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Editorial

This issue sees the advent of One Careful Owner and our first article on buying quality hi-fi secondhand. It might seem like an unusual topic for a magazine that concentrates on reviewing new kit, but used equipment is, and always has been a vital element of the high-end hi-fi world. Not only does a carefully chosen secondhand purchase stretch your budget further, but it greases the wheels of the market as a whole. After all, the hi-fi industry relies to a huge extent on the impulse to upgrade. The customer who leaps straight in at the deep-end is out there, but they're few and far between. Instead people tend to work their way up the ladder one step at a time, and that means that each new purchase generates something secondhand that needs to find a home. In fact, where equipment is traded in, any profit from the sale is tied up in the part-exchange. If the used units hang around then they put a severe crimp into a dealer's cash-flow, which is why many dealers sell on a customer's behalf rather than operating traditional trade-ins.

All that means that the hi-fi buyer looking for a bargain is going to be spoilt for choice. Indeed, it's the breadth of weird and wonderful equipment available that is often the problem, tempting the unwary into purchasing cheap exotica with a dodgy reliability record that doesn't actually fit their system. Instead, what we'll be concentrating on will be the sort of solid building blocks that can offer a sound foundation for future upgrades. And where better to start than the venerable Linn LP12 turntable. It might have slipped from the analogue pinnacle that it once occupied, but it's still one hell of a turntable and arguably the best vinyl replay value on the market. Where we go next? Now, that's an interesting one!

Roy Gregory



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THE ORDER IN AUDIO ENGINEERING

Featured
Speaker_LAT 1

Upper_Showcase Processor
Lower_Showcase Cinema Amplifier

Far right_Krell FPB 750MCX Amplifier



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Music+

Music Reviews

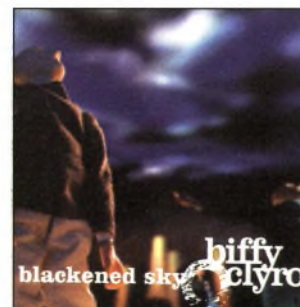
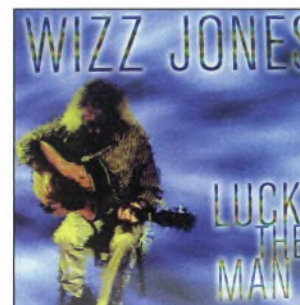
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The full Duevel range of omnidirectional speakers. Exceptional performance from the little Venus (£1795), the popular Bella Luna (£2995), and the imposing Jupiter (£7500).



The Nottingham Analogue Spacedeck (£862.50) and Hyperspace - pictured - (£1955), both priced without arm, are firm favourites here. They ooze quality and sound great; a lasting investment.



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Incoming!

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or via the web-site at www.hifiplus.com

Dear Sir,

I thought I would make a few comments about your editorial in issue 16, in the context of my first visit to a Hi-Fi show.

As a show 'virgin', I am not sure what I was expecting; enlightenment, education, perhaps mainly to hear a range of different sounds. In many ways I was disappointed. As your article suggested, I heard noise at filling loosening intensity, which left me with slight but alarming tinnitus by the end of the day. The music was not only loud but similar, rock, acoustic guitar and solo voice and gentle jazz. Am I being cynical in thinking these are easy and impressive to reproduce at high volumes? Why no choral, opera or complex orchestral music? I know this goes back to the old question, why can't demonstrations use your choice of music? Because it might be too difficult, or less than perfectly recorded.

There were definite harbours of quiet and sanity. I headed straight for the Living Voice demo room. Like you I love their speakers and recently acquired a pair of Auditoriums. I wanted to see if I could be convinced that only valve amps would do. I wasn't.

The only education, and boy was it, was the Nordost cable demonstration. Lars Kristensen used worse and worse recordings to demonstrate better and better cable, plumbing the depths of Deep Purple! Why doesn't anyone else deliberately use bad recordings? I was convinced enough to shell out for a set of Blue Heaven interconnects. But where were the other demonstrations and comparisons? I would have liked Lars to go on and use the Primare gear he had, with and without Pulsar Points, but he couldn't be expected to do everything. Why by and large was no one else doing anything similar? Just room after room of ear splitting noise. Any system can sound good, or should that be "impressive" at 150 dB, but no one listens at home like that, so what's the point.

Don't get me wrong, I enjoyed the show and would go again, but how many companies were playing a good variety of real music at real volumes? Or trying to demonstrate or contrast different approaches. Am I being hard in suggesting it all seemed a bit lazy, to an only

moderately informed enthusiast?

As a newcomer to your magazine, I would also like to say how refreshingly different it seems to all your competitors. I like the tone of the reviews, but miss one aspect the others cover. I refer to comparative reviews or group tests.

Most reviews are complimentary, reading between the lines, some are more complimentary than others; for example your enthusiasm for Living Voice speakers seems. Nevertheless, if you don't do direct comparisons how can you "grade" enthusiasm. I presume the lack of group tests represents policy. Perhaps you feel they are too subjective, but so are single equipment reviews particularly when the reviewer is comparing with his own set up presumably bought with his own hard earned cash. I have always found group tests most helpful in looking for the next upgrade, especially as I also shop secondhand.

This really makes direct comparisons impossible, unless you are going to use your retailer for the comparison and buy elsewhere, which seems dishonest. It does allow for poking around some of the wonderful second hand shops we have in the UK, with their racks of Victorian steam driven valve amps. It also makes for great chance discoveries, such as the EC Audio Finestra pre-amp I found a few months ago. I'd never heard of it but I think it is a great product with a particularly good phono input.

I am digressing, but thanks for an excellent read, and particularly the music reviews and your very good Web Site. Best Wishes

David Wise

As regards group testing of products, it is indeed our policy to avoid this except in certain defined situations. The reason is that any such test will simply tell you which of the products being assessed will work best with the system being used for the listening. Thus, although it might appear that such an approach will deliver a general conclusion, in reality it's actually doing completely the opposite. Instead we listen to products in a whole range of system contexts, and then try to indicate which one suits each product best. Ed.

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Dear Sir,

Your magazine has brought much pleasure to us here at Vivante Productions Limited. It's mixture of software and hardware reviews and witty columns from the likes of Jimmy Hughes are both informative and amusing.

However, I feel moved to write regarding Simon Groome's recent feature on Super Audio CD's. We fully understand his frustration at the lack of retailers who stock SACD software. So he may be relieved to learn that Vivante Productions probably stock more SACD labels and titles than just about anyone else on the planet... This may sound like a bold claim but it just happens to be true. We carry the full range of Sony, Chesky, Fone, Waterlily, Telarc, Groove Note and Linn SACDs, as well as a few others.

Please publish this letter so that all those lovers of the SACD format know that Vivante Productions should be able to satisfy their every SACD desire! Please refer to our adverts in your magazine for details. Thanks again for a great mag. Best wishes

Sean Ormonde/Mike Fegent

Directors Vivante Productions

Dear Sir,

Thank you all for making Hi-Fi+ such a pleasure -and so inexpensive, now that other hi-fi magazine subscriptions can be cancelled.

Your refreshing assessments have persuaded me to 'open the anorak' a little on thoughts of lower-cost upgrades for we hi-fi hoi polloi.

Basic discoveries over the last 30 years have significantly and afford ably improved home hi-fi listening, This leaves me nervously nibbling my anorak toggles wondering what similarly simple improvements remain undiscovered.

Worryingly -speaker spikes, equipment racks, cable directionality, power cord quality, mains cleaners and many more developments post-dated our very cleverly landing a man on the moon -which tells us something about the priorities on this planet.

Here are a few other upgrades I'm presently worrying about but don't have good enough facilities -including my late-middle-aged ears -to properly assess. I therefore leave it to your fearlessly informative organ to explore their benefits.

1. Cartridges are electromechanical devices. It would be odd if they alone failed to benefit from a thorough warming up before each serious listening session.
2. Perhaps they aren't alone. How about speaker drivers?
3. What is the point of meticulous vibration control when you then pummel the equipment with high energy soundwaves from your speakers? Surely speakers should

be the only hi-fi items in your listening room.

4. We are happy to enhance our poor eyesight with spectacles, microscopes, night vision equipment and image-enhancing software. The human ear is also inferior compared to those of many creatures a long way down the food chain.

Should we design 'listening hoods' to be worn like giant bat's ears? A sophisticated arrangement of damping material, baffles and sliding apertures could allow individual and precise acoustic tailoring at a fraction of the cost of the usual upgrades.

5. Mains degradation can be addressed relatively cheaply. Fluctuating mains quality is more expensive to fix. So why not copy the old sailors who couldn't influence the winds and tides -but sailed when they were favourable?

Anoraks like me would pay to know how noisy their mains is and how the voltage fluctuates. So, design a combined Noise Sniffer (a la Russ Andrews) and a Voltmeter. The voltmeter should have a reset table high/low reading like a barometer.

An Advanced model could include a dial calibrated from Heavy Metal through Jazz and Smooth Classical to Plainsong. When the mains is less than perfect the minimally acceptable style of music would be indicated. A variable damper on the needle would allow calibration of the user from 'Young & Athletic' to 'Geriatric & Frail' -to avoid undue stress if the recommendation swings to and fro.

The Reference model could include a triggering mechanism to a house bell, siren or strobe. When mains quality improved to a pre-selected minimum the alert would be activated so the owner could stop gardening, decorating or whatever and rush in to start Listening. Based on the Advanced model, this may require dual calibration for users from Athletic to Geriatric, as well as a setting for the difficulty of intervening terrain.

I hope this is of interest. It's not easy typing in the foetal position.

Yours sincerely,

David Harris

Via E-mail

Of course, both cartridges and drive-units do warm-up. Likewise, a company in the US did actually marketed a set of leather ear extenders, although I believe the product was short lived. If you want to hear the benefits simply cup your hands behind your ears. But the variable quality mains assessment barometer is genuinely novel. Surely it's not beyond the wit and wisdom of the audiophile community to generate such a device - and when they do we'll definitely review it. Ed.



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"Budget" separates from Audio Research

Following the appearance of the SP16 pre-amp, Audio Research has announced a new partner for it, the VS55 stereo power amplifier. The combination together means that customers can now enjoy ARC pre-power ownership for under \$5000, and that's sure to attract interest.

Harking back to the SP8, the 16 is an all valve unit offering not just four line inputs but a medium gain phono stage as well (a line-only 16L will also be available) in a single chassis styled after the company's CD players. So soft-touch buttons and remote control replace the oval rotary knobs and chromed toggle switches, but this still remains visibly an Audio Research. In another nod to current trends it also offers a processor pass through. Inside the circuit is highly regulated and features a cathode follower output stage and digitally switched analogue



volume control. Gain in the line stage is 12dB, while the phono input provides a total of 54dB.

The VS55 also marks something of a visual departure for Audio Research, with its traditional open chassis look. It's a push-pull design built around pairs of 6550EH output

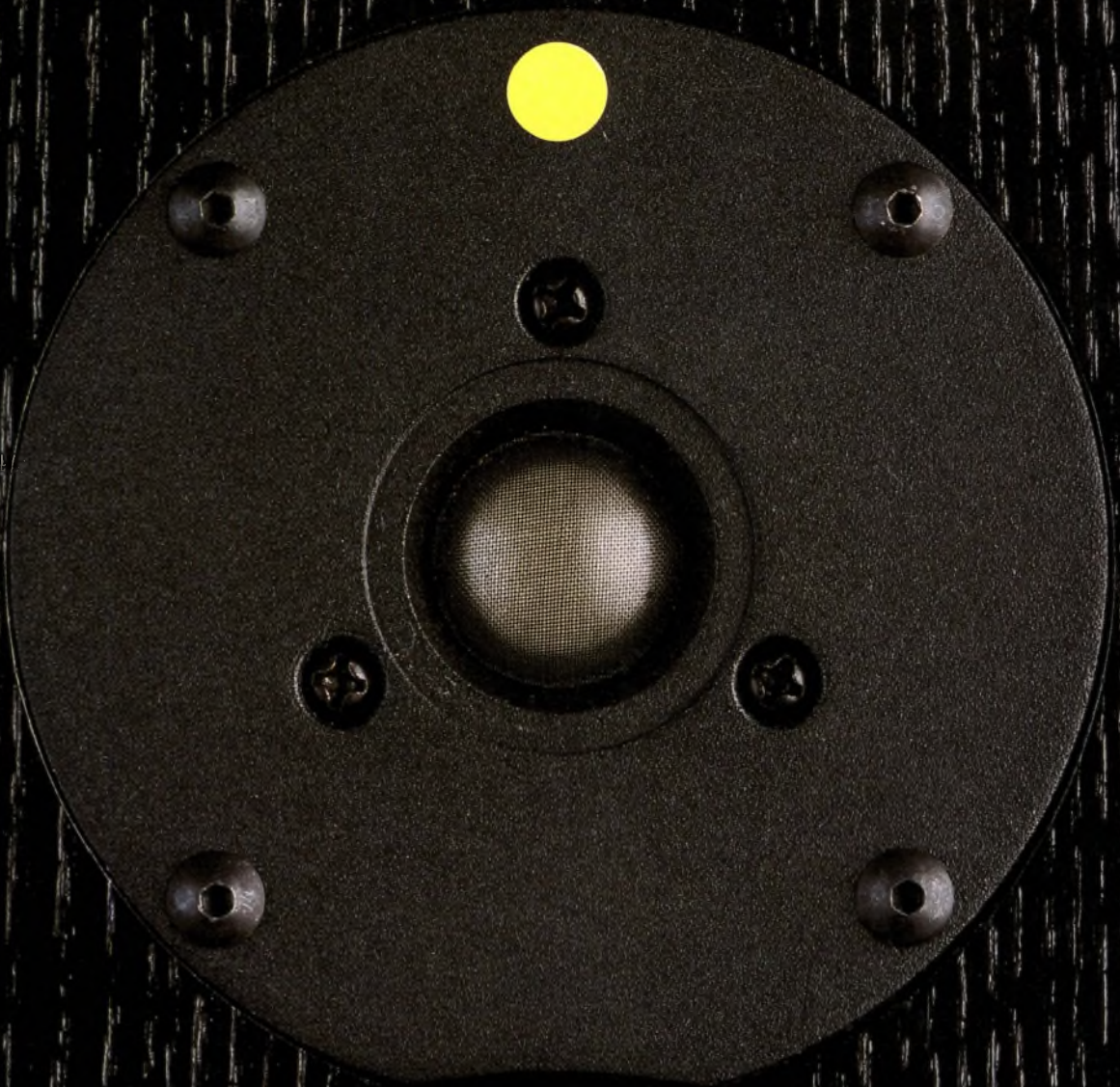
tubes, although whether it's ultra-linear (a la VT100) or not remains to be seen. It also features ARC's normal generous power supply arrangements.

As a combination the SP16 and VS55 echo the SP8/D70 pairing that did so much to establish Audio Research's reputation on this side of the Atlantic. Whether they can fill such illustrious boots only time will tell, but I for one am looking forward to finding out.



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Heathrow Hi-Fi Show

I think it's fair to say that it wasn't without some trepidation that the exhibitors gathered at the Heathrow Renaissance Hotel (the Penta as was) for the brave new world of a spring show in London. With any such venture there's always a risk of failure, and given the degree of confusion surrounding shows in general, and the political back-stabbing that's been going on over London in particular, this could only be described as a high risk venture.

Imagine then, the surprise and blossoming sense of satisfied pleasure that spread amongst those exhibitors brave enough to appear as it slowly dawned on everybody that this wasn't just going to work, it was actually going to succeed handsomely. Indeed, several of the show visitors remarked to me that it was the best show they'd ever attended, and comments were universally positive. That's the visitors talking, not me.

So how can what was, frankly speaking a tiny show, attract such a response? Well, let's look at the elements. First and foremost, the limited number of exhibitors meant that everybody got a big room and a reasonable chance to show what they could do. Also, the uncertainty surrounding the event meant that a lot of the big players stayed away. That meant that for many visitors this was their first opportunity to hear the kind of equipment that all too often finds itself shoved into the broom cupboard that passes for the average hotel bedroom under rather less restrictive circumstances. And if the rooms weren't thronged with jostling crowds, that actually allowed people to sit and listen, taking the time to appreciate what was on offer and talk at length to the exhibitors. The lack of really heavy hitters and multi-national conglomerates also meant that we were spared the deluge of A/V demonstrations and sub £500 5.1 systems that are increasingly characteristic of hi-fi shows these days. What we got instead was an honest to God high-end hi-fi show of the kind the specialist manufacturers have been crying out for for years now.

How could it be a high-end show without the likes of Absolute Sounds, Audiofreaks, B&W, Path Premier and Naim? Well, how does a product line-up that included the Clearaudio Master Reference deck carrying the Shun Mook cartridge, the Halcro amps, CAT pre-amp and A Cappella speakers sound to you. Then there were products from Lamm, Reference 3a, Antique Sound Labs, Renaissance, VPI, Border Patrol, Living Voice, Beauhorn, Audio Note, Rogue Audio, Amphion and Boulder amongst others. More affordable offerings were to be had in the shape of speakers from Reference Audio, Audio Vector and

Cadence, electronics from Loricraft and a whole host of accessories from Activ Audio. And don't go thinking that's a comprehensive list by any means.

For those on the lookout for product launches there was the Boulder 2008 phono stage at a cool \$25000! I'd be reviewing it if someone hadn't bought it at the show. Never mind, there's another on the way. Audio Atmosphere were showing the beautifully understated Hegel amplification, hailing from Norway but first spotted at Frankfurt a couple of years ago. Border Patrol also showed their new 22W push-pull 300B, carrying a full complement of Golden Dragon mesh anode valves (see Audio Smorgasbord) and boasting not one but two MB power supplies. Yes I did ask for one to review! Activ Audio were demonstrating the extremely effective Isotek mains products. The brainchild of Nick Poulson of Trilogy fame they offer massive isolation transformers and the configurable Sub-Station parallel filter system, capable of feeding up to six individual components. Nicely styled (especially the cuboid transformers) there's a lot more here than meets the eye, and once again, a review will be forthcoming. Expect to see a novel regeneration set-up too.

Sadly, the new Lavardin IT arrived just too late to take part, but what is for me the most eagerly anticipated product of the year will also be making an appearance in these pages shortly. As this isn't a full-on show report I'll confine myself to these high lights, but they should serve to give you a flavour of proceedings.

I've always held that it's the quality of show visitors that matters and not the number and so it proved here. Two days of intelligent discussion and pertinent questions proved the point, while the software sellers did a roaring trade in both vinyl and CDs. Ironically, the only disgruntled exhibitor was Quadraspire who'd elected to do a static display rather than their entertaining and convincing active demonstration. And that with the ideal audience just waiting to lap it up.

There's been a tendency to try and recapture the glory days of the Penta show. I think that's a mistake and that this Heathrow event provides an important pointer for the future. Take its vital ingredients (a good location with decent, large rooms; active magazine support; quality hi-fi orientated demonstrations) and add another twenty or so exhibitors and local dealer support and you'd have a blueprint for a series of half a dozen smaller, but higher quality events, spread around the country. Sounds like exactly the kind of impetus and new direction the hi-fi industry could do with!



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The Wrong Trousers...

In the rush to get Issue 16 out in time for the Bristol Show we suffered from one of our now notorious typos. Problem is, this one was the title of one of our product of the year awards! So, red faces all round when Ricardo pointed out that while he was obviously very happy to receive an award for the Audio Research LS2 Mk II, it was somewhat overdue, and that the unit we'd actually reviewed was the LS25 Mk II. However, the ever mischievous distributor couldn't help but be amused by the prospect of a sudden hike in the price of used LS2s as secondhand dealers scramble to acquire them! Would that we were that influential...

*Apologies all round,
and especially to ARC, who should by now
have received their corrected award.*



Denon/Marantz Merger

In a surprise move, Marantz has cemented its post Philips future by merging with Japanese electronics giant Denon. Both brands will continue to sell and market goods separately, but combining development budgets and efforts will enable them to compete far more effectively in world markets and areas of new technological development. Although both companies enjoy a high profile in the hi-fi market, they are relative minnows compared to the true consumer electronics conglomerates such as Sony and Philips. The new company will employ around 1650 people world wide, which puts things into some sort of perspective.

Whilst this decision is unlikely to have any immediate effect on the hi-fi market or the products we see, it is indicative of the widening gap between the specialist hi-fi sector and the consumer electronics market. Increasingly, it is going to be difficult to straddle that divide and companies are going to have to decide which side of it their future lies. Meanwhile, all those who are hoping for a convergence of the two should take note. There will be consumer electronics. If we are lucky there will also be hi-fi, but it isn't going to come from the same place.



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- several major **RECORD LABELS** are backing SACD with many new releases
- difficulties continue with a reliable **COPY PROTECTION** code for DVD-A.

New transports will now appear, eg the **dCS VERDI**, able to play both SACD and CD at high quality. Some early one-box SACD players were compromised on CD.

We believe record companies are keen to back SACD because it is secure and cannot be copied. DVD-A's protection relies on a vulnerable software code.

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Music in the home



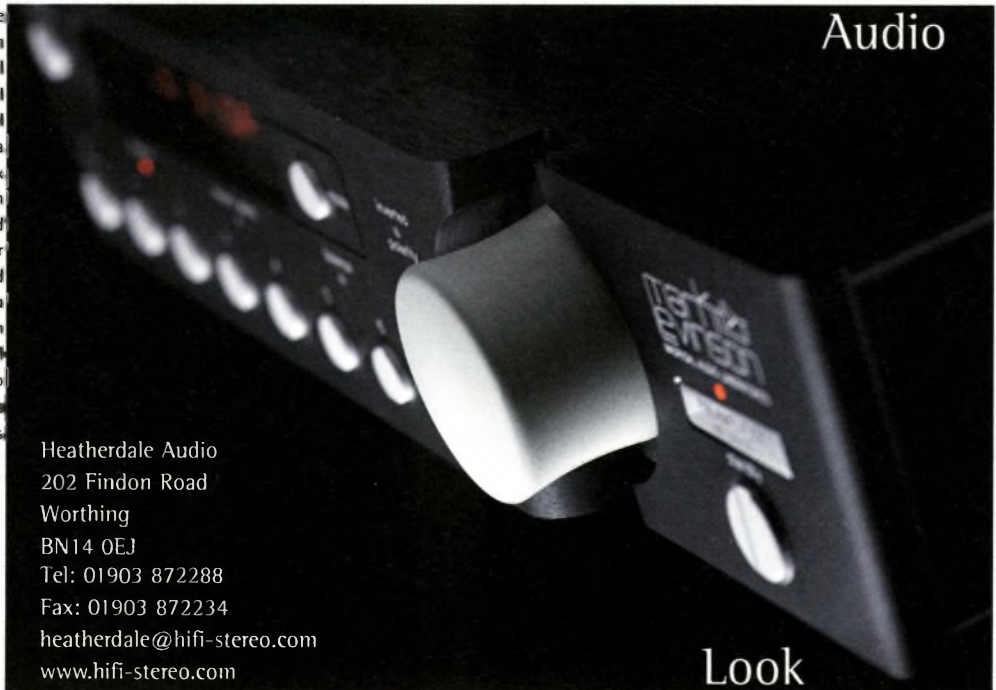
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CD: ACCUPHASE, ADVANTAGE, AUDIO SYNTHESIS, dCS (ELGAR, DELIUS, PURCELL AND VERDI), MERACUS, PASS, SUGDEN, WADIA. **VINYL:** AUDIO SYNTHESIS, BASIS, CLEARAUDIO, DNM, (THE) GROOVE, GRAHAM, LEHMANN, MICHELL, STRATOSPHERE, SUMIKO BLUE POINT SPECIAL, TRANSFIGURATION. **AMPLIFIERS:** ACCUPHASE, ADVANTAGE, BALANCED AUDIO TECHNOLOGY, CAT, DNM, GAMUT, HOVLAND, NAGRA, PASS, SONNETEER, SUGDEN. **LOUDSPEAKERS:** AUDIO PHYSIC, BKS, ETHOS, LUMLEY, MAGNEPLANAR, NEAT, TOTEM, VERITY AUDIO. **TUNERS:** ACCUPHASE, MAGNUM DYNALAB. **CABLES:** ARGENTO, CHORD Co., DNM, HOVLAND, NORDOST, SILTECH, SPECTRAL, YAMAMURA CHURCHILL ETC

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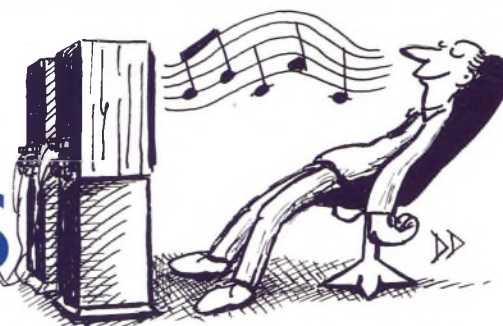
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Look

Listen

Sound Affects



by Alan Sircom

I go from one extreme to another: on the one hand, there's full-blown surround sound music and video; on the other, there's a Tivoli Audio Model One table radio, which is bandwidth limited and mono. Guess which one I listen to the most?

All change is progress, but not all progress is vitally important. Sometimes, despite our best intentions, technological progress ends with regress in performance. So it is with multi-channel audio and home cinema, at least in part.

Although the complexity of today's systems has increased, the price we are willing to pay for them hasn't. A true hi-fi buff of the early 1990s would not hesitate to drop £1,000 or £2,000 on his or her system, to get a good sound. A decade later, we have a source unit that is supposed to cope with stereo sound, multi-channel sound and high quality video in one, six speakers instead of two and an amplifier with five power amplifiers and a sophisticated digital decoder inside. Despite this technological sophistication and proliferation of speakers, many are reluctant to spend much more than they did on a two-channel system a decade ago. It's little wonder that multi-channel has a reputation for mediocre sound quality compared to two-channel kit.

It doesn't have to be that way. Good multi-channel systems can sound remarkable, even in stereo, but to get good multi-channel takes money and to get good stereo out of multi-channel kit takes big money. The sound of a CD played through a cheap DVD player into a tiny set of 5.1 speakers does not do the medium justice at all. It's a little like LP in the days before the likes of Linn began to inject a bit of quality into the sound. Whether you like the products or not, Linn's 1970s marketing genius turned the spotlight on the record player as a potential source of great (or very poor) sound.

We have grown out of the more fevered flat earth views these days, but someone needs to shake up the home cinema world as dramatically as Linn did to the

hi-fi industry of its time (but this time hopefully without the zealots). Otherwise, we will remain in this curious state where the equipment gets better and the sound gets worse.

A big part of the problem, however, is complexity. The very fact that a modern home entertainment system can play stereo or even mono sounds, doesn't automatically mean it is particularly good at the job. The old maxim 'Jack of all trades, master of none' has never seemed so valid. So far, the best multi-channel systems I have heard to date have focused on the stereo system first, and then grafted on separate sources, decoder and extra speakers to the system as an add-on. Although this is a more cumbersome way of spinning your DVDs, from a purely sonic aspect, it rocks!

There is a parallel with computing here. There are two ways of dealing with data, like the text of this column. The most common way is to use an 'application' like Microsoft Word. The 'application' comes bundled with all sorts of features, options and text-wrangling features; generally more than any one user will need, all under the same banner. However, a few Unix-loving ubergeeks prefer a more basic approach and use a different tool for each task in the document creation chain. The Unix-user has a vast array of different tools to hand, allowing them to fine-tune their text-generation process to fit their tastes perfectly. They will type the copy in a text editor like Vi or Emacs, then pipe that text to a spell checking program such as Spell and grammar checkers like Style or Diction, then finally to a text formatting or email program such as Enscript, LaTeX or Mutt. If they want to write a letter, the text file might be passed through up to half a dozen small 'tool' programs, each one specified by the user. These may make life more difficult for the occasional user, but those tools are blindingly fast even on a slow PC, don't ever crash or freeze and keep the file size as small as possible. It's a different kind of flexibility.

By these standards, a modern all-singing, all-



▶ dancing multichannel system is the perfect example of an application. They are the Swiss Army Knives of audio and can be equipped to play anything from an old mono recording to the very latest MLP-equipped multi-channel disc. Furthermore, the flexibility and ease of use both make such systems a shoe-in for most people, who look upon 'mere' stereo systems the same way as a PC buff might look at an abacus. And, if the system is well-matched and of good bloodstock, it will sound good at some or all of the tasks it has in its extensive repertoire. By contrast, a good stereo system or even a decent mono radio is a tool; it only does one thing, but it does it exceptionally well.

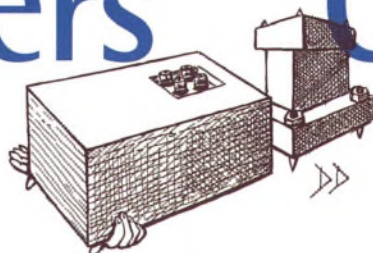
Perhaps the tool-based approach is the right one, at least for the purist. Such a system will have one set of tools for handling stereo sound and an extra set for dealing with multi-channel or AV. That way, we can concentrate on getting the audio side correct before applying the same rigid set of criteria to select home cinema components. This works exceptionally well, especially as TV or DVD sound through a stereo hi-fi system has far more to offer than our home cinema cousins would have us believe.

Furthermore, the tool approach allows us to bias

the system in accord with our own viewing/listening tastes and priorities. However, as the tools used for creating sound (for example, a CD) and those used to generate pictures (like a DVD player) must stay on their own side of the tool box, it can spell a lot of extra components than is normally found in today's increasingly integrated systems. For example, using a DVD player as a CD player would undermine the toolkit approach; a CD player is a tool to play CDs, and a DVD-Video player is a tool for playing DVD-Videos. This does leave DVD-Audio and SACD out in no-mans land on a number of levels. Not only do these products cross the audio-video divide, but ask of us the question about their status as a DVD player. In theory, taking this tool approach to extremes, you could have a system with four separate components, to cope with CD, DVD-Audio, SACD and DVD-Video respectively. The selection process would define how these sources fit onto your home entertainment tool belt, depending on your own tastes.

While there is a lot of scope for application-based all in one systems, I favour the other option. But then again, that's hardly surprising; lots of people think I am a bit of a tool. ▶+

Speakers Corner



by Paul Messenger

After twenty something years in the business, a degree of cynicism and "we've-been-here-before" syndrome is probably bound to creep into my writing. While it's not always easy to whip up enormous enthusiasm for yet another group test on the latest batch of budget bookshelf speakers, there's still enough fun and fascination in this excellent hobby to rattle my chain on a pretty regular basis.

The latest piece of kit to do just that is a brand new version of Rega's famous RB-series tonearm. I can still recall my astonishment when, sometime back in the mid-1980s I guess, Rega's main man Roy Gandy first showed me an RB300 prototype. With hindsight this tonearm, and its subsequent derivatives, has got to be


one of the best value hi-fi products ever, and the good news is that it goes on getting better, because Rega goes on getting better at making it.

The core feature of all the RB-series tonearms is that the arm tube, headshell and bearing housing are all part of a single complex alloy casting. There are no mechanical joints throughout this structure, which therefore has exceptional mechanical integrity. The bearing assemblies are also very high quality with tight tolerances, even on the less expensive variants like the RB250s, found on Rega's budget P2 and a popular choice with other turntable makers too.

Indeed, a couple of years back I got to group test ▶

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Interconnects

▶ seven turntables priced between £220 and £650. Four of these turntables came fitted with RB250 or RB300 tonearms, and it was pretty clear that this common factor gave them at least a modest edge over their rivals. A high quality tonearm is no compensation for a poor quality turntable, but once a turntable achieves a respectable standard, a high quality tonearm will do much to maximise its performance.

The RB-series tonearms are unquestionably high quality, though not beyond criticism. Picky audiophiles complain at the quality of wiring used internally, and that there's no easy provision for height adjustment. Purists might point out that the horizontal bearing is single-sided rather than a true gimbal.

The vast majority of Rega tonearms are RB250s and RB300s, though the company has used different finishes and selected bearing tolerances to create smaller numbers of RB600s (for fitting to the mid-price P25) and the even fewer RB900s which were used on the upmarket P9. Reflecting this hierarchy of bearing tolerances, the RB-series come in at a range of price points from £124 via £188 and £358 to £648.

Crucially – I'm getting to the point at last – Rega has just relaunched its "no compromise" top-of-the-line turntable. The new P9 now costs £2,248 and features a number of detail improvements on the motor unit side, plus, rather more significantly, a rather special RB1000 tonearm. The latter carries a nominal £998 pricetag, although at the time of writing all production is being fitted onto P9s.

Visually it's distinguished from the rest of the RBs by a nude, polished bare-metal finish, which looks very tasty indeed. And just for the 1000, the plastic mouldings used to house the magnetic bias compensation mechanism are now fashioned in more rigid, less resonant metal.

More critical from a performance point of view are two less visible changes, though which matters most is anyone's guess. The first is that the wiring now runs continuously and without a break, from the (irritatingly fiddly) cartridge connection tags, right down through the arm tube and bearing assembly, to the phono plugs on the end of the connecting cable.

(Incidentally, dissatisfaction with Rega's standard wiring has led to a number of small companies offering aftermarket modifications, and RG speaks highly of a German kit called Incognito. However, in Rega's experience these changes often lead to practical problems of increased bearing friction: you have been warned!)

The other main RB1000 improvement is that the bearing tolerances have been further tightened up and refined, so that the clearance is now around one micron. Crucial to attaining such an extraordinarily close tolerance is the simple fact that Rega currently produces something like a thousand tonearms a month. That represents hundreds of bearing assemblies a week, only a handful of which are destined to become RB1000s, allowing just the very best toleranced bearing sets to be "creamed off" for use in 1000s. Indeed, the super-close bearings used in the 1000s simply wouldn't be achievable without being able to pick from such a large regular production quantity.

According to Rega, an RB1000 takes thirty times longer to produce than an RB300. Besides Angie, who has long overseen Rega's arm production, only two of its most experienced technicians are currently able to build it. Stand up, Wayne and David, and take a bow!

If you've got a Rega dealer in range, drop by for a quick feel(!). There's something instantly recognisable about a truly exceptional bearing system, and it's detectable just by moving the headshell around. There's a sort of silkiness on top of an innate smoothness that just feels so right, it's almost as though there are no bearings there at all. I recall feeling something similar in the legendary gimbal-bearing Swiss Brueuer tonearm I had in the early 1980s. The RB1000 possesses a similar magical "feel" (alongside considerably greater structural integrity). (One can argue that unipivot designs, by their very nature, offer the very finest bearing tolerances. But the unipivot approach is qualitatively different in principle, and adds an extra and unwanted rotational degree of freedom over the much more complex gimbal approach.)

None of all that would matter a jot if it wasn't reflected in superior sound quality, and it's the listening that proves this particular pudding. I can't recall ever hearing vinyl sounding cleaner, sweeter or more delicate at the top end, and the RB1000 seems to have just that extra bit of incisiveness and dynamic resolution over my regular Naim ARO unipivot. It reminds me very much of the improvement I encountered when changing over from Linn's original Arkiv cartridge to the mechanically superior Arkiv B which I currently use.

Tonearm bearing tolerances have always tended to be relatively large compared to the actual size of the music modulations in the groove, especially those that relate to high frequency information. Rega's new RB1000 provides some evidence that this gap continues to narrow, and that vinyl reproduction will consequently continue to improve.



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Home Truths



by Jimmy Hughes

Although most of us choose loud busy music with lots going on when we want to demonstrate the capability of our hi-fi systems, or evaluate a new product, often a more telling test is the way quiet simple music is reproduced. If your hi-fi system can make a fairly static piece sound interesting and engaging, it's doing pretty well. Just because the music's slow and not especially showy, it doesn't necessarily mean there's a lack of intensity or feeling. Sometimes quite the opposite

Quiet music can often be highly atmospheric and moody. Yet the conductor Sir Adrian Boult always reckoned you had to take slow movements a shade faster for a recording compared to a live performance. What I think he was pointing to was the way the record/replay process seems to rob the music of forward impetus. Some years back I went to a Claudio Abbado/LSO concert where Ligeti's *Atmospheres* for large orchestra was played. Heard live, I thought it a totally fascinating piece.

But - there are no tunes, and few if any rhythms, just tone colours and textures with variations in dynamic level. It's the sort of work that succeeds live, but falls flat in a recording. Why? Because so few hi-fi systems can accurately recreate the sound of the piece. It requires high-definition and very crisp resolution, especially at middle and low frequencies. The fact that there are no sharp edges, no crisp starts and stops, puts clarity and resolution at a premium

When I finally got a recording of the work - Abbado's on DG - I was disappointed. There's a passage about two thirds of the way through where the dynamic level rises along with the pitch of the instruments. In the concert hall my ears started ringing, such was the intensity of the sound. That did not happen with the recording. Instead of bright pulsating textures, the overall sound seemed grey and flat. However, we're talking of what I heard ten years ago.

As a preparation for writing this piece, I dug out the disc again and played it - this time using Chord's DAC 64. What a difference! It sounded great - crisp, luminous,

glowing. My ears even started ringing when the loud high bit came along! Because the sound had the necessary detail and immediacy, the music became interesting - much as it had been all those years ago when I heard it for the first time live. My Chinese mother in law (currently staying with us for a few weeks) ran out of the room in a state of high alarm - it was that good!

All this reminds me of the first time I saw one of Monet's paintings of the Lily pond in his garden. Seeing the real thing, I realised no reproduction could ever do the original justice. The various colours and shapes might be accurate, but you could never capture the almost three-dimensional texture and depth created by the different layers of paint. It's this quality that makes the painting a masterpiece, rather than Monet's draughtsmanship in depicting the scene.

If a piece of music is lively and changeable, it's obviously a test of your hi-fi's ability to twist and turn. Suppose your system had soft transient attack and poor definition; you'd simply hear a muffled lethargic rendition of music that should've sound crisp focused and articulate. Yet curiously, lively changeable music can often afford to lose some its edge without suffering too badly. Music that's fairly static and continuous is far more seriously damaged.

In visual terms it's the difference between a scene that's full of distinct shapes and bright contrasty colours, and one that's made up of dark browns and blacks with few sharp edges. The latter is much harder to deal with. The slightest loss of definition or contrast and the whole scene clogs up. A bright contrasty image can afford to lose more before the result becomes unacceptable.

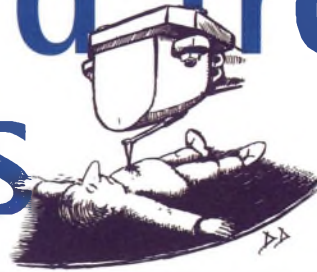
Another curious thing; if you can successfully reproduce subtle shades of dark brown and black it's likely the colourful bright contrasty scenes will be good too. In the same way, a hi-fi system that sounds focussed and detailed on spare static music will almost certainly reproduce lively rhythmic music well. If it's responsive when little if anything is happening, it'll respond even more when tempo, dynamics, and contrast increase. ►

▶ Although it's possible to find music that's totally static or relentlessly upbeat, most pieces are a mixture of tension and relaxation. A hi-fi system that does its job can and must handle both extremes. Many enthusiasts talk about systems sounding 'fast' or 'slow', and this is perhaps another way of expressing the same difference. It's reproducing rhythms so they have a sense of lift that creates the impression of speed, and perhaps ironically this helps static music too.

A further side-effect of good definition is the way it creates a sense of presence - meaning you don't have to play things loudly to fill the room with sound. Very often the perception of volume level is based more on clarity than actual loudness - if you can't hear what's happening clearly you turn up the sound so it's louder. Trouble is, if you're playing things too loudly to compensate for poor clarity, the sound can easily become overbearing during climaxes



Postcard from Venus



by L. S. Webster

The word on the street is of an intriguing new phenomenon emerging from planet Audio. Apparently it's not the year of the horse after all, but it is in fact, the year of the hi-fi show. And in order to help audiophiles celebrate, anyone who's anyone is going to be throwing a bash. They're already popping up like daisies in towns across the UK, and invitations and exhibition packs are being dispatched to the makers and shakers of hi-fi by the truckload. Faster than the time it takes to put them through the shredder, by all accounts.

I have no clue what's going on. This latest craze is a tricky one to fathom, though I suppose it could easily turn out to be just another example of British maledom at its potty-est (something for which our men are renowned, after all); and especially those from planet Audio where, let's face it, being a bit bonkers is actually the norm.

Admittedly, being female is a disadvantage here, certainly in terms of trying to understand the appeal. I may be missing the point but I really haven't the faintest idea why anyone in their right mind would want to ruin clutching a pitiful carrier bag stuffed with leaflets, and listening to the same CD over, and over, and over, and Yawnorama. "Thanks, but no thanks. Gotta dash, I've just remembered my drains need cleaning".

And call me Betty Bash Basher, but I cannot help

thinking there must only be a limited number of these things that even the most enthusiastic hi-fi goer can attend before losing the will to live. You see, I've been to a couple of these myself, and have experienced at first hand the wonder and novelty of being sandwiched into tiny, stinky rooms with Norman Wisdom impersonators, humming and tapping out of time. It's impossible to know whether to laugh or cry. And then absurdly, you find yourself in the ridiculous situation of being unable to get out of a particularly crammed room, because those on either side of you have fallen into a trance. You're trapped and you know it. They know it too, and you know they know it. And yet, as amazing as it may seem, some people actually enjoy this sort of thing.

