oistrakh family Igor (violin) and David (viola), with a Russian conductor and orchestra who give a warm, completely relaxed and exceptionally musical performance that many might not anticipate from Kondrashin and the Moscow Phil. Blasphemy and sacrilege? I prefer it to my 1963 1G/2G pressing previously regarded as benchmark material.

Another Mozart, the *Notturmo for Four Orchestras/Serenata Notturmo* SXL 2196, is a rarity probably because the repertoire (which includes Interludes from *King Thamos* and *Lucio Silla Overture*) is less well-known. It is definitely the most surprising of Peter Maag's expertly delivered LSO performances. It is not just the curiosity value alone that places it ahead of his Clarinet/Horn Concertos or Mendelssohn LPs. The distinct orchestral groupings: left-to-right alternations, backward and forward movements of the sound help to make

this a demonstration disc that is actually musically attractive. The replica, again, compares favourably to a treasured 1960 edition. A lower noise floor and an absence of deterioration towards side-ends on the recut are real bonuses.

Saving the best till last? Maybe. A virtuoso and totally willful display from Ruggiero Ricci is its focal point. His tempo for the *Saint-Saens Havanaise* is such that an otherwise excellent LSO under Pierino Gamba's guidance can barely stay in touch. The unique brilliance of a beautifully shaped *Introduction And Rondo*, the hyperactive Bizet *Carmen-Fantaisie* and pyrotechnics that light up *Zigeunerweisen* (Sarasate) are to die for. Yes, the Wide-Band DECCA SXL 2197 is marginally better, but it will probably cost upwards of £250.00. Be indebted to Kai Seemann for bringing it to us for only twenty notes.

So, as a postscript, what does the future hold for the Speakers Corner team? Promising new releases, with test pressings of Mahler Three, and Puccini's *La Boheme* are already in the can and set to appear later this year. And following the 24bit/192kHz comparisons conducted (with Universal's help) at last year's Frankfurt show, expect further investigation of the new digital formats. Speakers Corner have always eschewed CD, but Kai is very positive about current developments. Watch this space.

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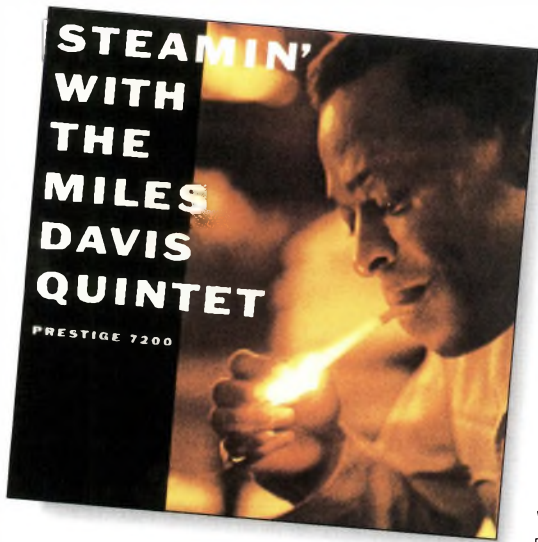
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XRCD versus Gold CD

The Miles Davis Quintet Recordings



Analogue Productions (Gold CD)
 DCC Compact Classics (Gold CD)
 JVC (XRCD)

The popularity of Miles Davis isn't exactly news. But as Sony crank out yet another new version of *Kind Of Blue* on SACD, the music buying public's apparently unquenchable thirst for Miles' recordings presents us with an unusual opportunity. Generally speaking, audiophile record labels cater to a small but highly dedicated market.

They avoid over-lapping re-issues like the plague - except where Miles is concerned. After multiple stabs at *KOB* and *Sketches* on 180g vinyl, I now have no fewer than three versions of the Prestige Miles Davis Quintet recordings on audiophile CD. For once we can do a head



to head comparison of Gold and XRCD versions of identical material.

