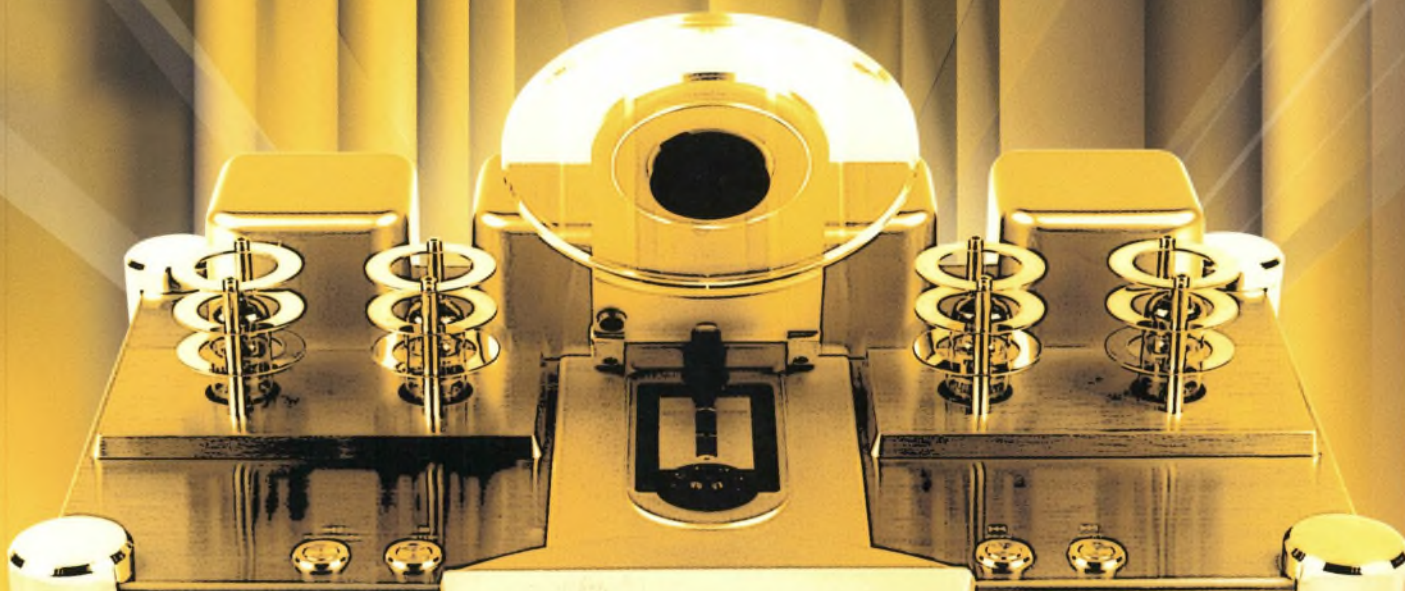


# hi-fi+

Issue 32  
£3.95

REPRODUCING THE RECORDED ARTS



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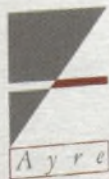
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ISSN 1465 5950

One of the great claims made for the internet is that it tells it like it is.

However, in reality, it tells it how people think it is, and that can be a long, long way from reality. Having drawn attention to the dangers of some of the wilder speculation that appears on certain web forums (Playing The System, Issue 31) I was unsurprised by the deluge of misdirected vitriol that poured forth from the office e-mail address. I selected the best of a bad bunch to respond to on the letters page in this issue. Meanwhile, what should I find in the latest issue of The Absolute Sound (Issue148, [www.absolutesound.com](http://www.absolutesound.com)) but Robert Harley's editorial highlighting a similar problem. He's discussing accusations of reviewer bias and magazine/magazine collusion. I mean, it must go on right? It's obvious! But, as Harley points out, where do the correspondents get their information? He's been doing this for a long, long time, both as a reviewer and an editor and yet he has never experienced bribery, either directly or indirectly. I can reinforce that message.

At the end of the day, I can't control the actions of individuals. If such corruption does occur this is the level at which it could do so. What I can do is not employ a reviewer who displays poor judgement (of any kind) or deal with those companies who seek to exploit it. This is a very small industry and the truth will out – just not necessarily where you might expect. And bear in mind that you might not recognise it when it does. After all, assuming something's true doesn't necessarily make it so...



DD

# PROVOnance



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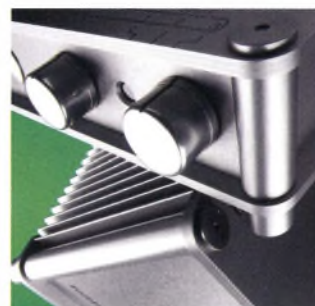
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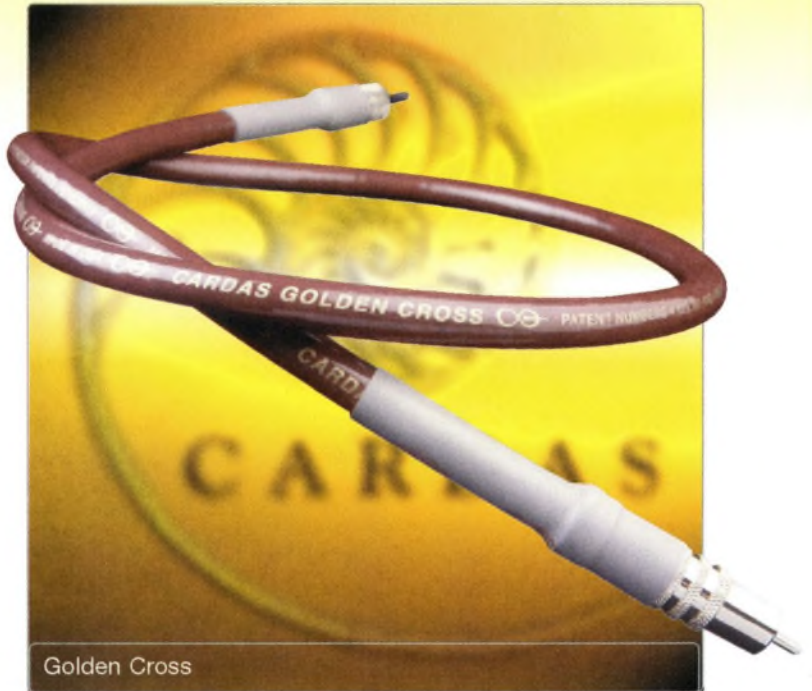
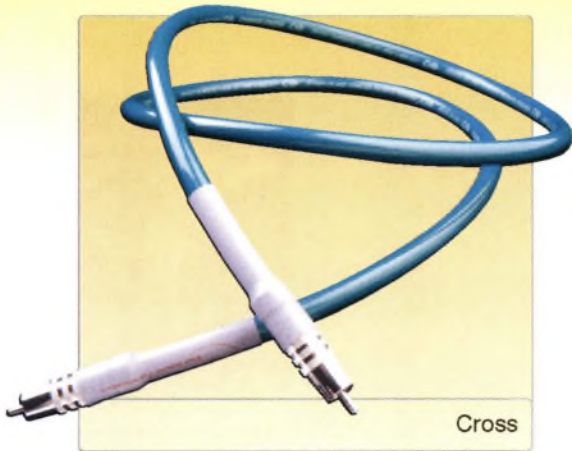
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# Home Truths



by Jimmy Hughes

We all have favourite recordings that get hauled out when the time comes to evaluate a new component or an unfamiliar hi-fi system. In some cases it's a recording we've known for years, having heard it on a wide variety of equipment. In others, it's perhaps a recording that has never sounded quite right - so you're forever looking for the right mix of items that finally makes it sound the way it always ought to have sounded! And then there are the recordings that really highlight system differences.

In contrast, when I evaluate something new, I usually choose music/recordings I simply fancy listening to. It's that scientific! Once I've got a feel for how the item (or system) performs, I might select something I think will show its good or bad side - just to see what happens. With an experienced ear, you can nearly always tell how a system performs - even when listening to recordings and music completely unfamiliar. You don't have to know the music or recording to make a judgement.

Nevertheless, it often helps if you do know the recording in question - particularly if it's difficult to reproduce in certain respects. For example, when evaluating pickup cartridges, I nearly always end up playing one of Russian pianist Sviatoslav Richter's Schubert LPs on Ariola - early digital recordings from live performances given in Japan. Some climaxes are so 'hot' they're virtually impossible to track - so it's an excellent test of a pickup's tracking ability.

But perhaps the disc that gets dragged out most often is Eric Clapton's *Unplugged* CD. I usually listen to the track 'Layla', because I like it and there are all sorts of inner details that appear or disappear depending on the system being used. In particular, I find it a useful track to demonstrate the effects of sub-woofers and super-tweeters. Details like the piano (which effectively plays in a different time signature at certain key points in the chorus) highlight a system's timing ability.

'Layla' has a distinct ChunkaChunkaChunk sort of rhythmic swing, and needs to sound earthy and solid.

But when you listen, home in on the piano - notice how audible it is, and whether you can tell what it's doing at all times. Also notice how apparent the audience is; not just when someone whistles or shouts "Whoaa!", but whether there's a constant background of audience noise. And listen to the harmonies of the backing singers - can you hear the pitches of the notes clearly.

What I'm talking about boils down to clarity and

separation - not simply a bright in-your-face up-front sound that screams "Detail!" at you. When everything can be heard without the loudest sound seeking to dominate quieter sounds, you start to hear all sorts of inner details that previously were not apparent. When you describe so many details to listen out for, it makes the whole process sound complicated; surely you just want to enjoy the music? Well, yes.

But, when a hi-fi system does its job properly, you don't have to direct your hearing to this or that detail.

Without being directed, you notice the piano playing off the beat and

across bar lines; you sense the presence

of the audience; you involuntarily nod your head back and forth in time with the shuffling beat of the music. Suddenly the music and performance become coherent; everything makes sense; each detail has its place within the whole.

*Unplugged* is not an album I generally listen to all the way through - I just tend to play "Layla" most times. But it's a funny thing; when everything's working right, I'll listen to "Layla" and then just let the CD run to the end, because the experience is so involving and pleasurable. Some nights that album's sounded so good, it's almost been like being there. I recall one time, with a group of friends, where we all sat and listened as though it were a live show - so believable and realistic was the sound.

I find that this album changes significantly depending on whether or not you've got sub-woofers or supertweeters in operation. There's some very deep bass on *Unplugged* - but ►



▶ it's mostly ambient noise; someone kicks a mike stand, or stamps time with a foot. Nevertheless, reproducing all the stage noises and thumps helps create the impression of liveness, as well as creating the sonic impression of a bigger more enveloping holographic soundstage.

Likewise, having a good super-tweeter enhances clarity and separation, helping create a clear distinction between the musicians singing and playing on stage, their noisy appreciative audience, and the venue where the recording was made... Most of all, having sub-woofers and super-tweeters improves timing, creating the 'live' feeling of the playing. It's quite uncanny how big the difference can be with this particular album - it seems to respond very positively to extended bandwidth.

Speaking personally, another interesting thing about *Unplugged* is remembering my reaction the very first time I played it. Actually, it sounded terribly disappointing! I'd previously heard it playing in a record shop, and was very taken by what I heard. But when I played it on the system

I was then using, I was less impressed. The audience seemed less 'present', and somehow the whole thing sounded a bit flat and lifeless - music as well as sound.