It has occurred to me though, that there is one redeeming feature. What if it ñ the venue that is - just so happens to be smack-bang in the middle of a vibrant city, surrounded by masses of shops (brimming over with the seasons "must-haves") and loads of juicy wine-bars. Not to mention the rustic market that's always tucked away there somewhere, oh and the restaurants, probably the odd art gallery and theatre too. OK, so now we're talking. "Erm, where did you say it was again? Really. What do you mean you haven't decided yet, it sounds brilliant! Well, I know I said freakish, but I didn't





▶ actually mean it".

Listen up girls; this could be a passport to some fabulous shopping expeditions. And just because it's a blokey thing (which we've no real hope of ever understanding), that doesn't mean we shouldn't at least try. It's all about the importance of compromise in a relationship isn't it, and there's no need to be unreasonable. It's really admirable that he's passionate about music, and I mean, who are we to argue? Indeed, I suspect these shows will be a raging success in no time at all. Quite likely, they'll eventually replace the more traditional weekend pastimes such as rugby, football and the like.

In fact, I can see quite clearly now the visionary genius behind the idea. And you have to hand it to the organisers for their expertise in the planning department, because the timetable is extraordinarily advantageous. Not only is kick-off at around 10am (very good – shops opening up), but better still, the final whistle doesn't blow until about 6pm. Perfect! (Though essential you get back in time to make sure

he's not buying anything too grotesque). The only problem I can see so far is that Leeds isn't on the list, and there's definitely a Harvey Nick's there.

Anyway, on reflection, it makes you wonder why no one ever thought of this before. Or is it all part of some cunning new initiative aimed at attracting a wider, more diverse audience. Now this may be purely coincidental, but I just happen to know there was a seminar at the recent CES, Las Vegas, discussing the buying power of the 21st century woman. Yes. Sadly I wasn't there, but I'll bet it was a scream. And when it came to the bit about "what women expect in a shopping experience", well, apart from the obvious "lots of shopping", it was now evident that a new 21st century approach had to be established. Pioneers of technology obviously then seized the opportunity to get their heads together with high street retailers, and in a joint effort, decided that a decent hi-fi show was exactly what women wanted. Of course - where better to safely deposit the other half for the day. Double whammy! Well, it does make you think.



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Bristol Sound and Vision Show 2002

by Roy Gregory

It may not be Paris in the springtime, but even the blustery conditions in a rain battered west country couldn't dampen the spirits of exhibitors and visitors alike at this, the 15th edition of what is fast establishing itself as the UK's premier hi-fi show. In terms of organisation and attendance, it is by far the largest and best show in the country, and whilst its location, the fact that it is organised by (and thus understandably and primarily serves the interests of) the local dealers, and is in danger of outgrowing its existing venue, all prevent it from inheriting the mantle of Penta, that doesn't stop its importance from continuing to grow. Attendance this year continued to match the all time high established last year, and organisers Tony Revelle and Jerry Lewin are to be congratulated for continually improving the product, rather than resting on their laurels.

However, despite all the positives, the show did disappoint in one important respect. Admittedly the responsibility of the exhibitors rather than the organisers, it's sad to report that sonic standards were down on last year, with few rooms playing real music to real hi-fi standards. This wasn't helped by the absence of a few key players who certainly take such things seriously (Beauhorn and Pear are obvious examples), but was also exacerbated by some of the worst cases of excessive application of dodgy sub-woofers I've had to endure in a long, long time. Hats off then to Vibe Technology who made

the most of their background in car 'hi-fi' by rendering most of the fourth floor uninhabitable for hours at a time. Hey guys, learn some manners – please! Elsewhere however, not all was doom and gloom, and there were plenty of important new products to whet the appetite.

Bristol's positioning barely a month after the Las Vegas CES means that a lot of the larger companies use it to give new products their UK debut. Add in a few World firsts from major UK players and it guarantees an interesting time. In fact, there was a whole clutch of important flagship launches from major UK manufacturers, so many that it's difficult to know where to start. Oh well, in for a penny in for a pound: or several thousand of them if you want to take any of the next few items home with you.

Naim finally unveiled the new NAC 552 partnering pre-amp for the NAP 500. Not surprisingly, this is a two box unit with a substantial off-board power supply. Styling combines the layout of the 52 with the much improved aesthetics of the 5 Series, but the biggest surprise comes round the back, where the usual array of din sockets is supplemented with a couple of pairs of phonos! Two of the six line inputs can be routed via these sockets, recognition from Naim that not everyone shares their disdain for specialist audiophile interconnects, most of which can't be accommodated by din plugs. I won't spend too much time on this as

I suspect that JH might have a lot to say on the subject, but it was interesting to note that the sound in the tenth floor dem room, whilst suffering from the fact that the new SL2 speakers were only finished the day before, was the most musically and dynamically coherent I've heard in years.

Talking of the SL2, the at long last replacement for the venerable SBL, brings us onto the subject of speakers in general, and something of a theme for this particular show. Naim's offering retains the two-way configuration of its predecessor but incorporates several important developments. Inherited from the NBL, the SL2 employs a precision acoustic resistance to couple the bass driver to its loading chamber, as well as the larger model's tapered cabinet and curved contours, this time deployed on the baffle. Less obvious is the fact that the tweeter now mounts directly to its own supporting frame, connected in turn to the speaker's cast aluminium plinth. At £4995 the SL2 is rather more compact than much of its competition, as well as offering near wall siting. Assuming that the glare and glassiness heard at the show are a result of the speakers' virgin status, and will decline with running, this looks like a very interesting product, and one that might regain some of the ground that Naim seem to have lost in the loudspeaker market. (An observation that will doubtless elicit an e-mail from the company, demonstrating in black and white ►

▶ how their sales figures continue to rise, and how misleading impressions can be! (www.naim-audio.com)

KEF were playing the new Reference series for the first time, in a combined two-channel and surround demonstration which again suffered from the effects of brand new speakers which had enjoyed little or no running. Despite that the flagship Model 207 was doing enough to suggest that it's worthy of very serious consideration indeed. In fact, Chord Electronics were making very nice sounds indeed with a pair of the smaller 203s, but this time boasting around 200 hours of use, and if the 207s build on the coherence and musical integrity of that sound by adding extra scale and bandwidth then they'll be well worth their £9000 asking price. Technologically speaking, the big news is the move to a titanium dome for the Uni-Q tweeter, and the adoption of reflex bass loading in place of the old, coupled cavity. Whilst KEF are keen to point out that this makes for a more user friendly and less room sensitive bass performance, it's impossible to ignore that it gets those big ten inch woofers out where the public can see them. The audio equivalent of wearing your underpants over your trousers? With 91dB sensitivity and a -6dB point at 28Hz it's a distinct possibility. Not satisfied with that KEF also showed re-engineered versions of the Q and Coda ranges, which hopefully we'll be reviewing soon. (www.kef.com)

Not to be outdone, that other great pillar of the UK speaker industry, B&W, played their Nautilus 800 to the public for the first time. This £11000 outgrowth from the 801 offers a pair of 12" bass units in place of the single 15" of the cheaper model. That allows for a slimmer cabinet and proportions that sit more happily with the domed



head unit than either the 801 or the 802. Those with really deep pockets can pay a \$5000 premium for the exquisite finish of the otherwise identical Signature 800. Either way, make sure your dealer delivers, because you don't want to try and move these around on your own!

The excellent sound emanating from the Nautilus 800s must be attributed, in part at least, to the efforts of the all Classe system doing the driving. Source was the Omega SACD-1 top-loading player, driving the CP65 pre-amp and CAM 350 mono-block power amps. Total price £24000, which seems pretty reasonable for the constructional and sound quality on offer. Which begs the question, just when are B&W going to start marketing these well regarded Canadian electronics a bit more aggressively? (www.bwspeakers.com)

As if the world didn't possess enough slim, floorstanding speakers,



the unimaginatively named Reference Audio, first seen at the Manchester show, put in an appearance with their £2800 Axis FS design. What sets this speaker apart from the crowd, apart from the excellent sound it was producing, is the care and attention that goes into the product. What at first sight might appear to be a standard d'Appolito design is actually far from it. The upper bass unit

is contained in its own infinite baffle chamber, while the lower one is loaded by a cross flow transmission line.

This combination provides a deep yet tuneful bass from slim cabinet dimensions, nicely balanced by the soft-dome tweeter. The units and crossover are entirely hard wired, and employ premium components from the likes of WBT and Hovland. The speaker stands on a purpose built steel plinth equipped with substantial and easily adjusted spikes. There's also a straight Axis stand mounter that doubles as a centre channel. Whilst these products are pitched into an extraordinarily congested sector of the market they do offer just enough that's different to stand out from the crowd (not least their sound quality). The guys behind the product are also refreshingly realistic and dedicated to customer service, which makes these speakers ones to watch out for. (www.referenceaudio.co.uk)

Meanwhile, Cyrus were showing the latest version of their NXT hybrid Icon loudspeaker. Now dubbed the X4, it offers two important developments: the NXT panel now employs four rather than the previous two exciters, the whole assembly being mounted to a machined heatsink for added rigidity and power handling; and the bass now has rather less extension, rolling off around 38Hz (shades of the KEF 207). Less obviously, the foam has now been removed from behind the panel, allowing owners to use the rear ▶

▶ facing slot port to tune rear output to suit the room. The end result is a speaker with better dynamics, power handling and maximum level capabilities in a package that is far less sensitive to positioning. Price has risen slightly to £2700, but the really good news is that existing owners can have their speakers upgraded to full X4 standard for £250.

Nice one Cyrus.

(www.cyrusaudio.com)

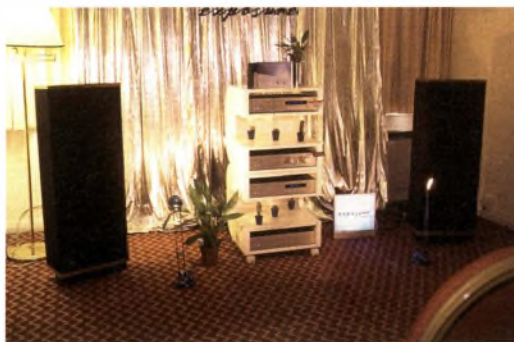
With just about everyone offering 5.1 channels of subwoofer and dinky surround, there were a lot of sub hi-fi systems, long on style and short on sound. If sonic quality doesn't matter, then the one that stood out from amongst the host of competing alternatives came

from Klegg Audio. You get six channels of amplification, a -6dB point at 30Hz and five of the cutest little egg shaped satellites you've ever seen, each small enough to fit in your hand. All for £400, and with a full suite of matching wall brackets and stands. (www.klegg-audio.co.uk)

However, a rather more interesting offering came from Leema Acoustics. Well known in professional circles, they were demonstrating their X Series pairing of Xen mini-monitors and Xen-on sub-woofer, priced at a cool £2500. With everybody else apparently abandoning any attempt at quality in a mad downward rush, it was nice to see a serious sub-sat system. Integration was exceptionally good, as was system transparency, and this looks like a very viable alternative for the space-restricted listener. Apparently the system is catching on big time with 5.1 mastering facilities, and having heard it at the show I can understand why. How well it stands up under more critical conditions will have to await a future review, but for those who can't wait that long, take

a look at www.aspen-media.com/leema.

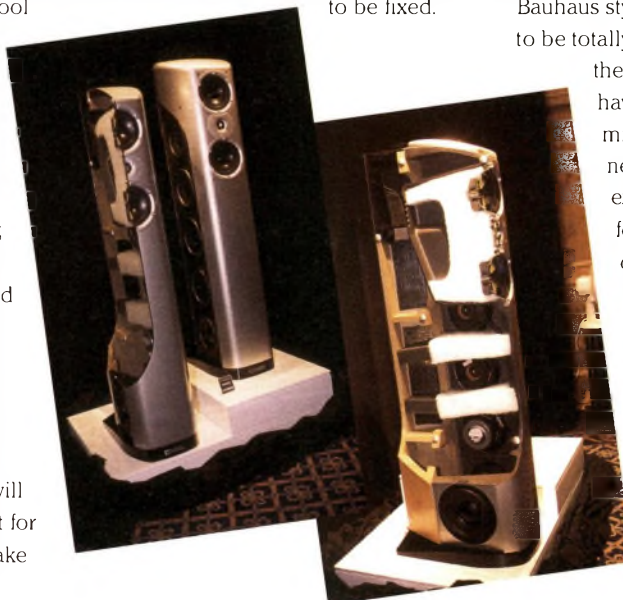
As if to prove that there's life in the old dog yet, there were a whole series of raves from the grave. Spondor made their public debut with their beautifully revised and crafted range of speakers (www.spondor.mcm.com), Pro-Ac re-launched the Tablette, now in Reference 8 guise



(www.proac-loudspeakers.com),

while the Vandersteen 2Ce Signatures sounded just as sweet as ever in the Exposure room

(www.exposurehifi.com). With a UK retail price that's a shade below £1500 they are a real bargain. Finally, Cadence reappeared, again, this time with a new model of hybrid electrostatic that looks for all the world like their original (and very stylish) Arca got shrunk in the wash. UK distribution is a possibility but the final details remain to be fixed.



But the most surprising speaker at the show had to be the Mission Pilastro, a £20000 flagship from the company better known for budget boxes. A tall slim floorstander with an awful lot of drivers (nothing new there then), sadly it was confined to static display. How it might sound only time will tell, but it certainly marks a departure for the price conscious brand.

Electronics debuts were few and far between, although

Creek (www.creekaudio.co.uk)

and Aloia

(www.audioreference.co.uk)

were both notable for the nice sound they were making, while Myriad showed their new Z-series AV components, combining the sound of their established M-series with the

stunning looks of the excellent little Cameo system (www.myriad.co.uk).

Elsewhere, Sugden showed a new line integrated version of the Masterclass amplifiers that should certainly be worthy of future investigation (www.je.sugden.co.uk) Likewise the Audionet amplification, imported by Wilson-Benesch. First seen at Novotel, these impressive German electronics hide their considerable sonic light under a 'plane to the point of boring' exterior. Me, I really like the functional, Bauhaus styling, but I'm well known to be totally out of aesthetic step with

the rest of humanity so you'll have to make up your own mind on these. The good news is that prices are exceptionally reasonable for the sound (and power) on offer, starting around the £2K/box level and stopping well short of the five figure mark.

(www.wilson-benesch.com)

Steinhart Audio showed a range of extremely retro looking (but distinctly currently priced) direct-coupled valve amps. ▶

▶ Remote control despite the polished rosewood fascias and chromed control knobs, they are internally hard wired and show all the signs of considerable attention to detail.

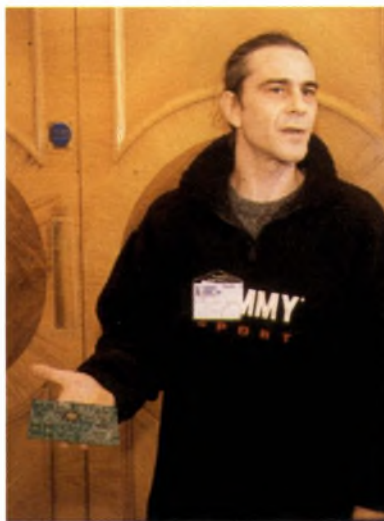
Meridian announced the latest upgrade to their state of the art 800 Series disc player and digital surround processor. Dubbed Version 3, it's retrofittable to all existing units and offers a number of important developments in both sonic and functional terms. The 800.3 and 861.3 now automatically recognise disc type and surround formats, configuring themselves appropriately. They also now automatically up-sample all sub-96/24 data streams as well as offering up to eight single-ended or balanced multi-channel analogue outputs for full DVD-A compatibility, as well as a proprietary digital transmission system between the two boxes for digital transfer of multi-channel, high resolution data, the first of its type in the World. Bob Stuart treated us to his usual fascinating demonstration of the latest thinking in surround circles, including the latest Chesky DVD-A surround recording. Imagine my horror as a note for note facsimile of *Jazz At The Pawnshop's* opening track rang forth, complete with audience noise and chinking glasses! Trapped between Messenger and Simon Pope I couldn't flee the room, but how even the notoriously dead-pan Bob managed to keep a straight face as he inflicted this latest audio horror on the assembled ranks of the UK press I'll never know. Revenge may well be a dish best eaten cold, but this was just needless inhumanity! (www.meridian-audio.com)

Naim were also doing a full 5-series surround demonstration which I have to say was extremely impressive, not least for the use of ambient music/lava lamp visuals as well as the more usual AV fare. Big surprise was the



appearance of the aXENT centre channel, albeit in 'rushed to the show' form. Visually reminiscent of the big KEF Reference centre, it uses no fewer than four 130mm bass/mid drivers, each individually loaded by a precision acoustic resistance between it and the main cabinet volume. Closer examination also showed that it was independently supported by its own stand, physically separate from but visually integrated with the Fraim AV rack. It's an interesting and typically lateral approach from Naim that certainly seemed to deliver dividends in terms of clarity and dynamic integrity. The aXENT is priced at £2750 (incl stand?) and should be available in July

New electronics might have been thin on the ground, but for me, two



Tom Evans displays the first PCB for his new modular valve power amplifier.

things made the show trip worthwhile regardless of anything else seen or heard. Lurking in the Chapter Audio/Avid room was the first ever sighting of Tom Evans' long awaited line stage designed to partner The Groove and using the same Lithos technology. Given how highly we rate the phono-stage I really can't wait to get my hands on

this one. The other long awaited emergence was Morgan Audio's



extremely neat Deva 500 components. Housed in casework that's virtually identical to our favourite 300 Series, the new units are very, very different on the inside. The CD player and pre-amp both employ valve circuitry, while the dual-mono power amp is an all mosfet design. Initial listening was certainly promising, but with a price-tag of £2000 a box (a complete 300 system, including tuner, is only £2200) the new products are going to have to go some in order to match the stellar music/money balance of the cheaper set-up. Still, I reckon it's going to be fun finding out, especially when the whole system looks this cute. (www.morgan-audio.co.uk) ▶



Planar 3) and no fancy carbon fibre armtube. Instead you get the same arm used on the perspective, an inverted ceramic bearing carrying an acrylic sub-platter and a substantial main platter turned from MDF but with a bonded acrylic surface and a record weight. The whole lot will set you back £500 and you get 25% off of the Ortofon

cartridge of your choice! No wonder Mr Armstrong was smiling so broadly. Tri-chord were showing a revised version of the Delphini

phono-stage which should bear investigation, while Path Premier had a first sample of a new Lyra cartridge designed to slot in between the Lydian and the Helikon. However, award for most exciting new cartridge had to go to the Shun Mook Reference moving coil. A Mpingo block, complete with its own tiny Mpingo discs and a retail price of £4430, it is as you might imagine, distinctly different. With an output of 0.34mV, this one I have to hear at home. (www.audioreference.co.uk)

But the best news of all I save for last. Diverse Vinyl founder John Reynolds announced a new venture, the Diverse Records label. Looking to issue commercially available recordings on high quality 180g vinyl, his first outing is the superb Alison Krauss and Union Station *New Favorite*. Interestingly, this originated as a DSD recording, and as a CD has received five



Grammy nominations. Cut by Ray Staff at Whitfield Street the LPs will cost \$16.90 and should be available by the time you read this. First listens to a test pressing certainly suggest that this is an auspicious start, and future plans are interesting to say the least. (www.diverserecords.com)

► Analogue hardware launches were also pretty thin on the ground, although Avid, Michell, Wilson-Benesch, Clearaudio, Rega, VPI and Project were all flying the analogue flag. Dig a little deeper though and there was news to be had. Rega showed the updated P9, with a new version of the 900 tonearm: Better bearings and a swish, new, machined cueing platform make it into the RB1000 with a price-tag of £998. There's also a new Tungsten counter-weight and a new wiring loom that eliminates one of the internal joins. Hmm, seems like Roy Gandy's head has emerged from the sand just long enough to notice what some other people are doing to his products! Compete 'table retails for £2248 and remains distinctly different to the run-of-the-mill.

Project were showing a prototype of a new RPM6, baby brother to the fascinating RPM9. No separate motor (this one's O-ring suspended a la original

► Which only leaves me to hand out the 'best sound' and 'most fun product' awards. The former goes to Living Voice who used a Wadia 861, Canary Audio amps and the Avatar OBX-R speakers to out-Naim Naim. As the rock steady bass of Sly and Robbie eased and undulated along the corridor, Salisbury acolytes, fresh from the Forum shindig on the tenth floor were drawn inexorably into the room. "How powerful's that amp then?"



22 Watts came the confident reply. You could hear the jaws hitting the ground from outside in the corridor! But even Nottingham's finest fail in the fun factor compared to the Soundpax speakers. These flatpacked cardboard "traffic cones" have an NXT exciter on the inside of their front panel. Pop up, plug in and away you go. They even have 'real' drive units printed on the front so that you know what they are and which way to point them. They go for £30 a pair, including speaker cable, and they had to get an emergency delivery in, they sold so



many at the show. And you know what? They don't even sound that bad! In fact I wound up Joe Reynolds from Nordost, suggesting that he could get Lars to do his infamous Dog and Pony show using a pair. Sure enough, the next day I spied Joe with a telltale triangular flat-pack under one arm. I don't know what the results were, but the notion of connecting \$6K worth of Valhalla cable to a \$15 speaker certainly isn't beyond the man. Good clean fun, which pretty much sums up the show. More please next year.

Another View

by Jason Hector

Well another February rolled in and with it the Bristol show, my favourite Hi-Fi outing and if that isn't damning with faint praise I don't know what is. But in all seriousness the Bristol show has always been the best, and talking to the exhibitors over the years this feeling is repeated across the industry. But why is Bristol that much better? Well I think the main reason is the crowd attracted to the show. They seem to consist of music lovers who are really interested in hearing not just good gear but good music on it. Whether



this stems from the original dealer organised nature of the show I don't know. The other reason is that on the whole sound quality at Bristol is higher

than London. Unfortunately this year I was in for a bit of a disappointment, at least as far as that was concerned. I think the crowd of visitors were still keen but average sound quality was lacking. Where quality was present it was very good but too many AV rooms can't have helped. Isn't it time that organisers separated rooms a little more, or at least attempted to zone them? But enough griping, what was new and what was impressive? I had to be very careful writing this article lest it become a Naim Audio show report as

► Naim had really gone to town, showing a new flagship pre-amp, new speakers (two channel and a centre) and more items to add to the expanding Fraim range of audio furniture. Firstly the hotly expected new flagship pre-amp, the NAC552. After 12 years as number one the NAC552 has had to concede its position to the new kid on the block. The 552 is designed to compliment the NAP500 power amplifier at the top of the Naim range and the price bears witness to this fact with a suggested UK retail of £11750. It certainly isn't cheap but it underlines (and adds several exclamation marks to) Naim's aspirations at the top end of the market place. The 552 is a two box design and like previous Naim pre-amplifiers one box contains the audio circuits and the other a massive power supply. Unfortunately for current 52 users the 552 is not compatible with any of the current range of power supplies, but Supercaps seem to fetch good second hand prices ... The reason for the lack of compatibility is that the 552 requires split rails (a positive and a negative voltage powder line) which are provided from a massive 800VA transformer coupled to serious smoothing caps and 14 hand selected regulators which supply different bits of the pre-amp. Audio boards are suspended in a similar manner to those in the CDS2 CD player to avoid microphony. The amplifier certainly looked serious and obviously matched the 500 (how long till the CDS2 is revamped one wonders?). Phono duty will be handled by the inexpensive Prefix and a socket on the 552 is provided to power it. A shock to many Naim users is the inclusion of two sets of RCA phono inputs (indrawn breath all



around). Naim still claim that Dins are the best sounding connection scheme and now buyers can test this out. The inclusion of the phono connectors should allow the amplifier to appeal to a wider buying group, which will be necessary at this end of the market. But how did it sound I hear you ask. Well before I discuss that, stop reading ahead there at the back, I need to describe the other new Naim product used in the tenth floor demo.



Not only was the 552 getting an outing but so was a new speaker codenamed the SL2. The SL2 will retail for £4995 in passive form and so slots rather nicely between the

NBL and Allae speakers in the range. The SL2 is certainly the best looking loudspeaker Naim have designed. It reminds me of the famous high-rise hotel in Dubai with its organic flowing baffle line. The speaker also contains some new technology and some improvements on some well known Naim speaker design techniques.

The cabinet is made from two separate boxes which are linked by what Naim call a precision acoustic resistance device which was pioneered in the SBL to allow a controlled volume for the bass / mid driver to operate in. With the SL2 Naim have managed to get rid of the mastic and gasket seal of the SBL and DBL which will certainly make setting these speakers up easier. The drive units are again based on those used in the Allae and SBL. The tweeter is not mounted on the front baffle however. It is attached to an arm that exits through the top cabinet without touching it, connecting to a bar which is in turn attached to the base. This means the tweeter is completely isolated from the other drive unit, a very elegant solution.

So we have a brand new amplifier being played through prototype (and even newer) loudspeakers, so how do we judge the performance? Well Naim sensibly had a 52/Supercap combination on hand for comparative purposes while a NAP500 provided power amp duties of course. The overall sound was not that fantastic to be honest but it did provide enough hints to get a feel for the potential of both the speakers and the pre-amplifier. The 552 was better than the 52 in its detail retrieval and timbral qualities and I was impressed with its easy power and ability to separate out

► musical strands. The SL2 follow the trend set by the Allae being a little more full bodied in the lower mid than previous Naim designs which is nice. The system was a little sharp in the treble but I guess this was an artifact of either a short warm up period or a lack of run in.

Other new Naim items were present in the AV dem room. The Naim AV system has taken another step nearer with the release of the aXENT (Sic) centre channel speaker. All we need now is a DVD front end and a sub for completeness. The aXENT uses four 130mm bass mid drivers that are housed in there own cabinets and again a PAR unit controls the volume they see. The tweeter is compliantly mounted as in the DBL and NBL to help isolation. There is certainly plenty happening in the stylish curved enclosure which will retail for £2750. Also released is a special aXENT Fraim rack that is designed to house the aXENT and support your telly. It provides an isolated support specifically for the aXENT and clads and conceals this in a Fraim style, a very neat solution. Unlike other AV rooms the Naim AV room certainly demonstrated that multi-channel doesn't have to sound bad. The system was well balanced using 5 series electronics including the AV2 processor pre-amp and four Allae speakers along with MK sub, all fed from a Denon DVD machine. On concert and music video discs the sound was very enjoyable with the usual Naim emphasis on pace, rhythm and timing.

So other than Naim who else was making good, interesting sounds? I think the best sound award has to go to the Living voice room. Canary valve amplifiers feeding their Avatar OBX speakers. The sound was super fast and integrated the music well. Some friends I was with were very impressed as their valve misconceptions were blown away, with one of them keen to get a dem based solely on the sound in that room! Other rooms that were impressive were usually the ones containing the smaller systems. I guess this avoids the room being overloaded with bass. So high marks for Castle speakers and Electro-companiet: simple system with good, balanced sound. Creek and Epos were sounding good for the money with their 53 series electronics driving Epos M15 speakers, check out the review in this issue of the integrated amplifier. Myryad and Elac were showing NXT speakers driven by the pretty and capable Cameo electronics to good effect. I am not sure about the NXT devices as main speakers (they were used in a sub-satellite combo) but what better way to put sound in all

your rooms?

Other trends at the show included a preponderance of Musicworks mains blocks and leads, obviously present in their own room with the Quadraspire reference rack which was ably demonstrated. The difference between the Quadraspire reference and the standard Q4 rack was very big. The system this time was by Rega (Jupiter and Mira) with JM-Lab loudspeakers, and demonstrated yet again that small, well executed systems are often going to embarrass the big boys. JM-Lab were also Musicworked, showing their speaker's with Moon electronics. It was also good to see Path Premiere at the show again, this time with "entry level" Mark Levinson electronics. The 383 integrated amp and 390S CD player were used to drive the Revel M20 speakers. Nigel was enjoying himself and keen to point out a new Rack called Soundations that Path will be distributing. Made in South Africa it is available in two flavours both of which feature unusual methods of supporting gear: one avoiding shelves altogether and instead opting to support the boxes on fingers, the other using "rubberised suspension".

Both systems have their main supports under tension to control resonances, a novel approach which should reap benefits.

So all in all a fun show as ever, but the drop in sound quality is a little worrying for what has become the UK's largest show. Hopefully things will be back to normal next year.



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Roy Gregory

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Amplification From The Deep End Of The Gene Pool...

The Hovland HP100 Pre-amp, Sapphire Power Amp, Generation 3 Interconnects and Nineline Speaker Wires

by Roy Gregory


There's a deep, earthy solidity to the drumbeat: an insistent impact and texture: a presence and sense of energy that drives the track. The soaring vocals effortlessly scale their range: guitars skitter and spray staccato runs of notes. There's a chemistry at work that integrates all these elements and combines them into music of meaning. The finger bells and tambourines ringing clear in space, the interlocking guitar breaks: it all makes sense. The track is 'Shotgun Down The Avalanche' from Shawn Colvin's album *Steady On* (CBS 466142-1) and it's a stellar performance from both the musicians and from the system that, in this case, is doing the playing.

Turn to the equipment and it's the Hovland amps that immediately draw the eye. The dark mirror surface of the HP100's front panel reflecting the proud chrome jut of its rotary knobs, the pale blue halo that surrounds them and floats the fascia create a visage that's striking enough to have made the cover of Issue 8. Beside it, the silvery, suspended plateau of the Sapphire amp's plinth carries the clear-coated polished alloy cylindrical output transformer housings, echoing the pre-amp's knobs, even down to

their blue lit bases. But where the eye settles, where it rests, is on the four clear glass chimneys, glowing that same faint blue in the darkened room, that surround the EL34 output tubes. The combined effect is a visual as well as a musical tour de force. It's Hovland finally delivering on the promise first made with their cables and capacitors: promise that extended through and was heightened by the arrival of the pre-amp, and that has now finally blossomed spectacularly into a full system with the appearance of the Sapphire power amp in my front room.

It's easy to get carried away with the beautiful construction and appearance of these products. They possess an almost architectural understanding of visual planes, especially in the way they detach from their surroundings and their willingness to mix media and textures. There's nothing flashy about them. In fact, the grace of their appearance grows out of their almost Bauhaus functional simplicity. It's a refreshing change from the overdressed ostentation that passes for style on so much high-end equipment, an aesthetic as vacuous as the sound that emanates from much of it.

The Hovlands are products where the looks are a bonus rather than an apology for poor sonic performance. The way they look grows out of what they do, and what they do is music: Wonderful music.

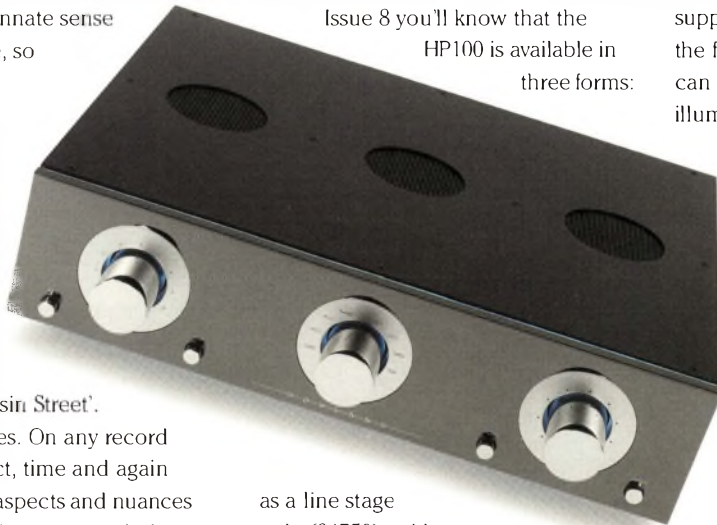
The performance they produce is lucid and clear, fast and dynamic, yet sinuous and muscular. The subtlety and power of those drum beats that opened this review is no flash in the plan. Running as a system the Hovland components are much greater than the sum of the already considerable parts. Take the midi-band of *Julian Cannonball Adderley In The Land Of Hi-Fi* (Speaker's Corner/Mercury MG36077): It's a great recording (and mono to boot) but the Hovland set-up imbues it with a sense of presence, substance and power that really makes it swing. The rapidly extending lines of Cannonball's alto sax jousts both playfully and purposefully with the cornet of brother Nat and Ernie Royal's trumpet. The underpinning of tenor, baritone and twin trombones is powerful and provides the perfect groundswell. In fact it sounds like a much bigger band, testament to both the players superb ensemble understanding and the Hovlands' 

► performance. It's never more clear than on the measured, funky blues of 'T's Tune' where the alto lead stretches out over the brass backing, leaving space for and never swamping the contribution of Junior Mance at the piano. That innate sense of inner balance, so crucial to any successful hi-fi system, allows the Hovlands to move effortlessly through the gears on the sudden shifts in tempo on 'Broadway to Basin Street'.

And so it goes. On any record or disc you select, time and again you notice new aspects and nuances to the playing. It's not so much that the Hovlands tell you more, it's just that they let you hear what you are used to much, much better. It's like having a better seat in the concert hall, a better table in the club: The greatness of great musicians is that much more apparent. Of course, the HP100's mono switch certainly helps on the Adderley, but then there's that broad, almost Protestant streak of practicality raising its head again. Despite the price and appearance of these amplifiers don't get the idea that they are in any way precious or fussy in operation: Quite the opposite in fact. Take those chimneys as an example. They aren't there just to look pretty, although that they certainly do. Vents in the underside of the amp allow air to be drawn through by the convection effect caused by the heat from the valves. Thus the problem of hot glowing bottles is neatly turned on its head, instead providing cooling for not just the valves themselves but the circuit as a whole, while at the same time eliminating the requirement for an ugly cover or cage to keep small,

prying fingers safe. It's just the most obvious example of the completeness of the thinking that has gone into these products. But more on that later.

First, the Achilles heel. If you've reread the HP100 review back in Issue 8 you'll know that the HP100 is available in three forms:



as a line stage only (£4750), with a medium sensitivity, 46dB gain valve phono stage (£5350), or with additional moving coil step-up transformers to provide a total of 63dB of gain (£5750). My original sample only had the active phono stage, and one reason



to get the pre-amp back (as well as it being the obvious partner for the Sapphire) is to listen to the higher gain phono stage. This employs a pair of custom wound transformers mounted immediately behind the phono input sockets, a neat arrangement that keeps the signal path as short as possible. Other refinements to the pre-amp

as a whole include improved finish on the casework, which is now anodised instead of powder coated, several small but significant component changes, and a new power transformer that includes a separate winding to supply the bulbs used to illuminate the front panel. This means that you can now leave the HP100 gloriously illuminated without compromising the sound. However, the switch

to turn the lights off still remains, just in case they offend your sensibilities. The previously mentioned weakness is in the sound of the step-up transformers. The active stage is excellent, especially for those who want to use a cartridge with a healthy output: I achieved exceptional results with Len Gregory's Grado derived Music Maker. However, the transformers are simply not in the same class. At least not yet. The problem is that whilst it's easy to run a CD player through a line stage for days on end,

it's not quite as simple with a phono stage. Knowing how long the HP100 takes to run in (months of continuous use!) there's no way that the transformers

are going to receive anything like the required running in the time available for a review. Even four or five hours a day every day for a month only adds up to five days of continuous use. So, a huge question mark rests over the validity of these listening results that can only be resolved in the fullness of time. Meanwhile, here's what I heard.

The sound of the transformers, because unlike the pre and power ►

▶ amps they do have a distinctive character, is lean, silvery and flat. They lack colour and dynamic range and that lends the music a fragile, ethereal quality. They also introduce a smoothness and lack of bite and attack to transients as well as a thuddy, immobile quality to the bass. In fact, in many respects they resemble an exaggerated version of the way the HP100 sounds straight out of the box, which in part accounts for my suspicions regarding running-in.

Now let's put that in context. Being blessed with the sadly temporary presence of the Connoisseur Definitions 4.0 phono stage it was just too easy to plug that straight into one of the HP100's line inputs, and it was this sternest of tests that exposed the Hovland's transformers, rather like a rabbit caught in the spotlights. Playing 'Hard Headed Woman' from *Tea For The Tillerman*, the Connoisseur injected, colour, pace, dynamic range, more colour and impact, not to mention a sense of presence and musical purpose. The track simply came to life from the pale shadow of its former self. It's hard to explain (or exaggerate) the magnitude of the difference. Perhaps the easiest thing is to fasten on a single example: the violin backing that enters after the first verse. Via the Hovland's transformers the sound was a simple, smooth tone, replete with a silky surface sheen. The Connoisseur introduced the texture and rasp of bow on string, the sense of drawing the bow itself, the tiny shifts in

pressure, level and accent that provide the expressive vocabulary of the instrument. And that's on one previously inconsequential backing instrument: An instrument whose presence now becomes vital to the structure and sense of the song as a whole. Now think what that means for the bass guitar, the drums, or more importantly, the lead vocal!



However it's not all bad. For starters, the combined cost of the Hovland's active stage and transformers adds up to £1000. Order the HP100 as a line stage and you can buy that, the power amp and all the cabling for this system for less than the cost of the Connoisseur phono stage on its own! More to the point, the wonderful sound of the Connoisseur was only apparent because of the performance of the Hovland line and power stages, which says a lot about their quality and capabilities. Look at a more

sensible alternative like The Groove, which also provides an exceptional match to the HP100, and you're looking at a system cost that comes in for rather less than the price of the Valhalla cables that I use. The Hovlands may be expensive, but they are also an absolute bargain. Where the high-gain phono stage fits into the equation only time will tell. The medium gain option is a steal for the occasional vinyl user or one with the appropriate pick-up cartridge. In the meantime, you should realise that all the sonic observations contained in this review stem from the Hovlands used with the Connoisseur or The Groove.

Hooked up to the Clearlight Recovery turntable, Incognito RB300 and Helikon, and driving the Reference 3A or Audioplan Kontrast speakers (I didn't have the extra cable straps for the OBX crossovers) I had a system of astonishing performance for its price. Even the addition of Audio Research's excellent CD3 to spin silver discs, or VPI's JMW 12.5 tonearm doesn't push it into the outer limits price wise. Back to 'Hard Headed Woman' and I'm astonished by the sheer physical presence of the sound and images. There is a natural presence and authority to the sound that should be the preserve of really big systems, but which they all too often lack. It comes not just from the scale of the presence but from the dynamic range and responsiveness, but above all coherence. The Hovlands are capable of projected energy equally across the entire audible spectrum. It produces a sound free of exaggeration or false emphasis, ▶

▶ one in which the sound, shape, colour and dispersion of acoustic instruments is uncannily natural. Likewise, the relationship between them, within the band, seems effortlessly right and correct. There's an acceptability in the message which means that you don't question its artifice, you simply accept its content, making the Hovlands a compelling listening experience.

I seem to keep repeating the word *effortless*, from the first paragraph to the one I've just written.

Of course, push-pull EL34s are hardly news when it comes to midrange detail and openness. What I wasn't prepared for was the extension of those capabilities with a healthy dose of sheer power, power that extends well down into the bottom octaves. The Sapphire quite simply sounds bigger and more powerful, with more authority than it has any right to. Rated at 40 Watts it's an object lesson in the irrelevance of measurement to hi-fi. The glory of the Hovland amplifier is not how much power it's got, but how it delivers what it has. The speed and texture of bass notes is remarkable, mirroring the easy grace, texture and naturalness of the mid-range. Music on the Hovlands breathes.

If the sense of easy power and authority is the first thing that hits you about the HP100 and Sapphire, what dawns more slowly is its lack of overt character. Anybody who buys the Hovlands expecting to

wrapped in the warm rosy glow of 'traditional' valve amps will be sorely disappointed. Neither do they sound solid-state. Instead they are notable for an uncluttered, lucid, dynamic presentation, full of life and colour. There's no rounding or false warmth (indicative of valves), none of the bleaching or micro-dynamic constraint (indicative of solid state). Like the much more



expensive Connoisseur and Lamm ML2s, they offer genuine neutrality, measured not in terms of tonal colour but in the energy propagation that actually generates those colours. There's none of the flatness or constraint that so often typifies so-called 'neutral' products because, rather than paring away additives this is neutrality that grows from within. And it comes in a form where the whole set-up costs less than a single ML2 mono-block. Like I said, the Hovlands aren't exactly entry level products, but their performance makes them impressive value for money.

Time then, to talk about the internal and external constructional details (for these are Hovland

products, based on the premise that the physical and electrical must always be considered together). The HP100 pre-amp that arrived for review this time round is, presence of the moving-coil transformers aside, outwardly little different from the original sample. The main casework is now anodised rather than powder coated, and the ventilation holes in the top-plate now sport nice, perforated, machined discs in place of the mesh they used to have. It all adds up to a neater, more finished appearance that's more in keeping with the glorious deco front panel. Inside, although they might be less obvious, there are changes too, with several key components either being changed for different types (notably the discrete resistors on the stepped attenuator)

or having their values trimmed. It's difficult without having the two units side by side, but I'd say that the newer one retains the transparency and temporal fluidity of the original whilst reducing its slight tendency to leanness in the mid-band. The current unit has just a little more colour and presence, it breathes just a little easier and sounds a shade more musically generous. But we're talking small, evolutionary steps here, which is very much the Hovland way: No change for change's sake with these products.