The five Quintet recordings occupy a special place in the Davis development story - and bring together a stellar line-up of the kind that we can normally only dream of. Miles was joined by Coltrane on tenor sax, Red Garland on piano, Paul Chambers on bass and Philly Joe Jones on drums. And for two years they cooked! The resulting recordings have always occupied a special place in the jazz lexicon, so it was no great surprise when various audiophile versions appeared. DCC were first off the line with a Gold CD version, and when Analogue Productions released their five-record 180g box-set, it was to DCC that they went for the parallel CD set. Now we have XRCD versions as well.

Starting with the Gold versions, I was astonished

to discover a significant difference in the sound quality between ostensibly identical discs. In fact I was so amazed that I got the two discs physically confused. No problem - you can hear quite clearly which is which! Take track 6 from *Workin'* as an example (*Ahmad's Blues*). The DCC version was weightier, with much better instrumental separation (on a mono disc!). The cymbal work, splashy and disjointed on the disc from the AP box, was cleaner, and more importantly, much better integrated on the DCC. Red Garland's piano lines

suddenly had purpose and direction, his dynamic and rhythmic stabs and shifts were far more apparent and made more sense. But it was the bowed bass solo that really took the biscuit. A meandering sprawl on the AP disc became a subtle progression, nicely balanced by the one note piano prompts. In short, one was a mess, the other was a really tight band on top form. And whilst I've only got two of the DCC discs, the differences are consistent right across them. Adding in the XRCD is a closer call. It doesn't have the free ranging dynamics of the DCC, but it adds a whole layer of subtle detail. The finger snaps at the start of 'Blues By Five' have far more texture and shape, and the playing has more life and energy. It also handles the percussion better, with cleaner cymbals and real, hollow drums. Overall, I'd have to give it to the XRCDs by a nose, but both they and the DCCs are clearly better than the DCC discs from the Analogue Productions box. Hearing is believing. My eyes still aren't sure.

RG

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Analogue Productions



DCC Compact Classics



JVC XRCD





Brahms
Symphony No.2 in D OP.73
Academic Festival Overture
Pierre Monteux, LSO

Speakers Corner / Phillips 835167 AY **180g** **4**

The pastoral-like *Second symphony* with its intriguing blend of romantic themes, comic spirit and classic craft demands a performance of resounding stature, and most would have backed an old war-horse like Pierre Monteux to deliver music of monumental insight. However, whilst this is a solid workmanlike account (one in which the LSO produce idiomatic playing of a very high standard) his cannot by any stretch of the imagination be regarded as a memorable reading. It certainly fails to set the pulse a-racing in quite the fashion of Kertesz on King Super Analogue's Decca transfer (KJJC 9221) which, in itself, is not a wholly satisfactory presentation. The Abbado or Karajan DGG recordings with the Berlin Philharmonic are far stronger recommendations that are probably also available to Speakers Corner. Still, my preference would be for an EMI reissue of Boult's wonderfully expressive and superbly recorded performance with the LPO. Here at least the Philips engineers do not compound octogenarian opacity with any sonic cataracts. The orchestra stays focused; individual instruments are nicely separated and detailed, while a spacious, warm atmosphere surrounding these images gives a gloss to this slightly disappointing LP

RP

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Chausson/Canteloube
Songs of the Auvergne
Poem de l'amour et de la mer
Jacquillat, Lamoureux Orchestra,
Paris. Victoria de los Angeles

TESTAMENT EMI ASD 2826 **180g** **6**

Charmingly played and beautifully recorded, the seductive warmth found in the voice of Victoria de los Angeles is well-matched to these two lovely French song cycles - especially in the subtle shading of Chausson's rather neglected *Poeme de l'amour*, where her evocative intonation suits its richer orchestral texture. The nine songs including *Bailero*, *Three Bourrees*, *Lo Fiolaire* and *Chut, Chut* culled from Marie-Joseph Canteloube's Auvergne settings are here (perhaps) too polished. Undeniably beguiling, de los Angeles definitely lulls you into a dreamy pastoral world with soft timbres that have their moments, but do not possess the implicit authenticity that is present in Netania Davrath's outstanding interpretation available through Analogue Productions. Davrath, much folkier in style, to my mind gets the nod ahead of Victoria de los Angeles because an attractive emotional edge to her singing serves as a constant reminder of the peasant roots underlying these tunes. However, Testament's remaster (improving on an EMI original that's still readily available secondhand) sounds better than those Vanguard tapes reworked by Chad Kassem and Doug Sax. The resonant bass notes and lifelike woodwind obbligatos are enhanced by the auditorium.

