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Issue 12 - Jul / Aug 2001
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Nº 2001 PLAYLIST

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The other day, whilst waiting for Stonehenge (Cycles that is, not stones) to rebuild a wheel suffering the shock of being sandwiched between 200lbs and the Forest roads, I was wandering down Fisherton Street when I came across a charity stall outside the church. Collecting for Rumanian orphans, amongst the wares on offer was a box of records, towards which I was naturally drawn, only to discover a hidden treasure trove of classical collectibles. I duly extracted immaculate samples of three wide-band SXL2000s, two wide-band 6000s, a pair of Lyritas, a couple of nice early Archivs, a Callas Tosca and assorted other interesting bits and bobs - all for the princely sum of 50 pence a record (or rather less than a back a piece, if that's your currency). Pleased? I should co-co!

Next to me was an expensively dressed man (I could tell because all his clothes had labels on the outside) looking through a large, coffee table book of Forest photographs. When he asked how much it was the answer was "A pound". To my astonishment he was outraged, complained bitterly to the elderly gentleman behind the stall, implied that he was a thief and offered 30 pence! No argument regarding charity or value would sway him, so I stepped in and paid the asking price, much to his annoyance. He then tried to buy the book from me, but I wasn't selling. After he'd departed I donated it back to the stall. So, I guess my records actually cost me nearer 60 pence each.

The point of this story? This idiot clearly wanted the book but he was quibbling over less than the price of the Mochachino that he was on his way to drink. This culture of something for nothing, in which people always want a deal is now reaching epidemic proportions. The problem is that it inevitably undermines quality of service and ultimately, quality of product. Remember that next time you are in your hi-fi dealer.



Roy Gregory

A lot of changes - and still rather a lot of money.



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Please address letters to the Editor at Hi-Fi+, Unit 12 Albany Business Park, Cabot Lane, Poole, Dorset, BH17 7BX.
or by e-mail to hifiplus@freenetname.co.uk

Dear Roy,

I don't write to magazines, but I am making an exception for Hi-Fi+. I have just received issue 11 in the post, and reading the Mark Levinson reviews, made me realise why I took out a subscription to your magazine (another thing I don't do!) in the first place. Where else would you get that quantity of pages and photo's devoted to one brand/product without it looking, and reading, like an advertorial? Quite simply a fantastic indulgence! Plus the writing in general is comprehensive, informative and a pleasure to read; and of course the photography more than stands up to your past high standards. It is the audio equivalent of CAR, a magazine I have bought since I was 12 years old (I was 27 this year). High praise indeed, I can assure any of your readers who haven't got a car habit as well. Enough of this gushing, after reading the report on the Bristol show I look forward to your review of PMC's excellent FB1 floorstanding speakers, as I have had mine for a few months now, and they just keep getting better and better. (They must be good, as they were funded with cash plundered from the nearly complete Lancia Intergrale Fund!)

Oh, and when will the second half of the interview with Mr Yamamura & Mr Churchill appear, as that was really special as well? As I impatiently await issue 12, have fun with all that fabulous kit!

Best regards

Matthew Carter, via e-mail.

The Levinson review has provoked a lot of comment, universally positive from readers, generally negative from the brand's competitors. Comments along the lines of "what do I have to do to get coverage like that?" elicit a straightforward reply: Produce a system that is as comprehensively engineered and thought through, as superbly built and that sounds that good and I'll gladly give you the space! We've always had a policy of reviewing on merit, and products receive the space they deserve. If a product simply demands more space then so be it. You can rest assured that there will be plenty more Levinson type articles, always assuming that we can find the products that warrant them.

The FB1's are finally in our hands, so both that and part two of the Yamamura-Churchill review will be appearing shortly.

Ed.

Dear Sir,

I was shaken enough by your review of the S.A.T CD player in Issue 11 to seek out other S.A.T owners. I was made to feel that I had made a huge mistake in buying one. I have to inform you that, having spoken to three other individuals plus the dealer that I bought the player from, all their opinions are at odds with yours.

I will admit that the CD-Fix is rather stark when first powered up (and for some time after), however, the reason I chose the S.A.T over that of more expensive British players was that it offers both good timing and a very musical sound. One man's meat etc.

Most of your comments I feel were justified, and I can sympathise to a degree about printing deadlines, though I have to admit that such a negative review has very powerful consequences. People like myself who have purchased products that have been given such derisory comments are often stunned and made to feel apprehensive about their new purchase. You may think that £1500 is a paltry sum to pay for a CD player, but to many (enthusiasts included) it's a king's ransom.

Just for the record, all of the people I contacted remarked that the CD-Fix is one of the most musical and cohesive players they had heard, and I agree. Opinion is an important element in communication but dangerous when used in such a negative way by a reviewer. I understand that another S.A.T player has been forwarded for review. I will do as you suggest, and watch this space. May I conclude by saying that I am more than happy with my S.A.T player.

Yours sincerely

Dr Clinton. J. Westridge, Cleveland.

As I pointed out in the preface to the review itself, we only printed it after much reflection. Part of the reason was deadline pressure (we would, quite literally, have ended up with four blank pages in the magazine), and part of it was ethical. We only review products which we believe to be worthwhile (the list of products we don't review tells its own story!) and we go to great lengths to extract the best possible performance from them. Having said that, we are also duty bound to call it as we hear it, and I'm confident that the results we obtained are accurately reported in the review. I am happy to accept that ►

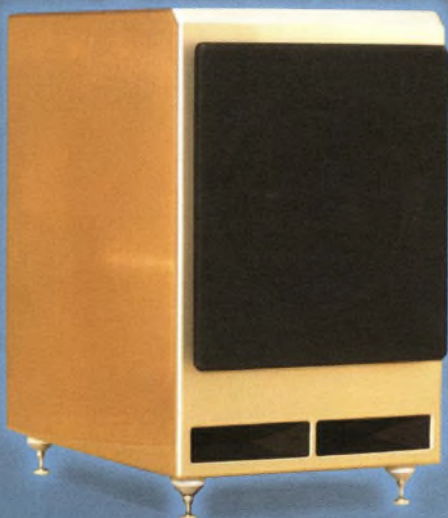
Watt Provo-cation



 The British Hi-Fi
Audio Awards News
2001

Wilson Audio System 6
Best High End Product of the Year

WILSON AUDIO



Watt Provo-cation

Provo, Utah - pioneer spirit, wide open spaces, mountainous vistas, home of Wilson Audio. So now you know why Wilson Audio speakers have a facility for reproducing all the grandeur of music: it's in the air. From the mighty WAMM VII, to the compact CUB, each and every Wilson speaker represents the pinnacle of size and price category. And none illustrates this better than the Wilson System 6, a modern classic which belies its size regardless of the installation, from pure music to multi-channel. And to supercharge the already-super? Dave Wilson likes bass deep and solid enough to convey everything from the Requiem Mass to mass destruction, so he created a new kind of subwoofer which exceeds the capabilities of all which have gone before: the WATCH Dog. Onboard power of 400W, a custom-made drive-unit and construction suitable a fall-out shelter, the WATCH Dog can augment the lower registers of every product in the Wilson range including their state of the art home cinema comprising of the Watch center and Watch surround.



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▶ *the sample we listened to may have been unrepresentative, hence the request for another one. Unfortunately we couldn't make the comparison before copy date, and the new sample is still yet to appear.*

What concerns me more is that our review should undermine your confidence in your system, and your own judgement. We made quite specific criticisms. If you don't hear what we describe then don't worry about it. As you rightly say, £1500 is a considerable sum of money. Prior experience with products from the same designer suggests that you have every reason to enjoy the fruit of his labours, as indeed we expected to. By all means watch for a second instalment, but don't lose any sleep over it. Just get back to enjoying the sound you chose.

Ed.

Dear Sir,

Please excuse me if I have misunderstood your article (Playing The System, Issue 11), but you are slagging off Linn Kan owners, aren't you? You are criticising their choice by suggesting that they lack the ability to appreciate the evidently superior attributes of other loudspeakers. Even worse, you accuse them of selecting their transducer in an attempt to be fashionable. You also postulate that active Kan systems are acquired as a result of incorrect auditioning methods. Specifically by using an 'internal reference' based on the comparison of only two components, which does not attempt to bring the concept of live music into the equation. This is presumptuous to say the least, how could you possibly know what led an individual to choose their particular hi-fi?

You lecture about the "sober consideration of the whole" when auditioning loudspeakers, but ignore the fact that loudspeaker design is essentially an exercise in compromise, and there is no such thing as a perfect speaker. People make their choice based on which compromises they are willing to live with, and these will not necessarily match yours. Some listeners may actually prefer dynamics and musical coherence at the expense of tonal correctness and frequency extension. This is a perfectly valid philosophy, although you would appear to find it difficult to accept.

This posture irritates me, as you may have noticed. Not because of the make of speaker that you choose to attack (I am not, nor have I ever been a Kan owner), but because there is a strong implication that if you don't like a product or a system (and you obviously don't like active Kans), then anybody who does is mistaken. You attempt to justify this approach by employing a flawed and wholly inappropriate bicycle metaphor, which for me did little more than illustrate how one member of your team is perhaps unqualified to proffer advice that might affect purchasing decisions, as he has just spent rather a lot of money on a bike that he doesn't seem to like much.

This is not the first time that you have taken such

a stance. In the review of the Arcam Alpha 9 CD player (issue 1) you concluded that anybody who didn't like it had something wrong with the way that they listen (i.e. them). This attitude is widespread, especially among the "5 star best buy" brigade, but I would not expect it of a publication that so obviously (and proudly) attempts to pitch itself at a more intelligent reader who can make their own decisions.

I do not wish to be told that my personal audio preferences are flawed (I don't particularly want to be told that they are correct, either). They're mine, and I'm happy with them. I would much prefer to be educated and informed than patronised and judged.

Yours faithfully,

William Dias, via e-mail.

Far be it from me to impose my tastes and prejudices on anybody else, or to suggest that somebody else's choice is 'wrong' (especially as, in the case under discussion, it has brought so much pleasure to so many people). I like Kans for what they do (a bit like I like original Quad ESLs), but I'm not blind to their weaknesses, but that is beside the point. Let's not forget that it was the Kan owners who were looking to change, not me telling them to do so. The whole point of the analogy was to demonstrate that you can appreciate that something is 'better' without necessarily preferring it to what you already have, at least until you re-educate your habit. The question is, why is that, and what does it tell us about the way we listen. I try to encourage both our writers and, more importantly, our readers to remember that the views expressed in the magazine are, ultimately, one person's opinion. Like all opinions, their validity depends on how informed that individual is. They aren't 'the truth' or more important than the reader's views. Hopefully, what they will do is encourage the reader to think and question for him or herself.

*People select hi-fi for many different reasons, and fashion is certainly one of them. In fact, as has been pointed out many times, a lot of purchasers will trust almost anything (review, salesman, mate...) ahead of their own opinion. The very fact that speakers (in particular) are so compromised means that they can place a heavy burden on the rest of the system, to the extent that they can begin to impose performance restrictions that have little or no reference to the real musical world. All the time the listener is happy with that then there's no problem. It's when he or she becomes disgruntled that it becomes a trap. It's trying to make a flawed product (and aren't they all) do something it's incapable of that can lead to a ruinous financial spiral. The purpose of the article was to try and get people to examine the opinions they hold, and why they hold them. As to my opinions of other people's systems, perhaps you take them more seriously than I do or you should. **Ed.** ➤*

new classic

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Home Entertainment 2001, New York

by Roy Gregory

Organised by, and universally known as the Stereophile show, the middle of May saw much of the industry decamp to New York. For anybody used to the likes of the London and Bristol shows, this was a distinctly different and fascinating event. And let's not forget that John Atkinson, the Stereophile Editor was the man at the helm of Hi-Fi News back when they first organised the Penta show. Okay, so the rest of E-map's home entertainment division got in on the act (Home Theatre, Home Theatre Interiors, Stereophile Guide To Home Theatre), but, as we shall see, this was, very definitely, a Stereophile show.

The event itself took up five floors of the Hilton International, with live music happening on a sixth, and being in a forty-five storey building, the construction of the rooms was a little more substantial than is often the case. Many of the rooms were in fact double suites, allowing separate display and listening areas, and their distribution throughout the hotel helped keep interference from other rooms to a lower level than usual, with non-show rooms and floors spaced in between. Cocooned in the air conditioned environment of the Hotel, it was weird indeed to look out of a window and discover what the 42nd floor really means!

Organisationally, one of the major differences between this and a UK show was the appearance of dealers as exhibitors. In the intensely political environment of the US market this serves the useful purpose of providing a layer of insulation between the organisers and manufacturers, even if it's not

without problems of its own (Sound by Singer had around ten rooms at the show, their heavyweight competition, Lyric Hi-Fi, none!). However, one peripheral benefit for visitors was that this made for far more varied systems, the single brand prerogative disappearing as soon as the dealer starts to spread the cost amongst his various suppliers. The resulting systems weren't just more varied, they were also rather more realistic, especially given the high average price of the equipment featured.

This was definitely a two-channel, serious music event. Whilst I haven't done a count, I'd guess that the A/V presence was confined to rather less than a quarter of the rooms, and tended to be seriously high-end (of the Path Premier in London variety). The rest was made up of serious hi-fi; whether seriously sensible, seriously expensive, or just seriously wacky (although the latter tended to get trampled in the stampede of five figure speaker systems). With a ticket price of \$31 for a weekend pass, the attendees were serious too, and the high price of entry did nothing to inhibit their numbers, which on Saturday threatened to bring the lifts and corridors to a grinding, grid-locked halt.

With a range of seminars covering subjects as diverse as Analogue, the role of the PC in home theatre installations, the obligatory DVD-A update, and Ask the Editor sessions with each of the sponsoring titles, as well as recitals from the likes of Hyperion Knight, Arturo Delmoni



HP's reference system – the front half of a cool quarter of a million bucks.

(fabulous!), Keb' Mo', Jimmie Lee Robinson and Nancy Bryan, there was something on offer for everyone. And if all that sounds a little safe then how about David Johansen, once of the New York Dolls, or the Atkinson, Perkins, Reina and Stewart combination of three Stereophile writers and a turntable manufacturer offering up "swingin' jazz". I passed on the latter, but hey, whatever lights your candle.

These are exactly the kind of events that UK shows have been crying out for, and the attendance levels at the ones I got along to suggest that the public agree. So, UK show organisers, over to you...

Leaving mere music aside and getting down to the really important thing, what about the equipment? ►

► Well, one room in particular deserves special mention. In an unprecedented example of co-operation, no fewer than eight manufacturers combined in a brave but ultimately doomed attempt to give visitors a taste of TAS Editor Harry Pearson's legendary reference



Awaiting an audience with HP
– well, his system anyway.

system. Clearaudio (analogue front end) Besthifiintheworld.com (the Groove phono stage) Burmester (CD replay system) Conrad-Johnson (ART-2 line stage) VTL (amplification) Edge Electronics (bass amplification) Wisdom Audio (speakers) and last but by no means least, Nordost (Valhalla cabling) provided the hardware and expertise. What they couldn't provide was the Sea Cliff music room, an omission which was felt all the more keenly because of the massive expanse of glass windows opposed by a mirrored wall in the hotel conference room. However, this didn't limit either the attendance or appreciation of the visitors, and the 15 minute demonstrations were packed for the entire show. You can't transport a listening environment lock, stock and barrel (or the time it takes to really tune and bed in a system) which is why the final results offered only

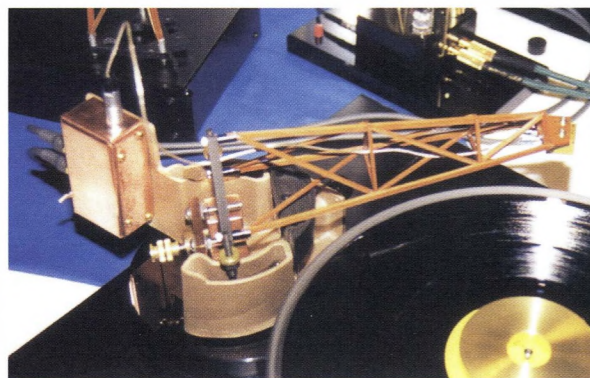
a pale imitation of what HP hears. But that doesn't stop this being a thoroughly worthwhile (and considerable) effort on the part of the participants, one that is to be applauded. More, gentlemen please.

Elsewhere, whilst analogue enjoyed a healthy presence, much of it was on the static display stalls, with few exhibitors using it to demonstrate with. However, it's noticeable that



All for one... uncommon cooperation and not a drop of blood spilt.

several of the best sounding rooms did feature turntables, but more on that later. One fascinating product was the Golden Gate tonearm. This unlikely looking construct employed



The Golden Gate tonearm, complete with dual damping troughs and rear mounted phono stage.

a lightweight wooden pylon as an arm wand, coupled to a pair of damping baths and a low slung, composite counterweight. The rear of the massive arm base incorporated a phono stage. The Japanese stopped playing with wooden arms years ago, and since then the idea has occasionally raised its head, although never in the form of a space-frame. With other manufacturers moving away from aluminium tubes into tapered castings, carbon fibre and even RDC, this is one product I'd love to hear. Other news includes a new arm from Basis which appears to resemble the Immedia/Kuzma Stogi S,

and a new range of low output (0.5mV) Statement wooden bodied variable reluctance cartridges from Grado. Amidst the acres of vinyl on offer, hot news was the release of yet another direct cut LP. Groove Note, following hard on the heels of Analogue

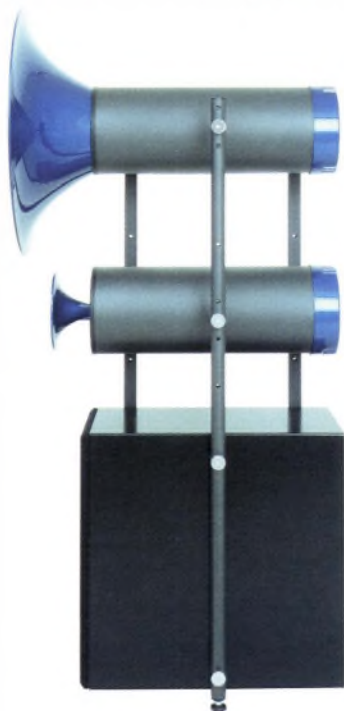
Productions, have issued a 45RPM disc of the Bill Cunliffe Trio, recorded direct to Bernie Grundman's lathe. Results are predictably excellent. Also available were the next two discs

in Classic's Led Zeppelin crusade. With Three and Four in the bag I say bring on Physical Graffiti. Ray Kimber was proudly displaying a new range of mains cables, in two gauges and with three different levels of termination hardware. The basic four foot 14AWG version will retail for around \$140. The Gold level adds high quality WattGate connectors (and \$120 to the price) while

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Avantgarde Uno, from £5300 (white)

We intended to put some text here, you know, the sort of trite caption we normally put in our ads. But Pete ran out of ideas, and anyway, the captions always paled after seeing them a few times. So these products have been left to speak for themselves. And this space has been left **intentionally blank**



EAR Yoshino V20 £2699



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Transfiguration Spirit £950



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▶ the Gold Plus features proprietary SWR Damping, a parallel device which forms a hefty 'sausage' around the lead itself for an extra \$160. Ray was excited but guarded about its action, and I await the promised samples with interest. Incidentally, given that the much heavier 10AWG version only adds \$20 to the price, who's going to skimp on the cheaper one?

On the subject of connections, WBT were showing their thoughtfully engineered universal speaker terminal plate. Interestingly, although this features the latest WBT terminals (very nice, very stylish, and with a new plastic shrouded model where the shroud definitely won't spin), a great deal of effort has gone into providing a substantial mounting plate which doesn't adversely affect the sound. The result is manufactured from aluminium plate, specially machined to eliminate eddy currents around the terminals, provided with proper gaskets and a choice of spacings. There's even plenty of room to write instructions/warnings. It's nice to see someone treating this oft neglected area of speaker design with the care it deserves, and with several manufacturers already adopting the new system, an investigation of its benefits is definitely on the cards.

It was nice to see the excellent KR amps again, a rationalised and reduced range now being handled



The Vaic Lumen White loudspeaker featuring an all ceramic driver line-up.

by Red Rock Audio (www.redrock-audio.com), who have also substantially reduced prices. Perhaps these superb sounding products will finally realise their potential. Driving the interesting new Talon speakers in a system featuring Red Rock's own passive pre-amp and carbon powder cables (used as a conductor in the interconnects and an RF shield in the speaker cables) the sound had all the speed, dynamics and clarity that I've always associated with the KR amps.

I can see why the speakers have created a bit of a stir too. In fact, it was a bit of a show for speakers. Opera had a new slim-line



Legend Audio's exquisite speakers; driven to astonishing effect by their monoblocks or Starlet integrated amplifiers.

floorstander on show, the SP2. Think Super Pavarotti but with a curved monocoque enclosure behind the solid wood baffle and a pair of 4" bass/mid drivers and you've got an interesting prospect indeed. Elsewhere, it was nice to finally get to hear the highly regarded Gershman speakers, a product which for once, more than lived up to expectations. Both the sculptural Gap and the new, rotund Opera Sauvage model were making impressive sounds, the former driven with Myriad electronics, the latter with impressive and keenly priced valve monoblocks from French company Kora. The Equinoxe pre-amp costs a mere \$1449 while the Cosmos 100 watt triode monoblocks weigh in at \$4795 a pair. Driven from an Audiomeca CD player, the system managed to combine presence and tonal colour with tremendous dynamic range and drive. With a real sense of space and dynamic contrast this was one of the best sounds at the show. It was also one of the few systems which was happy playing the less than audiophile discs

that I took along. Bap Kennedy was reproduced with all the energy and sardonic wit I'm used to, and no one made a dash for the CD player once they discovered just what I'd put on. Gershman are high on my list for future attention, and enterprising would be importers could ▶



do far worse than check out Kora (www.kora.net).

Vaic were present in force under the Acoustic Dreams banner, showing a fascinating new speaker, the Lumen White. This substantial floorstander uses three of the ceramic bowl drivers that so impressed me in the Karma Exquisite Reference, but this time coupled to a 75mm ceramic mid-range and 25mm ceramic tweeter. This exotic line up is housed in an asymmetrical cabinet with a full height slot port in its tail, a loading which Vaic claim to be unique. Driven by a Wadia/DCS front end and Vaic monoblocks, the sound had speed and clarity to burn. Resolution freaks need look no further - this is the speaker for them (assuming they have the required \$38000 entry fee!). (www.acousticdreams.net)

Legend Audio were making their customary excellent sound, their stand mounted mini-monitors driven by their own modest valve mono-blocks delivering all the spatial precision and finesse that you'd expect, but adding astonishing weight, scale and musical authority to proceedings. Stand mounted speakers might be one of the hardest sells in hi-fi at present, but with performance like this from what are very realistically priced products, perhaps it's time to fly in the face of fashion. (www.legendaudio.com)

We were also treated to both sides of the Japanese high-end. Final Laboratory (they of the battery powered amps in Issue 2) launched

47 Labs PiTracer CD player.



a mains powered valve integrated design. Based around two pairs of push-pull EL34s, it goes to great lengths to mechanically isolate the output and mains transformers to prevent them interfering with the rest of the circuit. Beautifully styled in a compact, deeper than it is wide chassis, and offering four inputs and 35 watts per channel, the Music-3

looks set to unsettle the valve integrated market. Its performance on the Barbirolli *Tallis Fantasia* was near perfect, the measured pace and dramatic tension underlining exactly why this is such a superior reading.

I could have listened for hours, which is all the more astonishing given the Sony portable CD used as a source.

(www.walrus.co.uk)

Those other masters of minimalism, 47

Labs, were showing their expensive (sorry, make that very expensive) PiTracer

CD player. Incidentally the name, despite the spelling, should be pronounced pit-racer. In this outrageous beast the entire mechanism is housed in a mechanically damped box which runs over the disc on inch diameter wheels. Any eccentricity in the disc is compensated for mechanically, by shifting the reader box back and forward! Sound, via the 50 watt Gaincard and Vaessen speakers was exceptionally coherent and tactile, demonstrating once again the value of alternative approaches to audio



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hi-fi+, Issue 10 - Mar/Apr 2001



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At the other end of the spectrum, I finally got to see the long awaited Niro amplification from Mechanical Research Corporation, the brainchild of Niro Nakamichi. Imagine my surprise when the cute little cylindrical unit I was expecting turned out to be a two foot high, eighteen inch wide, 150 watt Class A behemoth costing \$22000 a copy. (Cheapskates can opt for the Class AB stereo chassis at a mere \$23000!) If you stuck a propeller on this thing it would look right at home in the nose of a Zero fighter - which could well be why it's dubbed the Power Engine. Love

or loath the aesthetics, a pair of the beasts was making short work of a set of B&W 801 NTs, the notoriously obdurate speakers behaving like maiden aunts at a garden party, despite the limited confines of the hotel room. The structure of the product is dictated by basic electro-mechanical principles, so despite appearances, the Niro designs share more than just a country of origin with Final and 47 Labs. Perhaps we should be taking a little more notice of what's happening on the Pacific rim. (www.niro.net)

Home grown US product was always going to be thick on the ground. This was my first chance to listen to the baby Red Rose system, and impressive it was too. Mark Levinson's latest project, now that he's moved on from Cello, centres on the creation of the kind of low impact high performance audio

systems that seem to fly in the face of the very "high price, high end" equipment he was instrumental in pioneering. Running from a combination SACD/DVD-A source, the valve integrated amp and hybrid ribbon speakers offered extreme



Hovland's gorgeous power-amp – a fitting partner for the equally lovely HP100 pre-amp.

transparency and the ability to really make the music breath. I only heard it playing small ensemble jazz, something which it did with breathtaking ease and naturalness, but a question mark has to hang over its capabilities with more complex and demanding large scale material. Personally, that's one question to which I can't wait to discover the answer.

Hovland had their gorgeous power-amp up and running with Audio Physic Avanti III speakers and an Immedia/Lyra Helicon front-end. The sound was suitably sweet, clean and absolutely wide open, indicating that it shares its sonic character with the HP100 pre-amp, meaning that if you are looking for romance and cuddly valve warmth then you'd best look elsewhere. Me, I want honesty, and I can't wait to try one of these at home, especially running with its own cables. (www.hovlandcompany.com)

This was another of those sonic oases that I could have stayed in for a lot longer than I should have, a category that also embraces the Joule Electra/Merlin room. Indeed, both the Merlin speakers and the Rogue Audio amps with which they debuted at Novotel 2000, were shown to advantage, and I suspect that it's only a matter of time before the Merlins join the amps in enjoying UK distribution. (www.merlinmusic.com) Meanwhile, old-stagers Krell and Wadia had introductions of their own. Krell were debuting their L.A.T2 stand mounted speaker, complete with milled aluminium

cabinet (and very tall stands). There were also new budget(ish) electronics, but more on those when they arrive in the UK. The sound of the system, running from FPB monoblocks was everything you'd expect; crisp, clear and taught. Now Krell aficionados can complete their systems without fear of dilution. (www.krellonline.com) Wadia showed their new entry level 301 CD player, complete with Pioneer stable platter transport and a new, softly sculpted silver fascia. I've yet to totally make up my mind on the new look, but one thing's for certain; it's a vast improvement on the utilitarian minimalism of its predecessor. The unit wasn't playing (they were using the two box player through Aesthetix amps and the big Vandersteen speakers; excellent) so sonic judgements will have to wait until the arrival of a review sample.

Which brings me, finally, to my ▶

▶ two high points of the show; one conceptual and the other sonic.

First, the conceptual. Now, I've never been a great fan of passive control units. Whilst I can appreciate their transparency and cost effectiveness, for me those benefits have always been outweighed by the compromises involved, especially at the frequency extremes and in terms of their crippling dependence on cables and positioning to even approach their potential. Enter then, the unfortunately named (at least as far as the UK goes) Bent Audio and the Tap, a multi-channel capable (up to eight), remote controlled passive pre-amp with a difference. Designer John Chapman reasons that the best place for a passive volume control is as close to the amplifier's input as possible, so he builds it into the interconnect! At the show he had a whole variety of the very pretty Goertz Micro-Purl interconnects each with a small milled aluminium box about six inches from the amplifier end. Each box contains a passive attenuator using Vishay resistors to set the level, and they come in a variety of guises, with or without additional sockets to allow the connection of extra sources. They also come balanced and single ended, and although the samples used Goertz cables, they are perfectly compatible with other choices. Additional expansion modules allow the control of additional sources, or provide a buffer/crossover option, allowing the controller to create a sub-woofer channel, or act more like a traditional pre-amp.

Now we get to the really clever bit. Each of the boxes also has a multi-pin socket for a communication lead which runs back to a central controller, itself running from a plug-top transformer (so no international voltage problems!). And what a controller. This perspex creation

features a row of clear acrylic posts that illuminate, just like a bar graph, to indicate volume level. It also lets you switch inputs and mute the volume, all by remote control. The cost of this creation is \$900, with the leads extra, depending on the precise specification required. A pair of single-ended Micro-Purls equipped with an additional input would run you about \$400 on top of the controller. The whole unit was only on passive display, so whether or not it matches up to

(showing uncharacteristic restraint if you ask me) to a pair of the VAC Signature stereo power-amps. End of the chain was a pair of the eight foot tall Pipedream speakers (that's 21 midrange and 42 tweeters per side!), complete with a pair of their cylindrical 18" sub-woofers driven from an intelligent, self adjusting active crossover. This lot was all crammed into a regular hotel bedroom, and when



Looking for oil in the North Sea?
- you need one of these, my son!
It's that turntable again.

theory when it comes to practice, only time will tell. But I have to admit, this is one product that I really want to work, if only because of the elegance of its thinking and execution. (www.bentaudio.com)

Best sound at the show? Definitely the system put together by Soundstage of Westfield. Starting with a VPI TNT-5 Hot-Rod, they added the JMW 12.5 arm and a vdH Black Beauty Cartridge. This fed the phono stage of a VAC Signature pre-amplifier, which then sent the signal via the more affordable VAC Renaissance Line Stage

you consider that every single piece of equipment in the system is on the extravagant side of large then it's amazing that there was room to sit down! But the sound was glorious, with effortless dynamic range at both ends of the spectrum, huge scale and wonderful transparency. The confines of the room simply disappeared as the music unrolled before you, full of intimacy, subtlety and life, yet with speed and power aplenty on tap. The Classic Records 45RPM cut of the Bruch *Scottish Fantasy* was simply breathtaking, Heifetz' peerless grace and technique revealed in all its majesty. I could get seriously lustful about this system, but with the speakers alone weighing in at \$50000, I think ownership is a fair way off just yet. I shudder to think what it would do in a larger room with the full complement of four subs. But then there's always the slightly smaller, full-range towers at a mere \$10 K. I wonder... (www.nearfieldacoustics.com) (www.vpiindustries.com)



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Playing The System

by Roy Gregory



In the last issue I mused on the attractions of the familiar; after all, we all know what we like and like what we know. Or do we? Human nature plays a central role in the way we choose and build our **systems**: a role which, all too visible to others, we are often the last to see. When we step false, do we recognise the fact, or do we charge on regardless, trying to put things right without ever having to confront our mistake? You bet we do. Audiophiles display an almost Lemming-like tendency to try and spend our way out of trouble. Our latest, dearly beloved and dearly bought pride and joy is placed on a pedestal, free of criticism or even critical examination. So, perhaps it doesn't fit with the rest of our system, but a bit of a shove here and a dent there and they can be made to accommodate it – at a price, and there's the rub.

This particular neurosis can take many forms, but the common factor always seems to be the expenditure of large, and largely ill advised sums of money. Let's look at an example. Fifteen or so years ago it was boom time for the hi-fi industry. A healthy economy and a whole series of undisputed 'champion' products combined to make selling big systems a regular occurrence. Then of course came the upgrades, as owners attempted to keep pace with ongoing developments (and their mates). Well, to cut a long story short, the shop where I worked had a customer who had it real bad. He started with a nice system, and quickly graduated to a super one: Goldmund turntable, Koetsu Red Signature, Audio Research SP11 and M300s, more silver vdH cabling than you could shake a stick at. In fact, it read like a who's who of what was desirable at the time. This was the kit that most people dreamed about.

The problem was the speakers – Martin-Logan CLS electrostatics left over from his original set-up. Now, the CLS wasn't a bad speaker, and it looked fantastic, but it was a less than wonderful match with the hybrid ARC M300s. Its extraordinary transparency and ethereal quality made a poor match for the white brightness that characterised the amps' mid-band. Add the sheer power available to the speakers' tendency to throw out everything below 70Hz at an even 50, and you can visualise the synthetic and lumpy sound that resulted. No problem, simply replace the speakers. Except that flavour of the month was the Apogee Diva. Not only did the customer live on the third floor, and

shifting these monsters is no laughing matter, but they too were a far from ideal match for the M300s, especially in their generous lower frequencies. Never mind, you can't gainsay the magazines, so up the stairs we went, if only to prove the point, which we duly did. The Divas were clearly less than happy.

At this point, the customer rings his hands and asks in anguished voice "What on earth do I do now?" Which is of course, exactly what I'd been waiting for. Here you have, I carefully explained, a classic case of two good products that don't match each other. What you need is a speaker that will work with the (enormously expensive) amps that you already own. And guess what, I happen to have in the car the very thing – a pair of Sonus Faber Electa Amators, small speakers with an apparently insatiable appetite for power, which they seemed to translate into scale and dynamics out of all proportion to their diminutive dimensions. Quick as a flash I hooked them up and sure enough, what a result. This was the best sound we'd ever got in this customer's room, a fact he readily accepted. Did he buy the Amators? Did he hell. They were cheaper than the Logans, and thus represented a threat to the value of his massively expensive system, undermining the notion that more expensive must be better. Instead, he started looking for a more expensive box to better the performance of the little Sonus Faber (the Extrema was yet to appear). It was a long and ultimately fruitless search that perhaps mercifully ended in the economic catastrophe of Black Wednesday. Nothing was ever going to convince this customer to simply sit back and enjoy the happy coincidence of two products with wildly different prices that just happened to really click. He simply couldn't get his head round the concept of using £20000 worth of pre and power amps with £2000 worth of speakers. There simply had to be a better (for which read more expensive) solution.

There are plenty of other examples. The Naim customer who dissatisfied with his system, rather than biting the bullet and changing it, embarked on an upgrade spiral that cost a fortune without ever doing anything about those aspects of the system that he didn't actually like. He ultimately

▶ chopped in the whole lot for an integrated CD player, integrated valve-amp and a different set of speakers. He could have done that straight off, which was indeed what we suggested, but instead he needed to prove to himself that this was the sensible option by spending a vast amount of unnecessary money (as well as wasting several years of premium musical enjoyment).

I'm not picking on either Naim or Absolute Sounds here, simply using them to illustrate that no matter how illustrious the products in question there's no guarantee that they'll provide the answer for you. These are classic examples of why you have to shop for a system rather than a product, and why when upgrading, the context should be your starting point rather than a shortlist of well reviewed products.

Whenever we spend a lot of money on anything, whether it's a bicycle, an amplifier or some item of clothing, there's a powerful disincentive to question the logic or correctness of that decision. It's so much easier to blame something else for any problems. You know the sort of thing: I need to be fitter, I need better cables or I need to lose some weight. Human nature is a powerful behavioural influence. Be warned: tie it down or you'll be setting out on the treadmill of equipment consumption. Of course, that's exactly what some people want, which is fine. But if you want to enjoy your music then constantly swapping your system is pretty much a guarantee that it's going to be a constant and costly underachiever. We all make mistakes. The secret is knowing when to cut your losses. Throwing good money after bad is one of the key symptoms of audiophilia nervosa. ▶+

Industry Perspectives

Ice Cream and Colour

by E. Leopold

In co-operation with Canadian magazine The Inner Ear Report, we will be running occasional pieces (and reviews) by their writers, to offer you an alternative perspective on a hobby that all of us occasionally get a little too close to. Ed.

Let's talk about ice cream, a favourite treat for young and old and one of my special enjoyments almost all year round. Though I have tasted Tom and Jerry's, Haagen Daz, Dairy Queen and Baskin Robbins, I have found a very tasty treat at the supermarket called Tofutti. It comes in a few flavours and tastes creamy smooth, although it isn't made with dairy products. Of course, unusual tastes are not available and for Pastachio, Blueberry Cheese Cake, etc. I have to go back to other manufacturers. On one such occasion I had to wait my turn to get served, as the shop was filled with the addicted. I observed over ten ice cream lovers as they ordered and it became clear that ordering took far too long as most customers decided on a flavour only after

they had seen the frosty merchandise in their original containers. This reminded me of some audiophiles I know who might wander into one or the other audio boutique to see what's new and what's on display. At the ice cream parlour, small samples of the various flavours are available for the asking. At audio establishments, small samples of music are also available, and, though rarely the case, here is where the 'flavour' you might desire should be available. As in the ice cream parlour, the audiophile may find a new flavour of sound, in terms of audio equipment. I feel that the electronics industry innately offers many flavours, distinctive, yet intangible qualities, to suit various preferential biases. Ice cream makers and audio designers must know that they cannot please everyone and the only retort to this dilemma is variety. I don't think that I'd be too much off the proverbial wall, comparing creamy blueberry cheese cake ice cream with lush, smooth sounding 300B amplifiers, while the orange sorbet (for those on a diet) could be likened with the sound of inexpensive solid state devices. OK, so, I AM a little off the proverbial... ▶

▶ Conceivably, colour can be compared with the sound of audio components. The scientific description of colour, or colourimetry, involves the specification of all relevant properties of a colour either subjectively or objectively, just the same as sonic characteristics. The subjective description gives the hue, saturation, and lightness or brightness of a colour, just the same as subjective audio reviews. The most difficult to describe colourations in audio are hue and saturation. The first refers to what is commonly called colour (i.e., red, green, blue-green, orange, etc.), while saturation relates to the richness (of a hue as compared to a gray of the same brightness). And then there is what is known to audiophiles as 'brightness'. I believe that the term properly describes the sound of a component, though, in terms of colour, it describes more precisely the brightness of a light source or the lightness of an opaque object, measured on a scale ranging from dim to bright or from black to white for an opaque object, or from black to colourless for a transparent object. A subjective colour notation system provides comparison samples of colours rated according to these three properties, and I wish it were this easy for reviewers of audio gear. An objective system for colour description measures dominant wavelength, purity and luminance, a cut and dried method and much more scientific than audio gear evaluations where guidelines are practically

nonexistent. Objective colour description has been carried out in co-operation with the Commission Internationale de l'Eclairage (CIE), which has set standards for such measurements. Objective audio evaluations, on the other hand, have no standards. Therefore, we must assume that audio evaluations are based on perceptions and the best we can hope for is the reviewer's honest opinion, influenced as little as possible by his/her personal biases. In addition to a reviewer's description of sound (or colour/flavour) as he/she understands it according to physical and psychological ideals, readers should take into account their own proclivities. They should know that tastes/flavours come in many hues and shades and that neither their nor the reviewer's ideal is necessarily representative of precision. The electronics industry offers at least as many flavours as your favourite ice cream parlour; and the myriad of colours (colourations) rival the colours we see during our fall season. However, when choosing a colour scheme for your house, or choosing a flavour of ice cream, there is no need to justify your choice; like choosing components for an audio system, the only one to please is you, and maybe your spouse.

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Home Truths



by Jimmy Hughes

How to recognise an obsessed LP or CD collector; count the number of copies he has of the 'same' disc. We all have favourite recordings and most of us are happy to have just a single copy of it. But not the serious collector. He (it nearly always is a he) has to have alternatives; the American or Japanese pressing; the digitally remastered version; the one with the European cover art, the limited edition gatefold sleeve, the picture disc, and so on.

Eventually this obsession reaches what might best be described as Sad Bastard territory. Looking for the cover without the bar code; the one with the early laminated sleeve; or STEREO written in big wonky letters on the top

right-hand corner. Then there's all the label changes that occurred over the years. Where do you start? Or, more pertinently, where do you stop? How many versions of a disc do you have to own before declaring - enough!

Believe me. I know what I'm talking about. Many's the time I've gone to a record shop and come out with a bagful of stuff I already had in one form or another. Of course, we need to make distinctions (read justifications) here. What I'd bought might well've been identical to what I already had. But it wasn't exactly the same! There'd always be some incy-wincy difference that justified purchase.

And anyway - if I saw something rare or exotic,



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For many years, **Naim Audio** refused to build a high power amplifier. The

technology simply did not exist, the company said, to make an amplifier with truly high power that would deliver the stringent standards of sound quality and musical performance that Naim demands. Allied with a newly designed circuit topology and sophisticated power supply arrangements, the Naim NAP 500 has a power output of over 140W per channel. Needless to say, notes Naim, every aspect of the NAP 500s sound quality is truly exceptional.