That was back in the early '90s. So clearly whatever I was using then - amplifier and CD player in particular - they weren't doing the business. Or were they? Point is, it wasn't as though my system sounded bad - period. It sounded excellent on many things. It's just that *Unplugged* really highlighted its weaknesses in ways that other recordings did not. That's why it's been something of a standby disc ever since. I really value its ability to reveal strengths and weaknesses.

*Unplugged* is a perfect test disc because it works on two levels; the first as a very enjoyable album in its own right; the second as a powerful diagnostic tool that highlights major differences between systems and components. It can sound wonderfully engaging and involving, or curiously flat and lifeless. Everything depends on your system, and how it's set up. ▶+

# Music Matters



by Alan Sircom

Hi-fi fundamentalists need to turn the page; I'm taking about CEDIA. That's right, the Custom Install people. The people that take perfectly decent stereo sound and destroy it by hiding it behind walls and distributing it around the home. In other words: Satan's Little Helpers.

Or perhaps not. At the recent CEDIA trade show at Birmingham's International Conference Centre, there was some tiny audiophilic light at the end of the tunnel. Where all us hi-fi buffs are sticking audio signals along line-level cables, the bleeding edge of Custom Install is looking at other methods of transmitting high quality signals around the home, and in some ways, this offers benefits for all of us. The secret is getting rid of all the standard methods of connection and using Internet Protocol addressing systems instead. So, your sound runs along Ethernet or wireless Ethernet cables just like computer data.

Unlike the traditional method of using CAT5 cables to run compressed audio signals from room to room (often in MP3 quality or worse), tomorrow's multi-room system will sport digital converters in each room and the sound will stay in the digital domain from room to room. No noise, no

compression... and with a digital module in each room, it's possible to extend the possibilities still further. NetStream DigiLinx prototype units are about the size of two Mars bars side by side. Inside is a stereo digital power amplifier, digital conversion, controllable DSP circuits, a pre-amp and microphone inputs. The last could mean Voice over IP control, which is deeply exciting. Imagine building one of these units into your stereo speaker and then letting it automatically calibrate itself for optimum distance and channel balance between the listener and the speaker. Or, imagine a multi-channel system with adaptive equalisation that compensates for the number of listeners in the room. Think of configuring the system so that every time the phone rings, the sound mutes and the voice of HAL announces that something is going on.

These might be trite solutions, but this technology does represent one of the most exciting developments in audio today. Traditionally, firing digital signals around the room was the stuff of Meridian-class components, and made little practical inroads into multichannel or multiroom digital. ▶



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Reference 3A  
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# Get it right!

► The next step, one that will become increasingly commonplace over the next two or three years, is to democratise the transmission of digital around the house. Dispensing with traditional multi-room concepts, this makes a lot of sense for someone who wishes to deliver high-quality digital audio to two locations without sacrificing digital performance in either system.

OK, so let's brainstorm this IP connectivity a bit (actually, 'brainstorming' is now officially politically incorrect. It's 'thought-showering' these days, to keep those with epilepsy happy. Although, most people with epilepsy were perfectly happy with 'brainstorming'... ah well, on with the newspeak). It's not hard to imagine a system with hardly any processing at the head end and built-in digital daclifiers (my new ugly little word, combining 'DAC' with 'amplifier') at each speaker. Given the propensity for hard disc server systems to interface with the internet when uploading a disc (such as getting information about a disc from CDDb by reading the disc's metadata from its table of contents), it's not beyond the bounds of possibility to think of a system that takes the next step, and downloads surround information (for example) from internet sources. Perhaps this is the holy grail of music replay systems after all; the person purchases the original recording through traditional sources (whether that is downloaded or purchased on CD). The buyer can then add extra data if applicable, or possibly even buy extra information at their leisure. Or, it could 'tell' the on-line delivery system exactly the specifications of the home system and tailor a surround sound profile to suit the listener.

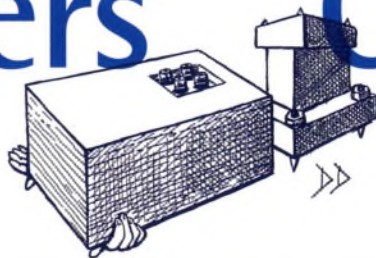
There's more. With built in microphones in each system, it would be possible (albeit with a lot of processing) for your music to follow you from room to room automatically. This is

disturbing, but not as daft as it first seems; many continental hotels have powersaving lighting systems in corridors. These have motion detectors that power up the light when someone walks near it and power down as the person moves away. The same thing is entirely possible with music replay.

Of course, most of this is a pipe dream. We will never get downloadable extra musical data until a groundswell of people own such systems; if these systems are only available to an elite who can afford multi-room equipment, then the numbers will be so limited as to never justify such a concept. Similarly the complexity of moving sound from zone to zone as the person walks is massive, especially when there's more than one person wandering around. What happens when the two meet in the same room, for example? However, none of these ideas are entirely beyond the bounds of possibility.

I am both suspicious of and excited by CEDIA concepts. They remain at arms length for me, in part because I choose to live in London without the £75,000 annual earnings a London lifestyle requires. If I had a larger property and disposable cash, I may well have custom lighting systems and more. But what of music? I genuinely think that multi-room systems add 'more' but not 'better' to the whole pantheon of hi-fi. That said, those that have a good base system as a hi-fi and then take multi-room links from there often have the best of both worlds – a system to cherish for the best listening and good audio around the house for less discerning times. And, with digital audio sources really coming to the fore over the next few years, the best way of doing this is in the digital domain. As most of the decent custom install companies started life – and many continue as – hi-fi dealers, perhaps the next generation of IP-based custom install products will add performance as well as zones to the overall hi-fi experience. ►+

# Speakers Corner



by Paul Messenger

Just for a change, I'm going to write about one of my favourite loudspeaker designers, and his latest adventures in South Africa. His name is Laurence Dickie, but everyone just calls him Dic, and after doing an electronics degree at Southampton, he found employment in B&W's Steyning research labs. Although he started with electronics, his real passion was loudspeakers, and B&W recognised his

creative talents when he came up with the multi-panel Matrix enclosure stiffening technique that has been used in B&W's top-of-the-line ranges since 1987.

The success of Matrix gave Dic the license to pursue his ultimate loudspeaker, and this turned out to be the original spiral-shaped Nautilus in 1994. Sales of this extraordinary speaker might have been modest, but ►

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Amplifon WL25 (left): 28W/channel using 6P3, £795  
 Amplifon WT40 (centre): 40W/channel using 6C33, £1995  
 Amplifon WT30 II (right): 31W/channel using 6H13, £1395

Amplifon is proving to be a huge success both with reviewers and customers alike - we are delighted! Now made in the EC (a warm welcome to our Polish neighbours is in order), this range of three models, all superbly built, all featuring automatic biasing, and all with large, wide bandwidth toroidal output transformers suitable for 4 or 8 Ohms, offer superb value for money. Sound quality is reminiscent of the best classic designs of the past, but modern circuit techniques and transformers give an authority of presentation and power reserve often lacking in older designs. Truly modern classics!

The Jadis Orchestra Reference (left) from France, at £1699. Output of 40W/ch using KT90s, and even featuring that long missed attribute, tone controls - my, takes me back!

The Consonance M100S (right), £1595, is proving to be a reviewer's favourite, offering a delicacy which is a speciality of the 300B output valve, giving here 25W/channel.

For people who prefer the authentic Star Trek look, the Shanling STP80 (left) fits the bill perfectly! With superb build quality, remote control, digital level indicator, 35W/ch output, all for a mere £1295. Oh, it sounds good too, by the way.

The Audiovalve Assistent 20 (yes, it is spelt like that) is a little gem from Germany, with a very musical performance - sweet as a nut, we say. 30W/ch output, in a neat chassis, for £1600.

The Musical Fidelity Trivista DAC: We have secured some of the last remaining UK stock of this brilliant device. An utter bargain for £1200 - and, as they say, once it's gone, it's gone! Don't delay - pick up the phone now.

Cawsey may not be the best known cable (others spend more on advertising) but it's quite possibly the best sounding. We have been selling these Australian made silver interconnects for several years and can recommend them without reservation. From £250 to £900 per metre set.



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▶ as an iconic totem, from a marketing perspective its value was incalculable.

Post Nautilus, Dic started getting more interested in ProAudio equipment. B&W was also interested in professional possibilities at the time too, but subsequently decided to concentrate on its core hi-fi business. Dic took a deep breath, and decided that, after fourteen years, it was time to take his future in his own hands. He left, and started up his own operation called Blast Loudspeakers, working on designing his own ideal drive units, and doing consultancy for other companies, such as Blue Room and Turbosound.

When B&W's part-owner Robert Trunz left the company in 1996, he took with him the Blue Room sub-brand, and re-established his association with the now freelance Dic. When Robert then subsequently emigrated to South Africa, he happened to meet up with a couple of guys he knew in the hi-fi business. He discovered they had ambitions to start up their own loudspeaker manufacturing operation, and were looking for engineering assistance, so he introduced them to Dic.

It's time for Dic to take up the story. "In 2001 Robert suggested I should fly down and meet Philip (Guttentag) and Bruce and Dee (Gessner), who were based in Kloof, just outside Durban in KwaZulu-Natal. Both had worked previously in the hi-fi business but were now running a successful professional acoustic consultancy business, so in a way our careers had followed similar paths. We got on well together and developed an immediate rapport. I was very impressed by the passion and enthusiasm they were bringing to the project"

"Philip and Bruce told me about their intention to build a genuine hi-fi loudspeaker in South Africa. They showed me the attractive shield-shaped enclosures they had designed – a nice touch of Zulu influence here – and said that they planned to use OEM drive units. I pointed out that the drive unit designs I had been working on could well provide a basis for what was needed, and we then started

looking in more detail at the engineering involved."

I interrupted Dic's flow here, pointing out that I felt exclusive 'in house' drivers were an essential part of achieving market credibility; if an unknown brand from an unfamiliar part of the globe was going to achieve any sort of success in international 'high end' audio. Dic agreed, and then went on to describe in some detail the approach he'd taken, both to the drive units themselves and to the way they were integrated into the complete Vivid Audio B1 loudspeaker.

Every speaker designer starts out working from certain principles and techniques he believes to be right. The reason all speakers are different has much to do with the fact that there's no general consensus about which of those principles and techniques represent 'The One True Path'. One man's meat is very much another's poison in this case.