Of course, the Sapphire, being entirely new, is a different kettle of fish. And believe me, there's a lot more going on here than meets the eye. You can't really miss the brushed aluminium chassis that supports

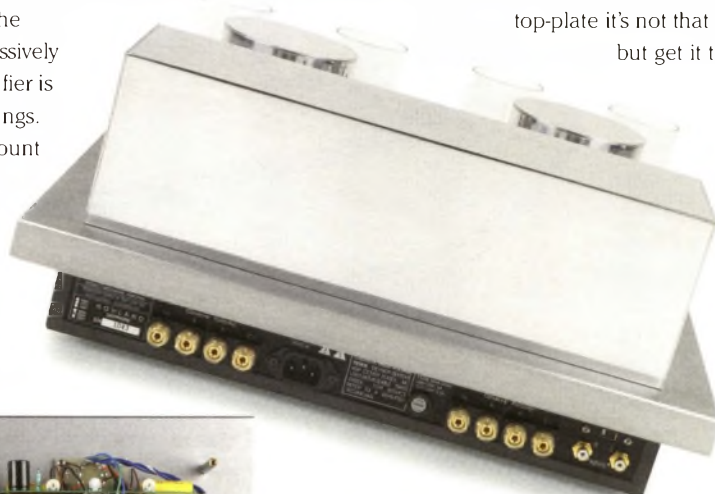
► the hardware. What is less obvious is the fact that that support is both visual and physical. Constructed from a single, inch thick slab, that chassis forms a mechanical ground plane for the entire amp. It sits on its own three feet which couple directly to the supporting surface (and which are threaded for cones if you so wish). The circuitry and ceramic valve bases are mounted directly to its underside, the major components (transformers and chokes) to its top surface. The enormous mains transformer, massively over specified for a 40 Watt amplifier is decoupled via elastomer mountings.

By now, anybody who can count will have worked out that this isn't just another jazzed up Williamson or Mullard application circuit. Not enough of the little tubes you see. In fact, the Sapphire is

mains transformer. The power supplies are substantial and, importantly, the amp uses custom wound choke filters for its HT supplies. Internal construction is a mixture of hard wiring and PCBs, the two approaches applied as appropriate to those situations where they produce superior results. Yet again, rather than simply following the herd and

opting for one or out in practice) but point out that reliable replacements are readily available from a wide variety of sources. yet another example of just how grounded in reality this company really is. In an industry where output tubes can cost well over £300 each and the five-figure phono cartridge is only just over the horizon, it's a reassuring situation.

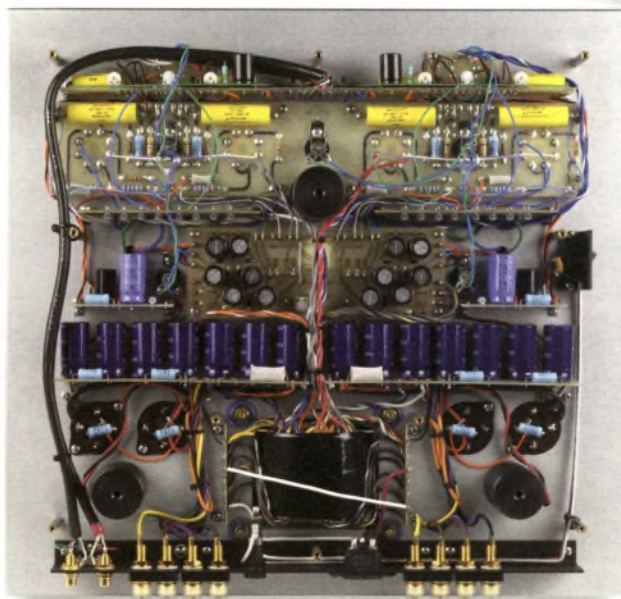
The Sapphire's back panel is also unusual. Tucked under the lip of the top-plate it's not that easy to access,



but get it to something like eye-level and you'll find the necessary socketry, and a bridging switch. Yes, for those of you who crave more power, the Hovland can be bridged to produce an 80 Watt mono-block:

a swings and roundabouts option that delivers the extra grunt at the expense of some transparency, but one that I'll be sampling just as soon as I can prize a second sample out of the importer. About now you'll do a double take. Alongside the single-ended phono inputs are the requisite rows of speaker binding posts, only for each channel there's a single positive terminal and three negatives, one each for 4, 8 and 16 Ohms: completely opposite to the normal arrangement. Hovland feel it sounds better this way.

Setting up the Hovlands is simplicity itself. I placed them on my Clearlight rack and hooked them up using the supplied cable sets. I achieved perfect, noise free connection immediately. Biasing is equally straight forward, using rotary trim pots accessed



a hybrid amplifier, with a bi-polar input stage and J-fet phase splitters used to feed a hybrid J-fet/12AU7 cascode driver for each channel. The push-pull EL34s run in Class AB and the entire circuit is dual mono down to separate windings on the

the other, Hovland have listened and evaluated the benefits of each over the years, and now apply that experience to honing and refining the Sapphire's sonic qualities. In the same way, the circuit eschews global feedback, but retains carefully implemented nested feedback around each stage.

Why EL34s when there are so many much more fashionable alternatives out there. Hovland are not only confident in the sonic superiority of their chosen device (a confidence spectacularly born



▶ through small holes drilled in the top plate and placed, along with a bulls eye meter, between the two gasometers. Select the appropriate valve and rotate the pot until the needle centres – elegant, effective, Hovland!

The only things you need to remember is not to place any kind of supports under the base plate of the amplifier (it must stand on its feet). That and to remove the safety plugs from the binding posts so that you can use 4mm plugs. You could use spades, but the access to the terminals is so cramped (an increasingly common failing on valve amps just at present) that you'll need very flexible cables, and double connecting bi-wires would be no fun at all. Fortunately, Hovland's Generation 3 interconnects and Ninline speaker cables are a model of flexible convenience when it comes to hooking them up. They might appear nondescript but these are

the latest incarnation of one of the first ever audiophile cable systems (evolution, remember!). Their performance within and between the Hovland electronics is one of the most powerful arguments I can suggest for the coherent application of cable technology to a system as a whole. This is one of

the most musically satisfying set-ups I've ever used at home. The total cost of the cabling involved adds up to £2100 (including a set of 5m bi-wires) – or rather less



than a single pair of the Valhalla interconnects I normally use! I'm not saying that the Hovland cables are better than the Valhallas, and the next stage in getting to the bottom of the amazing performance possible from



these amps will be to substitute the Nordost cabling into the equation. But this is a review of the Hovland system, and a system it is. Which means that the whole is considerably greater than the sum of the parts. Oh yes indeedy!

I've already discussed this system's astonishingly inviting sound and the level of musical access it provides, and in doing so I've touched on the inter-

relationships it reveals between instruments and players in a band. For me these are key aspects of what makes this such a musically convincing and satisfying set-up, but it also alters the way you listen. The Hovland puts the music on a plate for you; you don't have to go

looking for it. In the same way that it grows the accuracy and placement of its colours and notes from the basic raw energy building blocks, you listen to the music from the inside out. It might sound like a strange observation, but all too often when you listen to a hi-fi system (and especially a serious high-end system) you start on the outside. After all, that's where you start at a concert hall – except that in a concert the orchestra talks so much more directly. Once it starts to play if you're aware of the environment as containing the music (rather than the music in the environment) then you're at the wrong concert, in the wrong seats or the band want shooting.

We spend so much time worrying about sound stage height, width and boundaries that some systems offer exactly that at the expense of presenting the orchestra as a single congealed blob within its holographically recreated acoustic surroundings. Marvel at that dimensionality, reach out and touch Orchestra Hall – what is it that the ▶

▶ orchestra's playing?

The Hovlands are neither forward nor enveloping. In the same way that The Groove manages to place you in the same sound space as the players, they manage to extend that impression. It's a simple case of direct access. Because your attention is firmly fixed within the performance the boundaries that enclose the acoustic event become secondary (just as they are in life). Listen for them and they're there, just as the individual instruments and players are clearly and precisely defined in space. But they form a continuity of, a coherent whole along with, the orchestra. They aren't as obviously separate or distant as they are on some systems. Rather than existing in their own right as something to marvel at and measure, they are a natural extension of and limit to the musical event. In fact, I was so convinced by the Hovland's presentation that it wasn't until another listener pointed out an apparent lack of depth that it even occurred to me. Such considerations form an essential part of the reviewing process, so as you can see, I gave the matter some considerable thought. I'd normally consider myself a spatially aware listener, and lack of stereo or acoustic information definitely worries me. The Hovland's lack neither, they simply present it in a different, and I'm beginning to believe that it might be a more realistic fashion. Whatever the rights and wrongs of this (and I can hear the "You don't hear stereo at live concerts anyway" brigade sharpening their knives) all I can say is that I'm enjoying my music. There are products that exaggerate dimensionality and inject it even into recordings that are spatially challenged (the Audiophysic Virgo springs to mind). If that's what you want, then you know where to

look. Me, I'm happy with the natural spatial perspective of the Hovlands, being more interested in what comes from the instruments in the first place. The width, depth and height are all actually present (and I believe correct), they just don't smack you in the face.

Listen to Heifetz playing the Bruch Scottish Fantasy (RCA LSC-2603) and his fiddle is a vital, vibrant, multi-coloured presence in front of a beautifully spread and separated orchestra. The great man is a little larger than life, and a little more forward than real life, but that's how he was recorded. With the Hovland system you can hear the bite of rosin on strings, the smallest expressive variation in pressure and the shape of the note. The musical event has a believable presence and palpable reality to it. It draws you in; shut your eyes and with the barest effort you are there. Change the record and you can have Kirsty McColl or Elvis (Costello please) singing just for you. That'll do for me. If products like the Lamm ML2s and Connoisseur Definitions 4.0, Nordost's Valhalla cables and the Clearaudio Master Reference record player have redefined what I believe is possible from a hi-fi system, then the Hovlands bring that level of achievement within the reach of mere mortals for the first time. Lavardin and Living Voice have redefined the real world market, but this is something entirely different. The HP100/Sapphire combination, in concert with their matching cables offer a foothold in the high-end. As such they offer the heart of a serious assault on the state of the art for less than the cost of any of the individual products I named above. Robert Hovland and his cohorts have created a bridge to the hi-fi stratosphere: Don't all rush at once. ▶+

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

HP100 Vacuum Tube Pre-amplifier

Valve Complement:

Line - 2x ECC83, 1x ECC82

Phono - 2x ECC83, 1x ECC81

Line Inputs: 8x Single-ended

Phono Input: 46dB or 63dB gain to order.

Input Impedance: 100 kOhms

Outputs: 2x Single-ended + tape

Output Impedance: 2500 Ohms

Dimensions (WxHxD): 464 x 134 x 370mm

Weight: 12.3kg

Price:

Line Only - £4750

46dB Phono - £5350

63dB Phono - £5750

Sapphire Hybrid Power Amplifier

Valve Complement: 2x 12AU7, 4x EL34

Input: Single-ended phono

Input Impedance: 680 kOhms

Input Sensitivity: 0.9V for full output

Rated Output: 40 Watts/Ch

Dimensions (WxHxD): 470 x 207 x 445mm

Weight: 37kg

Price: £6995

Generation 3 Interconnects

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1.5m pr Phono - Phono: £385

Nineline Speaker Cable

5m Bi-wires: £1394

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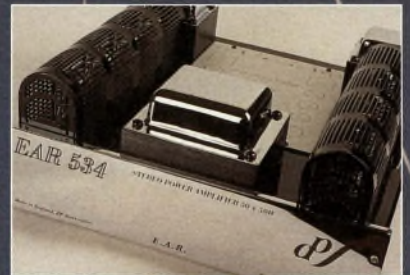
Avalon Symbol £3750



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Kuzma Stabi Reference turntable £4000. Triplanar VI tonearm £3350. Clearaudio Accurate cartridge £2750



EAR 534 valve amplifier 50wpc class A Can be bridged to mono £2200. With balanced inputs £2300.

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Kuzma Stabi Reference Turntable

by Roy Gregory

Designing turntables has always been a juggling act, maximising one aspect of performance while trying to minimise the damage it does to the others. Speed stability requires close coupling of the motor to the platter, but that compromises isolation.

Okay, so let's use a really heavy platter, but that aggravates the noise performance...

You begin to get the picture. Which is one of the reasons why there are so many different approaches to turntable design, and absolutely no consensus as to which is best.

However, the one thing that you can normally rely on is that once they've adopted an approach most designers pretty much stick to it, modifying the hardware and execution to hit various price points. So if you get a box with Clearaudio written on the outside you can predict with some certainty the kind of turntable it contains. It will be a rigid design with a separate motor assembly and the main plinth will be made from acrylic. A Basis, an SME, a VPI, a Rega, an Avid - all have strong genetic markers defining their design paths.

Not so the Kuzmas. The original Stabi was a four point suspended deck constructed mainly from wood. The Stabi S employs a skeletal brass chassis

and a separate motor housing. The Stogi tonearm is a traditional gimbal type design, the Stogi S a damped uni-pivot. Rather than simply modifying an existing product to fit a new price point, designer Frank Kuzma seems to approach



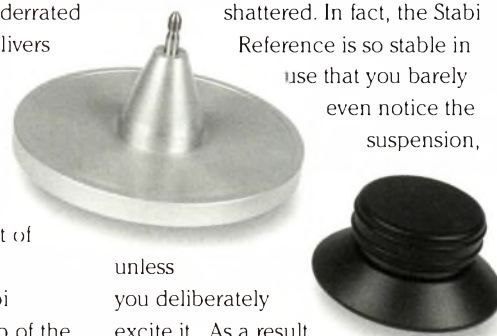
each new project as a blank sheet of paper, selecting the concept, engineering and materials most appropriate to the available

budget. And it seems to work too. The Stabi was always a seriously underrated performer, whilst the Stabi S delivers superb results at its modest price. The tone-arms too, have been consistently excellent. It's safe to conclude that Mr Kuzma has a pretty good grasp of what it takes to get music out of record grooves.

Which brings us to the Stabi Reference turntable and the top of the Kuzma tree. The heart of any turntable is its bearing and drive system, which I've detailed in the descriptive sidebar, but it's worth noting that despite the complexity of its overall construction and engineering, the Reference is also elegant and that elegance manifests itself in the shape of sheer practicality. Record players have never been the

easiest devices in the world to set up and use, and the assumption has tended to be that the more you're prepared to pay for the privilege of playing records, the more inconvenience, fuss and hassle you're prepared to tolerate too. The Stabi Reference breaks that mould. Not only is it a genuine top-level performer (at a fraction of the price of some of the competition) but it's an effectively suspended design that's a piece of cake to set-up and use, and it stays that way.

Anybody who thinks that a suspended deck means a severe case of the wobbles and endless tinkering with springs and cable dressing is about to have their pre-conceptions shattered. In fact, the Stabi Reference is so stable in use that you barely even notice the suspension,



unless you deliberately excite it. As a result cueing, clamping and record handling are just as straight forward as they are on a rigid table, which comes as a blessed relief. Indeed, the big Kuzma exhibits many of the benefits of a rigid deck, combined with the low noise floor and information retrieval of a good suspended design. It's also largely impervious to the nature of its ►



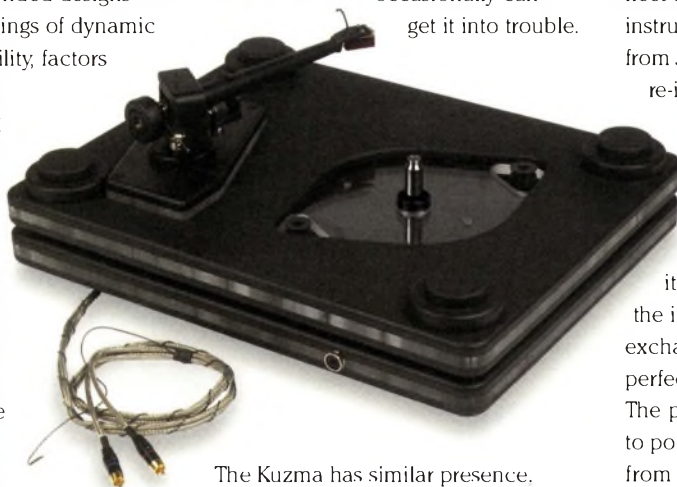
► support, as long as it's stable and sufficiently strong to support the record player's 40kg total mass.

So, does the Kuzma Stabi Reference represent the best of both worlds? In many respects it does, but that requires some explanation. The long time Achilles heal of suspended designs has been the twin failings of dynamic range and speed stability, factors that are not entirely unrelated. By offering both significant suspended and rotating weights, and a superbly damped suspension the Kuzma aims to stabilise the platter-motor interface. Add a second motor to the equation and drive them both from a well executed power supply, specifically designed to reduce motor vibration and provide constant torque to the platter, and you are beginning to approach the ideal of something that simply needs to be quiet while it revolves at a constant speed. The final piece of the jigsaw comes from the fine pitch adjustment, allowing the user to vary the speed by $\pm 0.4\%$ in discrete 0.05% steps. At heart, the job of a turntable is very simple. The Kuzma keeps it that way.

Playing piano music (whether it's Solomon, Janis, Rubenstein or the Duke) the Kuzma can't quite match the speed stability and absolute authority of pitch achieved by the rigid, three motor Clearaudio Master Reference driven from its regenerative power supply. But then it doesn't match its price either (or the care required when it comes to support). Indeed, at around 40% of the Clearaudio's cost, its weak suit gets surprisingly close to the German player's strength, whilst also offering considerable alternative benefits of its own. Indeed, the logical competition

for the Kuzma comes from the similarly heavy, similarly suspended and similarly priced VPI TNT HotRod. It's a fascinating comparison.

If I had to characterise the VPI I'd major on its scale, power and musical enthusiasm. Enthusiasm that just occasionally can get it into trouble.



The Kuzma has similar presence, weight and substance. Its scale is slightly less obvious, as is the sheer sense of musical energy, but both those things are down to its greater sense of control, and it's this that primarily separates the sound of the two 'tables. Where the VPI is meaty, beaty, big and



bouncy, the Kuzma is an altogether more cultured and refined performer. That sense of control and stability is further extended when the deck is used with the matching Stogi Reference tonearm, whereas the VPI JMW 12.5 introduces a shade more air into the proceedings, allowing the instruments to breathe that much more freely. However, the important thing to note is that with neither arm did the

sound ever cross the line into over-damped sterility. The deck's behaviour might be physically and mechanically well damped, but that characteristic never imposes itself on the sound.

Indeed, rhythmically speaking, the Stabi Reference is both agile and fleet and foot. The rapid rhythms and instrumental interplay of 'E Luxo So' from *Jazz Samba* (the excellent DCC re-issue LPZ-2011) intertwine

effortlessly as Stan Getz and Charlie Byrd joust and revolve around each other. The relationship between the two instruments never loses its track or simply meanders: the increasingly rapid and complex exchanges locked together by the perfectly paced rhythm section.

The pedants amongst you will jump to point out that the rhythm comes from the playing and I agree. The point is that the Kuzma delivers it intact and then downshifts gracefully to the mellow smooch of 'Baia'. So gracefully in fact that it isn't even an issue. The mechanics of reproduction don't intrude and once again the deck doesn't impose itself on proceedings.

The additional low frequency information doesn't phase the deck and that speaks volumes about its freedom from bass artifice or overhang. If that doesn't sound like much of a compliment then think again. The ability of any turntable to portray changes in musical pace is intimately

linked to the way it handles low frequency energy. Some chop or truncate it, adding a sense of pace, but adding it to everything. Others release that energy unevenly, slurring and disturbing time signatures and musical momentum as a result.

Both the Kuzma and the VPI avoid those sins of commission ►

Build and Set-up

Kuzma's flagship is a massive, four-point suspended design. The plinth and sub-chassis/top-plate are constructed from laminated Aluminium/Acrylic sandwiches. It uses a sophisticated, electronically controlled, two-motor belt-drive system to turn an aluminium sub-platter on a massive, tapered inverted bearing. The platter weighs 8kgs and the whole assembly spins on a Ruby ball mounted in the tip of the bearing shaft. There's a one piece record clamp and a separate arm board that's big enough to accommodate most tone-arms, including awkward linear trackers like the Eminent Technology and Clearaudio designs. Set-up consists of basic assembly followed by levelling and setting the height of the suspension. This is accomplished by turning the top mounted knobs, while lines machined

into the suspension shafts and easily visible from the side of the deck, offer a simple yet accurate guide. Those and a spirit level are pretty much all you'll need, and the whole process should take about half an hour from opening the box, assuming that you've got a pre-cut armboard. The suspension itself is heavily damped using silicon wells that automatically seal when the sub-chassis is unloaded. It's an elegant arrangement that I first saw on the Basis Ovation and which delivers stable, effective isolation devoid of the nervousness of light-weight designs. It's nice to see that Kuzma's open mind isn't blighted by "not invented here" syndrome! Resonant frequency of the suspension is a low 2Hz. I used the Kuzma with both its own Stogi Reference arm and my own JMW 12.5. It's incredible stability makes it a natural partner for both uni-pivot and linear tracking tonearms, as well as accommodating even relatively stiff tonearm cables without complaint.

▶ and omission, but that doesn't mean they sound the same. Whilst both deliver music with life and pace, the VPI conveys the greater sense of energy and volume, the Kuzma greater transparency and texture. Getting back to the vexed question of piano reproduction, play the new Coup d'Archet release of Yvonne Lefebure playing Beethoven's *1st Piano Sonata* and the Kuzma's reproduction of this 1961 mono recording will amaze and delight you. Its ability to sort the finest percussive textures imbues the musical picture with uncanny shape and presence. The dynamism and virtuosity of the playing leaps to life, bringing the performance, solid into the room. All without the benefit of audiophile bandwidth or stereo! It's an impressive demonstration of the Kuzma's capability to control and dictate without stifling or limiting. Key to that capability is the subtle distinction and definition of individual



key pressure. The ability to let the listener hear through to the weight and attack of each note without effort and without destroying the structure of the music as a whole. Extend that beyond the single instrument on up through the ensemble jazz of EST, the Basie big band and studio rock of Led Zeppelin, and you quickly discover that this clarity and insight into the structure and energy spectrum of music expands with the scale and power of the performance. It culminates to stunning effect on well-recorded orchestral material like the Heifetz/Sargent Bruch *Scottish Fantasy* (RCA LSC-2603). The space between instruments and behind the soloist is clear and stable, the energy that comes in waves from those instruments, not least of course the poised lyrical sweep of Heifetz' violin, combines and builds exactly as it

does in a live concert, at once separate and together: Without becoming confused or congested. Just as you can in a live concert you can follow the individual strands within the whole.

Where does the Kuzma compromise? Well, it lacks the extraordinary detail and sheer resolution of the Clearaudio Master Reference. It also lacks the musical gusto and verve of the big VPI, but by treading the middle path it succeeds in being better balanced overall than either. Of course, that doesn't necessarily make it the best deck for your system: that will depend on the context of the equipment as a whole, but the Kuzma Stabi Reference is as capable as the alternatives in its own style, and cheaper than most of them. Its great competitor, the VPI TNT Hot Rod was one of my products of last year. On this showing, the Kuzma's going to be on the list for next year. If you're in the market for a top-flight turntable that is reliable, versatile in terms of matching arms, and beautifully engineered to last, then it should be on your list too. ▶+

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Suspended, belt-drive turntable
Motors:	2x 24 pole synchronous
Speeds:	33 and 45, + or - 0.4%
Suspension type:	Fluid damped
Suspension resonance:	2Hz
Platter mass:	8kg
Lid:	Optional extra, free standing
Dimensions (WxHxD):	500 x 200 x 400mm
Weight:	40kg
Finish:	Black
Price:	£3995

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Eclipse TD 512 Time Domain Personal Monitor System

by Roy Gregory

When someone presents you with a product as determinedly different as the Eclipse TD 512 loudspeakers and amplifier it's difficult to know just what to expect. The loudspeakers in particular, employing a diminutive single driver, rigidly mounted to a mass loaded stand and de-coupled from their radical, egg shaped cabinet, fly in the face of accepted speaker design wisdom (or should that be fashion?). The amplifier too has its unusual side, being a two chassis, single input integrated design. In fact, the whole system is designed, as the name suggests, as a near-field monitoring set-up with cross-over hi-fi applications, a brave and dangerous path if history is anything to go by.

So, eclectic in concept, exquisite in execution, exotic in appearance and not inexpensive to purchase, the Eclipse challenges both preconceptions and convention with equal abandon. Under the circumstances it seemed logical to subject the system to the searching examination of the very criteria it discards, and who better to do just that than Phil Ward, freelance loudspeaker designer and contributor to both Hi-Fi+ and studio mag *Sound on Sound*? Would its alternative approach win hearts and minds whilst challenging the basis on which we measure equipment, or would it prove to be altogether too different for its own good?

The Theoretical Perspective

Loudspeaker design, as any loudspeaker designer will delight in the telling, is a tightly constrained discipline. Back

in the early '50s, when the

ancestors of the speakers we now know and love appeared, the discipline (too self-important a term surely) took a couple of fundamental and perhaps pragmatic decisions

that still constrain the breed today.

I'm thinking firstly of the decision to house drive units in wooden cabinets produced by the furniture trade; and secondly of the decision not to persevere with full-range drivers but to split the band between woofers and tweeters. If the majority of speaker designers back then had dealt with those two issues differently, perhaps the average

common or garden speaker would now be something other than the archetype two-way stand mount. But what if, in a parallel universe, those decisions did go another way? Maybe, just over the multi-dimensional, parallel universe horizon, full range drivers rose to dominate and enclosure manufacture didn't fall by default to the furniture industry. And maybe, early in the 21st century, a speaker from that parallel universe fell through a worm-hole and appeared miraculously and incongruously in ours. Ladies and gentlemen, I give you the Fujitsu Eclipse TD 512.

The Eclipse even has something of an other worldly look about it. The gloss black egg shaped enclosure with its circumferential fixing details, and the stark, functional aesthetic of the stand combine to generate, if you've a mind to see it, a palpable Buck Rogers look. I'm sure some will love the look, and I'll have little argument with them, but I never felt entirely comfortable with it. The amplifier is a far more successful piece of aesthetic design to my eyes than the speaker and I was immediately seduced. Of course the aesthetic of the speaker is dominated by Fujitsu's single-minded approach to design philosophy. It looks the way it does primarily because there is no other appearance that fits their philosophy of minimising "time domain" errors.

But in spite of the Eclipses' rocket science looks, there's little rocket science technology to be found in the design. In fact pretty much



▶ every notable feature of the Eclipse 512 has been seen elsewhere before: Direct coupled “full-range” drivers everywhere from Lowther via Beauhorn and Acoustic Precision to Canon Audio (the latter, pretty closely related to the Eclipse unit similarly made by Fostex); both floating de-coupled, and loaded resin enclosures from Mordaunt-Short and others; Egg shaped, or at least spherical form enclosures from Genelec or Cabasse. No doubt there are many other examples of each technology. Perhaps the only unique aspect of the Eclipse is the particular combination of features.

Fujitsu’s “time domain” argument is that errors in the time domain are fundamentally responsible for making moving coil speakers sound the way they do. They say that if you get the time domain performance right, frequency domain issues become of secondary significance. Now there’s a kernel of truth in this in that the kind of time domain errors they are talking about, and which the Eclipse is designed to banish - delayed resonances from various sources, diffraction effects, inter-unit time delays - are undoubtedly undesirable in any speaker. However it’s a little disingenuous to imply that designing primarily in the frequency domain necessarily leads to problems in the time domain without pointing out the corollary might also be true. For, of course, especially in a fundamentally minimum phase device like a moving coil speaker, you can’t treat time and frequency domains as independent. Concentrate on, or fiddle with, one and you’ll see the results of your work, beneficial or otherwise, in the other. In fact you could quite plausibly argue

for all of the Eclipse’s technical features from a purely frequency domain perspective - and if you did, you might also notice that the Eclipse is missing a significant chunk of it.

Small single drivers are great in theory. So great that countless speaker designers have

tried to make them work in the past, and I guess

many will in the future. There are however some very difficult engineering challenges to overcome. In fact, given our commercial expectations of volume, bandwidth and dispersion, I’d argue that any single driver, whatever rocket science it incorporates, will always be working at the very edge of the envelope that the laws of physics in this universe allow.

The driver in the Eclipse makes a stab at “full range” that’s technically pretty typical of the breed. It has a low moving mass helped (probably) by a Kapton voice-coil former, a copper cap

on the pole-piece to reduce voice-coil inductance, a well damped but relatively flexible, lightweight glass-fibre cone, and a stiff dust-cap. These ingredients combine to produce a driver that still has output up to 15kHz. But there are two problems. Firstly, the output up at 15kHz is only really present on-axis.

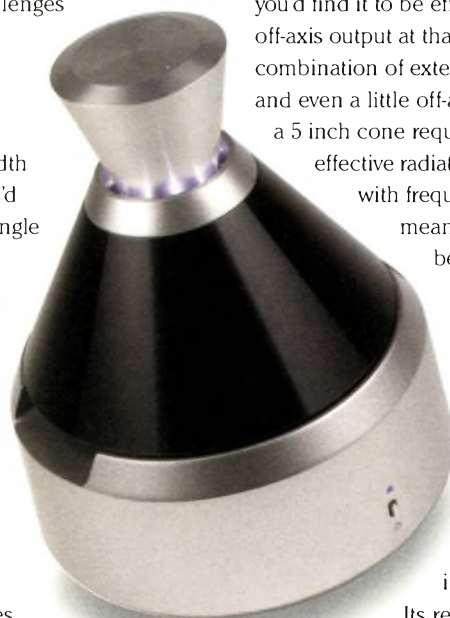
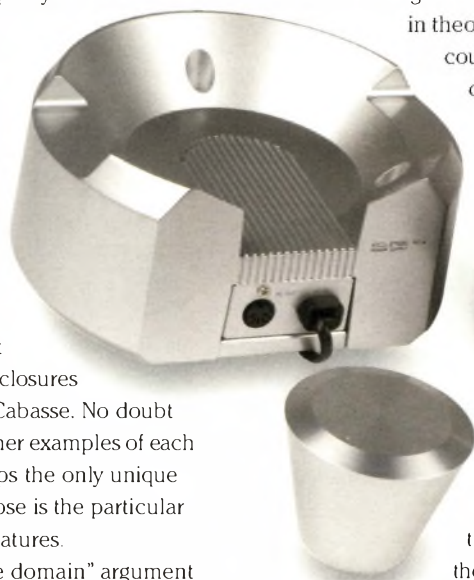
Move 20 degrees off axis and the output is nearly 10dB down at 10kHz.

Secondly, the only way to make a 5 inch driver work up to 15kHz is through cone material

trickery and through designing-in some resonance. You can propose all the hi-tech lightweight cone materials or profiles you like, but, even supposing you made a cone with a mass of less than, say, 5 grams that worked without break-up to 15kHz, you’d find it to be effectively without off-axis output at that frequency. The combination of extended HF response and even a little off-axis output from a 5 inch cone requires the cone’s effective radiating area to reduce

with frequency. And that means the cone must bend, and if it bends it must introduce time domain errors. The Eclipse driver measures just as I’d expect for one that’s being asked to work outside its natural band.

Its response is raised by 3dB or so through the mid-band, and then combines a slow droop with signs of multiple high-Q resonances, to just past 15kHz, where its output drops like ▶



▶ a stone through a wet paper bag.

The cone on the Eclipse is probably engineered such that its outer regions progressively de-couple as frequency rises, with the stiff, lightweight phase plug engineered to enter a resonant state above, say 6kHz or so to “help-out” as the cone output dies - thereby creating a “full range” driver. Trouble is, in addition to the poor dispersion, “full range” comes at the expense of those pretty obvious high frequency resonances (visible in both time and frequency domain measurements, by the way). I can't help but feel that a small tweeter would have been a better compromise. Yes, there are time domain issues inherent in both the inter-unit time delays and the necessary passive crossover, but both of these could, with careful design, have been minimised for one listening position. And before you ask what good is a speaker that only works in one listening position, read what RG says about off-axis listening to the Eclipse as it is.

At the other end of the spectrum, the Eclipse makes a surprising and significant concession to the frequency domain: it is reflex loaded. Reflex loading at typical port tuning frequencies will, by its very nature, introduce significant low frequency group delay. If I were to design a speaker with optimised time domain performance, I'd make it a closed box and reduce that low frequency group delay by half or so. But then perhaps I wouldn't have chosen a full-range 5 inch driver in the first place and had reflex loading forced upon me in order to get some reasonable LF

extension and power handling.

If there's one lesson that loudspeaker designers learn it is that theirs is the business of engineering compromise. Even so, the history of loudspeaker design is also littered with brave attempts to break-out and show that things could be different. The Eclipse is braver than many, and as a piece of single minded, other worldly engineering, I'm full of admiration. I just wish it had a tweeter.

Phil Ward



I started out by asking just what I might expect from the Eclipse system. Looking at the ingredients I would anticipate a performance that makes the most of the specific benefits of the multiple technological approaches applied. Thus, I'd be looking for the phase, dynamic and tonal coherence

that comes from single driver designs. I'd also want the immediacy and rhythmic integrity that comes from the absence of a passive crossover. Mass loading the driver's motor assembly should provide improved dynamics, while the carefully shaped and de-coupled cabinet should provide an open, box-less sound. Which is a long and convoluted way of introducing you to the dangers of drinking by the label. I could not have been more wrong; appearances could not have been more deceptive.

The assumption of low colouration and wide dynamic range inherent in the 'monitor' tradition were equally wide of the mark.

The sound of the system is dominated by the speakers so let's start with those. I embarked on my listening with high hopes. After all, my recent experience with single driver designs (the various Beauhorns and the Acoustic Precision FR1s) has been extremely positive, rewarding

me with a tactile musical immediacy that

was at once convincing and involving.

However, driving the TD 512s from sources as various as their own amplifier, the Mark

Levinson No 383 integrated or the Hovlands, in turn fed by Rega, and ARC CD players or the Kuzma Stabi Reference turntable, proved to be a frustrating and even disturbing experience. Whatever the partnering equipment, the sound was marred by the intrusively obvious character of the speakers. Central to this was a combination of pervasive mid-band colouration and lumpy, ▶

▶ detached and overly weighty bass. The result was slow, turgid and uninteresting. Listen off axis and it gets even worse.

On the plus side the speakers do possess an excellent noise floor which underpins good overall dynamic range, and it would be wrong to criticise their limited listening window given their moniker. Listen on unfamiliar material, especially clean, uncluttered recordings and the results can be initially impressive, the novelty masking the problems. However, as soon as you play something that you know well the impact on the pace and tonality of the music is instantly apparent. So much so in fact that vocals and particular instruments are altered to the extent that they take on quite different personas. Gregg Saffery's distinctive voice, familiar from live performance, interview and repeated listening to the Stewboss album *Wanted A Girl* is rendered at once gruff and hollow. Very peculiar, astringent and ultimately whining. Likewise, Arturo Delmonico's familiar tone becomes distant and echoy, almost as if he's playing in a large bore drainage pipe, whilst his relationship to the guitar of David Burgess becomes muddled and indistinct. As reviewers go I'm probably more tolerant of deviations from a flat frequency response and extended bandwidth than most, especially if the upside is enhanced structural and rhythmic integrity. Unfortunately, I can't hear past the Eclipses' character, while they also do little to elevate my understanding of the musical underpinnings.

However, there is a ray of light at the end of this particular tunnel. The matching A502 amplifier is a gem. Petite and perfectly formed, it enjoys all the constructional and structural quality of its partnering speakers in a package that combines

elegance and tastefully understated looks. The nested design is both novel and effective and nobody who saw it could resist the massive, up-lit volume control perched on top. At first sight, the single input might seem like a severe limitation, but in practice there are a great many systems built around a single CD source. Its power and drive belie its diminutive footprint and sensible socketry means that you can get proper cables in with ease, the bulky Hovland bi-wires proving to be no problem at all. I was frankly astonished by the crisp, solid presence that it elicited from the Audioplan Kontrasts, a more demanding load than the bare specs suggest. It is sure footed and rhythmically agile, organised and unflustered, providing direct access to the core of the musical performance. Bass in particular, is solid and tactile, pitch relationships within bass lines explicit and unambiguous. I can think of any number of excellent speakers that would make the most of its direct and communicative performance – and any number of customers who would enjoy its discrete good looks. As such, it stands in such marked contrast to the TD 512 loudspeakers that it's difficult to credit that they stem from the same company.

While I'm the first to applaud companies that challenge accepted approaches, kicking over the traces rather than scrambling for the tailgate of the latest bandwagon, it does tend to be a hit or miss proposition, certainly in market terms. It's not enough to be different, your products have to perform as well. The Eclipse TD system is a mixed bag: one disappointing miss and one resounding bull's-eye of a hit. It's living proof that care in construction and excellent materials can't overcome a flawed concept, but that a carefully executed yet

radical concept can overcome people's initial prejudice. Whilst the speakers clearly aren't my cup of tea, the amplifier most definitely is. It alone makes Eclipse TD a company to watch. One out of two ain't bad and who knows, maybe the speakers will do for you what they failed to do for me. Even if they don't, listen to the amp on its own. It's a star! ▶+

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

TD512 Speaker

Drive Unit:	5" woven fibre
Bass Loading:	Rear Reflex
Impedance:	6 Ohms
Recommended Power:	30-60 Watts
Dimensions (WxHxD):	286x373x363mm
Weight:	12 Kg
Finish:	Black
Price:	£1175 each

A502 Amplifier

Rated Output:	30W/6 Ohms
Inputs:	1 x Line
Input Sensitivity:	0.27V
Input Impedance:	10 K Ohms
Dimensions (WxHxD):	215x294x183mm
Weight:	5.7 Kg
Finish:	Black and Silver
Price:	£1175

UK Distributor

Eclipse TD UK
Tel. 0207 328 4499
Net. www.eclipse-td.co.uk

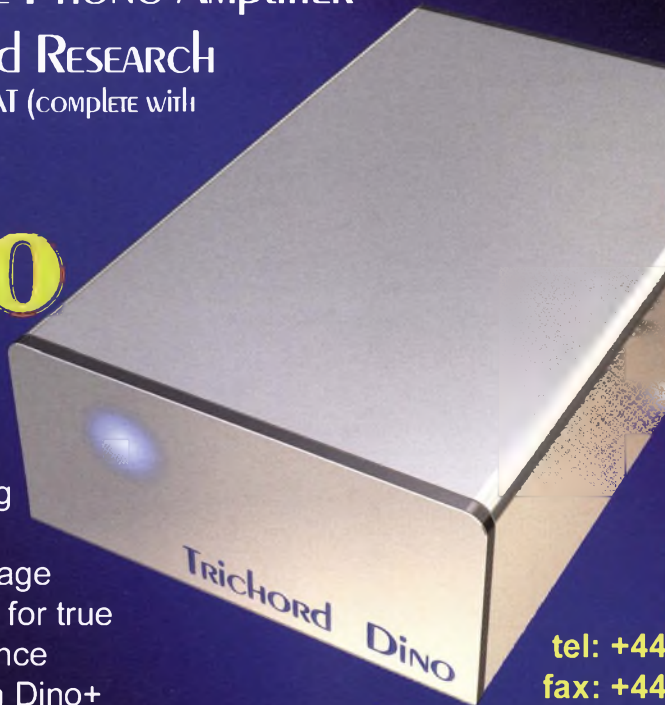
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Spendor S8 Loudspeaker

by Paul Messenger

I've long had an affinity for Spendor loudspeakers. My first "serious" speakers, way back in the late 1960s, were a very early pair of BC1s. And in the mid-1970s, prior to the journalism thing, my first job in the industry involved helping to make Spendor speakers. It's no surprise therefore that I have a soft spot for a brand that unusually enjoys equal respect and enthusiasm amongst both domestic and professional customers.

Spendor's original roots lie firmly in the broadcast monitoring tradition, established back in the 1960s by the BBC's Research Department. During the 1990s, however, the brand was part of a ProAudio group, and rather lost its profile on the UK hi-fi scene.

I was therefore very happy when the news broke, a year or so back, that Philip Swift had taken over the company. Philip is first and foremost a hi-fi person and was another very early BC1 fan, so this is a logical enough move for someone who has worked in many sections of the industry - most recently as a co-founder of Audiolab (which ultimately became TAG McLaren Audio).

Spendor might not have actually made BC1s for a great many years, but some of the models it does make don't look all that different, and tradition is a core element in what the company is doing today. The company's Classic series (such as the SP2/3 I recently reviewed in another magazine) do indeed bear close similarities to the models which were being made back in the 1970s. Transplanting those

traditional values into a context that takes account of current fashion trends, however, is the altogether trickier proposition that the new S-series models set out to achieve.

The £1,700 S8 is the middle model of three S-series floorstanders, and actually shares something of the outline configuration of the

mentioned stand-mount SP2/3. The key ingredient that these two have in common, yet which also distinguishes them from the overwhelming majority of today's hi-fi loudspeakers, is something called an 8-inch main driver.

When I bought those original BC1s thirty years ago, it was an era when 10-inch and 12-inch drivers were commonplace, and an 8-inch driver seemed, if anything, rather small and lacking machismo.

It was, however, the core component in the market-leading "bookshelf" speakers of the era, like Wharfedale's Denton and Linton.

Today you can count the number of models using 8-inch drivers on the fingers of one hand, and the marketplace is dominated by combinations and variations on the 6.5-inch theme, alongside a good sprinkling of 5.25-inches. The S8 (and SP2/3) might therefore be regarded not only as very close relatives, but also as having some throwback-to-an-earlier-age tendencies.

Where the S8 scores – and justifies its higher price – is in providing a package that looks so much more elegant and up-to-date than its SP-series stablemate. That's pretty much true of any floorstander compared to an equivalent stand-mount, especially when the latter is amongst the larger examples of the breed, but the S8



► goes a couple of steps further than most in making the most of the floorstanding configuration.

The grille is meant to be left in place here, its acoustic effects taken into account in the overall mix, while its cunningly tapered shape adds significantly to the elegance of the total package, helped by a chunk of real wood trim at the foot.