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▶ wasn't it my duty to buy it in order to 'save' it for posterity? One of my most exciting if perverse 'finds' was a Hungaroton LP copy of Bernstein's West Side Story on DG - that's right, a DG set pressed in Hungary. Unfortunately, it wasn't sung in Hungarian (now THAT would be a collector's item!) but it did sound better than my German original. So it was worth getting...

I can't begin to explain the endless fascination of alternatives as a way of renewing your relationship with music and recordings you discovered a long time ago. If you love Miles Davis' Kind of Blue album, it's a killer there isn't more of it. So what better than to keep buying it again and again in different versions? That way, (and this is the cynical negative view) you can specialise in all the various alternatives, rather than expanding your horizons with fresh material...

But, on another level, it's also about gaining fresh insights into something you thought you knew backwards. Hearing a familiar recording in an improved transfer is an exhilarating thing. It's perhaps as close as you'll ever get to recreating that 'first time' experience all over again. And isn't that what we want when we listen to those old favourites - to be blown away just as we were that very first time?

Although it's now over thirty years ago, I can still recall the impact of hearing Barbirolli's Mahler 5 on HMV - my introduction to a marvellous symphony. It was a fantastic overwhelming experience; music, performance, HMV's sound. It was easily the best set of LPs that had ever been on my turntable; I wanted more more more! And now? Well, it's still good. But, perhaps inevitably, I'm not left a total gibbering wreck at the end. It's too well-trodden a path for that.

How could it be otherwise? Why should someone approaching 50 years old experience music with the same passion as a youth of 20? Yet, everytime

I play Barbirolli's Mahler 5, I stupidly hope I'm going to be blown away just as I was that Saturday morning back in 1970 when stylus first touched groove. It's as though, somehow somewhere, the magic I experienced all those years back is still out there. All I have to do is get the right set of LPs, or a newly-remastered CD.

On yet another level, buying extra copies of things you've already got probably has something to do with suddenly finding recordings that were once aspirational (and out of reach financially) available at a reasonable cost. As a young collector I used to go into record shops and gaze longingly at the various Mahler boxed sets on the shelves. I coveted them all. But two full-price LPs on the wages I earned at the time was a major purchase. Apart from that, I was still paying for my hi-fi system.

I especially loved Haitink's Mahler series on Philips, with their atmospheric landscape paintings on the cover. It was thanks to these sets (and others like them) that I first set eyes on the work of painters like Arnold Böcklin, Gustav Klimt, and Caspar David Friedrich. Because of this, there's always a link in my mind between music and painting.

Now, if you're lucky to be in the right place at the right time, you might find one of these LP sets in a Charity shop selling for the price of a cappuccino in one of London's 30 million vastly overpriced coffee shops. How can you not buy given the low low price? How can you pass-by such treasure?

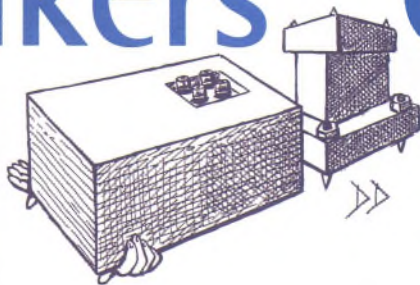
Now that classical CD reissues tend more and more to come out with the original LP artwork, I once again find

myself wanting to buy what I've already got. Especially if the booklet depicts an LP sleeve I never managed to get in its original form. It makes the whole package look and feel more authentic. As though you're buying an original rather than a replica, with the promise of experiencing the music and performance at first-hand. That's my excuse - and I'm sticking with it! ▶+



"I finally managed to get a copy of the 1000g re-issue of Love Over Gold"

Speakers Corner



by Paul Messenger

Elsewhere in this edition I get to review a new state-of-art speaker from Tannoy, the Dimension TD12. It's an excellent speaker, no question, but because it's based on one of Tannoy's famous dual-concentric drive units, the sound is presented in a rather different way than the average.

It's all down to the sound distribution (usually, though less precisely called the dispersion). This plays a major role in perceived sound quality, because it dramatically affects the way the speaker interacts with the listening room. And a speaker like this TD12, with its large diameter main cone and horn-loaded dual-concentric tweeter, generates a distribution pattern that's significantly different from the conventional. Not necessarily better, nor worse, but certainly different.

When you sit in your lounge and listen to a pair of speakers doing their thing, the sound that you hear is a combination of the soundwaves that travel directly from the diaphragms to your ears, all mixed up with the soundwaves that bounce off of the walls, ceiling, floor and furniture en route. The contribution of the latter arises from a combination of the characteristics of the room and the distribution pattern of the loudspeakers, and has a marked effect on the overall presentation.

This is best illustrated by comparing the two extremes. A full range dipole, such as a Quad Electrostatic, has a 'figure-8' distribution pattern with nulls at the sides, and this results in a much lower reflect/direct ratio than regular (monopole) loudspeakers. Listen to a pair and you'll become aware that you hear more of the speaker and less of the room - dipoles can sound a little like headphones in this respect. They also, as a consequence, give superb imaging, because the phase information that creates the image is only in the direct sound. The net effect tends to be to provide a very well formed 'window' onto the recording situation.

The opposite side of the distribution coin is the omnidirectional speaker, such as the larger Shahinians, or the classic Bose 901s. Multiple drivers ensure a pretty similar distribution in every direction, which in turn means that a relatively high ratio of reflected to direct sound reaches the listeners (depending obviously upon the characteristics

of the room). Image precision will be diluted, as the omni emphasises rather than minimises the contribution of the listening room, and reflected sounds will no longer carry coherent phase information. While the omni might not appeal to those heavily into stereo imaging, it's particularly effective at creating the impression that the musicians are actually in the room.

Regular 'direct radiator' loudspeakers fall somewhere in between these two extremes, and could therefore be said to represent a good compromise. The Tannoy Dimensions, however, are a rather different case, partly because of the horn-loaded tweeter, and partly because of the large main drivers.

Horns act like lenses, and have specified directivity, the 'tulip waveguide' used by Tannoy's horn tweeter effectively delivering its output as a 90 degree cone. That's probably only half the radiation angle of a conventional baffle-mounted dome tweeter (at the lower end of its operating range at least).

Furthermore, although a regular bass/mid driver delivers the bass frequencies omnidirectionally, it moves into a more directional, forward-firing mode further up its operating range. The larger the driver, the lower the frequency at which this 'forward focusing' starts to take place, so much of the 12-inch Tannoy's midband will have a directionality that's broadly similar to the horn tweeter. This is probably a good thing from the point of view of crossover integration, but it also means that the speaker is less omnidirectional than most regular speakers. It doesn't go as far down that road as a full range dipole, but it will certainly create less room interaction than the norm.

I don't think it's possible to take sides here, and state categorically that one approach is superior to another. This really is a matter of taste. I kind of like the 'sound' of my own listening room, and don't place stereo imaging too high up my personal list of priorities. However, if you want the most information off your recordings, there's a powerful case for going for a design with narrower directivity. The choice is yours - but at least here in hi-fi land we do have a choice, and don't have to be slaves to mass market stereotypes. ➤

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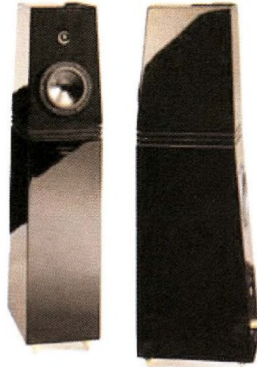
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ACOUSTIC ENGINEERS

That sense of integration...

by Roy Gregory

In days of yore, life was simple. You started off with an integrated amp, and as your hi-fi improved you graduated to a pre-power combination, the holy grail of all true aficionados, the line that separated the men from the boys. It depends when you are talking, but as far as I was concerned that divide occurred at around \$200 a box. There was the venerable A&R A60 costing exactly that, whilst the Naim 42/110 weighed in at a shade over \$400 the pair. Like I said, life was simple, with nice, even steps that everyone understood. Let's face it, if you know where you're putting your feet, there's more chance of getting them in the right place.

The product that changed all that was the original Audiolab 8000. In the years immediately P6 (Post SL6), and with the likes of the Linn Kann and Sara still around, a special emphasis was placed on an amp's ability to drive awkward and inefficient loads. This, the reasoning went, was why you needed a separate power amp, with its large, dedicated power supply. Then along came the 8000, a slim and, for its day, beautifully finished integrated amp, capable of driving exactly the awkward loads that everyone was so concerned about. Overnight the magazines were full of pocket battleship analogies, and a new price-point was established.

The 8000 started at £275 but it soon sprouted an A and an elevated price tag that was well the wrong side of £300, which made it more expensive than a lot of entry stage pre-powers.

Of course, everyone tried to emulate its success, and soon the clear line between integrated and pre-power amps was becoming increasingly blurred and indistinct. Add the realisation that more and more people were dispensing with records in favour of CD and the considerable economies created by losing one set of casework could be further enhanced by eliminating (or making optional) the difficult and costly phono stage. It only remained to add remote control and the modern line-integrated amplifier was born.

Exactly who took the whole thing a stage further and started making really costly integrated amps is open to debate. In the UK market it was probably Krell who, if not the first, were certainly the first successful proponents of the approach. Having said that, the massive Emitter integrated amp was already well established in Germany. Nor is this logic confined to high-powered solid-state designs. We've seen low-powered class A units, valve and hybrid designs, and let's not forget that the Audio Note Ongaku (somewhere between £25000 and £45000 depending on the day of the week

and the direction of the wind) was also a line-integrated design. Whatever the protracted development history, the high quality line-integrated amp is now a permanent fixture in the audio landscape. Looking abroad, Krell, Rowland, Classe, Audio Research, Conrad-Johnson, Jadis, Advantage, Sim Audio, Plinius and now even Levinson all offer models. In fact, only Spectral continue to resist the temptation, probably aware that it's not quite as simple as just sticking your name on the outside of a one-box unit and waiting for the cash to come rolling in. And there's the rub. Although the designer gets to save a pot of money by losing a box and various other bits and pieces, it's not enough to make the integrated product really competitive in today's crowded market place.

How successfully the integrated model can embody the performance of its expensive pre-power stable mates depends, as always, on the ability of the designer to balance the conflicting requirement of price against aspects of performance. Add to that the emergence of up-market models from previously more affordable brands and the situation is confused indeed. Leaving aside the myriad alternative options, its time to look at the high-quality one-box





SIA2-150
Stereo Integrated Amplifier

Input Select

cd

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line monitor

power

standby

ATC SIA2-150 Integrated Amplifier

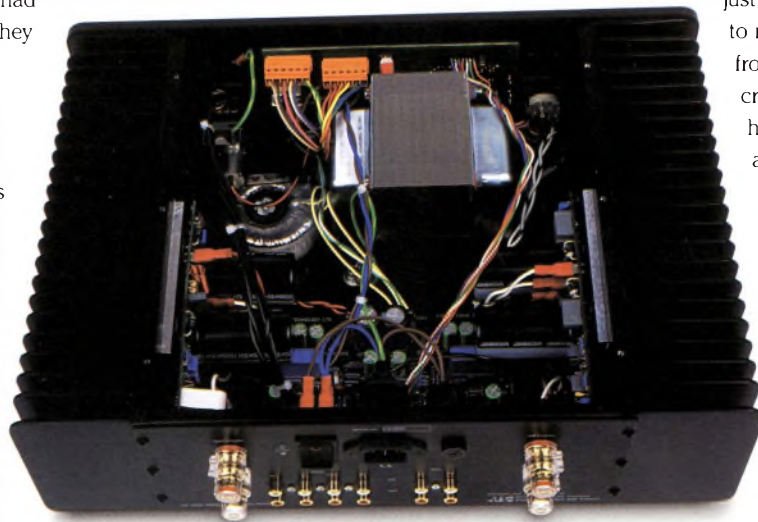
by Roy Gregory

History is replete with examples of electronics companies that have gone on to produce speakers, and successfully so. Over the years, the likes of Naim, Arcam, Quad and, lately, Krell, have all trodden this well worn path with varying degrees of success. It's difficult however, to find examples of companies making a success of a move in the opposite direction. Just look at the problems that Linn had making the jump, and they were in a position of almost unparalleled market dominance as regards their speakers and source components at that time. Anybody who listened to the lessons of history (and history itself tells us that no one does!) would think at least twice before embarking on this particular course.

Yet, that's exactly what we have here, and perhaps it's no surprise that the company in question is ATC. No surprise, because if there's one company whose self-confidence can rival Linn's then this is it. When these guys suggest that their SCM70 SL speaker system "sets a new reference for the third millennium" they mean it. Every single word of it! I think it's safe to say that there's no shortage of self-belief in Stroud.

Of course, it goes beyond the

question of simply having the confidence to do something. It helps to have the expertise too, and here ATC are at a distinct advantage. Having been producing active loudspeakers for most of their 25 years, they already deal with power amp and cross-over modules, and whilst those are along way from a successful stand alone design, they certainly represent



a healthy head start. The question is, how successfully have they managed to translate that experience out of their speaker cabinets and into a separate chassis? What might seem on the surface to be a simple case of wrapping a box around an existing circuit is, in practice, considerably more complex.

Well, one thing they've got right is the external appearance. The SIA2-150 is a squat, compact and surprisingly

heavy box, featuring the almost mandatory thick aluminium front panel and extensive, and thankfully well-curved heat sinking. The clean, simple fascia boasts two large rotary knobs for volume and source select, with two smaller push buttons for tape monitor and power standby. The profiled knobs and their contrasting finish (sort of pale gunmetal) provide

just enough individuality to make the ATC stand out from the US high-end style crowd, whilst the butch heatsinks, front-panel and the four massive allen bolts that hold it in place are close enough to a uniform to leave no doubt over its allegiance. This is aimed squarely at Krell/Levinson territory. The rear panel springs a few more surprises. Given the company's pro back-

ground, you might well expect a whole rake of inputs and outputs, most with balanced connections. Instead you'll find a refreshingly Spartan layout; just four single-ended line level inputs, a tape loop and single pairs of binding posts for speaker connection. Socketry is all phono and decent quality; the speaker posts being the excellent shrouded WBT's. Apart from an IEC mains socket and the power switch, that's about it. One thing that does

► confuse me slightly is the provision of the front mounted standby switch. Don't get me wrong, I thoroughly approve, being of the 'if in doubt then leave it on' school. The confusion comes from the instruction manual which states that the amp will take around



three hours to reach its operating temperature, but then goes on to say that full performance will be achieved from switch on!

Why bother with standby then? Perhaps there's a hint of being caught between the hi-fi and pro camps here, but either way, the SIA2-150 manages to cover all the bases. You'll not be surprised to know that once connected to the mains with a Kimber High Current mains lead, it stayed fully powered for the entire review period.

Lift the lid on the ATC and you'll discover what is, by today's standards, a well-populated interior. Most obvious feature is the pair of mains transformers, a large frame type for the power amp boards, a smaller toroid for the separate input and pre-amp board. That, in it self, is an important indicator of the thinking that's gone into this design: here we have a proper line stage providing fully buffered inputs and 10dB of gain, rather than just a power amp with a switchable input. The power amps are closely related to the ones

used in the active speakers and are mosfet designs using two pairs of Hitachi devices a side. These are directly connected to the large heat sinks for greater thermal stability, an often overlooked aspect of amplifier performance. This solution requires careful consideration of earthing arrangements but means that you can avoid the cost (sonic and monetary) of additional output devices. The power amps also employ the soft-clipping circuit developed for the active monitors, and this allows high levels without at least some of the harshness that generally accompanies them. Despite its considerable rated output into 8 Ohms, the SIA2-150 isn't intended as a power-house design capable of driving all comers.

The power is to provide dynamic peaks with well recorded music when driving the kind of nominal 8 Ohm loads that ATC's own passive designs present.

Final part of the package is an RC5 remote control. A simple moulded generic unit, it's in stark contrast to the milled from solid slab that arrived with the Chord. Having said that, whilst it might be physically less impressive, it works just as well, and is a darned sight

easier to use. Don't read too much into the inclusion of the basic CD functions. Their presence simply means that you can operate both the amp and an RC5 compatible player from a single handset. Full marks to ATC for bothering to think this through. Combine that sort of attention to detail with the overall presentation and power output of the SIA2-150 and at £2199 it starts to look like something of a bargain, assuming of course that it can deliver the sonic goods.

I got to try the ATC with a range of partnering equipment: ClearAudio and Clearlight turntables played back via The Groove phono stage, Rega and Levinson 30.6/31.5 CD player, and a whole host of speakers. ATC supplied a pair of their SCM20 loudspeakers, a combination that they particularly recommend. Cables were my normal Nordost Valhallas, which whilst they don't exactly match for price certainly let you hear what's going on. Just to be on the safe side I also used a more realistic Chord Co. Chameleon and Odyssey combination.

The ATC faced the unenviable task of trying to fill the considerable gap left by the departing Levinson Reference System. Hmmm - £2200 plays £35000. Should prove interesting! And it did. Although the integrated unit couldn't match the scale, drive, detail and limitless dynamics of the monster Levinsons, it had a more than

commendable stab at the task. But

the really interesting thing was the uncanny closeness of its spectral balance to the bigger system. Using the same speakers, cables and front-end they were so close that had I been told that this was a cheaper model from down the Levinson range I could have easily believed it.

Perhaps there's some- ►



▶ thing in ATC's claims of accuracy.

The one thing that quickly became clear was that ATC's strictures concerning the load presented by the speaker are spot on. Early forays with the Revel Studio and even more ruinously difficult to drive NHT 2.9s robbed the music of flow and easy grace, introducing a mechanical and strained quality to proceedings. That's what you get for ignoring a manufacturer's recommendations. NHT's 1.5 and ATC's own SCM 20s proved a far happier match, showing the amp at its considerable best. Obviously a case of try before you buy, the SIA2-150 should be happy with just about any 8 Ohm speaker, and with its power output, efficiency is far less of an issue than is sometimes the case.

The ATC SCM 20s delivered exactly what the SIA2-150 required (as well as what ATC had promised) and against all expectations this was the combination that stayed undisturbed for the longest time. At £2000 the speakers are an obvious match, and this is a combination that's well worth seeking out. Playing 'Tell Me How' (Nanci Griffith The Dust Bowl Symphony Elektra 62418) showed the expected lack of the lowest levels of micro-dynamic discrimination (the preserve of smaller amps all together) but confirmed the pleasing sense of scale and solid presence that you look for in a high-powered design. The easy, rolling pace and catchy rhythm of the track were present and correct, clearly proclaiming this as a Holly composition. If you want more warmth and roundness in the vocal then there are any number of alternatives with class A output stages or valves, but few of them are going to provide the scale

and presence of the ATC combination, or its explicit presentation of the music's structure and elements.

It's the age-old stand off between musical beauty and musical accuracy. The ATC, with its pro heritage, leans clearly towards the latter, but it gets the balance just right; proper scale and plenty of detail without the tendency to pull the performance apart or punish poor recordings.



'Long Time A Comin' (Bap Kennedy Domestic Blues) has its familiar rolling gait, with beautiful separation of the vocals and rock solid rhythm. The hitch kick where we enter the bridge is slightly slurred, robbing it of a little of the stop/start suddenness that gives it its impact, but it's more a case of less obvious than not there. Once again, it's this low level agility which has always been a challenge for any high powered design. The ATC makes a far better fist of it than most of the competition, and that's its weakest point! Play to its strengths and it really comes into its own. That old standby the Gladiator OST soon proves the point. The SIA2-150 handles the ponderous opening to 'The Battle' with complete assurance. There's tremendous weight, presence and that all important sense of menace. Layer builds on layer with a feeling of unstoppable momentum and if it finally starts to crack on the loudest crescendos then let's be honest, I was

playing it extremely loud, desensitised to the need for restraint by prolonged exposure to the unburstable Levinsons. When the ATC did let go it was at the top, but you really had to push to get to that point.

With its proven circuitry, excellent build quality and solidly executed engineering the ATC integrated amp delivers exactly what you'd expect. Follow the manufacturer's recommendations and you'll be rewarded with consistent, musically engaging and informative results. A beautifully considered package, it has enough inputs, enough power and a few nice touches, enough to satisfy most people most of the time. Add that to the

bargain price and it becomes something of a benchmark in the muscle integrated market. Weighing in at less than half the price of much of its (imported or otherwise) competition, if this is the market you're in, then the ATC SIA2-150 is where you should start. ▶+

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Integrated Amplifier
Inputs:	4x single-ended line 1x tape
Input impedance:	47 kohms
Output:	1x tape 1x speaker
Output power:	150 W / 8 Ohms
Dimensions (WxHxD):	440x130x325mm
Weight:	19 kg
Finish:	Black
Price:	£2199-00

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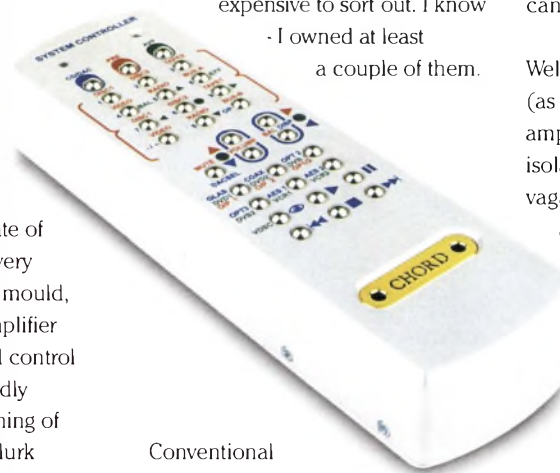
The Chord CPM 3300 Integrated Amplifier

by Chris Binns

Although there might be a lot to grumble about concerning the present state of the hi fi industry, in some ways we have never had it so good. The sheer range of products that are available is quite staggering, let alone the technologies and philosophies that accompany them. Who could have predicted a market place where single ended triode amplification (circa 1920) could sit alongside highly sophisticated and powerful designs that utilise the latest technology (certainly in terms of components if not in design), yet both might be considered state of the art? The Chord CPM 3300 is very much representative of the latter mould, being a high powered Mosfet amplifier with sophisticated operation and control facilities. And it looks unashamedly hi-tech. But that's only the beginning of the story – within the case work lurk electronics that puts Chord amplification firmly in a category of its own – the use of a switch mode power supply.

They are not the first manufacturer to incorporate this sort of technology into audio products; since the late seventies there have been designs from such people as Sony, Carver, and Meridian. But they were the first British company to make a long term commitment to this approach; all of their power amplification has been based around switch mode circuitry since the first widely available product, the SPM 800. It is no coincidence that company founder John Franks was previously

a director of one of the worlds leading manufacturers of high frequency power supplies. I think it is also fair to say that until the Chord amplifiers came along, switch mode technology had something of a bad reputation for reliability in hi fi equipment – when it went wrong, the results were often spectacular and expensive to sort out. I know - I owned at least a couple of them.



Conventional power supplies consist of a transformer which (in the case of most solid state amps) reduces the 50 Hertz AC line voltage to a working level, this is then rectified to produce 'pulses' of DC. The reservoir capacitors are thus charged fifty times a second and hopefully allow the production of a nice smooth supply for the audio electronics.

The basic concept behind a switch mode power supply is to take the mains, rectify it and then produce a high frequency 'switched' supply that is then fed to a transformer, rectifier and reservoir caps. The major advantage of doing this is that the caps are being

charged up at a far higher rate, meaning that when the amplifier is being driven hard and energy reserves are being depleted, power is available more easily. The other plus point is that the transformer and caps become more efficient at higher frequencies, and so for a given size, a switch mode unit can have a higher power capability.

So why is it not more widely used? Well, putting the mains transformer first (as is the case with a conventional amplifier) offers some degree of isolation and protection against the vagaries and spikes that pollute the average mains supply. It is not uncommon in highly industrialised areas to encounter transients in the order of a Kilovolt or so, which probably explains the premature expiry of some of the early designs. The

other problem is that because the technology has proven to be cheaper to mass produce, it has found almost universal acceptance in televisions and computers. So what? Well, a lot of people feel that high frequency supplies inject too much noise back into the mains supply and thus pollute it, causing a deterioration in the performance of hi fi equipment. (See the interview with Julian Vereker in issue no.4 for some interesting points.) I think it is fair to say that the expertise of Chord electronics has satisfactorily dispensed with the reliability problem. Apart from anything else, they are one of the few amplifier manufacturers to successfully span

▶ both the professional and domestic markets with their power amplifiers, and their electronics are seen in an increasing number of professional situations, where reliability is a key issue.

Due in no small part to its electronic power supply, the CPM is relatively compact given its generous output capabilities. But it does look larger than it actually is due to the four large turrets that form the feet.



These are actually a fairly expensive optional extra, but contribute a lot to the aesthetics. Despite the lack of a large mains transformer, it is still pretty solid, partly because of the large amounts of machined aluminium involved in the casework, all of which is finished off with jewel like precision. The result is impressive – here is a product that visually lives up to the title of “precision component”. Whether or not you like it is another matter; I still have a problem with gold plated adornments on equipment, and that’s what the two control knobs look like; it smacks of being flashy just for the sake of it. I gather that there might be a black finish available soon.

Designed with flexibility in mind, the Chord has six unbalanced and two balanced inputs, these can be designated to either of the input busses, both of which have a dedicated tape output with full monitoring available.

Thus, for example it is possible to listen to one source while recording another, and of course AV processors will not present a problem. There is gain adjustment available for each input which means that all the individual sources can be set up to provide the same volume control setting, although

I also found that it had a minor effect on sound quality. All operations are masterminded by a microprocessor, and usefully, the last settings used are stored even when the unit is powered down. Connections at the rear of the unit are all made using

high quality components with inputs via Teflon insulated phonos and Neutrik XLR's. A single set of WBT binding posts is provided, but due to the somewhat cramped conditions, bi-wiring with thick cables proved to be awkward. To make matters worse, none of the connections are labelled, which was frustrating,



although probably not so much of a problem in normal use.

Front panel controls consist of standby, volume and balance, and three push buttons for selection of source and the input busses. As soon as power is applied, the status led glows red to indicate standby mode and green for full operation, whereupon the display

on the right hand side lights up to indicate the source selected and volume or balance position numerically. When the unit is in use, the inside of the amplifier is illuminated by a ring of Led's underneath the top grille – which apart from looking pretty, is claimed to mop up any stray RF radiation produced by the power supply.

Internal construction looks to be to a high standard, but for once, I chickened out of taking the top off to have a look – maybe the threat of high voltage, high frequency potential dampened my enthusiasm a bit.

The CPM is fully remote controlled, although whether you would want to do so is another matter. The handset is capable of controlling up to six Chord systems, and to say it is complicated would be an understatement. It is also something of an ergonomic disaster with fiddly buttons and a poor feel. The fact that it is crafted out of solid aluminium pales into insignificance when you see the garish hieroglyphics and try to use it. Surely a remote control should be above all else intuitive and straightforward to use, with the most obvious functions easily available?

Now you can understand why I got to hate those little gold knobs.

That aside, the Chord proved pretty much unflappable in use. Having observed the usual courtesies for a product under review (plenty of running in, for example) the first task it had to perform was a little unusual, certainly in domestic terms. Having brought home some pre-mastered material from a band I was recording, for

a proper listen, one of the engineers involved in the session phoned up in a panic and invited himself down to hear the tracks on my system. What then occurred was a lengthy all night session while we applied various amounts of equalisation in an attempt to clear ▶

► up the sound. The CPM3300 coped admirably, driving the (difficult) Primary monitors at high levels with ridiculous amounts of bass, and without raising a sweat – for hours on end. Respect where it is due – score one for the Chord.

Come the weekend, I was able to listen to the CPM 3300 under more tranquil conditions, i.e. for pleasure rather than work. Previous experience with a Chord SPM 800 power amplifier led me to expect a rather hard and relentless character to the sound, in fact, the 3300 could not be more of a contradiction. Top end was smooth and refined, with no trace of hardness, while bass performance was all that you would expect from a powerful solid state amp. Well, not quite. As well as good extension and weight it had a tactile quality unrestrained by the leaden quality of some heavy weight models, and it could be pretty damn snappy when required to do so.

I was less happy with the mid range, which I felt was vague and indistinct, and had the overall effect of giving music a rather reticent quality. This was less noticeable with rock and pop, as to a certain extent the Chord was quite happy to let you wind it up and explore its excellent power delivery. Despite this, the general performance I was getting had a distinct 'I can't be bothered' quality that made listening to music dull and uninvolved. This was more apparent with CD, despite a guest appearance by the normally buoyant and cheerful Resolution Audio CD 55, a machine not short on timing and dynamics.

The substitution of the Nordost SPM speaker cable with Chord Company Odyssey (if I say no connection, you know what I mean...) gave a more wholesome sound, at the expense of some resolution. I also found that a change to balanced connection improved things considerably. and to

be fair, Chord advocate this wherever possible. But the biggest improvement came in the form of substituting the standard mains lead for a Nordost one. Things sharpened up considerably, and the music seemed to gain some life and vitality, becoming much more interesting to listen to. Interestingly, one of the Valhalla mains cable's claims to fame is excellent



RF rejection - in both directions. Likewise, the Odyssey offers better RF protection than the wide open SPM.

After two weeks of living with the Chord, I felt as if I had more or less got the measure of its capabilities. Even tempered and highly refined, it seemed to lack any sort of distinctive qualities, which is in one way a good thing, but I was always aware of wanting more. In the light of my cable experience, I decided to try a regenerative power supply on the Meridian 508 CD player. Now this always makes a difference, but in this instance the benefits were huge. That grey, grainy mid-band evaporated, and the music became more accessible and engaging, with better timing and integration. The drop in the noise floor allowed much better leading edge

definition and clarity. The end result was a system that was more involving and had lost that lack of interest, and whilst I don't think the Chord will ever offer the kind of tactile presence and colour that you get from a great valve amp, that's not what it's about. Now its midrange poise and definition were on a par with the rest of the frequency range, offering the same neutrality and refinement. The conclusion seems inescapable. Whilst

Chord have conquered the reliability issue, pollution of the mains remains a problem that you'll need to tackle if you want to hear this amp at its best.

The Chord CPM 3300 is an expensive integrated amplifier.

Flexible and thoroughly competent in use, it is compatible with a wide range of equipment, and will happily drive most loudspeakers. But, it places heavy demands on the set up of the system in terms of cables and in particular, mains supply. While this goes without saying for any amplifier at this sort of price, in my experience the Chord exerts a greater influence on partnering equipment than more conventional designs, and care must be taken if the CPM 3300 is to realise its considerable, unflappable potential. ►+

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Output power:	220 Watts into 8 ohms
Output impedance:	0.03 Ohms
Input impedance:	47 K Ohms unbalanced 94 K Ohms balanced
Channel balance:	0.01 dB
Signal to noise ratio:	- 93 dB
Dimensions (WxHxD):	420x152x355
Weight:	19Kg
Price:	£5595 £6135 with legs

Manufacturer:

Chord Electronics Ltd.
Tel. (44)(0)1622-721444
Fax (44)(0)1622-411388
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“The CPM3300 coped admirably, driving the (difficult) Primary monitors at high levels with ridiculous amounts of bass, and without raising a sweat – for hours on end. Respect where it is due – score one for the Chord.”

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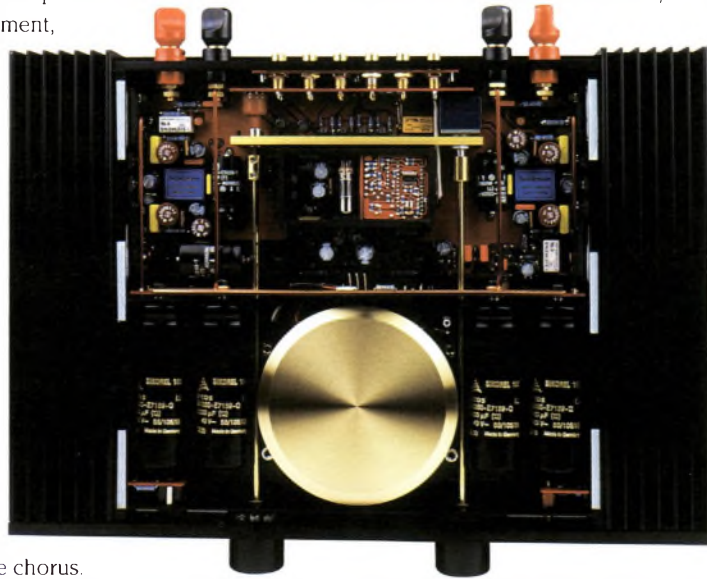
Brinkmann Integrated Amplifier

by Roy Gregory

Thea Gilmore, she of *Lipstick Conspiracies* fame, has a new EP out entitled *As If* (Flying Sparks TDBEP0054). It's a simpler recording, less heavily mixed and manipulated, and much of it is just her and guitar (and all the better for it), including a superb cover of 'Straight Up'. When the music's this stark and exposed there's a symbiotic relationship between voice and instrument, the spacing and attack of the strummed chords underlining the phrasing and emphasis of the lyric, providing the song with its own internal pace and momentum. The shape and accent of notes becomes all important.

Approaching the end of the first verse, there's a slight slur, a hesitation in the guitar's chords that separates and adds weight and impetus to the chorus. In the absence of a rhythm section it's a crucial element in establishing the song's structure, announcing to the listener "here it is, here's the chorus that you've been waiting for!" Small though it is, this sort of subtle emphasis is essential to the impact and effectiveness of the performance. Demanding speed coupled to an iron grip on the loudspeaker, the secret is not to hold things so tight that you crush the life out of them. It's exactly the kind of communication that you

get from a small push-pull amp driving a pair of efficient speakers, like the Monarchy SM70 driving the Living Voice Avatars that I've enjoyed so much recently. It's exactly the kind of communication that you get from the Brinkmann. The difference is that the Brinkmann gives it to you through the notoriously awkward Sonus Faber



Electa Amators, a speaker so power hungry that it normally sucks the cojones out of an amplifier via its binding posts!

And there's more. Connect the Brinkmann and suddenly the Amators throw off that rounded, slightly lazy sound and take on the kind of urgent immediacy and authority that their devotees know they are capable of (and which becomes for many the kind of unrequited search for a perfection

which only a few achieve). Those strummed guitar chords have positive spacing and attack, the music has intent, there's shape and emphasis to the singing. The heavy reverb is plain to hear, the hollowness of the 'space' creating a slight coldness to the voice. Thea Gilmore's music could never be described as a comfort blanket; the Brinkmann serves it up

with the appropriate edge and attitude. More guitar, this time from Dolly Varden's 'Apple Doll' (*The Dumbest Magnets*, also from the excellent Flying Sparks, TDBCD052 and distributed by Vital) and we hear Mark Balletto open the track, and the album, with a stark, carved from solid phrase that is burnt into the air. His control of attack, the power of his notes and perfect pacing of the phrase create the motif

on which the whole song is built, echoed more softly on acoustic guitar and marimba, the Glockenspiel adding a nostalgic touch with its associations with Buddy Holly. It's a subtle song that is subtly arranged, and without that arrangement it becomes ordinary, it's fragile beauty crushed, it's delicate power clumsily constrained.

The deep, deep bass that can be coaxied from the Amators underpins everything without swamping or blurring the edges, the track's soft

▶ pulse never slowing, the solid, tuneless thud of the bass drum ever present. And over that foundation the guitar line develops, each note clearly struck, and equally clearly damped or sustained, adding impetus here, pausing for effect there. It's masterly playing, and the Brinkmann delivers that message with the kind of unfussy ease and transparency that etches the tracks onto your mind. The complex jigsaw that comprises 'The Thing You Love Is Killing You' comes and goes taken in its stride and suddenly I remember that I'm supposed to be reviewing this amp, something rather different to simply listening to music. I look again at the Brinkmann, slim, confident and self contained. Clearly, there is rather more here than meets the eye.

The Integrated is a deceptive product in all kinds of ways. It's compact yet powerful; simple yet sophisticated, small of size but big of heart. At first glance there's little to suggest the latent power that lurks within, but its deceptively slim dimensions and minimalist controls conceal a carefully considered and far from run-of-the-mill design doing an excellent job of hiding its light under a bushel. Perhaps the first clue is the headphone socket, blatantly, almost rudely positioned on the front panel. While other designers 'handle' this necessary inconvenience by placing it inaccessibly on the rear panel, the Brinkmann wears its heart firmly on its sleeve. If it's worth including then it's worth putting it where you can actually reach it. Common sense; a quality that's sadly lacking in so many designs dictated by conventional wisdom (which more often than not boils down to simple fashion).

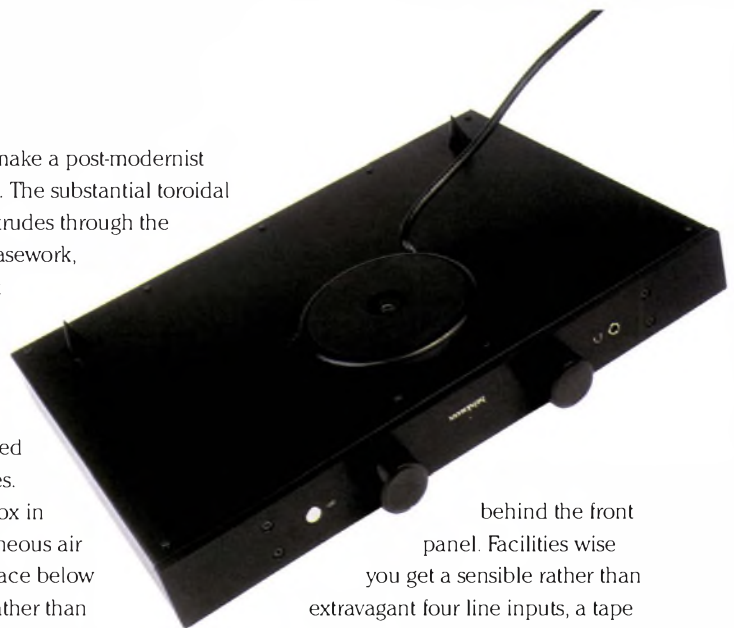
Even the fascia is deceptive, offering the kind of floating, detached

appearance to make a post-modernist architect swoon. The substantial toroidal transformer protrudes through the bottom of the casework, creating a direct coupled foot on which the amplifier rests, its two rear corners supported on viscous cones. The result is a box in which the extraneous air occupies the space below the casework, rather than inside it. Consequently, the densely packed innards fill the available room, a fact it's easy to verify by simply looking through the amplifier's glass cover. But the clear lid, whilst it's indicative of considerable confidence in the constructional standards on the part of the manufacturer, isn't simply a sop to vanity (yours or theirs). As should be becoming apparent, and like everything else in this product, it's there for a reason. Its compliant mounting provides mechanical damping to the structure, whilst it's



non-metallic nature reduces the influence of eddy currents on the circuitry. The flanking heatsinks are far from cosmetic too, running noticeably warm to the touch (especially with the Amators).

In order to keep the fascia clean, the input selected is viewed through the glass top plate, an engraved disc rotating



behind the front panel. Facilities wise you get a sensible rather than extravagant four line inputs, a tape output and single pairs of speaker binding posts. There are also two digital inputs. Digital? Yes, the Brinkman comes with the £500 option of an onboard DAC, again something that was common in the early days of CD but which has since fallen out of favour. Once again, attention to detail is apparent in the binding posts. With their unplated copper contact surfaces and nice, finger friendly locking collars, these are quite the nicest I've used. And for once, everything is nice and clearly labelled.

Switch on takes a moment for the relay to click, whereupon the red LED in the fascia lights. From then on, operation is entirely intuitive, with only the lack of remote control to remark on. For me, that's a blessing, but there are those, PM among them, who consider remote control indispensable. Rejecting the Brinkmann on those grounds would be a shocking waste, for this is a consistently musical and musically rewarding performer.

Rated at 75 W into an 8 ohm load, rising to 120W into 4, the Brinkmann is hardly a paper power house, although its performance is far more capable than those figures suggest. The pre-amplifier functions are essentially passive, although the tape out is buffered, the volume control driving the high gain, DC coupled, global feedback free ▶

► amplifier directly. There is no power switch as such, the unit going straight to standby from power up. The 'Ein' switch on the front panel connects the output stage, and when in the off position, activates the (excellent) dedicated headphone amplifier.

The DAC option is shrouded in mystery, simply because I don't have any details of its digital hardware. However, it uses a valve output stage, based around a sub-miniature twin triode, the filtering provided by capacitive loading around the plate output. The tube heaters are switched by the digital input, so to warm it up it's necessary to provide a digital signal. The DAC will auto switch for inputs between 32 and 48 KHz, making it compatible with CD players, DAT machines and DAB radios. All in all, a sensible and cost effective option, although I have no information regarding the possibility of a 96 KHz upgrade.