Dic set out much of his agenda when he did that original Nautilus, and a number of the basic principles used then may be seen again here in the B1. For example, he believes in creating pistonic drive units – ie drive units that are able to operate in a substantially linear manner throughout their intended operational bandwidth, with mechanical breakup modes kept more than two octaves beyond the crossover rolloff frequency. To this end, the B1 uses anodised aluminium alloy diaphragm drivers throughout, in a 'three-and-a-half-way' configuration, with tightly defined, fourth-order crossover filtering, so that each driver is restricted to its appropriate operating band. Dic continues: "The two identical 160mm bass/mid drivers with 125mm alloy cones are mounted back-to-back here. They're mechanically coupled so that reaction forces cancel out, and the one facing backwards just provides additional bass – it's fed via a first-order roll-off operating above 100Hz. These drive units have a very open and unobstructive frame, so there are no cavity resonances. The short-coil/long-gap motor section has some unusual features too, building on the work I've done to improve cooling and reliability and avoid power compression with Pro Audio drivers. ▶



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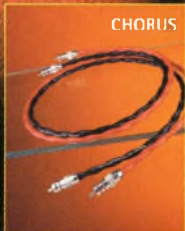


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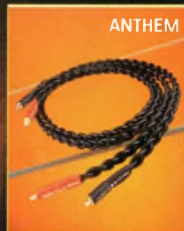
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# OPC CROSSOVER



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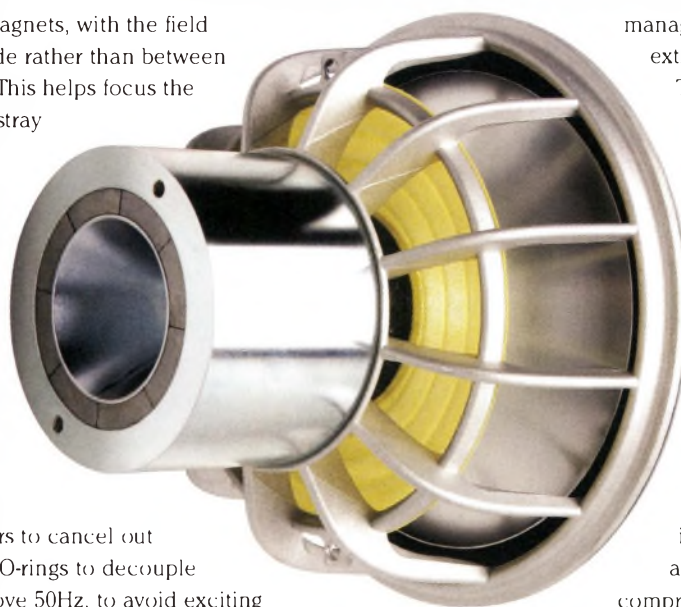
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► We also use special radial magnets, with the field running from inside-to-outside rather than between the flat surfaces of the ring. This helps focus the magnetic field and reduces stray flux, so that additional shielding isn't needed. The air beneath the central dome (within the voice coil) is ventilated through the motor, and the tendency for this to create a Helmholtz resonator is avoided by using a heavily perforated former for the 50mm voice-coil."

"Besides mechanically coupling the two cone drivers to cancel out reaction forces, we also use O-rings to decouple them from the enclosure above 50Hz, to avoid exciting any panel modes. The enclosure itself is moulded from a polyester resin loaded with carbon fibres, and its curved shape has acoustic benefits inside and out. The bass drivers are loaded by twin reflex points, situated on the front and the rear (so you can look right through), again to balance out reaction forces."

"The front-facing bass/mid driver hands over to a 50mm dome midrange driver at 900Hz, primarily in order to ensure that even and wide dispersion is achieved throughout the critical presence band.

We actually use the same cylindrical magnet elements for this driver as we use in the bass/mid drivers, which makes life a little simpler. Inside the enclosure, a tapering tube transmission line is fitted behind this mid dome to absorb rearward radiation without creating reflections. An internal tapering tube is also used behind the 26mm alloy dome tweeter, and here we've used finite element analysis to maximise the magnetic flux. With careful magnet shaping we've



managed to achieve an extremely high flux of 2.4 Tesla."

I queried the need for such high magnetic power (most hi-fi tweeters settling for around 1.6 Tesla), and Dic pointed to two advantages: "The poles will always stay saturated, which reduces the effect of the steel while the high efficiency also improves headroom and hence reduces power

compression. And the use of a large padding resistor also improves

the stability and consistency of the effective driver load on the crossover network with different power levels", he explained.

I asked about the potential difficulties of attempting to manufacture a serious high-end speaker in somewhere as apparently unlikely as South Africa. Dic foresees no real problems, since there's a good industrial infrastructure around Durban, and therefore no problem in sourcing much of the basic engineering. "An experienced local contractor supplies the enclosures, and we also source all the metalwork for the drivers locally. Tricky bits like cones, domes, spiders, surrounds and voice-coils are brought in from the UK, and the crossover networks come from an experienced Taiwanese supplier. But the vast majority of the work is done here in South Africa.

Costs are probably comparable with those in Eastern Europe, and while they're higher than those available in China, for example, working locally gives us much closer control and greater flexibility."

After some hours chatting, I'd become quite impatient to hear what the B1 sounds like. The first examples are due to arrive in a couple of weeks, and we hope to carry out a first review in the next edition of Hi-Fi +. Target price for the B1 is £6,500, and a larger K1 with two more bass drivers and therefore greater headroom should cost £8,500. A centre channel version is also planned. I have to admit my appetite has been well whetted.





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# Incoming!

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

Dear Sir,

As a precision transmission Engineer I cannot understand all the excitement about a beryllium tweeter on a cost no object speaker. Beryllium, glucinum a hard white metal obtained by electrolysis used for light corrosion-resisting alloys has an atomic weight of A.W. 9.013, at No4. Lithum a light, silvery-white metal the lightest solid known, used in alloys, with an A.W. 6.94 at No3 would be far superior. As I said we are talking cost no object.

It is interesting to note from your letters page that flat earthing is making a comeback, as they say what goes around comes around.

**Thomas Armstrong**  
Warwickshire

*Presumably, part of the cost that made up the no object would be devoted to keeping the Lithium in a state were it wouldn't spontaneously combust. As I recall, it doesn't much like water either. Still, in a world of Mercury interconnects... Ed.*

Dear Sir

Firstly, congratulations on publishing the best hi-fi magazine in the UK. Aside from the high quality of the equipment reviews and the excellent photography, the music reviews continually inspire me to check out artists I would never otherwise have heard of.

I have only one serious gripe, and that is with the over-use of superlatives. It is rare for an issue not to contain at least one equipment review that declares amplifier A or CD player B to be 'astounding' or 'astounding'. Now clearly there will be times when this is actually the case; when a piece of equipment is so much better than the opposition that anything short of superlatives would be damning with faint praise, but overuse will simply have the effect of devaluing the currency of criticism, so that 'breathtaking' comes to mean 'not bad' and 'redefines the state of the art' means 'better than the last amplifier I heard'. In a similar way, the music reviews have reached the point where a recording that doesn't achieve full marks might appear to be a failure in comparison to those that do, even if (in absolute terms) it's actually very good. In fact, doing away with the 'blobs' box altogether would be a good

idea; it might lead people to read the reviews in detail!

Other than that, keep up the good work, even if I can't afford £2,000 mains cables or a £50,000 turntable it's nice to dream!

Regards  
**Joe Hutcheon**

Dear Sir,

Issue 29/Consonance Reference 8.8

There seems to be a disparity between the text and the pictures ... the text says 2 x 12AU7, the pictures show 2 x 12BH7, I tend to believe the pictures. Also the magic eye is missing from the tube complement - is it an EM84?

I also have to say that of all the hi-fi mags I read, I like yours the best. To a great extent because of the number & quality of the pictures and the elegant layout & readable copy.

**Dave Dlugos**  
Via e-mail.

*You are indeed correct. The discrepancy occurred because the technical panel was drawn from the manual, rather than from the amp itself (which was still with JMH). Whilst the 12BH7 is an electrical equivalent of the 12AU7, it does dissipate a little more power, which we suspect would make the amp sound a little punchier and more dynamic. This is the likely cause for the change that is, we understand, standard in production. It's just taken a little time for the manual to catch up. Ed,*

Dear Sir,

I have read your review about the Townsend supertweeter with interest. I am sure you can hear a clear difference when this unit is switched on. I do trust your ears otherwise I wouldn't subscribe to your magazine, but I don't think the way this unit is reviewed is entirely correct. This supertweeter must have certain electrical properties, especially because it will necessarily have some sort of filter built in to protect the delicate ribbon tweeter from low frequencies.

This must mean that it has a certain capacitance and inductance that will be put parallel to the main



► loudspeaker and, more importantly, the amplifier. Even without producing any sound at all this is guaranteed to change the sound of the whole system.

A much better test would be to use a separate amplifier for the super-tweeter, just like sub-woofers have their own amplifier. In this way the sound from the main speakers would be unaffected and the difference in sound quality can be attributed to the sound produced by the super-tweeter. It would be very nice if reviewers would exclude alternative explanations for perceived difference before starting to air opinions about high frequencies that are perceived through the skull and other implausible options.

If we really want to find out if frequencies above the audible range affect the perception of sound we need a more scientific approach and much less of your wild theories.

An alternative would be to just describe the sound changes and leave out any theories about perception. Most users will connect it the way you did, so in the end the sound difference in this configuration is what counts, even if it is produced by putting a filter parallel to the amp. High frequency perception might not have anything to do with it.

**Maarten van Casteren**

Via e-mail.

*As you observe, we used the Maximum super-tweeters as recommended by the manufacturer, and reported on the results thus achieved. However, your suggestion is indeed intriguing and I'll enquire of Max Townshend whether this is an acceptable wiring configuration. If so, let's give it a try. Ed.*

Dear Sir,

RSF's review of the Titan Mono, and in particular the comments on the Joan Baez 2 LP brought back some very fond memories. It was September 1960, freshman orientation week at the Brooklyn Polytechnic Institute. We would head-off each night during the week to Manhattan for some fun and adventure (usually starting with a Bridgette Bardot movie). One evening, as a change of pace, we headed to Greenwich Village where we stumbled upon Gerdes Folk City. The headline act that evening was the very excellent Greenbriar Boys. The backup act was the one and only Mr. Bob Dylan!! History in the making and we were there to witness it. Jose Feliciano the very next night too: we were in heaven.

Keep up the great work.

**Russ Lachow**

Via e-mail.

PS - I'm still on the job, I wish I could actually remember something I learned in college.

Dear Sir,

I am writing to warn potential purchasers of Tom Evans products such as the Groove phono stage. My Groove phono stage developed a fault just over a month ago (no sound from the left channel), I contacted Bill Pilcher of Ex-Cell Power Solutions the UK distributor, from whom I had purchased the Groove in September 2002, however I was informed that Bill was in a legal dispute with Tom Evans. I was given no hope of getting my Groove repaired - just wait and see. The latest I have heard is that Bill is waiting for the case to come to court. I think that you should publish this letter as you promote (is this the right word?), Tom Evans products so heavily. Beware potential purchasers, no matter how good the product is, if there is a problem, what hope?. Incidentally I got the impression that there was a backlog of faulty Groove's waiting to be repaired.

Best Regards,

**David Urquhart**

Via e-mail.