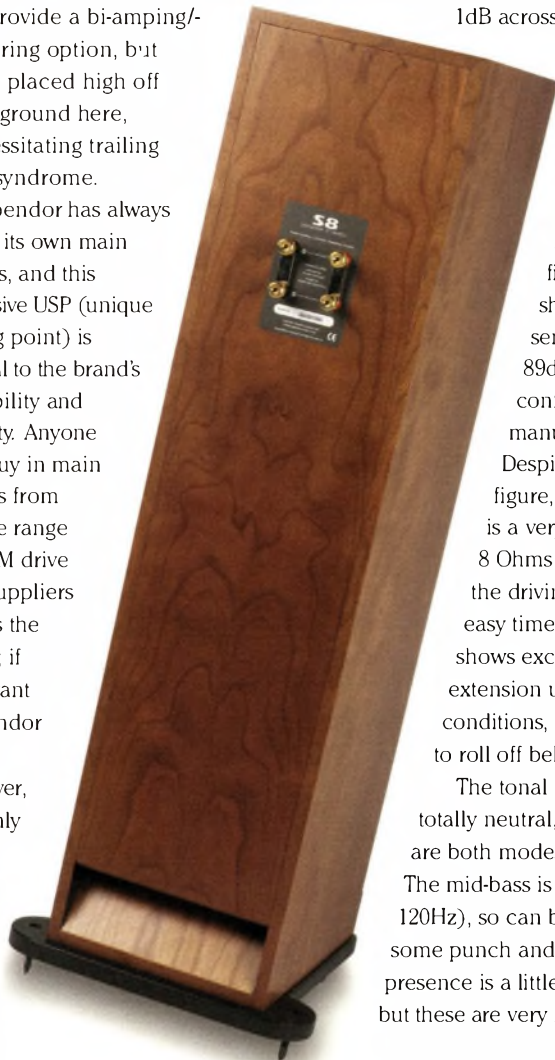
The S8 might use an

8-inch main driver, but it still manages to look surprisingly slim. It also comes with a proper plinth, made from painted MDF here, which in my experience is the only way to ensure a decently stable footprint and secure spike fixing. The rear part of the plinth is augmented by a stabiliser bar, a sort of outrigger which extends the lateral footprint out beyond the edges of the enclosure, and incorporates a metal

strip that guarantees fine mechanical integrity for the chunky 8mm spikes, ensuring solid floor-coupling.

You get good quality Cherry or Maple real wood veneer all round which is just as well, as the bass alignment clearly favours siting well clear of walls. The port here is more of a ducted slot, extending the full width and exiting at the rear, close to the floor. Spendor calls this a 'linear-flow' port. It's gently tapered, with a large cross-section to give smooth air flow, avoiding turbulence and also, somewhat incidentally, stiffening the structure of the whole enclosure. Twin terminal pairs provide a bi-amping/-wiring option, but are placed high off the ground here, necessitating trailing wire syndrome.

Spendor has always made its own main drivers, and this exclusive USP (unique selling point) is crucial to the brand's credibility and identity. Anyone can buy in main drivers from a wide range of OEM drive unit suppliers across the globe; if you want a Spendor driver, however, the only



place you'll find it is in a Spendor speaker. The 8-incher used here has a cast frame and Spendor's diaphragm of choice, deep-profile moulded from transparent polypropylene. The cone diameter of 150mm gives a significantly larger area than about half as big again as a 6.5-incher. The tweeter used here has a largish (27mm) doped fabric dome.

Wiring is high purity mono-crystal, silver-plated copper, and the crossover network uses low loss polypropylene capacitors, high linearity magnetics and air-cored auto-transformer inductors. The enclosure is internally braced to control panel vibrations, with additional high mass visco-elastic damping panels. The inside is lined with acoustic grade foam. All Spendor loudspeakers are matched to within 1dB across the audio

spectrum, and all drive units and crossovers are calibrated and pair matched to within 0.5dB. My in-room (far-field) measurements show a decent sensitivity (88-89dB/W), effectively confirming the manufacturer's claim.

Despite this healthy figure, the impedance is a very straightforward 8 Ohms or better, giving the driving amplifier a very easy time, and the bass shows exceptionally good extension under in-room conditions, only beginning to roll off below 30Hz.

The tonal balance is not totally neutral, but its departures are both modest and gradual. The mid-bass is a little weak (70-120Hz), so can be expected to lose some punch and drive, and the presence is a little restrained too, but these are very mild criticisms ►

A daresay many of the more mature readers will have negative memories of the sound of speakers from twenty or thirty years back. The temptation is to blame the sound on the speakers, whereas in truth the sources and amplifiers of the day are much more likely to have been responsible. Take an ancient but high quality pair of speakers from the 1970s, sit them on proper, rigid spiked stands and feed them from a modern high quality system, and you'd be amazed how good they can sound.

The main changes, over the years, have been improved power handling (due mainly to better glue technology), and the dictates of fashion.

As long as you take care not to drive them too hard, "vintage" loudspeakers can give totally impressive results. If you then get carried away and do drive them too hard, there's a very good chance you'll burn a voice coil, and an equally good chance that it'll never quite sound the same again, even if you do get it fixed.

▶ which introduce just a little character to the proceedings.

"Gently restrained" is probably the most apt phrase to describe the S8. My first reaction was that it was perhaps a little too restrained for its own good, but a short acclimatisation period soon convinced me that it was very well judged indeed, delightfully easy to live with over the long haul, yet without seeming to sacrifice any detail. There will be some who maybe prefer a sound with a little more "bite", but I'd suggest that can become a little wearing longterm, and the Spendor's slightly more laid back approach is that much easier to live with.

What I do particularly like here is the midband transparency. This of course is a traditional Spendor virtue, but it remains a relatively rare quality across the broad sweep of commercial speaker brands. The S8 has a delightfully evenhanded and smooth broad midband, partly because of its fine main driver, but also because any box colorations are exceptionally well controlled and suppressed. In some respects it has the delicacy, expressiveness and freedom from boxiness normally found with open-back speakers (eg panels and other dipoles), which was always one of the BCI's cleverest tricks. Precision stereo imaging with focus and depth is another of those clever tricks, and

again the S8 delivers the goods.

Although I didn't have access to SP2/3s, I've always kept a pair of BC1s handy as an important reference point, which just happens to be particularly relevant here. While the latter do have a slight edge in vocal neutrality, thanks to a brighter and more open top end, through the midband the similarities seemed much greater than the differences. Direct comparison made it abundantly clear that the S8 is a genuine Spendor, one that's following in the true tradition of this highly respected brand.


If the midband is a major strength, the bass isn't far behind (and is certainly rather better than the BC1 can manage). It goes impressively deep, with considerable weight, power and authority, though it's also a little "heavy" in tonality. One might wish for a little more "punch", especially from bass guitars, but the classical thing gives a thoroughly convincing sense of scale and weight.

Qualitatively the top end is thoroughly satisfactory, though quantitatively I found it just a shade lacking. I personally prefer the greater openness of a slightly brighter balance, but my partner often finds this verging on the aggressive, and consequently found the S8s very much to her taste, so who am I to argue?

This slight lack of top end openness

is my most serious complaint, and is in any case likely to attract as much praise as criticism, especially from anyone with slightly bright sources and/or amplification. I guess the overall character is tilted in favour of classical rather than rock, though I spent weeks on end with the S8s, working my way through a whole variety of sources and material, and always found them thoroughly involving and entertaining. They never get aggressive, even when played loud, yet do show considerable powers of discrimination, even at low levels.

I don't want for choice when it comes to serious loudspeakers, yet happily left the S8s in situ for week after week, feeling no inclination to swap them for something more pretentious.

Although it took a little while early on, by the end of the day I was thoroughly persuaded that the S8 is a fine and subtle loudspeaker in the true Spendor tradition, dressed up in a new and fashionably smart suit of clothes. Furthermore, the price is realistic for a genuine thoroughbred, one with a midband that's been setting the standards for the past thirty years. 

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Two-way floorstander
Driver complement:	27mm doped fabric HF 200mm polypropylene Bass-Mid
Efficiency:	89dB
Impedance:	8 Ohms
Dimensions (WxHxD):	226 x 918 x 319mm
Finishes:	Cherry, Maple
Price:	£1700

Manufacturer:

Spendor Audio Systems Ltd
Tel. (44)(0)1323-843474
Fax. (44)(0)1323-442254
E-mail. mailto:spendor@cwcom.net
Net. www.spendor.mcmail.com



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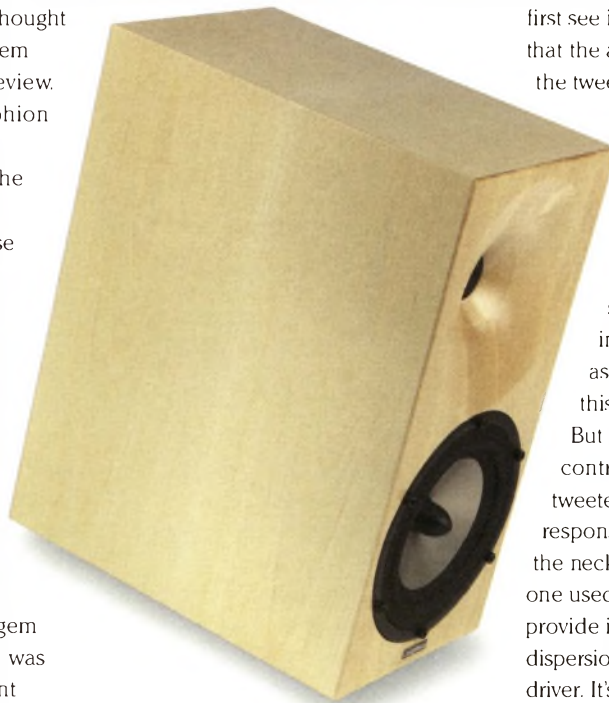
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Amphion Argon 2 Loudspeaker

by Chris Thomas

As the copy date approached I was getting a bit worried. The sparkly new, unused speakers I had unpacked several short weeks before were not those that now sat before me. The promise they had showed was a distant memory. And I really thought that I was going to have a problem when it came to producing a review. Let me explain. When the Amphion Argon 2 first arrived it was a bit of a revelation. As mentioned, the review pair were totally unused and as with all new Hi-Fi it is wise not to make snap judgements until a break-in period has elapsed. But it was impossible not to be impressed by their performance over the first few days. Indeed, I was thinking that this might well be one of the very best sub £1000 speakers I had heard at home. Sitting atop my Revel stands they had all the hallmarks of a real little gem (if you'll excuse the pun). Here was a speaker that married excellent bandwidth, with a crisp, nicely etched sense of detail and an immediate sense of rhythmic and musical togetherness. But now, some weeks later they had curiously lost the edge that had made them seem special and were now soft, tonally flat and frankly boring. And where, despite their relative inefficiency, they had responded to the volume control with relish they now refused to awake from their slumbers, even under heavy power. I eliminated the

obvious, which was that something, somewhere was broken and was left wishing that the real Argon 11 would stand up and be counted. Fortunately, a few days later it started to.



Designed and manufactured by Amphion in Finland the Argon 2 is the entry model in a range of 4 loudspeakers. This is a two way, rear ported enclosure of compact dimensions necessitating a stand mount, more of which later. The most visually striking thing is the way in which the tweeter has been mounted in the throat of a deep baffle scoop, the size and shape of which mirrors the exact dimensions of the bass driver.

In fact it is not really deep enough to be called a horn and Amphion refer to it as a wave-guide. It is easy enough to see that this brings the acoustic centres of both drivers together and offers time alignment, but when you first see it you can't help but imagine that the amount of wood in front of the tweeter is going to introduce all sorts of reflective problems and possibly some phase anomalies too. Speaker designers have always told me that one of their primary concerns is that the tweeter should have as smooth an interface with the outside world as possible and, at first glance, this seemed to break that rule. But the aim of Amphion is to control the directionality of the tweeter to give a more even off-axis response. By placing the tweeter at the neck of an identical flare to the one used on the bass/mid driver, you provide it with similar coupling and dispersion characteristics to the bigger driver. It's one of the benefits that KEF cite for their Uni-Q drivers, and should make the crossover point harder to spot and thus less intrusive.

Both drivers are aluminium and made to Amphion's own specification by SEAS. The bass/mid driver measures 6.5 inches and the tweeter is a 1-inch dome design. The cabinets are superbly made. The review sample finished in a blonde birch looked great, particularly the way in which the veneer had been worked within the flare of the

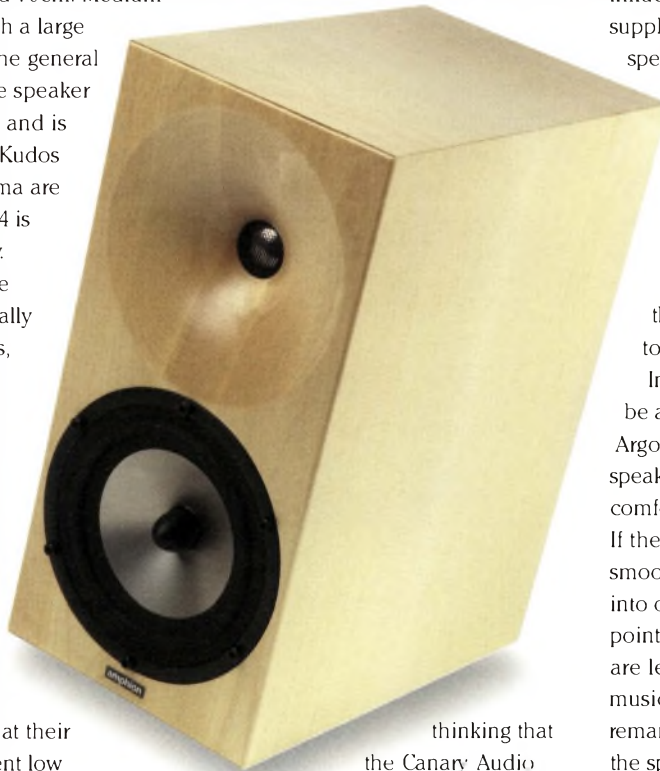


▶ wave-guide. They can be single or bi-wired and the terminal quality looks excellent though you will need a spanner to adjust the connections, so tight are the threads.

Where the two arcs of the wave-guide and the bass driver are at their closest, which is right in the middle of the baffle, is the point source and the level at which you want your ear to be and this means a stand height of roughly between 60 and 70cm. Medium to high-mass stands with a large top plate seems to be the general recommendation as the speaker itself is no light-weight and is physically quite deep. Kudos work quite well, Atacama are better and the Target R4 is also a strong possibility. My own Gem stands are a little too tall to be totally ideal but the Amphions, sitting on 4 blobs and a thin line of Blotak seemed, eventually, to be quite happy there. Siting them is easy, depending on how much room you have. Pull them as far out into the room as you can is my recommendation if you want to hear them at their best. They have excellent low frequency extension and need no help from rear walls or corners but they are still quite tolerant of near-wall placement, though you will lose some of that open throated clarity they are so good at.

Amplification is an interesting one. Despite their humble price these speakers will not be at their most successful in a system with other similarly priced components. Their tonal balance could certainly be described as lean rather than rich but one thing it does do is to leave you in no doubt as to the nature of the driving amplifier. If you employ

a lean, high-resolution speed merchant, even one as good as the Spectral, you may find the Amphions tonally a touch on the chilly side. Their lowish 86dB efficiency necessitates an amplifier of considerable power, but it is more the nature of this power that is important. Put simply and ever so slightly crudely, it craves fat power rather than lean power and, though I unfortunately had to part with it recently, I cannot help



thinking that the Canary Audio CA 608 would have been a terrific partner for these speakers. Ultimately, valves may be the way to go with the Argon 2; budget Japanese integrated amps need not apply. Certainly, speaking to the designer in Finland and the importer I found they were both recommending several thousand pounds worth of amplification. And if you think that any sub £1000 speaker would sound good under these circumstances, think again. I see no problem in using these speakers with source and amplification costing many times their own value.

The dumb period that the Argon 2

went through lasted approximately two weeks yet still remains a mystery. Neither manufacturer nor importer had ever encountered such a wildly variable performance. There seem to be a couple of possible answers. Either this was a natural electro-mechanical break-in effect with crossover components and drivers behaving in a temporarily non-linear way. Or there were some external influences like an inconsistent mains supply. I am told that some Shahanian speakers are known to go through such "off" periods during their lengthy run-in time. But me, I've never known anything like this degree of variability, though I was mighty glad when they started to come back to showing the promise of the early listening. I'll put it down to experience.

Integrated musical clarity would be a good way to describe how the Argon 2 goes about its business. The speaker has a bandwidth that it seems comfortable with and in control of. If the wave-guide is an attempt to smooth the response of both drivers into one another around the crossover point, then it has succeeded and you are left with a virtually seamless musical performance that has the remarkable ability to detach itself from the speakers to give just about one of the most solid musical pictures I have heard from a small speaker. Every design has a different way of framing the sound and at these price levels you often find a strong left/right presence with a detached centre fill but the Argon 2 spreads the sound in a solid unbroken image right across the stage with plenty of vigour. Bass is very well extended, given the speaker's size and very tightly controlled. It stops and starts with commendable speed and has very little sense of the cabinet in its tonality. It flows smoothly into a lean but open midband which might sound a little mean with a conventional ▶

► tweeter installation. It certainly does not have an enormously extended feel about it, but the wave-guide does seem to bring a greater sense of presence (not forwardness) to the treble so, although the Argon 2 might not have as much "air" and sparkle as you might expect, it certainly has a great feeling of solidity and impact. This top end presence is quite unusual and has absolutely none of the possible side effects I was anticipating. Quite the opposite in fact as it is not remotely "phasey" and has great focus and projection though it never sounds artificial, constricted or unnatural.

The promised off-axis



response is excellent and you can sit way off the hot spot with a barely discernible drop in high-end response and even using the speakers on their side alters the shape of the sound very little.

Top quality Bluegrass musicians are some of the finest acoustic players on the planet blessed with a feel for time like few others and Tony Rice is one of their leading lights. This flatpicking wizard occasionally turns his attentions to other kinds of music as he did on *Backwaters* (Rounder 0617) where, with a band of 5 others he leaned ever

so slightly into the jazz arena. The CD has a rather unusual sound but the ensemble interplay is what has always drawn me back to it. Listening to it through the Argon 2 it was easy to see why. There is no drummer on this album so the musicians have no timekeeper other than themselves. Rice lights the way as he sets up a chordal highway that the bass player sits just underneath, subtly suggesting new harmonic possibilities by not always concentrating on the dominant notes of the chord. The twin violins and mandolin explore their way in and out of the structure, but the band are even more interesting when the chords stop. You can still hear the progression in your head as small solos pull your emotions one way then the other. I loved the sheer clarity that the Amphions brought to the performances and the way that they allowed each player his own space and time. The subtlety of the mandolinists' plectrum technique and the sheer variation of expression that vibrato holds for the master was all very well illuminated by the Argon 2's. I've heard this disc drift by almost unnoticed on many an expensive system but these little speakers gave it an air of poignancy that really made the experience worthwhile.

Rachelle Ferrell on the other hand demands a different set of strengths. *Individuality (Can I be me?)*, (Capital 94980 2 0) is a showcase for her talents and her vocal range and, especially on the up-tempo numbers, recording subtlety was sacrificed for impact. There has been a lot of production gone into this album most of it devoted to pushing the whole band into your living room so you just can't ignore it, or her. Listen to it on the little Amphions and you soon realise that the aim has been to capture the impact of a live gig on CD. There's quite a lot

going on and some of the tracks are quite dense but the "lightness" of the Argon 2's touch and its quick recovery from heavy transients meant it made comparatively easy work of it. Again, I was pretty amazed at the way they paint a full width picture of the music while still retaining that sense of control of both the big and the small aspects of the recording.

This is a very good all rounder with no notable weaknesses though there are a few things to bear in mind. The biggest consideration will be the driving amplifier, which should be chosen so as not to exaggerate the already lean balance of the speaker. It should also be of adequate power; the Argon 2's can soak up power like a sponge. But given that, I doubt you'll find too many speakers at this price with as much to offer. Oh, and make sure you audition a pair that have been well run-in. ➤

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Rear ported two-way
Drivers:	6.5 inch aluminium bass-mid 1 inch aluminium dome hf
Efficiency:	86dB
Impedance:	8 Ohms
Bandwidth:	40-20000Hz -3dB
Dimensions (HxWxD):	380x190x310mm
Finishes:	Cherry, Birch, painted black, painted silver
Prices:	£900 for cherry and birch £750 for black and silver

UK Distributors:

Audiocraft
Tel. (44)(0)1895-253340
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Revel Ultima Salon loudspeaker

by Chris Binns

It's nearly official. I will soon be moving house – this scary prospect is about to come to realisation and I'm looking forward to it about as much as a pile up on the M25. As to where I end up...well, I don't entirely know yet, but you can be sure that high on my list of priorities will be somewhere that I can indulge myself with music, whether it be the recording or playing of it. And now that the time has come, I have become acutely, no, damn it, painfully aware of just how lucky I have been for the past ten years. Atypical of the average British living room, I have been able to accommodate all but the very largest of loudspeakers and listen to them at frankly abusive levels whenever the mood has taken me. So I guess that I might well have to become a more socially responsible person from now on...hard though it will be. Add to that the entertainment of looking out over the river Avon (and all the associated wildlife) while playing music and it becomes a hard act to follow, particularly as far as reviewing loudspeakers is concerned.

So the Revel Salon might well be the last large loudspeaker that I review for a while (although there is a cunning plan afoot to arrange for something monstrously, ridiculously big for the leaving party; but that's another story, or possibly a review - and if you live anywhere near Salisbury you'll probably hear it).

Actually, to say that the room comfortably accommodates large loudspeakers is not strictly true, as due to the geometry some of the very big units I have used have tended to overpower the room with bass, resulting in a bloated performance that was less than flattering. Which is why I was a little nervous about getting the Revel Salons

for review. Make no mistake, these are big loudspeakers, and bloody heavy – over 250 pounds per unit, so unpacking and positioning was very much a team effort involving much tea, cursing and swearing. They also come with a reputation for having a genuinely wide bandwidth – I had been warned.

With all the various people on hand for moving the Salons, opinions of their aesthetic were quick to come, none of which I'm afraid to say were particularly flattering. At best, one can say that for such a large loudspeaker the curvaceous organic contours mean that it is not as imposing as many other more 'square' designs, but hey, one mans meat...For me, the real wood veneered sides with their black edge reminded me far too much off really naff caravan tables circa 1973. Which is a shame, as there has been obvious effort on the part of the designers to come up with something a bit different, a sentiment that I wholeheartedly endorse. But, there are a number of different finishes available, and for me the more high tech aluminium finish is eminently preferable.*

Having been so unkind about the way they look, I am glad to say that the

Salons performance allows me to be considerably more positive. Fact - they are the first loudspeakers I have ever used that have got a unanimous thumbs up from everyone who has heard them. Over the last month and a bit, that's a lot of people, with an incredibly wide range of musical tastes and differing interest in hi-fi. No one was less than complimentary about what they heard, so I figure the

Revels must be doing something right.

The man behind the team responsible for the Revel loudspeakers is Kevin Voecks, and like many designers he was drawn into loudspeaker manufacturing by a general dissatisfaction with what he heard while working in retail.

I first heard his name in connection with the Snell loudspeakers, where he spent a considerable amount of time working in conjunction with Canada's National Research Council's Audio Laboratory to investigate and correlate measurement techniques with real world performance.

With the incentive of a virtually unlimited budget specifically for designing better high-end loudspeakers beckoning, Kevin joined Revel some six years ago. In practice, this meant a genuinely no compromise approach to the project, with state of the art ▶



► research and development facilities plus the luxury of being able to design drive units from scratch. Throughout the gestation every aspect of performance has been painstakingly evaluated, while listening tests have been some of the most rigorous and controlled ever, with participants having to go through a three stage computer aided instruction and testing program as part of a vetting process, before even qualifying for the panel.

The Salon is the largest loudspeaker in the Revel range; all are characterised by a similar aesthetic, which as I have already described is certainly eye catching. A four-way design, it uses no less than seven drive units, housed in a two part cabinet of substantial dimensions. Three 8" woofers with mica and carbon filled domes occupy the lower part of the cabinet, coupled with a 6.5" mid bass unit of similar construction, bass loading is via a flared rear firing port of enormous dimensions. The multiple bass drivers are said to have greater power handling than a single 15" unit, as heat build up in the motor assembly is spread over six voice coils rather than two, minimising compression at high power levels. (As an aside, one of the benefits of being part of the Harman organisation is the ability to pull in the expertise of a sister company, in this case JBL, when required. The two companies worked together on the low frequency alignment of the Salon. JBL lending a hand with bass? Now that is scary.)

The upper section of the cabinet houses the mid-range and tweeters, the 1.1" aluminium domed unit complemented by a smaller unit of similar design firing from the rear, this is claimed to flatten the in room response at the top end. The upper cabinet is contoured to minimise diffraction and enhance the high frequency response. There is not room here to discuss the drive units individually in detail, but they all incorporate some pretty high tech engineering as part of the ongoing

research project.

The back panel has two sets of binding posts to facilitate bi-wiring, while there are controls that provide adjustment in 2dB increments for low frequency compensation (centred about 43.9 Hz) and level adjustment of the front and rear tweeters. Small though the adjustments might seem on paper, do not underestimate the differences they make in practice – it is worth spending time playing with them.



The Salon gives off the air of a product in which every last detail has been thoroughly considered, from the advanced technology of the drive units and the superb finish of the cabinets, down to the effective spikes with caps for hard floors.

The Salons that I had for review had seen considerable use, and I was not anticipating having to run them in, but a quick listen suggested otherwise. Much heaving and grunting got them into what sounded like a favourable position in my room, but the mid and

top had a 'knife edge' quality inconsistent with the rest of the audio band. A few days later this had all but disappeared, and although I was aware that the mid range units had recently been replaced, they had not been subsequently used. That was exactly what I heard – a lack of integration with the rest of the loudspeaker. For a large loudspeaker, the Salons are not overly efficient, although they do not represent a particularly difficult load to the amplifier. The resident Primary valve amps at 300 Watts per channel would appear to be fine on paper at least, and I guessed I was about to find out just how capable they are at the bottom end.

When a product first arrives for review, I tend to find that I select music to demonstrate certain qualities where you think the systems strengths lie, or conversely, fall short. Tell me you have never selected your music to show off the system when you have interested guests in your house, and I won't believe you. For me, it also acts as an anchor to further evaluate, and discover the limits if you like, of what a system can do. With the Salons, I simply could not be bothered, instead going for whatever music I wanted to listen to at the time. Forget the demo discs, you won't need them, as the Revels seem to make the most of whatever you feed them, regardless of its origin. They also do the same thing with partnering equipment, by not drawing your attention to its lesser attributes (for example, the slight lack of bottom end control with the valve amps). The fears that I had regarding the Salons' match with equipment and room proved to be unfounded. Extended, yes, overblown, no. They singularly failed to excite any of the room resonances that I know exist, and have seriously made me reevaluate just what is achievable in my present domestic situation. While listening to music, there were no indications as to the size of the loudspeakers, as the image that

▶ they presented appeared to be totally divorced from the cabinets, a feat they managed without having to sit yourself dead in the middle. String quartets were thus presented with a scale commensurate with the performers, while an orchestra filled the room, and rock music did whatever the engineer wanted. Either way, the Salons behaved like a small precision monitor, until some deep bass was present, and you were reminded of the fact that there were no apparent limitations to the bottom end extension. A few quick measurements indicated that the in room bass output extended well below 20 Hz, but at no point did it ever sound uncomfortable. Reproduction of drums and percussion was fast, detailed and devastatingly dynamic, and bear in mind this was with the Primary valve amps, which while offering plenty of power, are not capable of the absolute precision of something like, say, the bigger Levinsons or the Briston 14B ST. The salons never forced themselves on you, and at no point did I ever feel overwhelmed by a large loudspeaker, only the music.

The Salons can go awesomely loud. There is certainly no shortage of headroom, and even at ridiculously high levels I could not detect any compression or flattening of musical dynamics, as far as the six hundred watts of amplification would allow. While I had a lot of fun listening at high levels, the Revels are mercifully free of

a volume threshold when it comes to musical satisfaction. Playing music at quiet, gentle volumes proved just as rewarding, with no loss of dynamics or detail, something that has been a problem with other high-end designs I have listened to. Perhaps helped by the minimal 'bloating' at the bottom end, I found the mid and top to be highly informative and precise, and often heard detail in recordings that I had previously missed, not that I was particularly looking out for it. That for me was one of the great attractions of listening to the Revels – this kind of thing occurred frequently and only served to enhance the music, rather than be reduced to a train-spotterish fetish about information retrieval. In other words, the Salons achieve this without dissecting the music and reducing listening to an academic process, quite often the price you pay for high resolution.

As I come toward the end of this review, I must say that it isn't really over yet. I would desperately like to try the Salons with some different amplification, such as the Briston 14B, to further explore their capabilities, so watch this space.

You will probably think I am mad, but I am going to suggest that the Revel Salons are something of a bargain. I can think of no other loudspeaker that offers this level of all round engineering, finish and above all performance at this kind of price, or even near it. There are also plenty at far higher prices that stand to be severely embarrassed by the comparison, but that's another story.

But for me, the most memorable

achievement is their ability to be expressive with all kinds of material in a way that I have rarely heard with recorded music. I have been heard to grumble that it sometimes appears as though loudspeaker design hasn't really progressed much in the last thirty years. The Salons have not only shut me up, they have restored my faith in just what can be achieved with present loudspeaker technology. They are a truly great loudspeaker.

* A final word on the aesthetics – maybe I have just got used to it, maybe I am now biased by their performance, but I could live with them. No, really.



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Drive units:	28mm tweeter 19mm rear tweeter 102mm mid range 185mm mid bass 3 x 210mm bass units
Frequency response:	25Hz – 20 KHz (-3dB @ 24 Hz)
Nominal impedance:	6 Ohms (3 Ohms minimum)
Sensitivity:	86dB/W/m
Dimensions (HxWxD):	1294 X 342.9 X 674.7
Weight:	108.9 Kg
Finishes:	Main body in matt black or gloss finishes. Side panels in aluminium, Rosewood, Light Oak or Black Ash.
Price:	£13495 - £14995

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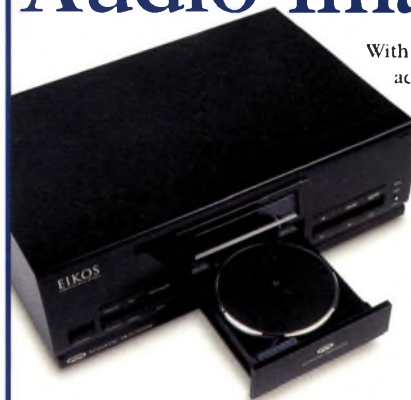
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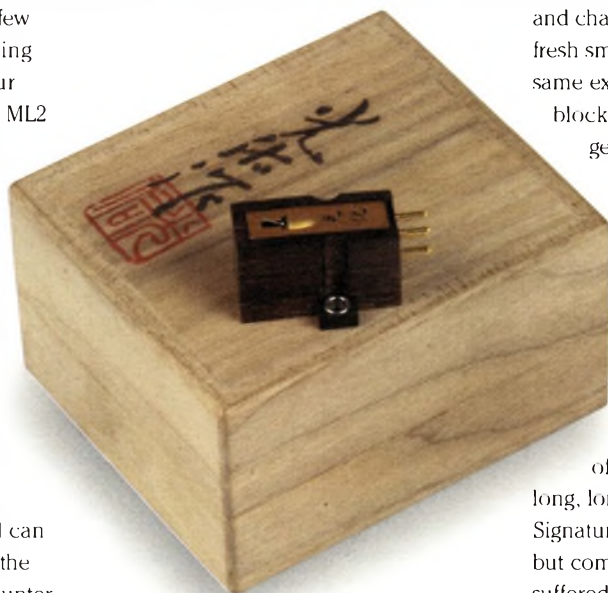
Koetsu Red K Signature

by Roy Gregory

Learning curves are never smooth: on any odyssey there are always distinct, defining moments. The search for hi-fi enlightenment (an intellectual odyssey if ever there was one) is no different. There are always products that rearrange your notion of what is important, indeed, what is possible. But such products tend to be few and far between, often appearing in flurries (like the Connoisseur Definitions pre-amp and Lamm ML2 power amps) with many fallow years between. However, each of those products, the moment of impact when its import hit home, stays clear in the memory. Long ago, when I was still wandering the lower slopes I was hit by just such a flurry: the Magnaplanar MG1b, Audio Research SP8, the Krell KSA 50 and, last but far from least, the original Koetsu Red Signature. I can still recall with absolute clarity the circumstances of that first encounter.

It was the downstairs dem room in the old Wigmore St KJ, and the system was a DNM pre-amp, Krell power amp and a pair of MG3as. The Red Sig was the new hot property, fresh off of ecstatic reviews in both the absolute sound and Hi-Fi News. A cash rich audiophile community (we are talking early eighties London here) was waiting with baited breath and crossed legs - £1250 was a lot of money in those days! The cartridge was installed in the rather unpromising combination of an SME5 mounted on an LP12, but even so its quality was clear, its superiority to the competition manifest. Its combination of rich tonality and

surging energy, the coherence and volume of its sound stage, the inner detail and dimensionality set completely new standards in the believable recreation of the original musical event. Like I said, the horizons fell away, the sky tilted and the earth moved.



And that's how things stayed for quite some time. The Red Sig enjoyed an almost unprecedented reign as undisputed object of lust for all aspiring audiophiles. More than any other single design, it established the category and credibility of the super cartridge, at once raising our expectations and the bar when it came to phono performance. No other cartridge had its classically understated proportions and elegance, and no other cartridge came in that perfect little box. There were flashier offerings available, including the likes of Koetsu's own Onyx, but none caught the

publics' imagination the way the Red Sig did.

Big shoes to fill, so offered the run of the current range, how could I resist? Enter then the latest incarnation of the venerable Red Sig, the Red K Signature, and yes, expectations were high. The same beautiful box with the same chop and characters on the lid and the same fresh smell as you open it: inside, the same exquisitely worked rosewood

block of a body. So you still don't get colour-coded pins, mounting hardware, tapped mounting holes or even the most rudimentary guidance when it comes to set-up. Not even a recommended down force. Such is the price of doing business with a legend. Oh yes, and while we're on the subject of price, the days of £1250 are long, long gone. The current Red K Signature pegs the scales at £2299, but compared to the rate of inflation suffered by the competition that seems almost reasonable.

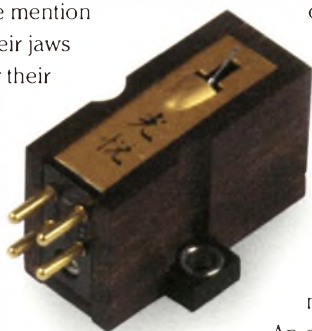
I mounted the Koetsu in the JMW 12.5 on the Kuzma Stogi Reference and Clearlight Recovery turntables. Step-up duties were performed by the Connoisseur and Groove phono stages as well as the transformers installed in the Hovland HP100, partnering equipment suitable to the Red K signature's exalted status. Tracking at 1.85g with minimal bias produced the best sound, with the JMW as near as damn it dead level, further testimony to the craftsmanship that goes into these cartridges. However, don't kid yourself that horizontal is close enough. The Koetsu demands far

▶ more care than that.

Back in the days when the earth was flat, Koetsu cartridges had a reputation for overly warm, turgid sound and slow bass. Sure, they imaged, but what did that matter if they couldn't keep time? Hindsight is always 20-20 and with its benefit it is easy to see how the Koetsu's inherent warmth and rich tonality combined with (willful?) misapplication as regards matching tonearms and systems might produce that result. Add a less than subtle slant to the reporting and on such things are reputations built: and boy do they cling. Even today, after the stellar reputation built by the original Red Signature, it's still easy to find "audiophiles" who at the mention of the K word pull on their jaws and mutter sagely under their breaths along the lines of 'warm and slow'. They should be tied to a chair and made to listen to the Red K Sig. It might stop them making prats of themselves.

The RKS is wonderfully warm but slow it isn't. It also times, boogies and makes you tap your feet. Indeed, this is one of the most musically engaging cartridges I've ever used at home. It is sweet, open and inviting. It beckons you in and just when you're starting to relax it blows you away with its sheer power. It's a capability that deserves respect. You see, although the output of fashionable cartridges has been on the rise recently, that's the way Koetsu have always done things. The Lyra Helikon offers around the 0.5mV mark and the RKS delivers more: more level, more body, more presence and above all, more power. When the Basie big band let rip with an ensemble tutti, the Koetsu gathers that energy from the depths of its capacious soundstage and hurls it at you. If that sounds uncomfortable consider two things: standing in front of a big band

at full tilt is a physical, visceral experience, and the RKS's ability to scale dynamic peaks with unparalleled grace means that any edge or glare present comes from the instruments rather than the cartridge. In fact, despite the power and impact of its delivery, if anything the Koetsu still rounds and smoothes the upper registers slightly relative to some of the other designs out there. It lends music a sweetness which whilst it might not be strictly accurate actually has more to do with the sound of real music than the exaggerated, bleached, ringing extension that passes for hi-fi all too often. It certainly doesn't interfere with my enjoyment



of my records. Indeed, quite the opposite! Aside from the lack of glare and fatigue, there are more immediate benefits to the RKS's treble balance: It is very kind to both surface noise and sibilance.

An elderly copy of Martin Stephenson and the Daintees' *Gladsome Humour and Blue* (KWLP 8) proved the point. Gone was the edgy crackle, much reduced was the pervasive sibilance of the close miked vocal on 'Me and Matthew'. At the same time, the drum beats and synth lines that open 'Wholly Humble Heart' have astonishing impact and weight, the snare rolls arriving like a fusillade, demanding the listener's respect. Timing, poise and rhythmic integrity are high points, propelling this power house track to new heights. But be warned, you'll only get this level of musical involvement if you set VTA with precision, which is easy with the JMW but is beyond the capability of simple post and socket tonearm bases (a problem which undoubtedly further contributed to the big K's early reputation).

Set-up with the appropriate care

the RKS will reward you with a coherent and superbly defined soundstage, peopled with solid, properly proportioned images that play together to produce real music. It's a performance that majors on presence and colour at the expense of obvious detail and separation. But whilst the Koetsu doesn't extract the information dug out by the likes of the Insider Reference, it's not as far behind as first impressions suggest. Why? Because it majors on integrating its information into a believable whole. Listen deeper into that soundstage and you'll hear that it's all there, it just isn't wearing a party hat to draw attention to itself.

As befits a classic product, the Red Signature has evolved gracefully, adding wider dynamic range, greater speed and a more natural tonal balance to its considerable existing strengths. Sinuous and surefooted it excels at revealing the music's shape and flow. Warm it might be, but don't confuse that with cuddly. Just like a big cat, that smooth, languid grace conceals explosive power. It's a recipe for long term musical satisfaction, which is just as well given the Koetsu's legendary longevity. Desire it, stroke it, just don't expect it to purr. ▶+

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Low-output moving coil
Output:	0.35mV
Loading:	<200 Ohms
Tracking Force:	1.85g
Weight:	11g
Internal Impedance:	5 Ohms
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INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER
No. 383

standby

Mark Levinson No. 383 Integrated Amplifier

by Roy Gregory

Back in Issue 11 I had my sensibilities trampled by a close encounter with the Mark Levinson "Junior" Reference System. Junior because I ended up with the half sized, but still enormous, 33H power amps in place of the "electrical re-plumbing required" 33s. I also had to slum it with the Revell Studio speakers in place of the even bigger Salons. Such are the hardships of life as a reviewer.

Something else you have to put up with is a constant stream of visitors who are more interested in the latest product to arrive for review than they are in your conversation. With the Levinsons in situ that stream became a flood. As word got out, the world and its wife all wanted a piece of this particular action. But then, who wouldn't? Impressive pedigree, impressive price, impressive size and very impressive sound: the Levinson Reference system has it all, and we all want a bit, even if it's only a case of rubbing temporary shoulders with these particular hi-fi glitterati. We come, we enjoy, and then regretfully we depart, for only a few can afford the cost of permanent residence. The complete Reference system costs as much as a very nice Ferrari, and whilst I know which I'd prefer, most people wouldn't agree and you don't see that many Ferraris on the road.

Of course, with any stratospherically priced products, Ferrari or otherwise, there will always be those who question their value and scoff at their price-tags. Most manufacturers simply ignore such

criticisms, while looking down their noses as if to say "If you don't understand what we do it's clearly because you're incapable of proper appreciation." Of course, that response also conveniently avoids providing any answers to the awkward questions such irritating killjoys have a habit of asking. Not so Levinson: This is one company that goes to great lengths to explain what goes into their Reference products, why they cost so much, and how they do provide a genuine Reference for everything else the company does. The argument is that even those who can't afford the Reference products can still enjoy the benefits that filter down to the less expensive designs.

Now, given the obvious audio lust writ large on the face of each and every visitor who experienced the Reference system chez Gregory, the idea of something embodying even some of the same qualities but at a price that somebody might actually be able to afford was simply too appealing to pass up. The fact that it also puts Levinson's claims to the test simply adds an extra piquant touch. And where better to start than at the opposite end of the spectrum, with the company's cheapest amplifier,

the 383 integrated. Of course, cheap in this case is a relative term, and the 383 won't leave you much change out of \$6000. But before you throw up your hands in horror, let's actually examine the bill of fare.