RP

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Copland/Menotti
Piano Concertos

Aaron Copland & Jorge Mester
Conducting Earl Wild, piano.

VANGUARD/A P APC 029 **180g** **CD** **CD** **2**

Earl Wild's spirited plunge into these atmospheric contemporary American works was a focal point for the Manhattan Centre engineers when they cut this disc for Vanguard back in 1961. It has stood the test of time well and Analogue Productions have made a nice job of the transfer. Spotting the piano (unrealistically) and building upon some solid foundations through a deeply powerful bottom end to the recording (while adding an expansive soundstage that's littered with fine instrumental detail) will surely appeal to the sonic sensibilities of a modern-day audience. Traditionalists can take solace - the attractive orchestral playing, by *The Symphony of the Air*, and bravura of a magnificent soloist upstages a controlled reading given by the composer (Copland) whose jazz-based themes could have benefited from freer exploration. The Menotti (arguably the lesser of the two concertos) has a greater fluency under the baton of the then youthful, Mexican-born, Jorge Mester. Likeable, understanding, neo-classical flavours reminiscent of Scarlatti's keyboard pieces (though not as enduring) also prove that there is more musical substance, Stateside, than a patriotic flag-waver or tired Gershwin tune.

RP





Tatsuya Takahashi & The Tokyo Union

Scandinavian Suite

Three Blind Mice TBM XR 1005 **XR**

Originally produced in '77 to mark Three Blind Mice' seventh anniversary, this is a splendid sliver of Japanese big band jazz. In six parts the piece represents the composer's (and tenor saxophonist's) impressions of Scandinavia. It ranges from a rather '70's film theme like intro – more New York than Stockholm in my book – to a very lyrical third movement 'The Legend of Garbo', which features some fine tenor soloing from Tatsuya Takahashi. After a homage to Sibelius, the album closes with 'Children at Play' the opening of which has perhaps the most dated feel on the album with congas and 'funky' bass, keyboards and synthesiser work. Thankfully an excellent trombone solo from Ejiro Miyazaki, which recapitulates the main theme, alleviates this number. The ensemble playing throughout the album is very tight. Without having heard the original recording, it's not possible to say how it's benefited from the XRCD process. It's certainly clean, with a sweet top end but is a little lacking in midrange body and bass warmth. A highly enjoyable experience for all that, but I'd re-title it 'Manhattan Suite' 'cos that's what it sounds like to me!

DD

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Mahler Symphony No. 4

Otto Klemperer. Philharmonia Orchestra

EMI/TESTAMENT SAX 2441 **180g** **2**

In 1961, at the Royal Festival Hall, Klemperer and the Phil. reputedly gave an imperious and quite captivating performance of this, one of Gustav Mahler's best-loved works. Inevitably, perhaps, bearing these events on the Southbank in mind, EMI cut his *Fourth Symphony* employing the same personalities. The subsequent release during the following summer included a lovely sounding, but overly dramatic, Elizabeth Schwarzkopf as soloist for the song sets. But, and this is a big but, if an even-handed approach to these thematic uncertainties of life and death is sought, then neither Klemperer, or the alternative Reiner Living Stereo disc from Classic LSC-2364, will be ideally suited. Though beautifully recorded, he adopts a heavy tone, especially in the quiet passages, while our friend Klemperer is often too pedestrian with his speeds. So although the finale has a wonderfully relaxed tempo and the Landler is perfectly shaped with his famous meticulous attention to detail, much of the First Movement is bedeviled by a flagging rhythm. Contrastingly, the serenity of Mahler's middle Movements is lost because the music flows too readily. It's a case of the tortoise and then the hare. Even some ravishing orchestral playing heightened by rich, transparent and sonorous engineering cannot redeem the reading