Internally then, there's nothing revolutionary about the Brinkmann. It's a carefully considered package, the care that's gone into its conception mirrored in the excellent construction visible through the top-plate. Yet its performance is far from ordinary, yet another example of the old adage, it's not what you use that matters, it's how you use it.

Listening to the Integrated, the immediate impression is one of musical integrity. Regardless of the speakers, and I didn't torture it with the Amators for the whole time, the Brinkmann gets two vital aspects of musical performance correct. It offers dynamic and temporal coherence. Which is another way of saying that the notes appear at the right level, one to another, and start and stop in the right place. These Naim like tendencies are more apparent with more difficult loads, almost as if the higher work rate strips away some of the amplifier's tonal sophistication.

The result is a sound which with the Amators was crisp, fast and agile at the expense of some midband leanness and a tilting of the tonal palette towards the yang (as opposed to the dark, velvety comfort of the yin). Offered the more realistic load of the Ars Acoustica La Diva, and the sound gains in warmth and tonal shading. And despite its drive capabilities, it never sounded clumsy, even with the 94dB efficiency of the Living Voice Avatar.



The digital inputs add to this tendency for clarity, their sound being noticeably cleaner, more open and detailed than the analogue option. Running from the Rega Jupiter, they offered greater transparency, deeper, more powerful bass, and more air around performers, and I markedly preferred them to the option of the stand alone Io converter. It's going to depend on specific situations, but I suspect that the Brinkmann DAC module will offer a worthwhile upgrade for all but the most serious integrated players, as well as DAB receivers.

This is an amplifier for the listener who values communication and structure over the colour and tonal shading of the music. Whilst it's no slouch in the area of tonal shading (particularly when driving more realistic loads) it doesn't have the gentle, rose tinted roundness to seduce the SET set. It's a versatile musical all rounder that manages to prioritise musical integrity and authority, never sacrificing them from its performance. An elegantly uncluttered, unfussy design that looks and sounds exactly that way, the

Brinkmann offers exceptional musical value, backed up by an excellent reputation in its native Germany. Like the Lavardin IS it is astonishingly comfortable between the most exotic front-ends and speakers, begging the question, how much further do I really need to go? Yes, you can get better, but from here on in, things get much more choosy about how you use them, and much more expensive. If the van arrived tomorrow to remove all my electronic exotica, leaving only the Brinkmann

Integrated, I'd not be heart

broken. I'd spend all that extra time normally absorbed by the constant chopping and changing of amplifiers, listening to, and mightily enjoying, my record collection. That puts the Brinkmann in the same category as the Lavardins, which is praise indeed. ►+

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Inputs:	4 x Line 2 x Digital (optional)
Input Impedance:	20 K ohms
Input Sensitivity:	400mV
Outputs:	1 x Tape
Power Output:	75 W/8 ohms 120 W/4 ohms
Dimensions (WxHxD):	440x80x365mm
Weight:	9.5Kg
Price:	£2000 £500 (DAC module)

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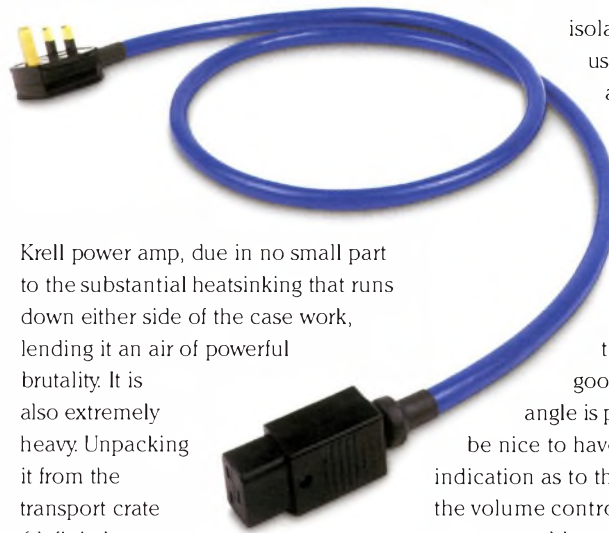
POWER

The Audio Analogue Maestro Integrated Amplifier

by Chris Binns

There can be no denying that the Italians have been making their presence felt in the audio industry recently. It started with loudspeakers – Sonus Faber can, I think, lay claim to opening the flood gates, and spawned many an imitator with their hard wood cabinets and distinctive design. More recently, we have seen a considerable amount of electronics, particularly amplifiers, with some interesting and diverse approaches. From the sleek Graff OTL designs to the single ended Unison research products (complete with bolt on trees), valve technology has been particularly well represented. Meanwhile, Audio Analogue have been quietly manufacturing a range of elegant and cost effective electronics that have been gathering a good reputation for sound quality and finish in the highly competitive mid-price part of the market. So it was something of a surprise, while visiting the Bristol hi fi show, to encounter the distinctly high end looking Audio Analogue Maestro in the UKD room. Much conversation and a few enquiries later suggested that the general consensus was that it appeared to be a lot of amplifier for the money, particularly if it sounded any good. Well, I soon got the opportunity to find out, as the requested review sample duly arrived.

As you have probably gathered by now, the Maestro is a large and extremely solid amplifier. It looks vaguely reminiscent of a mid nineties



Krell power amp, due in no small part to the substantial heatsinking that runs down either side of the case work, lending it an air of powerful brutality. It is also extremely heavy. Unpacking it from the transport crate (definitely a two man job)

I figured that it would sit nicely on a sound organisation stand that was to hand. Half an hour later there was a resounding crack as the platform gave way and the maestro dropped half an inch to be supported only by the frame.

Apart from its sheer bulk setting it apart, the Maestro is also unusual in that it incorporates a fully fledged phono stage, thus making it an even more attractive proposition – no extra boxes and expensive interconnects to think about. The front panel is dominated by the extremely large volume control, while small push buttons control input, tape output and standby. These are augmented by LEDs to indicate the selected function, and the independent record out buss allows a degree of flexibility with recording or processors - there is an off position to

isolate this when not in use. The remote is a small lacquered metal device offering basic functions of mute, volume and input selection. It is a bit awkward to use, and although the range is quite good, the acceptance angle is poor. It would also

be nice to have some visual indication as to the position of the volume control, as switching sources could sometimes prove a bit hazardous with unmatched levels.

Connections on the rear panel are well laid out, and utilise high quality connectors - of the four line inputs, one is balanced, and there is a pre-amp output. Only one set of speaker terminals are provided, and although beautifully made, will not accept two sets of 4mm plugs, which was awkward. One thing to note, the mains connection is not the normal IEC type; instead a 16 amp socket has been used. Fortunately the supplied lead looks to be of good quality. The phono input is internally adjustable for both magnetic and moving coil cartridges, but the loading characteristics are sadly not adjustable. That's probably ok if you are just a casual user who wants to play the odd record now and again, but frustrating for those who are

▶ more serious about vinyl.

Internal construction is very neat and well laid out, with the input and pre amp circuitry situated on the back panel, while the power amplifier boards are bolted to the heatsinks on either side. Underneath these lie what looks to be a generous amount of reservoir capacitance, while two extremely large encapsulated toroidal transformers occupy the remaining space at the front, and partly account for the enormous weight of the Maestro. Each channel utilises four pairs of complementary bi-polar TO-3 output devices – these are not biased that heavily into class A, as the generous amount of heatsinking remains fairly cool to the touch under quiescent conditions.

Setting up was straightforward, and being fully integrated, it made a pleasant change to dispense with all the various different units and cables that normally clutter the end of my living room, its been a while since it has looked so tidy. I had no qualms about using it with the Primary monitors - the manufacturers claim good power delivery in to almost any load, so I was not shy about cranking it up. Sadly, this was a brand new unit, and although a quick listen revealed no obvious problems it sounded half asleep, so I left it to stew for a few days before indulging in any serious listening.

Well, well. Maybe appearances can be deceptive. I suppose I was expecting the maestro to behave like some ball breaking megalomaniac – I mean, with nearly one and a half kilowatts of audio power available, an empty household on a Friday night and a bottle of wine....

Goaded on by a couple of friends, out came some of the more

embarrassing examples of my record collection. It has been said that with a good hi-fi system, all music has a 'natural' level at which it should be played. This particular night it was the Pixies, Tin machine and King Crimson, and a lot of other things I dare not mention. And so 'sensible' levels went by the board. I mean, this is a big amp, right?



The Audio Analogue turned its nose up in disdain at my lack of taste. Unlike us, it was not up for a night of partying and revelry, and refused to join in. It wasn't that it sounded awful, or was sweating with the exertion; on the contrary it remained cool as the proverbial cucumber under the onslaught. What it did do was scare the hell out of me by cutting out now and again when I wound the volume up, to leave a bleak silence and a guilty expression, and despite all that I have said, we were not being that demanding.

Come the morning, I was able to be a little more rational about last nights events. Swapping the loudspeakers for a pair of Sonus Faber Electa Amator IIs produced the same result, although to a lesser extent.

A quick call to the distributor confirmed my suspicions – basically the protection circuitry was being over zealous. Further experimentation showed the problem to be almost non existent with CD's, suggesting that the amplifier was mistaking a bit of low frequency record noise for a DC fault condition. Rest assured that the manufacturer is aware of the problem and future production samples will not suffer in the same way.

Listening to the Maestro in the cold light of day, I was still not convinced that it was really giving its best, particularly with vinyl. From previous experience

I know that the Lyra Helicon cartridge can sound a bit flat into a load impedance of 100 ohms, and substituting the Pass labs phono stage with its adjustable loading set at 1250 Ohms lightened things considerably. But it still sounded edgy and unappealing, but with enough glimpses of more to come to make me figure it was just a case of further running in. Sure enough, a few days later, it sounded like a different amp. Gone was that rather thin, two dimensional quality, and music began to acquire a far more natural and coherent character, with a decent soundstage and loads of depth.

Now that the real character of the Maestro was showing through, music became much easier to listen to. It had a character that was quite relaxed, but without being mushy or indistinct, indeed there was a wealth of detail that had a good natural presentation, especially with acoustic instruments. The rather special Naxos recording of Arnold Bax chamber music was enchanting to listen to, ▶

▶ and the sound of the flute and harp was highly believable with a stable image that compounded the effect.

Roy and I were lucky enough to attend a concert by the St John's orchestra in Salisbury cathedral just before I was writing this review, and they played Arvo Pärt's – Cantus in Memorium of Benjamin Britten, a piece that I particularly like. It is always a mistake to rush home and play a recording of the same music on



your hi-fi, as it is inevitably a disappointment. So of course I did exactly that, and to my surprise it sounded remarkably good. The Maestro effectively conveyed the haunting quality of the music to great effect, and I had a distinct lump in my throat as the music ended.

This was really where the forte of the Audio Analogue lay. Playing more up beat music (gravitating toward Friday nights episode) was now much more rewarding, and the bottom end performance had some real weight behind it. The available bass extension could produce awesome results with large orchestral works and organ music, giving the full impact of the

performance when required. What it didn't have was the kick that some music needs to propel it along, regardless of volume – it had great definition, and blended well with the open mid-range, but it lacked the tactile quality that can have you on the edge of your seat.

The French duo St Germain have produce intriguing music made up of jazz samples and fashionable beats on the album *Tourist*, and the overall effect is both subtle and

engaging. Somehow, the Maestro couldn't get its act together with this type of music, and the recording sounded a bit flat and uninteresting as a result.

On a more positive note, I had a Roksan turntable system in the house that I was setting up for a friend, complete with a Shiraz cartridge that favours a lower load impedance, such as the 100 Ohms offered by the Audio Analogue. The results with this were far better than with the Lyra, and suggested that if the matching is correct, the integral phono stage is no slouch, and certainly no embarrassment to the rest of the amplifier.

So, it would seem that looks can be deceptive. The Maestro is not the heavy weight muscle amp that it appears to be. Yes it has ample power

reserves, but it prefers to use them to support the music where necessary rather than unashamedly showing off its strength. It is not an 'impressive' amplifier that revels in high level demonstration tactics; nor does it posses the ultimate in rhythmic capabilities, the speciality of certain other amplifiers. Its strengths lie more with delicacy and natural presentation, normally the domain of much lower powered designs – the difference being that it will achieve this performance at realistic levels into almost any loudspeaker. A couple of grumbles aside – in particular the lack of loading adjustment for the phono stage – the Maestro certainly is a lot of amplifier for the money. So, whilst appearances can be deceptive, they can also reveal a truth. As with all hi-fi, which truth you see is up to you. ▶+

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Inputs - line:	1 balanced 3 single ended 1 tape
- phono:	MM or MC
Outputs:	1 tape 1 pre-amp
Power output:	150W into 8 Ohms 300W into 4 Ohms 600W into 2 Ohms Any phase, continuous
Input impedance:	Line: 21K Ohms Phono MM 47K Ohms MC 100 Ohms
Input sensitivity:	Phono: MM 110mV MC 1mV
Dimensions (WxDxH):	445x475x195
Weight:	52 Kg
Price:	£2500
Distributor:	UKD Ltd
Tel:	(44)(0)1753-652669
Fax:	(44)(0)1753-654531
E-mail:	post@ukd.co.uk
Net:	www.ukd.co.uk
Manufacturer:	Audio Analogue
Net:	www.audioanalogue.com

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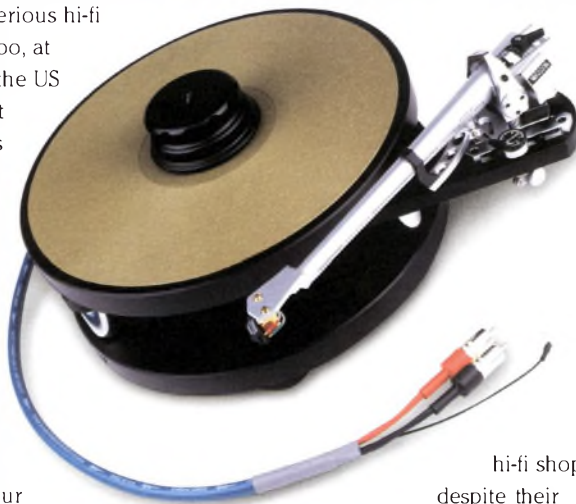
The Audio Consultants mix and match a system from Clearaudio, SME, conrad-johnson, Cardas, finite elemente and Avalon.

by Roy Gregory

"Unsung?" I can hear you asking yourself. These brands aren't exactly unknown, and for our American readers the likes of c-j, Cardas Audio and Avalon Acoustics are familiar markers on the serious hi-fi map. Over here too, at least if you read the US magazines, but at the same time, as far as the UK is concerned, all these products have one thing in common. None of them has ever really caught the moment; been the height of fashion, the flavour of the month. In a market increasingly dominated by the opinions to be found in magazines, they've all too often found themselves playing second fiddle to something fleetingly perceived as sexier (or liable to sell more advertising space). But despite the disproportionate influence of the UK hi-fi press, especially abroad, the British market for such exclusive and exotic product is surprisingly small, with even market leader Absolute Sounds experiencing a decline in dealer numbers and the level of commitment.

What that means is that these products, like others at their price,

will take a little more finding than some. You are unlikely to simply walk off your high street and find them lurking on the shelves of your local



hi-fi shop, despite their regular appearance between the pages of the hi-fi press. Starting at the front we have an SME turntable, in this case the baby Model 10. Now SME are hardly low

same, almost blanket success as their tone-arms. Cartridge is a Clearaudio Accurate, and again, a product from a well established company, but one that has only recently begun to receive the attention it deserves, and then only in certain quarters. And whilst analogue can be considered an increasingly specialist market, the same cannot be said of valve amps. You don't come much better established than conrad-johnson, with their long and enviable reputation for audio excellence, but once again, despite a constant stream of favourable reviews and an instantly recognisable brand image, their products are confined to a generous handful of dedicated British dealers. Cardas Audio were one of the earliest American specialist audio cable manufacturers, and unlike some, have



profile, but their turntables have never enjoyed the

continued to go from strength to strength, their cables turning up inside all sorts of products as well as between them. Which brings us to Avalon, and in a way,

▶ the catalyst for this particular project. Something of a rarity in the UK, this time it's mainly down to price. The stellar reputation of the Avalon Acoustics speakers comes with equally stellar price tags. Until the arrival of the new Symbol that is. This new model halves the entry fee to an almost attainable £3000. Given the excellent performance demonstrated at last year's Novotel show, this was one product that jumped straight to the top of the 'Should Review' list.

So, perhaps it's not surprising that when I came to frame the brief for The Audio Consultants, I made sure that the budget was amenable to the Symbols' inclusion. The rest just came together, indicative of the company's eclectic product profile as much as any master plan on my part. Who am I to complain? Just as most of you won't have heard these products in your local dealer's, I don't get to see them as often as I'd like either. Because one thing's for sure: Whilst these products might be viewed as under achievers from the point of view of market share, it's got nothing to do with their performance. Budget for this scenario was £20,000,

and whilst all systems should play all types of music, the bias in this case was towards voice and acoustic instruments. Which make the Symbols a shoe-in, so we might as well start there.

Whilst previous Avalon Acoustics speakers have been expensive, compact and perfectly formed; squat, faceted shapes with sumptuous veneer finishes, the new Symbol represents something of a departure. Their tall, incisive cabinet is supported on four small flying buttresses, and whilst they are certainly tall, they pack a lot of volume into a slim profile. That's a trick that cuts both ways. On the one hand it keeps them cute and domestically

acceptable, on the other it undermines the pound for your pound count, something which is further underlined by veneer which can't compare with the quality used on the much more expensive models. At £3000, the Symbol doesn't present a particularly impressive face, but then you have to remember that Avalon's next cheapest speaker costs twice as much, which begs the question; Would you rather they saved the money on the inside or the outside?

In fact, closer examination reveals that if the Symbol represents a cost cutting exercise, then at least it's a highly intelligent one. The narrow

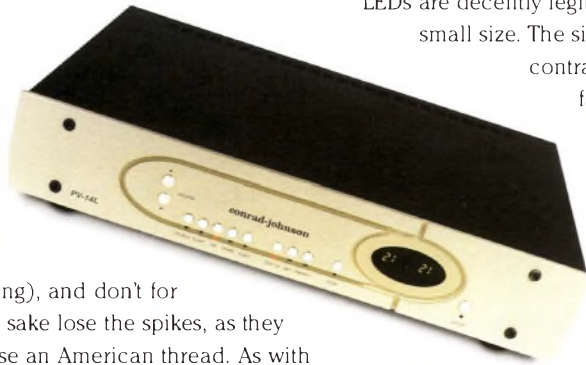
cabinet walls are easy to brace, whilst their tapered shape helps prevent dominant resonances, as well as time aligning the drivers. So far so good, and pure Avalon. The surprises come on the underside, where you'll find a largish reflex port (hence the moulded feet) and a substantial terminal block allowing single wire connection via spades. The spacing feet that allow the port to breathe are plastics mouldings which incorporate ferrules for spikes, and help spread the speaker's footprint, which is just as well given its height. The end result, once levelled and locked, is reassuringly stable.

Tweeter is a version of the familiar Focal inverted ceramic dome that seems almost de rigeur these days, at least as far as high-end OEM is concerned. The bass-midrange drivers are new to me, employing a 5 1/4" diaphragm whose ceramic coating continues the theme established by the more



expensive Avalon models. In the absence of any further information from the manufacturer, that's as much as I can tell you. I couldn't even get inside, the allen bolt fixings defeating my entire selection of both metric and Imperial keys. Judging from their behaviour I'd have to say that they share a single enclosure, employing a straight two-way crossover, another sensible and cost effective design choice. The care and attention extends even to the grilles, the tweeter panel receiving a sculptured felt insert to minimise its sonic influence. ▶

► Set up is straight forward, and I ended up with the speakers some two feet out from the rear wall, slightly toed in. It's worth taking the trouble to get the speakers absolutely vertical (you'll hear it in the precision of their impressive



imaging), and don't for God's sake lose the spikes, as they too use an American thread. As with all speakers using a downward facing port, what they stand on can affect the sound. The thin carpet over concrete in my listening room was fine, but if you have problems (softly sprung floorboards or really deep carpeting) it might well be worth investigating standing them on slabs. I guess spike height also affects things, but even I'm not that sad. Besides the bass integration was just fine so why mess with it.

The conrad-johnson contribution comes in the shape of the PV14L line-stage, EV1 phono-stage and the Premier 11A stereo power amplifier. The PV14L is one of the new generation of c-j pre-amps that dispense with rotary knobs, relying instead on a numerical read-out and a remote handset. Sensibly, all functions except balance are duplicated on the unit itself, as well as a few extras. You get five single-ended line inputs and two loops that I'll come back to. There's a single pair of main

outputs, and an IEC power socket, allowing you to use a decent mains lead. The front panel offers a mute as well as a standby button. The large oval display gives separate left and right channel levels, running from 00 to 99 in 0.7dB steps, and the orange LEDs are decently legible despite their small size. The silver buttons

contrast with the familiar gold front panel, and offer a nice positive action. All but the volume up and down controls have LED telltales, and these too are orange, to match the volume readout.

The PV14 also offers a pair of external loops, one labelled EPL and the other Theatre. The EPL loop is intended for use with external processors and is situated immediately before the output stage. The Theatre loop is positioned

offering fixed gain for use with a home theatre set-up. The volume control itself is a microprocessor controlled, discrete resistor network derived from the one developed for the ART.

Internally, the 14 relies on a single pair of 6C4 triodes arranged as a DC coupled buffer stage with a very low output impedance to enable it to drive a wide range of loads. The all-new circuit is global feedback free, and has discrete DC regulation to help isolate it from power supply fluctuations and noise. The circuit is also phase inverting which means you'll need to swap back at some point further down the system, normally with the speaker leads. Switch on involves a half minute or so wait while the circuit stabilises, avoiding any unpleasant accidents: a necessary but all too often overlooked feature on valve pre-amps.

Initial volume setting automatically defaults to the moderate 20 level, again avoiding any unpleasant mishaps.

After the host of buttons and sockets on the PV14, the EV1 is as plain as can be. One in, one out, an earth post and a power switch: that's it for the outside. Inside it's another story. The input stage

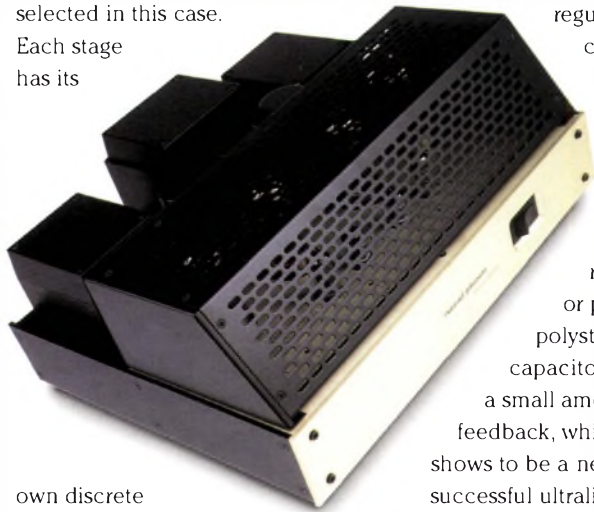
uses a paralleled 12AX7 twin-triode per channel, which in turn feeds a 5751 gain stage and a 12AU7 cathode follower. The circuit offers 49dB of gain, enough for moving-coils with upwards of 0.5mV of output



before the line stage and bypasses the volume control,

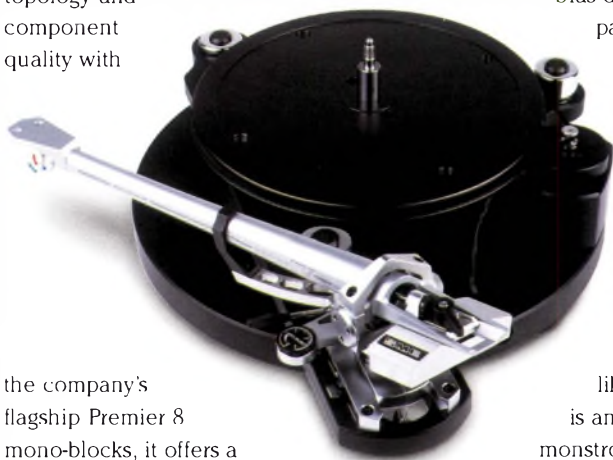


▶ (handy given the increased vigour of the excellent new Lyra Lydian Beta and Helikon, which means that decent matches start at around £600). You also get variable loading in five discrete steps from 200 Ohms to 47K, via two banks of dip switches. The lower setting (200 Ohms) was selected in this case. Each stage has its



own discrete regulated DC supply and once again, there's no global feedback. One small point that did aggravate was the red power LED. Please make it orange so that it matches the ones on the PV14L.

Power amplification is supplied in the considerable shape of the Premier 11A, the smallest of c-j's Premier power amps. Sharing circuit topology and component quality with



the company's flagship Premier 8 mono-blocks, it offers a scaled down alternative for less power hungry speakers. (It is also available as a mono-block, the

Premier 12, a half way house to the 8s.) An ultralinear design, the 11A produces 70 Watts a side from two pairs of Svetlana 6550Cs. Input stage is a pair of paralleled 5751s DC coupled to a cathode coupled 6FQ7 phase splitter. Once again, each stage has its own discrete DC

regulation, and in common with other Premier designs, the 11A uses carefully selected components: tin oxide on glass or bulk foil resistors, polystyrene or polypropylene (with polystyrene by-pass) capacitors. The circuit uses a small amount (12dB) of global feedback, which experience shows to be a necessary feature of successful ultralinear designs. More importantly it shows that c-j are not members of the "good idea club" slavishly following some idea or other because it is supposed to be the new Holy Grail. They use feedback (or anything else) if it works, a victory for common sense and sound design. And yes the pun was intentional!

The Premier 11A is a fixed bias design, which paradoxically means you have to adjust it. This is easily done using the rotary pots and LED indicators at the front of the top-plate. There is a cover, which like all such devices is an aesthetic monstrosity, but at least it's available. c-j recommend that you keep the interconnects to the amp short, which is especially wise

given the absence of balanced inputs. The single pairs of binding posts are also sensibly understated, underlining



the ethos that dictates that c-j products should sell on performance rather than spurious features.

The SME 10 is the company's latest and most affordable turntable design. It shares the compact dimensions, DC motor, suspended sub-chassis and elastomer suspension medium of its more expensive brethren, but is a three point design rather than the others' four. It's the latest in a

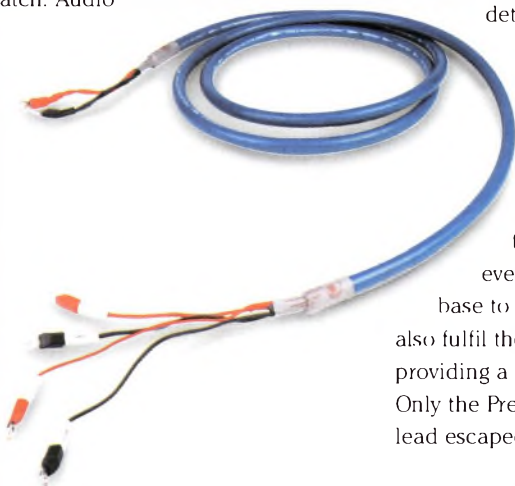


long line of circular decks, one that started with the original Dias and Systemdek II turntables of the early eighties. The suspension itself is a far cry from the nervous bounce of spring suspended decks, feeling essentially solid, relying as it does on decoupling columns fastened to the circular baseplate. Further isolation, as well as levelling, is provided by three rotating feet beneath the baseplate, each standing on a Sorbothane layer. The sub-chassis is a T shaped construction bolted together out of thick aluminium plates, supporting the main bearing and ▶



▶ tonearm. There is no separate armboard. The platter with its polymer surface 'mat' and clamp comes straight from the Model 20. A sophisticated external supply controls the two available speeds, as well as an electronic brake that rapidly slows the platter for removal of the clamp and changing of records. I'll leave it there for now, as it quickly became apparent that the 10 demands a full review in its own right, which I'll be organising as soon as possible.

SME produce a special, simplified version of their arm to match the Model 10, but Audio Consultants chose to supply the SME IV in preference, feeling that the sonic benefits far outweigh the £361 difference in price. I was somewhat surprised to find that the silver finished arm provided some welcome relief from the otherwise sombre look of the turntable, making a handsome match. Audio



Consultants also dispense with the optional wire rest for hand cueing, which is no hardship given the IV's excellent cueing action. Both the deck and arm were a joy to use.

Cartridge choice was something of an extravagance in the diminutive but costly guise of the Clearaudio Accurate, one of my long time favourites. It has been discussed many times in these pages, so I'll confine myself to the observation that its particular blend of tonal colour, presence, transparency and dynamic precision suited the system and brief perfectly, it's healthy 0.6 mV output mating perfectly with the EV1.

As with all systems that we review, this one came complete with all cabling and supports. The Cardas interconnects and mains cables were chosen for their natural tonal balance and spacious presentation, the Cross models being about middle of the range. Whilst they might lack the detail and extension of a cable like the big Nordosts, they also lack the price tag that goes with it, and their own particular strengths were preferred, given the brief. Able to supply everything from the tonearm base to the wall sockets, Cardas also fulfil the primary criterion of providing a complete cable loom. Only the Premier 11A with its captive lead escaped.

The Pagode rack from finite elemente turned out to be a perfect match to the rest of the system, sonically and aesthetically. Its pale wood shelves offset the golden hue of the c-j front panels perfectly, accentuating the skeletal construction of the turntable. Each shelf consists of a support shelf and a braced frame within which it sits, resting on four soft feet. The shelves have horizontal threaded cones that engage dimples in the aluminium uprights, creating a surprisingly solid yet adjustable structure. The thick base frame incorporates M8 floor spikes.

Comparisons with one of my standard RDC racks showed that



whilst the Pagode lost a little of the sheer purposeful presence and energy of the RDC, it made up for it with a much larger and better defined soundstage. Combined with a slightly more distant perspective, its precise and focused transparency again suited the system to perfection. Given the absence of glass and steel uprights perhaps it should come as no surprise that this is another name that you can add to the pitifully short list of decent racks.

Set-up and operation were completely trouble free throughout the review period. There were no nasty pops, clicks or buzzes, and the power amp stayed perfectly biased ▶

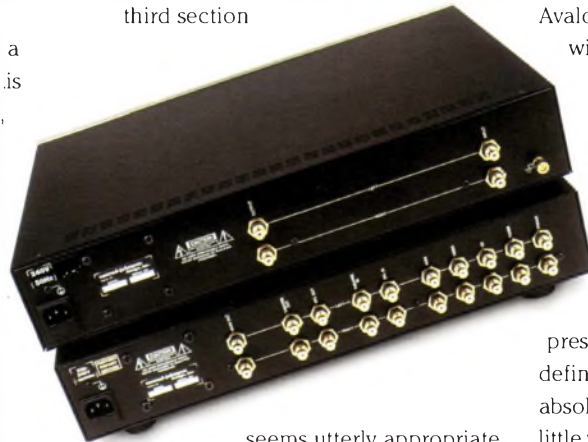
▶ throughout. In fact, everything worked exactly as advertised, underlining the solid engineering that underpins all of these products, a quality that is sadly lacking from some of their more fashionable competitors. The request was for a system to suit a music lover rather than an



equipment freak. The chosen solution fits the bill perfectly and should give a long, musically satisfying and trouble free life.

So, how does it sound? In a word, wonderful. This system is characterised by its unforced, natural and open quality - a quality that is due in no small part to the speakers. Sure, the turntable lifts the information, and the amps preserve and pass it along, but it's down to the speakers to actually present it. Which they do, with an almost electrostatic like clarity and spaciousness, combined with the dynamic range and heft of a

moving-coil design. The result is music whose scale belies the modest dimensions of the speaker cabinets, and which breathes with its own (rather than an imposed) sense of life. Virgil Thomson's *Plow that Broke the Plains* (Stokowski, Analogue Productions AP001) arrives from a vast soundstage, the powerful music swells, ebbs and flows without apparent restraint or inhibition. The huge scale is, of course, all important, given the music's subject matter, but so too is the system's ability to move seamlessly from its delicately stated melodies to the majestic sweep of the full orchestra. The interwoven and layered woodwinds and strings are beautifully separated, their tonal identities immediately apparent, the music's complex structure clear without intruding on the tonal picture as a whole. And perhaps most important of all, for once the piece's quintessentially American character is unmistakable, the entrance of the guitar and banjo in the third section



seems utterly appropriate and in keeping, rather than the afterthought that some systems make

of them.

Likewise. Listen to vocals from Ella through to Suzanne Vega, and enjoy the effortless rightness of the performer's phrasing and breathing (especially when Ms Vega tries just a

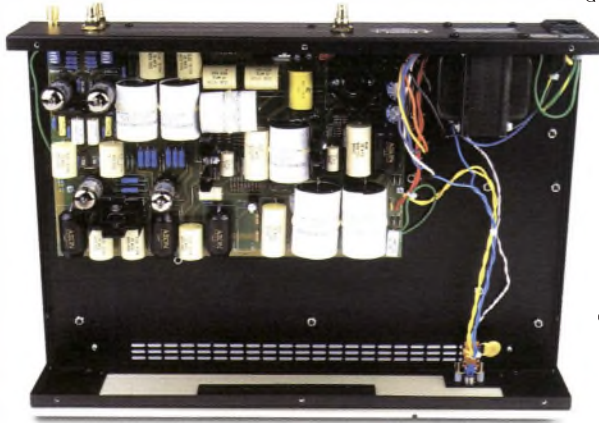


little too hard). It's these details which allow the music to convince, details which this system handles with an unobtrusive ease which allows you to sink into a performance.

Now, much of this stable, wide open character depends on the bass performance that the driving electronics can squeeze from the Avalons' slim dimensions. If you are expecting the kind of steamroller rumble that seems to be becoming de rigeur for floorstanders these days then you'll be disappointed (despite the fact that the Symbols represent Avalon's first foray into the A/V sector, with a centre and surrounds to follow). Their bass has none of that stolid, earthbound quality that so often passes for extension. Instead it is light on its feet and full of air and texture. Ray Brown's upright (*This One's For Blanton*) is wonderfully solid and present in the soundstage, the pitch definition and shape of his notes absolutely clear. They begin to lose a little weight at the very bottom of their range, almost as if Ray has backed off slightly on the power of his



▶ plucks, but it's a smooth transition that seems perfectly natural, and neither his bass nor Ellington's piano suffer. This lack of exaggeration or hype at low frequencies is the key to the speakers' midband clarity and spatial precision. You can't have one without the other, yet despite the position of the port and the size of



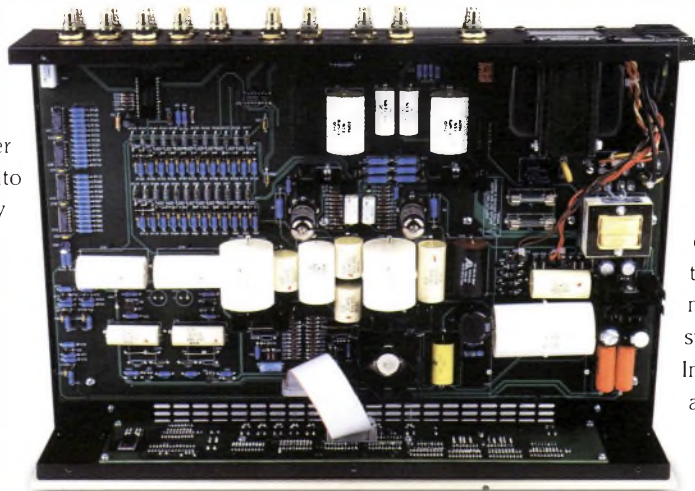
the drivers, there's no under-grumble or separation of the low bass.

In fact, we're back to our old friend coherence, spatial and musical, which is the key to this system's success. In passing the information out of the groove and along to the speakers, it succeeds in keeping the whole intact, rather than chopping it up into a collection of vaguely related bits. That old chestnut 'True Love Ways' (Buddy Holly *Legend* MCA MCMD 7003) provides the perfect example. The soundstage spreads way beyond the speakers, the control room speaker well off to the left, but despite the separation of the strings and rhythm section, the coherence of the overall picture ensures that everybody is playing in

the same band. The pace and pitch of the recording's tubby bass is nicely handled, never slowing the song or simply plopping along in a world of its own, and the sax is locked in space, properly plaintive and reedy. And then of course, there's Holly's voice; sweet focused and above all, intimate. Oh yes, this one definitely works.

Likewise, the Corelli *Concerto Grosso* from *The Tube* (Tacet L74). The space and height of the venue are clear, but so too is the stable image of the orchestra within it. And whilst boundaries aren't clearly defined (you'll need to move

a notch or two up each of the contributor's product lines to achieve that level of definition) the scale and sense of the musical event are unimpaired. The harpsichord



continuo also loses some detail, the volume of the instrument, but its contribution is stable and consistent, never wandering or slipping in and



out of the music depending on the level of the other instruments. It's this even handedness which makes the system's minor short comings so unobtrusive.

Shortcomings? Well it doesn't like heavy rock or dance music, but then they were specifically excluded from the brief. Otherwise it's down to resolution. There are systems out there that will give you more detail, and even more transparency. They won't do it with the wholesome natural colours and perspectives available from this one. The brief was specific, and so too is the performance. I didn't include party levels on the agenda, and you don't get them. Don't misunderstand me, the system will play loud, and it'll fill a surprisingly large room, but sustained high levels are not what it's about. This system is all

about the original event, presenting it all over again, just for you. Which is where its spatial coherence and tonal accuracy come in. Investigation with other components reveals that the turntable is responsible in no small part for the overall stability of proceedings. Interestingly, it also brings a healthy dose of life and jump to proceedings, a quality which has been absent from SME's earlier designs. The 10 might

not have the resolution and absolute transparency of the Model 20, but its sound is more approachable and friendly. Its sense of bounce and ▶

▶ musical momentum suits the system perfectly, ensuring that the natural distance and perspective, the lack of exaggeration, the refusal to add attention grabbing colour or dynamics are the strengths they should be, rather than weaknesses in the face of more 'impressive' competition. The overall effect is unforced and engaging, a system that will entertain for hours (and it has done).

Nor is it a dynamic slouch. There's no point in having superb tonal accuracy if the micro-dynamics that shape notes and harmonics are absent. That way lies musical sterility. This is a system which is, genuinely, equally at home with orchestral music (unless you live on an exclusive diet of heavy romantics and symphonic showstoppers - real headbangers use classical!), chamber, jazz or pop. 'Look Down, Look Down' (Martin Stephenson and the Daintees *Boat to Bolivia* Kitchenware KWLP5) opens with the kind of gentle but insistent, almost unaccompanied vocals that you just know herald the crack of doom. Here we have beautifully separated and distinctive voices, spaced individually and each with

its own identity, and when that drum cascade arrives the system rises to the occasion with a complete absence of fuss. Bang - bang - bang bang - bang! and there you are. Solid drums, full of purpose and impact. The subtle rhythmic upshift in the first chorus is all present and correct, as are the dynamic nudges and hints from the guitars. The dense mix of this propulsive track never congeals or envelopes the music, the system never robs it of the energy and drive that make it special.

Letting the record run. "Slow Lovin" is again characterised by more relaxed but equally solid drumming. The backing vocals are again beautifully separated and natural, Stephenson's slightly nasal voice unmistakable. The easy pace is fluid and mobile, the hesitations and gentle rhythmic surges that characterise the song are taken in its stride. Likewise, the fractured, staccato phrase that opens Basie's 'Beaver Junction' remains intact, the intentional rests and jolting rhythm make perfect sense. It may only be a handful of notes, but it's incredible how many systems trip over them. Not this one, but then, by now I've come to take its easy confidence for granted. Considering its modest power and minimal domestic impact, the sheer scale of the soundstage and the easy, open naturalness of this combination



are impressive indeed. So where are the stars? Well, the speakers stand out, as does the turntable. In fact, I suspect the Model 10 might well represent a new benchmark for entry level high-end turntable performance, a suspicion I'll attempt to confirm with longer acquaintance. But that misses the point. The c-j electronics are their normal, understated selves, but that doesn't mean that you can overlook their contribution. There's the excellent, and above all tonally consistent Cardas cabling, and the carefully chosen Pagode stand. And let's not forget that the Model 10 is armed with the SME IV tonearm, the superb Clearaudio Accurate cartridge and the Cardas tonearm lead. This is a carefully assembled whole whose performance is greater than the sum of its parts, which is exactly what a system should be. It's easy to be seduced by the capacious soundstage and the naturalness of its perspective and tonal shading; the intimacy of its vocal delivery or its dynamic range and discrimination. But the longer you listen the more you'll realise that it's the whole that counts. And the whole is the music, a fact this system never forgets.



A different approach...