This might be the least powerful amplifier in the Mark Levinson line-up, but it still pumps out 100 Watts into 8 Ohms and 200 into 4: Real output rather than fanciful optimism. Such power levels actually necessitate substantial components, especially in the power supply, and as a result the 383 represents an imposing physical bulk.

Once again, pick it up (carefully) and you'll be surprised just how dense it is. This is no large, empty box, but would be considered by most people as a two-man lift. 36kg is heavy, whichever way you pick it up. So, first things first: even though this is their cheapest amplifier, it still follows the company mantra of a simple circuit with a darn great power supply. There's no skimping in the hardware department. Pick it up and you realise that this is, definitely, a real Levinson.

Next, let's consider the 383's genetic links to its more illustrious, higher profile and much more expensive relations. Of course, the most important of these is the sound, but before we get to that there are other, far more



▶ apparent similarities. It's a bit like looks and personality. The kid next door might look like his dad, but what you really need to know is whether he behaves like his crazy grandfather. The 383 looks the part but how deeply does the similarity penetrate?

First off, the casework, connectors and control knobs are all in the same style and built to exactly the same standards as the parts used for the Reference series products. More than that, the operational system architecture is inherited directly from the No. 32 pre-amp. That means that each of the five line inputs (two balanced) can be individually named and adjusted for channel balance, overall gain and whether or not the signal is routed to the record outputs. The level of muting can also be user set at anything between -10 and over -70dB depending on your preference. Once you've set those parameters you can defeat any inputs you're not using so that the rotary input switch only offers you the ones with sources connected. All this programming might seem like a chore but the Levinson software is so comprehensive and simple to use that even a technophobe like me was able to grasp the process in seconds. When a friend's CD player failed, requiring total revision of the balanced and unbalanced inputs to accommodate a spare player, I was able to reconfigure her 383 over the phone, from memory. Of course, the whole process is helped enormously by the large alpha-numeric display, and can even be carried out completely from the nine button remote control! Incidentally, this new, compact handset is the best I've ever used, with clear control layout, positive feel and exceptional range. It seems set to become the basis for all future Levinson handsets, so the company obviously

believes in trickle-up as well as trickle-down. I despise remote controls with a vengeance, failing to appreciate the minor benefits in convenience when the sonic costs are calculated. This is one exception to that rule. Not only does it actually work, and work everything from anywhere, but for once I'm happy to accept that few if any sonic

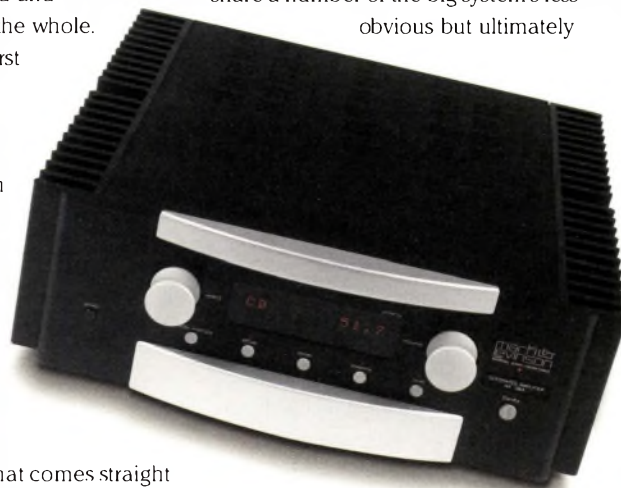


compromises result simply because Levinson have evolved the entire system architecture to incorporate it. This is no afterthought, but a carefully considered and essential element of the whole. Levinson aren't the first company to do this, but they are the first to get it right. This is a functional extension rather than a programmable interface. Of course, it's that too, but for once this is a genuinely user friendly and totally intuitive device.

The other thing that comes straight from the No. 32 is the volume control graduated in precise 0.1dB steps. I said in the review of the Reference system that this is the nicest control I've ever used, and its presence on the 383 simply confirms that fact. Anybody who feels that 0.1dB increments are inaudible just needs to listen for themselves (they're probably the same people who can't hear absolute phase,

and the Levinson lets you switch that too). Other than that, the 383 enjoys all the same interfacing and connection capabilities as the rest of the Levinson product range, allowing especially easy integration into multi-room systems, but again, like its big brothers, this operational convenience is achieved without compromising the sound. The only thing I miss from the big system is the double height display that's even easier to read from across the room. In use the 383 is just as unflappable, with power cuts, shorted speaker cables and other abuses leaving it totally unperturbed.

It's big, heavy, totally silent in operation and a joy to use. Of course, play some music and you'll quickly realise that the 383 lacks the sheer scale, power, solidity and unlimited dynamics of the Reference set-up. Less power and nearly a tenth of the price accounts for that. Mind you, most other systems lack those things too. However, it does share a number of the big system's less obvious but ultimately



more musically important features, chief amongst them its uncluttered sense of organisation and clarity. The 383 brings a wonderfully unforced quality to a system, an effortless grace to musical reproduction. Along with it comes the same phenomenal sense of musical access that made the big system so memorable. When it comes time to ▶

▶ step inside the performance, the integrated's view might not extend quite so high, and certainly not as low, but that first step is just as easy and just as inviting. It's a bit like stepping out onto a balcony: the twenty-fourth floor might let you see more than the twelfth, but the actual act of walking out there is just the same, regardless of the view. Unfortunately, such is the state of hi-fi (and in this regard we're in danger of going back-wards rather than forwards) it's often overcoming the initial disbelief with what we're presented that's the hardest part.

In fact, so unforced is the 383's presentation that it's easy to dismiss it as unimpressive, but that's just because nothing's jutting out and waving for your attention. Balance is fast becoming an overused word in my reviews, reflecting the increasing importance I place on this rarest of virtues. I don't want a component to do any one thing outstandingly. I want it to do everything equally well so that the internally relationships and chemistry within the performance are retained. After all, that's what separates music from noise, a collective of great musicians delivering a great performance from a bunch of jaded cynics going through the motions. That performance should be greater than the sum of its parts. Just like a hi-fi system. It's this internal balance with which so much hi-fi struggles that the 383 achieves with almost contemptuous ease. So naturally does it tread the tight rope that crosses the divide between control and expression that at first it's easy to miss the fundamental importance of the achievement: Just like a ballet dancer, the most tortuously complex

steps are made to look poised and easy. Try those steps yourself and you'll begin to appreciate how truly difficult they are. Swap in another amplifier and you'll rapidly appreciate just what's suddenly gone.

Likewise the colours thrown out by the 383 are equally unforced, and if they aren't as vivid as some, that's because they aren't exaggerated either. This is a recognisably "neutral" product, in the hi-fi, subtractive, sense of the term. Notes lack some of the vibrance, body and harmonic complexity of the big system or the best alternatives. But, importantly and comparisons aside, it's not a lack you

notice when listening. The music never sounds lean or threadbare, but don't expect the 383 to add weight and colour to a thin, bright speaker 'cos it isn't going to.

Playing Dave Alvin's *Black Jack David* (Hightone HCD 8091) brings out the Levinson's strengths. From the huge atmospheric acoustic of the opening track, a space slowly but inexorably filled with instrumentation, to the sparse verses of "California Snow" the 383 changes gear and scale without ever imposing itself on the music. It separates the elements, tonally and in space, and holds them stable relative to each other. Each track has its own character and presentation, each benefits from tiny, incremental changes in level, almost like focusing a camera (just like the big system).

I'm running out of words already, and the examples I could trot out are legion: the brilliance of Ferras' skittering bow, the precision of Terpsichore on DG Archiv, the bite and scorn of Polly Jean

on *Stories* and the breathless tension as Ricci teeters on the brink of musical disaster before triumphantly carrying off the third movement of his otherwise flawed Sibelius. The Mark Levinson is a piece of hi-fi that actually delivers on its promise. It is faultless in operation and utterly reliable, it'll drive most of the real world speakers out there. It's a joy to use for its intended purpose: the reproduction of music at home. Visually understated and devoid of complex controls, valves, or overt industrial design, the 383 relies on the music to do its talking, which means that to appreciate its virtues you actually have to listen. If you just want to play then you'll quickly get bored with its self contained competence. If you just want to play music then look no further. Expensive yes, but this is a one-time purchase to savour over time. Savour it for what it does, savour the satisfaction of having made the right choice.



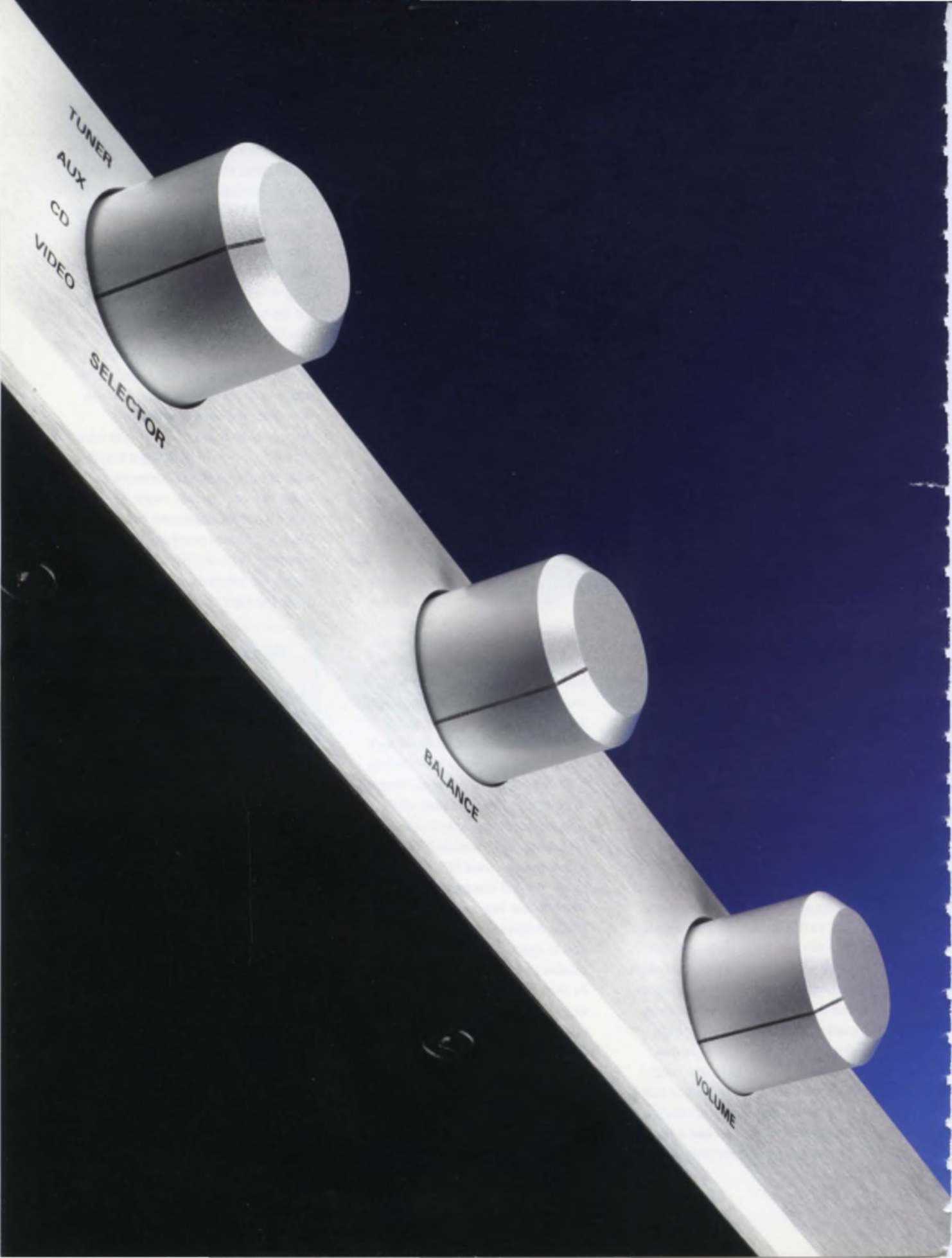
TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Line-integrated amplifier
Inputs:	2pr balanced XLR 3pr single-ended phono
Input Impedance:	100 kOhms
Outputs:	1pr tape 1pr binding posts (bare wire or spades only)
Rated Output:	100 W/8 Ohms, 200 W/4 Ohms
Dimensions (WxHxD):	445 x 166 x 496mm
Weight:	36.6 kg
Finish:	Black and silver only
Price:	£5995

Distributor:
Path Premier
Tel. (44) (0) 1844 219000
Fax. (44) (0) 1844 461209

Distributor:
Mark Levinson
Net. www.madrigal.com/madrigal/marklev.





TUNER
AUX
CD
VIDEO

SELECTOR

BALANCE

VOLUME

Bryston B 60R Integrated Amplifier

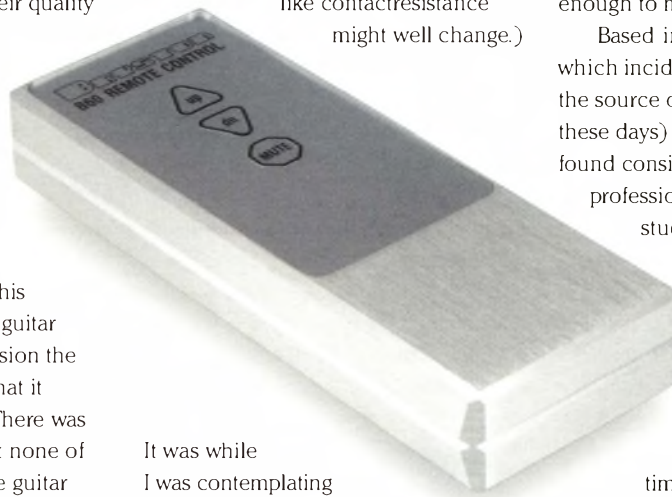
by Chris Binns

It's an inescapable fact; despite my admiration for what valves can do in audio amplification, a major drawback is that as you use them, the performance is deteriorating. No sooner have you put that expensive selected set of tubes in, biased them up and left them to burn in, the clock is ticking. How long they last is dependant on their quality and how hard the amplifier pushes them, and because it is a gradual process (rather like stylus wear) you are only aware of how much they have deteriorated when you decide to replace them.

I was recently reminded of this fact when I came to use my guitar amplifier for a recording session the other day, only to discover that it sounded really quite awful. There was nothing basically wrong, but none of the harmonic richness of the guitar was coming through, and after much messing around I put new output valves in, where upon it sprang back to life. But the original valves were no more than a year old. Of course, all of this made me think about the amps I use for hi-fi, and I must admit that it irritates me that the performance is subtly changing as I use them. There is always that nagging paranoia that your system doesn't sound quite as good as it did last week... And as anyone who runs large thermionic power amplifiers will testify, frequently replacing valves is an expensive business.

Of course, none of this is a problem

with solid state...or is it? There are those that believe that transistors can suffer deterioration with time and use, although whether there is scientific evidence of this I do not know. (I can believe, however that like any device that is thermally stressed, such as a power transistor, factors like contactresistance might well change.)



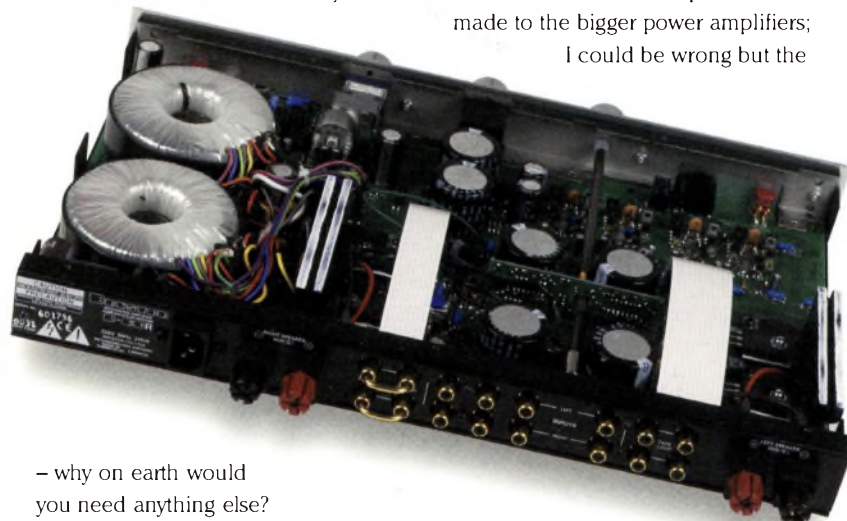
It was while I was contemplating this that the Bryston B60 turned up on my doorstep, the result of a conversation with UK importers, PMC. Having had great results with the top of the range 14B ST/ BP25 pre – power combination, they wondered if I would like to try the entry level integrated. Well, why not? My feelings about the 14B in particular were that it was one hell of an amp, and if such a thing as value for money existed in high-end audio then this was it. If any of its qualities had trickled down to the B60 it could be an interesting proposition – particularly with a starting price of £1350 inclusive

of vat. Bryston are a company who would not, I think subscribe to the theory of transistors having a finite life. Why? Because they are confident enough in their products to offer a twenty year guarantee against parts and manufacturing defects, and not only that, they have been around long enough to mean it.

Based in Canada (a country which incidentally seems to me to be the source of a lot of interesting hi-fi these days) Bryston amplifiers have found considerable acceptance in professional audio, in particular studio monitoring where reliability and general ruggedness is just as important as sound quality. Not always a recipe for success in domestic audio, the Americans have for a long time recognised the Bryston amps as being rather special, while their profile is steadily growing in the U.K. Having described my introduction to Bryston amplifiers over twenty years ago in some depth with the review of the 14B (in Issue 14) I will not cover that ground again. Suffice to say that I have a high regard for both the company and their products.

The B60 looks almost identical to the BP25, to the extent that a couple of visitors to the house have assumed that it was a pre amp and asked where the power amp was. Hinting at its professional origins, the BP60 is 1 standard rack unit high, which ►

► equates to 44mm, which makes for a very slim, almost diminutive amplifier, while the front panel finish is available in black or silver. The version that arrived for review included the remote control option, the handset being identical to the one supplied for the BP25, which sensibly only offers mute and volume adjustment



– why on earth would you need anything else?

The same attention to detail that is evident with the more expensive pre and power amplifiers is applied here, and one could look upon the B60 as the marriage of Bryston's smallest power amp and a basic version of their pre-amp, with consequential savings in cost, particularly regarding the casework. Bearing in mind that the B60 is primarily intended as a domestic amplifier, it doesn't need the substantial external heat sinking that the bigger units have, instead opting to use the case to dissipate excess heat.

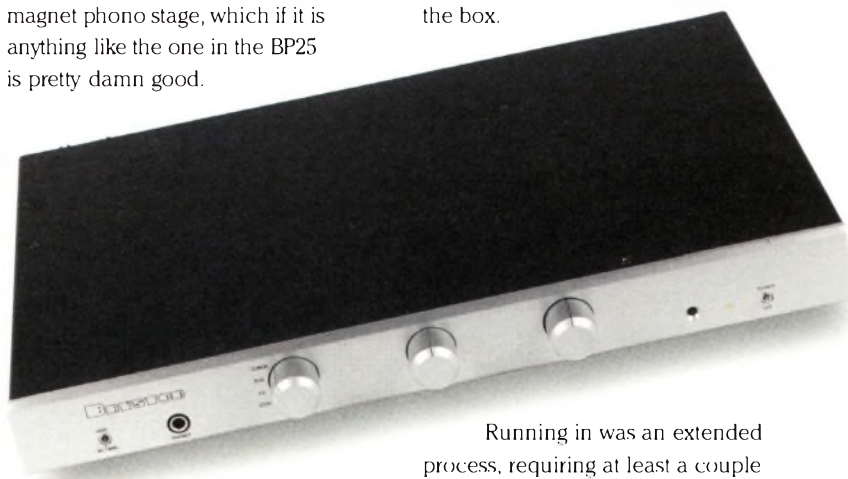
Internally, all of the electronics are mounted on a single board, which as you might imagine with such a small box is pretty densely populated. In spite of this, layout is neat and methodical, with short signal paths and effective placement of components. (Which are all discrete by the way: Bryston are not a fan of op-amps for audio use.) For example the reservoir capacitors for each power amp channel are situated close to the output transistors, which are in turn near the output

sockets. The power supply utilises two slim toroidal mains transformers, one per channel, with regulated rails for the pre amp section. All of the components look to be of high quality, and I suspect that the B60 (which has been in production for several years) has undergone a certain amount of revision as a result of improvements made to the bigger power amplifiers; I could be wrong but the

output transistors look very similar to those used in the new 14B. I should also mention that for an extra £350 there is a version available incorporating a moving magnet phono stage, which if it is anything like the one in the BP25 is pretty damn good.

power on/off and tape monitor. An LED indicates green for normal operation and red for mute, this also doubles as a clipping indicator. Rear panel connections consist of high quality phono connectors for signal input and output, the pre-out and power-in allow the connection of processors where required. Loudspeaker connections are made by way of sensible insulated five way binding posts. A small problem arises should you need to use two sets of 4mm plugs; while the connectors have no problem accommodating this your access is limited by the shallow depth of the amplifier – there is simply not enough room to get into the underside of the sockets. As well as the pre-out (which has a low enough output impedance to make it genuinely useful) there is also a headphone output, a feature that for some people I know will be a godsend.

If the B60 has inherited some of the finer points of its more expensive relatives, it would appear that it has also picked up some of the more tiresome as well. Don't even think about listening straight out of the box.



The B60 is essentially a straightforward design, offering basic facilities for four line inputs and one tape loop. Front panel rotary controls comprise volume, balance and input selection while two toggle switches are used for

Running in was an extended process, requiring at least a couple of weeks to settle down and shed a boring, lifeless character. The mains switch on the front panel cuts the supply to the whole amplifier, and it takes about half an hour to sound its best after switch on.

One of the more endearing

▶ aspects of an integrated amplifier is the freedom to dispense with the multitude of boxes and cables that go to make up my normal amplification system. Instead I end up with comparative simplicity in the form of a CD player, record player and phono stage, and of course the amplifier. Whether this influenced my first impressions I don't know, but the B60 sounded clean and uncluttered from the start. While rated at sixty Watts, the Bryston will, not surprisingly considering its heritage, produce considerably more power into lower impedances, (although 4 ohms is the recommended lower limit) and thus drove the Primary monitors to quite reasonable levels. However when it runs out of steam it is quite sudden rather than graceful, and you are left in no doubt as to when to back off with the volume control.

But, up to that point, the B60 sounded great. There are definitely hints as to its heritage, and while it doesn't have the sheer unlimited power reserves of the big power amplifiers, it demonstrated a good ability to remain under control and not get flustered with demanding material. I mention this because I have recently been listening to an album of electronic music (Boards of Canada – *Geogaddi*, not normally my sort of thing; it reminds me of Eno/Fripp circa 1976) and it is hard work. The music is dark and at times dense with so many things happening, the B60 impressed me with its ability to present everything that was going on with great clarity and definition, even with the sub-bass noises on some of the tracks.


That same clarity was evident with vocals and acoustic instruments, where detail of the performance and the acoustic were well presented, together with a hint of the 14B's forte, an ability to reproduce what the instruments are not playing. If that sounds silly, what I'm getting at is the background from which the sounds emerge, the 'blacker' this is the more realistic things become.

Where the B60 did fall down a bit was in the presentation of a sound stage – while it was good at presenting images between the loudspeakers, it was a little disappointing in terms of depth to the front and rear, and I sometimes felt as if the music was lacking in projection away from the loudspeakers.

I have just about finished a slow and painstaking restoration on a pair of Quad ESL 63's, and testing them with the B60 proved an interesting combination – they absolutely loved it. The control coupled with finesse and delicacy really got the best out of the electrostatics, and the sound was musically dynamic and full of expression with a wonderful transparency, while the Bryston had no problems at all driving them to healthy levels.

The B60 was party to one moment of complete hi-fi madness, as the review period overlapped with the arrival of the Revel Salon loudspeakers, and I couldn't resist the temptation to try the two together. So that's fifteen hundred pounds worth of amplifier driving loudspeakers costing ten times as much. I have to say that the Bryston acquitted itself extremely well, and while the Salons do really need more power than the B60 can provide, at reasonable levels it sounded pretty damn good all things considered. OK, the bass didn't have quite the authority and slam that a large loudspeaker like the Revels demanded, and when asked to go deep there was a lack of control. But the chances of the B60 being used with something like the Salon are, I hope, pretty remote. Using more sensible loudspeakers suggested that within its limits bass control was pretty tight for a modest integrated.

The Bryston B60 has got a lot going for it. It offers the essence of what I am beginning to discover is the Bryston hallmark; clean uncoloured delivery without having to tread carefully with partnering loudspeakers. Or to put it another way, a fuss free, real world amplifier that plays music with a degree

of musicality usually reserved for more 'specialist' designs. More importantly, it applies its strengths to the job of reproducing music, and while I have absolutely no doubt as to its technical prowess, this is what really matters. A carefully selected system based around the B60 could offer a degree of musical satisfaction that a lot of more expensive set ups miss; that in itself is a recommendation. The fact that this kind of performance comes in a diminutive little box which is fuss free to use, guaranteed for twenty years and, dare I say it, not a lot of money, should make it an extremely attractive proposition. 

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Power output:	60 Watts into 8 Ohms
Input sensitivity:	500Mv
Input impedance:	50 K Ohms
Pre amp output impedance:	50 Ohms
Dimensions (WxHxD):	430 x 44 x 272 mm
Weight:	12 Kg
Finishes:	Silver or Black
Price:	
B60	£1350
B60R	£1550
MM Option	£150

UK Distributor:

PMC Ltd
Tel. (44)(0)870 444 1044
E-mail. info@promonitor.co.uk
Net. www.pmc-speakers.com

Manufacturer:

Bryston
Net. www.bryston.ca



The Mains Event...

Mains interfaces from PS Audio and Shunyata Research

by David Ayers

Christmas 2001, and Santa Claus came in the shape of RG lugging boxes of mains kit down my drive for festive fun and games. The idea of these particular Christmas holiday goodies was to see how successively sophisticated mains treatments would fare in the context of my home system. To that end RG brought the following: A Russ Andrews Silencer, a PS Audio Ultimate Outlet with cable, and a Powersnakes Hydra with a selection of their cables.

At this point, a quick recap of my system is probably in order. I currently use a Michell Orbe TT with SME V and Clearaudio Accurate cartridge and Trichord CD transport and DAC as the front end. Phono stage is Tom Evans Groove, whilst the amplification is the Michell Argo with Hera pre-amp, and four Aleco monoblocks. Speakers are the Audiovector 5. Interconnects are from XLO, and I use Nordost SPM speaker cable. All of the above electronics are connected to a self-built mains board using their supplied mains cables. Given that the Trichord Pulsar DAC has a separate mains for the analogue and digital stages, add this little lot up and you require a grand total of 10 mains outlets and associated cables, 2 digital, 7 analogue, and one

motor supply. Going into this review, I was clearly hoping that I wouldn't find a great affinity for mains cables costing several hundred pounds, as multiplied by ten, that would be simply ruinous.

First job was to ensure that the system was warmed up and running to the best of its ability, without the aid of any mains conditioning. As it turned

detail in the process. One of the details it tends to lose is the sense of acoustic and ambience which, for example, would trouble RG far more than it does me, majoring as I do on studio bound rock music. Another failing is that it sounds slightly mechanical, like all the musicians are keeping their buttocks firmly clenched instead of fully relaxing into their musicianship.

Finally there is a layer of grain, which I have managed to reduce greatly through the use of Ringmat's feet and domes, and the cd-str5

feet, but have been unable to eliminate.

This system has been built up over a number of years on a reasonable but not unlimited budget, and compromises have to be made. These compromises are the ones that suit me best, but that's not to say I don't want to improve on the systems failings, and the mains supply is the next obvious target.

So on with the motley. First up was Russ Andrews diminutive Silencer. Built into an oversized plugtop, it is used by simply plugging it into a spare socket on the mains distribution board, or into another socket on the same mains ring, as near as possible to



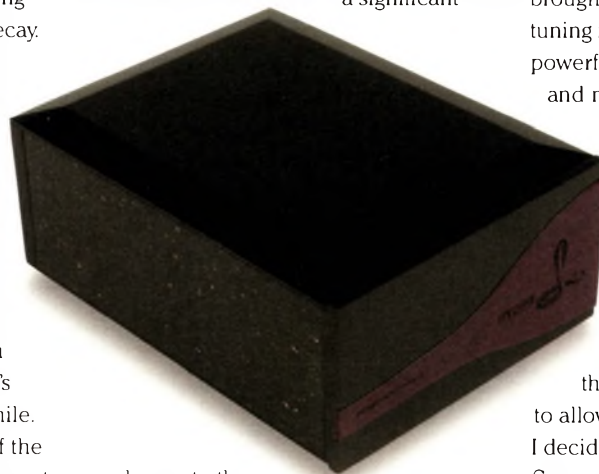
out I had a 'situation' with this baselining action, which I will return to later in this article. Anyway, once I sorted out the 'situation', I re-affirmed the strengths and weaknesses of the system as I then perceived them. The best way to describe my system is 'larger than life', in that it plays very loud, is very dynamic, has excellent timing with serious amounts of bottom end wellie, and it brings out a real sense of performance from both LP and CD. However, it draws the picture with broad brush strokes, losing some

▶ the system. As I had a spare socket, I plugged it straight into the distribution board. The idea is that the Silencer will soak up any mush infesting the mains at the outlets, including any generated internally by any of your components. The effectiveness of this was described by RG in the now sold out issue 9. So what was happened in the context of my system? The most immediately noticeable change was the removal of some of the grain talked about earlier. This had the effect of sharpening up the leading edges of notes giving a greater sense of attack and decay. More obvious was the effect on female vocals. Playing 'Charlie Big Potato' from Skunk Anasie's *Post Orgasmic Chill* album showed both improvements clearly. This track has staccato guitar left and right, with Skin dead centre giving it large. The improvement in both the rhythmic intensity and Skin's diction was subtle, but worthwhile. Taken in relation to the price of the unit (£40), this sort of improvement can be considered a bargain. Also the unit is a keeper, if you upgrade your systems mains supply further, then it can still perform useful duties keeping down the mains hash elsewhere in the house, particularly in the kitchen, where fridges and freezers are a source of much nastiness. Also bear in mind that TVs can also produce large amounts of mains noise, and if your house regularly hosts simultaneous music and telly sessions, then a Silencer next to the TV can be of great help.

Moving on, the next item for perusal was the PS Audio Ultimate Outlet and associated cable. This device provides out of circuit filtering of the mains, sinking the interference into the circuitry without putting anything in the actual power path. Built into a small metal box with an IEC input and two standard three pin sockets as outlets, this unit can be

permanently affixed to the wall if required. I was slightly unhappy with the design of the supplied cabling, as the cable does not exit the plug at right angles as is normal, but perpendicular. This means that the weight of the cable causes the plug to droop out of the socket significantly, putting a strain on the inner works. I opted to use a box to prop the cable up so as to avoid the problem and then plugged my normal distribution board into the outlet.

In use the Ultimate Outlet made a significant



change to the sound of my system, both structurally and cosmetically. The most obvious change was in the tonal balance brought about by the unit, becoming considerably brighter. However as this was accompanied by a significant decrease in grain and corresponding increase in coherence, the result was not unpleasant, but certainly different. Playing 'Charlie Big Potato' once again, this time the guitars left and right had a real sense of strings being strummed by a plectrum, whilst Skin's singing acquired an extra level of expressiveness. On the downside, the extra brightness brought with it a very slightly unwelcome emphasis on the heavily plucked bass guitar. Moving on to 'Mein Hertz Brennt' from Rammstein's *Mutter* album, the dynamic jump from the quiet intro to the full on guitar riff was impressively handled. Also it was much easier to

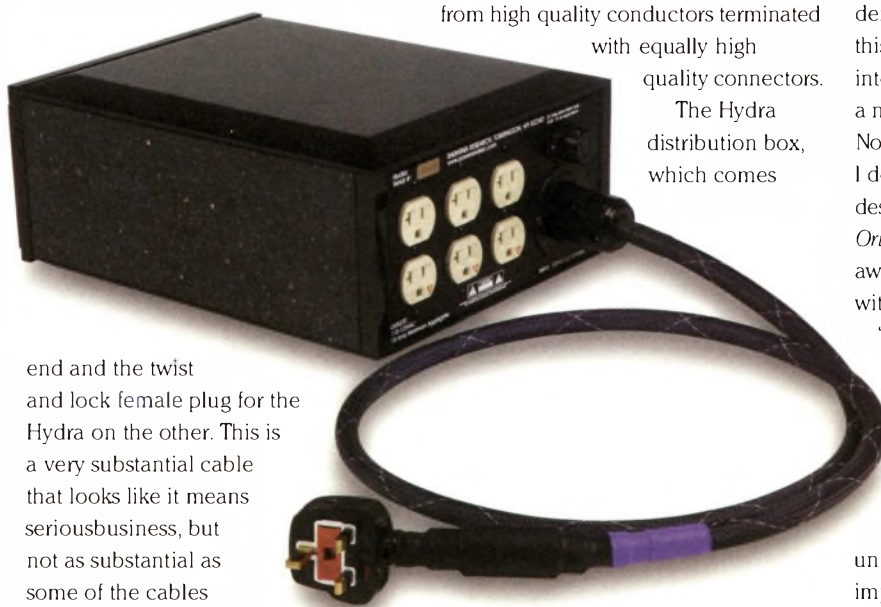
pick out the drums and their associated acoustic from the maelstrom of this superb album. On this disc the riffs should be thrown out of the speakers left and right like slabs of concrete, but the slight brightening of the tonal balance robbed them of a little power.

At this point you might be thinking that I wasn't too impressed by the Ultimate Outlet, but that's not the case. The problem for me was that although I appreciated the extra clarity and insight into the musical structure brought about, I have spent a long time tuning my system so that it sounds very powerful when the music demands it, and much of the music I listen to make precisely that demand.

To lose a little of that power for improvements elsewhere is a bitter pill for this particular reviewer to swallow, and is one of the reason that we at hi-fi+ review by description rather than absolute judgement. In order to allow the Ultimate Outlet to shine, I decided to play some Fairport Convention, in particular 'The Brilliancy Medley & Cherokee Shuffle' from their album *Nine*. This largely acoustic track displays some fantastic musicianship and interplay as it fairly storms along. On an under-performing system it can either be difficult to hear what each musician is playing or conversely it can seem like they are all tripping over themselves to get the notes out in the time available. Using the Ultimate Outlet in this case clearly showed what it was capable of bringing out in my system. Now the clear reduction in grain allowed me to hear much more clearly what each musician was doing, whilst the increased leading edge clarity gave each note its correct placement within the piece. An excellent result! So to sum up, the Ultimate Outlet brings a lot of benefit to the party, but at a little cost. Whether you want to pay the cost to get the benefits will depend on ▶

▶ your personal listening preferences.

So on to the Shunyata Powersnakes gear, which arrived in a huge wooden packing crate plus two large cardboard boxes. Unscrewing the crate and digging into the packaging revealed the Powersnakes Hydra, a beautifully finished black box with absolutely nothing on the front apart from the embossed Powersnakes logo. Round the back are six American mains outlets and one push and twist male socket. The supplied Hydra mains cable comes with a high quality three pin UK plug on one



end and the twist and lock female plug for the Hydra on the other. This is a very substantial cable that looks like it means serious business, but not as substantial as some of the cables that greeted me when I opened up the two cardboard boxes. Supplied for review were a variety of Powersnakes, each terminated with an American mains plug at one end and an IEC connector at the other. Supplied were a number each of the Sidewinder Gold, Mojave, and Python cables.

Picking up a Python is an interesting experience, as the outer casing is filled with a compound called FSE-100, which moves up and down the cable as it is handled, rustling like the outer sheath is half filled with coarse grain sand. This patent pending compound has apparently been developed from

NASA research, and if you think about the importance of the electrical systems in the space shuttle, you can understand why NASA would be interested in a material that would dampen and remove interference without interfering with the conductors. The fact that Shunyata choose to refer to the compound as Stardust in some of the literature is probably unfortunate to the cynical English brain, but no matter, the proof is in the listening. Of the three types of Powersnake supplied, only the Python contains the compound. All Powersnakes, however, are made from high quality conductors terminated with equally high quality connectors.

The Hydra distribution box, which comes

supplied with its own buffing cloth to keep the beautifully shiny outer case in pristine order, is packed to the gills with the Stardust compound, making it extremely heavy for its size. The idea is that the Hydra is plugged into the wall socket, and then all your equipment is attached to it using the Powersnakes of your choice. In the form supplied, with American mains plugs, it was not possible to use the Powersnakes without the Hydra, as I had no UK to US plug converters available, and I imagine that even if I had they would not be beneficial to the sound. What this means is that the minimum configuration would be one Hydra and one Powersnake feeding

a standard distribution board that uses an IEC connector. Using a single Sidewinder Gold, the cheapest of the supplied cables, this little lot would cost you \$100 under three grand. Ouch!

Reading the supplied literature it became clear that time was going to be an issue, as the Hydra and Powersnakes require about 200 hours running in time before they settle down and give of their best. Running in can be achieved by hooking up a couple of table lamps and leaving them on, although I am sure that things will settle down further with the dynamic demands of a well used system. To this end I decided to plug the Hydra into my home cinema system, and a nice string lamp and leave it running. Now this was the point at which I decided to baseline my system as described above. Listening to *The Origin Of Symmetry* by Muse I became aware that my system was performing with a hitherto unheard of clarity and 'rightness'. Strange I thought, well

audio memory can be a funny thing, so I carried on listening whilst I idly perused the Powersnakes literature. Shunyata state that a Powersnake that is plugged into the mains but left unconnected to any equipment can improve the sound of a system to a surprising degree. Hmmm, a little bell started ringing, so I went back into the other room and disconnected the Hydra totally and tried again. Blimey! Now my system sounded exactly as I expected it to, and as described in the introduction. Considering the Hydra was connected in the other room to the stereo, and on a completely different ring main, I was more than a little shocked. The practical downside in this, for me as a reviewer, was that I had to interrupt the running in process every time I wanted to listen to the other two items. Not a problem for the normal purchaser of course, but it did mean I was forced to listen to

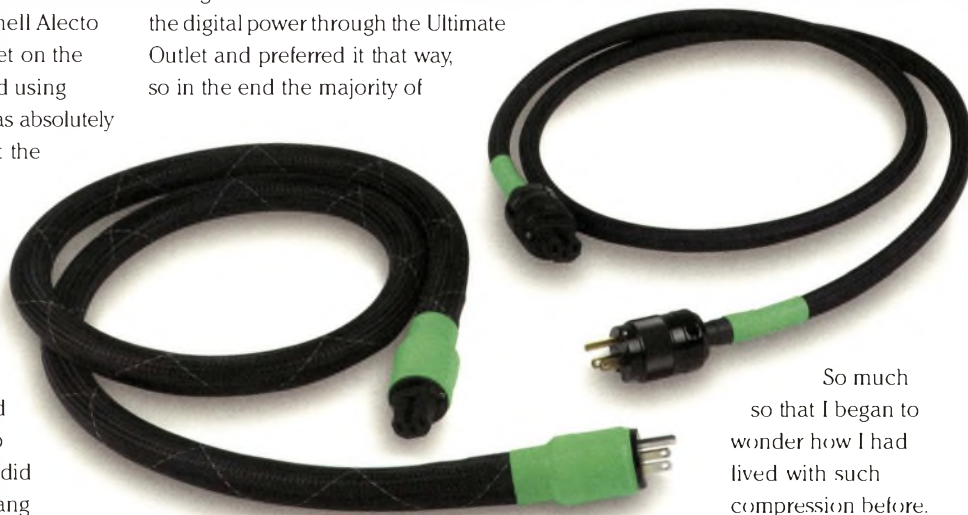
▶ the Shunyata set up before it had fully run in, so bear that in mind when reading on.

Problem numbers two and three reared their ugly heads when I came to hook everything up. Firstly the IEC connectors on the Powersnakes are massive, easily the largest I have seen, and whilst the cables can be curved round corners, they are relatively inflexible, and so can't be forced round tight bends. The Michell Alecto Monoblock has its IEC socket on the underside, and is connected using a right angled plug. There was absolutely no way that I could connect the Powersnakes to the Alectos without laying them on their sides, which is hardly sonically ideal. Secondly, the Hydra has only six outlets, and I require ten to fully power my system. This meant I had to find a suitable solution to both these problems. This I did by wiring up a standard 4-gang distribution board with an IEC socket. This could duly have a Powersnake connected, and then I could run all four power amps using their standard leads from the distribution board. I figured that although there was some potential for interference to re-enter the cabling at this point, it would show a real life situation whereby the Shunyata gear was bought a stage at a time.

With rather too many combinations to play with in the time available, and safe in the knowledge that RG would have the gear for further assessment after me, I majored on using the two Pythons and the two Mojave cables, utilising the Sidewinder Golds for comparison. In this context I don't believe the Sidewinders ever truly ran in whilst in my tenure, and the comments below should take that into account, and RG's later experience may prove different to mine.

I elected to use one Python to

power all four power amps, and the other to power the pre-amp. The first Mojave powered the Groove phono stage, and the second the analogue stage of the Trichord DAC. The CD transport, having a captive lead was never attached to the Hydra by any means, but was instead fed through the Ultimate Outlet, whilst the digital power for the DAC was connected through a Sidewinder Gold. I also tried the digital power through the Ultimate Outlet and preferred it that way, so in the end the majority of



listening was done with this configuration. In hindsight I should have tried the Ultimate Outlet on the end of a Powersnake for the digital stages, but I didn't.