*There is indeed a dispute between Tom Evans Audio design and their former international distributor, Ex-Cell Power Solutions. However, this should not effect end users. New international distribution arrangements are being finalized while UK customers can deal directly with TEAD. The same applies to overseas owners until those arrangements are made. Mr Urquhart took this route and has now had his unit serviced and returned.*

*You can contact Tom Evans Audio Design at:*

*Tel. (44)(0)1443 833570*

*Ed.*

Dear Sir,

In your article "Playing the System" you inquire "When was the last time you witnessed a cogent and coherent debate at closing time?" Let me suggest somewhere you may well find such a thing... an online hi-fi forum perhaps. Unlikely as it may seem to you, the forum users on the various sites I've read seem a remarkably well informed bunch, and come over as nothing worse than enthusiastic (hardly a criminal offence). If someone posts a query, there's generally an answer within minutes, which seems to compare rather well with writing to a magazine only to wait months for a response. Sure, the opinions of magazines can and do set trends (Flat Earth anyone?), but the days when you had sole possession of the playing field are over. Like it or not, the advent of the interweb has changed not only how we shop, bank or buy music, but also how we research a possible purchase

Happy though I am to read your own or other

▶ magazines' opinions of a product, I see no reason not to read the opinion of a forum user. After all, it all boils down to personal taste in the end, but realistically, the view of a long term user who forked out hard cash seems at least as valid as a reviewer who may have used the unit from cold, had an ear infection that day, just doesn't like valves etc etc.

In whatever area, the web provides a wealth of information, which must be sifted through and the rubbish discarded. What it seems to lack in your view is editorial control, or, put slightly more cynically, the ability to filter out the opinions you don't want to hear. I've been reading the hi-fi press for twenty years now, and the same pattern is repeated over and over. First a product is hailed as the answer to all our prayers, a vast improvement over the previous version. Then a few months later, you guessed it, another product comes along and poor old item A is shuffled out of favour and onto the discount shelves. As a more high-end magazine, Hi-Fi+ is rather less at fault here than certain others, but I feel my point remains valid. As the general public becomes better informed, this obsession with the latest version is finally being seen for what it really is, a means to an end.

While I certainly wouldn't accuse anyone of behaving improperly, you have to admit that the relationship between the magazines and the trade is inter-dependent, whereas online this is not the case. At the end of the day, if your goal is that your readers enjoy better hi-fi, then surely you must agree that the more informed we are, the better. However, rather than make vague threats about legal action, I'd suggest its the press itself that needs to wake up. Your hegemony is under threat, and if you want to survive in the brave new world, you need to change the way you view the situation. But if you insult us, suggest we're nothing but ignorant drunks with little clue what we're talking about... well guess where we'll read about hi-fi then!

Yours,

**Matthew Stringer,**

Via e-mail.

*Just the most intelligible of a torrent of similar responses provoked by last issue's column. You only have to criticize the web to have knee-jerk defensive mechanisms kick into action. Hey guys, how about actually reading the article and responding to the points it makes? We're not anti-web, or anti-forum. You might also have noticed that we embrace a wide range of often conflicting views. What we are against is intemperate and inaccurate opinion being pedaled with no hope of recourse on the part of injured parties. For instance, I didn't accuse anybody of being drunk. What I said was*

*that anonymity has a similar effect to alcohol on peoples' inhibitions, exactly the sort of distinction that a decent editor would point out. The point I'm making is that the confidence of never having to actually answer for what is said simply encourages people to make excessive statements. Hi-fi forums are in no way unique in this regard: sites that serve sports fans are even more extreme.*

*However, the simple fact of posting lies on a web-site as opposed to printing them doesn't make you any less legally responsible, and if you post lies about a manufacturer or that undermine their reputation, then you should expect them to get upset. Sooner or later, an individual poster or web-site will come to grief. I don't want to stifle valid opinion, but I don't see how libel serves any useful purpose. Ed.*

Dear Sir,

Nice to read a "review" of the Meridian M20. We've got a pair (used as front speakers in the surround system).. ...we've also got a pair of M2s in our second 2 channel system, not to mention a pair of M3s used as the rears in the surround. They still make great sounds.

Now the question. I recently acquired (from ebay, naturally!) a small box sold as a "rare Meridian CD adaptor for older Meridian amplifiers". I've never come across anything like this before (and my first Meridian amp was bought 22 years ago) but was going for not much money, and therefore worth a look. The box duly arrived; a 4" x 2" x 1" hand built (but well put together) half dozen Rs & Cs in an aluminium box (didn't we call them Eddystone Diecast boxes, back in the mists of time?). The paintwork is pure Meridian 1xx series (the earlier "purple-ish" colour rather than the later "brown-ish" colour) right down to the stipple effect, and there's a Meridian label on it.

I connected it up between our Meridian 200/263 CD/DAC and the Aux input of our 101B pre-amp feeding the M2s. What a remarkable effect! Another veil lifted from the sound across the whole audio bandwidth, but most noticeable in the treble area which really sparkles.

So what is this little box? Some sort of impedance matching network between the DAC & Aux input? Am I right in thinking that the 101 pre-dates CDs, and hence would not have the "right" inputs for CD?

Can you shed any light on this?

**Chris Mullen**

Via e-mail.

*Only guessing but I suspect this is an inline attenuator, possibly with some additional filtering built in. The line inputs on many pre-CD amplifiers are severely overloaded by the 2V+ output level of most CD players. Hence the* ▶

► *increase in ease and fluidity. Rothwell, Chord and Russ Andrews all offer attenuators or attenuated leads to achieve the same effect. Ed.*

Dear Sir,

Here is a variation on the usual "what would you do to upgrade my system and make it sound much better than you can't verify it does now - and then if it doesn't it's your fault".

I suspect your observations will be of interest to many others, for differing reasons.

I'm considering introducing a digital bit into my main system. (Presently only analogue radio and vinyl - for non-Luddite reasons I won't bore you with). I bought my very first little CD player eight weeks ago when my wife decided she needed some stirring music in the kitchen. It is hooked into the auxiliary input of a Bose radio and does a very good job in between the Archers.

So, I have almost no investment in CDs to protect and can approach the new formats with an unusual freedom.

If I duplicated the cost of my vinyl front end I would be looking at about £6,000 – but I doubt I could persuade myself ( let alone my wife ) to a similar spend. Let's say £3,000 max. My wiring loom and mains conditioning is exclusively Kimber cum Russ Andrews. Pre- and mono-block amplifiers are John Shearne (valve-like warmth from transistors) driving a pair of Living Voice OBX-Rs (thank you Hi-Fi+ ). Musical taste is eclectic, with a bias towards jazz & blues, a mild aversion to much of the classical - and a wide-ranging selection of antique pop for those indecisive evenings. You would correctly conclude I am not breaking trail here.

- Do I await a clear winner of the format wars ? (I've demonstrated heroic patience so far).

- Do I go multi-format (which formats?) with what sized compromise in sound quality. Or should I guess at the winner ?

- Do I forget it all and allocate £1,500 to the best second-hand and new vinyl and put aside £1,500 to eventually upgrade my cartridge ?

In short, which direction would you trudge if you were starting from here – and why ??

By the way, to counter some recent Letters to you, my vote is for the present slice of high-end reviews. I don't buy Hi Fi + to help me decide a major purchase every issue or two. What it does for me is thoroughly describe and substantiate the attributes of excellence, some of which might eventually become accessible below stairs. I also, quite simply, enjoy reading toe-wiggling reviews of celebrity-priced kit. It is out of reach, fascinating and strangely comforting.

My wife has just intoned from the kitchen "a sort of Hi-Fi hello!". They will never understand.

Yours sincerely,

**David Harris**

Via e-mail.

*Well, don't ask an easy one. The performance demonstrated so far by SACD and to a lesser extent DVD-A suggest that they are well worth persevering with, although the decision ultimately won't rest with the likes of us. The obvious route is to adopt a multi-standard approach, but in doing so you need to ensure that you don't compromise straight CD replay to too great an extent. The latest generation machines are finally beginning to deliver in that regard. However, the real question is why you want a digital machine at all? You seem to be managing very nicely thankyou, so unless you have a burning desire to hear material that's only available in the new "hi-res" formats (there's very little!) or you really want surround, why the rush? I'd hang fire just a little and see what the latest generation delivers. Either that or invest a modest amount in a Philips DV 963-SA, with the possibility of after market mods to upgrade it if you think it's worthwhile. Ed.*

Dear Sir,

Richard Foster states in his review of the Lyra mono Titan cartridge that Lyra makes the only true mono cartridges. This is not the case. Denon makes the DL-102 and according to John Grado in a conversation with me, Grado's mono cartridges are also true mono designs, not just summed stereo.

**Jeff Bellin**

Salem MA

By e.mail

*Dear Mr. Bellin,*

*Thankyou for the correction regarding the Grado mono cartridges. I was indeed under the misapprehension that these were simple summed designs, although speaking to John Grado I now find that this is not the case. Excellent news. I await review samples as you read this.*

*The Denon 102 has very limited availability, primarily in Japan and special order through the internet. Not something your local HIFI shop would stock, and so I consider it a non-player in the marketplace.*

*Miyabi now also offer a mono cartridge and that too is waiting in the wings, along with the possibility of contenders from Benz too!*

*Hopefully this (and the up-coming reviews) will clarify the situation.*

*RSF*



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# Full Of Eastern Promise...

## The Chinese manufacturing revolution and its impact on hi-fi.

by Roy Gregory

You can hardly have failed to notice the rapidly increasing influence of Chinese built product in the western hi-fi markets. The material content, casework and engineering that goes into some of these products is impressive to say the least. Take the price ticket into account and it becomes quite breathtaking.

For most people, their first real exposure to the power of Chinese manufacturing was the Red Rose products. With legendary audio guru Mark Levinson pointing the way, these products produced astonishing results. But where the shock really hit home was when we all started to realise that Red Rose products were simply badged and breathed on versions of indigenous Chinese designs. Suddenly, amplification or speakers that we were used to seeing with price-tags well into four figures were turning up for literally a fraction of that price. Externally identical, these products had an immediate impact on peoples' awareness. And with all the audio public loving a bargain, who cared whether they were internally and sonically identical too?

But there's the rub. As we've learnt to our cost, there's much more to building a decent sounding piece of hi-fi than a pretty casework. Chinese manufacturing undoubtedly delivers huge cost savings, but there remain question marks over how those economies are exploited and whether the end result matches the apparent value. On the one hand, some

manufacturers have simply had their existing range built in the far-east and pocketed the savings as additional profit. On the other, companies have exploited the cost savings to create budget ranges to fit below their existing product lines. Yet, cynical as they might seem, both these approaches can be justified depending on the end product. Consider the instance of a company coming under increasing market pressure, in part at least from imported, far-eastern product. They've probably already trimmed their margins to hold prices and the drop in profits is crippling the company. The shift to Chinese manufacturing frees up new revenue to continue development of existing or new designs, maintaining customer access to that body of knowledge and experience – not to mention warranties and repairs. It's a sound business decision. Whether or not it's also a SOUND business decision depends on the performance and consistency of the products. And there's the rub: the proof of the pudding is in the listening.

What's more, even a cursory examination of the products on offer suggests that there's more than one way to skin this particular cat. As discussed, you can simply shift manufacturing to the Chinese mainland and carry on producing essentially the same product range. Alternatively you can simply buy something off the shelf and stick your own badge on it. Thirdly, there's a half way option where a company cooperates with a Chinese manufacturer

to modify and tweak one of the off the shelf offerings.

The products that we have assembled here for review cover those bases. The Quad electrostatic is an established, even legendary product. But the parent company is now owned by the Chinese consortium IAG, and the latest version of the speaker is wholly manufactured in China. The Inca Designs Katana CD player represents the middle-way, a western modified version of a Chinese designed and built product. Finally, we have the Shanling CD player, Consonance a109 hybrid amplifier and Aurum Cantus loudspeaker, Chinese designs that aim to take on the best from the west in their respective price ranges.