Audio Consultants who supplied this system are far from a run-of-the-mill dealer. Situated in Camden, North London, they stock an eclectic range of product with a strong bias toward valves, vinyl and two channel. With a long and rewarding relationship with conrad-johnson equipment it was no surprise that this formed the heart of the system, but as Stephan Harper was quick to point out, the precise selection was far from a foregone conclusion, and was carefully matched to the musical brief. Choice of cartridge, cabling and speakers were all carefully considered. A different brief might involve products from the likes of Lyra, Nordost or the Final hybrid electrostatics, and whilst at this price level c-j would probably remain their first choice electronics, the solid state MF2500 might well come into play.

For those with a similar brief but a less elastic budget, all is not lost. A cut down version of this system could be built around the Symbols, but using the Kuzma Stabi S/Stogi S turntable, armed with either a Clearaudio Gamma 2000 or Lyra Helikon cartridge, feeding the budget PV10B pre-amp (enthusiastically reviewed in Issue 11) and the new MV60 power amplifier. In fact, this could well be one of the cheaper ways of hearing just what the Avalon Symbols are capable of. Nor should you despair if vinyl's not your thing. Audio Consultants may prefer the black disc, but they also offer a range of CD replay systems as well, including the Resolution Audio machine that so impressed me a couple of Issues ago.

Audio Consultants' carefully tailored approach employs unusual and eclectic products to great musical effect, mirroring to some extent the long term brand loyalty and depth of knowledge that is often associated with Naim dealers – albeit with distinctly different sonic results. With a distinctive portfolio of products and a clear notion of how to create systems from those raw ingredients, this is one dealer that definitely still warrants the moniker 'specialist'. As you can see from the review, the results can be pretty special too.

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Clearaudio Accurate

Type: Low output moving coil
Output: 0.6mV
Price: £2750

SME Model 10 Turntable/SME 4 Tonearm

Type: Belt Drive,
Isolated Sub-Chassis
Motor: DC
Speeds: 33/45
Finish -T/T: Black
T/A: Silver
Price - T/T: £2644
T/A: £1127

conrad-johnson Amplification

EV1 Phono Stage

Valve Complement: 2 x 12AX7, 1 x 5751, 1 x 12AU7
Cartridge Loading: 200, 500, 1.9K, 9.6K, 47K Ohms
Gain: 49dB
Sensitivity: 0.4mV
Overload: 200mV
Dimensions (WxHxD): 483x85x 65mm
Weight: 5.7kG
Finish: Gold
Price: £1500

PV-14L Line Stage

Valve Complement: 2 x 6C4
Gain: 22dB
Inputs: 5 x Line Level
Outputs: 1 pr RCA Phono
Loops: 1 x EPL (Tape)
1 x Theatre (Unity Gain)
Input Impedance: >39 Ohms
Output Impedance: <200 Ohms
Dimensions (WxHxD): 483x85x365mm
Weight: 6.8kG
Finish: Gold
Price: £1990

Premier 11A Power-Amplifier

Type: Push/Pull Ultralinear
Valve Complement: 2 x 5751, 2 x 6FQ7,
4 x 6550
Input Sensitivity: 950mV For Full Output
Rated Power: 70 Watts/Ch Into 4 Ohms
Dimensions (WxHxD): 445x184x387mm
Weight: 24.5kG
Finish: Gold
Price: £3695

Avalon Symbol Loudspeaker

Type: Two-Way Reflex Loaded
Efficiency: 86dB
Impedance: 5ohm nominal (3.5ohm minimum)
Bandwidth: -3dB @ 35Hz
Power Handling: 30-150 Watts
Dimensions (WxHxD): 200x1090x230mm
Weight: 16Kg each
Price: £3000

Cardas Cross Cables

Prices: Tonearm: £220
Interconnect: 1.0m pr £395
Speaker: 3.0m pr £770
Mains: £230

Finite Elemente Pagode Rack

Prices: 4 shelves 460mm wide £699.00
4 shelves 550mm wide £829.00
Optional high absorption shelf
for above £75.00

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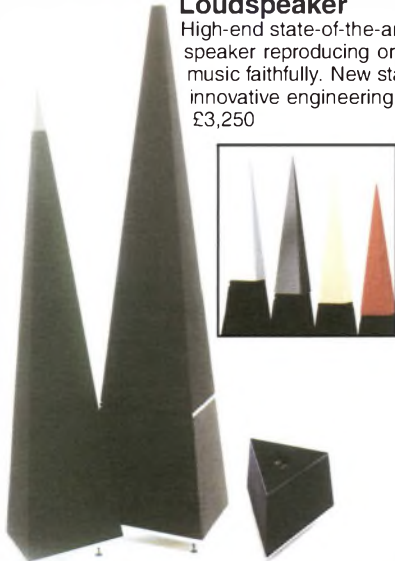


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The Klyne Model 7LX 3.5B Pre-amplifier

by Chris Thomas

It was about a dozen or so years ago that this American preamplifier first came to my notice, but it was by reputation rather than aural impact and since then it has hovered on the edge of my consciousness as a possible contender. Up until earlier this year that is, when RG offered me the chance to live with one for a decent length of time and not just for a quick few days blast, which often raises more questions than it answers. Klyne Audio Arts, to give them their full name were founded back in 1980 and have been hand building preamplifiers and phono stages under the guiding light of Stan Klyne ever since. They actually make two basic designs, which can be configured in a number of ways with or without both balanced input/outputs and internal phono stages. The cheaper range is the Six series but the model I was to be living with was the more costly and hopefully more definitive Seven series. Both models are solid-state.

When the Klyne arrived I was disappointed to see that there was no remote control. Since I moved the position of the system in my room it has become difficult to set the volume accurately from where the preamplifier is now located so a decent remote volume control is a considerable asset. But alas, like my own Spectral, the Klyne is a manual design with separate power supply. It is a rather unassuming-looking device that is available in anodised black or platinum gold finish, like the review sample. Pick it up, feel its 7kg weight

and have a good look around. It is unquestionably beautifully made and quite superbly finished. On the inside the unit's construction is just as impressive. Many of the shiny black components carry the Klyne legend and the lacquered circuit boards are etched with their own dragonfly logo. It is in fact so beautiful that Klyne provide the option of a clear acrylic top, which replaces the aluminum one, so the innards are exposed to admiring glances.

But be warned that although there is a slight improvement in sound quality with the acrylic top in place you will lose shielding and lay the system open to potentially disastrous unwanted transients should you suddenly come over all house-proud and start to polish. Acrylic surfaces are notoriously susceptible to static build-ups with the danger of arcing across to the main board ever present. Only dust when the power amplifier is off is my advice. I checked with the importer who said that the unthinkable had never happened.

The nomenclature of the Model 7LK 3.5B I was supplied with indicates that a single pair of balanced input/outputs compliment the other four RCA phono input connections and the two existing unbalanced outputs. The balanced input has been assigned to CD and all selections are made via a rotary control on the front panel. There is also a separate record side to the pre-amplifier,

which uses the same size knob and incorporates an off setting. Instead of a conventional balance control the Klyne uses independent level adjustment for each channel. With the phono stage fitted I can see that variable input levels makes sense to equalise the different gains, but I still find it a pain. You either love or hate this kind of arrangement and I am one of the latter. With each channel's gain flat out you are limited, with CD input anyway, to the first few notches of the stepped volume control before the volume comes on with a rush making accurate setting especially for low level listening next to impossible. Attenuate each channel's level and you give yourself a better range of control but the channel controls are not stepped and there are no markings on the front panel to calibrate them by. Only the grooves cut in the head of each knob gives you their independent positions and what seems equal when you are next to it looks all wrong by the time you get back to the listening chair. If there

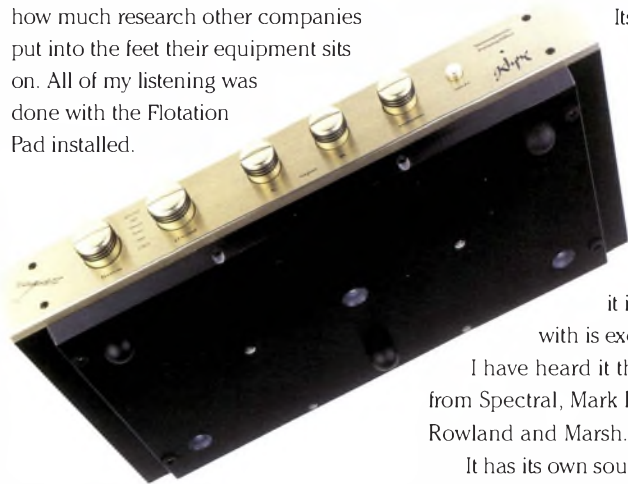
was a mono switch it might be easier. After a while you get used to it and it does not seem such an inconvenience, and as I only really used it with CD I settled on having the input levels heavily attenuated to give me more "room" on the volume control, though the unit does lose perhaps a little presence when configured this way.

As an optional extra the Klyne can be fitted with something called a Flotation Pad.

This is an inch thick slab of



▶ Corian, which directly replaces the standard bottom plate of the unit. Corian is a kind of man-made stone (I have seen it used on Well Tempered's Reference turntable as a plinth, in speaker cabinets and as a kitchen work surface). Into the bottom of this are machined five hemispherical sockets into which are mounted rubbery little balls, a bit like small squash balls though made of far more esoteric materials. Klyne claim their energy absorbing capabilities to be close to 100%. Use three if the unit is mounted alone and five if the separate phone stage, the 7PX 3.5, is to be stacked on top. You should not even think of owning a Klyne without this and I consider it to be of such fundamental importance to the performance of the preamplifier that it really should be a standard item. Put it this way. The improvements that I heard with the balls in place were so great that without them this is a different animal. And once the differences have been appreciated it certainly makes you think about just how much research other companies put into the feet their equipment sits on. All of my listening was done with the Flotation Pad installed.



This particular preamplifier was received direct from the factory and therefore had no prior use or running-in. So it was a great surprise when it sounded so good straight out of the box. Huge bandwidth and presence were immediately there as was that special sense of balance between power and delicacy that all top-end

equipment should possess. There was a slightly dull tonality but I have found that, after the Spectral, with its remarkably bright, light and fast characteristics, much equipment can initially seem a little dull. But, bearing in mind that this was a fairly long-term audition, I decided to let things take their course. Over the following weeks either the Klyne changed or I just grew more used to it, I'm not sure which.

But it crept up on me and my respect and admiration for it grew and grew, until by the time of writing this review, I would say that the overall balance of the pre-amplifier is just about perfect. I still notice the slight dullness, but it is less relevant and now seems more like a restrained richness.

Its refusal to grow remotely flustered, artificially bright or compressed, even under arduous musical conditions, regardless of the power amplifier it is being used with is exceptional and I have heard it through amplifiers from Spectral, Mark Levinson, Jeff Rowland and Marsh.

It has its own sound though, there's no doubt about that, but one of its main strengths is that it never sounds remotely electronic, exaggerated or forced in any way. You may be tempted, as I was, to conclude that it can seem a little over-relaxed at times but give it some real work to do and it will surprise you with its dynamic intensity. My recording of Vicente Amigo's extraordinary flamenco guitar on *De Mi Corazon Al Aire*

(Sony/CBS 468932 2) shows what a difficult instrument this is to record. Vicente is all flowing hair and flared nostrils, his guitar, a bomb permanently just this side of exploding. His runs and rhythmic chord work are as frightening as his technique and I have listened to this CD on many systems yet I have very rarely heard the music illuminated so invitingly and so enjoyably understandable as via the Klyne. From a hi-fi point of view you will require speed, transient delivery and recovery coupled with dynamic freedom and a lack of system compression to make the music work.

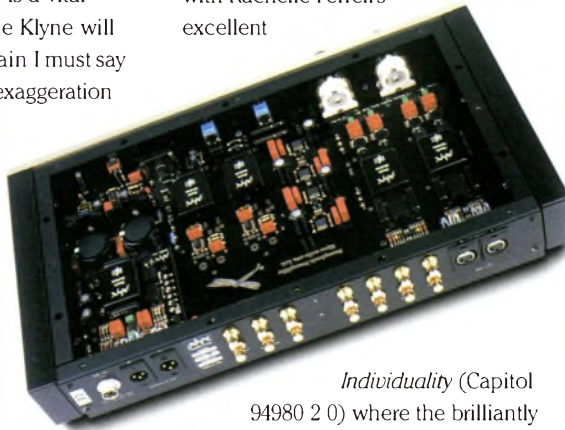


But where the Klyne is so extra-ordinary is its sense of tonal and harmonic completeness. Flamenco guitarists contact the string through their fingernails and not their soft pads. They do this to shape the note by extracting all that percussive top end and dramatic leading edge. This is, after all, music to tap your feet to. It's about the strong emotions of love, pride and honour with a touch of arrogance thrown in, and the runs and flourishes that are so much a part of Vicente's music tap into those of us with souls open to these influences. Most systems will give you the leading edge of the note but often this will swamp the system. It may sound fast but listen for the guitar body. Where is that sense and shape of the note? Where is the colour or the harmonics? The Klyne seems to make a point of not snatching at the attack of the note. Instead it opens them up to you and illustrates with stunning clarity that speed and true rhythmic coherence go way beyond the leading edge of the note. Timing-wise this amplifier is superb. Rhythms just ▶

▶ pour through it like a fast flowing stream. The way in which the elements of tempo combine to form the whole is, at times, mesmerising and it all happens with such unrestrained fluidity. That magical sense of progression through the structure of the music from chord progression to the much finer embellishments that musicians are so fond of is where this preamplifier excels. It is totally transparent and if you believe that a realistic three-dimensional soundstage is a vital audio ingredient then the Klyne will not disappoint at all. Again I must say that there is no sense of exaggeration or artifice about this preamplifier and the way it goes about its business. Given suitable ancillaries the Klyne will amaze you as much with its stability and depth as it will with its rendering of low level detail and ambience. If you are used to a solid-state preamplifier like the Mark Levinson No.380S, the Spectral DMC-12 or the Naim NAC 52 you might just think that the smaller details could be a little sharper etched but you will be impressed at how open throated this Klyne is at all levels.

As a reviewer I am always looking for the ultimate potential of a piece of equipment, especially of this class. What it can or cannot do? The Klyne is a deceptive and elusive subject. At certain times I thought I had identified areas where it might not be so eloquent. The bass, for instance, obviously shows good extension and is nicely pitch coherent but just when I was thinking that it could perhaps be a little better controlled along came a piece of music to prove me wrong. This happened quite a few times. One area where there was never any doubting its abilities though was on vocals. Put quite simply I have never heard a better, more understandable or emotionally charged performance from

any pre-amplifier when dealing with the human voice. *The Song Lives On* by Joe Sample and Lalah Hathaway (GRD 9956) showed this performance at its best. Not only was Lalah standing about ten feet in front of me, but the clarity and quality of her voice and phrasing was remarkably natural and believable. And the relationship of her voice with Joe Sample's piano was so close that at times they sounded like two parts of the same instrument. The same with Rachelle Ferrell's excellent



Individuality (Capitol 94980 2 0) where the brilliantly mixed vocal arrangement with Russ Barnes on 'Reflections Of My Heart' was about as breathy, schmaltzy and humanly intertwined as I have heard. Or Michael McDonald's *Blue Obsession* (SANC D002) which illustrates perfectly that when he gets the right material there are few singers in his field that can actually convey a "feel" like him. All these singers excel at pulling you into the song to share or identify with the lyric. Delivery and emotion - it's what singing is all about.

I am not always in the mood to sit and listen to music, but when I am and the wind is in the right direction, magic sometimes happens. And those moments are, to me, what make all this hi-fi nonsense worthwhile. They can't be explained - if they could they wouldn't be magic. Best just to enjoy them as I suspect that music speaks to each of us in a different way. I do think that to get something valuable from a musical experience you have to give something of yourself first and at audio's high end

this can be a problem. I have found that so much of the equipment is impressive but impersonal. I love vintage Fender Stratocasters but that doesn't mean that I don't like Gibson Les Pauls. The Klyne is very unlike the pre-amplifier that I use in my home system, but I'm happy to say that I still had more than my share of those magic moments with it and will be genuinely sorry to see it go. Bearing in mind the performance, I think that it is sensibly priced though certainly not cheap. Check it out. Definitely a contender. ➤

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

The Klyne can be factory configured in several ways and the importer should be contacted for specifications available. The input/outputs described below are those applying to the review model.

Inputs: 4 x unbalanced,
1 x balanced

Outputs: 2 x unbalanced
(1 x inverting,
1 x standard,
1 x balanced)

Bandwidth: 0.1Hz to 150KH

Input impedance: 25K Ohms unbalanced
inputs with level control set to max. 25K
Ohms per side for balanced.

Output impedance: 300 Ohms

Size (HxWxD): 6.4 x 48.3 x 29.4 cm

Weight - Pre-amp: 8kg
- PSU 2kg

Prices

Depending on spec. from £3750 - £5150.

Optional Internal Phono section - £1500.

Flotation Pad £360

Preamp as tested - £5510

Importer

Wollaton Audio

Tel: 0115 928 4147

e-mail: audio@wollaton.demon.co.uk

Manufacturer

Klyne Audio Arts

Website

www.klyne.com



Sonus faber

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Sonus Faber Electa Amator II

by Roy Gregory

Aural memory is a notoriously fickle and rose tinted medium, yet for all of us, our hi-fi judgements and perceptions are inextricably entwined with our past experiences. Somewhere in our own personal hi-fi history are the lows and highs of our sonic education; some of them long drawn out realisations, some of them 'road to Damascus' turning points. The latter are fewer and further between, but we've all had them, and despite their limited number, for me, like many other people, more than one has involved Absolute Sounds.

I can remember the first vividly. It was a Brighton show, and the first time I heard the Magnaplanar MG3a. I can even remember the driving system; Oracle, Sumiko MDC 800, Koetsu Onyx, Audio Research SP10 and a pair of Krell KMA100s. Ah, those were the days. Not a CD in sight!

A few years later came another, equally memorable experience. This one was at a Bristol show, in the days when Absolute Sounds still exhibited, and involved the compact, stand-mounted Sonus Faber Electa Amator, driven by the Audio Research SP11 and the mighty M300s: or, as Ricardo succinctly put it, "my largest amps driving my smallest speakers". The sound was truly astonishing. The massive sound-stage, impressive scale, dynamic range and musical impact that thundered

forth from those tiny cabinets was hard to credit. Indeed, this unlikely combination (remember, in those days we all sat down and allocated our budget before we even started to think about what products to buy) was clearly a match made in heaven, a conjurer's trick which left the audience bemused and Ricardo with a satisfied smile.

Unfortunately, impressive though the results were (and they were), contained in this tale are the seeds of the Electa Amator's Achilles heel. In order to achieve that kind of performance you needed absolutely gobs of very expensive power, with the result that the speakers tend to spend much of their time running within an inch of their life. Just a little too much on the volume control, or one of those unheralded dynamic peaks which caught everybody by surprise when CD first appeared, and the



impressive was transformed into the spectacular, in all the wrong ways. That original version of the Electa Amator was the second Sonus Faber model to reach these shores, and along with the cheaper Electa, was responsible for popularising solid hardwood speaker cabinets. Were Sonus

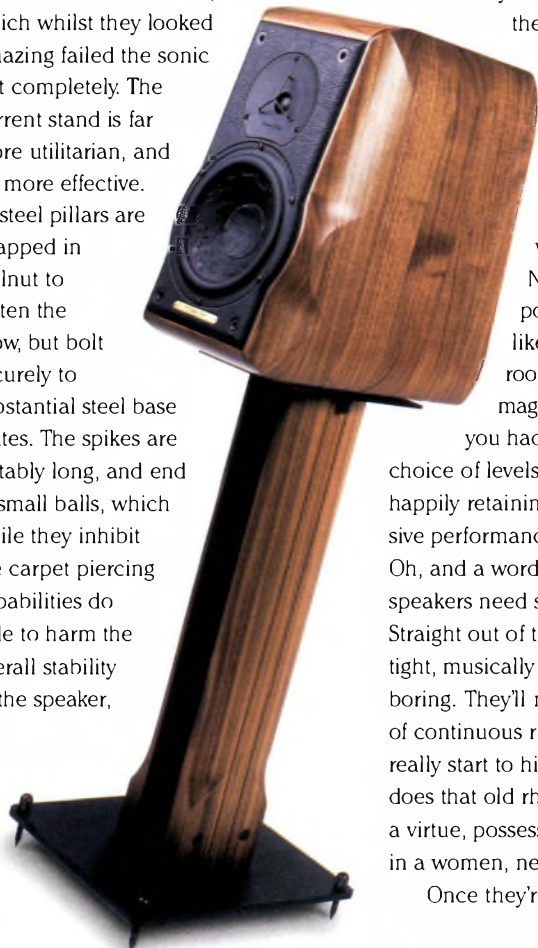
Faber the first to do solid wood speaker boxes. Probably not, but the facts are lost in the mists of time, and frankly, who cares? They are unquestionably responsible for the popularity of the approach, and the Amator Electa was instrumental in that success.

Of course, that was a few years ago now, and whilst this venerable campaigner was still uniquely qualified as far as compact two-way speakers were concerned, an update was clearly becoming necessary. Enter the Amator Electa II, the revised and improved version of the recipe, and the changes make interesting reading. The new model is slightly larger than I remember the original, with more upright proportions (but that could be down to my memory playing tricks). Importantly, it retains the same sculpted cheek bones around the bass/mid driver, a small detail but one that always made this the most attractive speaker in the Sonus Faber range.



► The most obvious change is on the front baffle, where the Esotar upper midrange, sorry, that should read tweeter, has been replaced with a much smaller 20mm unit. The Esotar was a fabulous (and fabulously expensive - see comments earlier concerning spectacular accidents) driver, but its lack of extension was responsible for the original speaker's slightly shut in sound and sweet, velvety quality. If the Amator was to compete against modern competition, it had to go. Round the back, the reflex port has been replaced by a large ABR, and you'll find the large bi-wire terminal plate, which oddly uses gold plated binding posts for the positive connections, and Rhodium plated ones for the negatives.

The other big change is in the stand. Many years ago, Sonus Faber offered marvellously worked objects in marble and solid Walnut, which whilst they looked amazing failed the sonic test completely. The current stand is far more utilitarian, and far more effective. Its steel pillars are wrapped in Walnut to soften the blow, but bolt securely to substantial steel base plates. The spikes are suitably long, and end in small balls, which while they inhibit the carpet piercing capabilities do little to harm the overall stability of the speaker,



and prevent the risk of damage to person or polished floors. Sensibly, the speaker is held to its stand by a pair of decoupled retaining bolts, which will prevent inadvertent topples, the finished structure being surprisingly heavy and very solid.

Along with the slight increase in cabinet volume and the ABR, comes a slightly less vicious drive requirement, and a bottom end which, whilst it lacks none of the original's depth or weight, is a lot more controlled and hence room friendly, making the Amator II a lot easier to position than its predecessor. But don't go getting the idea that this is an easy load. As Ricardo says "The harder you beat

them, the more they like it", only he used rather more colourful terminology (you can always tell when he really likes a product!).

An all too brief outing with the Mark Levinson No 33Hs proved the point, offering a Tardis like transport back to that room in Bristol. All the old magic was there, only now you had a much less restricted choice of levels, the new model happily retaining its scale and impressive performance at lower volumes. Oh, and a word of warning. These speakers need serious running in. Straight out of the box they sound tight, musically constipated and boring. They'll need around ten days of continuous running before they really start to hit their stride. How does that old rhyme go? Patience is a virtue, possess it if you can, seldom in a women, never in a man!

Once they're run-in they'll repay

a systematic reappraisal of set-up. Given their extraordinary bandwidth, they remain sensitive to positioning,

and whilst their more forgiving nature means that less than the ideal isn't the disaster it was before, getting it just right pays real dividends in terms of bass definition, speed and midrange clarity. I ended up with them 21" out from the wall and toed in to fire directly at me. Adjustments laterally in steps of around 0.5cm or so were the final bit of fine tuning and

it was time to sit back and enjoy the results of all my effort. And enjoy them I did, as did my neighbours, my neighbours' neighbours... you get the picture. Yes, the Amator II is happier at lower volumes than the older model, but there's still something about all that smooth power and gigantic scale that encourages you to wick it right up!

The *Gladiator OST* has become something of a universal reference point around the industry (here included) with its thunderous crescendos and massive dynamic swings. But when I reviewed it, I rated composer Hans Zimmer's alternative offering, *The Thin Red Line* as the better recording. The Sonus Fabers let you hear why. Right from the opening of 'The Coral Atoll' they conjure the surging power, the lazy rhythm of the pacific surf crashing ashore. The huge soundscape fashioned to accompany Mallick's impressionistic master piece is eerily atmospheric, yet distinct and free of the normal movie suspense paraphernalia. The Amators effortlessly recall its particular character, laying the careful, subtle orchestration over the sweep of the broader brushstrokes. It's an

► impressive performance, and one that is ably underpinned by the speakers' nicely graduated dynamics, lending just the right sense of ponderous power, the deep seated power of nature, against which the combatants' squabble pales into triviality.

When you've got a speaker, especially a small speaker, that does the big thing so well, it's easy to get carried away. Yet most of the music we listen to, and most of the recordings simply don't demand such excess. The Emmylou Harris track 'Love Hurts' (*Spyboy Grapevine* GRALP241) offers a welcome reality check, although even here, the Amators manage to slip in a low blow. This live, duet plus acoustic guitars recording is close and personal. And this time again, so it is - except that the Sonus Fabers manage to capture the sheer scale and space of the recording venue, the size and expectancy of the crowd. At the same time, the natural ease and intimacy, the easy pacing and breathing, remind you of exactly what it is that makes people buy mini-monitors. This is a wonderful track, but played back by the Amators, partnered by the impressive Mark Levinson No 383 integrated amp (a fabulous combination that I enjoyed for a regrettably short time) it becomes something really special. The simple beauty of the lyric, the scorched tension and edge to the harmonies make this a far more coruscating and affecting experience than the Everlys ever managed.

Tonally, the speakers are characterised by a creeping warmth that becomes gradually more apparent the lower they go. Conversely, the mid-band is as quick and open as you like, while the high-frequencies are extremely extended (giving beautiful air to choral recordings) but will cut if provoked. Mercifully, the warmth and weight of the bottom end somehow manages not to slur or slow the mid-band, although

it does rob the lower registers of the texture and transparency that comes from (much larger) full-range designs. Which just goes to show that you can't break the laws of physics, although the Amators do a pretty convincing job of bending them!




In one of those uncannily coincidences, I was using the Sonus Fabers over the Spring bank holiday, time of cuckoo fairs and brass bands. In this case the rather excellent Woodfalls band. At the same time, what should appear but the latest Reference Recordings disc, a collection of Sousa marches (RR-94CD).

Recorded to Keith

Johnson's normal exemplary standard, it brought the echo of the Woodfalls band back to my front room. The brass was suitably vivid and vibrant, the sheer energy impressively present (we're talking a lot of horns here - just think about it). There was all the proper spit and glossy sheen to the notes, the bass drum was appropriately boisterous and emphatic. Even the familiar, jaunty air of 'Semper Fidelis' didn't have me reaching for the next button (although I'll admit that I drew the line at 'The

Stars and Stripes Forever').

Let's face it, to have any chance at all, the system playing this music is going to need serious dynamic and rhythmic integrity. The Amator's additional tonal and spatial grace to the mix, with such effect that they create a real, live quality that allows the music to amuse and engage. I never thought I'd spend a Sunday evening listening to Sousa, but the Sonus Fabers managed to change my mind, and whilst part of that is down to the impressive recording, it's not as impressive as the trick the speakers just pulled.

The Amator Electa was the original quart in a pint pot. The revised version has refined the recipe, making it a less daunting load as well as adding some very necessary top-end extension. Amplifier quality is still critical, but now it tends to be measured in terms of just how much the speakers give. Musically expressive and emotionally convincing, driven with a carefully chosen amplifier this is one stand-mounted speaker that belies its modest dimensions and lives up to its name. The bandwidth is impressive, the musical authority more so. Sonus Faber indeed. 

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Drive Units:	20mm silk dome HF 180mm multi-coated paper/carbonium cone B/M 180mm high density paper ABR tuned to 35Hz
Bandwidth:	-1.5dB @ 35Hz
Efficiency:	88dB
Nominal Impedance:	8ohms
Dimensions (WxHxD):	225x380x360mm
Weight:	22.5Kg/pr
Finish:	Solid Walnut
Price -Speaker:	£2498
Stand:	£480 (adjustable height)

Distributor:

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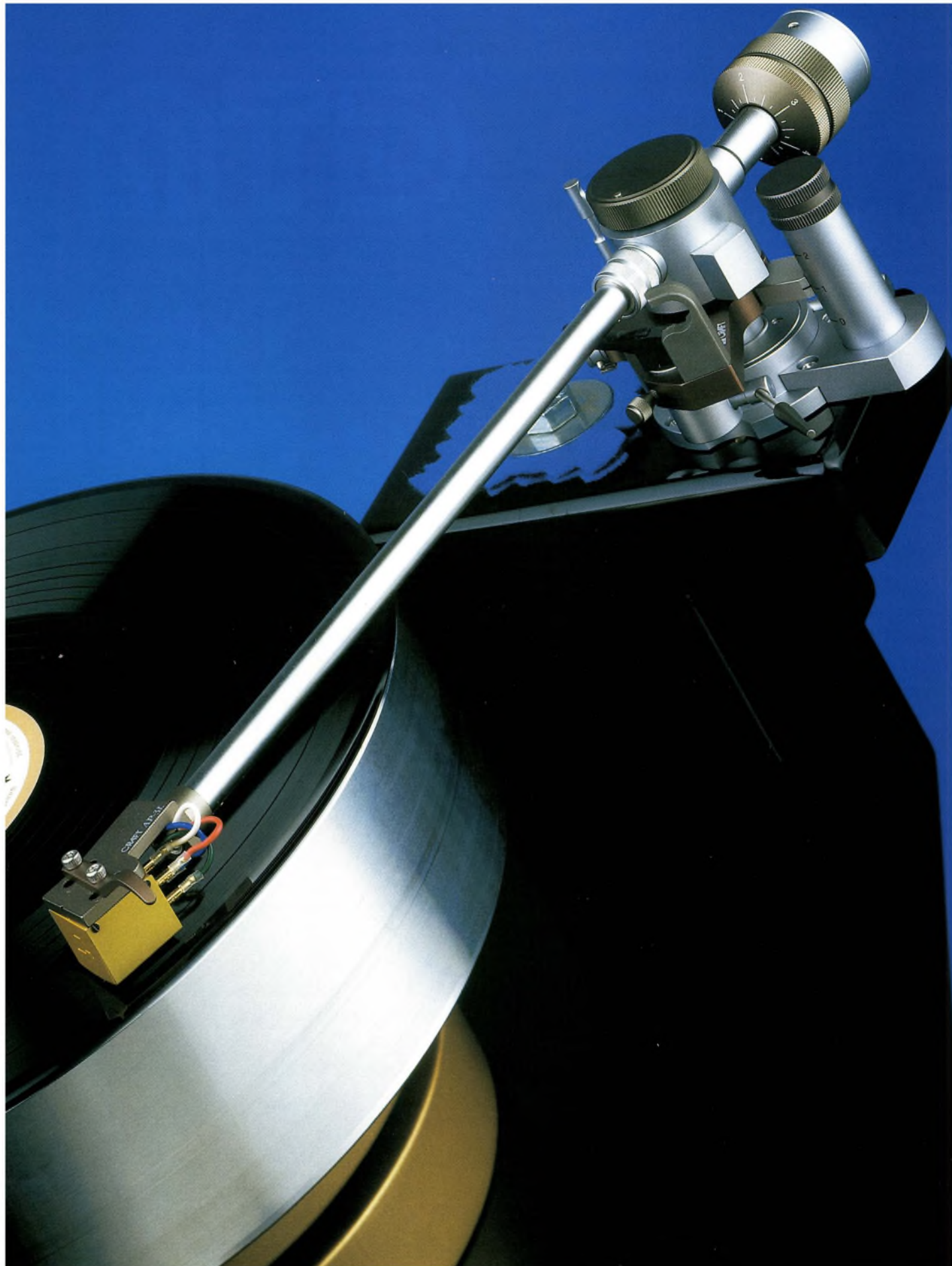
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Platine Verdier Record Player and Audiocraft AC4400 Tonearm

by Peter Russell

Occasionally, just occasionally, one comes across a product which challenges our usual perceptions. Over time we all become jaded, prisoners of our own history and experience; where the familiar is comfortable and safe and predictable and anything new is a threat, unless it makes our lives easier or more convenient, and where difference is less acceptable than newness. Whilst the pursuit of the new fuels consumerism, radicalism challenges our view of what is familiar. Nowhere is this more true than in the world of hi-fi. "Me-too" products parade in the clothes of progress as newer versions of the old technology are tweaked and given a more polished gloss or more complex functionality. Our attention is continually drawn to how unique this or that modification is. Occasionally old technology finds a new application or is revitalised in the light of current knowledge and economic viability. Sometimes a product comes about by using simple but familiar technology and applying it in an unexpected manner. The Verdier turntable is just such a product.

Here we are confronted with a turntable that has been around for 20 years with very little alteration; its technical principles are the same, just that some of its components and materials have changed. Mention the Verdier Platine to anyone interested in vinyl and they will respond; ah yes something to do with magnets... it has a magnetic suspension hasn't it? True, but that is only half the story. At first sight the turntable looks like any other high mass top-heavy table. It does not seem feasible for the massive platter to

provide a stable foundation for spinning records, and in any case the profile is the wrong way round, especially when you see it being driven by a thread belt. This visual incongruence is of course part of the problem; it should not work, and if it does then it is surely compromised. Well you would be wrong because it does work and whilst its feat of levitation may not be magic the sound it produces is.

A few turntables are deserving of the epithet



transcription, i.e. are able to accurately transcribe the received signal and produce a facsimile of the original. The Verdier does just that. This review has taken an inordinate amount of time and at times confounded my patience with the innumerable permutations available in the process of nailing down the sonic signature of the turntable. In fact I don't think that I have yet got to the bottom of the character of this deck. There can be no question that a large part of what it does is due to the suspension and the engineering principles employed in its design.

Before we get to the legerdemain of the platter we should consider the base on which the platter sits. This consists of a hollow acrylic plinth into which are inserted three sprung feet that in turn support three diaphragms on which the top plate

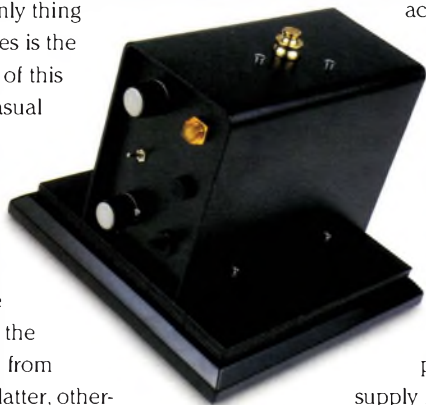
of the plinth rests. The position of the feet are deliberately sited to balance the fully loaded deck and the levelling of the base is accomplished by adjusting three large bolt heads that protrude through the top. The diaphragms drawing in air, which is audible as you release the plinth,

compensate for any downward pressure on the deck. The suspension system on the more expensive rejuvenated Granito version is slightly different in the positioning of the feet and their relationship to the plinth base.

Okay, so that's the easy bit. If we look at the other end of the turntable then we are confronted by the massive 16kg platter made out of high-grade aluminium and measuring 60mm deep. To this is bolted the cast iron ring housing one of the two opposed magnets that float it. When the deck was assembled by Graham Tricker, the importer, he used an alignment ring to ensure that the two magnets in their housings were in perfect opposition to each other when the platter was assembled. To create the stability required for the platter when it rotates, an axel carrier, which is bolted to the underneath of the platter, penetrates the centre of the platter. Into this housing an axel spindle goes through the axel carrier and rests on a large adjustable set screw which is bolted to the underside of the plinth. Oil is injected into a chamber at the top of the axel spindle and allowed to seep into the space between the axel carrier and the axel spindle to enable the platter to rotate and



▶ also to counteract the drag on the cartridge stylus in the groove of the record. There are three dissimilar metals between the spindle and the platter, which serve to deflect mechanical energy. It is important to note that the only thing that actually rotates is the platter. Very little of this is visible to the casual observer. The two powerful magnets housed in their dull gold cast iron rings are in plain view and the setscrew is visible from underneath the platter, otherwise there is little to see.



With the outboard motor the actual turntable base is quite small but large enough to mount two arms if you should so wish. The usual arm-board is in the same material as the plinth, whilst for the Granito version it is aluminium. If you are feeling particularly exotic you can commission one in ebony! The turntable was fitted with an Audiocraft arm. This should really be described as a tone-arm system as it provides for remarkable flexibility. We are all familiar with tone arms which offer the versatility of interchangeable arm wands of varying masses to accommodate different cartridges, but no one goes to the extent that Audiocraft do to provide a means of matching virtually any cartridge including the Ortofon SPU's, as well as any turntable, as it has a choice of overall weights to fit suspended and non suspended decks. As fitted to the Verdier it came with the 12" arm with fixed headshell, set of counterweights, overhang protractor, damping fluid, an additional S shaped arm to accommodate the Ortofon SPU, lateral side weights and its own high quality phono cable. Once set up it looked a million dollars with its bronzed

features and sculptured engineering. The detailing of the arm I will reserve for later as we discuss the performance of the arm/deck combination.

The motor supply, sited on a separate support, can accommodate either a thread or rubber belt. For the purposes of this review the drive belt was the waxed button thread provided and the supply was situated 22 inches from the platter spindle. The supply has the usual on/of switch and status light, a switch for 33/45rpm and two rotary controls for setting the turntable speed, together with a switch at the back of the housing labelled thread/rubber. All of this is housed in a pressed metal box mounted on a acrylic plinth. Given the engineering involved in the platter and base it is unfortunate that the motor assembly does not mirror the same attention to form and function. I would have thought that a more thoughtfully engineered motor housing and switching commensurate with the price of the turntable would have been more appropriate. I understand from the UK importer that this may well be in hand and that there will be further modifications to improve the look and feel of the turntable.

It is possible to replace the existing motor supply with a battery driven one. Here the turntable is activated by a switch on the battery supply not the motor which, at the same time disconnects the mains. The turntable can run continuously for a week without requiring charge

but when the turntable is turned off the battery's intelligent charging system will recharge itself. The advantage of the battery power supply cannot be underestimated; once connected there is an audible drop in the noise floor and the notes take on a sense of space and musical accuracy only hinted at by the standard Verdier, whilst at the same time inner detail becomes distinct and an integral part of the musical performance.

As a general comment about the integration of form, function and feel of the Verdier Platine, there is some room for improvement. I am not convinced that the agricultural school of engineering has much to endear itself to prospective purchasers. It is not sufficient to point to the sonic virtues of the product if it looks, in part, as if it came out of a 1950's parts bin and a can of discarded hammerite paint. With a little thought and attention to detail the Verdier could match its glorious musical qualities with equally attractive looks. I do know that some of the detailing has been addressed by the UK importer, but at an additional cost.

For the purpose of this review I employed the Van de Hull Grasshopper IV, Clearaudio Insider and an Ortofon SPU Reference GM as well as the Ortofon Kontrapunkt as cartridges in the 12" arm. All were fed into the Counterpoint Claritas phono stage which gave flexibility over MC/MM input as well as gain and loading. This front end was part of the 47Labs system driving a pair of Rethm (Lowther drivered) horn speakers. Cartridge set up was a dream. The Audiocraft arm is so well engineered that every adjustment transmits that feeling of quality and reassurance. ▶



► It was fitted to the turntable by way of the heavy suspension weight that locates underneath the mounting board. There is a lighter one available to enable the arm to be accommodated on lightly sprung suspensions. Tracking weight is effected by rotating the counterweight and then zeroed with the bronzed collar with its graduated markings, which proved to be reassuringly accurate. By throwing a small lever at the base of the arm pillar a locking collar is released which then enables a vernier scale thread to be adjusted for VTA, and then relocked by the lever. Whilst it is not possible to adjust VTA whilst the record is playing it only takes a couple of seconds to do any required adjustment. Because the arm is a dual-pivot design it allows a facility to vary the damping of the arm/cartridge by the use of a large screw at the top of the arm pillar that varies the amount of oil within a small well. The instructions and drawings, which accompany the arm, leave very little to the imagination; they are both comprehensive and easy to follow, a model some other manufacturers would do well to follow. Changing from the 12" arm to the S shaped arm to allow the Ortofon SPU to be fitted was a breeze, about two minutes to replace the existing counterweight with the heavier one, attach the lateral side weights, SPU, adjust VTA, set tracking weight, and finalise the damping. We were ready to ride the grooves.