RP

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Tony Bennett & Bill Evans

The Tony Bennett Bill Evans Album

ANALOGUE PRODUCTIONS REVIVAL SERIES

APR 3004 **150g**

In audiophile circles crooners are something of an endangered species. Exceptions on vinyl are of course the EMI Sinatras, Nat King Cole (DCC) and this Bennett/Evans collaboration originally engineered back in the mid seventies by Don Cody at Fantasy's California studios. Taking a break from jazz trio work - the subtle, unforced opening piano notes of an inspired Bill Evans go on to provide a spontaneous and wholly convincing accompaniment to all nine of the slow, seductive numbers here. Touchingly, Tony places Bill's own 'Waltz For Debby' among his intimate, richly romantic renditions of 'My Foolish Heart', 'Days of Wine and Roses' and an exquisitely cut, 'Young and Foolish'. Another example of the chemistry igniting when these two are together is the beautiful Ray Noble song, 'The Touch of Your Lips'. Bennett (centrestage) can have rarely been as well-recorded and celebrates with an intoxicating performance where the phrasing, timing and tempo perfectly matches both the words and music. Underpinning this tour de force is Stan Ricker's excellent Acous Tech/RTI remaster. Always sensitive to the material, he and Bruce Leek deliver a clear and natural sounding LP whose focus and balance are intrinsically right for this session. Anything more spectacular would be a vulgar betrayal of all involved.

RP

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Antal Dorati conducting The London Symphony Orchestra

CLASSIC/MERCURY SR 90226 180g 1



Ernest Ansermet conducting L'Orchestre De La Suisse Romande

SPEAKERS CORNER/DECCA SXL 2017 180g 1



Eiji Oue conducting Minnesota Orchestra

REFERENCE RECORDINGS RR-70 HD

Stravinsky - The Firebird

A wonderful twist of fate brought together the youthful brilliance of Rimsky-Korsakov's star pupil and the great Ballet Russe impresario. For it was an impatient Serge Diaghilev who turned to Igor Stravinsky when an old and increasingly dilatory Liadov failed to deliver his musical commission based upon the exotic Russian fairy-tale of *The Firebird*. The rich pictorial hues and scoring for a gigantic orchestra (which includes a stupefying array of percussion instruments) make *The Firebird* a natural for audiophile release, and we are well-served by the differing displays of plumage currently on offer. Interpretatively, Ansermet and Dorati are chalk and cheese, yet their approaches to the Complete Ballet have equal validity. The Swiss conductor adopts a slower tempo (especially in the finale) but this also suits those quieter passages of music where his sensitivity and delicacy of touch flesh out the tiniest instrumental detail. The solo violin which signals Prince Ivan's final capture of *The Firebird* is a fine example, as are the opening flutes of the Choral Round Dance between Ivan and the princesses. Ansermet, overbrimming with all this subtlety, draws upon accomplished brushwork from his OSR players to apply Stravinsky's aesthetic pigment. The recording (one of their earliest stereo releases) produces precise, individual images of remarkable clarity. Only some audible tape hiss, at what I might add was an extravagant listening level, reveals its 1958 vintage.

Alternatively, on LP, there is the Mercury. Watford Town Hall was the venue chosen by the famous Cozart, Lawrence, Fine and Eberenz team and, with the LSO seated in a normal concert arrangement, three microphones were suspended along its frontage in an omni-directional pattern designed to capture what is widely regarded as one of the most exciting and vividly dramatic version of the ballet heard in this country. Dorati sacrifices the niceties of Ansermet's reading in favour of a heat-treated and truly dynamic pace that really ignites in the big tuttis with the kind of unquenchable passion you would expect of a Hungarian maestro. Whereas Ernest is content to coax a performance, Antal employs the whip-hand to drive his musicians ever onwards.