So to the sound. At the risk of starting with a conclusion, every so often there comes a time when you listen to a system and you just know it is 'right'. This is a revelatory experience: it's not a case of differences in presentation or cosmetics like tonal balance. It's not that there aren't compromises or that everything is perfect, it's more a sense that everything you heard before was wrong, and now it isn't. I had already had a sense of this with the Hydra connected in the other room, but now the sense of 'rightness' was overwhelming. Now I know this is a bold statement, and I am not saying everything is perfect in Davidland, so I need to break it down as best I can.

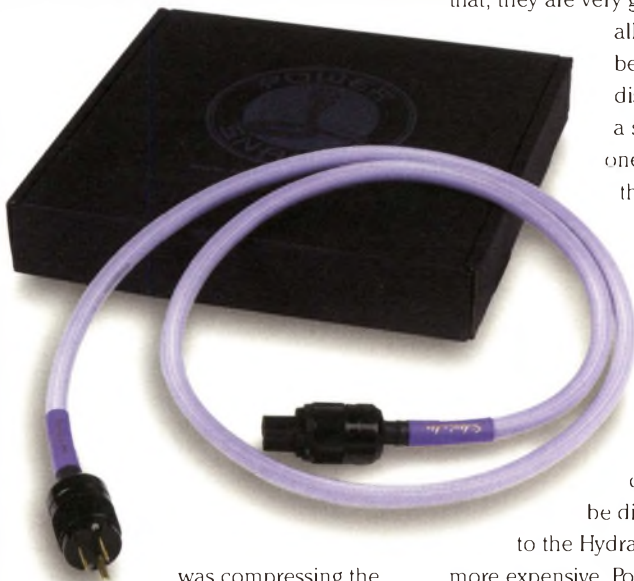
First of all the noise floor, both generally from the electronics, and specifically from the stylus on vinyl, dropped significantly, allowing the decay of individual notes to be heard far longer than previously. Secondly, the grain that I talked about before was banished. Not reduced but removed - totally. Finally the dynamic range became seemingly unbounded.

So much so that I began to wonder how I had lived with such compression before.

Put these three together and you suddenly find that the music that pours forth from the speakers is a living flowing organic stream. Everything pops into place, the placement, the acoustic, the timing, the interaction of the musicians, all comes out as a multi-faceted whole, which is exactly as it should be.

Playing 'Mein Herz Brennt' again, the unbridled power and depth of the riffing guitars as they chugged along was astonishing. Not only was the difference between quiet and loud hugely increased, but the depth and force was just like hearing a huge Marshall stack being fired up in anger, but without the need for the 120dB that would be produced if it was sitting in your living room (heaven forbid). The drums powered out of the speakers in a way I have only previously heard from really high efficiency loudspeaker systems, yet in all this nothing was harsh or unpleasant, nor too soft ▶

► and mushy: Just the opposite. For example I could hear cymbal strikes and strokes in a manner only previously hinted at. Moving back to the Muse album showed just what would happen when this noisy, melodrama is given the space to really breathe. On a previous visit from RG, we had both noted that the album sounded like it was holding back, almost like it had been put through the dreaded optimod compression system loved by commercial radio. Not so in reality my system, powerful though it is,



was compressing the peaks. With the Hydra and the Powersnakes the dynamics just kept on coming. What is important to understand, and why I am so impressed with this, is that the system could achieve all this whilst leaving the quieter detail clearly audible, and this I think is the essence of the 'rightness' that I felt throughout my listening sessions. Singers sounded like real singers, acoustic guitars were plucked in front of my nose, drums resonated, and keyboards shimmered. At a stroke all of the criticisms I had about my system were removed.

Moving downward to the Sidewinder Golds from the Python and Mojave cables lost me that clear

musical quality. However we are talking about cables that are a quarter of the price of the Pythons, and so you cannot expect the same result. Also bear in mind what I said above; that the cables were not fully run in the time available to me. My experience with the Sidewinders is that they were much brighter and more 'hi-fi' than the more expensive cables, and also more compressed. However, every cable I have tried since has also sounded more compressed than the bigger Powersnakes, so they are in some very good company. Having said that, they are very good cables, and do

allow one to gain the benefits of the Hydra distribution box at a starter price. This is one thing I like about this gear, it is possible

to start with the Hydra and one Sidewinder Gold feeding a distribution block, and then as funds allow individual components can be directly connected to the Hydra using additional, more expensive, Powersnakes.

Now don't get me wrong, I am not saying that with the Shunyata gear my system is now perfect. What I am saying is that all the building blocks to musical enjoyment are present and in the correct order; that the system now sounds more musical than it ever has. This is not entirely down to the Hydra and Powersnakes of course. The judicious use of the Ringmat feet and domes, and the cd-str5 feet as detailed in previous issues took me a long way down this road, as has all the general system matching done previously. However what RG was saying in previous articles about the mains being the foundation upon which everything else is laid is entirely

true. I may have got the walls, doors and windows in the right relation, but until I laid a solid foundation, they still wobbled about in the wind. Of course, even this foundation has been compromised in the way that I was forced to use the Powersnakes, and I can't help wondering what would happen if I had a complete set of Pythons (and of necessity two Hydras). As that would cost over 15 grand I guess I am unlikely to find out. The set of Hydra, two Pythons, two Mojaves, and the Ultimate Outlet as I ended up using costs a little over £6,000. The fact that I am currently trying to work out how to finance the purchase of these items should tell you clearly how much I felt they brought to the enjoyment of my system.



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

UK Distribution and Pricing

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E-mail. sales@ultimate-sonics.com

Ultimate Outlet: £340
Lab power lead: £420

Shunyata:
Audio Atmosphere
Tel. (44)(0)1785 711232
E-mail. stuart@audioatmosphere.com

Hydra: £2595
Sidewinder Gold: £329
Mojave: £599
Python: £998

Manufacturers:

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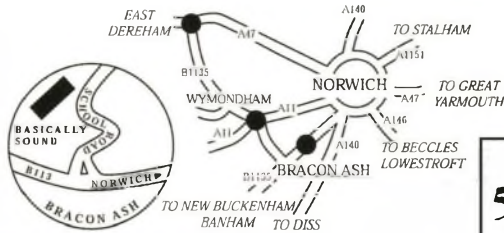
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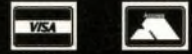
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The Real Deal

Creek 5350SE Integrated Amplifier

by Jason Hector

The integrated amplifier is enjoying a renaissance in the high end sector with all the big players, you know, your Krells, your Audio Researchs and your Levinsons, releasing integrated designs relatively recently to much (too much?) critical acclaim. Of course at more modest, dare I say mortal, price levels the integrated has always been the only option. Mind you it's had to grow up more than a little! Creek have obviously realised this and have developed the 5350SE amplifier, a real world, 21st century device. Creek have always had an excellent reputation for making great sounding small (physically) amplifiers, tuners and latterly CD spinners. My in-laws have an old "wooden" bodied 4040 on my recommendation and it still sounds great after many years use. The 5350SE is a different, more up-market prospect in many ways. No longer is it possible for an amplifier in this price bracket to just sound good, it has to look the part and offer a decent selection of features as well. Well score one on each count for the Creek. But the 5350SE is pitched into a ludicrously competitive market sector. Direct competitors include the Naim Nait 5 (similar price and a great sounding amplifier), the Roksan Caspian (similarly priced and also great sounding) and the Rotel 1060 (cheaper but offers power and features for the money as well as being damned good fun sonically) and these three excellent amplifiers are just the ones

I have had direct experience of! In this price band the designers will be allowed quite a bit of extra freedom in terms of parts so we should expect more personality in reproduction using these amplifiers, and personality goes a long way if you and it are compatible.

So what does the Creek offer as an alternative to this fierce competition?



Firstly looks; this amplifier is very well executed. The casework is all aluminium, anodised black for much of the case but set-off by a front panel which is a serious 10mm thick and with a natural brushed metal finish. The remainder of the casework is less massive but solid, the amp doesn't flex and twist when you pick it up even though it is much heavier in one corner, due to the off-centre positioning of the large toroidal mains transformer. This Creek amplifier is also physically larger than previous designs which should allow the designer a bit more freedom in the layout of the components. The solid casework, along with the clear labeling and large, well-finished control knobs,

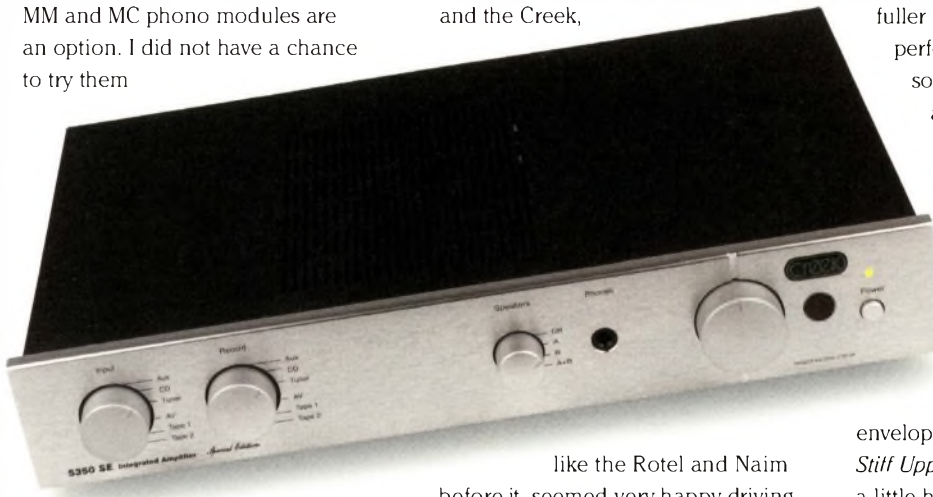
lend the amplifier serious presence. While it is not as pretty as the Roksan Caspian for example, it certainly looks like its worth the money. You won't have to make excuses for the appearance when the in laws visit, or indeed if you recommend it to them. In use all of the controls feel very solid, well damped and have a positive action that increases your general pride of ownership of the amplifier; you should be thinking Volkswagen not Vauxhall at this point.

Secondly, features. The Creek (like the Rotel 1060) is fully loaded.

Remote control of volume and input selection is possible from an, admittedly nondescript, handset, with speaker mute also remotely controlled.

This remote uses the RC-5 standard and for once actually works across a wide acceptance angle and with high sensitivity which makes using it a charm rather than a pain. I actually have the Creek CD53 CD player at the same time as the 5350SE and currently the remote of each device will not control the other. However, an optional system remote should be available by the time you read this. The amplifier offers 4 inputs and two tape loops via RCA phono sockets, selection of which is controlled via a high quality motor driven Alps rotary switch. A separate record controller allows any input to be recorded whilst listening which ▶

▶ will be very useful for some and is an unusual feature to find at this price level. Two pairs of speaker outputs are provided and both sets are controlled from the front panel to be used independently or concurrently, which makes bi-wiring or running a separate pair of loudspeakers easier. Pre-amp outputs and power amp inputs (linked when operating in integrated mode) give further flexibility of application with bi-amping a possibility. Both MM and MC phono modules are an option. I did not have a chance to try them



myself (my Dynavecator Te-Kaitora shod LP12 has a Naim Prefix phono-stage hard wired inside it) but based on previous experience of Creek amplifiers I am sure they won't let the side down. Also gracing the front panel is a full size headphone socket that further enhances this amplifiers all-round appeal.

The circuit consists of a passive input stage and volume control which then feed the power amplifier section. It is possible to make this pre-amp section an active device by adding a gain module. The amplifier is DC coupled from input to output to avoid capacitance in the signal path. It is an all MOS-FET amplifier using N-channel devices in the output stage driven by a P-channel phase splitter and double differential voltage amplifier which is run in class A. This topology has allowed Michael Creek to create a "fast and low distortion amplifier

with minimal negative feedback". The amplifier runs pretty warm, not ludicrously, just hotter than the average integrated, implying higher than average bias currents.

During my time with the amplifier it was used in combination with the Creek CD53 (the subject of a review itself in the next issue) as well as with my own Micromega CD player and LP12 / Prefix vinyl front end. Speakers were my usual Shahinian Obelisks and the Creek,

like the Rotel and Naim before it, seemed very happy driving these speakers which are well outside the list of those you would expect it to be partnered with. The amplifier was always a pleasure to use once it had settled in.

So after all the guff above about sound quality not deciding sales success what does the Creek sound like? Well the first thing that strikes you about this amplifier is its mid-range performance and in this area the Creek excels. Listening to virtually anything on the 5350 SE and you are presented with a very expressive mid band that is wonderfully seductive and very easy to listen to. The obvious place to experience this is with female vocals and I listened to a lot of female vocalists with the Creek. Take Suzanne Vega and her *Nine Objects of Desire* album. Ms. Vega has a very communicative voice and this is both well projected and given plenty of space by the Creek on this

her most rhythmical album. Those rhythms are very well portrayed with minimal time smearing across the whole frequency range keeping the music whole. Bass underpinned the song in a very satisfactory way with pretty reasonable weight although the lighter balance of the CD53 was appreciated more than the full range output of my Micromega. Creek have obviously balanced the sound of these products extremely carefully and the fuller Micromega and excellent bass performance of the Shaninians sometimes exposed the Creek a little too much. The 5350SE lacks the leading edge definition of the Naim Nait 5 but has excellent tonality in that all important midrange giving instruments plenty of body and realism.

Testing the other end of the performance envelope by playing the AC/DC album *Stiff Upper Lip* and indulging in a little heavy metal nostalgia (and air guitar playing) we are given plenty of emotion in the unique vocal. Again the quality midrange is making itself apparent. Over and around this, Angus Young's guitar was constantly singing its hypnotic tune, the Creek resolving the subtlety and speed of the guitar playing. The result is very tuneful allowing you to simply enjoy the music. When things got going at serious volumes the amplifier did start to lose control and as a result lost some of its musicality. But bear in mind that at these sorts of levels you are basically listening to the limits of the power supply (especially given the Obelisks' awkward load) and this was well outside of the operating range of most domestic situations. But a spin at high volumes does emphasise the lack of absolute control and depth in the bass that we would get with the Rotel 1060, or indeed my much more expensive Dynavecator ▶

► and Naim amplifiers. You need some pretty serious speakers to make this deficiency apparent and using more typical partnering devices the bass is ample and well controlled, keeping the result musical while the 5350SE rocks well enough for all bar the most heavily studded of users.

This amplifier continually demonstrates a rhythmic integrity that is rare to find. Sure, the Naim and to a lesser extent the Rotel also have it, but increasingly this ability to hang a song together rhythmically seems to have been sacrificed on the audiophile altar with far too many components at many times the Creek's price. The Creek is definitely a strong performer in this most important area. Take Natalie Merchant and her latest long player *Motherland*. When you first listen to this album the obvious springs to the fore; Natalie's fantastic and unusual voice. But if that voice lacked a connection to the music of the song the result would be simply dull and boring. Through the Creek you don't have to worry, all of the performers can strut their funky stuff and produce a result greater than the sum of the parts, making music that grabs you emotionally.

The Creek's balance of sonic virtues makes it an excellent choice for the classical music lover. I am a complete amateur in this musical sphere (which you will have picked up from my references in various reviews!) but I know what I like, and the Creek is more than capable of getting it out into the room. String tone and timbre are extremely well

handled. Take the "Libiamo ne'lieti calici" from Verdi's *La Traviata*. Here the string section is allowed to provide a wonderful backdrop to the singers. And again in *Aida*, "Se quel Guerrier". The upper registers are sweet and don't draw unwarranted attention to themselves. The treble is a very natural extension of the mid-band and means nothing is forced on the listener.



The result is a low fatigue sound allowing you to listen to many records in a row. My only concern is the lack of control under extreme duress. There is no hardening but there is a thickening and lack of absolute control of the transient power. Provided you stay in the envelope however you can only be impressed with the dynamic contrast that is available. This amplifier performs extremely well in my relatively small listening environment, but if you want to fill a hall with music make sure the speakers are efficient! Other competitors will play louder but at the expense of the pure quality of the Creek. You pay your money and take your choice.

Which is exactly the point. At the end of the day you are spoiled for choice if you have this sort of money to invest in an amplifier. Whether the Creek ends up in your equipment rack will depend on how

you react to its specific blend of virtues. The competition is so hot that a definitive recommendation is impossible, but the 5350SE should definitely be on your listening list. Its combination of looks, facilities and sound quality is amongst the best on offer. ➤

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Line integrated amp with optional gain and phono sections.
Inputs:	4x Line 2x Tape 1x Power-amp
Input sensitivity:	525mV
Outputs:	2x Tape 1x Pre-out 2prs Speakers
Rated Output:	85W into 8 Ohms
Weight:	8kg
Dimensions (WxHxD):	430 x 80 x 280 mm
Price:	£799

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The Best Bargain In Vinyl Replay... Hunting Down A Secondhand LP12

Once upon a time the Linn LP12 ruled the roost as far as record replay was concerned. Well, the times might have changed, and events have overtaken the classic three-point suspended sub-chassis design. It no longer represents the pinnacle of performance that it once did. However, its history as a design classic ensures one thing: lots of people bought them. And that means that they're readily available second-hand, which makes for low prices. Next consider the fact that even if it's no longer the undisputed champion it once was, it's still

capable of a remarkably fine performance, and you have the basis for that rarest of commodities, an honest to God bargain.

With LP12/Ittok combinations turning up in the free ads for around the £350-£400 mark, you're getting an awful lot of performance for the money. Assuming that is, that the deck's been well cared for – which is where the problems start. With such an extended working life, there are an absolute plethora of different versions and models available, to the extent that it's difficult to know exactly what you're buying. To that end, here's the layman's guide to LP12 pedigree, by none other than our own Jimmy Hughes.



A typical mid-vintage LP12 complete with Ittok tonearm. Note the Valhalla type mains switch with single red LED and expensive (although inappropriate for this tonearm.) Koetsu Red cartridge. You shouldn't allow this to artificially inflate the price.

The Long And Winding Road

by Jimmy Hughes

From today's perspective, it's difficult to appreciate the impact Linn's LP12 had on hi-fi thinking. In the '70s it was the turntable to aspire to, the standard by which all others were judged. Inevitably, during a life span measuring over a quarter of a century, there were many different versions and types. The very first decks had a considerably heavier platter, a one-piece ribbed sub-chassis, and foam-damped springs. The motor was mounted on a cork gasket, and the plinth had a cut out on the right to accept a plastic support arm from the lid.

Linn owners as a breed seemed to be a fairly progressive lot, always up for the newest updates and revisions. So, your chances of finding a mid-'70s Linn in original condition are fairly remote. Indeed, some decks may well have been updated three, four, five times, as changes were introduced. But is it necessarily the case that later, more up-to-date (and much more expensive) decks sound better than earlier examples? Actually, it all depends on what you're looking for...

The classic LP12 sound is rich, full, and warm, with a strong powerful bottom end. Naturally, the character of the turntable is influenced by the arm and cartridge fitted. But the early Linn's had a distinct fullness and weight. Detractors described the Linn sound as coloured and bass-heavy. As a broad generalisation, most if not all the modifications and updates Linn

introduced were aimed at making the turntable sound leaner and more incisive - more CD-like if you want to put it like that.

At the time, most of the changes seemed like improvements. Looking back, I'm not so sure. There was



a magic about the earlier Linns that to a greater or lesser extent was eroded at the altar of increased lucidity and sharpness. The 'ultimate' upgrade (downgrade?) was probably the Lingo power supply. This radically altered the sound of the deck, making it more articulate but also a shade dry and thin. If Audiolab had ever made a turntable, this is what it would've sounded like!

Putting it another way, later LP12s might've sounded more accurate, but the earlier ones sounded more authentic. If you take CD as your reference, then the later, updated Linn's are better: if you want a classic vinyl sound, then arguably the earlier LP12s are preferable.

But all this ignores the importance of setting-up. A well set-up deck is preferable to one that's not well set-up, regardless of vintage. No turntable is more critical of setting up than a Linn. And that's its downfall.

First thing to check is the suspension. Does it bounce freely and easily, and is the movement a clean up and down? If the arm board swings laterally when you bounce the suspension, it's not the end of the world. But it may indicate opposing tensions in the support springs and grommets, and/or bent bolts. The suspension tends to bounce best with a lightweight arm like Linn's LV-X. Ironically,

Linn's much heavier Ittok and Ekos arms compress the rear left spring, which can skew the suspension.

Of critical importance is the arm cable. This needs to be dressed so that it doesn't foul the plinth or the base and it must be gripped very tightly by the nylon P clip before it exits the plinth. And of course it must not pull or push the suspension over. Another detail; check that the four ►

► corners of the stainless steel top plate press down hard on the plinth. Early LP12s had a slight crease in the top plate, from front to back, to ensure the corners pulled down tight.

When I used to set up Linn turntables professionally, I would often remove everything from the top plate to clean it, then slightly bend the top plate half-way along from front to back. However, this is not something you should attempt at home kids! The most important corner is top left because that's where the motor is. If you can feel slight movement when you tap the top plate near each corner it's not disastrous. But it may worsen the sound slightly.

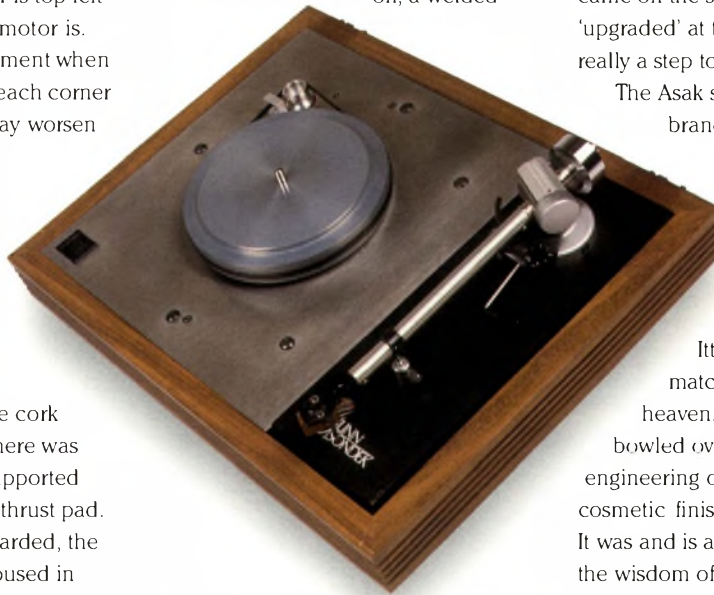
Some Linn turntables were plagued with noisy motors. Actually, it wasn't the motor making the noise, it was the bottom bracket assembly. On very early decks (the version with the cork gasket mounted motor), there was a U shaped bracket that supported a coiled spring and nylon thrust pad. Later, the bracket was discarded, the spring/thrust pad being housed in a plastic cap that was a tight press-fit on the underside of the motor. For some reason, this assembly was prone to noise.

Often, you can reduce (or eliminate) this noise simply by removing the plastic cap and refitting it. This alters the way the bearing surfaces run together, and (with a bit of luck) the noise disappears. Adding a blob of grease does no harm. With the cap removed, check that the nylon bottom bearing is fitted square - I've known many that run eccentrically, causing a rubbing noise. Having a noisy motor doesn't necessarily worsen the sound, but it's annoying if you're sat close by.

At some point in the late '70s, the motor changed. Going on memory, I think the early motors had the number

MB 01 or MB 02 on the silver foil transfer on the base. The later motor was an MB 10. As a consequence Linn replaced the cork mounting plate with special metal spacers. If memory serves me correctly, the early spacers were aluminium and the later ones stainless steel. I believe the MB 10 motor had higher torque necessitating this change.

Other mods included more compliant black suspension springs, black suspension bolts, black bearing oil, a welded



(later, glued) stiffening plate on the sub-chassis, a revised plinth with corner bracing, changes to the arm board, and a different drive belt. At the time, these changes seemed to make quite a difference, which was the reason why so many Linn owners were gung-ho to have their decks updated. But looking back I wonder if it was a case of walking a long distance to travel not very far. In my view it was often the additional work done to improve setting up - tightening loose fixing bolts and getting all the details right - that made the key difference in sound quality. The best sounding LP12s were always the ones that were well set-up, regardless of updates and mods.

Looking back, I feel that certain

vintages of LP12 were perhaps more compatible with the more generally used arm and cartridge combinations of particular periods. For example, the '70s combination of pre-Valhalla LP12 with Grace G-707 arm and Supex 900 cartridge had a certain magic about it. It definitely 'worked', creating results greater than the sum of the parts. Trouble is, dealers and Linn users were so partisan, this combination all but died once the Ittok/Asak arm/cartridge came on the scene in 1979/80. I myself 'upgraded' at that time. But was it really a step towards audio nirvana?

The Asak sounded good when

brand new, but was notorious for losing its bite and sparkle within a few months (weeks - days?!) of use.

Couple this with the fuller richer bass-heavy

Ittok, and it's clear the match wasn't one made in

heaven. Many of us were bowled over by the outstanding engineering of the Ittok; its superb cosmetic finish and ease of use. It was and is a lovely arm. But, with the wisdom of hindsight, I think the lightweight Grace G-707 was actually better-suited to the LP12.

Adding the Valhalla board to provide the motor with a cleaner more precise AC voltage was another questionable improvement. It wasn't so much the board itself as its placement inside the plinth. This seemed to add an electronic 'edge' to the sound, as though the cartridge was picking up the radiated electromagnetic field from the circuit board. Putting the board in a separate box allowed one to hear the full potential of the Valhalla modification, but this entailed extending the wires from the motor, and messing about with the mains. Around this time I got into a lot of trouble for revealing that the LED in the on/off switch made the sound worse - if you put a piece



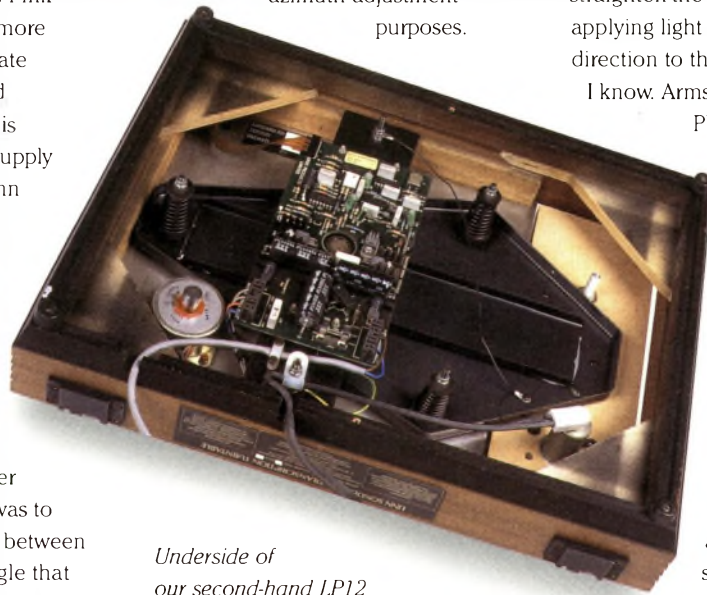
▶ of tape over the relevant contact to interrupt the supply voltage (thereby extinguishing the light) there was an audible drop in grainy hash. It was as though the LED was putting noise into the circuit, and that somehow this was being fed back into the supply. Scary!

The Valhalla board was hugely complex given that a simple capacitor was still used to phase-shift the AC supply to drive the two halves of the synchronous motor. Later power supplies, like the Lingo and Pink Triangle's Pink Linnk were more sophisticated, having separate individually-adjusted phased output supplies. In theory this allowed the phasing of the supply to be set precisely for the Linn motor in question, thereby reducing mechanical noise and vibration to an absolute minimum.

Pink Triangle also came up with another modification - a new top plate that repositioned the motor at 7 O'clock rather than 11 O'clock. The idea was to place any slight movement between motor and platter at an angle that could not be 'read' by the stylus. I had my Linn updated with the new top plate and it made a big difference - much cleaner and more solidly focussed, with better bass and treble extremes, and greater dynamic range. Unfortunately, whilst LP12s might be common, Pink Linnks are like the proverbial hen's teeth.

One of the more arcane setting up details concerned the 'right' fitting of the belt - which way up, and which way around. Early Linn belts were fairly thick, not especially flexible, and smooth. The later belt was more compliant and had a rougher surface - presumably to give increased grip with less slippage. But a degree of slippage was actually deemed good at one time - it helped reduce the 'cogging' effect of the synchronous motor.

Spraying the belt with Mister Sheen furniture polish, so it was slightly waxy, was a recommended tweak. No doubt, as the quality of the power supply improved, there was greater benefit in having a firmer drive. Hence the changes to the belt. Getting the belt to run correctly on the motor spindle was important too. Alas, some motors were damaged by people mistakenly tightening down the two protruding bolts used to rock the motor for azimuth adjustment purposes.



Underside of our second-hand LP12 showing internal Valhalla power supply board and general layout.

This bent the motor fixing plate, and once done it was impossible to straighten it. Incidentally, at some point in the mid-80s the motors started to come with the upper and lower case halves soldered together. But whether this was done for sound quality reasons, or to prevent the motor from splitting apart (as sometimes happened in transit if the deck was dropped) is not clear. Certainly, LP12s could be damaged in transit, and some suffered serious platter/armboard misalignment.

You'd adjust the suspension so the platter sat level with the top plate, and the arm board would sit at a funny

angle. Get the arm board square and flat and the platter would be leaning over. Because the earlier LP12s were shipped with the inner platter fitted into the main bearing (albeit with a piece of packing fitted so that the bearing tip did not contact the thrust plate), a short sharp shock would cause the sub-chassis to bend at the centre bearing.

The solution? Replace the sub-chassis or use a piece of pipe to straighten the bearing - basically by applying light pressure in the opposite direction to the bend! Frightening,

I know. Arms like the Syrinx PU-2 or PU-3, because they had displaced vertical and lateral bearings, were extremely sensitive to even quite small levelling errors. Other arms were more tolerant. The problem was avoided by better packing, which stored the inner platter on its own. A similar but less severe problem could also be caused by the sub-chassis twisting slightly as a result of the spot welding used to attach

the strengthening beam. This was more insidious as it tended to manifest itself in terms of the deck slowly drifting out of set-up over a period of weeks, another contributor to the LP12 set-up legend. Ultimately this was cured by gluing the beam in place, an approach that produced a flatter, more consistent and better sounding sub-chassis, later to be included as a standard element in the Cirkus kit.

If the deck is fitted with a tonearm, it's worth checking the bearings for excessive free play and stiction. If a Linn arm is fitted there should be no discernable free-play in the bearings. A good Grace G-707 was pretty firm too, though some did



▶ exhibit slight bearing wobble. Arms like the Zeta and Mission Mechanic are prone to both stiction and free-play. To check for bearing stiction, adjust the counterweight so the arm is in equilibrium and then see how easily it moves.

A good arm should move freely and easily in both vertical and lateral planes. If the arm has a sticky feel and/or there's a speeding-up and slowing down effect to the movement, the bearings may be dirty and/or damaged. Since this test has to be undertaken with a cartridge

fitted, make sure the stylus guard is in place. Speaking of cartridges, it's difficult to tell how much wear and tear a pickup might've endured just by looking, and performance is influenced by more than stylus wear.

Check to make sure the cantilever isn't bent, twisted, or excessively off-centre. Also, make sure the cartridge body doesn't sit too close to the LP surface when playing a record. If it almost touches, the cantilever assembly may've collapsed. That said, some pickups do naturally sit close

to LP surfaces - the Linn Asak for example. So long as it doesn't actually touch, you're okay.

As with buying anything secondhand, you're bound to run into a wide range of Linn LP12s of varying vintages and conditions. Some will be old but impeccably looked after; others will be relatively new but trashed. Good cosmetic condition isn't always a reliable guide, but if something appears clean and looked after it usually means it has been cherished and cared for.

Secondhand LP12s – what to look for...

by Roy Gregory

JMH's account of the arcane practices involved in setting up an LP12 (and he left out the dead chickens and ritual dance) should by now have given you pause for thought. This isn't a turntable you simply pick up from a stranger, sling in the back of the car, take home and insert in your system. In fact, there are two ways to get a decent secondhand LP12: buy a reconditioned and fully serviced one from a dealer, or buy one privately and take it to a dealer to have the necessary done. Assuming you adopt the second, generally more involved but cost effective path, what exactly should you be looking for?

The key periods in LP12 development can be divided into five:

- Early decks in original condition can be readily identified by the silver bolt heads supporting the spring assemblies. These are located beneath the platter.
- The first serious upgrade was the Nirvana kit, designed to make the suspension and set-up more consistent. This introduced black

bolts fitted with new grommets and springs. It also introduced the modified motor thrust pad and black Allen bolts fixing the motor itself.

- The Valhalla kit introduced the onboard power supply and is easily identified by the black, latched on/off switch used in place of the large, illuminated orange block of earlier decks. The switch carries a single red LED.



Sub-platter removed from main bearing showing bearing shaft and tip.

- The Cirkus kit introduced a whole plethora of new parts, and is in many ways the most controversial of all the upgrades, changing the sound of the deck more than any of the others, moving it towards a more even, detailed but arguably less involving performance. The heart of the upgrade is a new bearing, mounted far more rigidly to the sub-chassis, which in turn necessitates a new chassis (see JMH's comments earlier) and sub-platter. Visually it is hard to identify without getting inside the deck, but the giveaway is the time it takes for the platter to settle. Original bearings can take a considerable time to reach the bottom of the well, often running into minutes. In order to avoid this, the Cirkus bearing incorporates small flutes cut into the back of the Teflon sleeve that surrounds the shaft, thus allowing air and oil to pass. As a result the Cirkus bearing settles smoothly in a few seconds.
- Finally comes the Lingo external power supply. This comes in a separate box and a deck

► modified to use it has two LEDs in its on/off switch. Don't buy a deck with this switch if the attendant power supply isn't available. The cost of replacing it will quickly turn your bargain into a financial millstone. Of course, you could always have the deck converted back to original spec...

The age of the deck is crucial because it will effect the price, the sound and also the cost of any upgrades you might choose to make. Much better to buy the one you want in the first place. Original decks turn up for silly prices, but are relatively rare. More common, and in many respects the best buy are the Nirvana/Valhalla decks I've already mentioned. These should cost you around the \$400 mark bought privately (depending on tonearm), and \$600-\$700 fully refurbished from a dealer, although prices naturally fluctuate depending on supply and demand.

Before buying a deck it's also worth checking the main bearing for wear. Remove it from the housing (which also tells you whether it's been running without oil!) and examine the tip. A small polished flat, maybe a mm in diameter is acceptable. Anything bigger or off-centre should be rejected. Other than that the state of set-up is largely irrelevant, because you're going to get the deck rebuilt anyway. A final word of caution: I'd also avoid the Trampolin support base. Outside of Linn Products and their acolytes I don't know anybody who actually likes the effect of this attempt to make the Linn less support sensitive. There are plenty of cheaper and better ways of positioning the LP12 and I've always thought that it's better to get it right in the first place.



Detail of motor-tixing and top-plate suspension bolts showing black hardware associated with Nirvana upgrade.

Tonearms? I'd go with JMH's advice, although I'd avoid models like the Syrinxs, which despite their excellent sound have reliability and servicing issues. Zetas and Mechanics are really too heavy, while Akitos and early Ekoses had bearing problems. If in doubt I'd avoid all of the above. Cartridges too have virtually no secondhand value. If you want to play your records using something with an unknown history then go right ahead. Me? I'd budget for a new cartridge!

Having obtained your deck the next thing you do is take it to a dealer,

and what you want is somebody who was a Linn dealer in the '80s. These guys were selling dozens of LP12s a month, and when it comes to setting up the Linn there's no substitute for experience. And bear in mind that there are plenty of dealers who no longer sell Linn products who fit that category. Indeed, if you favour the early style sound then this is really the place to go. Nearly all these dealers continue to service decks for their old existing customers, and even if they can't get parts from Linn, they often have alternative routes, as well as carefully hoarded supplies of secondhand and exchanged parts as well.

Your chosen dealer should replace the springs and grommets on your deck, fit a new belt and then set it up from scratch. Expect that to cost around a \$100. That might seem like a lot of money but believe me when I say that he'll be adding a lot more than a \$100 worth of value to your new pride and joy. At this point, I'd take the deck home and enjoy it, but human nature being what it is I just know that you're going to get around to worrying about upgrades. After all, it's part of the deck's culture.

LP12 upgrades are a whole different ballgame, and a not inexpensive one at that. Next issue we'll look at the options, including comparing the sound of a fully loaded LP12 to Naim's Armageddon version and Russ Andrews' Torlyte modified deck. Just bear in mind that the whole point of a bargain is to keep things cheap, and sound per pound you can't do much better than a well set-up, secondhand LP12. ►+



Underside of sub-chassis showing later glued construction.

Zerodust Stylus Tip Cleaner

by Roy Gregory

After the phallic vibrator, now the KY Jelly! This business is just getting weirder and weirder. I mean, what exactly are we supposed to make of a small plastic box with a clear lid and a body in that particular shade of turquoise green that only seems to exist in Japan, which is full of clear gloop?

What could it possibly do for your hi-fi system? Clean its stylus is the answer.

So how does the Zerodust work? It couldn't be simpler. All you do is dunk the stylus into the soft surface of the gel bump that occupies the centre of the box. The tacky surface clings to any loose detritus, thus removing it from the tip of your pride and joy, simply and safely. Without the dangers inherent in waving brushes around close to this most fragile of components.

Time then to try it out, which is right about when this reviewer became eternally grateful that he had someone else's expensive cartridge close to hand. My hand barely even shook as I lowered £2300 worth of Koetsu towards the slime, and truth be told, I needn't have worried. It sat in place for a few seconds, I lifted it off and sure enough, there was a pinpoint smudge of grime polluting the glossy surface of the Zerodust.



Which beats the hell out of it polluting your listening experience. Once the Zerodust gets a bit grubby after repeated use, you can rinse it under warm water to remove the offending detritus.

Of course, the Zerodust is no substitute for a solvent based scrub, but as a safe and simple way of getting rid of the loose rubbish that litters your records and inevitably finds its way under the footprint of your hardworking stylus, it's hard to beat. Besides, it's just so darn cute, with its pretty coloured box and Secret Squirrel magnifier moulded into its lid. It's the perfect purchase for the one you love... Your turntable that is.

E20 from Audio Atmosphere

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Stat of the Nation...

A whole system's worth of Ringmat products

by Roy Gregory

Collectively, JMH, DA and myself have written an awful lot about the various Ringmat products, so the recent arrival of a new, Anniversary Ringmat, and a virgin system in need of treatment from scratch, offered a valuable opportunity for a reality check. Armed with the full suite of Anniversary Ringmat, LP Blue Statmat, Statmat CDi Blue and Statfeet, I descended on the poor defenceless set-up and proceeded to Ring or Stat everything in sight.

I started with the record player, a Rega P25 carrying a Dynavector DV-20X. Out went the felt mat to be replaced with the Anniversary Ringmat: in came better focus, separation and dynamics, greater clarity and tonal warmth. Clarity and warmth? Yes. Paradoxically the Ringmat manages to provide both these normally opposing attributes. The increased weight and body of the Chittarone combined with the added speed and attack of the lute easily distinguished these two instruments in the Julian Bream Consort's recording of the Vivaldi Concerto for Lute and Strings (RCA LSC 2730-B). The overall acoustic space as well as the spaces between the players, were both far better defined, as was the overall sense of

timing. Adding the LP Blue Statmat simply extended these virtues to an even greater extent, especially in terms of low-end weight and the grounded sense of overall stability.

The CDi Blue Statmat was just as effective in this system as it was when I originally reviewed it. However, one thing that is worth noting is that the Wadia 861 CD player has a very shallow loading tray, similar in some respects to the Teac machines. In this instance, although the CDi Blue is thicker than the original, single layer Statmat, its laminated construction is also much stiffer and less flimsy. As a result you are far less likely to suffer the "Statmat scrunched by drawer mechanism" horror that sometimes occurred with these machines. It's also far less likely to be ingested, never to appear again.

Which brings us to the Statfeet, small plastic squares carrying the now familiar pattern of ink and cutouts. I'd never used these before so was especially intrigued by their potential. Starting as directed with a single foot, placed as per instructions, under the rear foot of the Rega, I was astonished by the increase in overall clarity and

dynamic range and discrimination. Subtle pressure changes in fast runs of piano notes were far more apparent, their impact on the purpose and direction of the music far greater. Adding further feet under the amp and CD player elicited similar improvements, although the collective impact of amp and CD or amp and record player wasn't twice the initial impact of treating the source component alone. Likewise, superimposing a second foot over the first (they come in packs of six) elicited a further though smaller improvement.

These results go a long way to confirm that as unlikely as it may seem, Ringmat's bits of card and clear plastic film are capable of producing real and musically valuable improvements in the sound of hi-fi systems at all price levels. Material value might seem questionable but you can't argue with the results. The Ringmat products remain one of the most cost-effective upgrade paths open to hi-fi users. And they don't become redundant as you upgrade the rest of the system. Our recommendation stands enthusiastically reinforced.



Ringmat Anniversary XLR/11 and Statmat CDI Blue

by David Ayers

I don't think anyone on the Planet could've developed Ringmat and Statmat except John Rogers. I don't mean that no one else could've come up with the concept - I'm sure lots of people could. Rather, I can't imagine anyone else endlessly worrying away at the basic design in order to refine and improve it. John's way of working is to make countless prototypes. He listens assiduously to each one. And on the basis of what he hears, modifies and polishes the product.