As I said before I am not sure that I have yet got to the bottom of the Verdier's sound. I must have ended up playing every kind of music from early music on original instruments through Mozart, Mahler and Jazz; small ensemble music through to

vocals by Amanda Mcbroom, Jennifer Warnes and Ute Lemper; guitar music by Albert Lee, Jimi Hendrix and Buddy Guy; Opera sung by Bergonzi, Ferrier, Callas and more eclectic music by The Penguin Café Orchestra as well as Bo Hansen. All in all this deck/arm combination created differences I had not heard before, whether it was in the subtle shadings in Ute Lemper's version of 'Cries from the Heart' or Amanda Mcbroom's original version. Both were portrayed with a sensitivity



and emotional impact, which revealed how very different these two singers are in their ability to create the subtleties and moods through their vocal repertoire. Increasingly I am convinced that the success of a piece of hi-fi lies in its ability to distinguish the differences between performances, instruments and recordings. The portrayal of contrasts in such a way as to produce the verisimilitude of the performance has to lie at the core of musical belief. As a listener I want to experience the performance, to participate in the event whether it is a live experience or one that I have created in my room with the equipment that I have available. If I can not believe in the performance then I usually end up being distracted or dissatisfied and

quickly lifting the tone arm to either replace the record or to leave it all to another day.

There are two records of early music that I return to time and time again. One is the Reference Recordings *Helicon* with music by Vivaldi and Bach whilst the other is called *The Tube* on the Tacet label with

a collection by Corelli, Vivaldi, Bocherini and Sammartini. They are both very different recordings, but both present the violin and its extended family with a remarkable faithfulness. The violin is the soprano of ensemble music; it nearly always takes on a solo role and has been described as the 'tool of the imagination'. On these recordings the performances are portrayed with remarkable veracity, a truth to which the Verdier is utterly faithful.

Spatial relationships are well scaled, the interplay between the two violins in the Vivaldi pieces are preserved whilst the remaining instruments can be identified easily as they provide the harmonic backdrop to the two violins. It was at this point that the impact of adjusting the arm damping was brought home to me. By finely varying the amount of damping, the tonal quality of the music could be controlled so as to capture the resonance of the original instruments on the Helicon disc and remove any traces of ringing. It is exactly this susceptibility to variations in set up of both the arm and the turntable that make this deck/arm combination both so frustrating and rewarding. Not only could you effect the presentation by varying the arm damping but also any change in cartridge loading was instantly discernable. Add to that

▶ the fact that the addition of a turntable mat and the effects of a clamp all made their presence felt meant that not only did this review seem to take for ages but also the permutations seemed endless. However, throughout these evolutions, one factor remained constant; the player's unerring ability to differentiate one performance from another.

I am sure that there will be considerable debate about whether to clamp and/or mat the Verdier. A number of people have said to me that a mat, especially the lead composite Verdier mat, closes down the sound, restricts the sound stage and that the leading and trailing edges of notes are lost. Well that may well be the case with whatever arm and cartridge they were using but in the set up here this certainly wasn't so. The Verdier mat changed the presentation of large scale performances from a wide wall of sound with a strikingly diffuse presentation to one in which you were able to discern the instrumental positions, and where the solo instruments were correctly scaled. The Vivaldi pieces without the mat were initially impressive, the notes filling out the stage and appearing as if created by a large ensemble. It is only by reference to the sleeve notes that one realises that there were only six instrumentalists. The mat and clamp readdress the errors of scale and notes take on their rightful shape and precision. In The Tube the mat resolved the resin tones of the strings and exercised control over the high levels of energy latent in the violins, which can so often sound hard and strident when they should not be. In Handel's Chaconne in G Major one could actually feel the pressure exerted

by the pianist as he phrased the notes. The same was evident in the piano playing of Kabi Laretei's Mozart *Fantasia in C minor*. Here the use of the mat established the relationship between the

the tonearm changes. With its battery power supply, the right support for the record, and favoured tone arm the Platine Verdier would provide the ideal locus of any analogue system. Anybody looking for a final turntable can't afford to ignore the performance of this Record Player. ➤



right and the left hand whereas without it, it was vague and diffuse with a lack of control and a large forward impressive soundstage. With vocals we see the same ability of the mat to present the timbral accuracy of the singing of Ute Lemper and Amanda Mcbroom. There is an intimacy and warmth in their vocal projection, which draws you into their emotional experience. By removing the mat their voices lost some of the midrange fullness that gives expression to their performance.

I am sure that given the numerous permutations possible with the turntable/arm/clamp/mat etc. that one is able to voice the system to suit whatever preferences one has and the tonal balance of the equipment. However, with its honesty to the recording, the Verdier/Audiocraft combination is a ruthless exposé of the rest of the system. The weakest link will be presented in all its failings and will have to be addressed if the full potential of this combination is to be realised. The originality of its design, commitment to its initial concept and the apparent simplicity of its engineering and operation have provided a remarkably neutral transcription base on which to ring

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Turntable

Bearing type:	Opposed magnets running on a vertical shaft.
Speeds:	33 and 45
Drive:	Thread (or belt)
Motor:	Separate unit with optional battery supply
Tonearms:	Two
Lid:	No
Dimensions (WxHxD):	390 x 23 x 410 (turntable only)
Weight:	65 kg
Price -	
Turntable:	£4250
Battery PSU:	£800
Lead loaded rubber record mat:	£120

Tonearm

Type:	Damped Dual-pivot
Effective Length:	Variable (9" or 12")
Effective Mass:	Variable
Price:	£1999

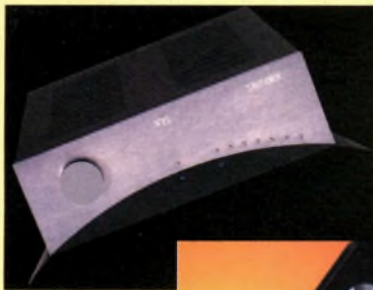
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Tannoy Dimension TD12 Loudspeaker

by Paul Messenger

The history of hi-fi is substantially defined by a small number of 'milestone' designs, which set new standards when they appeared, and carried on doing so for many years thereafter. Few if any can match the track record of Tannoy's famous dual-concentric (DC) drive unit, created by engineer Ronald Rackham, which made its debut as a 'hi-fi FA' speaker way back in 1947, and is still going strong today, after innumerable evolutionary iterations. If longevity is the criterion, only Paul Klipsch is in the same ballpark.

Big reflex-ported or horn-loaded Tannoy DC drivers were a hi-fi bedrock through the mono and valve eras, where high efficiency was essential to accompany low power amps, and one big speaker was much easier to accommodate than two. Stereo and solid state treated the big Tannoys less kindly, here in Britain anyway. Far Eastern markets have continued to demand the 'heritage' type Prestige and Kingdom models that retain both the spirit and styling of those early years, and DC drivers of various sizes are widely used throughout the company's regular domestic and professional ranges, though it's probably true to say that it's many years since the company offered a true 'international' high end contender such as this.

Enter the Dimensions, a range of three models based on high class 8-inch, 10-inch and 12-inch dual-concentric drivers, mounted in strikingly styled

enclosures with obvious Art Deco overtones, surmounted by silver, hewn-from-the-solid Supertweeters. This £6,500 TD12 with the 12-incher is the biggest of the three, a handsome but decidedly large beast - too large for some tastes and rooms, I daresay. If the '12 is too daunting, the £5,000 TD10 is a much friendlier size, and the £4,000 TD8 looks positively cute by comparison.

I wasn't too sure about the styling at first sight, but it's grown on me, and there's a definite element of form-follows-function here. A 12-inch driver needs a large box behind it to do the bass tuning properly, and a 130-litre enclosure is always going to take up plenty of space, and a wide front panel is obviously essential too.

Furthermore, creating something elegant which can place a 12-inch driver so that its axis is somewhere near seated head height is not a trivial task, especially if you also have to find room for a time-aligned Supertweeter too.

The TD12 might look unconventional, but its size and shape makes plenty of sense. It's expensive, true, but there are plenty that cost more, and few that can better the quality of ingredients and build here. Tannoy could easily have

asked for more - and got it.

The enclosure is massively built, each speaker weighing 49kg, which is close to a hundredweight, made up from thick birch ply covered in a top quality real cherry wood veneer. Necessarily wide and tall, the tapered shape also gives ample depth, so it sits very securely on very pretty alloy cones at the front, and adjustable chunky spikes at the rear. The trapezoidal shape will help avoid focusing

the internal standing waves, and the post-formed alloy trim that forms the two front edges will help diffuse baffle-edge diffraction. Part of the top and front is covered in an attractively contrasting jet-black velvet, and this matches the finish of a good looking and very sturdily built grille, with spaced, stretched vertical black elastic bands covering the actual driver, held behind a handsome chrome ring.

The TD12 is crammed with interesting and unusual technical features too. The main cone is good old paper, which is still the preferred choice of many audiophiles, while the surround is a real throwback, discarding modern synthetic rubbers in favour of the sort of cloth surround found back in the 1950s and '60s. This might not offer the cone-edge damping termination of neoprene and the like, but it avoids the hysteretic energy storage found with ►



▶ soft, lossy materials.

The terminal block is unusual too, consisting of five chunky WBT socket/binders arranged in a ring. Why five? Four are used to provide separate access to the bass/mid and tweeter, for bi-wiring or -amping, while the fifth is connected to the driver chassis, so this can be earthed back to the amplifier. This is claimed to clean up the sound by ensuring the chassis doesn't pick up RF (radio) signals or communicate these to the voice coils. Any wire can be used for this earth connection, though Tannoy is offering its own brand five-core cable to make this more convenient.

The Supertweeter is the most contentious feature, and there's been plenty of debate about whether and how it works and its importance. The device itself looks like any normal 25mm dome tweeter, mounted in a hewn-from-solid billet of aluminium shaped like a giant Smartie. In fact its diaphragm is thinner and lighter than regular tweeters, and it only comes in at a nominal 14kHz, which is close to the top limit of human hearing, and has a claimed usable bandwidth extending to 50kHz and beyond. It's set back on the sloping top surface of the enclosure, to provide time alignment with the tweeter proper, located down the throat of the main cone.

Do we need to extend the bandwidth beyond 50kHz? I honestly don't know. The Supertweeter does make a difference sonically, albeit a fairly subtle one in my experience. It seems to add a little extra top end air and spaciousness on every occasion that I've tried it, and somehow remove a little harshness too. However, whether that's down to the

bandwidth per se is difficult to say, since the Supertweeter also serves to increase the sound distribution at very high frequencies, and presumably re-aligns the phase relationships too.

It's simply not possible to isolate these variables from one another.

The crossover point from bass/mid cone to treble horn is at a relatively low 1.1kHz here, while the Supertweeter comes in at around the afore mentioned 14kHz. Top quality ingredients are used in the network, using components made to specific non-standard values to suit each particular element.

Measurements made in a 4.3 x 2.6 x 5.5m room, averaged across an arc of likely listening positions, show an impressively flat balance through the upper midrange and treble, with little sign of the presence 'dip' that most conventional speakers demonstrate. There's rather more unevenness through the lower midband, and a little excess energy too, but the bass looks well extended (20Hz at -5dB in-room) and commendably free from midbass boom.

Tannoy's claim for 92dB sensitivity corresponds closely with my own findings, while the impedance faced by the driving

amplifier stays above six Ohms through the important, power-hungry portion of the spectrum (sub-5kHz). The introduction of the Supertweeter makes it fall steadily above that point, to a low c2 Ohms at 20kHz. Because there's little energy up here, it shouldn't cause problems for most amplifiers, though it might affect stability margins in some cases.

My first reaction to powering up the TD12s was a mild disappointment that the sound didn't quite 'fill the room' in the way a more conventional speaker does (see Boxout and Column), but as I settled down into my comfy chair and became accustomed to its 'differentness', my respect and enjoyment rapidly increased, in equal measure.

This is a 'sit down and listen' loudspeaker, which doesn't drive the room in the way a conventional direct radiator speaker does, but which instead combines quite exceptional overall neutrality with a wide bandwidth and dynamic range, and wonderful dynamic headroom, expression and detail. Its subtlety sneaks up on you over the first few hours, and by the end of a respectable warm-up period

I was well into some very real strengths which are hard to find elsewhere.

Very few loudspeakers seem to supply genuine neutrality, and even the most pretentious and expensive designs often sound somewhat nasal and 'shut in' through the presence band, which is a key area for voice reproduction. This is such a widespread characteristic, one tends to take it for granted, and the ear/brain quite quickly adjusts to having it around - until you hear a speaker which is truly flat and substantially neutrally voiced. This Tannoy joins a select band ▶



▷ which includes established classics like the Quad Electrostatics and Spendor BC1 in sounding both open and neutral right through the voice band, and as such is a very satisfying and natural listening experience.

It isn't entirely free of coloration, to be sure. There is a little boxiness here, and the sort of mild 'hollowness' one tends to associate with large paper cone drivers. There was maybe slightly too much warmth, and a touch of thickening on male speech under our listening conditions, but the balance has an attractive richness and authority too, bringing a generosity to the sound without unwanted - and all too often encountered - heaviness and excess 'thump'.

The bass performance of the TD12 is a bit special. It's weighty, powerful and more even than most, and most significantly it's superbly free from overhang, so the full complexity of elaborate bass mixes, such as those found on Massive Attack's *Mezzanine*, are laid bare with great subtlety and tonal discrimination.

Another stand-out feature of the TD12's sound is its treble, which is qualitatively quite distinct from the usual 'dome tweeter' in character. Its headroom and lack of strain is magnificent, even when punching out the rich harmonics of a brass ensemble, and there's no evidence of the slightly over-focused 'hot-spot' quality that one has come to accept as an integral part of living with a regular dome tweeter.

Imaging is another strength, aided and abetted by the narrow distribution, and

the excellent midband coherence and focus of the 'point source' dual concentric. Stereo information is primarily confined to the direct sound reaching the listener from the speakers, so a speaker such as this (or indeed a dipole panel) will carry a richer mix of 'image-coded' sound than one which creates more reflections around the listening room. Using Tannoy's own cables certainly helped get excellent stereo precision and fine top end air and sweetness.

During the time the TD12s were in residence, I got to do a group test of eight fairly upmarket amplifiers, half valve, half transistor. The Tannoys seemed to have all the qualities needed to sort this batch out, and so it proved in practice. Their combination of wide bandwidth and dynamic range with fine neutrality made it ridiculously easy to pick out the quite obvious and substantial differences between the various different amps, unequivocally laying bare their individual characters and technologies.

This is an excellent loudspeaker, so good indeed that criticism doesn't come easily. A genuine monitor, its fundamental accuracy and high loudness capability set it well apart from the herd. Tannoy has effectively re-invented the dual-concentric, and this Dimension will give it a whole new lease of life. The evenhandedness and generous headroom, combined with a gently laid-back character all tend to make for a slightly underwhelming first impression. Give the TD12 a fair chance, however, and the lack of hype and contrivance here becomes its own reward, delivering sounds from whatever source with impeccable honesty,



Dual-Concentric Distribution

There are several reasons why this Tannoy sounds qualitatively 'different' from most regular loudspeakers. The most important is probably the narrower-than-usual angle over which much of the midrange and treble is radiated -- itself an inherent function of the dual-concentric main driver.

For space reasons, a full discussion of the ins and outs was relegated to this month's column (see page 24). The short version is that the sound you hear with a pair of TD12s has a higher direct-to-reflected sound ratio than most speakers, so you get to hear more of the speaker and less of the listening room - which might or might not be how you like it!

accuracy and integrity, packed with all the musical information the amp has been able to deliver.

The bottom line for prospective purchasers is one's personal reaction to the way this speaker drives the room, and just what direct/reflect sound ratio suits your taste and conditions. This Tannoy dual-concentric will deliver more information about the recording itself, but is less inclined to 'bring the musicians into the room' than less directional designs. ➤

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Two way twin-port reflex loaded with super tweeter
Drive Units:	12" Dual-Concentric driver with paper bass cone and horn loaded tweeter Dome super-tweeter
Efficiency:	92 dB
Impedance:	6 Ohm nominal
Bandwidth:	-3dB
Dimensions (WxHxD):	1210x440x440
Weight:	49 kg ea.
Finishes:	Cherry
Price:	£6500

Manufacturer:

Tannoy Ltd
Tel. (44)(0)1236-420199
Fax. (44)(0)1236-428230



Project Perspective Turntable

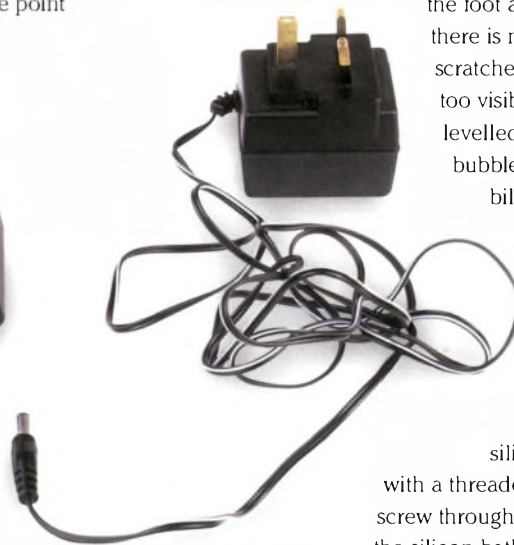
by Peter Russell

When RG suggested that I review the Project Perspective I actually jumped at the opportunity. Why, given the range of expensive turntables that have graced my listening room, would I be enthusiastic about reviewing a complete turntable that is significantly below the price point of most of the tonearms that I have owned or listened to in my system? Or tonearm leads come to that.

There are only a few ways you can engineer a turntable to spin a black disc, just as there are only a few ways you can design an arm to track the grooves in the record. The differences are in execution, materials and combining different philosophies to produce the desired goals. There has never been a time, certainly not in the last ten years, when the serious audiophile has had such a choice of turntables to choose from at sensible money. It is important to remember that the £750 Project Perspective shares the same goals as the £3700 Linn and a similar philosophy to a £6500 Oracle. If you throw enough money at designing a turntable you might do a half reasonable job, and if you are really lucky produce a state of the art achievement. Or so the accepted wisdom goes. The road to turntable nirvana is littered with me-too products and 'nearly there' attempts, which only too often have an ephemeral existence.

This is certainly not the case with the turntable combination under review here. There is a real challenge to create a turntable that satisfies most of the sonic and musical criteria at a price that most people would consider sensible. That is exactly what the Project achieves, and more.

What you are getting here is a package; a classic three point



suspended turntable, tonearm and a cartridge, record clamp and some innovative touches all for the price of £900. A bargain? Only if it delivers the musical goods!

For the majority of people the deck will come ready assembled by the dealer, however by putting it together oneself it is possible to explore the design and engineering philosophy, and the inevitable compromises that have to be made. First out of the box comes the chassis, a thick rectangular

piece of acrylic with the motor assembly, tone arm and sub-chassis all in place. All you have to do is place it on your support by screwing in the three pointed feet. It is here that you start to notice the attention to detail. The feet are sufficiently large that you can get your hand under the base of the deck and adjust the knurled spikes,

and with a felt washer between the foot and the acrylic base there is no danger of making scratches, which would be all too visible from above. Once levelled with the aid of the bubble level in the immobilised sub-chassis you can turn your

attention to the platter and belt assembly. One useful addition to the deck is the provision of a small silicon bath in the base with a threaded brass rod that you screw through the sub-chassis into the silicon bath. The idea here is that if you have the deck on a stand which in turn relies on a suspended floor, the damping well and rod will help reduce sympathetic resonance in the suspension system.

Releasing the transit screws allows the sub-chassis to float on its three springs. You then simply drop the platter gently over the spindle, and carefully run the belt around its outer edge and the drive pulley. The suspension can be adjusted from above using the large screw heads mounted through the sub-chassis, and once again, the spirit level. ▶

▶ Speed change is a mite unusual. Instead of moving the belt on a stepped pulley to set the speed of the platter, here you unscrew the motor unit from below the chassis and replace it with another, complete with the correct size pulley. Neat, and designed to keep the angular torsion of the belt on the suspended mass in its correct plane.

With the platter and belt in place you can turn to setting up the arm and cartridge. The arm is a familiar gimbal-bearing configuration with the usual thread and weight arrangement for anti-skating. VTA is adjusted by two grub screws set in the back of the mounting ring. Having wrestled with this awkward arrangement once I can't see you wanting to change your cartridge in a hurry. Altering the VTA demands orang-utan arms and considerable patience, especially if you only have access to the arm pillar from the front. Fortunately the arm pillar is quite a tight fit so you do not have to worry about the arm crashing to the base and thereby losing your point of reference, although it does make small adjustments difficult. Once installed, the supplied cartridge was parallel to the record surface with the arm set to its lowest setting. Anyone wanting to use the deck with a shallower cartridge will have difficulty in setting the VTA accurately. Given the wildly varying thickness of available LP's, the ability to adjust arm height easily is a real necessity these days, especially with a deck that has the potential to deliver something that little bit special.

The Perspective arrived as a complete package, including an Ortofon Kontrapunkt α moving-coil cartridge, the price of £900 representing a saving of £350 over the cost if purchased separately. Similar packages are available with other cartridges (how about

a Perspective Rohmann combo for £1250 - a saving of £550!), both cheaper and more expensive.

The Kontrapunkt offers a healthy 0.45 mV output, and with an internal loading of five ohms will partner most mc phonostages. Like the turntable, the cartridge has some thoughtful features. The base of the body has a conductive carbon part which apart from reducing the electrostatic clicks from the record, actually protects



the vinyl from accidental damage should the cartridge body be dropped onto its surface.

The terminal pins are recessed into the back of the body to allow space for the headshell wiring, which can often get very cramped, but the pins are quite close together so care needs to be exercised in mounting the wires as space is at a minimum. The usual stylus guard is supplied to protect the easily visible stylus tip and cantilever.

The arm is obviously optimised for Din standard cartridges, as there is little latitude for overhang adjustment. A protractor is supplied, as is a small balance for setting the tracking weight, but I relied on an electronic stylus gauge and my own alignment protractor. There is no means for adjusting the arm for cartridge azimuth but the Ortofon solves this problem

as a ridge in its top plate means that you can tilt the body by two degrees either way, a nice touch when so many modern arms overlook this important alignment parameter. With the cartridge in place and everything aligned all we have to do is guide the cantilever into the run in groove, right? Wrong. With the cueing lever in the raised position the cartridge is suspended over the record like a crane poised to deliver its load. Lowering the lever starts the cartridge in its descent, only to be interrupted

a fraction above the LP and a purposeful push on the cueing lever

is needed to finally locate the stylus into the run in groove. All this on a sprung chassis sends the deck into mild oscillation. I assume that the whole assembly will loosen up through use, but I am not convinced.

Ok, so we finally get the stylus into the groove was it really worth the wait? The answer is a resounding yes! I don't know about you but whenever I see a turntable it always gives me some expectation of its sound. With the Project I was expecting a competent performance in which everything would be presented in a fairly polite manner; adequate bass, slightly emphasised highs and a somewhat recessed presentation but large soundstage. Oh dear wasn't I in for ▶

▶ a surprise. The first thing that hits you when you hear this combination is the sheer authority and power it exercises over the music. There is real energy here, small Jazz combos are presented to you as if you are sitting at the first table on the floor of the club; with your eyes closed you are there, you can smell the cigar smoke, the cheap perfume, the stale dust and beer from last night's gig, and the bite of the saxophone as it rasps its way up the scales provides just sufficient pain to be believable. Here's the confession, I dragged out a whole load of jazz albums from the ubiquitous *Jazz at the Pawnshop* to a number of Dixieland albums; Ben Pollock's *Pick a Rib*, Pee Wee Russell (no relation), and some of the early MJQ. It was a great night as I had forgotten what these albums sounded like.

One of my favourite guitar players is Albert Lee, who along with Eric Clapton can do things with an electric guitar few can match; he is also a great acoustic guitarist. On his album *Speechless* on the MCA label, there are two tracks, 'Seventeenth Summer' and 'Salt Creek' which when played at near concert volumes can create a real physical and emotional reaction. Speed, power, soundstage and impact are all combined to create that visceral reaction so important to good amplified electric music. With the Project system it was there in spades, there was no break up anywhere along the frequency range; the cartridge tracked the grooves like a cowboy at a rodeo. This rig is a power junkie's delight.

If all this sounds too good to be true, then it is, because whilst authority, energy and power are the hallmarks of this system, small ensemble music by Corelli and Boccherini is robbed of its delicacy. The lightness of touch is lost

to the forcefulness of the presentation. The pianoforte is a case in point. Originally the instrument on which Mozart and Beethoven would have composed their music, it represents both the loudness and power of the 'piano' and the subtlety of the 'forte' or soft presentation. It is a much more tonally complex instrument than the metal-framed piano we are all more familiar with, and as such requires a particular deftness of touch and an ability to render



dynamic nuance. The Project is much more at home with the 'Piano' inherent in the Steinway than in the 'Forte' of its predecessor. In the area of small chamber music the presentation is initially impressive; notes are large with big middles, short decays, with rock solid imaging and a big sound stage. One notices the absence of air around notes, especially those delivered by percussive instruments. The harpsichord is deceptively beguiling, dangerously so, as it acquires a sonority at odds with its normally astringent tone. This imposition of elision where the note acquires a fullness and a richness through compression of its timbre and a liquid rendition is very seductive whist at the same time enormously engaging. It reveals a loss of low level

timbral and dynamic resolution, but that doesn't stop me enjoying it.

Nowhere does this ability to round the note become so involving as in the presentation of small scale organ works. Let me explain. We are talking here of organs which have been built on a smaller scale than the usual large Cathedral constructions. Whilst a large organ in full 'blow' is impressive, few systems are capable of capturing the sheer energy and sonority buried in such a presentation, especially given the size of the average listening room. On the other hand these small scale organs produce a delicacy

and a timbral richness lost in their larger counterparts. Notes become identifiable, distinct and one can follow the melody as well as the underlying harmonics. Rhythmic undertones were presented by the Project consistently as the counterpoint weaved its way through the music. A real delight.

If I pull myself back to earth and reflect on what we have in the Project turntable I have to remind myself that we are talking here about a deck, arm and cartridge combination which costs £900. Admittedly it was performing in a much more expensive system than it is likely to be partnered by of, but that is not the point. We are exploring the deck's potential, ▶

▶ pushing it to deliver its maximum performance, warts and all. Because of this potential, I decided, partway through the review to change the stock phono leads for my FM acoustic ones. How on earth you can justify using a pair of leads which cost nearly as much as the turntable and tonearm I do not know, and I am not going to try. All I do know is that the presentation was transformed. It still retained its



signature of power, energy and control, but instrumental passages became more refined, micro level detail emerged to create complexity and shading previously veiled. The notes continued to demonstrate their richness and power but perhaps within a more varied context. Voices became more timbrally rich and expressive and retained their stability, but in the same plane of the music. There is no doubt that experimenting with better phono leads could produce real improvements here, although it would be difficult to justify going to the same lengths as I did.

In an attempt to explore the contribution the various parts of the turntable system made to the overall sound, I put the Ortofon Kontrapunkt

a in the Audiocraft arm on the Verdier. There is no doubt that the 'sound' of the Project Perspective is largely a result of the cartridge exercising its authority over the music. The same power and energy was presented as part of a full and embodied sound-stage, but with a finer portrayal of

micro-dynamics and vocal inflections. Notes still retained their fullness but continued to shade off their leading and trailing edges to present a sound, both engaging and involving if not altogether tonally accurate. The Project turntable and arm combination obviously presents a transparent platform for the cartridge, clearly presenting its character to the listener, and allowing them to choose their own preferred balance. Greater speed and clarity? How about a Dynavector DV17D2.

Whilst I might quibble over some of the idiosyncrasies of the arm, in the Project Perspective we have a package which has one of the most engaging musical presentations I have come across. My intuitive reservations about the arm are mainly concerned with the way it feels and works, but do make me wonder what the deck would sound like with one of the

Linn compatible alternatives. Give me time and I'll find out. Meanwhile, as delivered, this is a combination which will take on all comers at its price point, or quite a way above. The considerable saving to be had if you buy the deck arm and cartridge together makes an already excellent buy even better, assuming you like the cartridge. If you don't then Henley Designs offers a whole range of equally attractive alternatives. This turntable has an ability to draw you into the musical presentation and to create some remarkably enjoyable moments. Whilst not always faithful to the source, whatever it doesn't do it makes up for in terms of the control and authority it exercises over the musical performance. There was a real pleasure in being able to enjoy and appreciate a turntable/arm/cartridge combination which is both excellent and genuinely affordable.



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Turntable	
Drive Type	Belt
Speed Adjustment	33 and 45 RPM via interchangeable motor units
Dimensions (wxhxd)	450x180x350
Tonearm	
Effective Mass	Medium
Effective Length	9"
Cartridge	
Type	Moving-coil
Cantilever	Aluminium
Output	0.450 mV
Internal Impedance	5 ohms
Tracking force range	2.2 – 2.7g
Prices -	see text

UK Distributor:

Henley Designs
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The Real Deal – Marantz CD 6000 Original SE Limited Edition

by Jimmy Hughes

Sometimes it's good to try a product without knowing what it costs. It means you can evaluate it free of prejudice, while at the same time trying to make an educated guess as to how much it might actually sell for. A superficial glance at the front panel of the CD-6000 OSE Limited Edition whispers Expensive; the rounded corners and deep-textured brushed aluminum create a smart but understated appearance that quietly oozes class.

The control layout looks clean and uncluttered, with widely-spaced user-friendly buttons of differing sizes placed logically, so that you feel at home with the machine after a just few minutes. Then there's the display. Quite a lot of information is given, yet the grouping of numbers (and the use of different sizes) allows the eye to quickly make sense of what's what.

It's nice to see Index Points displayed. Although used less and less frequently these days, there are still quite a few classical music CDs that incorporate Index Points within tracks. And there's something fun about the way 'TOC Reading' scrolls down from top to bottom as the disc's table of contents is read, not to mention the way parts of the display briefly fade, ensuring your eye goes



to the section that's relevant. Could we perhaps be looking at a machine costing £800?

Well, no. One immediate giveaway about the CD 6000 OSE LE's probable selling price is weight. At 4.3kg it lacks the heavy, solid, 'battleship' build quality you associate with players costing nearly a grand. But finish is excellent, and no excuses need to be made on appearance grounds. You're getting a classy looking machine for your money.

Of course, cosmetics, styling, and finish are all very well; the real clincher has to be sound quality and whether or not the CD-6000 OSE LE has the sonic allure of an expensive CD player. The word

'Original' in the machine's moniker is a bit of a giveaway, along with the by now cliched SE, although in this case, the use of both is somewhat pointed. It was, after all, Marantz who started the whole trend of tweaking basic players to extract superior performance (the CD65-SE if memory serves), in the process coining the 'Special Edition' tag that has now become almost universal. Such has been the commercial success of their modified models that

other manufacturers have rushed to follow suit. Mind you, being first is only any good if you are still the best. Marantz have further extended the concept with their KI Signature models, named for Ken Ishiwata, which have certainly maintained their commercial ascendancy. Recent SE models have fallen into the super-detail trap, impressive on first listen, but less so long term. I was fascinated to see how the line had continued to evolve.

First impressions were highly favourable. The sound was clean, solid, and precise; highly detailed

▶ and crisp, without sounding forward or 'etched' at the top-end. Tonally, the player sounded open and natural, with good definition and dynamics.

But what really struck home was the overall focus and precision of the music; clarity and separation seemed to be maintained no matter how complex things got. The CD-6000 OSE LE is the sort of player that remains cool in a crisis. No matter how busy the music seemed to get, the sound retained its poise and control. You never felt things were on the verge of collapse or disintegration, even in the biggest loudest noisiest climax.

For some tastes, perhaps, this might imply a certain lack of drama. But I'd say it's more an absence of that false busy-ness that makes a string quartet sound like a small string orchestra. The CD-6000 OSE LE recreates cleanly what's on your discs. So a recording that has just three instruments sounds exactly like that. You hear what's there. Not a smeary souped-up mish-mash that makes it seem there's more going on than there is.

As well as excellent clarity, there's impressive spatial depth and three-dimensionality, giving voices and instruments plenty of body. Pitch definition was extremely good too, aiding the impression of lucidity and focus. At the same time the CD-6000 OSE LE sounded pleasant and easy on the ear, making its musical points effortlessly rather than crudely underlining every dramatic twist and turn. The overall presentation seemed at once both relaxed and alert, but without any superficial hi-fi brilliance that might distract one from the music.

This combination of clarity and

precision is very much a characteristic of Bitstream at its best - though no doubt other aspects of the player's design contribute too - you can never say an excellent overall performance is down to just one thing. For example, I'm sure Marantz' HDAM analogue output stage plays an important part. It employs discrete components, offering

the notes start and stop cleanly, making rhythmic detail stand out clearly due to excellent articulation. At the same time, there's a proper sense of dynamic decay; you can follow each note as it fades - it's not just about clean fast leading edges and crisp attack. Because of this, piano tone has a nice pearly bloom to it, while dynamics remain precisely articulated.

There's excellent top-end cleanness too; something that's very apparent on CDs of baroque and early classical music



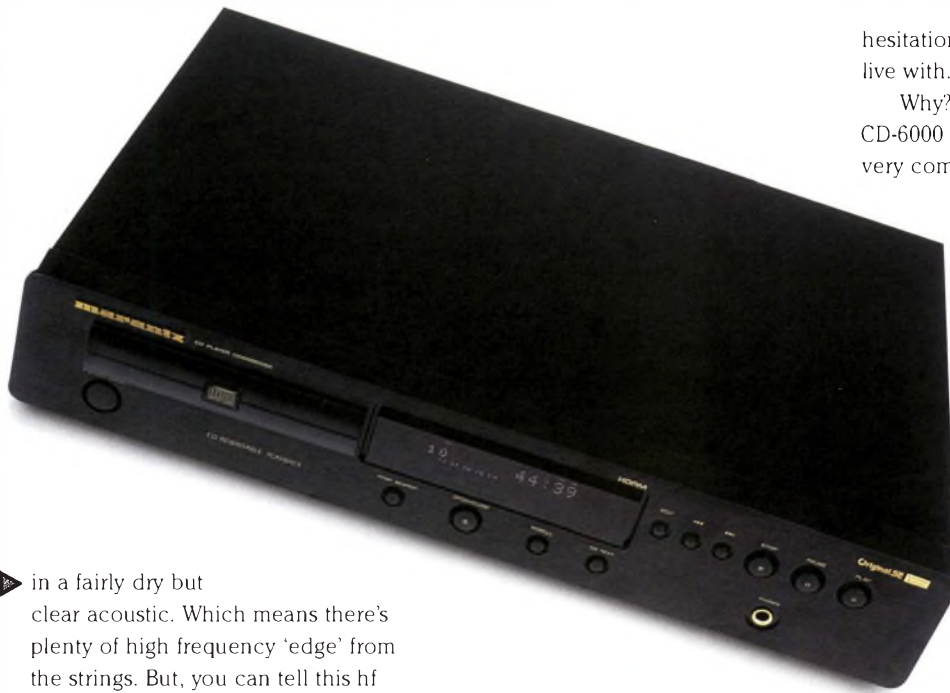
improved performance compared to the Op amps used in conventional CD players.

Nevertheless, I mentioned the clarity and precision of Bitstream because this is very much a quality noticeable when Philips use Bitstream to make new recordings or to digitalise their back-catalogue classical analogue recordings for issue on CD. There's a focus and absence of 'hash' which makes the music sound both detailed and natural. There's a 'quietness' around the notes that gives a lovely unforced clarity and separation.

Piano recordings played on the CD-6000 OSE LE show this beautifully;

featuring period instruments. Tonally, such recordings usually present a bright forward balance that can easily seem thin and harsh on the wrong equipment. As I write this, I'm playing just such a disc; Mozart's last two string quartets on Astree with the Quatuor Festetics. It demonstrates perfectly the CD-6000 OSE LE's winning combination of sharpness and cleanness.

It sounds like the engineers placed their microphones close to the four stringed instruments ▶



▶ in a fairly dry but clear acoustic. Which means there's plenty of high frequency 'edge' from the strings. But, you can tell this hf edge comes from the musicians, not the equipment. Presentation is superbly sharp and tactile, with almost palpable presence - bows scraping strings. Sonically, the presentation is wholly natural and believable - as though you were sitting close to the players in a small dryish hall.

Actually there are (or were) three CD-6000 variants. The basic version was recently discontinued, leaving the CD-6000 OSE LE, reviewed here, plus the special Ken Ishiwata Signature version. The OSE LE player features a number of improvements over the basic machine, including customised components and gold plated shielding. The KI version adds further refinements, including a copper-plated chassis and a toroidal mains transformer.

Both CD-6000 variants are built around the VAM1201 mechanism, and Marantz claim its excellent stability and low resonance ensures that CD-R and CD-RW discs can be read perfectly, along with conventional CDs. This has been a problem in the past, with

many players rejecting CD-Rs, although manufacturers seem to be getting to grips with the problem now. It's also the source of the large and potentially misleading sub-heading emblazoned on the CD-6000's front panel. Yes, it will play CD-Rs, but don't go thinking that it'll record them!


Track access is pretty fast, and mechanically the transport is virtually silent during operation - only a faint brief whirr can be heard when a track is cued or the table of contents is read. The speed, touch and feel of the 6000 are all first class, and it reminds me of the slickness of response that amazed me on the early, expensive Sony players. How things have moved on.

A terrific CD player then. But what's the cost? Having guessed a selling price of £400 or more, it was a pleasant shock to learn that the suggested retail is a very reasonable £299.90. I was genuinely surprised the CD-6000 OSE LE was so cheap. And while it's maybe not quite the finest machine I've ever listened to, I can say without

hesitation it's a player I could happily live with.

Why? Simple! Because the CD-6000 OSE LE does what it does very competently, and doesn't try to do more than it's able to. Consequently, it never gets into a flap. It's retained the detail of the earlier SE models, but has learn't how to present it more effectively. No matter how difficult things get, it stays in control, yet doesn't rigidly strait-jacket the music. What more could you ask for?

Especially at a selling price of under £300.

Even so, the devil in me wonders what the KI version is like... 

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Finish:	Black or Gold
Price:	£299

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Silver Bullets!

The humble Phono is transformed down-under.

by Roy Gregory

The lowly phono plug (or RCA connector) has come in for its fair share of flak over the years, and rightly so. Given the hi-fi communities' collective obsession with just about every aspect of the reproduction chain, our continued acceptance of off the shelf connection hardware is little short of astonishing. Of course, there have always been those like Naim and DNM who have rejected the phono plug and socket, and just about everyone else has bitched about them at one time or another. The problem is that very few people have tried to do anything constructive about it. Establishing a whole new and more appropriate standard is the real solution, but that's beyond the realms of probability, so how about trying to improve on what we've actually got? Sure, there are plenty of people offering massive plugs with locking actions and more gold on them than a pimp's wristwatch, but no one's really thought this one through from first principles.

People have been aware of the significant impact that the choice of plugs makes to the sound of an interconnect for some time - and the news is generally bad. So bad that they quickly came to the conclusion that there's no plug like no plug. Perhaps the most extreme response came from Cogan-Hall, with a wonderful sounding and wonderfully impractical cable that dispensed with connectors altogether, opting for direct conductor contact instead. Further developments on this theme have seen the Lab 47 solution, described in detail in Issue 11, and

various manufacturers shedding as much of the phono plug as possible, in an attempt to minimise its deleterious effects. And simply getting rid of the phono plug by opting for Din or balanced connectors is no solution either. The problem lies in the physical bulk and materials used in the

construction of the plugs themselves.

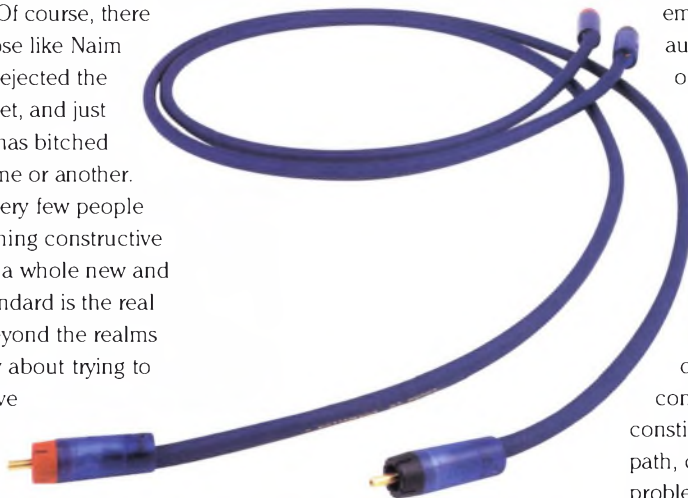
Enter then, a new solution to the problem of providing a good sounding and universal cable termination from Eichmann Technologies in Australia - the Bullet Plug. In the course of developing their own cable range, Eichmann were appalled by the sonic degradation caused by the vast majority of commonly used phono plugs. So they set out to develop their own. The result is a nondescript and fairly conventional looking "phono" plug, made predominantly from plastic. It's also the nearest thing to no plug that I've ever heard, but I'm getting ahead of myself. Despite its conventional appearance, the bullet

plug has reassessed just about every aspect of phono design, owing its shape to the dictates of the sockets it has to mate with.