Classic's re-cut is the most impressive of the Dorati/*Firebird* reissues: the Mercury Golden Import, Phillips and even an outrageously good budget Contour release that I have at home, are all pale imitations by comparison. The orchestral flourishes, drum detonations and spiky brass interventions stand out while the sweet midrange strings spread warmth throughout an entire soundstage - though this recording is marked down for opacity at the furthest reaches of the frequency extremes.

Oue and the Minnesota treat us to Stravinsky's 1919 revision of *The Firebird* - a Suite roughly half the length of the whole Ballet. *The Song of the Nightingale* and *Rite* complete the running order, but they cannot compensate for what is the weakest of the three interpretations. Understandably, Oue lacks the maturity and direction found among his eminent predecessors and while this colourful, impressionistic account is justified, the inconstant speeds are not. There are unaccountable accelerations away from a generally slow tempo that adversely effects rhythmic cohesiveness. The superb orchestral playing and brilliance of Keith O. Johnson's wide-ranging HDCCD Reference Recording has a tendency to spotlight these flaws in Oue's approach work. Transparency, scale, accuracy and an imperceptible noise floor in the engineering department can be a blight as well as a blessing on these occasions.

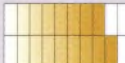
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SPEAKERS CORNER/DECCA SXL2017

RECORDING 
MUSIC

CLASSIC MERCURY SR 90226

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REFERENCE RECORDINGS RR-70

RECORDING 
MUSIC

Korean Vinyl

- Pt 2

by Jimmy Hughes

In this second instalment, JMH continues his overview of the treasures contained in the LP pressings of a Korean attempt to take on Reader's Digest. Pressed from original metalwork supplied by the likes of Philips, Decca and (predominantly) DG, these albums are available at the bargain price of £6 a piece. See Part 1 for Jimmy's views on pressing quality, but rest assured, there are bargains to be had.

The early '70s saw a virtual avalanche of new Karajan issues from DG, among them an extremely fine LP of six Suppe overtures. All the favourites are here; *Light Cavalry*, *Poet and Peasant*, *Morning Noon and Night in Vienna*, etc. Karajan was brilliant in light music, and these enjoyable ebullient pieces are played for all they're worth - even after some thirty years this is still the collection of Suppe overtures to beat! The sound is good too; vivid and full-blooded, with only a slight tonal hardness to complain of. 2864 072 24.

Karajan was an outstanding Strauss conductor and his celebrated late '60s recordings of the *Blue Danube Waltz*, *Tales From the Vienna Woods*, etc have been recoupled with his slightly later accounts of Bizet's *Carmen suite* and second *L'Arlesienne suite*. The Bizet items catch Karajan (and the Berlin Philharmonic) at the peak of their powers, and the playing is both sensuous and full-blooded. The Strauss

pieces sound well, but the Bizet has a little of the tonal hardness that affects the LP of Suppe overtures. 2864 072 25.

A great showpiece like the Mussorgsky-Ravel *Pictures at an Exhibition* needs brilliant orchestral playing and virtuoso conducting. So who better to supply them than Herbert von Karajan and the Berlin Philharmonic? The coupling of *Pictures* and Ravel's *Bolero* from 1967 is one of Karajan's most famous LPs. The playing is beautifully refined and precise, and demonstrates the almost hypnotic control this conductor could exert over an orchestra. The sound is smooth and well balanced rather than vivid and highly detailed, though clarity is good. 2864 072 26.

Karajan again for a compilation that brings together his Tchaikovsky *Nutcracker* and *Swan Lake* suites. *The Nutcracker* is the slightly earlier recording, and dates from 1967 - a period when Karajan taped quite a lot of Tchaikovsky for DG that culminated in a magnificent seven LP boxed set released in autumn that same year. *Swan Lake* dates from the early '70s, and marks something of a watershed in this conductor's career - the hypnotic time-stands-still quality, noticeable in the recording of *Pictures*, is even more noticeable, leading to some magical moments. Sound is good in both works. 2864 072 27.