The bottom line is simple: results speak for themselves. With any emergent industry there will be issues regarding consistency and reliability. Hard learnt lessons which are now accepted practice in the west will have to be learnt all over again, with apparently trivial issues such as component type and quality and the standard of soldering all raising their ugly heads. We are looking in at the start of what could be an audio revolution – or an audio disaster. But take heart from the fact that we've been here before – with cars and cameras. Whether or not Chinese manufacturers are getting it right now, you can bet your bottom dollar that they'll do so sooner than you think. Indeed, more than a few people are doing just that.



QUAD



# The Quad ESL 988 Electrostatic Loudspeaker

by Chris Binns

If any loudspeaker can be described as reaching iconic status, it has to be the Quad electrostatic. Certainly the original ESL '57, which was in production virtually unchanged for nearly thirty years, although its successor, the ESL 63 was fast approaching a pretty respectable twenty before disappearing from view. Which, when you think about it is pretty amazing for any product, let alone a loudspeaker – considering the magnitude of change that has occurred over the years, and that the electrostatic as a principle has never enjoyed universal acceptance. Leaving aside the issues of what they can and cannot do in sonic terms, a major problem is that they need to present a fairly large surface area as a part of their fundamental *modus operandi*. Which makes for something of a challenge on the domestic acceptability front, particularly when the conventional moving coil competition can be about the size of a large shoe box for an ostensibly comparable bandwidth. Add to that a reputation of being 'difficult' when it comes to positioning within a room for optimum performance, comparative inefficiency and limited volume and bass capability (especially in view of their size) and it becomes a little clearer just why they have not achieved that universal acceptance. But there are, as we shall see aspects of the performance of a good electrostatic design that to date no conventional loudspeaker as yet can hope to achieve (although the gap is closing), and while some might consider this a case of merely trading one set of compromises for another, there are those that cannot live with box loudspeakers.

From a theoretical viewpoint, the possibility of an extremely lightweight diaphragm (imagine something even lighter than clingfilm) driven over its entire surface is a highly attractive one. While this has been tried with some success with coils and magnets – the Magneplanar loudspeakers being a prime example – the electrostatic approach has occupied a small but steadfast corner of audio for a considerable time. While there have been a handful of companies to go down this path,



Quad have been far and away the most successful and consistent suppliers of this type of design, the model reviewed here represents only the third generation in a history that spans nearly fifty years of production. (Interesting but slightly disturbing aside; Ross Walker, son of founder Peter, once said that the company never made

a penny out of the ESL 63.)

It is no secret that the late nineties was not a particularly good time for Quad; the uncertain economic climate together with a bad call on the 77series of electronics effectively brought the company to its knees, since when there have been a number of changes of ownership. Now a part of the Chinese owned International Audio Group (that also includes Wharfedale), production of the electrostatics recommenced in 2000, and more recently all manufacture and production has been relocated to a purpose built factory 40 minutes north of Hong Kong, where everything from injection moulding to assembly is carried out in house; only small items such as resistors and the like are bought in. Testing and quality control is carried out before units leave the factory, and again after their arrival in Britain, this is of particular importance with the ESLs where mechanical precision is crucial to their correct operation.

Both new models are conceptually an update of the ESL63. While the 988 is of a similar size and has the same diaphragm area of its forerunner, the larger 989 adds an extra pair of bass panels to increase low frequency extension and offer greater loudness capability. Peter Walker's original '63 design was both innovative and brilliant, and sought to address some of the shortcomings of the earlier '57, in particular the radiation pattern, which was highly frequency dependant. What evolved after many years was a radical solution which effectively synthesised a virtual point source located about 15 centimetres behind the loudspeaker, ►

► achieved by driving the diaphragm with concentric anodes the signal to which was progressively delayed the further away it gets from the centre. There is not the space to describe the principle in detail; but upon its launch the '63 set new standards in terms of coherence, phase linearity and low distortion.

The 988 retains exactly the same topology as the '63, but has provided an opportunity to incorporate ideas more in line with current audiophile thinking, and as such corrects a number of weaknesses in the earlier model. Power handling and ultimate loudness has always been an issue with electrostatics, and it was found that attention to details such as modifying the solder joints on the panels to prevent them forming a high point allowed just a little bit more excursion of the membrane, and thus provide a bit more headroom. Things that were not considered an issue in the early eighties have been looked at; the copper used in the delay lines (of which there is reputedly several miles) is now of a high purity type, the transformers have been redesigned, and the frame that holds the panels – which was previously rather flimsy – is now considerably more rigid giving a far higher standard of mechanical integrity. The protective grille, which on the '63 was louvered with the holes facing down, and generally considered to compromise performance has been replaced with a flat mesh that should be more acoustically transparent, and the general quality of electronic components is now higher. The protection circuit has also been revised to allow for the greater diaphragm excursion, and while it is said to be less intrusive on the signal path, it still operates by effectively short circuiting

the speaker terminals if the input level is too high – a situation that some amplifiers might strongly object to.

Aesthetically, the 988 is available in three flavours; vintage, with a wood top and suitably brown cloth, presumably to

cater for the pipe and slippers brigade,



black – which would undoubtedly be my choice were it not for the top cap being plastic (but it is £250 cheaper) and the rather gauche 'nouveau' with brushed aluminium top as featured here.

Not surprisingly, the 988's need to be plugged in and left switched on for several hours to allow the charge to dissipate evenly over the diaphragm, while this particular pair seemed to show significant improvement over several days – I say seemed to because it takes me a little while to become

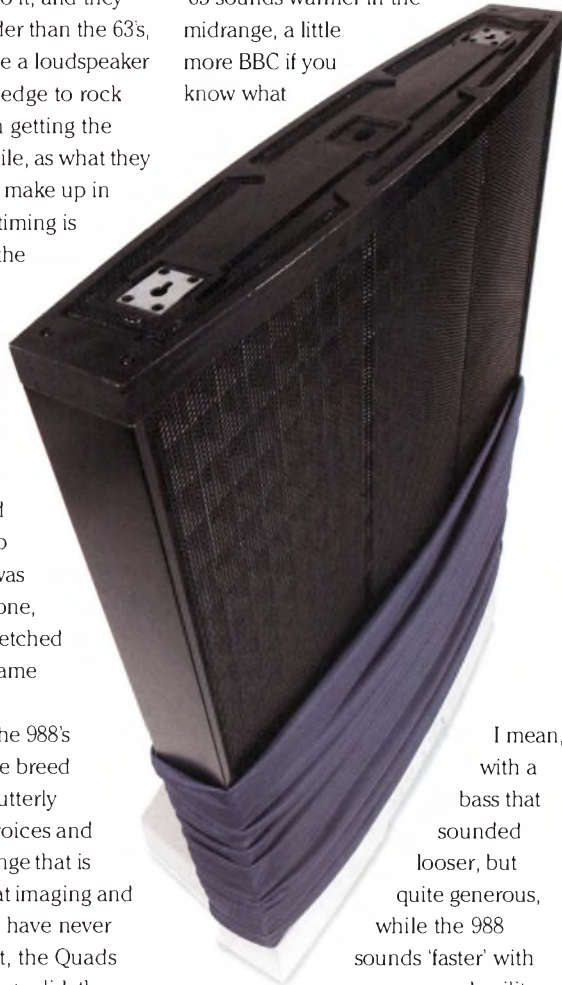
accustomed to the way (in general) that electrostatics do things. The manner in which they 'drive' a room is very different from a box loudspeaker, the most obvious difference being that they are a dipole, and there is equal sound radiated from both front and rear. One of the results of this is almost akin to a lack of 'intensity' that leads you to believe that you are not listening very loudly. Until you try and hold a conversation that is, while the absence of distortion also disorientates your judgement of level, particularly when you have been conditioned by years of listening to conventional loudspeakers, which can sound quite dirty by comparison. Having used both 57's and 63's before, I thought I was pretty clued up about positioning them in my listening room, which seems to be awkward when it comes to dipoles – but I must confess it took me ages to get the 988's working well, with a painstaking process of positioning the speakers inch by inch to get any reasonable bass. Although the 988's are now angled back by five degrees to lower interaction with the floor, and there is facility for spiking the base, I found it beneficial to use them on stands to raise them by about 12", this significantly reduced a muddiness that afflicted the upper bass.

The 988 is still recognisably a Quad electrostatic. Immediately apparent were all the usual attributes of coherence, low coloration and distortion, and with the right recordings, near holographic imaging. While the '63 used to be criticised by some for being a bit dull, particularly if you were not sitting directly on axis, the 988's seem to have considerably more treble energy. Not that you would ever describe them as bright, but they have a more forward nature that definitely pulls them out of the 'laid back' category; it also makes them more even handed away from the sweet spot. What has always concerned me about using electrostatics is the way they in

▶ which they seem to influence my listening tastes, and I find myself playing music that is not too demanding in terms of volume and bass content, so its Delius rather than Led Zeppelin. The 988's are no different in this respect, and while there is no doubt that the bottom end has a bit more kick to it, and they will play fractionally louder than the 63's, they are never going to be a loudspeaker that gives that explosive edge to rock music. But...the effort in getting the positioning was worthwhile, as what they lack in quantity they can make up in quality, and the sense of timing is excellent. Together with the leading edge definition, sheer cleanliness and lack of 'muck' there is no shortage of rhythm to help the music along, and within their envelope, they can be pretty fast moving and dynamic. The partnership with the Naim NAP 300 was a particularly rewarding one, where there was a finely etched definition that never became clinical or unmusical.

But the real forte of the 988's lies in the areas where the breed traditionally excels, an utterly magical presentation of voices and instruments in the midrange that is unique. While I admit that imaging and soundstage presentation have never been at the top of my list, the Quads did the best job of creating solid, three dimensional images that I have heard to date in my living room, while the sheer naturalness of acoustic instruments was startling. Going through a number of the Shostakovich string quartets one evening, I was struck by how much more acceptable some of the more 'difficult' passages sounded. There are times of extreme dissonance that made considerably more sense with the 988's, without setting ones teeth on edge. Truly, if this was the only type of music that I listened to, I would buy these tomorrow.

While I had no intention of making any direct comparisons with the 63's, I had offered (somewhat foolishly) to re-cloth a pair for a friend of mine, so there was an opportunity to do a direct comparison. Is the 988 a better speaker? Due to the different tonal balance, the '63 sounds warmer in the midrange, a little more BBC if you know what



I mean, with a bass that sounded looser, but quite generous, while the 988 sounds 'faster' with more snap and agility.

To answer the big question as to whether they go louder, I don't know. At this point, one of the 988's became indignant and developed a fault which manifested itself with the protection circuit cutting in prematurely. At anything approaching reasonable levels, the speaker would cut out, thus rendering any further evaluation difficult. Cue phone calls to the manufacturer, and as I write there is another pair on their way, but not, unfortunately in time to contribute further before deadline.

While I'm far from unravelling the whole story as regards the 988, preliminary conclusions are clear. The original ESL 63 formed a consistent benchmark during its production run, and became a reference for many classical recording engineers. The 988, while different in tonal balance, looks set to continue that tradition. In many ways it is a worthy successor, but don't go thinking (on current listening) that it is going to re-define the formula for what an electrostatic can do from the point of loudness and bass extension. This is evolution, not revolution. So far I've used it very much according to Quad. We're planning a follow up which stretches the envelope a bit to see just how much we can really get out of them. Then of course, there's always the 989.