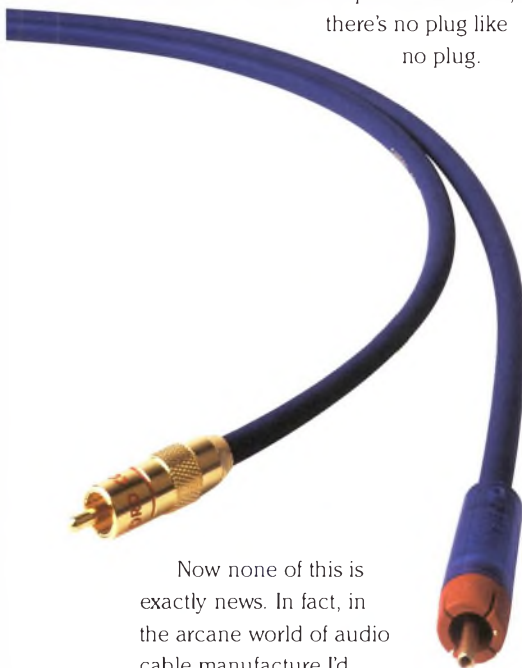
In investigating the sonic influence of phono connectors, Eichmann arrived at a series of conclusions. The most obvious concerns the materials employed. Whereas the majority of audio cables employ copper, silver or a combination of the two, most plugs are made of brass, with around quarter of the conductivity of the cables' principal conductors. Add multi-layer gold plating, which forces the signal to travel through several dissimilar materials, and it's not difficult to see why the conventional phono plug constitutes a bottleneck in the signal path, capable of creating phase problems and smearing in the signal.

The construction of the phono plug also creates problems. The way in which the ground contacts mate with the socket can itself introduce a number of undesirable elements into the equation. The multiple contact points can lead to eddy currents, while imperfect mating produces tiny air gaps which have unpredictable arcing and capacitive effects (which is why locking collars have an audible affect). Finally, the annular nature of the construction creates an undesirable impedance, again with unpredictable results.

The final nail in the coffin is the size of the plug itself, or rather, the body that goes with it. Having spent a considerable amount of time (and



▶ your money) ensuring that the spacing of the conductors in your cable, their size and the ratio of conductor to insulation is as consistent as possible, designers are forced to pass the signal down a darned great metal tube and through a massive connector. This is why often, contrary to popular opinion, the bigger andritzier a connector looks, the worse it sounds. The best sounding connectors are generally the smallest and simplest. Like I said, there's no plug like no plug.



Now none of this is exactly news. In fact, in the arcane world of audio cable manufacture I'd describe it as common knowledge. The difference is that Eichmann decided to do something about it. Maybe it's because they're Australians, or maybe it's because nobody bothered to tell them that industry inertia made the project a fool's errand. Maybe they just don't like to lose. Whatever the reason, they've succeeded in creating the first serious step forward in phono design in years. And it's a step which demonstrates conclusively that all the scorn, suspicion and dissatisfaction hurled at conventional phono plugs is entirely deserved.

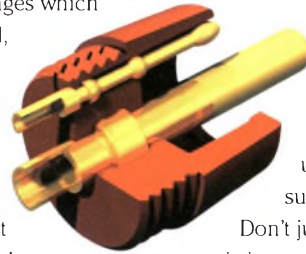
The Bullet Plug employs a fairly conventional two part construction, the mating element attaching to a screw on

sleeve which provides cosmetic and strain relief. Unscrew the plastic sleeve and you'll be left with the business end, which is also constructed mainly from plastic. Plastic? Yep, plastic. The chunky, colour-coded flanges which grip the socket are indeed, glass reinforced plastic. The centre pin is pretty much as expected, but the return connection is made by another, narrow rod, forced against the side wall of the socket by the outer flanges, creating a single point contact. What is less obvious is that the conductors themselves are constructed from gold plated copper alloy, and that the cross sectional ratio conforms to a "golden constant" also employed in the Eichmann cables. (Who knows? But then they got the plugs right so I reckon they deserve the benefit of the doubt, at least until the cable samples arrive.)

The careful choice of conductor materials, the low mass, the elimination of all extraneous metal and the carefully considered return contact have created a plug which is in effect, a mini extension of the cable itself, or at least as close as you are going to get. The only downside is that the sleeve currently employs a grub screw for strain relief and the access hole is sized to accept Eichmann's own 9mm diameter cables. This makes using smaller diameter or flat cables something of a problem, although one that can be readily solved using adhesive heat shrink until such time as Eichmann produce the necessary alternative barrel sizes. I'm not that much of a fan of compressing cables anyway. It's all too audible, so I'd go with the heat shrink for preference anyway.

Before we get into the listening, there's one other, practical point. The Bullet Plugs are tight! So tight that

Eichmann suggest that in some situations it's worth heating them with a hair dryer before fitting. I didn't have to go that far, but I could see it being necessary in some situations. More importantly, removal risks damage to your sockets, especially if they are the moulded, PCB mounted variety used on virtually all sub-£1000 separates.



Don't just pull! If you use a twisting action to remove the plug then not only is it easier but your sockets will survive intact. This applies to all plugs, but it applies with a vengeance to the Bullet Plugs.

Fortunately, those nice people at The Chord Co. are nearly as interested in these plugs as I am, which meant that as soon as I had sufficient samples they stuck them on a virgin length of Chameleon for me, providing an identical pair of similarly unsullied leads with their standard plugs on for comparison. After a week on the Cable Toaster, I sat down to the comparison. Naturally, I started with the standard Chameleon, a cable that I know well, and which offers excellent value for money. Sure enough, it was its familiar self, sounding controlled and organised, with a good sense of musical coherence. Which made the change to the Bullet Plug equipped version all the more surprising.



Suddenly it was as if someone had taken their foot off Kristen Hersch's throat! The guitar and other instruments had more colour, more detail and were better focussed. They were also larger, much more three dimensional and far more present. Images moved away from the plane of the speakers, becoming independent elements of the whole. The vocal was dramatically more natural, expressive and involving. But it was the pace and flow of the music which ▶

► was really impressive. What had passed for control with the standard plugs was exposed as a choke hold on the music. Rather than allowing the free flow of the track, the system was imposing its own sense of pace on proceedings. Swapping the plugs was like opening a sluice gate. Now the music moved at its own pace, with its own sense of momentum and flow. Notes were placed by the musicians, the shape and sustain perfectly apparent. The phrasing of the vocals and with it their impact was dramatically enhanced.


And these differences were completely consistent across tracks and three different systems. Comparing the Bullet Plugged Chameleons to other, far more expensive offerings showed an embarrassing narrowing of the performance gap, the ground made up reflecting the care (or otherwise)

taken in the selection of the pricier cable's plugs.

Having been banging on for years about the fundamental impact of cables and connectors on system performance, it's nice to have it confirmed so clearly and simply. The Bullet Plug has, over-night, leapfrogged the performance available from existing phono plugs, and disappeared over the horizon. The benefits are huge, HUGE! They transform the performance of affordable cables, and I can't wait to hear them on serious leads. Yes, I'm impressed. How impressed? I've already spoken to Nordost about re-terminating the Valhallas.

Which brings me to a note of caution. Another, seriously underestimated influence on cable performance is the standard of soldering. If in

doubt, which means unless you are a professional, get the people who made your cables to re-terminate them for you. The minor cost will easily be reflected in the performance.

Ah yes, cost. The nicest thing about the Bullet plugs is that they'll only set you back around \$26 for four. Considering the cost of having a design like this engineered from scratch, employing no existing parts, that's remarkable. Considering the sonic benefits it's an absolute steal. I reckon you'll be seeing Bullet plugs appearing on a lot of cables in the near future, and I'd make re-termination of existing leads an absolute priority. How good are they? I'm convinced they're a major contribution to road safety - you'll all be in listening to your rejuvenated systems rather than down the pub moaning about them! 


The Ringmat Support System and VTA, part II....

by David Ayers

So why all the fuss about VTA? As many of you will know, VTA is the angle subtended by the record surface and a line drawn between the cantilever pivot and the tip of the stylus. But there is also a second and much more important angle to be considered, the stylus rake angle (SRA). This is the angle subtended between the line drawn through the centre of the stylus and a line perpendicular to the record surface. It is this angle which determines how well the stylus sits against the groove wall and traces the modulations therein. For the best performance, the SRA must match exactly the angle

used when the record was mastered, and it is this angle that can vary from record to record. Because the stylus is rigidly attached to the cantilever, the VTA and SRA are in a fixed relationship, and so changing the VTA also changes the SRA. It is the precise alignment of SRA to cutting angle that is being achieved by varying the VTA, and although VTA is important, it is not the determining factor in tracing the modulations exactly.

So how do you recognise the sweet spot, the point at which the music 'snaps into focus'. The answer, as ever, is to use your ears, but I will try and give some pointers. In my

system there are certain key indicators to the VTA being too high or too low. If the VTA is too high, the sound will come much further out of the speakers and into the room, and the far left and right placements more so than the centre, giving a kind of unfocussed semi-circle of sound. The sound will be a little brighter and brasher, and rather like forward sounding speakers in a dem room, will tend to initially impress but be ultimately wearing. As the VTA is reduced towards the correct point, the sound will recede towards the speakers, and the far left and right instruments will even out, gaining 

► their own acoustic. This is a dead give away, as often I listen to systems where the centre images have a clear acoustic, but the left and right are indeterminate. The bass will also become more powerful, whilst remaining tuneful. Another interesting effect of an elevated VTA is a tendency to mistracking on the right hand channel, which would normally be cured by increasing the bias.

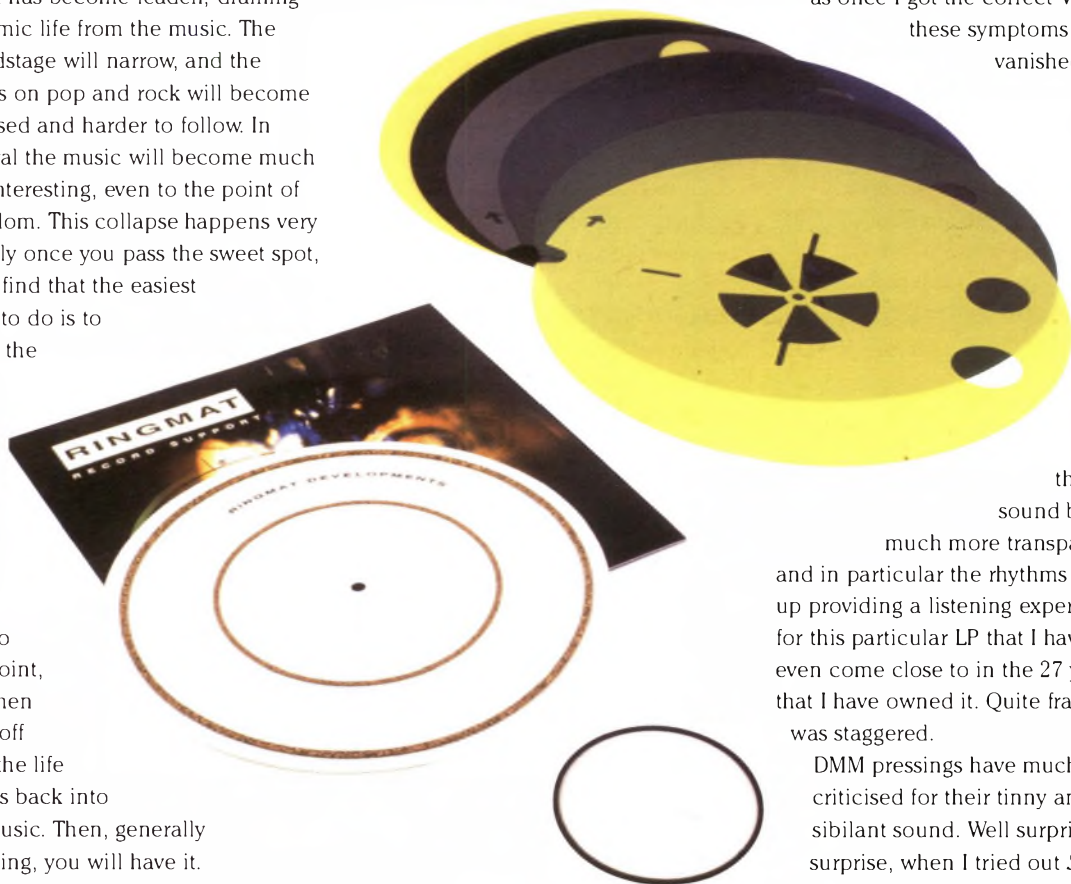
Once you lower the VTA past the optimum point, the bass will become fatter and more earth bound. On kick drum, it may sound even heavier, but when you listen further you will find that it has become leaden, draining rhythmic life from the music. The soundstage will narrow, and the vocals on pop and rock will become recessed and harder to follow. In general the music will become much less interesting, even to the point of boredom. This collapse happens very quickly once you pass the sweet spot, and I find that the easiest thing to do is to lower the

VTA to this point, and then back off until the life comes back into the music. Then, generally speaking, you will have it.

How does the RSS help you with this? By allowing the VTA to be changed in increments of 0.025 mm, representing a change of SRA of a mere 0.025°. Whilst this may seem like a very small change in angle, in my system each step is distinctly audible, especially the one either side of the

sweet spot. But before I launch in, I must make a couple of points. The first is that the RSS is actually designed to be used on all types of turntable, and not as is generally believed, just those that are supplied with a mat, e.g. the Linn Sondek. The second is to point out that the sound of the RSS is not purely down to the ability to accurately set the VTA; the materials used, and the design of the system are such that the improvements described last issue are valid even when the VTA for a particular record has been carefully set prior

from this VTA setting. How wrong I was. Playing the Jethro Tull album *Heavy Horses*, which comes from the late 70s, I found I needed the increase the mat thickness, i.e. decrease the VTA, by 4 steps or 0.1mm to obtain the correct VTA. Conversely the Peter Hammill album *Nadir's Big Chance* required a decrease of 4 steps. Musically, this is my all time favourite album, but I have always found the bass in general and the kick drum in particular to be fat and thick, unbalancing the production. Now I see it is a symptom of the much greater cutting angle on the pressing, as once I got the correct VTA all these symptoms vanished, and



the whole sound become much more transparent and in particular the rhythms opened up providing a listening experience for this particular LP that I haven't even come close to in the 27 years that I have owned it. Quite frankly, I was staggered.

DMM pressings have much been criticised for their tinny and sibilant sound. Well surprise, surprise, when I tried out *So* by Peter Gabriel I found that I needed to decrease the VTA by 5 steps, and the DMM sound signature all but vanished. Bear in mind that every one of the aforementioned pressings are on 120gm vinyl. 180gm audiophile pressings require an appropriate reduction in mat thickness to

to using the RSS.

I used the current vinyl issue of Santana's first album to perform my initial set-up. This is a 120gm pressing, and so matches most of my collection. My expectation was that most of my other 120gm pressing would not require any adjustment

► compensate for the extra thickness of the vinyl, without that they will show the symptoms of a too low VTA, although for some reason that I cannot for the life of me fathom out it is not as pronounced as with standard 120gm pressings. There also seemed to be less variation in the cutting angle for these discs, once you find the correct VTA for one 180gm pressing, it seems to be same for most others.


Later Mobile Fidelity LPs were pressed on 200gm vinyl. Frequently doubts were expressed about the bass quality of these discs, and the fact that they were all half speed mastered was normally considered to be the cause. But a 200gm disc is thicker again than a 180gm pressing, and the symptoms shown by these discs are the same as those for an under set VTA. Reducing the thickness of the mat again to compensate shows that, in fact, most of the criticism can be laid at the door of the extra thickness of the vinyl causing the VTA to be too small. The two discs I played, *Tales Of*

Mystery And Imagination by The Alan Parsons Project and *Tarkus* by Emerson, Lake and Palmer, showed none of these problems once the VTA was corrected.

But there has to be a downside, right? Too true. My LP collection runs to over 1,000 discs, and I have no idea what will be the correct mat thickness for any given album until I play it. On top of that, you cannot possibly remember this information for each disc without writing it down, so some sort of file is required. Changing the mat thickness takes about a minute each time, which will irritate those who find a record clamp too much effort. Worst of all, I suddenly find myself with an overwhelming desire to buy an anorak.

So is it worth the effort? I think that depends on your point of view. I found that I can live with a VTA that is too high, but that if it is too low, then the music becomes muddled and boring. If I were to take an 'average' approach, then I think I would determine a mat thickness for each

record weight, ensuring that the VTA is correct for the record with the maximum cutting angle. That way the VTA would never be too low, and good results can still be obtained. The problem is that when you hear how good a particular record can sound when the SRA is correct, it's difficult to accept second best.

In the style of a game show host, I'd like to leave you with a little conundrum, but there's no prizes. Many of the effects of incorrect SRA described above are mirrored by the effects of poor speaker placement, e.g. too close to a rear wall and the bass becomes leaden and less rhythmic, similar to having an SRA that is too small. So how do you set up your system? How do you know that in adjusting one you are not cancelling out the effects of the other, i.e. trying to get two wrongs to make a right? I know what I did, but letting it slip here would be no fun, would it? After all, I've got to keep something for next time! 

The Cartridge Man Music Maker II Moving-Iron Cartridge

by Roy Gregory

Back in Issue 6 I looked at what seemed like the last of an endangered species, the expensive moving-iron cartridge. At \$575, the Cartridge Man's Grado based Music Maker was well into moving-coil territory, despite which it seemed to be gathering a growing number of vociferous advocates (our own SG included). Of course, there's Grado's own, wooden bodied offerings, including a new range of low output versions, but experience with the

higher output models suggests that they're neither fish nor fowl, lacking both the absolute delicacy and resolution of a good moving-coil and the substance and drive of a decent magnet. The Music Maker, based on Grado's earlier plastic mouldings had all the fire and power associated with the Signature series, combined with a healthy dose of refinement. Running in the Souther TQI linear tracking arm, it offered a fascinating alternative to

the likes of the Lydian Beta and Dynavector DV17. What it lost in terms of transparency and detail, it made up in substance and energy. Not to mention the fact that it dispenses with a whole stage of amplification. The Lydian Beta has a pretty healthy output for a moving-coil; around 0.6mV. The Music Maker gives you nearly ten times that, allowing valve pre-amp owners to dispense with transformers, solid state users to lose whole layers ►

▶ of noise, and both of them to avoid considerable expense.

Of course, the real world isn't that simple. Nowadays, most specialist phono stages are moving-coil compatible, the moving-magnet being such a rarity. Outside of a few valve pre-amps the cost benefits offered by high output cartridges have been severely eroded. Which leaves the decision maker trading off a higher output at source against less amplification. The question is, which does the most harm; the loss of resolution caused by the higher moving mass of the cartridge, or the extra amplification required by the feeble signal generated by most moving-coils. The question is further complicated by the realisation that both approaches also have an inherent sound, one that is accommodated to a greater or lesser extent in different systems. The high frequency resonance that afflicts all moving coils gives them an etched and overtly detailed sound. The clever designer can minimise this and incorporate it into the overall sound. Additionally, the use of such powerful magnets introduces problems in keeping the flux density linear, which can result in further splash and over shoot at high frequencies.

So, despite the dictates of fashion, if you can get a moving-iron cartridge to deliver the detail then you are off to a flying start. Which brings us to the new, and improved Music Maker II. Just what the internal differences are is a matter of mystery to me, but what I can say is that they are clearly audible. In direct comparison to the original, the new version offers greater detail, transparency and focus, whilst losing none of the substance, enthusiasm and musical integrity that made its older relation so appealing. Listen to the II replaying the *Martzy Kreutzer sonata* (Coup d'Archet COUP 003) and her power and attack are breathtaking. This is a violinist who used to break instruments, and using the Music

Maker II you can tell why. Likewise, the Classic Records re-issue of Heifetz playing the Bruch *Scottish Fantasy* (LSC-2603, and probably the best of their Heifetz releases) takes on extra air, space and focus, the soloist's flawless control and technique that much more vibrant and alive. It doesn't match the separation of the Clearaudio Accurate (at around \$2500), but it more than matches it for colour and presence.

The extra air so noticeable on the Bruch hasn't been won at the expense



of exaggeration or a tipped up frequency balance. The II, loaded at 47K and 100pf, just like its predecessor, is resolutely natural and unforced at the top end, and whilst this robs it of the spectacular separation and speed of a cartridge like the Clearaudio Signature, it makes for a far more natural and believable tonal and harmonic structure. Here we have a transducer which places the musical ahead of hi-fi, and whilst that makes it less than obviously spectacular, those who listen to music (rather than hi-fi) will quickly realise its strengths.

The other consideration is realising those strengths. To get the best from the Music Maker you need a lower than average tonearm mass. That rules out the likes of Linn and SME arms, and whilst the Souther linear tracker proved ideal, it is also expensive and rare. Your

best bet will be one of the resurgent group of uni-pivots, or an arm like the Morch. I also had access to a Hadcock, an arm which is within an ace of being as big a bargain as the Music Maker itself. If George can tidy it up, making the finish match the performance, then he's onto a winner, but more on that next time.

Get the arm mass and the loading right (and a pair of speakers which don't have a truncated top-end designed to hide the worst excesses of CD) and the Music Maker II will take on

all comers. Sure, it doesn't sound like a top-end moving-coil, but it's hard to question its musical validity. The really stellar alternatives like the Insider Reference offer greater transparency, detail and insight, at a considerable cost. Meanwhile the Music Maker will, in its latest guise, stand toe to toe with coils at anything up to three times its price. Users of electrostatics and horns should take especial note, the strengths of these transduction technologies dovetailing perfectly. Meanwhile, if you have the right arm, and the requirement for a new cartridge, the Music Maker will buy you a lot of extra records compared to the competition.

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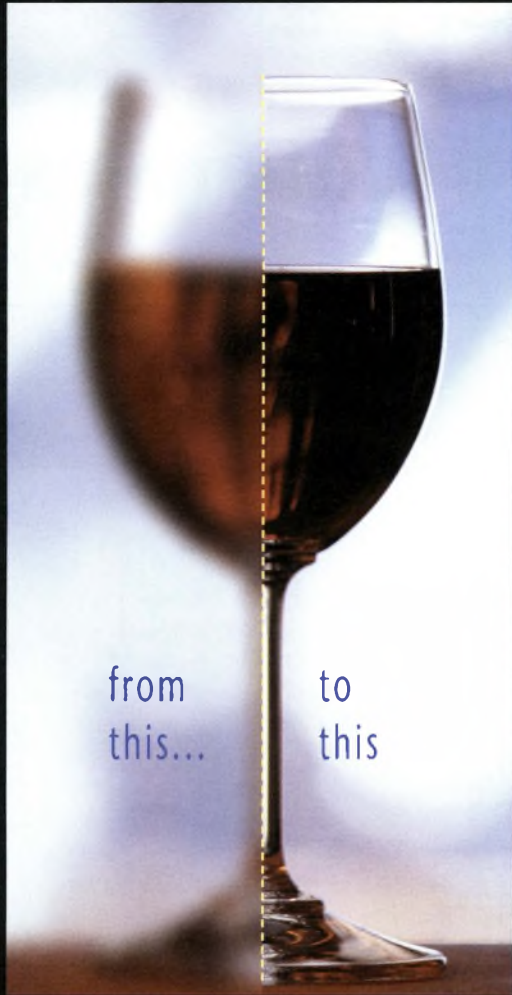
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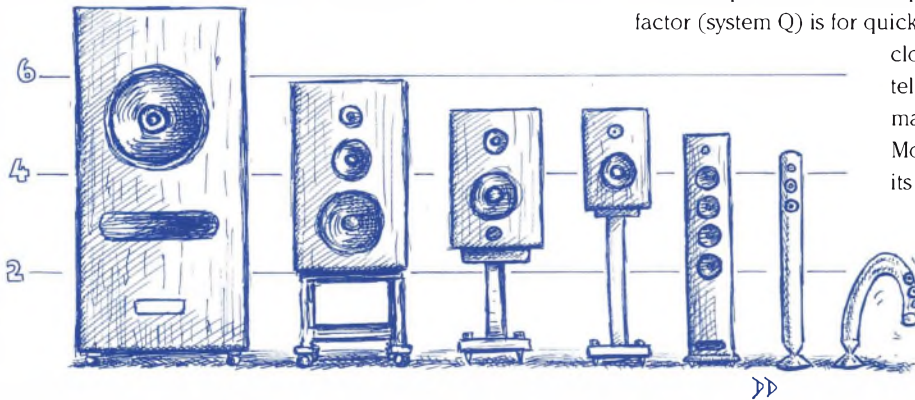
The Deep - Speakers and Low Frequencies

by Phil Ward

Bass seems always to have been a source of fascination in recorded music. Perhaps because there's a fundamental and ancient human response to low frequency sound? Maybe because, right back at the birth of hi-fi as we kind of know it, an obvious distinguishing characteristic of a "hi-fi" rather than a "radiogramme" was that it played bass? Schoolboys snared by the hi-fi bug (and here, sadly, I speak from experience) were consumed by an interest in low frequencies and how proper loudspeakers contrived to

been raised to that hallowed status through containing a kernel of truth. So, yes, Bass IS the foundation of much music, both rhythmically and harmonically (if you want your Hi-Fi Plus feature articles cliché free, go read another page), and IS a fundamentally defining factor in the ability of a loudspeaker to play music rather than just make noise. But it seems to me, that for all folks' fascination with the subject, there remains a fair level of misunderstanding and a fair number of mistaken suppositions on the subject. An example: Ask most pundits what the appropriate system damping factor (system Q) is for quick, tuneful, bass from a small

closed box speaker and they'll tell you it has to be around 0.6, maybe 0.7 at the most. Well the Mordaunt-Short MS20, lauded in its day as a budget speaker with just those qualities, had a system Q of around 0.9. Surely it should have boomed and rumbled and held a tune with all the assurance of a kitten with a ping-pong ball?



reproduce them. Lurid tales of the supposed ability of high-levels of very low frequencies to drive internal organs into fatal resonance was the stuff of gruesome fantasy. And there was something almost hypnotic about the periodic oscillation of the KEF B200 bass driver in my Tangent TMI1s as the stylus tracked that old warped copy of *Selling England By The Pound* (no sniggering at the back there please). Up to age six it was dinosaurs, to age ten it was cars, and then at around 14 or so, hi-fi took over and hi-fi was predominantly about -3dB points (cars, and something called girls did of course remain running as background applications).

There's much more to bass however than the compulsive preoccupations of a hormonally challenged teenager, although it's not easy to write about without crossing the border into cliché-land. But then clichés have generally

So what was going on? How come the MS20 had things so wrong and yet so right. The answer is of course, as ever with matters hi-fi, that the perception of recorded music is more complicated than can be characterized by a single number. In particular, you can't design, analyze, judge or criticize one characteristic of a system out of the context of the whole. The MS20 may well have had sloppy, tuneless bass but in the context of its articulate and emphasized midrange you rarely noticed. It was a case where the all too easy architectural analogy fell down - the quality just above ground masked some questionable foundations (and a pretty flaky roof if truth be known). Of course having just written that you can't design, analyze, judge or criticize one characteristic of a system out of the context of the whole, guess what I'm about to spend the next few pages doing? ►

► So a health warning: What follows is context sensitive.

Far more so than any other section of the audio bandwidth the bottom couple of octaves of a loudspeaker's output submits to simple description and simulation by mathematics. Neville Thiele and Richard Small in the sixties and seventies respectively laid the groundwork for the analysis of moving coil low frequency systems in terms of analogue filter theory. Given a small number of relatively easily measurable mechanical and electrical driver parameters (now almost universally known as the Thiele-Small parameters) and an appropriate piece of software it's a pretty trivial task to accurately predict the time and frequency domain response of a given acoustic system. Such a trivial task in fact that you'll see the odd illustrative simulation after these few pages.

But despite the undoubted effectiveness of such design and analysis techniques there remains deep suspicion in some quarters that they're not to be trusted - that surely music can't be described by mere numbers. There's probably three reasons behind this ever so slightly Luddite tendency (if denial of thirty year old knowledge can still be described as Luddite). I've already touched on one, the MS20 effect; we don't just listen to bass. Second: Once you get into the realms of more complex low frequency systems; past the intuitive, simple closed box and into reflex or, horror of horrors (we're told), coupled-cavity territory, the filter theory gets challenging and requires a fair degree of intellectual rigor to get your head around it. I suspect that opinions on the merits of higher order LF techniques are sometimes shaped by fear of maths. Probably there are attempts at higher-order alignments for sale out there shaped not just by fear of maths, but by incompetence in it. Third, and probably most significantly, the very ease with which a piece of software can spit out the low frequency performance of a driver in a box tends to draw attention away from some hidden complexity. For instance; we talk of measuring the Thiele-Small parameters of a driver as if it's a once only, definitive, shut the book and go home event. It's not. The parameters of a driver, its voice coil resistance and suspension compliance in particular, vary significantly with both

temperature and level. Measure the parameters by driving the unit at 200mV and then again at 5V and you might as well be measuring two different units. Similarly, measure the parameters with the driver at room temperature and then again after it's been working hard for an hour and you'll see another different set of numbers. And each set of numbers has an associated time and frequency domain response. So the Thiele-Small parameters do enable the LF response of a driver in a box to be accurately predicted and simulated. They do exactly what it says on the tin. Unfortunately the parameters themselves are all over the place. So your carefully designed closed box speaker may well have a



I think we should pull them out another $\frac{1}{2}$ inch.

perfectly judged system Q of 0.6 when you measure it carefully from cold. But halfway through a thorough blasting of Cafe Blue? Who knows? (Part of the benefit of Naim's "Precision Acoustic Resistance" loading technique I suspect is that it reduces the tendency of the low frequency alignment to vary with level). Add a reflex port to the system and the uncertain nature of the true low frequency alignment under dynamic conditions, is magnified.

As level increases and the air flow through the port goes from comfortably linear to uncomfortably turbulent Dr. Thiele's and Dr. Small's nice cozy filter equations throw up their hands and run screaming from the room. It says nothing on the tin about variable parameters or non-linearity so we ignore them both and wonder why just sometimes, well, quite often really, what we expect to hear from the mathematical analysis is not quite what sings forth when we press play. Bass fails to behave "properly" not because we forgot about the lay lines, didn't ionise the bath water, or tightened the spikes on a Tuesday, but because we're too lazy and/or not clever enough (self included) to understand its mechanisms and perception fully. And apart from that we're probably not rich enough to be able to indulge in a speaker where non-linearity and dynamic variation in LF performance are banished through sheer engineering will.

But, going back to my health warning that this is all context sensitive and that we don't listen to bass alone, what is bass anyway? Where in the audio band does a typical speaker designer (if such a beast should exist) ►

► stop talking bass and start talking midrange. Of course there's no easy answer to that one either. Bass doesn't stop and midrange start - even if a simplistic view of crossovers in three way (or more) systems, or between subs and "satellites" would have us think that way - one kind of morphes into the other. Seems to me though, that not long past the point where frequency is measured with three figures, we're knocking on the door of midrange. At 150Hz or so we're starting to get into the meat of melody and harmony and lyrics. To return to the architectural analogy (that no doubt you'll recall I discredited a few hundred words back), the building has just broken through ground level. There's also perhaps a distinction between bass and midrange in the musical world, at least with acoustic musical instruments; midrange begins with significant directionality. But, always with the proviso that bass on it's own is little to write



home about, what factors down at designer level drive the multitude of variation on a theme solutions to the problem of reproducing the bit below 100Hz?

Well for a start, in much the same way that you can't divorce bass from the rest of the bandwidth, you also can't avoid the commercial realities of the speaker market. Where selling speakers is concerned bass is a big issue. Unless there's some startling characteristic elsewhere, bass is one of the first things, probably THE first thing, the majority listeners latch on to when they first hear a speaker. And that makes life pretty tough for the designer because not only is there often a very strong commercial pressure for "more bass" (and never mind the tune), there's also the inconvenient fact that the perception of bass is so dominated by the vagaries of system setup, listening room acoustics and, as we'll see, listening level.

Those commercial realities are the reason why the majority of budget to upper mid-range products from the major brands use reflex loading. In the intensely competitive sector of the worldwide market that these companies inhabit (the realm of large multiple retail organisations that view speakers in much the same way that Tescos view bread), performance in a five minute comparative demonstration is everything, and the

something for nothing promise of reflex loading is all but de rigueur. I'll examine the justification for the "something for nothing" promise of reflex loading in a moment but just to digress a little for a moment there's another peripheral reason why reflex ports are so prevalent - industrial design. It's very hard to make speakers look sexy. There's a tough aesthetic design problem to be solved; the conflict between furniture and technology. On the one hand manufacturers

want to imbue their products with leading edge design and technology values, but on the other hand, in many respects they are selling furniture. Developing an aesthetic that both advertises the product's inherent technology (yes, even if the technology is more imaginary than inherent) and yet looks acceptable (to customers) in a typically furnished home is a tough one. But what has this got to do with reflex ports? One only has to look at B&W's Nautilus range with its "Flowport Technology" to

see that as well as extending bass, ports can be pressed into service as aesthetic and marketing devices. I've no idea if peppering the inside surface of the port exit with golf ball style dimples, as Flowport does, is really of benefit in delaying the onset of port turbulence. I'm quite willing to accept it has an effect but I'm not so sure how significant that effect is likely to be (I can't help wondering why aerodynamically critical surfaces of cars or aircraft are not similarly covered in dimples. Should I be rushing down to the Patent Office?). I do know though that it was an inspired wheeze to invent a "technology" that both provides an interesting aesthetic and links a range of high(ish)-end speakers to golf. I mean, which sport do you think B&W owners are most likely to play? Once B&W's R&D department had come up with Flowport (or was it their industrial design consultants, Native Design, I wonder) was it likely that the Nautilus range was going to be closed box loaded?

Meanwhile, back on the "something for nothing" of reflex loading. Well no, you don't get something for nothing, there's no free lunch. But the exact mechanisms of failure; the underlying reasons why reflex loading is as attractive to me as cyanide laced custard are far more complex than the open and shut case that opinions would



▶ suggest. When you chose reflex over closed box loading, apart from the increase in LF bandwidth (although even that is not guaranteed) that you were after, two significant things occur that might put at risk the music making abilities of your loudspeaker. First, the well known but perhaps not particularly well understood tendency of reflex loading to degrade a speaker's time domain performance. There's two interrelated but at the same time distinct issues. The first one is that reflex loading by its very nature implies faster phase change as frequency falls. And phase change can be expressed as a delay time (the technical term is "group delay"), or even distance. With a typical small(ish) box reflex alignment, a bass player's bottom E at 41Hz happens around 10mS later than, and therefore effectively comes from around 3.5 metres behind, say the piano player's middle C at 260Hz. However, the real world audibility of such a delay (the psycho-acoustic literature has the low frequency group delay audibility threshold at around 30ms) and the fact that we're only talking about the fundamental of the bass player's bottom E, not the finger noise or the harmonics mean that 10mS might not be the complete disaster it sounds. 10mS in the context of 41Hz is, after all, less than half a cycle and your brain needs at least a couple of those to identify the pitch. And of course closed box speakers are not immune from group delay. A well damped small(ish) closed box alignment will have around 4mS delay at 41Hz. I'm not claiming here that low frequency group delay of 10mS or so is benign (recent work by Keith Howard published in Hi-Fi News suggests that it's not) but simply that things are not so simple.

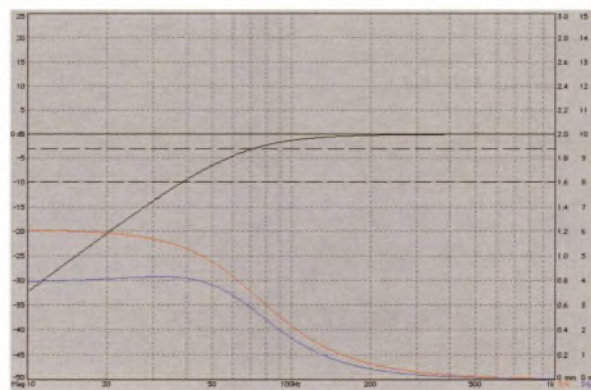
The second time domain issue is that reflex loaded speakers can be even later finishing a note than they were starting it. Again, the very

nature of things means that reflex loading is more resonant than closed box loading - if it were not, it wouldn't extend the low frequency bandwidth. And a resonance that's effectively one step removed from direct control by the amplifier is a resonance that's harder to stop once it's started. The problem becomes worse the more a designer uses the port to extend the bass. Modest reflex alignments that demonstrate no "ripple" in their amplitude response have reasonably benign and well damped resonant tails. However, seeing as bass extension was the whole point, its not unusual to

find the envelope pushed and the decay of notes in the vicinity of the port resonance lasting a little longer than the musicians intended. A strong port resonance is probably responsible for, or at least contributes to, the pitch accuracy problems that reflex speakers are often said to be afflicted with. A note at a frequency close to the port resonance excites the resonant tail and ends up sounding out of tune. A similar effect can be experienced in stringed instruments (bass guitars are notorious) where a neck resonance and a note almost, but not quite, coincide - the resonance makes the note sound slightly awry.

I wrote that two things happen when you chose reflex loading over a simple closed box. The second is perhaps more ephemeral and harder to analyse but I suspect has more significance. It is simply that reflex loading changes the level of complexity. More degrees of freedom and more variables to control necessarily means more second order effects and more things to go wrong. I've already touched on one - port turbulence and linearity. But there's others. For example; for a reflex alignment to be effective in extending bass the Q factor of the port resonance itself must be high. If it drops much below 5 its hardly worth the trouble. But if your bass unit is playing mid-range too and the enclosure needs to be cavity filled with polyester wadding or long fibre wool then you'll struggle to keep the port Q anywhere near that. This is why reflex boxes tend to be foam lined rather than cavity filled. And call me an old fogey but there's no substitute for good dollop of Mongolian yak pelt.

In conclusion I leave you with four simulated response curves to mull over (courtesy of John L Murphy's MacSpeakerz package). Each simulation shows the same typical 170mm bass driver in a 15 litre box. The black curve



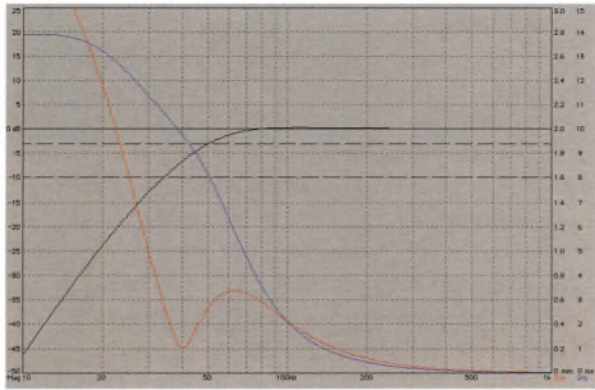
A. Closed box system.

is frequency response, the red curve is nominal cone excursion in millimetres (for 2.83V - 1 Watt into 8 Ohm) and the blue curve is group delay in milliseconds.

Graph A shows the system as a closed box. Note the early but gentle roll off. The system is -3dB down at around 70Hz and dies thereafter at 12dB/Octave. System Q is 0.64 at 63Hz. Group delay doesn't

significantly exceed 4mS and the cone excursion is pretty well controlled. This is

typically the kind of alignment that a designer would aim at for quick, tuneful bass in a boundary design. It's also, typically, the kind of alignment that will have sales



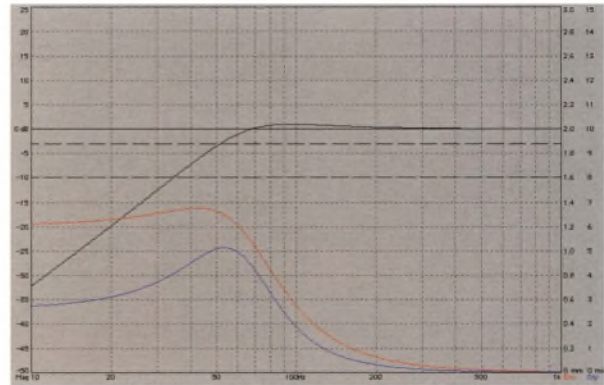
B. Reflex system.

► managers muttering darkly about prima-donna designers and the difficulty of “moving” speakers with “no bass”.