Another great Karajan LP from the

early '70s was the Grieg coupling of *Peer Gynt* suites with music from *Sigurd Jorsalfar*. I don't think this music had even been played with such seriousness and intensity before - as though Karajan were trying to show Grieg as a great composer and not just a minaturist. The sound is beautiful too, presenting a slightly recessed orchestral picture but capturing the depth of the hall acoustically. Listen out for James Galway's beautifully limpid flute playing in *Morning Mood!* 2864 072 28.

While on the subject of classic recordings, the 1965 LP Karajan made of music by Debussy and Ravel has long been regarded as one of his finest. Indeed, for some this *La Mer* is the best ever; a miraculous blend of refinement, precision, and sensuality. The *Prelude L'apres-midi* is beautifully languid and subtle, while the second suite from *Daphnis and Chloe* is mercurial and exciting. The DG recording is delicate and finely shaded, but recreates detail and space convincingly. The cover of Karajan's 1964 *Rite of Spring* is used, rather than the original. 2864 072 29.

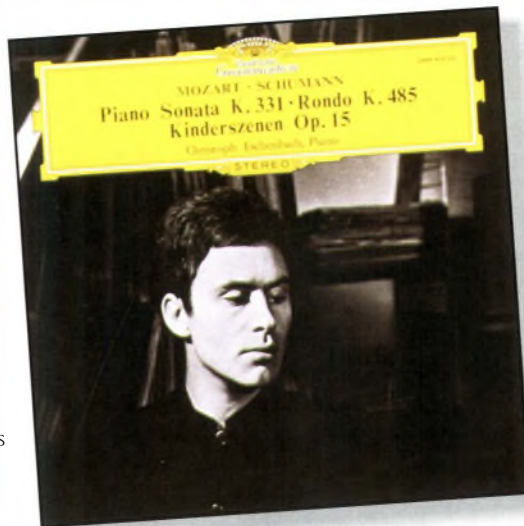
Speaking of Karajan's 1964 *Rite*, it's actually the last LP in this box - naturally with the cover art of yet another DG *Rite*. Abbado's LSO version from 1976! Stravinsky himself, in a review of then recent recordings, famously rubished Karajan's 1964 *Rite* (Perfumed Savage and Tempo di Hoochie-Coochie were some of his

▶ kinder remarks), yet it remains an impressive performance. True, Karajan's later 1977 account is much better - it seems he took uncle Igor's criticisms to heart - and the newer recording copes with the wide dynamic range of the piece better. That said, the original recording is still worth hearing, and the present transfer is a good one. 2864 072 30.

Instrumental music dominates the fourth box - solo piano, organ, guitar, and an LP of works for violin and piano and cello and piano. The first disc is an inspired choice: Karl Richter's recital of popular Bach organ works including the famous *Tocatta and Fugue in D minor*. What makes this LP special is the high quality of the 1964 recording, Richter's fluent playing, and his brilliant colourful choice of registration. The present transfer is good too. 2864 073 31.

Mozart next, and the *Sonata K. 331* sensitively played by Christoph Eschenbach. Also included is the *Rondo K. 485* and an imaginative account of Schumann's *Kinderszenen* (Scenes of Childhood) - this latter piece coming from the pianist's 1966 DG debut *LP K. 331* is taken from Eschenbach's complete recording of the Mozart *Sonatas* released in 1970, but the *Rondo* I can't trace - it's a bit of a rarity. Clear open piano sound. 2864 073 32.

Mention Beethoven, pianos, and DG, and Wilhelm Kempff's name won't be far behind. His stereo cycle of the *32 Fiano Sonatas* for DG (released in 1965) was something of a landmark, and an international best-seller. Of the separate issues, naturally the *Pathétique/Moonlight/Appassionata* LP took pride of place. Kempff's approach to Beethoven was lighter and more mercurial than some of his contemporaries, and DG's slightly brittle forwardly-balanced piano sound rather emphasised this. Yet curiously, his



crystalline touch and simple directness are perhaps closer to modern-day period-piano performances than most others. A classic. 2865 074 33.