One final point; while it is sad that the Quad electrostatic is no longer built in the UK, as it stands, (with the caveat hanging over this particular pair) the Chinese manufacturing not only enables production of the loudspeaker, but at a selling price that represents pretty good value for money. And allows the marque to survive.

Welcome back then.



#### TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Electrostatic loudspeaker
Sensitivity:	86dB /2.83 V rms
Impedance:	8 Ohms nominal
Bandwidth:	
Maximum input:	10 V continuous voltage
Programme peak (undistorted)	
	40V
Permitted peak input:	55V
Power consumption:	6 Watts
Dimensions (WxHxD):	670x940x315mm
Weight:	20.5 Kg
Finishes:	Brown, black or pale blue.
Price:	£3500 (black) £3750 (others)

#### Manufacturer:

Quad Electroacoustics Ltd.  
Tel. (44)(0)845 458 0011  
Net. [www.quad-hifi.co.uk](http://www.quad-hifi.co.uk)



# Aurum Cantus Leisure 2 Loudspeaker

by Chris Thomas

The old adage that says if something seems too good to be true then it probably is, looks like being challenged with the increasing influence and impact of Chinese manufacturing on the British audio scene. And if any tangible proof were needed, then look no further than the Leisure 2 speaker from Aurum Cantus. This company, founded in 1994 employs over 100 people and specialise in the manufacture of cabinets, drive units and complete loudspeakers. Their ribbon tweeters especially have been making quite an impact, especially their pricing which is competitive enough to have several serious UK based companies looking closely at the models on offer, so perhaps we can expect to see them showing up with increasing regularity over the next few years. And it is hardly surprising that the industry is looking somewhat nervously at the Chinese manufacturers. We have already seen the success of the American Red Rose company using Chinese hardware technology and manufacturing and more than a few in this country are sourcing their cabinets in China. And now Aurum, who produce some of the Red Rose speakers, are turning out speaker systems which at least, in terms of construction and finish, defy price comparison.

When I reviewed the stunning Red Rose R3 a couple of years ago it was just prior to the release of the Aurum based Rosebud speaker that superseded it. I was, at the time, staggered that the company had

discontinued such a great little speaker only to replace it with something that in my opinion was notably worse, albeit a little cheaper. But, in hindsight, this would seem to be a pure business decision as the Rosebud is an Aurum speaker very probably tweaked by Mark Levinson himself. Doing away with the expensive Dynaudio



mid/bass driver and the custom made ribbon tweeter in favour of the much cheaper Aurum drivers would no doubt bring a smile to the face of Red Rose's accountants but to me it seemed like a step in the wrong direction. But then I'm just a punter who cares little about the economics and a lot about the musical performance. But even the splendid £3.5K R3 looked like about £1000's

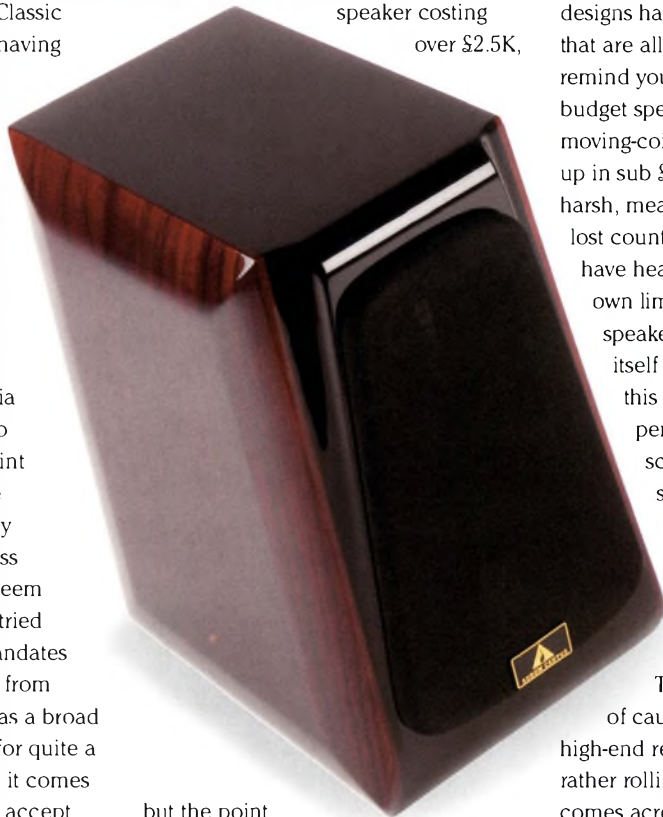
worth of speaker with its plain, averagely finished cabinet. Take a close look at the Aurum Cantus Leisure 2 with the same eyes and you might imagine that these glossy little things would cost between £2- £3k. I kid you not; the quality of construction and finish really is quite amazing even before you take price into consideration. Check out the cabinet closely. Look at the piano black lacquering, the quality of the edging and the veneers used on the side cheeks, or at the rebating around the drivers or the scalloped, tapering cabinet fronts. In the acoustic guitar business we know that lacquer can cover a multitude of ills and don't like its damping qualities on a resonant structure like a guitar body. But in the world of Chinese cabinet-making high gloss lacquer finishing is king. Aurum lay it on, or spray it on with a will and the results, whether you like shiny things or not, are mightily impressive.

The drive units used in this 2-way rear-ported design are also interesting, especially the aluminium ribbon tweeter (one of several designs produced by Aurum). Designated the G2, it utilises a wave shaped vertical surface and extends upward to a claimed 40Khz. The bass/mid driver is a 130mm carbon fibre/Kevlar coned device with a flat-wired aluminium voice coil and gives the speaker a claimed response down to 55Hz. These are mounted on an inclined time-aligned baffle and can be covered by the removable, framed ▶

▶ clip-in grille though I would recommend that you leave these off. Sensitivity is a lowly 87 dB and the speaker offers a nominal impedance of 8ohms dropping to a low of 6.4 ohms. Recommended power handling is claimed at 100 watts and I would suggest that you are going to need fair amounts of those as the Leisure 2 swallows chunks of wattage with alarming greed. The Pathos Classic One was soon discarded as having insufficient power and the excellent solid-state Moon i-3 was pressed into service as its 100 watt output and excellent speed and control was much more suitable.

No stands came with the speakers so I initially mounted them on the single column JM Labs Micro Utopia stands which bought them to the right height. Their footprint is such though that there are many stands that could easily accommodate them at far less cost. The Kudos 100 would seem like a well priced though untried contender. That rear port mandates that you site them well away from back walls but the tweeter has a broad enough dispersion to allow for quite a bit of experimentation when it comes to finalising toe-in. They can accept single or bi-wired connection through their large bling-type gold plated connectors and you soon realise that although the Aurums have a budget price tag, they really do demand and deserve to be used with quality ancillaries. In fact, one of the main problems I had when listening to the speaker was the continuing tendency, because of its appearance, to assess it by thinking of it as a design costing around £2K and I often had to remind myself of its actual price. When a friend who works in audio PR came to visit he had no idea what the speakers were and after a brief listen and a look

around them, asked me for their story. Like a rotten cad I told him they were made in California and cost \$2.5K. He never blinked an eye. About an hour later, after we had listened to several bits of music and discussed their performance in this context, I told him the truth. I wish you could have seen the look on his face. In reality, they do not sound like a quality speaker costing over £2.5K,



but the point is that, without knowing their Chinese heritage, he was easily fooled and he has a lot of experience dealing with expensive equipment from all over the world. So, you get the idea. These speakers punch way above their weight in the looks and finish department and have enough about them that they almost pull off the same trick performance-wise. But they take a while to get there. I had the opportunity to compare a well run-in pair against some straight from the box and I can say that you will need 100 hours and more to really loosen them up as, from new,

they are very, very tight and not at all representative of the finished article. But it does not take long to realise that it's that tweeter that really defines the quality of the overall design. It integrates seamlessly with the mid/bass driver and has that sense of smooth dynamics and uncompressed, open energy that ribbons can provide. Most, if not all, comparably priced designs have tweeter compromises that are all too easily heard and always remind you that you are listening to a budget speaker design. Conventional moving-coil designs that usually show up in sub \$1K speakers can be thin, harsh, mean and pinched and I have lost count of the amount of times I have heard these units impose their own limitations on such loudspeakers. But the Aurum places itself above such comparisons as this ribbon offers much greater performance potential and scope. Mounted in this speaker it is smooth and a little too gently voiced for me. The designers have quite obviously gone for a tonal balance that is most unlikely to upset anyone. They have erred on the side of caution by not accentuating the high-end response of the driver but rather rolling it off early so the treble comes across as creamy rather than particularly dynamic or extended and this could be one of the reasons why the overall driver integration feels so impressive. The crossover point between them is unnoticeable and the music is presented as a whole. They are not going to challenge the high frequency performance of the rest of your system at all and even if you have the amplification and cabling to present the speaker with some real work to do, the Leisure 2 will be gentle and accommodating at all times. It has the resolution and it has the bandwidth but it just lacks impact and a real sense of cutting edge when needed. ▶

► But I could never blame the designers or call it a flaw. When you consider some of the amplifiers and source components these are likely to be used with I think it is an entirely rational decision. The levels of bass coming from the box is entirely consistent with its size, it's just a little soft and ill-defined as the frequency drops though it is surprisingly tuneful and pitch coherent.



It starts and stops quite well too though and is fairly weighty, but I could not say that rhythmic resolution and drive is one of its more notable features. It works quite well when the tempo is straightforward and regular, but throw in a few extra elements and the Aurum never really lays the structure of the timing quite bare enough to really enlighten.

The real notable weaknesses of the design lies in the fact that it can quite easily get confused when asked to do too much work. This happens exclusively through the mid-band which lacks that sense of separation and instrumental independence that

better speakers bring. Push too much information into it and the image perspectives will flatten and the instruments in question will flow into and behind each other, leaving the view a little cloudy and uncertain. But, once again and to the designer's credit, they never sound offensive or hard work to live with when this happens, as it does quite a lot and at any level. But, in its favour I must say that on occasion the speaker can stun and surprise you with the sheer quality of high frequency separation and ambient detail. It is this aspect of its sound, which gives the Leisure 2 its class and is the one area of its performance that stays in the mind. You could surely comment on the lack of a broad tonal colour palette or the fact that the image it conjures up is a little left and right with some central information and with the exception of the top end the fact that there is not enough real front to back depth to the sound. You might also notice

that the speaker never really projects the music forcefully enough. You tend to sit on one side of the room and listen to the music being made on the other side. Perhaps it's partly due to its low sensitivity but a bit more presence and strength would help this speaker enormously. It needs to open the musical strands up, to draw you towards it and to make you ask questions about the piece you are listening to. It should intrigue down through the mid-band and here it falls a bit flat. And if you think I am being over critical, I have to say that there are similarly priced speakers that can do this. I have heard models from other manufacturers

recently that did more to engage me musically though none of them had the high frequency sophistication and class of the Aurums.