And the latest versions? Sonically, they're just like the earlier examples. Only better. Same sort of difference only more of it. I especially like the new Ringmat Anniversary XLR/11 with LP Blue Statmat and Statcap. Though, as I'm currently dallying with an Avid Volvere it's not much use. To give of its best, Ringmat needs to sit on a hard platter; the Volvere has a cork mat which dilutes the effect produced by the Ringmat system.

So I went back to my regular Kuzma Stabi turntable, which also has the Ringmat Spacers. The LP Blue Statmat consists of a two Statmats working at 90° to each other, bonded to a 0.1mm blue polyester substrate. It goes on top of the bare platter (or Ringmat Spacers) underneath the Ringmat. So, once you've fitted it, it's out of the way and you can forget all about it. The Statcap goes on top of the LP label, completing the process.

The Anniversary XLR/11 Ringmat is broadly similar to earlier Ringmat designs, only it has anti-resonance cut outs placed at strategic points to improve performance. If you've heard and liked the earlier Ringmat, I think you'll find the latest incarnation offers more of the same. What I especially value is the way Ringmat improves clarity and separation between loud and soft and high and low. It makes it sound as though the whole record playing process is easier and less stressful.

Play a busy complex piece of music and, with the Ringmat in place, you get much better differentiation between opposing forces. Suddenly, all voices are singing from the same Hymn sheet rather than trying to drown each other out. Cartridge needle talk is reduced, making for a cleaner less congested presentation. Speaking personally, I believe the latter to be an important indication that the Ringmat is doing something fundamentally right.

As a result, it's my belief that use of the Ringmat system should extend the working life of the cartridge. Because the innards aren't being subjected to so much vibration, there should be much less wear and tear over time. The same is true of the stylus; lowering needle talk would seem to indicate that the stylus is having an easier time of things, and tracing the groove with much greater accuracy.

The Statmat CDI Blue is a further development of the existing Statmat, consisting of two Statmats placed at 90° to each other. This makes it a bit thicker and perhaps slightly easier to handle. However, as the two mats are only joined in 2 places, it's important to avoid getting creases and folds in the material. Indeed, it's recommended you periodically flatten the CDI Blue between the pages of a large heavy book.

It's interesting that the Statmat CDI Blue made a difference even though I was using Chord's DAC-64. The reason being, the DAC-64 used with full buffer does so much processing of the digital signal, it virtually reconstitutes it. That being the case, the quality of the CD transport used is far less significant than it normally is. Despite this, using the Statmat CDI Blue improved refinement and openness, leading to a purer more natural sound.

Using the new Statmat with a Musical Fidelity A-3 player, the transport didn't seem too keen and kept rejecting the mat. However, substituting the new A-3.2 (which looks similar but uses a different transport) there were no problems. Because it's a bit thicker and slightly more prone to wrinkles, I think the CDI Blue may prove a wee bit more transport-sensitive than the standard Statmat.

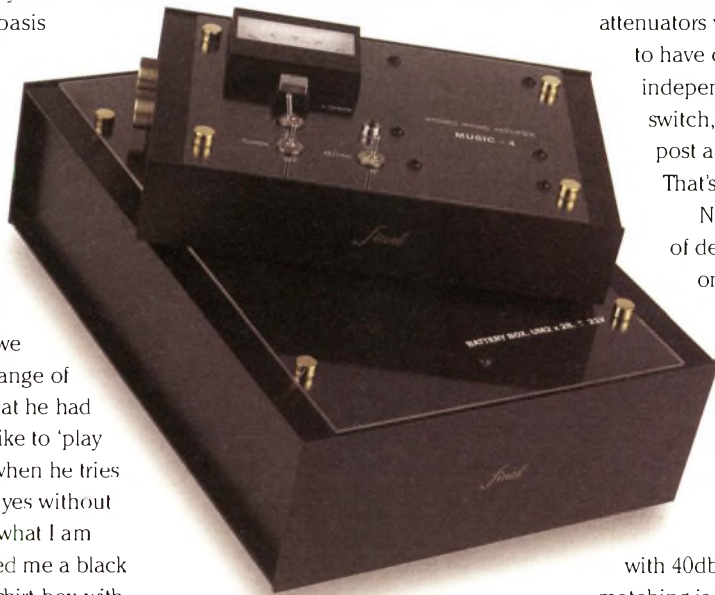


Final Music-4 Battery Powered Phono Stage

by Peter Russell

Why is it that I always get the weird, the whacky and the wonderful to review? I guess that by the end of this review you will find out. It was on one of those days that RG and I arrange to meet at a pub that is supposed to be 'equidistant between his and my places of residence'. One of these days I will challenge the accuracy of that statement. Anyway we meet there on an occasional basis to talk Hi-Fi, eat, and exchange large boxes of equipment. Heaven knows what the landlord thinks we are up to. Up 'til now no flashing blue lights have greeted our departure. On this particular occasion, as we were finalising the exchange of boxes, RG mentioned that he had something that I might like to 'play with'. I always dread it when he tries to tempt me into saying yes without actually understanding what I am committing to. He handed me a black plastic box the size of a shirt box with a metre of umbilical chord. Ah, yes a power amp, er no, there's no cable terminators or inputs. Another box is then placed in the boot of the car that looks for all the world like a control device from a 1960's sci-fi B movie. You know, with large VU meters, toggle switches and flashing lights. Oh dear, which garden shed did this come out of? It's a phono stage he said, testing my credulity. Oh sure, of course it is

I replied with confidence; it seemed that one should humour him, after all he is the editor. No but it is; it's the Final phono stage he declaimed. He assured me that he had mentioned it in a previous edition of the magazine. At this point I gave in and reflected that at this stage of my reviewing career it probably would be the final phono stage that I would review!



Yes it really was and is a phono stage. The large aluminium and perspex shirt box is a battery power supply, containing twenty-eight batteries. Yes you read correctly, 28 manganese batteries, not alkaline. Just replace them when they run out. These are not rechargeable and will probably give you about three months average play time. So at £17.50 a set you can calculate the annual cost!

I understand that there is an alternative vacuum tube outboard power supply available but I did not have it to hand to do a comparison. Fortunately the accompanying box, also plastic, enables you to determine the charge left in the batteries by flicking a switch that activates the vu metre to tell you whether you have sufficient charge. There are a couple of left and right attenuators which satisfies my need to have control over each channel independently, as well as a mute switch, phono in, a grounding post and two RCA outputs. That's really it. Simple.

Not quite. There a couple of design parameters which one needs to understand if one is to get anywhere near the best out of this unit. For a start you do need a cartridge with a reasonable output to make this retro box sing. I understand that it is virtually unloaded and with 40db of gain, careful cartridge matching is essential; a good MM or high output MC is required, probably at least 0.5mV. And remember, the harder it works the quicker it goes through batteries. Normally you'd plug the Final's output into a line stage, but I happened to have my Radford STA15 on hand, with sufficient sensitivity to be able to link the phono stage directly to it using the attenuators as volume controls. I also put it through my Croft Vitale unity gain preamp ▶

► just to see what it would do.

I chose my Clearaudio Insider for most of the listening. It's 0.6mV output is towards the lower limit of the Final's comfort zone and should reveal clearly whether the Japanese phono-stage is a serious proposition for moving-coil use or not. I also had an LFD three box phono-stage. For those of you with short memories, this was, and I think still is, their ultimate statement of the phono art. It is a dual mono chassis with two twenty-eight positioned attenuators and a battery power supply.

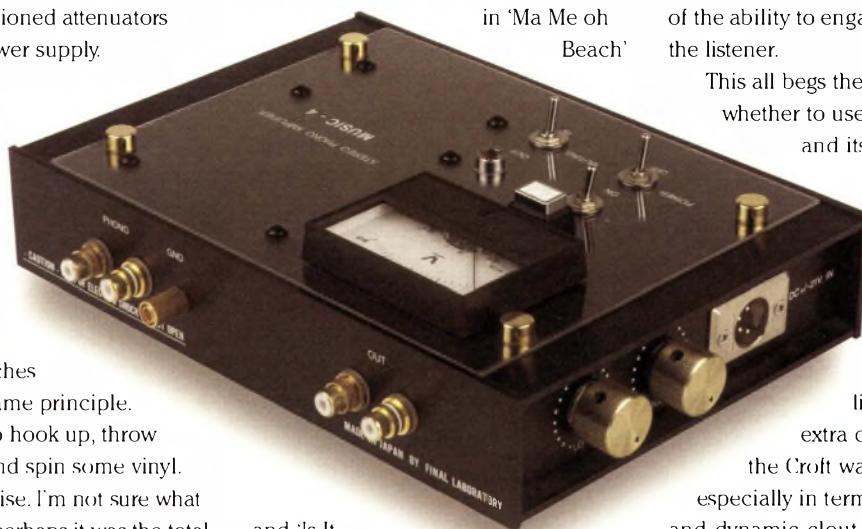
In this case the power supply is charged from the mains and then isolated when in use. I was looking forward to comparing two different approaches embracing the same principle.

It was time to hook up, throw some switches and spin some vinyl. Well what a surprise. I'm not sure what I was expecting; perhaps it was the total absence of grain that threw me. The music just floated out and hovered with a fluid articulation that astonished me. Sometimes, when I listen to equipment the music begs to be dissected. You know: timbre, transparency, spatial imaging, immediacy, frequency extension etc. With the Final you have exactly the opposite tendency. I was utterly beguiled by Ella Fitzgerald's ability to span the range of vocal emotion, by the presentation of her performance as a living, breathing thing. Timbre, vocal projection, imaging and spatial cues were all there, but seamlessly integrated into a captivating whole.

A couple of other vocal recordings confirmed that the Final excelled in this area. Jennifer Warnes' *The Hunter* is one of my favourite albums; in some ways better than the more well known and over used *Famous Blue Raincoat*.

I was fascinated by the way the final allowed her to express her phrasing and vary the tempo, to control the emotional expression in the vocal line as she explored the subtleties of the melodies. I happen to enjoy forceful women, and you cannot get more forceful than Joan Armatrading, especially in *Me Myself I*. I have a Japanese pressing on 140gm vinyl that captures her power and the

accompanying bass riffs in 'Ma Me oh Beach'



and 'Is It Tomorrow Yet'.

Whilst the Final was not the last word in bass control and timing, it certainly allowed her vocal power to come through. Who said Quad ESL57's can't rock?

Moving on to something completely different, I played Reference Recordings' *Helicon*, a collection of works by Vivaldi and Bach played on original instruments. This record can sound a little lacking in emotional expression, the strings brittle and the whole performance two dimensional. With the Final, whilst the strings still sounded slightly shrill, there was body to the mid frequencies and a finely worked appreciation of the quartet's interplay with the harpsichord.

Just when I had decided that I had captured the distinctive qualities of the Final, I thought that I would put

it through the Croft Vitale with its unity gain attenuator. Er... what's happening here? The strings in the RR album were fuller with much more body and energy. The harpsichord became integrated into the ensemble rather than as an emasculated solo instrument. On replaying the other albums mentioned above, there was the same ability to capture the performance's dynamic profile and presence, whilst losing none of the ability to engage and beguile the listener.

This all begs the question as to whether to use the phono stage and its attenuators directly into your power amp or feed it into a line stage? Sonically speaking, there's little doubt that the extra drive provided by the Croft was a positive thing,

especially in terms of presence and dynamic clout. However, the Final Music-4 does give the listener the option to pursue the last word in delicacy with the single-source hair-shirt approach. Either way, if you can live with its quirky nature, and take the time and trouble to match it with your system, then the effort will be well worth while. Definitely one for those who favour the organic over the analytical, after the Final, everything else sounds somehow mechanical.



Price: £2500

Distributor:

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The On-Going Saga Of The 300B

After the Western Electrics, Golden Dragon enter the fray with their own "designer" bottles.

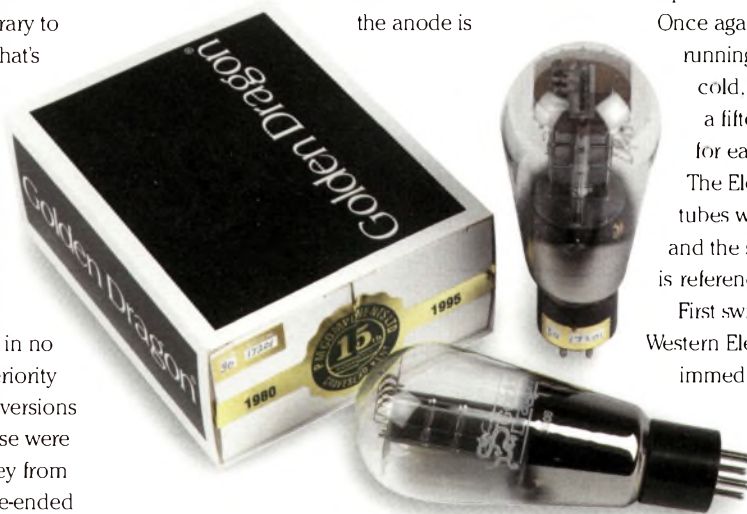
by Roy Gregory

Back in Issue 16 I reported on the Western Electric 300B, valves the size of whose reputation is matched only by the size of their price tag. The wrong side of £300 each for consumables moves them into the same territory as exotic cartridges, although like those other thoroughbreds they should also offer a longer working life than more mundane examples. However, there's no escaping the fact that for someone with a push-pull amp (and contrary to popular opinion, I reckon that's the way 300Bs work best) the entry ticket to the WE club will be the wrong side of £1200.

Can they possibly be worth that kind of money? Well, listening to them in the Renaissance RA-01 mono-blocks left me in no doubt as to their stark superiority over the Electro-Harmonix versions supplied as standard. If these were my amps I'd find the money from somewhere. If I had a single-ended amp I'd kill to get it! The inherent simplicity of such devices makes them even more susceptible to component quality than ever. However, now there's good news for the impoverished (and those with qualms about the act of murder). Golden Dragon, who are more normally associated with the other end of the market, are offering their own high-quality 300B – and it's a valve with a difference, at least as far as looks are concerned.

In an extraordinarily canny piece of marketing, they've reached far back to

the dawn of the thermionic age for the glass envelope they've used to wrap their valve. The retro, balloon shape will prove irresistible to single-ended aficionados, and sure enough, everybody who has seen it has let out an involuntary coo. Of course, it takes more than a pretty shape to create a quality product, and the GDs differences run more than skin deep. Look a little closer and you'll see that the surface of the anode is



perforated with a grid of tiny holes. The theory is that the increased surface area improves efficiency, but as I'm far from qualified to discuss or pass judgement on such matters I'll confine myself to the way they sound. Just note that the M in the 300BM designation indicates this mesh anode.

Time again then, to borrow the RA-01s, along with a full complement of both WE and Electro-Harmonix output tubes, for which I extend grateful thanks to IES. Slipping them between the HP100

and the Audioplans was a matter of moments, and there they sat while I ran the matched Quartet of Golden Dragons for a few days, just to burn them in. After that, it was time to listen in earnest, although I'd been forming an impression of the performance offered by the Chinese valves over the intervening time. Let's just say I was looking forward to the show down with the WEs with some serious expectation.

Once again, it was a case of running all the valves from cold, listening after a fifteen-minute warm-up for each set in turn. The Electro-Harmonix tubes were used as a control, and the sound in each case is referenced to them.

First switch was to the Western Electrics and I was immediately greeted by their familiar, solid, muscular sound. Let's use the Christian Ferras recording of the

Tchaikovsky *Violin Concerto* as an example (the excellent Testament 180g re-issue). Right from the opening notes the presence and tangible dimensions of the soundstage are obvious, far more so than with the Russian tubes. Instrumental voices and choirs are more separate, solid and painted with a richer palette and more substance. This is particularly obvious as the Philharmonia build towards the first *ff* crescendo. The Electro-Harmonix valves start to glaze over, congealing the sound of the ▶

► orchestra into a single, glassy whole, replete with an unpleasant sense of strain. In contrast, the WEs keep each contributing instrument separate and distinct, adding texture and control to the upward swell in level. It's a bit like seeing all the individual strands that combine to create a really well-defined muscle. The result is much more powerful, dramatic and believable, the absence of strain allowing you to listen straight through to the entry of the solo instrument without even noticing the amps.

Ferras' playing also receives a considerable boost. Whereas both his style and the recording lack the sumptuous lyrical splendour of the Heifetz on RCA, the Wes allow his violin its full richness and complexity, banishing the astringent quality of the standard tubes. Likewise, his playing becomes more dramatic and dynamic. The contrast with the beautifully tactile and airy pizzicato notes that underpin the opening bars of his solo entry is even more effective and evocative. It's a tour de force performance in the true sense of the phrase.

The Golden Dragons offer another alternative again. Let's start with the solo instrument. It may lack the absolute substance and rich colour it possesses through the WEs, but it's more nimble and agile. If the American tubes move Ferras towards Heifetz, the Chinese make him sound more like himself. His phrasing and the way in which he accents proceedings with his bowing is far more apparent, as is the way he manipulates pressure and tempo. The pizzicato underpinning may not have the absolute substance and tactile presence that it does with the Western Electrics, but the space around the instruments is clearer as is the shape of the phrase they're playing.

So, if the WEs major on power and

dynamic range the GDs offer greater dynamic discrimination and transparency. I suspect there's greater high frequency extension there too. The opening of the Tchaikovsky treats you to a lighter, wider and deeper soundstage peopled with better focused images. There's no doubt in my mind that the Chinese valves offer greater transparency and rhythmic sophistication: Not exactly the rapier and the broadsword, more the rapier and the sabre.

Returning to the Western Electrics after



listening to the GDs, it's

impossible to ignore their slightly crude and hamfisted way with things.

Which is the better alternative?

That's an interesting one and a question to which, like so many others in hi-fi, the answer starts with "That depends". There are those who love Heifetz for his smooth, lyrical panache and graceful power. There are others who abhor his lack of musical sophistication, finding his playing schmalzy and melodramatic. You pay your money and take your choice. Well it's much the same with 300Bs. You can go for the broad, sabre-like sweep of the WE, or the rapier incisiveness and speed of the GD. Which you prefer will depend on your amplifier, your system's overall balance of virtues and your own personal preferences. However, one thing I can guarantee: Whether you opt

for the sabre or the rapier, either is infinitely preferable to the two bits of wood crossed with a bit of twine that represent the Electro-Harmonix.

There is of course, one other consideration that I've purposefully left for last. That's because I'd really like people to make this choice on musical grounds. However, once you see the relative costs, I'm afraid price will swing more than a few of you. Depending on source (see the panel below) the Golden Dragons are slightly less than half the price of the Western Electrics. Okay, so you don't get the nice wooden box, the individual data sheets or the guarantee. You don't get the history and track record either, but in this world at least, money talks. For anybody running 300Bs the advent of the Golden Dragon 300BM has to be good news. I suspect that it will inevitably be viewed as a cheaper alternative to the Western Electric, but that's to miss the point. Judge it on sound rather than price and you'll find it meets the American heavyweight on equal terms.



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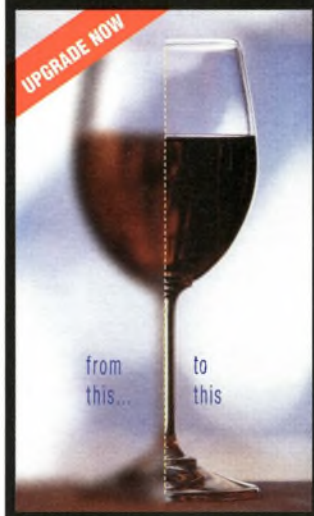
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Jimmy Hughes hi-fi+ Issue 15 Jan/Feb 2002



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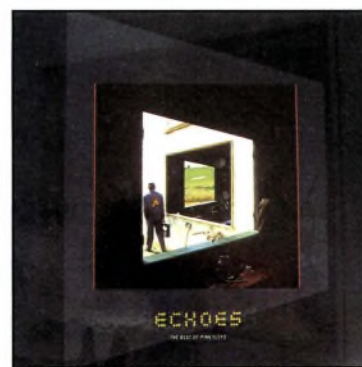
The ratings at the bottom of each review reflect the reviewer's opinion of the recording quality, and musical merits of the album. You'll soon realise that a great many musically significant albums offer less than wonderful sound. Don't let it put you off! For your information the scale rates a standard,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

The reviewers are identified by their initials.

They are:- Chris Binns, Pete Christie, Dave Davies, Roy Gregory, Jason Hector, James Michael Hughes, Jon Maple, Reuben Parry, Dave Ayers, Andrew Hobbs, Chris Thomas, Mark Childs, Simon Groome.



Key to Icons

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Pink Floyd

Echoes

EMI 7243 536 11118  

It is easy to harbour hostile thoughts when most "best of's" boil down to the common denominator: a collective reprise of some high-charting and undeserving singles. *Echoes* differs in a number of obvious ways. Pink Floyd's enduring and influential cult band status here merits a four LP format. The expanse of vinyl also lends itself to an exploration of music that includes the late sixties psychedelia, space and art-rock experimentalism, as well as those technical and instrumental triumphs lifted from *Dark Side Of The Moon* and *The Wall*. In charting this evolutionary process it passes through the Barrett years and those albums borne out of the long-standing enmity between Waters and Wright. There is space, too, for an epic title-track taken from *Meddle* and for those famously indulgent side-long eulogies like 'Shine On You Crazy Diamond' (*Wish You Were Here*). Early classics 'See Emily Play' and 'Arnold Layne' are cleverly and contrastingly paired with later songs, 'The Happiest Days Of Our Lives' (*The Wall*) and 'Learning To Fly' (*A Momentary Lapse Of Reason*). The digitally remastered 'Emily' and 'Arnold' have rarely sounded better. While those stereo effects found in the likes of 'Money' are well-realised, even if they don't quite match that on the highly-regarded mo-fi pressing of *Dark Side*. However, at around £30.00, *Echoes* is a bargain not to be missed.

Supplier: Cherished Record Co. 01579363603
RP

RECORDING
MUSIC





The Waifs

Sink Or Swim

Hot Records HOT 1080

Stray Aussie roots outfit, The Waifs, were recently heard as the support band at Billy Bragg's Lowry Concert, which suggests that besides their honed acoustic skills Josh Cunningham, Donna and Vikki Simpson possess a healthy scepticism for institutions that perpetuate a status quo. The writing from all three is exceptional. However, highest praise goes to the Donna Simpson songs. A commonplace story of an ambitious young musician moving to the city, the transient nature of relationships, those everyday bills that must be met – all financed by dishing up food rather than notes or chords in, 'The Waitress', is deliberately clothed in suitably mundane language, that really works. Her date rape song, 'Service Fee', from its opening lines "you broke down my door and let yourself in / you helped yourself to my soul and skin" offers a more sophisticated lyricism. But my favourite track is, 'The Haircut', Donna's ironic, sharp-tongued reflection upon being dumped, with all those boyfriend put-downs that preceded it has exquisitely delivered humour in, "so now when I make love I make love to myself / I got no disease so it's good for my health / I got my hands in my pants – down my calvin klein's / I don't need you no more baby I can come every-time". That is a women's priceless sweet revenge!

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Shawn Colvin

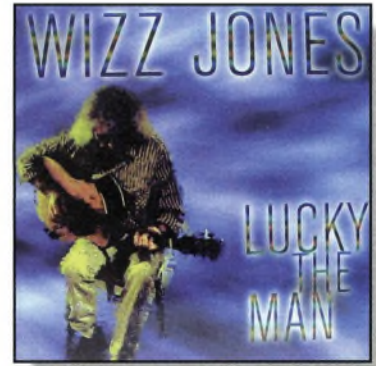
Live '88

Plump Records PL7901-2

Culled from three adrenalin-filled stage performances, this unaccompanied, yet compelling excursion, revisits nine of Colvin's own songs (eight of which are to be found in a studio form on *Steady On*) as well as two covers in Paul Simon's 'Kathy's Song' and David Bell's 'Don't You Think I Feel It Too'. Among the originals are 'Stranded', 'Cry Like An Angel', 'Ricochet' and 'Shotgun Down The Avalanche'. If you warmed to that debut album, then this CD will bed in nicely. Although pared back to guitar and vocals, Colvin projects a truly big sound and so the absence of familiar flashy production values, percussion or layered bass, electric, dobro and mandolins is not critical. Simplicity is its strength. That, and the finely executed and tightly-woven urban folk music. Live recordings, of course, will have their detractors, but I appreciate the honesty and interaction with the audience on these discs. There is integrity a plenty to be found here outside of the perfection that can be crafted in the studio. Occasional bum notes and a level of intensity where you can almost hear the beads of perspiration form and drop to the floor during a set are a potent and timely reminder of how disproportionate all that studio window dressing can become.

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Wizz Jones

Lucky The Man

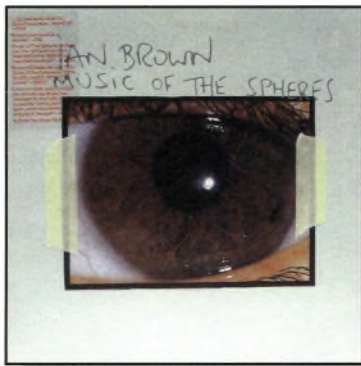
Scenescof SCOFLP 1009

Students of Rod Stewart's early R&B career will perhaps recall that during the Sixties, prior to his sojourn with Jimmy Powell And The Five Dimensions as a tempestuous harmonica player, he had toured Europe alongside Wizz Jones. Rod went on to become a trouser-thrusting Seventies rock icon. Wizz, meanwhile, still basks in that collective anonymity of our middle-England acoustic folk-blues scene. Accompanied here by Gerry Conway (Fairport Convention), Clive Palmer (Incredible String Band), John Renbourn and Jacqui McShee (Pentangle), he plies a durable, honest and quite distinctive guitar-licking trade on this intimate thirteen track studio-bound album. It's easy to warm to the evenly paced rendition of Blind Boy Fuller's, 'Weeping Willow Blues', or the Ray Charles 'Funny (But I Still Love You)'. A traditional folk song like, 'Ornie Wise', drips with sensitivity. Interspersed amongst them are three Wizz-penned originals that compare favourably. 'Another Summertime', 'Lullaby Of Battersea' and the title-track, 'Lucky The Man', typify this polite, well-mannered school of English folk music. Consequently, Wizz does not possess a universal appeal. Soft enunciation and gently-shaped delivery lacks the cutting edge of his Trans-Atlantic counterparts. LP strictly limited to a run of 800.

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RP





Ian Brown

Music Of The Spheres

Polydor Records 589126-1

Between apathy and much-publicised management squabbles "Madchester" favourites, the Stone Roses, were capable of creating classic guitar/pop records. Their self-destructive quality was reflected through line up changes and infrequent releases. It's surprising they lasted as long as they did. Founder member, Ian Brown, though, has remained in the limelight even when being rubbished for vocals that have occasionally strayed seriously off-key. He has, however, since 1996, pursued a fascinating solo career. Last year's *Music Of The Spheres* is the latest and most subtle step in this blend of guitar electro-pop. Brown, like much of his hometown, has undergone a dramatic makeover during the past five years. Yet, buried beneath some sweet, lingering and ethereal melodies in 'F.E.A.R.', 'The Gravy Train', 'Hear No See No', 'Northern Lights' and 'Whispers', are real life lyrical allusions and worries. Broken relationships, drugs, shadowy figures, givers and takers populate and juxtapose these often dreamy-sounding mixes. The musical veneer, as with much of Manchester's redevelopment, papers over but cannot, on it's own, resolve these issues. An overlay of keyboard programming and studio-sourced effects suits and sustains this attitude.

RP



Butterfly Jones

Napalm Springs

Vanguard VCD 79590-2

Butterfly Jones is the latest venture from ex-DADA frontman Michael Gurlet and drummer Phil Leavitt. Add guitars, keyboards and various period pieces and you've got a recipe for musical genre mayhem. The results however, are surprisingly palatable: modern enough to be hip, laden with enough psychedelic nostalgia to be hip, just near enough to the white line to be recognisable, far enough away to be, well, hip. *Napalm Springs* consists of 14 songs loaded with hooks, run through with all the guitar riffs that Oasis lost (and have been looking for ever since). Yee Gods, it's that rarest of beasts, an album loaded with intelligent pop. The singing and playing are both top notch, and the production's not bad. There's enough variety here to keep you interested while there's a satisfying mix of hope and healthy cynicism. The gentle, bittersweet caress of 'Sophie', the naïve joy of 'Wonder' cut through with self-parody, contrast with the cascading guitars of the title track, the rough and tumble of 'Sunshine and Ecstasy'. Shades of the Beatles and the Monkeys look on from afar, thankfully without ever intruding too obviously. But it's the Dylan-esque jangle and edgy chords of 'The Systematic Dumbing Down Of Terry Constance Jones' that's the standout track here. Don't be fooled by the tacky, bikini clad cover. It's just another example of a band who aren't prepared to take themselves too seriously. It's a musically refreshing trait.

RG



Bruce Springsteen & The E Street Band

Live In New York

Columbia COL 500000 1

An atmospheric, adoration-filled triple decker recorded at Madison Square Garden after a hard year's touring with his terrific old backing group, The E Street Band, reiterates what we've always known - Springsteen is a brilliant rock and roll performer, guitarist and storyteller. No need to warm up this audience. They are irrevocably bound to their messiah through a diurnal sense of clarity, purpose, fatalism, hope and compassion he has shown for those generations of blue collar characters who have now populated his narratives spanning four decades. Nineteen tracks here, range across themes of howling desolation in 'Youngstown', the violent streets of 'American Skin', to an aching 'Tenth Avenue Freeze-out' and the show-stopping, 'Badlands'. Anthems, familiar and new, are present too. Flag-wrapped optimism in the shape of 'Born In The USA' and 'Land Of Hope And Dreams' have even more resonance these days. If your purpose was an exploration of the Boss's inventiveness as a songwriter, then go to the studio albums where those multiple bridges, varying choruses and a meter stretched to breaking point demand attention. *Live In New York*, however, is a homecoming musical celebration where fans dote, band members vamp and a charismatic New Jersey prodigal accepts canonisation.


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RP






Pine Top Perkins

Back On Top

Telarc CD83489 


Terry Evans

Walk That Walk

Telarc CD83486 

Mighty Sam McClain

Blues For The Soul

Telarc CD83487 

Run the handles, "Pinetop", "Mighty Sam" and "Terry Evans" past me or any other like-minded audiophile and we are going to think of Analogue Productions and Audioquest releases. Occasionally, though, finding yourself proved completely wrong can be a pleasant experience. Which is the case with these three CDs taken from a mainstream blues label.

First into the tray was *Back On Top*, the second recording for Telarc by octogenarian pianist, Pinetop Perkins. This man has lived a lifetime with the blues. From 1930s boogie-woogie in rural Mississippi, and cutting those ivories around Chicago haunts of the fifties and sixties, to an eleven-year stint as replacement for Otis Spann in the Muddy Waters band – Pinetop has simply engaged his audiences in a soulful, uncomplicated conversational style that, with a deft and



disarming caress of the keys, moves dewy-eyed listeners and musicians alike. When he runs those hands across an old standard like Leroy Carr's, 'How Long The Blues', there is nothing academic about his delivery. It just drips with tenderness and authenticity. Guests, Ray Norcia with his crying harmonica and that sweet acoustic guitar work from Carey Harris, dovetail right in alongside him and the band. Great pace and dexterity, too, in his 'Down In Mississippi' where the later stunning electric guitar licks and a weeping harp are almost more than a grown man can bear. Elsewhere, subtle and slow-burning material such as Edie Boyd's, 'Five Long Years', and the Earl Hooker classic, 'Anna Lee', rake over those temperature-raising coals that have preoccupied generations of bluesmen – dead end jobs, no money and woman trouble. Pinetop's is a finely etched performance, nicely revealed though some clean-sounding, detailed and unfussy engineering.

Technically, the Terry Evans and Mighty Sam McClain recordings, that employ Sony's Direct Stream Digital mastering system, are even better. While offering greater dynamic range and an improved resolution that exposes those most delicate of instrumental nuances, they can still fire out really punchy vocals and a snappy horn or trumpet arrangement when demanded. A rock-steady musical image, in terms of shape, size and soundstage location, reinforces a "live" session feel to these Bernie Grundman mastered discs.

On, *Walk That Walk*, big Terry Evans not only talks the talk but strides purposefully through nine of his originally-penned numbers which, whilst drawing on a sweet-soaked Delta Blues legacy, also have an indelible brand of that more recent LA scene imprinted upon them. His neat acoustic guitar, thickly set, rich and sometimes grizzled vocals, all have the right credentials. And, when



you hear a support band including Ry Cooder, Jim Keltner, Kenny Dew and Jesse Samsel, you realise that these are seriously good blues musicians at play. Reframing this idiom is another Evans objective. Indebtedness, an age-old theme, is freshened up for a final, 'Credit Card Blues'. Yet, Evans has a knack of getting his hooks into you early. Here, with the snappy title-track (a witty discourse on shoes) and while musing on more women problems for 'The Story Of My Life'. When he drops the pace back for a gospel-like, 'A Stones Throw Away', his versatility shines through. Mighty Sam McClain is a man who has placed his faith in less secular solutions. Sam's spiritual side is unequivocal. In a dozen soaring songs our Louisiana-born vocalist looks heavenward – his cadences rise to be joined by equally uplifting horn, trombone and trumpet arrangements. Not everyone's cup of tea, perhaps, and not as inspired as those earlier Audioquest LPs, *Give It Up To Love* and *Sledgehammer Soul Et Down*. They too, like *Blues For The Soul*, were produced by Joe Harley and his efforts are almost as persuasive as the ministry on offer – but you still won't find an old atheist like myself reaching for a bible.

RP

Pinetop Perkins

RECORDING 
MUSIC 

Terry Evans

RECORDING 
MUSIC 

Mighty Sam

RECORDING 
MUSIC 



Hans Zimmer

Black Hawk Down OST

Decca 440 017 012-2 (CD)

The movie might be deeply flawed, marred by the same perspectival myopia and resultant incipient racism that infected *Platoon* and further back, *The Green Beret*, but as Zimmer points out, that leaves the music as the only voice available to the Somali people. As such, he does a sterling job of recreating that cultural void between the rich, well-fed technocrats of the US armed forces and the impoverished Africans with the temerity to reject the opportunity of salvation. Of course, it's not the starving that make that choice, but then the World has never responded to overly simplistic foreign policy. This soundtrack sees Zimmer at his powerfully atmospheric best, teasing us with the hints of familiar themes that flicker tantalisingly before whirling away in the complex weave of the music. Here it's the hard-edged riff from Led Zep's 'Kashmir' that provides a momentary bridge between North and South, whilst anyone familiar with Gaspar Laval will find themselves on recognisable ground. The insistent techno ambience of tracks like 'Synchronone' stand in stark contrast to 'Barra Barra' and the sublime Baaba Maal vocal on 'Hunger'. Zimmer rates this as his most ambitious work and I'd agree. However, like all steps into the artistic unknown the results are patchier and less polished than the likes of *Gladiator*. But alongside the odd trip this is evocative and moving music of real power. A treat.

RG



Nickel Creek

Nickel creek

Sugarhill Records SUGCD 3909 (CD)

Bluegrass music hasn't had the high profile in the UK of say, your Shania Twain or Leann Rimes slant on Country Music. Attitudes are changing though, as the huge sales of the soundtrack *O Brother Where Art Thou?* and Alison Krauss' albums have gone to prove. Krauss in particular has been a major influence on the steady growth of the genre and here we have another young band who are going to open it up to a whole new audience. Nickel Creek are a three piece comprising Sara Watkins, (violin and vocals), Chris Thile, (mandolin and banjo) and Sean Watkins, (acoustic guitar). The quality of the playing and the high standards they achieve with their songwriting make a mockery of their ages. They are respectful of the roots of bluegrass but they drive it on to a fresh and vibrant new plateau. A perfect example is their version of Sinead Lohan's gorgeous 'Out of the Woods'. Sara Watkins delivers a beautiful vocal performance, but no less impressive are the harmonies and playing, especially Sean Watkins acoustic guitar work. Although of tender age, Nickel Creek have been together for 10 years – and it shows. They've picked up countless awards and they'll go on to win many more, selling millions along the way. They're that good.

AH



Christine Collister

An Equal Love

Topic records: TSCD 1 (CD)

My trawls round the record shops over the years have uncovered Christine Collister's name on many occasions, courtesy of albums by Richard Thompson, Clive Gregson and her own personal releases, but I dismissed them all, mainly because they were always filed in the folk section. In my naivety I had her down as another one of those yelping, heavy-on-the-Irish-accent, fiddles everywhere folkies types. Oops, big mistake. It just goes to show you – never judge a book by its cover!

The first time I actually got to hear Miss Collister sing was on *The Dark Gift of Time* which is in essence a Best-Of compilation. Two things struck me. Firstly the voice – and what a voice it is! It's truly a wonderful creation, deeply hypnotic one moment and intoxicating the next. Secondly, the songs. Collister is a folk singer, but that's not all she is. She can sing jazz, blues, pop, country – in fact she can sing anything, and brilliantly too. Her latest offering, *An Equal Love*, is yet another eclectic mix with a least half of the songs written or co-written by Collister herself. This album simply confirms the fact that she is one of this country's finest ever singers.

Don't be a plonker like I was and get down to your local record store pronto – you'll find her albums in the folk section!

AH





Maura O'Connell

Walls and Windows

Sugarhill Records SUGCD 3937 (CD)

Some singers are natural songwriters. Joan Armatrading, Patti Griffin, Shawn Golvin and Jann Arden have the gift in abundance. Others might not be songwriters but they are masters of interpretation – Maura O'Connell is one such singer. Born and raised in the town of Ennis in County Clare, Maura O'Connell grew up in a singing family. Her first taste of a professional musician's life came with a six week tour of America as vocalist with the traditional Irish Band, Dedanann. After leaving the band Maura relocated to Nashville where she graces albums by the likes of Van Morrison, Roseanne Cash and Dolly Parton. Solo critical recognition followed in 1993 when she contributed standout tracks to the compilation *A Woman's Heart* and since then she has consolidated her reputation with a string of fine releases.

Walls and Windows is her most accomplished album to date, those interpretative skills and that honey coated voice wrapping them selves gloriously around songs by such luminaries as Patti Griffin, Ron Sexsmith, John Prine and Van Morrison. The excellent production comes courtesy of Ray Kennedy (the other half of 'Twangtrust' with Steve Earle) and the list of musicians contains some of Nashville's finest talents. All in all, *Walls and Windows* is a triumph for Maura O'Connell – a true songwriter's singer

AH



Black Rebel Motorcycle Club

BRMC

Virgin Records America 7243 8 10045 2 4 (CD)

2002 looks set to be the best year for music for a long time. With a whole host of fresh new British bands just waiting to release debut albums it looks almost certain that guitar music is back for real. But before the British lads get in the ring its time to check out the latest from over the pond. Black Rebel Motorcycle Club fit the Zeitgeist perfectly, with dark rhythmic songs tinted with psychedelia. The artwork is all grainy mood shots, distinctly eighties, and the music follows suit, reminiscent of bands such as the Cult and Jesus and Mary Chain.

The album kicks off with three superb songs back to back, but fails to keep the pace.

The album quickly descends into much more pedestrian territory. The album loses focus, wallowing in effects, it has a great sound, but no direction whatsoever.

At their best BRMC produce beat music with a vital energy, and this album has plenty of great moments, but like so many albums from the decade it pays homage to, it's a few great moments in an hour of filler.

BRMC add a kick to the singles chart, and are another name on a growing list of guitar-based albums in 2002, but fail to deliver the goods. Buy the singles, keep an eye on their progress, but leave the album on the shelf.

MC



Biffy Clyro

Blackened Sky

BBQCD226 Beggars Banquet 2002 (CD)

I stood next to Biffy Clyro whilst watching Seraphim (also worth looking out for) last month. One day I hope to tell my children that. Biffy Clyro are an energetic three piece from Scotland that sound like all bands should. They stand somewhere between American nu-metal and British guitar rock. Except unlike nu-metal there's no joking about, and unlike current British rock there's little pretension. Also, unlike most debut albums about at the moment *Blackened Sky* sounds slightly rough and fresh. It doesn't sound as considered, and consequently dull, as a lot of current releases. *Blackened Sky* is loud: it's primal screams all round and in harmony no less. The tried and tested quiet-loud-quiet formula makes many appearances, but under all the signature changes and percussion there are solid tunes and innovative lyrics, as a recent unplugged session proved.

Watching Biffy Clyro live gives you a deep-seated feeling of excitement, a feeling which the album captures well. Nirvana comparisons abound, but favourably, as they manage to mimic the intensity just as well as the sound. I cannot recommend this album highly enough. It's a solid and exciting debut album from a seriously good band. The songs may come to life on stage, but the album has the greater depth of emotion. Recorded skillfully, played ably and paced perfectly.

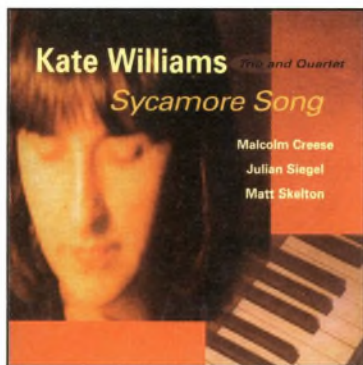
MC



Hard to find...

...to keep you abreast of what's available on non-CD formats here's a listing of the latest arrivals from the leading specialist mail-order suppliers.