Kempff is the link on the next LP which couples Beethoven's '*Spring*' *Violin Sonata* with the *Third Cello Sonata*. In the *Violin Sonata* Kempff is partnered by Yehudi Menuhin, while Pierre Fournier is the cellist, and both performances were part of complete cycles of the violin and cello sonatas. The playing is good, though Menuhin's tone (as recorded) remains slightly vinegary and his intonation isn't always spot-on. Decent late '60s sound. 2865 074 34.

Schubert is the logical follow-on from Beethoven, and the coupling of Schubert's *Wanderer Fantasie* and the *Fiano Sonata in A minor D. 845* is one of DG's outstanding LPs from the early '70s featuring Maurizio Pollini. This is fabulous playing; technically adroit and beautifully shaped and phrased. And the sound is good too, though side two runs for well over half an hour. 2865 074 35.

The next LP is Pollini's legendary set of the Chopin *Etudes* from 1972 - a truly great performance that has never been equalled. Technically, Pollini's playing is quite staggering, and he romps through the most difficult passages with almost insolent ease. Yet above all the playing

is intensely alive and always musical. The piano tone was always rather shallow, and remains so - not even the DG/Speakers Corner 180g Audiophile re-cut could eliminate a slight tonal thinness. But the quality of Pollini's playing transcends such considerations. One of the great LPs. 2865 074 36.

Not content with having Maurizio Pollini producing great Chopin LPs, DG also had the exciting volatile Martha Argerich doing the same. Her 1975 LP of the *Second Sonata, Scherzo No 2*, and *Andante Spianato* was justly famous for its dazzling pianism and willingness to take risks. The piano sound is detailed and articulate, and Argerich plays to the limits of her technique - what more do you want? 2864 073 37.

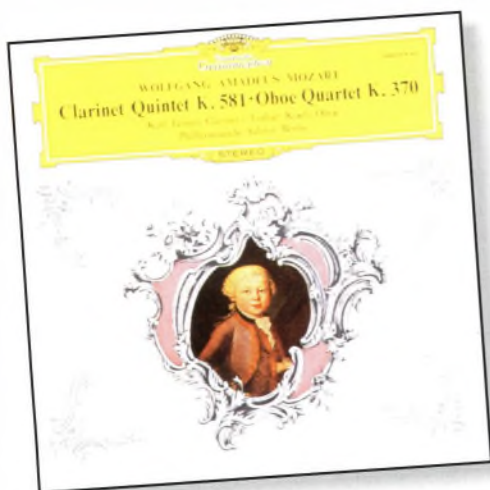
Tamas Vasary recorded extensively for DG in the '60s; mostly Chopin, some Liszt, and the present LP of piano music by Debussy. It's a well-chosen recital of popular pieces - *Suite Bergamasque, Deux Arabesques, Masques, Pour le Piano, L'Isle Joyeuse*, etc - and the late '60s recording is nicely forward and clearly delineated; a tribute to Vasary's clean technique as much as DG's engineering skills. As an introduction to Debussy's piano music, it's ideal. 2854 073 38.

More brilliant playing from Martha Argerich; her celebrated mid '70s LP of Ravel piano music that includes the *Valses Nobles, Sonatine*, and an exiting, volatile *Gaspard de la Nuit*. Here, dynamic contrasts are very wide (the opening of *Gaspard* is very quiet), but a good system should cope. The piano tone is just a shade thin, but the treble sparkles nicely. 2864 073 39.

For something like a quarter of a century Narciso Yepes was DG's 'house' guitarist, producing a steady stream of LPs covering all periods of guitar music. The present LP is a compilation ranging from JS Bach to Villa Lobos, and it includes many popular pieces ▶

▶ expertly played by Yepes on his special 10 string guitar. The recordings are of decent quality and easy to reproduce. 2864 073 40.