But all of these criticisms have to be taken within the context of the speaker's price and it's here that Aurum will win hands down most of the time. For a very reasonable asking price the Leisure 2 is a bit of a steal, especially if you appreciate and value the amazing cabinetwork. Technically it seems to have all the elements in place for a really memorable little speaker and I sense that it is close to being exceptional though, for me, it just falls short of a complete recommendation. But I bet it won't be long before they hit the nail right on the head and that will be the time for rival British companies to really start worrying. If you are looking for a sub £1K stand mounted speaker you really must give it a listen. It has its flaws, but what doesn't?



#### TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

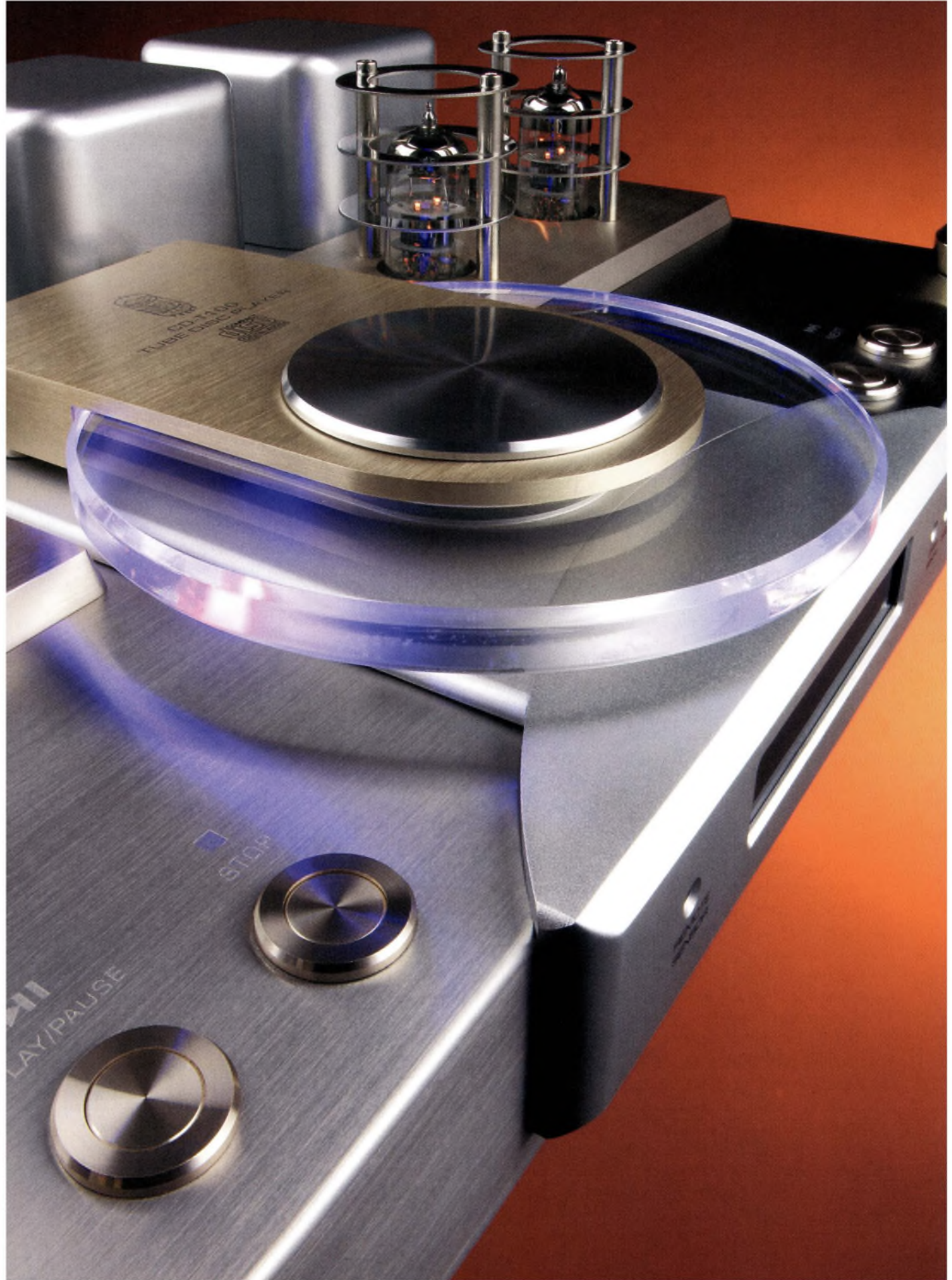
Type:	2-way rear ported
Drive Units -	
Tweeter:	Aluminium ribbon (G2)
Mid/bass:	Cantus AC-130-130mm non-woven carbon-fibre +Kevlar.
Sensitivity:	87dB/W/M
Impedance:	80hm nominal, 6.4 Ohms minimum.
Crossover Freq:	2500Hz
Cabinet material:	MDF
Dimensions(WxHxD):	236x360x280 mm
Net Weight:	10.5Kg
Finishes:	Many. Consult importer.
Price:	£900.

#### UK Distributor:

Absolute Analogue  
Tel. (44)(0)20 8459 8113  
Fax. (44)(0)20 8459 8113  
Net. [www.absoluteanalogue.co.uk](http://www.absoluteanalogue.co.uk)

#### Manufacturer:

Aurum Cantus, China.  
Net. [www.aurumcantus.com](http://www.aurumcantus.com)



CD-14100  
TUBE CLASSIC by J. V. K&S

STOP

LAY/PAUSE



# Shanling CD-T100 CD Player

by Alan Sircom

The £1,650 Shanling CD-T100 is causing a stir. It's the first Chinese valve-based CD player anyone has ever seen. There's more to come: a valve SACD player is on the cards, a souped-up version of the existing player (more on this later) and valve power amps are all scheduled.

I need glasses! I thought this was a stereo SACD player for the first few days, until I realised the lights were for HDCD and 24/96 up-sampling, not SACD landing lights. So, I was casually playing my SACDs in stereo nodding along, only to discover I was listening in CD-stereo. There was no manual in the box, so I can plead ignorance with the best of them. Mind you, the name CD-T100 should have been a giveaway – an SACD player would have SACD in the title. Dumbass!

The toploading Philips 1201 transport mechanism with its Perspex CD lid is manually operated and looks exceptionally cool; especially at night, when it's illuminated by a blue LED. This, allied to the rosy glow of the four valves, makes it look like a cityscape skyline instead of a disc spinner. One strange omission though; the player will attempt to play a disc even when the lid is up, making strange graunching sounds. Although this seems not to damage disc or player, this is not a good strategy.

It sports four Burr-Brown PCM 1704 DACs with a Crystal CS8420 24bit, 96kHz upsampler, and the latest second-generation HDCD chip, the PMD200 (the underside of the player comes with the Pacific Microsonics – and not Microsoft – license, however; odd since Microsoft has owned PM since 2000). Then, there's the output stages; along with the normal solid-state output, there

is a second output stage featuring four 6N3 Chinese pre-amp triodes, two for the single-ended RCA output stage and two for the headphone socket. There is no switching between the output stages, they are entirely separated, even down to different phono sockets. This is a bonus for those who want to use the different stages as a form of filter for some discs; simply double up the number of interconnects and put the tube output into one pre-amp input and the solid state into another. Then, use the source selector on the pre-amp to do all the switching. Or, you could do without the pre-amp altogether, as the player has a built-in 100 step digital volume level control on both outputs. It's not as elegant a volume control as found on Wadia players, but does the job well.

There's not much of a manual, just a collection of Shanling promo material in anglo-chinese. The exception is the following, on a strip of paper: "Cleaning tip: Keep your Shanling looking shiny and new by using a few drops of Johnson's Baby Oil on a lint-free cloth or paper towel. Finish off with a fresh piece of absorbent paper towel!". Perhaps it would be best to do this naked. Add in the white gloves and cloth provided in the box and divorce proceedings will commence.

In fairness, there's not much need of a manual (reviewer assumptions

aside). It is an extremely rudimentary player in the control department. It has just four buttons on the top panel: play/pause, stop, track back and forth. Oh and an on/off switch on the rear right of the player. That's it! Standby (on the player itself) would be nice, for example. The rest are all on the remote control, which is comprehensive, cool and almost exactly like the sort supplied to Marantz for its 17 series models. The front panel has a blue LED screen, two LEDs for 24/96 and HDCD operation and a remote control eye.

The socket line up isn't much more comprehensive. It has those two sets of analogue outputs, both with high quality phono sockets. There's also a single coaxial S/PDIF digital connection.

Toslink or XLR balanced outputs are all outside the Shanling remit. It does have a headphone socket with a difference, though. The cans socket, on the rear side of the case is designed to work through the output tubes, making it the smoothest sounding headphone sound this side of electrostatics.

One of the signs that Shanling take the player seriously is that it comes with a range of extras not normally seen in a CD player. Like the choice of spiked feet alongside the normal ones. Like the very decent braided mains cable. All these are the sort of extras people may or may not use in practise (I have very good mains and find special cables

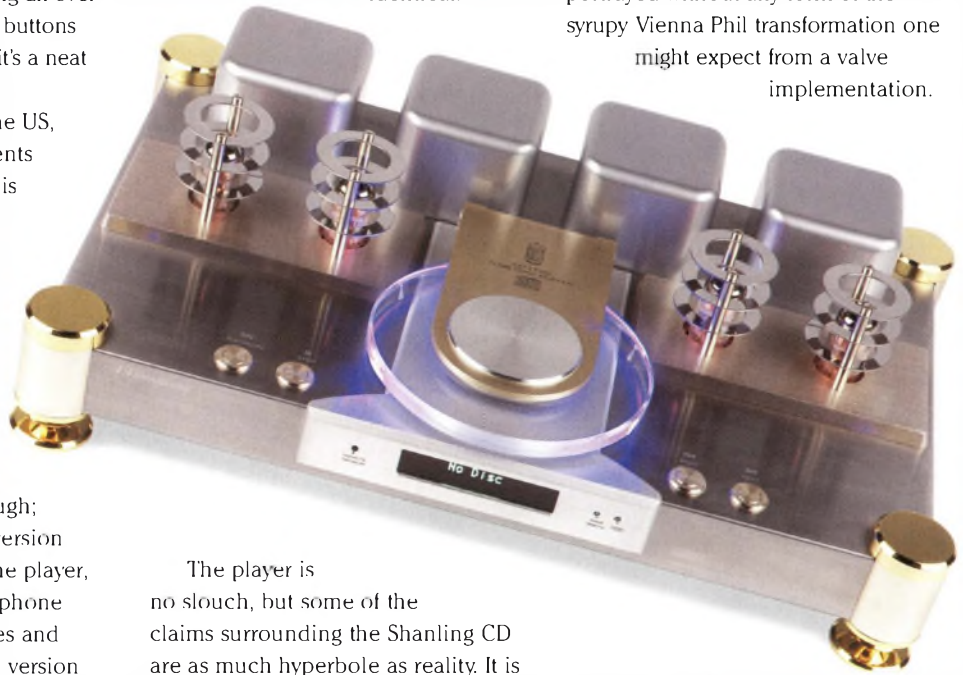


▶ don't make a big difference; those with less good mains feeds may find a very different result), but featuring these extras as standard seems like a good idea. From a strict functionality point of view, it's a pity the blue LED panel can only be dimmed, not switched out entirely, and the grey lettering all over the chrome case makes the buttons hard to fathom. Otherwise, it's a neat and elegant player.