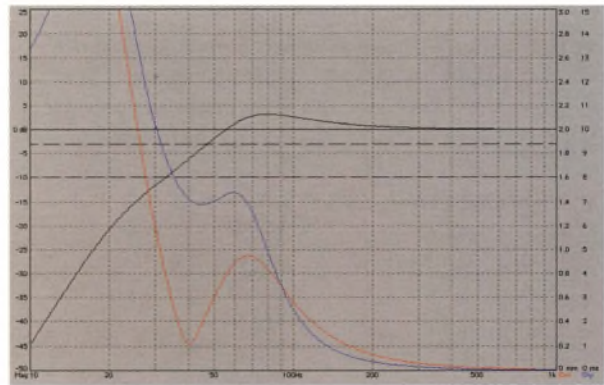
Graph B is the same driver in the same box but this time with a reflex port tuned to 41Hz. This gives a classical maximally flat alignment with the -3dB point lowered to 50Hz and the roll off at 24dB/Octave. Our sales manager can now retire to the bar a happy (well, happier) man. The Group delay has, as expected, soared but with no ripple in the response (it doesn't exceed 0dB) the system will still “stop” reasonably tidily. Perhaps more interesting is the driver displacement. It reaches a minimum at port resonance and then rushes upwards. The interest is however not in how little the driver is working at 41Hz but in how hard the port must be working and therefore how significant port linearity is going to be. Maybe B&W's Flowport really is worthwhile?

Graphs C & D are repeats of A and B. But to illustrate how much more complicated is the real world than all this cozy simulation I've tweaked just one of the driver parameters to illustrate what happens after the system has been working pretty hard for a while and the voice-coil resistance has increased by around 50% due to temperature rise of around 120°C (it's not unheard of for voice-coil resistance to double). The true situation will be more complicated still as quite a few parameters change with temperature (the magnet flux

falls, suspension compliance increase, etc). But even with just one parameter varying both systems have changed out of all recognition - the closed box now has sales manager pleasing bass extension while the reflex loaded box has turned into a particularly wild, resonant dog's breakfast. They may as well be different speakers now and it doesn't need me to point out that they won't sound the same as they did at cold. But of course you can probably compensate for the changes by reorienting to alternative lay-lines and tightening the spikes on a Thursday....



C. Closed box system at elevated voice-coil temperature.



D. Reflex system at elevated voice-coil temperature.

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Record Reviews

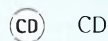
How To Read Them

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

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

The reviewers are identified by their initials.
They are:- Chris Binns, Pete Christie, Dave Davies, Roy Gregory, Jason Hector, James Michael Hughes, Jon Maple, Reuben Parry, Dave Ayers, Andrew Hobbs, Chris Thomas, Mark Childs.

Key to Icons



CD



Gold CD



HDCD



XRCD



Double Disc



SACD



120g LP



150g LP



180g LP



Availability As S/H LP



Vinyl Double Album



Drugstore

Songs for the jet set

Globe GLOBCD6



While I find this album truly excellent to listen to, if I was a long-time Drugstore fan I would be a tad worried. Don't get me wrong, this album has a wonderful vocal largely delivered by Isabel Monteiro, a Brazilian for what its worth, and enough melody to keep a dozen terminally bad drummers humming along in time. No what would worry me about this album is that it seems to be an ending. The album has a completeness that implies that nothing else will follow it, would the last one out turn out the lights and bolt the door, that sort of thing reinforced by the fact that many of the songs have ending as a theme. It would be a shame if this feeling was the truth. Drugstore's general style is hard to quantify and as with many mature bands they have evolved a niche of their own. Somewhat surprisingly the band are noticeable by their lack of chart success, brought home to me when researching this album, I was surprised to discover it was their third and that they have been together for eight years. Not an album to watch girls by but definitely one to have a drink with. This album is excellent and I would recommend it to anyone. Get the habit.

JH

RECORDING

MUSIC





Martin Stephenson

Lilac Tree

Floating World FW 003



Martin Stephenson is an artist completely at peace with himself, and one who continues to produce albums that possess exceptional degrees of individuality and insight. "Organic" may be a much over used adjective, but it aptly describes this harmonious relationship struck between a gifted poet, the songs he writes and those performances given to a small band of devoted fans who've followed him since the early days on Wearside. Content to remain one of the best kept secrets around, he plays the folk clubs, cafes and bars, sometimes reviving the old songs – to the applause of these small appreciative audiences. On other occasions he'll mix up his own more recent works with those from like-minded musicians. Here, it's 'Folk Singer' (Tom Ovans), 'Rainbow' (Gary McCourt) and 'All Men Condemned' (Washington Phillips) which complement a dozen Stephenson originals. An unpretentious production, nicely engineered at the Redwood studio near Aviemore by Peter Rawson, develops these uncomplicated arrangements for guitars, Hammond organ, piano, handmade drums, simple percussion and a didgeridoo (on an unlisted, 'Working In My Garden'. It suits a subtly observed track, 'Bluebottle Theory' and those touching ballads like 'Rowan Berries', which express an affinity with rural Scotland.

The Lilac Tree is a quiet place to rest awhile and contemplate life.

RECORDING
MUSIC



RP



Thea Gilmore

as if

Flying Sparks TDBEP 0054



Naim have always loudly denied that they're an audiophile label, and if proof were needed then it arrived in the form of last year's *Lipstick Conspiracies*. Hard of edge, dense and muddy of sound it was, none the less, a fantastic record, revealing the latent talent of a teenage Thea Gilmore. She and Naim have since parted company, and this new EP is a taster for a forthcoming album on Flying Sparks. On this basis I can't wait.

Gone is the opaque congestion of *Lipstick*, and these six tracks vary between straight ahead four piece (featuring Pretender Robbie McIntosh on Guitar - and ironically recorded at Room With A View where Naim recorded the wonderful *Foo Foo*) and simple girl and guitar. The clean, clear takes bring a new space and confidence to her singing, allowing the vocal to stand front and centre, which given the strength of the lyrics is exactly where it should be.

Only the mannered, spoken 'Don't set foot over the railway tracks', littered with forced rhymes and poor scans, hints at Gilmore's youth. The rest is excellent, soaring to a pinnacle with the solo acoustic cover of 'Straight Up'. Get this now, 'cos this girl is going to be huge.

RG

RECORDING
MUSIC



And another thing....

Roadworks songwriter's tour. Wednesday May 9th 2001. Manchester's Life Café. Tom Merae headlining. Thea, maturing with each live gig, outshines two other support acts and the top of the bill Merae. A composed and beautiful acoustic session supported (as ever) by guitar ally Nigel Stonier, working an audience through her songs, old and new. She's come a long way in some six months since I last heard her live. So where's the album we've all been waiting for? September's looking good. For now, though, there's a numbered, limited edition, six track EP to satisfy those hunger pangs. *As If's* opening number, 'This Girl is Taking Bets', once again demonstrates compositional and textural versatility with a bouncy rockabilly beat. Plenty of feminist fire and prickly humour, coupled to that thematic trademark sense of hesitancy and uncertainty found in love songs like 'Straight Up'. Politics? Yes, we'll have that too, served with a generous helping of scepticism and bold lyrics: "Every door has leprosy.... Jesus has a nose-ring and Mary has tattoos" ('Don't Set Foot Over The Railway Track') mocks politicians of all persuasions, while the live recording of 'You Tell Me' should get you off your settee to see and hear Thea Gilmore in the flesh. This EPs the best £6.00 I've spent in ages!

RP

RECORDING
MUSIC





Anam

Tine Gael/ Bright Fire

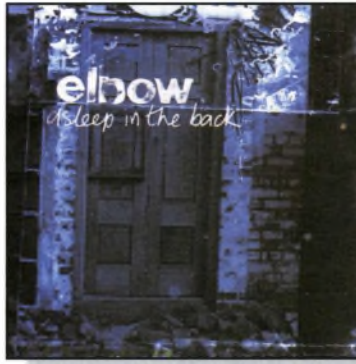
Linn CKD 121 

Mixing traditional Gaelic songs with self-penned numbers there's a freshness about this album that's very appealing. You never get the sense of over-earnest folkies at work and the band are clearly having a great time. The session encompasses a wide range of instruments which include bouzouki and accordion in addition to the expected fiddle, bodhran and guitar.

The band play some great instrumentals: reels, jigs and hornpipes, but the real joy of the album is in the singing of Fiona Mackenzie. She's blessed with one of those voices that grabs your attention immediately and draws you into the feel of the song. 'S' Gann Gun Dirich Mi Chaidh (It Is Unlikely I Will Ever Climb)' is a fine example. Her tones convey the emotion of the song about a hunter expressing his sorrow at being forced to quit his living in such a clear way that you barely need to glance at the translation to get a sense of the songs meaning. Fine singing too, from Brian óhEadhra in the traditional song 'North Americay'.


The recording is very good: clean, clear and entirely natural and 'in the room' doing full justice to the music. An unpretentious treat.

DD



Elbow

Asleep in the back

WVR1015882 V2 2001 


As the rift between the chart and the live scene widens, the pressure is building up. How long can so many bands of such quality flourish underground before the major labels loose their grip? Elbow are just one more band to add to this growing list. There has been a lot of excitement around Elbow over the last few months, following a handful of electrifying live performances and two breathtaking Ep's. And, as with the majority of bands placed in the spotlight before they have even begun to record, the album sounds carefully considered rather than organically grown. After an almost perfect start, 'Any day now' and 'Red', the album gets a little bogged down before pulling itself right with a sequence of four heart-stoppingly perfect tracks. 'Bitten by the tail fly' adds a little bite to the listing, with grit and guitars providing a bit of pace to an otherwise downbeat album. Asleep in the back is yet another gloriously dark debut album. Following in the footsteps of Doves (whom they supported at one of this years NME awards nights) they have created a work of vast, gloomy introspection, that lurks, occasionally bursting into colour. It's a collection of superb, well crafted songs, played by people who really care, designed to aim straight for the heart, emotion expressed through a long proven medium. I like it, I like it a lot.

MC



Tony Joe White

Lake Placid Blues

Remark Records 527530-2 

Basking just below the shoreline, that big ol' swamp rock crocodile Tony Joe White, has no natural enemies whatsoever. Whether you knew it or not, in those clear blue waters of Lake Placid his lyrical (razor sharp) teeth cut him a place at the head of the food chain. After all, this is the man whose creative juices were responsible for 'Rainy Night In Georgia'. When you've fully digested this album it's easy to understand why TJW has a reputation for being an uncompromising musician who never gives less than one hundred and ten percent to each and every recording project he undertakes. Here (as his tempo varies with style) those early country roots, that swamp thing he did in the Seventies and a richly layered "thick as molasses" blues voice come to the fore. These are familiar topics – small towns, dirt roads, tin shacks and down South reminiscences – themes that ease themselves into the title track, 'Bayou Woman' and 'Louisiana Rain'. A nice touch, too, is a semi-autobiographical Take on an ageing journeyman guitarist musing on home truths and life's loves in an intuitive, 'The Guitar Don't Lie'. Chewing over these rugged songs with TJW are Leland Sklar (bass) Benmont Tench (keyboard) and Jim 'Blind Bubba' Spake (sax). Their contributions to this Doug Sax mastered production are as colourful as these names would suggest.

RP





Kings of Convenience

Quiet is the new loud

SOURCD019 

Well, as summer appears to be around the corner, I'm sure you're all stocking up on your banging house and phat garage beats. But for those of you whose idea of heaven is sitting in the shade, with a cold Gin and tonic, I'd like to recommend *Quiet is the new loud*.

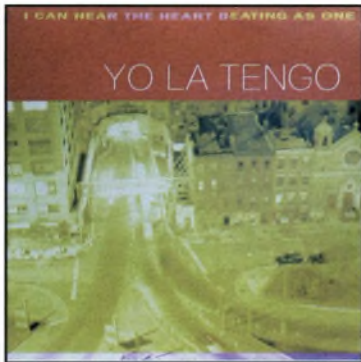
It's fair to say that this album has never been far from my hi-fi since I bought it on its release. And the album, like the songs themselves, came as a very pleasant surprise.

The first single, 'Toxic girl', introduced Kings of Convenience as purveyors of the very finest, most delicate music this century. Two young men from Norway, they represent the quietest, frailest of the bands behind the current New-Acoustic-Movement, and easily the best.

The album features little more than one acoustic guitar and two voices, save for the occasional cello or trumpet, but still manages to provide enough in the way of variation of rhythm and pace that it never drags. But the real surprise is that the album binds together as a whole much more strongly than the average contemporary recording, to form a complete meaningful statement.

Quiet is the new loud is a delight. It grabs you on the first listen, and then just keeps getting better. Perfect for the summer.

MC



Yo La Tengo

I can hear the heart beat as one

OLE222-1 

Yo La Tengo (in case you wondered, the website states "Yo La Tengo still means "More Ketchup, Bubba" in Spanish") are a mature band who have managed to produce a large amount of decently consistent work across a long, in this case thirteen year, period. I can ... is their eighth album, and possibly their best.

Firstly there is an obvious comparison to the Velvet Underground. Its justifiable since they also seem to thrive on mixing melody with heavily distorted walls of guitar. Perhaps not surprisingly Yo La Tengo also hail from New York. A three-piece outfit they are a band that marry contradictions. This album was recorded in Nashville, but it isn't country: They play tight like it's a good jazz album, but they are no way performing jazz. The album sounds like it has captured a moment of improvised performance and not been produced in the typical way. They also appreciate that the sound they produce in most tracks needs a little tempering, and every time it all gets a bit much, along comes some welcome relaxation.

This review can really only offer an overview, and hint at the manic roller coaster ride of skilful variation that represents the listening experience. Definitely one to try.

JH



The Inflatables Sharks

See You On The Ice

Springboard SMCDIS001 

Ever wondered what happened to all the serious pop/rock bands? Hankering after something with a bit more substance than pop candy-floss or REM going through the motions. Reach for the Inflatables Sharks, a joke fin concealing an all too serious shape lurking in the musical morass.

Perhaps the likes of Atomic Kitten will be seized by a shapely leg and dragged from view. We can live in hope.

The opening chords, the galloping pile driver bass line of track one leave you in no doubt. This is pop with purpose. Sort of like Oasis before they got all pompous and anthemic on us. There's edge, wit and intelligence a plenty – not surprising given that the entire band contribute to the writing. The results are at once pleasingly familiar and sufficiently different to catch and hold attention. Not too challenging but consistently entertaining, stand-out tracks like the opener 'Snow', 'Best Part Of The Day' and 'Falling On Your Feet' hold out promise of great things. The Inflatables Sharks deserve to rise from the depths of university and bed-sit depression to reach a wider audience. Buoyant, up-beat and with just enough bite, these boys will go far.


RG





Edgar Meyer, with Béla Fleck and Mike Marshall

Uncommon Ritual

Sony SK 62891 

This CD has been appearing on audiophile lists for a few years now, and the recording does have a very natural sound. It is tonally spot-on, although it occasionally suffers from limited separation. But, it is the music that holds my primary attention, with an amalgam of varying styles; from Bluegrass (the core of the trio's individual experiences) to Classical, fabricated with significant improvisation and experimentation. While it is Meyer's bass that often takes centre stage, the three musicians all assert their own identities, but this never diminishes what brings these great performers together. This is namely the love of playing, while extending the boundaries of the expected musical norm, evolving the music into sounds that are often beguiling, confounding and startling.

The music has a natural momentum, and it is rich in melodic charm. There is a core of classical accents throughout, but with surprising rhythmic effects, including the underlying cadence found in Rock 'n' Roll. The highlight has to be Sarasate's *Zigeunerweisen* performed on the bass, with both refinement and ferocity.

This is a captivating CD that challenges the listener to confront the conformist within. With excellent playing and very good sound, it is wholeheartedly recommended.


SG

RECORDING 
MUSIC 



Linoleum

Dissent

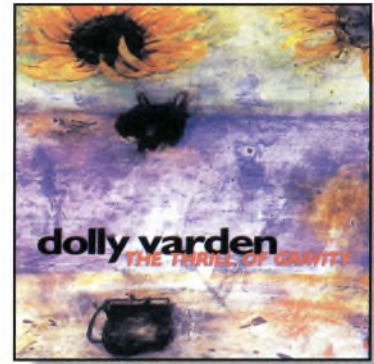
Lino Vinyl LIN0005 

The debut album from London four piece Linoleum never really turned any heads on its release in 1997. After the similar fate of their second album *Race* from the burning building last year, it rather seems that Linoleum will forever be remembered as the band that Paul Jones played in before defecting to Elastica. Jones' distinctive guitar style is wasted alongside Justine and Co. but with Linoleum he shines, as he did in their rare live performances. Many comparisons were drawn between Linoleum and other female fronted indie outfits, but Jones' unique sound, coupled with Caroline Finch's sultry, almost whispered vocals, set them apart. The production is superb, with the songs carefully paced to reflect the fatigue in so much of the subject matter, whilst injecting a sheen of Parisian chic (track down the French version of 'On a Tuesday' that backed the single 'Marquis').

In a year when every other band were happy to be mediocre, Linoleum seemed to want to record in 3D, and *Dissent* feels huge, like the difference between TV and cinema. Every even numbered track bubbles with energy and tension, every odd numbered track staggers with the comedown, and each and every one is excellent.

MC

RECORDING 
MUSIC 



Dolly Varden

The Thrill Of Gravity

Evil Teen ETR 10007-2 

This, the second outing from Chicago country rockers Dolly Varden, preceded the fabulous *Dumbest Magnets* reviewed in Issue 12. More conventional in its structures and use of the near telepathic harmonies of husband and wife songwriting team Steve Dawson and Diane Christiansen, this is more of a straight ahead rocker, without the intricate textures and deftness of the later album. Having said that, the evolution is clear, and tracks like 'Lucky 23' would be equally at home on either disc.

So *Thrill* might not scale the inventive heights of *Magnets*, but does that make it any less of an album? No, it's just different, and in some ways more accessible. Its denser instrumentation is nicely propulsive without ever overpowering the vocals which, once again, hold centre stage. Intelligent lyrics and delivery are once again the order of the day and make Dolly Varden stand well out from the crowd. Songs like 'Dangerously Thin' and 'All I Deserve' are classics in their own right, making this another album to cherish, another album worth seeking out. Make the effort and you'll not regret it.

RG

RECORDING 
MUSIC 



Songdog

The Way of the World

Zara Records TED CD 

To be original, invigorating and daring is becoming an increasingly rare phenomenon in today's MTV saturated world. Enter Songdog, a totally different listening experience lead by one Lyndon Morgan, occasional playwright, novelist and songwriter, who pushes the art form onto a different plateau. *The Way of the World* is a quite extraordinary album bursting with Morgan's fabulously detailed Lyrics, which are heavily laden with tales of love, loss and passion (and sex in a cemetery!). The backing is very spare allowing Morgan's lyrics the room to breathe and weave their magic. Take the opening lines on first track 'Goodbye Isabel' for a taster of what's to follow; "In her heart I think she wants me dead/Second best she sleeps with me instead/ I give her all her books and records back/Roy Orbison, Burt Bacharach and Kerouac, in paperback/West Side Story Soundtrack." Some of the songs have a bleakness and desolation to them that cuts right to the core; witness the line in 'South London Winter' where Morgans Howls "Lucy wrote me a letter, pink crayon on blue Paper, to say every useless thing we'd planned was off." *The Way of the World* is very intense in a Leonard Cohen kind of way, and it stopped me in my tracks and demanded that I give it my full attention. It's a remarkable achievement and a real treasure - seek it out.

AH



Genesis

Foxtrot

Classic Records  


Foxtrot was the album that made the public start to sit up and take notice of Genesis. They may not have had major commercial success until some years later, but at least now they could pay the rent. Most remembered for the 20 minute epic 'Supper's Ready' taking up most of side two, tracks such as 'Watcher Of The Skies', with its staccato motif, and 'Get 'em Out By Friday', with its cautionary tale of compulsory re-housing, should not be ignored. Swimming against the current, I prefer the preceding album *Nursery Cryme*, but *Foxtrot* runs it close. As is typical of the prog rock albums of the time, the LP is keyboard heavy and packed full of unusual time signatures giving Phil Collins the opportunity to show what an excellent drummer he is, despite the flack he gets these days. Sadly, this re-issue is not up to the same standard as Classics Led Zeppelin re-issues. There is some tape hiss evident, which implies that they couldn't get hold of the original master tapes. Additionally side one runs to over 28 minutes, and the LP would have been better pressed over three sides. Having said that, the original pressing pushed the cutting envelope so hard that serious mistracking would occur on side one, or even groove jumping, so in the end the Classic version is still an improvement.

Supplier: Vivante - Tel: (44)(0)208 977 6600
DA



Kristen Hersh

Sunny Border Blue

CAD 2102 

Kristen Hersh is an unusual woman with an unusual voice. She is somebody who seems to walk that fine line that separates genius and madness, at least as far as her music goes. I have been a big fan since her days with the Throwing Muses, so each of her solo efforts have been eagerly awaited. Occasionally I have been a tad disappointed but not with this album. Thirteen seemingly crafted songs that are rather more polished and produced than some previous efforts, despite which they lose none of her passion and anger. I say seemingly crafted, as she has always claimed that the songs arrive in her mind fully conceived complete with the method of achieving the finished result. In which case she has a mixing desk for a brain. Hmmm - 64 tracks, that explains quite a lot!

These are largely acoustic tracks, simple in form, framing her distinctive voice.

Always from the heart these songs contain a bitter taste of bile that is at odds with the gentle delivery, but don't get suckered in. These songs can shock, and often leave a feeling, an emotion, buried in your mind which your subconscious seems to work away at with the result that the next listen generates a new respect for this music. One of pop's great talents (and what a lovely sleeve too).

JH





King Crimson

Discipline

CDVKCX8

Beat

CDVKCX9

Three Of A Perfect Pair

CDVKCX10

The time is 1982, and a group assuming the name of veteran prog rockers King Crimson appears on the music scene. While the world steels itself for another avanté-metal assault, the new band releases its first album, *Discipline*, and this time it's funky. Welcome to the Twilight Zone. In fact, *Discipline* was only a surprise to those who had overlooked Robert Fripp's interim band The League Of Gentlemen. Here was a group whose roots were not in Royston Vasey but New York, where Fripp had long been ensconced as one of art rock's leading lights. Combining elements of Blondie and Talking Heads, The League Of Gentlemen produced fine snippets of eccentric bouncy pop. Thus it was no surprise to find that the new King Crimson included one time Talking Heads contributor Adrian Belew. Also drafted in was Peter Gabriel sessioneer Tony Levin on bass and Chapman Stick, having worked together with Fripp on Gabriel's first two albums. The final member of the court was Bill Bruford, the highly intelligent drummer (is that an oxymoron?) from the previous Crimson incarnation, and one time skin basher with Yes. As Fripp's Funky Foursome was probably not going to sell too many records, it was time to re-instate, once again, the King Crimson moniker.



As part of the ongoing re-issue project to celebrate KC's 30th anniversary, which is now long passed, we now have the three albums recorded by the funky four. Each is presented in an attractive miniature gatefold sleeve, denying the fact that all three LPs were originally released in slip covers. No matter, the presentation feels lavish, and each includes a bonus booklet containing reviews of the original releases, notes from Fripp, and other trivia. Musically the three CDs chart a course from the tight melodic guitar patterns of the aptly named *Discipline* to the deranged monster that was the *construKction of light*, *Three Of A Perfect Pair* marking the halfway point of the journey, and on the original release being prophetically broken into two halves pointing to what had been and what was to come. Listening to this release of *Discipline* I was struck by the fact that the CD appears to feature a subtly different mix to the original LP, something that was not apparent on the previous set of three re-issues. Certain tracks on the LP were really difficult to reproduce unless your system's timing was spot on; the altered mix seems to give an easier ride to the cyclic guitar patterns set up between Fripp and Belew. The second album, *Beat*, is themed loosely on the writings of the '50s beat heroes, and in particular Jack Kerouac. Frankly I'm too young, too English, and too philistine to comment further on the theme, but musically the album continues the fusion of funk and maths to good effect. Whilst not hitting the highs of 'Frame By Frame' and 'Indiscipline' from the previous album, tracks such as 'Sartori In Tangier' will quickly have you tripping the light fantastic around the living room. Sadly though, the closing improvisation 'Requiem' is a real dog. *Three Of A Perfect Pair* is the real collector's find, for while the only bonus track on the preceding



two CDs is a largely redundant single edit of 'Matte Kudasai', here we get a mini album's worth of extra material and, for owners of the original, a big surprise. Ignoring the extra tracks, the album is split in two, funky and weird. The funky "Left Side" bats along at quite a pace with some great songs and even a stab at the singles market in the form of 'Sleepless', and herein lies the surprise; the version here is completely different to the one on the original vinyl. The original vinyl version is now tucked away with two other re-mixes in the extras section. How odd. The "Right Side" is considerably more challenging (or rubbish according to several friends), sounding at times like a visit to a haunted factory. I love the first track on this side, 'Industry', with its staccato bass line, swirling effects, and interjected percussion. In the end these three CDs represent a set of musical ideals presented by four superb musicians at the peak of their abilities. If you fancy a bit of discipline in your life, then you could do worse than starting here.

DA

King Crimson



Beat




Three Of A Perfect Pair





Gordon Haskell

Look Out

Flying Sparks Records TDB-CD-053 


To be honest, since Gordon Haskell left King Crimson he has been flying under my personal radar, and so I had no idea what to expect when his latest spinner landed on my lap for review. What I can guarantee is that I didn't expect a CD that sounds like a summit between Tom Waits and Captain Beefheart over a bottle of single malt and half a dozen good Havanas. Haskell may be sampling the Highland firewater, but he's not drowning in it. Rather, like the aforementioned malt, he has matured and improved with age. His outlook seems remarkably upbeat for a man who has steadfastly avoided commercial success since the early '70s, and *Look Out* is a refreshing blend of liquor fuelled rockers and smoky ballads. Eschewing the overproduction favoured by many of his contemporaries, Haskell is backed by a competent band who obviously enjoy playing his material. The production is sparse with a slight rough edge to the sound that surprisingly adds to the performance, given that the band sound like an upmarket pub act. When I first got the CD, I slipped it into the player intending to sample each track before reviewing it properly at a later date. That the remote remained untouched as the complete CD played should speak volumes about how the artist hooked and reeled in this reviewer.

DA



REM

Reveal

Warner Bros 9362-47946-2 

The latest Album from REM has been heralded as a return to form, a true classic REM record. But then, most bands when faced with marketing their 16th album will roll this cliché out one more time. If a return to form can be read as turning back on the brilliant and youthful direction their last four albums took, and instead heading off down a path labeled "no-where in particular" then yes, it is a return to form. Whereas *New Adventures* saw them invest in blistering guitars and screamed vocal pleas, and *Up* stripped this down to its most basic components to give a more soulful and distressed album, *Reveal* is REM at their most complete, their most polished, but sadly, without any songs to back it up. The album has only one real tune to speak of, the basis for 'All the way to Reno', and even that is simply 'Near wild heaven' on loop (in fact, 'Near wild heaven' seems to crop up all through the record). The songs bleed into each other without ever really making any sort of impression at all. It's a disappointing follow up to a superb run of albums, and not even some fantastic Phil Spector style guitar work can lift it from the bin marked "Dirge".

MC



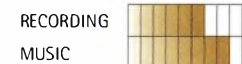
Nadine

Lit Up From The Inside

Glitterhouse GRCD 508 

Thoughtful, reflective songs from St. Louis based Nadine, a Missouri four piece with more than a hint of *After The Goldrush* about them. Perhaps it's the slightly nasal whine to the vocals, perhaps it's the deliberate pacing of the self produced songs, but the shade of Neil Young stands silent guard in the background while the band go through their impressive paces. With no individual credits, even down to who does what with what to who, it's difficult to single out any particular contribution, and maybe that's as well, for it's the coherence and solidity of the playing that really makes this record stand out from the crowd. The easy, open flow of 'Streets' followed by the insistent, probing of 'Hope Like The Rain' form the heart and pivot of the album. These are simple, beautiful songs, beautifully played by a band that knows each other and exactly what it's doing. They bed things in after the varied scale, style and textures of the opening, leading into the more measured songs of side two (or they would if this wasn't a CD). The result is a subtle, gentle delight of a disc that creeps up on you, and before you know it, it's become a staple on your play list. Wonderful.

RG



early
warning
system!

hi-fi
2001
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THE MANCHESTER HI-FI SHOW
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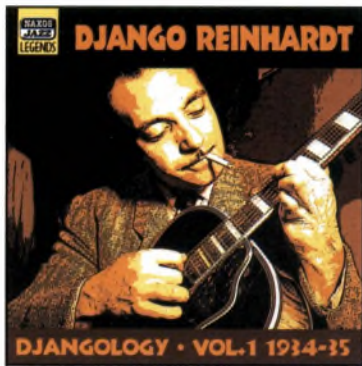
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2ND
GREAT
YEAR!


EXHIBITORS

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Django Reinhardt

Djangology Vol 1 1934-5

Naxos Jazz Legends 8.120515 

Forget hi-fi (what can you expect from recordings of this vintage) this is simply a phenomenal talent at work, making history with some of the greatest guitar work ever recorded. Blending gypsy rhythms with jazz, Django carved a path of his own and found his most sensitive partner in Stephane Grapelli with whom he formed the Quintette du Hot Club de France. This album includes some of their earliest recordings where even dusty standards like *Swanee River* are given a bounce and urgency they normally lack. Grapelli sets Reinhardt off perfectly, each urging the other on to faster and faster paced runs – just listen to *I Got Rhythm* here for proof of their energy. Slower paced numbers, like *St. Louis Blues* work just as well and the fact that Reinhardt achieved all this sans the use of two fingers never ceases to astonish. These recordings have been re-mastered using CEDAR noise reduction. Background noise, although varying slightly from track to track in line with the quality of the available master material, is minimal.

This is among an initial batch of *Jazz Legend* recordings from Naxos that includes recordings from Ellington, Nat King Cole, and Stan Kenton. At the usual bargain Naxos price you should snap 'em up as soon as you see them!

DD



Cal Tjader

Soul Burst

Verve V/V6 8637 (Speakers Corner) 

Recorded in '66 this is one of Tjader's better releases. Whilst he was not an outstanding vibes player he was able to play a leading role in the integration of Latin rhythms and jazz. He was largely responsible for introducing both Willie Bobo and Mongo Santamaria to wider audiences. The Latin influence is there from the first notes of the opening number *Cuchy Frito Man*. What sounds at first like another easy going Latin-fest quickly gets tougher and by the time we reach the percussion-led side one closer *Manteca*, a favourite tune of Dizzy Gillespie, things are really cooking; well, at least they're simmering nicely. The band is fine, with noticeably good flute playing from Jerry Dodgion throughout, and the 12-piece set-up are remarkably tight. The four-man percussion section plays a major role in keeping this session above the easy listening category.

The recording is crisp and clean and the 180g pressing excellent. At just under 36 minutes you barely have time to relax into the album before it's over. Maybe I'm getting too used to CD's.


Supplier: Vivante - www.vivante.co.uk

DD



The Chuck Israels Quartet

The Bellingham Sessions, Vol 2

Audio Ideas ai-cd-013 

Chuck Israels originally came to prominence as the bassist with the Bill Evans Trio from '61 to '66 although he's also paid his dues with a number of other greats including John Coltrane, Bud Powell, and Stan Getz. In the eighties he contributed to a couple of favourite albums of mine: The Kronos Quartet's Bill Evans and Thelonius Monk albums. This album pairs Israels with drummer Donald Bailey, guitarist Dan Faehnle, and pianist Miles Black. Evan's music is an undoubted influence on the set, which runs through a series of traditional and original compositions in a genial and laid back manner, which subtly draws you in to the music and soothes the soul. Israels is content to take a back seat here, providing a sensitive backdrop for the other band members. Faehnle in particular shines throughout with particularly fluid playing. The recording is remarkably natural – no single element intrudes – leaving the focus entirely where it should be – on the music making. This is a 'nice' album in the best sense of that over-used word: no barriers are broken, the entirely natural recording won't wow hi-fi nuts, but to those who enjoy music first it makes an entirely enjoyable and relaxing set.


DD





Lalo Schifrin

Insensatez

Verve V6-8785 (Speakers Corner) 

And now, from the man who brought you *Mission Impossible*, an album of ... well what is it? The album opens with *The Wave*, which with its driving piano theme has more than a hint of his big hit. Then it's straight into Jobim territory with *Insensatez* and on through more Bossa Nova fare including *Samba Para Dos* and *Murmerio*. Schifrin's intention with the album was 'to show respect for the real feeling of bossa nova, using either Brazilian themes or other material that was suitable for that kind of treatment.'

The Creed Taylor production is good, with what sounds like a vast band, the string section and top notes of Schifrin's piano are a little acid but generally this is a very full-blooded recording. The strings are too heavy for my taste tending to rob the album of the Brazilian feel it strives for.

Jobim's albums are, for me, the role model of how strings can be sensitively integrated, adding to rather than sacrificing the atmosphere.

Oh, and just what is it? Easy listening of course: Elevator music for very superior elevators.

Supplier: Vivante - www.vivante.co.uk

DD



The Jerome Harris Quintet

Rendezvous

Stereophile STPI1-013-2 

Recorded in just two days in Acoustic Sounds Blue Heaven studios, this was a labour of love for all involved. The Kansas studios were chosen as a democratically inconvenient venue between the New Mexico based Stereophile crew and the New York based musicians I'm glad they made the choice though, because the set benefits from a convincingly warm, natural sound set in a tangible acoustic space.

Harris plays a Taylor acoustic bass guitar throughout - a very different and to my ears much more musical sound than a conventional electric bass, with a full-bodied, rounded tone. The opening number, *Decision Point* features some fine trombone work from Art Baron, but the standout track for me comes mid-way through the album. The band's take on the Ellington standard *The Mooche* starts in such a laid-back way that you feel it will grind to a halt. It stays in this relaxed groove throughout, but the band overlay some fine soloing that lift the track right out of the rut. Notably Steve Nelson on vibraphone and especially Art Baron, who makes it clear in this number that he's played with Ellington for real.

This is a good, well-played and very well recorded, if musically unexceptional album.


Supplier: www.stereophile.com

DD



Art Blakey! Jazz Messengers!

Art Blakey & the Jazz Messengers

Impulse AS-7 (Speakers Corner) 

'Missis Blakey's only son Arturo' can do little wrong in my book and this '61 set that introduced Wayne Shorter to the band crackles with energy from the start. The rest of the line up includes Lee Morgan, Curtis Fuller, Robert Timmons and Jymie Merritt and you'd think they'd played together for years. The fast-paced opener *Alomode* is followed by a gentler, more sedate *Invitation* which features some fine horn playing from Morgan, Fuller and Shorter; then on to a faster paced *Circus* to close the first side. Side two opens with a fine reading of *You Don't Know What Love Is*. This really plays up the strength of the three horn section with great solos from all three, but more importantly, some really fine interplay. The album closes with a storming rendition of *Gee Baby, Ain't I Good To You*. As ever, Blakey is the glue that binds this band together with his propulsive style, but he never gets in the way of any individual, being perfectly content to lead from the back.

The recording is a fine example of Impulse at its best: each instrument clearly defined, dynamic, warm and full bodied, set in a fairly convincing acoustic space; in fact a fair approximation of live jazz. Recommended.

Supplier: Vivante - www.vivante.co.uk

DD





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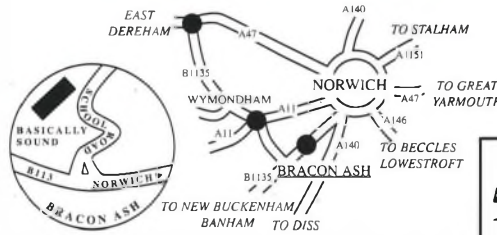


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Fantasia De Mon Triste – Renaissance Lute Virtuosi of Rome and Venice

Christopher Wilson

Metronome MET CD 1025

In 1998, members of the Lute Society voted this as the "Best Lute Recording of all-time". While I would not go that far, it is certainly superb. I have been a fan of Christopher Wilson's craft for a few years, since attending a concert by him and tenor, Paul Agnew, at the Wigmore Hall. He has a superbly clean technique that reveals the sensitivity contained in the phrasing of this refined repertoire, allowing the listener to hear and follow the melodic qualities contained within each piece. Some of the works featured here appear quite improvisational (Spinacino), while the works of Capirola are more simplistic and the Da Milano pieces are markedly more controlled. Wilson overcomes these extremes of style sublimely, with great panache, sympathetically bringing each piece to life, and revealing the musical textures and emotional impressions.

The recording – made originally for Hyperion – is excellent, revealing every nuance of Wilson's instruments. There is plenty of life, and a superb tone, but I would prefer a slightly more distant microphone position.

This is certainly a top recommendation for anyone looking for an excellent introduction to either the lute music of the renaissance, or Wilson's impeccable talent.

SG



Vivaldi Nisi Dominus/Salve Regina/ Concertos for Strings Scholl/Australian Brandenburg Orchestra/Dyer

Decca 466 964-2

Through his associations with the Ospedali (welfare residencies for women), Vivaldi wrote a number of works for the solo female voice. There is today an argument over whether these pieces should be performed and recorded by countertenors such as Andreas Scholl. While there is some basis for the negative, Scholl's performances throughout, but especially in the beautifully crafted *Nisi Dominus*, should be enough to quash this theory. He sings with perfect tenderness, in enchanting contemplation and absolute intimacy. His eloquent diction and superb pitch match Vivaldi's compositional ideas. Scholl's voice sounds haunting in *Surgite Postquam Sederitis* and beautifully pure in *Gloria Patri*, where his only accompaniments are the viola d'amore and the organ. The two motets, *Clarae Stellae*, *Scintillate* and *Vestro Principi Divino*, are infrequently performed and are a very welcome addition to this recording. The two *Concertos for Strings* are inserted between the works for solo voice, and as with those pieces are played with aplomb by Dyer and the ABO.

The recording is very good – being very natural, and vivid enough to reveal the delicacy of the composer's textures.

This is a CD that features Scholl at his superb best, performing works that really suit his consummate talent.

SG



JS Bach Keyboard Concertos Nos. 1, 2 & 4 Academy of St. Martins Perahia

Sony SK 89245

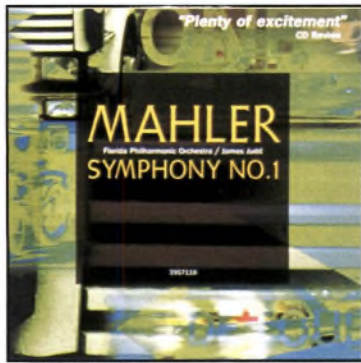
While I have not always been totally enamoured with some of Perahia's recordings, these are superb. The performances are full of life and feeling, and the music seems to dance with infectious stimulation and joy.

Concertos 1 and *2* are based on two of Bach's *Cantatas*, and sound accordingly reverential. Recordings of the *D minor Concerto* can often exhibit austerity, but Perahia's playing is full of verve and vivacity, while his direction of the ASMF is inspired, creating music of delight and freshness. The slow movements are profound, with both Perahia and the ASMF performing with exemplary refinement and sensitivity. In the *A major Concerto*, the ASMF utilise a Theorbo (Bass Lute) to represent the chordal instrument that Bach wrote into the continuo group. This adds some extra texture to the performance, as well as fullness of the recording. The sound is very good, if slightly close. It is full and rich in tone, and vivid enough to hear many clicks from Perahia's fingernails. While this can be occasionally distracting, it does add to the atmosphere.

This is a landmark recording, of Perahia at his very best, which reveals both the greatness and the beauty of Bach's accomplished compositions.


SG





Mahler Symphony No. 1/Blumine

Florida PO. /Judd

Harmonia Mundi
Classical Express HXC 3957118 

This reissue is of a CD that has been hailed as one of the best sounding ever. While that may not quite be the case, the recording is warm, yet vivid and detailed enough to reveal every compositional nuance. The dynamics are tremendous, handling Mahler's brass and percussion with ease, and the acoustics of The Broward Centre match Mahler's ideals superbly, allowing space to develop with the music. Distant hunting horns can be heard far to the rear, and layers of orchestral detail are unveiled.

The performance is also very good, with Judd directing matters with obvious understanding and appreciation. There is a wonderful klezmer-like feel to the *Funeral March*, and the *Finale* is almost apocalyptic in its outburst, yet the whole work comes across with inspirational meaning. The only disappointment comes with some of Judd's slower tempos, especially in the *1st Movement*, which can sound a little ponderous and heavy. The playing of the Florida Philharmonic Orchestra is excellent, and the inclusion of the *Blumine* (Mahler's original *2nd Movement*, removed by the composer for a traditional 4-movement form) is an important bonus.

Harmonia Mundi has given us an audiophile recording, with a very good performance. All at Naxos prices. Fabulous!