Diverse Vinyl	Vivante	Cherished Record Co.
Alison Krauss Et Union Station <i>New Favorite</i> (Diverse Records 180g) £16.90	Van Morrison <i>Moon Dance</i> German Pressing (Universal) 180g Vinyl £19.95	Nick Drake <i>Nicholas Rodney Drake</i> 3LP
A Certain Ratio <i>Early</i> (Soul Jazz Retrospective) £14.90	Traffic <i>John Barleycorn Must Die</i> German Pressing (Universal) 180g Vinyl £19.95	Beatles <i>Live in Japan 1966</i>
Alfie <i>A Ward In Your Ear</i> £10.90	Fleetwood Mac <i>Rumours</i> German Pressing (Universal) 180g Vinyl £19.95	Booker T Et MG's <i>Green Onions</i> Sundazed 180 g
Angie Stone <i>Mahogany Stone</i> £12.90	Nirvana <i>Hormoaning</i> 180g Vinyl £14.95	Creedence Clearwater Revival <i>S/T</i> Analogue Productions 180 g
Cat Stevens <i>Teaser Et Firecat</i> £16.90	Nirvana <i>Nevermind</i> (Universal) £14.95	Creedence Clearwater Revival <i>Green River</i> Analogue Productions 180g
Chimera <i>Chimera</i> (Tenth Planet) £15.90	The Who <i>Bbc Sessions 2 Lp</i> £14.95	Eva Cassidy <i>Songbird</i> 180g
Cinematic Orchestra <i>TBC</i> £13.90	B.B. King <i>Live At The Regal</i> (Universal) 180g Vinyl £19.95	Dusty Springfield <i>A Very Fine Love</i>
Cornershop <i>Hand Cream For A Generation</i> £9.90	Eric Clapton <i>Chronicles (The Best Of Eric Clapton)</i> (Warners) 2 Lp £15.95	Kathy Mattea <i>Willow In The Wind</i>
Electric Soft Parade <i>Holes In The Wall</i> double 45rpm £14.90	The Mama's And The Papa's <i>If You Can Believe Your Eyes Et Ears</i> (Universal) 180g £19.95	Karla Bonoff <i>New World</i>
Giant Sand <i>A Caver Magazine (Thrill Jockey)</i> £12.90	Leonard Cohen <i>Ten New Songs</i> £13.95	Sade <i>Promise</i>
Gomez <i>In Our Gun</i> £18.90	Gomez <i>In Our Gun</i> 2LP 180g £15.95	Sade <i>Diamond Life</i>
Harry Nilsson <i>Nilsson Schmilsson</i> (Simply Vinyl) £18.90	Ost <i>The Big Lebowski</i> 180g Vinyl, Features Tracks By Bob Dylan, Nina Simone, Townes Van Zandt And Many More £15.95	Nanci Griffith <i>The Last Of The True Believers</i>
Hives <i>Your New Favourite Band</i> £10.90	Sonic Youth <i>Daydream Nation</i> 2LP £16.95	Little Feat <i>Waiting For Columbus</i> Warners 180g
Iron Maiden <i>Rock In Rio</i> (3LP picture disc) £24.90	Cat Stevens <i>Tea For The Tillerman</i> (Universal) 180g Vinyl £19.95	Ry Cooder <i>Paris, Texas</i> OST Warners 180g
Jewel <i>This Way</i> (US import) £17.90	Cat Stevens <i>Mona Bone Jakon</i> (Universal) 180g Vinyl £19.95	Talking Heads <i>Stop Making Sense</i> EMI 100 180g
Jon Spencer Blues <i>Plastic Fang</i> £13.90	The Who <i>Live At Leeds</i> (Universal) 180g Vinyl £19.95	Jeff Beck <i>Beck-Ola</i> EMI 100 180g
Joseph Arthur <i>Junkyard Hearts 1</i> £5.90	The Who <i>Quadrophenia</i> (Universal) 180g Vinyl 2LP £19.95	Jeff Buckley <i>Sketches For My Sweetheart The Drunk</i> 3LP £19.95
Lift To Experience <i>Texas Jerusalem</i> Crossroads Ltd £15.90	Eminem <i>The Slim Shady LP</i> £15.95	Michael Hedges <i>Aerial Boundaries</i> Alto 180g
McClusky <i>McClusky Does Dallas</i> £10.90	SACD Roger Walters <i>In The Flesh</i> Single Layer Multichannel SACD £24.95	Ricky Lee Jones <i>Pop-Pop</i> Alto 180g
Neil Young <i>Are You Passionate?</i> 2LP £18.90	James Taylor <i>Hour Glass</i> Single Layer Multichannel SACD £24.95	Menuhin <i>The Musical Offering</i> (ASD 414) Alto 180g
Patti Smith <i>Horses</i> (Simply Vinyl 180g) £18.90	Jacintha <i>Lush Life</i> Hybrid Multichannel SACD £24.95	Ledger <i>Elgar Coronation Ode</i> (ASD 3345) Alto 180g
Sergio Mendes Et Brasil 66 <i>Equinox</i> (Speakers Cnr) £19.90	Celine Dion <i>All The Way</i> Single Layer Multichannel SACD £24.95	De Burgos/Orff <i>Carmina Burana</i> (SAN 162) Alto 180g
Small Faces <i>Immediate Hits Et Mod Rarities</i> £15.90		Mott The Hoople <i>Mott Absolute</i> Analogue 180g
The Streets <i>Original Pirate Material</i> £14.90		Mott The Hoople <i>All The Young Dudes</i> Absolute Analogue 180g
U2 <i>Rattle Et Hum</i> (German reissue) £16.90		
Yardbirds <i>Greatest Hits</i> £15.90		
Badly Drawn Boy <i>About A Boy</i> (OST) £10.90		



Kate Williams, Malcolm Creese, Matt Skelton, Julian Siegel

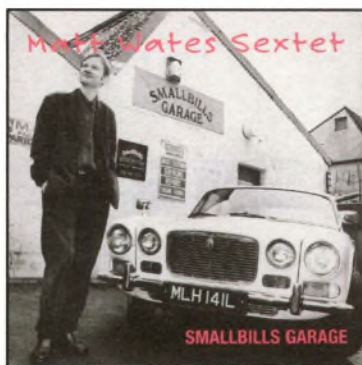
Sycamore Song

ABCD 8 (CD)

Ivor Cutler reckons "Kate Williams attacks the piano as though she is going to stand no nonsense from it". I know exactly what Ivor meant but it doesn't quite do justice to the range of her piano playing which although it's pretty emphatic is full of feeling and subtlety, nor to this fine set. Joined by Matt Skelton on drums, Julian Siegel on tenor and the inimitable Malcolm Creese on bass, the set includes a smattering of William's originals, notably the opening 'Crocodile Tears', the title track and the lovely 'Penumbra' which closes the album. Another William's composition 'Interlude' does just what the title suggests, providing a brief and deceptively gentle introduction to the fastest paced number here, the Tristano composition 'Lennies Pennie's'. This really does provide some no nonsense playing from Kate, real percussive force, before giving way to some great interplay between tenor and percussion. All driven hard by Creese's bass. The album also features standards like 'You don't know What Love Is' and 'It's You or No One' all of which the band make their own. This is a highly enjoyable set from a band that are clearly both very talented and are having a great time. Good warm, natural recording lends the set an appropriately live feel. Recommended.

Supplier: Vivante - www.vivante.co.uk

DD



Matt Wates Sextet

Smallbills Garage

ABCD 9 (CD)

This CD should come with instructions to 'play loud!' This'll bring the best from the percussion driven 7/4 opener 'African Dawn' and the whole set, whilst it shows plenty of variety gains that extra dimension with a tweek or two more on the volume control. Wates, who has been nominated a Rising Star in the BT British Jazz Awards, is much in demand in UK clubs, and on the evidence of this recording, it's easy to understand why.

There are some great tracks here including a number the band describe as 'a shameless bit of Blue Note revival...we always rely on to get a flagging audience going a bit'. With solos from five of the six piece, only bassist and Producer Malcolm Creese misses out here. 'Ballad for Stan Getz' is just that, a gentle and evocative number that hints at Getz's style without overtly copying it, with some lovely alto from Matt Wates. One of my favourites, held together by a distinctive bass line from Creese, is 'Waiting for the Dudo' named after an unpunctual Italian friend of Wates.

This is a really refreshing and enjoyable set from a label I'll now be watching with interest, and is well worth checking out.

Supplier: Vivante - www.vivante.co.uk

DD



Satch and Josh

Oscar Peterson & Count Basie

Pablo/ JVC XRCJ VICJ-60376 (XR)

This is a cracking set recorded in '74 and boy do Peterson and Basie have some fun. Accompanied by Basie band alumni Freddie Green, Ray Brown and Louis Bellson, with either the two pianists belting it out or as on the blues drenched "S&J Blues", with Basie on organ, their enjoyment simply oozes from the speakers. Despite an increasingly unwieldy collection of his music, I can't seem to get enough of Basie's 'just behind the beat', relaxed economical style. Here, with his equally distinctive band members he's perfectly complemented by Peterson's faster paced, more complex approach. The band play a number of Basie classics like 'Jumping at the Woodside' along with some joint compositions such as the opener 'Buns' which if it doesn't get your toes tapping within two bars of the off will prove that you've forgotten to remove your diving boots. The point is that there's not a weak track here. It's simply a great set.

The sound quality is excellent: warm and tangible with plenty of clout when necessary. This is great music making by a band of consummate musicians and is a recording I suspect I will be playing many, many times in the coming months.

Why's it called *Satch and Josh*? Sorry you'll just have to buy it and read the sleeve notes!

Supplier: Vivante - www.vivante.co.uk

DD





Tony Coe, John Horler, Malcolm Creese

In Concert

ABCD 6 

This is another real find. An excellent band, featured in a live recording that captures a real, tangible presence and sense of occasion making for great, unpretentious music. Recorded at St George's, Bristol in '97 it features Tony Coe variously on clarinet, tenor & soprano, John Horler on piano and Malcolm Creese on drums. The opening track 'Waltz' is a knockout: Coe on clarinet wrings every drop of emotion from this Horler composition, the strength though is in the integrity of this trio, great pianism from Horler, subtlety and drive from Creese and no one player unduly dominating. This fine musician-ship is maintained throughout as the band work through a range of own compositions and standards including 'Body and Soul' and Ellington's 'Blue Rose' The band take the time to get the best from every number – the shortest track here is over six minutes and not a note seems like it's overstayed it's welcome. Nor for a millisecond did I miss drums throughout the set. The most ambitious piece here is the closing number 'Minor Dance' described by the band as 'semi-jazz, semi-classical'. Forget classifications, as the sleeve notes say, "This is some of the most accomplished, musically satisfying jazz you will hear, and repeated listening only increases its appeal." You should have guessed by now that I'm not about to argue with that!

Supplier: Vivante - www.vivante.co.uk

DD



Count Basie

Chairman Of The Board

Classic Records/Roulette SR52032  

This has long been one of my favourite Basie discs, and as anybody who pays attention to the records I use for equipment testing, an invaluable reviewing tool. You might assume from that that the sound quality on this disc is exceptional and you'd be right, although that's only a means to an end. The great thing about this record is that it catches a truly stellar band at the height of its powers, and the recording actually does them justice. The sheer energy and effortless enjoyment of the musicians floods out of the speakers and fills the room. The Count's lazy style provides the perfect structure as well as the space for the solos, while the ensemble playing of the brass provides real bite and punch as long as your system's up to the task. The album opens with the sublime 'Blues In Hoss' Flat' and maintains the standard throughout, although 'Half Moon Street' stands out as a personal highlight. Say "big band" to a lot of people and they pull a face. Play them this and they soon change their tune. Accessible and engaging, brilliantly played and recorded; what more do you want.

Supplier: Vivante - www.vivante.co.uk

RG



Count Basie

The Atomic Count Basie

Classic Records/Roulette R52003  

The best Basie album ever? Some certainly think so, although my vote goes to Chairman Of The Board. Still, why quibble. This is one hell of a record and it's a real pleasure to have a nice, quiet, flat 180g pressing readily available. You get ten tracks of Basie doing his inimitable thing, and centre stage or not, there's no question who's running the show. 'The Kid From Red Bank' opens proceedings and introduces the cast, allowing the Count a spell in the limelight. Thereafter, normal service is resumed, with Basie happy to take a back seat, his notes prodding and shaping proceedings, setting the tempo and setting the style. Take the easy smooch of 'After Supper'. The easy piano intro establishes the style, picked and developed by the brass and rhythm section before it's the Count that moves it on again, developing the theme and building the track from the inside out. The instant shift to the up-tempo 'Flight Of The Foo Birds' features an inspired Tenor solo from Eddie Lockjaw Davis, the Count almost unnoticed until he signs off. After all, if you're going to surround yourself with some of the finest musicians around, why not let them strut their stuff. Here they do. And how! Caught trying to choose between this and 'Chairman...'? Easy. Buy them both.

RG





Webern
Passacaglia; Five Movements for Strings; Six Pieces; Five Pieces; Symphony; Variations
Ulster Orchestra/Yuasa

Naxos 8.554841 (CD)

Anton Webern remains one of the most influential composers of the 20th Century, despite only crediting thirty-one of his works with opus numbers. While his early influences were clearly the leading romantic composers, following studies with Schoenberg, he gave priority to atonality and serial composition, and would later inspire the likes of Stravinsky, Boulez and Stockhausen.

While Karajan's and Boulez's recordings with the Berlin Philharmonic on DG have the Berliner's famous tonal beauty, and may demonstrate more of the momentous turmoil that is the fundamental nature of Webern's compositions, this disc reveals an excellent performance and a very good recording, that still manages to reveal resounding climaxes. Takuo Yuasa's direction is splendid, with articulation and delicately considered minimalism presenting wonderfully anxious virtues. He guides the Ulster Orchestra to generate an abundance of detail and a considerable scale of expressiveness, while their playing is of a very high order, achieving great tonal poise. Highlight is the remarkable *Funeral March* from the fourth of the *Six Pieces*, where Yuasa generates the escalating intensity more vividly than any previously.

With relatively few tempting recordings of Webern's work available, this CD is a welcome introduction, making it yet another highly recommended release from Naxos.

SG
 RECORDING
 MUSIC



Rimsky-Korsakov
Scheherazade
Borodin
Polovtsian dances
RPO, Beecham

EMI 5 66983-2 (CD)

With his love of the unusual and exotic, Sir Thomas was in many ways the ideal interpreter for *Scheherazade* – one who revelled in its bright vulgar colours and unabashed sonic splendour. His 1958 LP of Rimsky's great orchestral showpiece was justly celebrated as one of the finest ever issued. And hearing it almost half a century later on CD the magic remains undimmed. Of course he had an outstanding orchestra at his disposal; listen to the way the strings shimmer and soar in the first movement, or the characterful individuality of the winds in the second. Some say *Scheherazade* is 'second rate' stuff. Maybe so. But heard in a performance like this, the music positively glows. Luckily, EMI's Kingsway Hall recording wears its years lightly, sounding vivid, clean, and well-balanced, with low tape noise and excellent fine detail. The *Polovtsian Dances* (complete with chorus) were taped a year or so earlier, but sound well – just a shade brighter and more forward than the main work. The performance is lusty, full-blooded, and very committed, with that curious Beecham mix of driving power and relaxed genial sensuality. The close of the work is sensational – the sort of thing to bring any audience to its feet stamping and cheering.

JMH
 RECORDING
 MUSIC

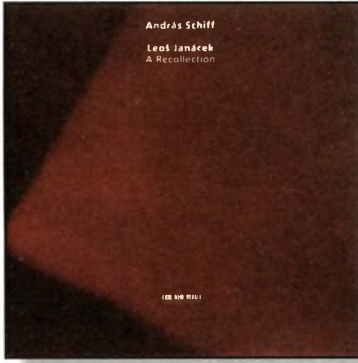


Saariaho
Graal Théâtre; Château de L'âme;
Amers
Kremer/Upshaw/Karttunen/
BBC SO/Salonen

Sony SK 60817 (CD)

During the last decade, Kaija Saariaho's style of musical composition fundamentally changed. These are three of her major works and bridge this transformation, with *Amers*, from 1992, belonging to the earlier style that established her reputation. This work is composed for cello (Anssi Karttunen), ensemble and electronics, and consists of sounds dancing in fields of textures, coloured by ever altering conformity. The *Graal Théâtre* was the first major work to concentrate on more uniform melodies, exhibiting stronger patterns of rhythm. It is a powerful violin concerto, in two remarkable movements, with the challenging solo part written specifically for Gidon Kremer. His instrument leads the orchestra through diverse musical settings until they finally establish themselves in conflict with each other. *Château de L'âme* is a set of ecstatically absorbing pieces for soprano (Dawn Upshaw), choir and orchestra, set to Indian and Egyptian texts of love. The supporting musicians make them wonderfully expressive pieces by providing each with contradictory acoustical characteristics. The engineering is very good, especially in the two works recorded in Finland, from where there comes a more open and detailed sound. With very good performances by all, this is an excellent introduction to Saariaho's imaginative writing.

SG
 RECORDING
 MUSIC



Janáček
A Recollection

Schiff

ECM (New Series 1736) 461 660-2

András Schiff is a distinctly unassuming, yet intelligent, pianist who lets the elegance of his playing and the expressions in the composition do the talking. This was clearly evident in his recent "Chopin and his idols" recitals at the Wigmore Hall, and is also apparent here, with Schiff exhibiting a wonderful finesse and fluidity. This approach matches the expression and intensity of Janáček's poignant writing perfectly, with pianist and composer fused into one delightfully persuasive entity. Whether it is the furtive, sonata-like *In the Mist*, the tragic masterpiece of *Sonata 1.X.1905*, which commemorates a Czech worker bayoneted by Habsburg soldiers on the date in the title, the superbly introspective *An Overgrown Path* or the reflective *A Recollection*, it is the subtlety of phrasing, combined with tense breaks in tempo, that make this performance so beautifully satisfying. Schiff shows a great understanding for the polyphonic aspects of these works, as well as a sense to their true proportion, and so brings out the elegance and sophistication that is present throughout. Combined with a wonderfully resonant recording, Schiff's benchmark performance of some of Janáček's intensely intimate, yet far too rare, keyboard miniatures can simply be described as exquisite.

SG



Boccherini
String Quartets, Op. 32, Nos. 3-6

Quartetto Borciani

Naxos 8.555043

Following the Borciani's first disc of Luigi Boccherini's *String Quartets* (Naxos 8.555042) comes this even more enchanting disc. While his chamber music may not be as well known as that of either Haydn or Mozart's, due to it not exhibiting the resolute aspirations of his two more celebrated contemporaries, Boccherini's does incorporate some delightfully genial writing, and splendidly distinct structures, as in the *Allegro bizzarro*, at the opening of the *Quartet in C major, Op. 32, No. 4*. The Quartetto Borciani play the four works here with obvious enthusiasm, revealing a certain amount of passion and exhilaration when the music warrants it, with the finale of the *Quartet in G minor, Op. 32, No. 5 - Capriccio ad libitum* - revealing both composer and players at their most lively. They characterise each distinct movement magnificently, and manage to urge even the more serene pieces forward with lively playing and wonderfully constant tempos, giving the music some additional support. The Quartet also possesses a wonderful Italianate character that is decidedly suggestive of their predecessors, the wonderful Quartetto Italiano. Naxos' sonics are excellent with natural tones and a nice amount of reverberation assisting the performance, making this a highly enjoyable recording.

SG



J.S. Bach
Keyboard concertos 1, 2, und 4

Murray Perahia (piano)
ASMF, Marriner

Sony SK 89245

Playing baroque music on modern instruments seems to be coming back into fashion again. And why not? After decades of purist performances using slimmed-down authentic forces, it's good once in a while to hear the music of Bach and Handel played with the warmth and fullness of tone one gets from contemporary instruments. Not that the present performances sound excessively lush or rich. Agreed, the sound picture is darker and fuller than it would be with authentic baroque forces. But fast tempi and crisp articulation ensure that the sound remains clean and transparent. The soloist is balanced quite closely, but the clarity of the recording ensures plenty of orchestral detail. Wisely, I think, Perahia and Marriner dispense with harpsichord continuo. Historically it might not be correct, but (to my ears at least) it sounds right not to have it. Instead, a discreetly balanced Theorbo is employed, and its softer tone quality compliments the rounder sound of a modern Concert Grand. Marriner's complete EMI set of these concertos from the '80s with pianist Andrei Gavrilov included a harpsichord, and it was strange to hear it tinkling away in the background with a modern Klavier playing the solo part. Sony's recording is smooth, clean, and very refined, with excellent clarity and believable balances.'

JMH



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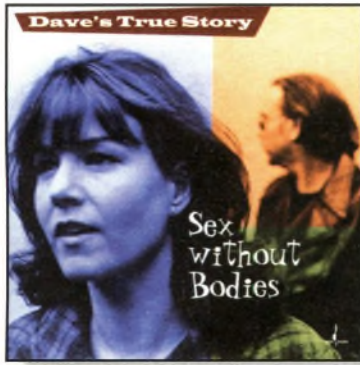
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Dave's True Story

Sex Without Bodies

Cheskey JD164 

Dave's True Story is vocalist, Kelly Flint, who can certainly hold a tune, and guitarist, David Cantor, who can't. However, as author of twelve of the thirteen songs here, his contribution should never be underestimated. Soft focus, stylised jazzy melodies for upright bass, vibes, tenor, and baritone sax, clothe intriguing lyrical constructs. There's a laconic title-track, dealing with phone sex, or, 'Ned's Big Dutch Wife', who leads a double life running a brothel. The quirky, 'I'll Never Read Trollope Again', and 'Spasm', with its raw instinctive sexual advocacy, Cantor throws together some fascinating and unexpected images. Witticisms aplenty, too, in the shape of "The men with their inner lives / As grim and as grainy as super 8 / There's no manner of appetite / That Ned's big Dutch wife won't sate", are diva-delivered in a timeless and quite beautiful fashion. An incongruous scenario? Well, almost, as, for a second, you're seduced by Flint's hypnotic cadences and, in the next moment, slapped back to consciousness through Cantor's unconventional language, proving the attractiveness of opposites. An unlikely church setting of St. Peter's Episcopal, New York enshrines these performances with a resonant, highly revealing and pristine acoustic.

Supplier: Vivante - www.vivante.co.uk
RP

RECORDING 
MUSIC 



Love

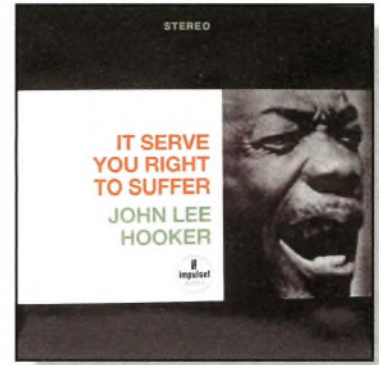
Forever Changes

Sundazed LPS102 

When folk label, Elektra moved into the realms of progressive rock their first signing was an innovative band familiar to the LA club circuit - Love. The second group to put pen to paper was none other than the Doors! *Forever Changes* (Love's third album, released in 1967) was and is a sensational soft-focus psychedelic record that no serious collection should be without. At its centre lies the wayward genius of Bryan Maclean and Arthur Lee, a partnership which did not survive the mercurial brilliance of an album that switches back and forth between those darkly powerful images buried within literally-titled songs like 'A House Is Not A Motel' (with its ominous echoes of South East Asia) and the comforting melodies offered up in the lovely, 'Andmoreagain'. When you are a black man fronting an ostensibly white rock band in "civil rights era" America, I suppose you will breath, eat, sleep and awake smelling the contradictions. Duality permeates Lee's imagination - revealing itself thematically and structurally through those expansive and lush sounding arrangements. The tactical application of keyboard and electric guitar overdubs bakes in these sentiments. Each will have his or her favourite moment, and mine will always be the breezy, over-optimistic evocation, 'Between Clarke And Hilldale'. Outstanding music.


Supplier: Cherished Record Co. 01579363603

RP
RECORDING 
MUSIC 



John Lee Hooker

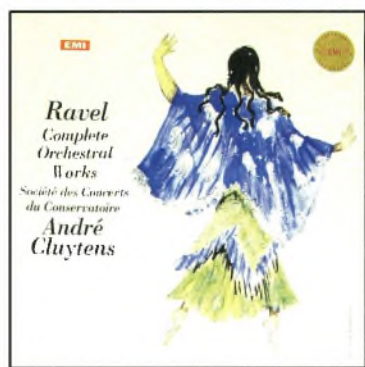
It Serve You Right To Suffer

Speakers Corner/Impulse AS-9103 

There will always be a market for John Lee Hooker discs, so synonymous is his name with the blues. So much so that it's easy to assume a degree of cynicism as regards the consistent flow of re-issues. However, that would be misplaced in this instance. Speakers Corner have unearthed a real gem in this 1965 recording, featuring seven Hooker originals and the Berry Gordy penned 'Money'. Taped in a single day, there's a real sense of performance here, critical to great blues and absent from far too many recordings, including many of those on 'audiophile' labels. This is the real thing, with Hooker's gritty vocals the perfect counterpoint to his spare, incisive guitar. Fronting a four piece, things never get too cluttered, tempos never lag as the band fall perfectly into his footsteps. Having said that, the highest point here is the down-beat, virtually unaccompanied 'Country Boy'. Even with things slowed right down, Hooker's sense of pace and his metronomic command of rhythm, never desert him. His tempo is emphatic, towering, driving power into his words. It's why his blues are so enduring, and why, at the end of the day, he remains the man.



RG

RECORDING 
MUSIC 



**Ravel
Complete Orchestral Works**

Cluytens/PCO/Rene Duclos Choir

Testament EMI SAX 2476-9  

This is an immensely satisfying and genuinely delightful compendium which, across these four open-sounding LPs, vividly traces those remarkable developments in personality, style and technique that define the evolving art of a master orchestrator. So effectively so, in fact, that we have largely forgotten that these sparkling concert hall favourites in a delicate 'Le Tombeau', languorous 'Alborada' and deliciously sentimental 'Pavane pour une infante defunte', were originally scored for piano only. Meanwhile, an exhilarating Spanish-influenced 'Rapsodie Espagnole' with its pleasing rubato and subtle tonal shifts, together with these piquant, bitter-sweet textures in a hedonistic 'Valse Nobles' are beautifully realised. As is a magnificent evocation of ancient Greece for 'Daphnis et Chloe'. Conductor and orchestra revel in such sensual music. Splendid all-round musicianship, then, especially throughout the many flute solos and harp passages which, consequently, stand out with startling clarity. The two flutes heard at the opening of 'Ma Mere L'oye' actually light up what is usually considered to be a remote and ostensibly cool composition. Thus placing a notably different emphasis on proceedings. Rarer, impressionistic pieces like 'Une barque' and that earlier and quite weighty 'Menuet antique' from 1894 are important inclusions. The former is a bobby-dazzler in the 'Alborada' vein. Both being drawn from the piano suite,

'Miroirs', while the 'Menuet', charts Ravel's emergence from under Chabrier's shadow. They definitely have their place as, I suppose, does that hypnotically swirling 'Bolero' which I could personally live another lifetime without. Sonically, these Testament remasters major on warmth and, reputedly, deliver a far greater degree of transparency than was to be found on the originals. The cut on to lacquer at EMI's Abbey Road Studios and the 180gm pressing at their Hayes plant are exceptional, with residual tape hiss kept to a minimum. Moreover, this all adds to the success of a recording where instruments like those prominent flutes or, elsewhere, the woodwind for 'Daphnis' and horns of the 'Pavane', impose themselves without becoming uncomfortably strident. A nice sense of balance is struck here and yet the precise detail, shape and form of individual images is still there to be heard. In 'Daphnis' this solidity and assurance extends to a flawless reproduction of the chorus. Proving, overall, that we should role back the decades in an unprejudiced way and think of these recut performances as rightly being forty years young.

Supplier: Cherished Record Co.

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Image Hi-Fi

Vinyl Essentials – The Ultimate Pickup Test Record

Image Hi-Fi LP003 

A decent test record is indispensable when it comes to optimising LP replay systems. All the measurements and calculations in the world are no substitute for practical testing of what is after-all a mechanical process. Tools, like decent allen keys and a nice large spirit level keep things tight and level and their necessity is easily understood. Just consider this as another tool. As well as the standard channel and phase checks (essential to check correct cartridge and tonearm wiring) you also get the important stuff. That means a cross-talk test, tone arm resonance test and tracking test. Of these, the last two are the really critical ones. The instructions are clear and concise (and in English as well as the native German), ensuring that you achieve the correct results. The resonance test in particular is essential if you want to achieve optimum damping performance from a tonearm with a fluid damping option, such as the various SMEs. What's even more interesting is the fact that Image provide three identical tracking tests, so that rapidly repeated use of the high level tracks won't cause premature wear (to the disc or your nerves as you try to track a damaged signal). The heavy pressing is also flat, which helps, unlike some of the competition. Highly recommended.

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RG



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The House of Representatives

Warner Bros. 180g Reissues

by Reuben Parry

Global corporations are crying wolf. Sony, Polygram, Time Warner and EMI are finger pointing at the likes of Napster and MP3 and calling "foul", "piracy" and "copyright". However, I think it's fair to say that the recent decline in CD sales has much more to do with their repeated over-investment in mediocrity rather than a smoke screen about technological advances which, regardless of court action, will not be halted. In fact the net has in many ways saved them millions. A small example would be when I receive a press release and the e-mail is instantaneously copied to, maybe, twenty other reviewers at the touch of a key. The advantages are of course considerable and not limited to the distribution of promotional material. They extend to all facets of the industry machine. No, for a decade, at least, we have witnessed a succession of manufactured bands and solo artists whose careers were based more upon hype than substance. Put simply, the creative direction of these companies has been largely determined by their accountants - men who have played a commercial "short game" by targeting a "teeny" market instead of employing a strategy which would have seen an organic, long term development of musicians possessing a degree of talent. They also signed big names for fat fees and then, famously, parted company for those well-publicised, even bigger, pay offs. Surely that is why sales have declined.

Meanwhile, teenagers have grown up and naturally outgrown the likes of Westlife and S Club Seven. Finding themselves disenfranchised and stuck in a musical vacuum, many have turned to the Seventies and Eighties back catalogues, and who can blame them. Moreover, there is a new

generation of discerning, critical and frighteningly opinionated teenagers out there. My number one daughter being one of them. She is certainly not alone in being a devoted Blink 182, Offspring or Jimmy Eat World fan. Bands that have reacted strongly against those cosmetic record company makeovers which have become all too familiar.

Yet, the major players have always had and been capable of going with the right instincts. The EMI 100 and Centenary series on 180 gram vinyl proved it when they tapped into that hunger for classic pop and rock albums. No Spice Girls or Boyzone there. Warners, too, had a moment of clarity when they dug not quite so deeply into the vaults for a vinyl reissue of their most successful recordings. Though less extensive

then EMI's contributions, there were still some notable releases. So there are still those within the business who recognise good music when they hear it.

Although they have now been out of print for several years, Vivante and the Cherished Record Company have an odd title or two in stock, moreover they are beginning to regularly turn up secondhand as well. Marketed under a "Vinyl Revival Collector's Edition" banner, these numbered German pressings hold an immediate and distinct advantage over their forebears because they use pristine, heavyweight virgin vinyl in their manufacture. Consequently, the majority of these mastertapes have never sounded better. There are a couple of exceptions, of course, with certain titles appearing down the years as stunning Mobile Fidelity half-speed mastered or Nimbus Super Cut LPs. The Super Cuts being especially hard to find. However, the Warner Brothers reissues compare favourably. Van Morrison's *Moondance* is in fact a fantastic transfer. The unapologetically populist list of releases is as follows. ►



- ▶ Donald Fagen: *The Nightly*
 Ry Cooder: *Paris, Texas*
 Paul Simon: *Graceland*
 Miles Davies: *Tu Tu*
 Taking Heads: *Remain In The Light*
 Quincy Jones: *Back On The Block*
 Fleetwood Mac: *Rumours*
 Little Feat: *Waiting For Columbus*
 Randy Newman: *Little Criminals*
 Joni Mitchell: *Blue*
 Van Morrison: *Moondance*
 Prince: *Purple Rain*
 Rickie Lee Jones: *Rickie Lee Jones*
 David Sanborn &
 Bob James: *Double Vision*
 The Roches: *The Roches*
 James Taylor: *Greatest Hits*



Several of the records really stand out whatever the format. *Blue*, *Graceland*, *Journeyman*, *Moondance*, *Paris Texas*, *Rickie Lee Jones*, *Tu Tu* and Little Feat's, compelling live double album, *Waiting For Columbus* deserve to be in most collections. The same goes for *Stampede* and, although I find the majority of "Best Of's" to be unsatisfactory, James Taylor's awesome remakes of 'Carolina On my Mind' and 'Something In The Way She Moves', for that *Greatest Hits* LP, gets my vote. What a fine American-roots style singer/songwriter he is.

To my mind there are two indispensable Joni Mitchell albums. *Court And Spark*, with some shivering emotional rushes induced by a lyricism that is pared back to the bone, yet accentuated through its' finely shaped musical dressing. And there is, *Blue*. An eloquent affair full of romantic wisdom. Intriguing confessional songs, handled with delicacy, ruminate upon those heartfelt dilemmas taken from Mitchell's typically feminine standpoint. Here, the emotions range through that giddy optimism of a knowing vignette like, 'All I Want', to those regrets found on an intimate, 'Last Time I Saw Richard'. All this knowledge is borne out of lessons lived and learned. An encounter with Joni is, therefore, never a dull one. Never precious. Always enlightening. A significant record (as if you needed to be told) and a great recut. As an aside, *Blue*, together with her other albums, recently received the HDCD digital remaster treatment courtesy of Warners. At mid-price these are certainly worth investigating.

Could the world's premier living rock guitarist be having a bit of a laugh when he christened his 1989 album, "Journeyman"? Slowhand was never the ordinary jobbing musician. Career highs and lows, infatuations and great personal tragedy, drug and alcohol dependency, all are well-documented. As are the many bands, guest roles and solo guises. What makes *Journeyman* such a rewarding

experience is its overall level of consistency. Strong song-writing, creditable vocals and his finest guitar playing in years awakens thoughts of those blues roots which remain

so close to Clapton's heart. Yes, the original records are commonplace and inexpensive. It's even probably in the rack at home already. But, as by the end of the Eighties pressing plant quality control was seldom a priority, perhaps you owe it to the main man and to yourself for that small investment in a newer, top rated, production.

Van Morrison is an influential musician of almost equal stature, one who has extracted the spiritual marrow found at the epicentre of rock, blues and R&B and invested it with an emotional versatility

that is awash with those undercurrents of his frequently prophetic vision. Following hard upon the heels of an unconstrained and shifting tapestry of the highly regarded *Astral Weeks*, a contrasting 1970 release, *Moondance*, (though it's jazzy inflections, tight-knit arrangements and discipline), presents an optimistic and solid bulwark where songs like 'Stoned Me', 'Crazy Love', 'Caravan' and 'Into The Mystic' draw you closely in towards his alter. Serious. Soul-searching. Metaphysical. Lyrical and accessible. Morrison, the towering presence, takes a grip of your senses. The recording, too, will leave you enraptured, simply because these tracks are blessed by a detailed and crystal-clear portrayal of vocal and instrumental textures.

Another awesome talent stepping up to the pulpit is a one time pupil of that self-taught, blind guitarist and ordained Baptist minister from South Carolina, whose imprint upon black rural music cannot be overstated. Yes, Ry Cooder's distinctive slide work owes a considerable debt to the late great Rev. Gary Davis. Whilst there are any number of class albums from which to choose, Warners went with one of those slippery customers, a soundtrack. The selection of *Paris, Texas* from a number of likely candidates including *The Long Riders* and *Johnny Handsome*, was probably made as much for it's memorable, off beat characterisation as it was for those adventurous and quite haunting rifts. While the eminently watchable Harry Dean Stanton and Nastassja Kinski are well-suited to their roles, it's the music which enigmatically builds layer upon layer of mystery into the film's theme of a puzzle-without-a-solution. Such a broad canvas also allowing an enviable degree of imagination and seamless playing to take place.

Casually casting an eye across those remaining titles reveals the presence of some influential figures from the ▶

► Seventies and Eighties. Mister Randy Newman does his bit for the great middle American songwriting movement. He may have lacked the usual pounds per square inch of bite on the 1977 release, *Little Criminals*, but then he made up for it with a series of songs like the harsh 'Short People' that not only polarised opinions but played to and developed a wider audience.

Fleetwood Mac, plying a fresh brand of California rock, attained "super band" status as *Rumours* easily captured the moment through the luxury of having three strong songwriters, a diva in Stevie Nicks, and one of the best rhythm sections around at the time with McVie and Fleetwood. Ten million punters can't, as they say, be wrong.

Elsewhere, doing their bit for sisterhood, were the Roches. These darlings of the New York folk club scene signed for Warners and, with the help of Robert Fripp's production skills, delivered an eponymous and often waspish late Seventies discourse on family, infidelity at al. It's quirky and a little dated, yet is still the best of their albums. The years, though, have been somewhat kinder to the self-titled Rickie Lee Jones debut LP which was also released in 1979. Lyrically indebted to earlier jazz and beat styles, this expressive and much-admired and imitated vocalist thirstily drew upon a buoyant bohemian West Coast sub-culture through her frequent use of urban landscapes populated by equally streetwise characters. While emotional depths were better realised during the releases of the following decade, it is clearly evident from 'Easy Money' and a ubiquitous 'Chuck E.'s In Love' that RLJ had enough nous to blend these snappy pop melodies in with less palatable, low-rent scenarios and in doing so captured the public's imagination.

Moving into the Eighties and we again see the quality, variety and robust nature of the Warner's catalogue. Talking Heads – witty, inventive and musically unorthodox – get on the stump with a memorable reissue of *Remain In The Light* that features African polyrhythms and a great single in 'Once In A Lifetime'. Very nice indeed especially if you happen to own the wonderfully extrovert and complementary 180g EMI release of *Stop Making Sense*.

For those wishing a further cross-cultural emersion in African music there is always Graceland. Even if Paul Simon does not raise your temperature, the contributions from Los

Lobos, Ladysmith Black Mambazo, Linda Ronstadt and The Twisters should. Overplayed in the Eighties, perhaps, but still worth the entrance fee despite some question marks against Paul Simon's motivations.

Meanwhile, there is honesty aplenty to be found in the melancholic and often haunting *Face Value*. It's levels of emotional intensity had much to do with the fracture and fissures opened up by a crumbling first marriage - but they do reveal what a fine singing skin-slapper Phil Collins could be – paving the way for an enthusiastic and powerful solo career which was to make him an instantaneously recognisable (increasingly hairless) Eighties icon. A strong solo debut, too, from ex-Steely Dan founder, Donald Fagen on the superb *Nightly*.

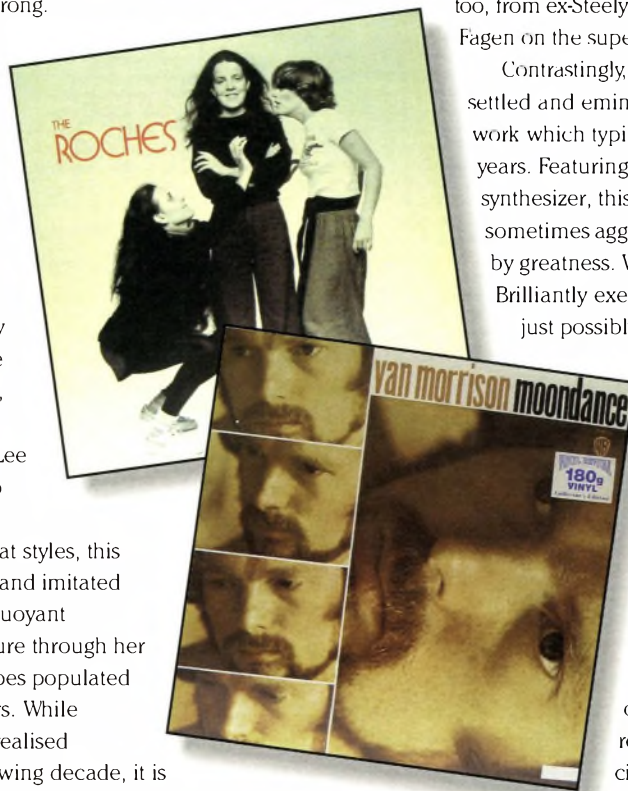
Contrastingly, *Tu Tu* is an example of that settled and eminently accessible pattern of work which typified the later Miles Davis years. Featuring trumpet played through a synthesizer, this funky disco-orientated and sometimes aggressive display is touched by greatness. Wonderfully sustained.

Brilliantly executed and recorded. This is just possibly my favourite among the Warner reissues.

Another archetypal black musician is of course Quincy Jones. A moderate trumpet player who recognised his shortcomings to develop an early interest in arranging until it became an acknowledged art form in it's own right. An extraordinarily varied body of work is actually quite well represented in audiophile circles. Speakers Corner are loud advocates. However,

I do admit finding a release like their Mancini album to be a little lame. As a latecomer to the Warner's stable, the choice of Quincy material was limited. Alternatives might have included *The Colour Purple* Soundtrack or a jazzy career celebration, *Q's Jook Joint*, but instead they went for a 1989 LP *Back On The Block*. Originals are rarely seen secondhand, so a remaster is welcome. Typically smooth. Subtle and sophisticated. It is his usual fusion of blues, jazz and World Music influences that have consistently injected body into the later-day pop idiom. A strong and representative album.

"Representative" is an appropriate adjective to use here. So why not exercise your constitutional rights and place a few crosses against likely candidates who can deliver their promises.






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