The fifth and last box majors on chamber and vocal music. Things get off to a good start with Haydn's *Emperor quartet* and Mozart's *Hunt quartet* played by the Amadeus Quartet. Both recordings date from the early '60s - a period when the Amadeus were at their peak and widely regarded as the finest string quartet in the world. The performances are rich and sweet, and beautifully phrased. Not everyone liked the Amadeus approach; some found their playing succulent and self-regarding. But it's quality playing, and you'll not hear it's like again. Decent clear sound. 2864 074 41.



Mozart's *Clarinet quintet* (Karl Leister) and *Oboe quartet* (Lothar Koch) also features the Amadeus quartet, and again the playing is very smooth and cultured - perhaps at times a bit too much so. Certainly this is playing from another age, and nowadays we'd expect to hear something leaner and more sharply articulated. But it's always enjoyable, and both works are beautifully played. 2864 074 42.

The greatest of all classical piano trios is arguably Beethoven's '*Archduke*' trio, and for this performance DG teamed superstars Henryk Szeryng,

Wilhem Kempff and Pierre Fournier. The playing is confident and assured, though perhaps slightly lacking in intellectual rigour and forward thrust. There is, nevertheless, much to enjoy, and the 1970 recording still sounds very acceptable. 2864 074 43.

One of the plums of the chamber music repertoire is Schubert's *Trout* quintet, and the performance issued here by pianist Jorg Demus and the Schubert quartet is something of a rarity. The playing is friendly and warm, and the early '60s recording offers good detail and clarity. 2864 974 44.

Chamber music of a much more serious hue features next, with a performance of Brahms' sublime *String Sextet no 1* by an augmented Amadeus quartet. This is the sextet with the famous theme and variations second movement, but all four movements are memorable. The playing is richly expressive and mellow, and the 1967 recording still sounds well. 2864 074 45. The next LP is something of an oddball; a collection of (mostly) popular choral excerpts lustily sung by the Berlin Handel choir and Berlin Radio symphony orchestra under Gunter Arndt. The disc begins with Handel's *Halleluja chorus* (sung in German), and continues with works by Mozart, Schubert, Gounod, Bruckner, Bizet, and Beethoven. The singing is perhaps a shade provincial by modern standards, and style is dated too, yet it's an enjoyable disc on account of the music. Solid well balanced sound. 2864 074 46.

Opera next, and highlights from Karl Bohm's famous '60s account of Mozart's *Marriage of Figaro*. The cast is a starry one - Janowitz, Fischer-Dieskau, Prey, Mathis, Troyanos - and expertly paced by Bohm. Some years back, critic Alan Blyth pronounced the complete set his favourite *Figaro* on record - high praise given the competition for this jewel among

operas. The recording places voices well forward, and the tonal balance is rather bass light. Otherwise the sounds wears its years lightly. 2864 074 47.

Choral music is represented by Mozart's powerful *Requiem* mass in a performance from the early '70s conducted by Karl Bohm. The performance is measured and imperious, with great weight and the right kind of serious tone for this moving and often dramatic work. Modern performances tend on the whole to be lighter and faster than this one, but great music can take more than one approach and there's no denying Bohm's sincerity. Good sound. 2864 074 48.

A single LP could hardly hope to do justice to the breadth of lieder by Schubert, but the next disc attempts the impossible with 7 songs from *Winterreise* (Fischer-Dieskau) and 7 assorted songs for male and female voice. With such 'greats' as *Erlkonig*, *An Die Musik*, *Die Foreile*, *Standchen*, *Wegenleid*, and *Heldenroslein* this is close to The Best of Schubert Lieder. Good early '60s sound 2864 074 49.

In the early '60s DG were not much associated with opera, but they did collaborate with La Scala for several productions, among them a complete recording of Verdi's *La Traviata* featuring the young Renato Scotto conducted by Antonio Votto. The last LP in the World of Great Classics features highlights from the complete set. Worth hearing for the two principles, then on the cusp of glittering international careers. Bright clear recordings with the voices placed nicely forward. 2864 074 50. 

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