SG

RECORDING 
MUSIC



Italian Baroque Sonatas, Vol. 1 Matteis /Suites and Sonatas from "Ayers for the Violin"

The Arcadian Academy/McGegan

Harmonia Mundi
Classical Express HXC 3957067 

Fairly little is known of the life and works of violin virtuoso and composer, Nicola Matteis. The title *Italian Baroque Sonatas* is a bit of a misnomer, as although he was Neapolitan by birth, he came to England in the early 1670's and settled here. The music on this CD comes from his *Ayers for the Violin*, which he composed in four parts, being published between 1676 and 1685. The music is a little quirky, although this is mainly due to its rhythmic qualities. It is relatively simple and rustic in composition, but all the more engaging for it, and there is a general folk-like quality, where the composer has blended rhythms of the baroque with both English and Italian jigs and dances.

McGegan and the Arcadian Academy perform with feeling and enthusiasm, letting the music speak for itself. There are no performing pyrotechnics, just pleasant music played with honesty and intelligence, allowing Matteis' compositional charms to come to the fore. The recording is vibrant, with a lovely depth to the timbre of each instrument, and the performers appear naturally within a persuasive soundstage.

A CD to cherish, that offers an unconventional aspect on the music of the baroque.


SG

RECORDING 
MUSIC



Corelli – Concertos, Vol. 1 – Concerti Grossi, Op. 6 (1-6)

Philharmonia Baroque McGegan

Harmonia Mundi
Classical Express HXC 3957014 

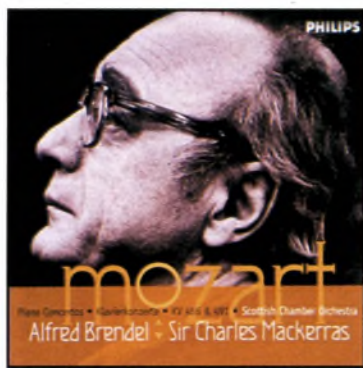
This recording contains the first six of Corelli's wonderful *Opus 6, Concerti Grossi* - hence the Volume 1 classification. But, any first part of these works should include the first eight *Concerti*, and therefore all the *Concerti Dachiesca*, or church sonatas, which have alternating fast and slow movements, as opposed to *Concerti 9-12*, which are chamber sonatas.

These *Concerti Grossi* are some of the jewels in the crown of baroque music, and McGegan and the Philharmonia Baroque Orchestra produce a gem of a performance. Although Corelli craved accuracy and composed with much conventionality and precision, these works display stylistic freedom and virtuosity, which through structured composition and rhythm create the textural contrasts that make them so engaging. The performances are full of vitality, yet are both sympathetic and polished, revealing Corelli's multi-layering of tone. They are beautifully proportioned, and the playing is superb. The recording is also excellent and complements the performance superbly, allowing the musical textures to live and breathe.

These are enthusiastic yet elegant performances of some of the greatest music of the Italian baroque, and an excellent way to begin exploring this wonderful composer's work. This is a very enjoyable CD in every way.


SG

RECORDING 
MUSIC



Mozart
Piano Concertos Nos. 20 and 24

Brendel/Scottish Chamber Orchestra/Mackerras

Philips 462 622-2 

These are two strong and inspirational performances of Mozart's only *Piano Concertos* set in a minor key. *Piano Concerto No. 20* is a dramatic work that Brendel plays as if it is a fresh piece. He is wonderfully inventive, and although his playing is not quite as smooth as that of Uchida, he never fails to hold the listener's attention, through the use of upbeat tempos and the passionate accompaniment of Mackerras and the SCO. *Piano Concerto No. 24* is another work that manifests weight and striking virtuosity. It is often considered as a piece of portentous tragedy, but Brendel supplies a performance full of heroism and lively bravura, balancing the traditional with his own inventive detail. He produces the *cadenzas* for both pieces, to augment those of the composer, which would have been improvised.

Like much of the performance, the recording is detailed and vivid. The performers are placed quite forward, and the piano is much too close, sounding as if the listener were actually seated within the body of the instrument.

While not a first choice for a recording of these two wonderful works, they are recommended to those looking for an edge of the seat performance.

SG



Mahler – Symphony No. 5
(includes discussion disc)

Philharmonia Orchestra/Zander

Telarc 2CD-80569 

Mahler – Symphony No. 5

Junge Deutsche Philharmonie/Barshai

Laurel Records LR-905 

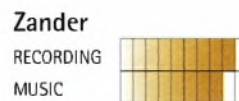
Mahler's symphonies are complete entities, rather than individual movements, and nowhere is this better illustrated than in his *Fifth*. This symphony needs to be thought of in three parts, with the opening two movements creating the first part, the *Scherzo* as the second, and the famous *Adagietto* and the *Finale* making up the third. It should reveal the triumph of light over darkness, but some conductors have treated the *Adagietto* as a Funeral Dirge, rather than the "love song without words" that Mahler envisaged. Since Visconti's film, *Death in Venice*, this treatment has unfortunately become prevalent, losing much of the romance, and putting it out of context with the *Rondo-Finale*'s emotions of hope and joy.

Zander expands on this in his, stimulating and amusing, discussion disc that accompanies his recording, revealing his enthusiasm for, and understanding of, the composer and his work. Zander always makes a great point of stressing Mahler's use of *rubato*, and indeed it is this that gives his compositions their fluidity. The performance flows beautifully, with Zander letting the music speak for itself. He applies generally brisk tempos, which make the music sparkle, and bestow the *Funeral March* with a lack of austerity. The



performance is meticulous, incorporating the crucial contrasts that reveal the symphony's inner details. But, this induces both a lack of passion in the *Adagietto* and a lack of joy in the *Finale*. The playing of the Philharmonia is superb, and the recording is up there with Telarc's best. Barshai's recording has recently been awarded an almost cult status through some outstanding reviews on the Internet, and from the opening fanfare this is indeed a special performance. By treating the symphony as a whole, Barshai has conveyed the complete scope of Mahler's emotions, matching his markings perfectly. Each of the three parts reflects the expanse of Mahler's conception, with Barshai never trapped by the temptation to speed up the *Scherzo* or slow down the *Adagietto*. He is fully aware of the rhythms and phrasing, as well as Mahler's wonderful use of counterpoint, communicating an intrinsic comprehension and extraordinary conviction. This is a performance of passion, thrills and understanding. The Junge Deutsche Philharmonie is immaculate and assured, with the brass being particularly dynamic. The live recording, while not quite in the demonstration class, is wonderfully real and brings a sense of drama to the performance. This is one of the great Mahler performances, and a totally thrilling experience.

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J.S. Bach
Partita No. 2 / Sonata No. 3

Lara St. John (violin)

Well Tempered Productions WTP 5180 

Johann Sebastian Bach's works for solo violin are the epitome of bourgeois good taste. Consequently, when such well-known pieces as the *Second Partita* and *Third Sonata* are delivered in tandem, a little more than the usual "reading by rote" or "sonic painting by numbers" is certainly needed if we are to separate a particular performance from the pack.

A fine starting point, here, is a dry, austere acoustic, pleasantly free from technical embellishments, but strong on transparency, clarity and detail. Across this tautly stretched canvas youthful Canadian soloist, Lara St. John, plays in an expressive style which radiates personal vivacity, flair and imagination. A canny, older violinist would probably have developed a riper, fuller tone for the *Partita's* five dances, while engaging in greater virtuosity during a *C Major Sonata* – both at the expense of tenderness. An obvious alternative to Miss St. John would be Ida Haendel's 180gr triple album recorded by Testament, SBTLP 3090. It definitely possesses compelling levels of insight. Yet, for an uninhibited (sometimes dazzling) and quite refreshing approach – allied to an outstanding 24 Bit HDCD easel – Lara has much to offer and little to learn.

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RP



Jimmie Lee Robinson

All My Life

Analogue Productions Original APO 2011 

For a Nation that possesses so little history of it's own, last year's abandonment by the Chicago City Fathers of a decaying Maxwell Street (instead of preserving and renovating that birthplace of a great blues tradition) was one of those typical expressions of modern mercenary myopia. A few, including Jimmie Lee, protested – but even his Eighty One day fast and its attendant publicity couldn't put a halt to the developer's wrecking ball. This breathtaking recording, through it's old fashioned front porch acoustic virtues, delivers an intelligent valediction upon that bygone age when aspiring blues men could be heard on any of those street corners. Terrifically gritty, mournful songs like *Forty Days and Forty Nights* (Morgan Field) and Robinson originals, *The Girl I Love*, and title track, *All My Life*, recreates that world once again with their poignant acoustic guitars and weeping harmonica licks. The jingle jangle of Jimmie Lee's spurs and those gravel-grazing vocals give them that meaty blend of fat and juices that thickens into a rich musical gravy. With these thirteen steamin' rhythm and blues numbers – amongst them Chester Burnett's, *I'll Be Around* – his slippery, sidewinding sidemen Jimmy D. Lane and Madison Slim are also given ample opportunity to bite down hard on this wonderful material.

RP



Mark Levinson

Live Recordings at Red Rose Music

Red Rose Music RRM01

Mark Levinson (the man, not the company) has recently been inviting musicians, friends and family to record on Sony's DSD system, and this hybrid SACD sampler is the inaugural result of those sessions.

Musically, this disc includes a number of genres, from jazz and blues, to classical and popular. It is generally very well performed with the highlight being Chico Freeman and Bill Sims' rendition of *Goin' Back To Louisiana*. But, there are also two tracks that bring this accomplished level of musicality down with a bump. Here Levinson accompanies his Mother-in-law and Wife's readings of the 23rd Psalm and Rupert Brooke, on eastern temple bells and his 17th Century bass respectively. These are trite and fatuous, and should only be of interest to dealers and those without a musical soul, and I have ignored them in my final rating. The sound is big, vivid and a little too close; meaning it does not have the spaciousness of a single-point recording. But, it does have life, and a wonderfully real timbre.

This is a great demo disc that will find its way into many dealers' systems. It is just a pity that a couple of inane tracks will surely make this a future "Record to die from".

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SG





Shostakovich Symphony No. 5 / Symphony No. 9

Vladimir Spivakov, RNO

Well Tempered Productions WTP 5190



Stylised and contrasting symphonies recorded in the Great Hall of the Moscow Conservatory possess electrifying immediacy of a kind you only get when the orchestra performs live to an appreciative audience. Yes, this excellent-sounding disc does pick up plenty of extraneous noises from musicians and public alike, but it's so refreshing to hear an audiophile CD produced in a fully occupied and atmospheric venue, that any doubts should be put firmly to the very back of your mind – performances emasculated in the editing suite these are not.

There's always been a special affinity between the Motherland's orchestras and her Soviet composers – it shines through as these Russian National Orchestra players, Spivakov and the Moscow concert goers interact. Superbly aggressive and dynamic brass for the central episode of the Fifth Symphony is definitely one of the hallmarks of this highly-rated rendition – as are the notes of discord, protest and impotency drawn out in a generally optimistic-sounding finale.

The *Ninth*, on debut, was a difficult pill for Soviet audiences to swallow, when another triumphant patriotic work to rival the *Eighth* had been expected. Instead a compact, ironic Symphony musing on a post-war world was unveiled. Here, those contemplative qualities are fully resolved.

Supplied by hififorsale.com

RP



Led Zeppelin

4

Classic Records



Any reviewer that assesses the album that contains the all time number one rock track runs the risk of being burned at the stake. No need for my asbestos suit, however, as I concur that, taken on its own merit, 'Stairway To Heaven' is a truly standout track. The problem with it is that over familiarity has lessened its impact, and that it overshadows the other excellent songs on this album, such as 'Four Sticks' and 'Misty Mountain Hop'. 4 saw the boys bringing together into a cohesive whole the disparate elements that almost fatally fractured 3, providing a much more satisfying end result. Side one storms off the block with the heavy rock fireworks of 'Black Dog' and 'Rock'n'Roll', then chills out with the mystic folk of 'The Battle Of Evermore' featuring Fairport Convention's Sandy Denny on guest vocals, before ending the side in style with the world's number one. Side two by contrast is a much more even affair, spotlighting the cavernous sound of John Bonham's kit, which could have been recorded in Wookey Hole. Led Zeppelin 4 is a milestone in rock, and the much maligned 'Stairway to Heaven' is a musical institution. You owe it to yourselves to own a copy. Forget the re-masters, this Classic Records re-issue is the real deal.

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DA



Mendelssohn Symphony No. 3 "Scotch" / Overture "The Hebrides" Otto Klemperer / Philharmonia Orchestra

Testament / EMI Columbia SAX 2342



In this, the most pastoral of Mendelssohn Symphonies, we see play maker Otto Klemperer (who was renowned for his slower than usual speeds) develop an expansive and powerful reading that is, for him, remarkably unfussy in conception. If there is a weakness this lies not in his interpretation, but with a Philharmonia Orchestra that isn't always at its best. However, their playing for *The Hebrides*, by contrast, is so greatly improved that to call them "outstanding" would be no exaggeration. Clearly, the cagey old Doctor imposed his will in no uncertain terms – with the Philharmonia players responding tremendously. Returning to the Third Symphony and the depth of these orchestral (Brahmsian-styled?) textures is warmly reproduced. Contemporary reviews of this 1961 recording cited it for spaciousness and I wouldn't disagree! Additionally Testament have cleaned up the original Columbia's slight tendency towards opaqueness in and around the tuttis and orchestral fringes. This refined level of clarity allows the strings, in particular, to open out – revealing incisive characteristics which propel both works along at their natural tempi. Without doubt this is a nice record to own. A gripping performance of the *Overture* and reasonably sure-footed *Symphony* will please Klemperer acolytes and create a few new converts as well.

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RP



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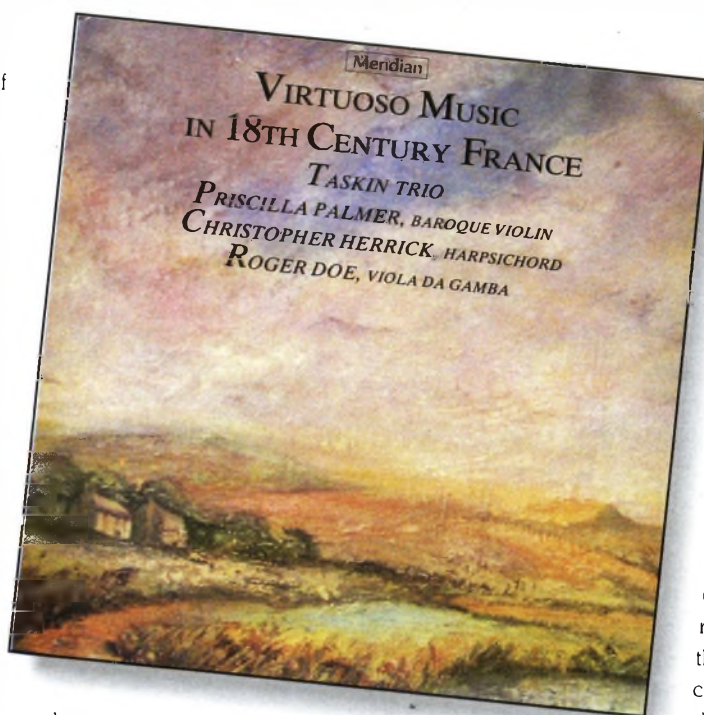
Part 2

by Reuben Parry

Failing memory aside, I still recall something of a conversation thirteen or fourteen years ago with Meridian Records' producer, engineer and fulcrum – John Shuttleworth. At that time they had started to introduce CD releases of their inimitable recordings, while simultaneously scaling down a record stock of around one hundred and forty titles. With spare cash burning a deep hole in my pocket, I contacted John direct to discover exactly what remained of the LP back catalogue. Several calls later I was about a £150.00 poorer but twenty or so LPs the richer.

Typically, when enthusiasts are given an opportunity to air their views, they take it, and I was no exception. Though I no longer remember verbatim what was said it's clear to me, on reflection, how tolerantly and adroitly my layman's observations (probably heard on a thousand previous occasions) were fielded. You may well ask where did this unbridled advocacy for these records stem from?

An answer lies partly within the intelligent selection of repertoire, which avoided a head on collision with the "Big Boys". You won't find too many of the mainstream Mozart or habitual Handel chamber works on Meridian. Instead, they sought out a niche market through music that dripped pools of authenticity. Anthony Holborne's *Muy Linda* and *The Countess of Pembroke's Paradise*



(E77027) comes to mind. And on a rare occasion when, say, a performance of Chopin's *Ballades* (E45001) or the Mozart *Clarinet Concerto* (E77022) made an appearance, then the focal point would more often than not prove to be a soloist. In those two instances it was simply the prospect of readings by, respectively, Colin Horsley (ex-Hallé) and Thea King, that originally drew me towards these releases. Generally, though, Meridian's pull comes from a tasty, real ale-like repertoire in the Holborne mould,

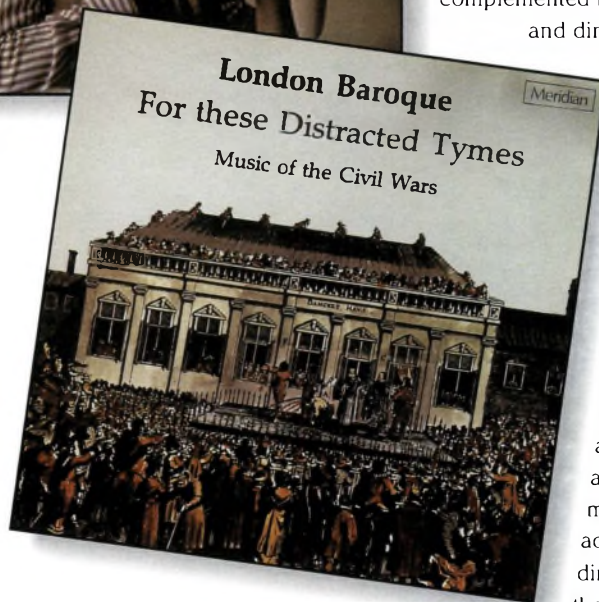
as opposed to another of those factory brewed glasses of Brahms or Liszt.

However, for an almost unrivalled level of intoxication then it is without question the uncannily sharpened image, tactile texturing and subtly developed nuance found within a John Shuttleworth production which will cause many, like myself, to drink deeply from this aural reservoir. His staggeringly heady mixture of recordings neatly divide up into two technical categories. Beginning in 1977, there were excellent standard 33 rpm releases. Later, came the "Natural Sound Recordings" which, significantly, happen to be cut at 45 rpm. These full length LPs are definitely something special in their own right. Easily spotted, (most have a distinctive white name sash across the top left-hand corner of the

▶ album sleeve and are numerically prefixed "E45..."), they enabled J.S. to build upon the seriously good results that had already been achieved with his tried and tested Nagra IV-S tape recorder, AKG mics and Agfa magnetic tape.

There must be at least a couple of dozen of these recordings and their noticeable improvement in sound quality is down to a higher cutting and playing speed that gives far greater head room, allowing records which possess a wider frequency response and dynamic range to be manufactured. Where this technique is effectively combined with Shuttleworth's studied choice, number and position of microphones (in venues that have some of the finest and most sympathetic acoustics imaginable), the end product can be a revelation in terms of scale and immediacy. But before I indulge in a few Natural Sound recommendations there's a smart little feature unique to a Meridian LP. The record incorporates a simple stroboscopic design whose ring of white dots around its' olive-coloured label will, when viewed under a normal 50-cycles per second electric light, appear to remain stationary if an album is turning accurately at 33 rpm. Clever! And worth knowing.

Now, whilst I could just as easily have heaped equal amounts of praise upon any number of these 45 rpm cuts: (John Shuttleworth's reproduction of massed, competing voices and awesome B-flats in choral and organ works pushes air and plumbs the depths in the best possible way – *Music by Orlando Gibbons* (E457706) is a great example of this exceptional clarity, definition and volume) more often than not it is an unusual, sometimes forgotten, bauble which catches my eye. Here, I would cite the evocative *Music at the Court of Spain* (E4577065), or even the varied programme, *His Majesties Sagbutts and Cornetts* (E4577077) that features Sixteenth and Seventeenth Century English composers Bracte, Locke, Adson and Holborne.



Ahead of these, though, my personal preferences dictate that I must place on a pedestal, the *Harpichord Music from the Burghley House Collection* (E4577063). Playing a Shudi Broadwood harpsichord (c.1775), Gerald Gifford returns to the Eighteenth Century manuscripts kept

at Burghley to tease authentic readings of 'Sonata No. 2' (J C Bach), 'Deidamia' (Handel), 'Canzonas in E and G minor' (Zipoli), 'Suite No. 4' (Jones) and the 'Sonata No. 3' (Paradies). Using just a single AKG C24 microphone within the Chapel of Burghley House, John Shuttleworth embraces these bright, elegant musical constructs with an architects eye. The skeletal keyboard qualities captured here are complemented by the crescendo and diminuendo effects,

which on this harpsichord are created by a Venetian swell device that covers the entire sound-board area of the instrument with hinged slats that are opened and closed by a pedal mechanism. It adds an expressive dimension to rival the resources of a piano, making

the lovely "singing" melody of Bach's 'Adante di molto' or those wide, violin-like, Italianate leaps of the Jones 'Fourth Suite' a much more intense experience. Between them, Gifford with his needlepoint accuracy and sculptor's hands, and Shuttleworth, whos observational sense is instinctive, simply enrich these already fine musical textures. For a recording, that is by its' very nature, small-scale, the resolution of tiny changes in the degree of weight and emphasis given to a phrase or even present in the delivery of a single note, is dramatically effective. This has to be put down to the advantageous characteristics associated with higher cutting and replay speeds. ▶

▶ Proving that the minimalist's art was not, in this instance, an accident is easy when records of the calibre of *Guitar Music by Fernando Sor* (E77066) also exist. An early 33 release, and the first Meridian to feature an extremely talented American guitarist, Alice Artzt, (who many will probably recognise as a regular TAS Magazine contributor), it was universally praised at the time. While I could quite reasonably have chosen either this or later *Manuel Ponce* (E77037) and *English Guitar Music* (E77041) collections, I have instead turned to her romantically-styled performances of Francisco Tarrega works (E77026).

Playing (appropriately enough) on an 1858 'La Leona' instrument by Don Antonio de Torres, Artzt enjoys herself tremendously in both the 'Tango' and variations on 'The Carnival of Venice', that were rare extravagant lapses for Tarrega, who was more renown for stately (crafted) vignettes in the salon tradition of the Nineteenth Century.

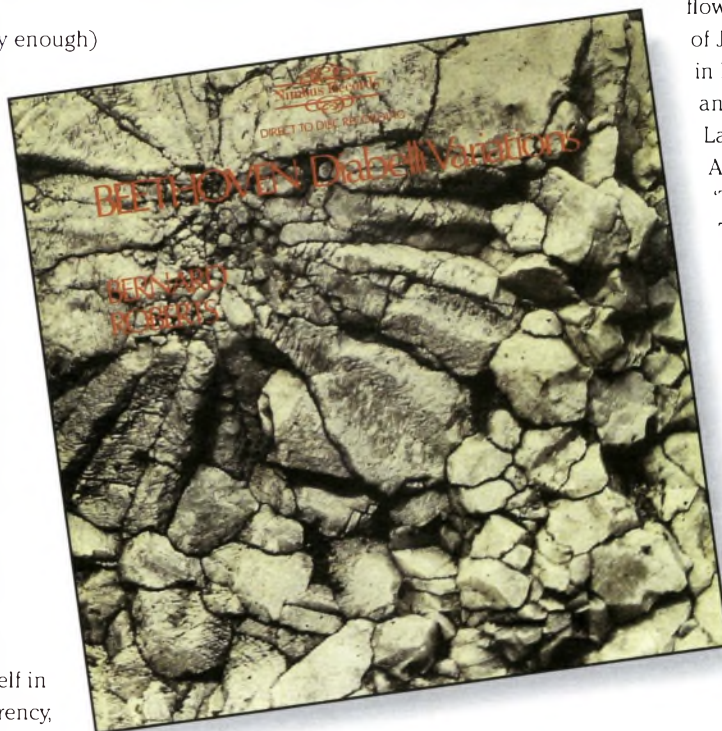
Again, utilizing only one C24 mic, and on this occasion switching from PEM468 to PER525 Agfa magnetic tape, John Shuttleworth excels himself in terms of levels of transparency, detail and focus achieved during a two-day recording session back in September 1978.

This record splits easily down the middle. Side one consists of those (and five more) Tarrega originals, while another seven Haydn, Handel, Schubert and Mendelssohn transcriptions (including 'Barcarola' from songs without words and 'Minuetto' out of the Samson overture) are to be found on its' flip-side. Throughout, Alice Artzt exhibits virtuoso fluency, dexterity and a flawless understanding of this varied material. At the conclusion of a truly gripping recital, I was left in no doubt that she is the mistress of both emotion and technique. Expressive interpretations and sumptuous sound like this alters perspectives. Suddenly you are acutely aware of how articulate a solo guitarist can be.

Group virtuosity can be heard in readings by the London Baroque quintet and period specialists, the

Taskin Trio. These are favourite records that I return to time and again, and ones which also throw some unexpected light on the development/extinction of an "English" school of music – but that is another matter. The former, in an album splendidly entitled, *For these Distracted Tymes – Music of the Civil Wars* (E77059), enthusiastically explore nearly forgotten works from around the time of Oliver Cromwell. Despite the execution scene of Charles 1st depicted on its sleeve, these Civil War ravages seem to have had little impact on the

engaging pieces that flowed from the quills of John Jenkins, 'Fantasy in F major' / 'New Ayres and Dialogues'; William Lawes, 'Pavan and Two Airs'; Matthew Locke, 'Trio Suite in G major'; Thomas Tomkins, 'A Sad Pavan'; William Young, 'Sonatta Seconda'; and two Christopher Simpson pieces, 'Divisions in D major and in F'. With the exception of the harpsichord manufactured in 1979, all the instruments played by London Baroque musicians (violin, viols, organ and



virginals) are roughly contemporaneous to this music. Shuttleworth, wearing only his recording engineer's hat, is joined here by producer Martin Crompton. Employing a pair of AKG C414 mics in a simple set up, they tap into that richly endemic vein which was to eventually all but disappear with Handels' arrival and the ensuing dominance of foreign composers that followed from the early 1700s onwards.

Idiomatically crossing the Channel in pursuit of those distinctly Gallic late baroque/early classical pieces by Duval, Mondonville, Marais, Rameau and Leclair, the Taskin Trio, through their *Virtuoso Music in Eighteenth Century France* (E77046) collection, gave convincing insights on some of the lesser works which would ultimately displace the "English" national style.

It's a close call who is the most assured here. Shuttleworth in the black arts or Priscilla Palmer (baroque violin), Christopher Herrick (harpsichord)

▶ and Roger Doe (viola da gamba). They all puff out their metaphorical chests and strut with that emblematic pride of a cockerel. And quite rightly so. Their combined treatment of 'Pieces de Clavecin en concert' (Rameau), the 'Sonata in A major for violin and continuo' (Leclair), or 'Fantasie and Grand Ballet from Pieces de viole BK.3' exudes charm, grace and vitality. Moreover, the sound effectively develops those sentiments through its' excellent attention to detail, timing and precision – helping to deliver the palpable sense of ensemble conveyed by these Taskin players.

In terms of stagecraft and performance both these LPs are representative and, though I may not have done the overall label repertoire justice with my restricted number of choices, I wouldn't expect anyone to pass up an opportunity to hear curiosities including *Harp Music By John Farry* (E45002) or Anthony Hedges' *Scenes From The Humber* (E77047), should they arise. Even seasonal offerings, *Carols from Norwich Cathedral* (E77100) and the plainsong and motets *In Nativitate Domini* (E77109) should not be overlooked.

These later recordings from the mid-1980s are still superb. However, I strongly believe that Meridian's greatest assets are drawn from the Baroque, and the English composers of that period, in particular. If you have to be choosy, place them at the head of any "wants" list.

Better known than Meridian is, of course, the Nimbus label. Today their presence on the high street is confined to a small, but regular, number of CD releases. Despite the recent resurgence in vinyl sales no new Nimbus LPs have been forthcoming. It seems that once you stop producing records the skills base soon disappears, which is why the closure of EMI's pressing plant could now prove to be a tragedy on the scale of the Decca New Malden debacle.

Turn the clock back twenty five years or so and things were quite different. The breadth and width of those recording projects coming out of Nimbus' Monmouth HQ was notable. In previous issues of Hi-Fi Plus we've touched upon the supercuts for Hi-Fi Today and Practical Hi-Fi

magazines, as well as those pressings done on Lyrita's behalf. But Nimbus made their own vibrant contributions to the recorded music of the day. Quadraphonic, direct to disc and 45 rpm cuts (analogue and digital) all fell within their remit.

When casually running the thumbnail along those Nimbus record spines at home, a pattern of repertoire is fairly quick to emerge. Lots of sonatas and chamber works; Debussy, Franck, Chabrier, Schumann, Brahms, Beethoven and plenty of Chopin - all have their place.

Then there are, of course, those peculiarities



which seem to haunt most of the minor labels – a Welsh Brass Consort's rumble through the Gounod 'Petite Symphonie', Satie's 'Trois Gymnopedies' and five Debussy miniatures that include 'Golliwog's Cake-walk', 'La Fille aux Cheveux' and 'Le petit Negre' (45006) – which, whilst colourful, could hardly be regarded (no matter how remotely) as popular fare.

However, amongst these idiosyncratic moments there are some brightly polished gems. Martin Best and his

Mediaeval Ensemble energetically explore music and song from an "age of chivalry" in a number of worthy and intriguingly well-recorded releases, one of which, *The Last of the Troubadours* (45008) makes it into my firmly recommended category.

Nor was a departure into the realm of a major orchestral recording unheard of. Under Enrique Batiz's baton there are serviceable readings of the emotionally-charged Tchaikovsky *Fifth* and *Sixth Symphonies*, as well as a decent Dvorak *New World*. Interestingly, all were early digital LPs cut at a lively 45rpm. It's a fascinating mixture of safe repertoire and engineering experimentation.

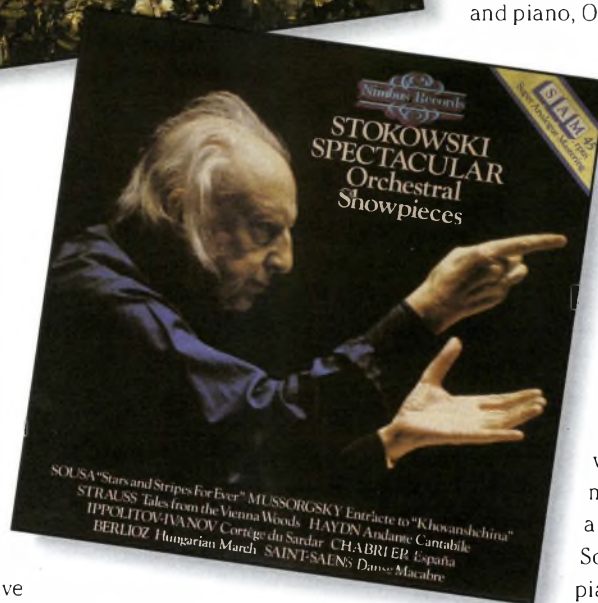
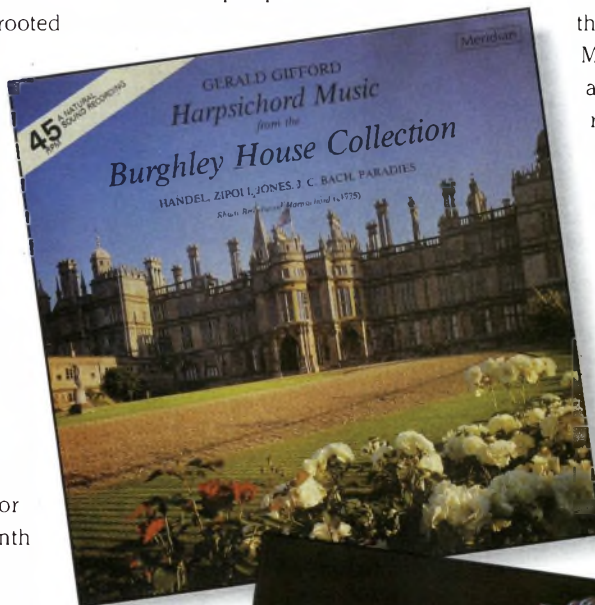
While the Nimbus line up is full of potential, it is a notably less diverse body of work than that found within Meridian's catalogue. Perhaps this makes it a more easily accessible repository from which to

► draw sustenance? Though, as usual, I've still agonised and thought long and hard over my final set of choices during this retrospective. However, I'll begin with something of an indulgence – one which will have a particular resonance for those who've visited Languedoc, read of its history and reflected upon Catharism and the bloody retribution of the Albigensian Crusades.

To set the scene – in South West France during the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries Catharism prospered.

A religious system rooted in dualism, an absence of personal wealth and the belief that social and sexual equality is paramount, was a blinding contrast to the excesses seen within the Roman Catholic Church of the day. Unsurprisingly, this egalitarian regime appealed to the poor and, by the Thirteenth Century, nobility as well. The very foundations of Papal Europe were threatened. Naturally enough, in a church not noted for its' tolerance of alternative religions, up went a cry, "kill the heretics!". *The Last Of The Troubadours*, subtitled: 'The Art And Times Of Guiraut Riquier 1230-1292, documents the closing days of the Cathar Heresy with a reconstruction of that long feudal tradition of sung poetry from this region.

Martin Best and his Medieval Ensemble open with an evocation of Simon de Montfort's sack of Beziers in 1209. Over the next thirty five years of war it's estimated that a million people died for their beliefs as successive crusades set about crushing this perceived heresy. Riquier's verses (accompanied by lute, psaltery, nakers, dulcimer, tabors, rebecs, recorder, pipes, oud, fidele, bells and timbrel) trace the massacres, inquisitions, soul-searching and passionate imagery through a troubadours' art. Over romanticised? Almost certainly. And probably more than tinged with poetic licence.



But brilliantly recorded. The authentic instrumentation and reverberant acoustic is heavily reminiscent of Fonè's excellent, *Ludus Danielis* LP, minus the liturgical robes. A 45 rpm cut, taped during two cold January days in 1981, offers rarely heard dynamic insights. The reproduction of vocal modulations and those less than familiar instrumental timbres, impressively accentuates the rhythmic and melodic cadences of a dying culture. Noiseless vinyl and

a highly informative translation completes the picture. These Nimbus Super Analogue Masters (like their Meridian counter-parts) are also easily spotted. Look for the SAM 45 rpm ribbon across the right-hand corner of the sleeve – it's a badge of excellence.

My next selections are much more musically representative of the Nimbus catalogue as a whole. Nineteenth Century lyrical 'Sonatas' from Brahms and Schubert (NIMBUS 2111) and those formidable Beethoven *Diabelli Variations* (NIMBUS DC906) are left to the capable hands of cellist, Amaryllis Fleming and pianists, Geoffrey Parsons and Bernard Roberts.

The 'Sonata in E minor for cello and piano, O.P.38' (Brahms) and

'Sonata in A minor for arpeggione and piano, D821' (Schubert) provides an opportunity for both soloists – Fleming and Parsons – to exercise some virtuoso skills through the purposeful directness of a mature Brahms work and then, contrastingly, explore wistful, poetically tender moments heard in a song-like, 'A minor Sonata', where the piano part adopts an accompanist role.

Impressively, for an early (1977) cut, Nimbus (without the "Super Analogue Master" or "Direct To Disc" markers) sets a very high recording standard. Amaryllis Fleming's Amati five-string cello of 1610 (the "arpeggione" of the Schubert piece was a novelty instrument – a guitar-cello that had six strings and fretted fingerboard) has tremendous presence and is

► full of animation. While a reproduction of Geoffrey Parsons dexterous keyboard work (especially in the Brahms fugal-style Allegro finale) is delivered with such elegance, weight and tenaciousness that the piano images are naturally overpowering.

When a normal Nimbus pressing is considered to be so good, and these are, what can you expect from those legendary qualities of a direct to disc recording?

Beethoven's *Thirty Three Variations on a Waltz by Diabelli, O.P.120* is such an LP. This is a very interesting choice of material out of which to make one of these strictly unedited performances, recorded directly from a studio microphone to the master laquer disc. The diabolically difficult 'Variations' are an ultimate test for a soloist's technique, virtuosity and showmanship. For any pianist this method of recording leaves no margin for error because there's simply no tape to edit should things go badly wrong in the studio.

Understandably, whilst Bernard Roberts gives a fearless performance of this massively structured work, it is not a flawless one.

However, the bravura, tension and sharp dynamic contrasts do justice to Beethoven's genius – Variations Twenty One and Thirty One being great, fluctuating examples. If you want a "note-perfect" rendition, look elsewhere, but I seriously doubt that it will sound half as good as this one.

The recording was made out at the Nimbus Wyastone Leys studios on the 16th March 1980, where Bernard Roberts' Steinway Model D Concert Grand was captured by a single Calrec CM 4050 microphone linked to a Neumann SX74 cutting head with valve amplification – resulting in an unabridged performance, of superb clarity and accuracy, full with a natural ambience but without any artificial reverberation – that clearly reproduces all those high energy transients present in the 'Variations'.

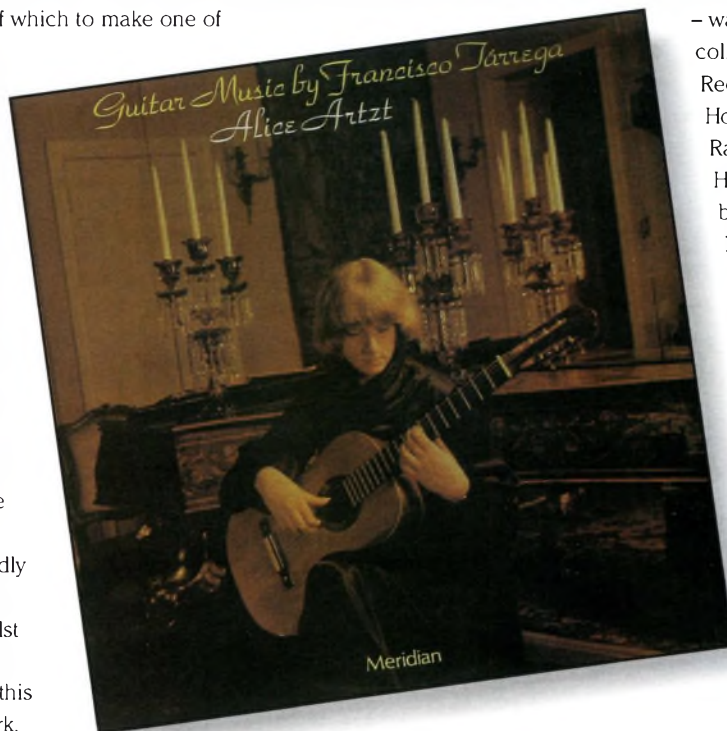
For my closing gesture, though, I'll eschew the serious business of Nineteenth Century Classicism, or those leathery Medieval parchments, in favour of an extremely

colourful and energy-filled musical collection. Was there ever a better interpreter or conductor of the orchestral spectacular than Leopold Stokowski? I think not! Here, it's the well-known 'Stars and Stripes' (Sousa), 'Entr'acte from Khovanshchina' (Mussorgsky), 'Tales from the Vienna Woods' (Strauss), 'Andante Cantabile' (Haydn) 'Cortege' (Ippolitov-Ivanov), 'España' (Chabner), 'Hungarian March' (Berlioz) and the 'Danse Macabre' (Saint-Saens) which receive the old maestro's vigorous treatment. This album

– a posthumous 1982 release – was actually made in collaboration with Pye Records producer Antony Hodgson and engineer Ray Prickett at the West Ham Central Mission back in November 1975. It's another high-speed Super Analogue Master (NIMBUS 45204) that shows a clean pair of heels to all competition. These explosive compositions just really benefit from the wide-ranging dynamics made naturally available to them on this format. Stokowski, in his ninety fourth year no less, brings an

extra degree of electricity to proceedings. It's a typical fire-cracker performance from his 'Indian Summer' of recordings made during the 1970s. Moreover, the National Philharmonic Orchestra, fresh from their own film music exploits for RCA under the Charles Gerhardt baton, are really up for this tilt at the lighter side of the classical music spectrum. Their playing is joyous.

Looking back amongst the many Meridian and Nimbus LPs raises eyebrows and smiles in almost equal amounts. Both Companies make the most of limited resources. The performances they have elicited from what are largely second-string bands of musicians are startlingly good. Whilst, where the recordings are concerned, cocking a wrist and throwing the dice isn't necessary, it only remains to grade them for degrees of excellence. Then there are those records, like the Stokowski spectacular, which are simply great fun to own. Even an instructive quality found within the 'Troubadours' LP, is enjoyable because it sheds so much light on rare and rarely heard music. Buy them all with confidence.





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