There is a revision in the US, changing normal components with funky ones. In part, this is to redress the problem of people shipping direct from the Shanling factory at a fraction of US retail. But the distributor in the UK is unconvinced that the changes this brings about are so dramatic as to justify the cost. There is another route though; the hot-rodged 3D-Sonics version entails radical change to the player, such as disabling the headphone and solid-state output stages and much more. The 3D-Sonics version is not available yet... give it a few months. Fortunately, this will be an £800 upgrade for existing owners, and will up the cost of new players to £2,250.

I am half convinced the success of the Shanling is due as much to the look as to the sound. That's no real problem, though... the thing looks bloody gorgeous. Sound is such a subjective

thing and perception can be so readily influenced by other matters that a good looking product will sound better than one that looks like the north side of a south-bound camel, even if the performance of the two products was functionally identical.



The player is no slouch, but some of the claims surrounding the Shanling CD are as much hyperbole as reality. It is not one of the best players you can buy under £3,000, but it does justify its price tag and is definitely one of the nicer sounding players you can buy at the price. It has a palpable sense of naturalness and fidelity to the musical performance that is extremely alluring. Put on almost any recording – even horror discs like the original pre-remastered *Marquee Moon* by Television – and the CD-T100 digs out the musicality and sense of occasion this classic slice of pre-punk Americana delivers. Better still, the smooth overall presentation of the player helps chill out the intrinsically hard edges of the disc.

It is also extremely detailed, delving into the inner detail of the

music. You can really hear into the recording, or at least you can really hear what the musicians are delivering. It's not a warts and all delivery, but neither is it an overtly euphonic performance. The piano of Glenn Gould and the strings of the LSO are portrayed without any form of the syrupy Vienna Phil transformation one might expect from a valve implementation.

It's a cliché to suggest the addition of valves makes anything sound smooth. In this case though, it has more than a touch of truth to it. A testable truth, too; compare the valve and non-valve sound and the player is distinctly warmer through the bottles. Yet, it's not so warm as to bathe every CD sound in a rosy glow. In many respects, this is the main advantage of the Shanling sound.

So, it's not a bad CD player by any standard, but play recent discs on very new players costing more than a grand and the sound is intrinsically musically wonderful. The Shanling player has musical wonder in its line-up, but it appears added *ex post facto*. It's not something fundamental to the sound of the player, it's added like a fine glaze. Whether this matters is moot if ▶



▶ both players sound good. However, I suspect the Shanling is more likely to trip up on some recordings than some of its peers.

It's also extremely flat and slightly thin sounding, although this is greatly ameliorated by the sound of the valves. It presents a sound that falls very wide of the speakers, but has a distinct lack of inner depth, seemingly regardless of the music played. Even the deepest recordings – the Solti/Mahler Eighth for example

that will enhance the benefits of the Shanling concept. Place this player with a nice, fat sounding valve amplifier and small to medium sized, efficient speakers and the whole sound will take on a euphonic magic that is hard to fault... unless you look closely. This scheme has worked very successfully before; arguably the Linn/Naim



appears to have been recorded using Lichtenstein as a concert hall – have little dimensionality in practical terms.

The thinness of the sound is more deceptive. This is not easily identified because it is much masked by the valve euphonic presentation over the lower registers. However, this masking hides a distinct lack of genuine bottom end information. You find that the bass is not as substantial as it first appears; in fact, the bass is quite shallow and lacking fundamental detail. Organ sounds are blurred into one another, deep bass notes are softened and blunted and the whole sound appears rolled off to make it appear light and fast, all the while retaining that warmth and richness.

In fairness, the thin nature of this player is not that problematic in practical terms, if partnered with the sort of electronics and loudspeakers

and Voyd/Audio Innovations/Snell Acoustics systems of the late 1980s and early 1990s used a very similar complementary combination approach to great effect. An additional wrinkle is the option to use – or not use – the triode output as a form of filter depending on the music. In most cases, the soft, smooth sound of the triodes is superior to the slightly more stark sound of the solid-state outputs. There are no hard and fast rules as to which works better; it's a disc-by-disc thing. In most cases, the triodes sound best, though. Neither output affects the fundamental sonic character of the CD-T100, but the player sounds nicer through the triodes. Mind you, they're not without their own signature. Use them to tailor your system as a whole and limitations to the sound in terms of frequency extension and image depth may start to niggle if you use the player's output as a permanent filter.

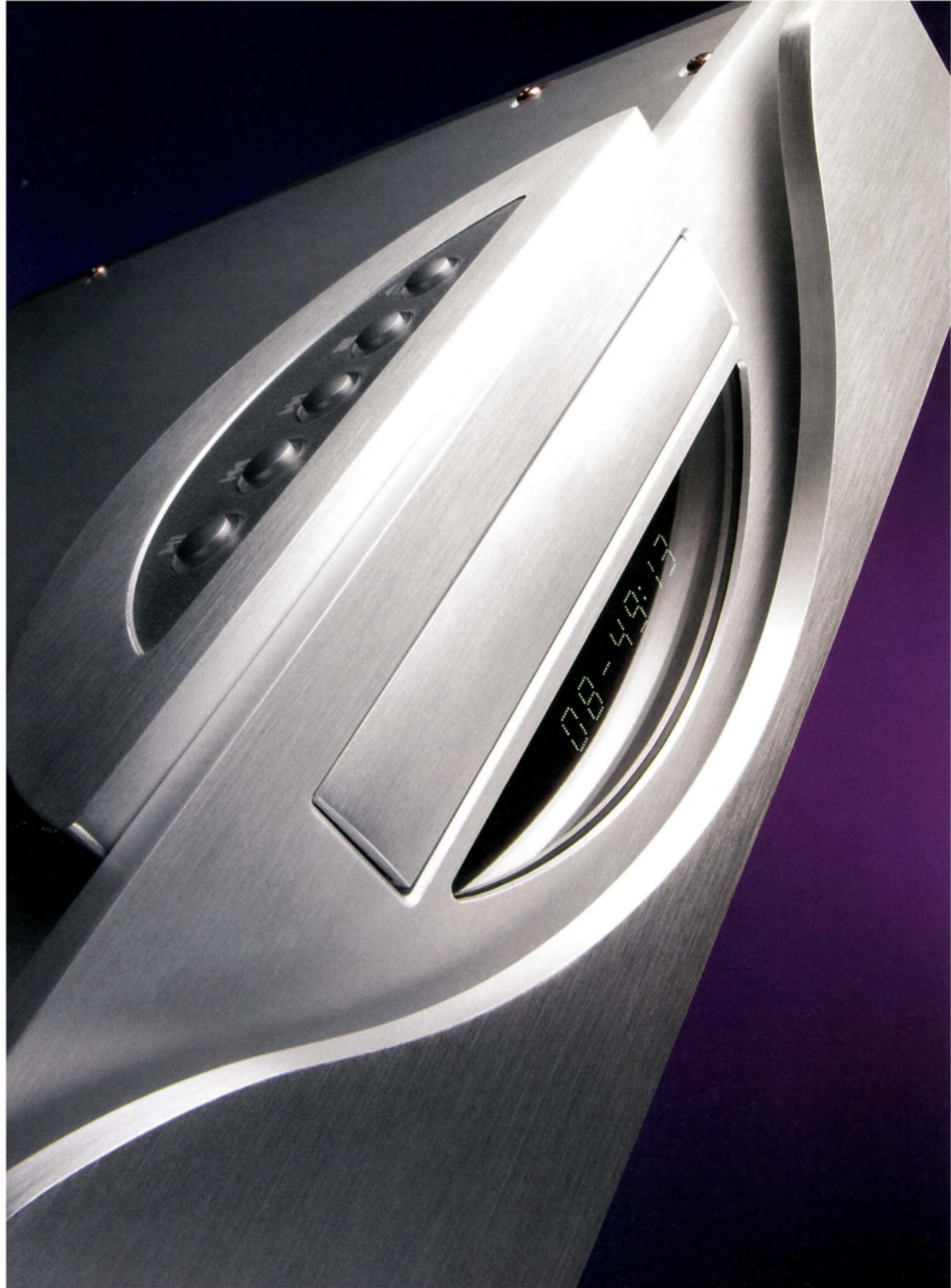
The tube headphone stage is a joy in and of itself. It's rich and warm and wonderful, a bit like building an Earmax into a CD player. It has enough gain to cope with almost any decent quality headphone. And, the limitations inherent to the sound are not as significant in headphones; image depth is not an issue and most headphones have a dry-rolled off bottom end that will never highlight the bass limitations of the CD-T100. If you use headphones a lot and like that euphonic enjoyable sound, the CD-T100 becomes almost mandatory at the price. Either way, it remains an extremely good player, with an attractive, enticing sound, but it's not the best player money can buy at the price. The addition of the tubes and especially the tube headphone stage does add a lot... as long as you want those things. But it's the looks that I suspect will impress. Set against the hair-shirt nature of much hi-fi, that aesthetic appeal counts for a lot. ▶

#### TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Top loading, HDCD compatible CD player with both solid-state and valve outputs
Chipset:	Burr-Brown PCM 1704 with Crystal C5 8402 24/96 up-sampling
Outputs:	1x single-ended RCA (solid-state) 1x single-ended RCA (valve) 1x coaxial RCA digital
Output Level:	2.2 V (variable)
Dimensions (WxHxD):	430x65x290mm
Weight:	11.8kg
Price:	£1650

#### UK Distributor:

Real Hi-Fi  
Tel. (44)(0)870 9096777  
Net. [www.realhi-fi.com](http://www.realhi-fi.com)



# The Inca Design Katana SE CD Player

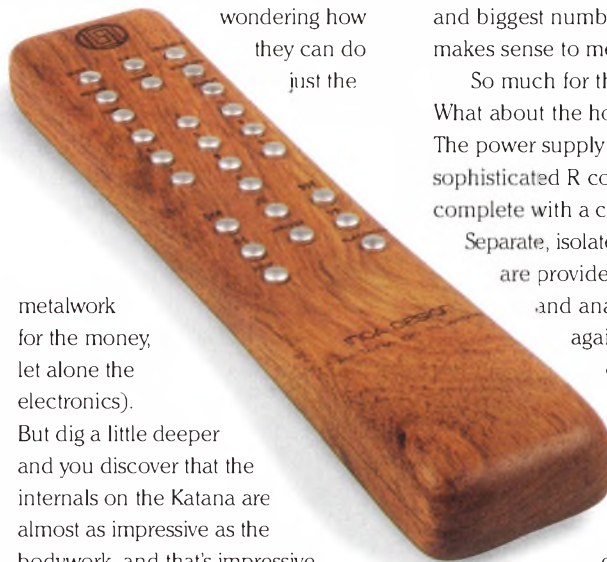
by Roy Gregory

The Inca Design Katana is nothing if not visually striking. Its beveled edges, sculpted double baffle and top-mounted controls all set it well apart from the mass produced run of the mill. So do the classy, understated graphics and the nice little design touches like the illuminating rings that surround the buttons. Then there's the rather nice, sculpted wood remote. I'm not particularly big on wood when it comes to electronics, but this is the nicest example I've seen, short of a really minimal stick that came with a Pathos unit. The Inca's remote has to deal with something like ten times the number of buttons, and does so with both clarity and common sense. It fits your hand and the buttons are really positively latched. The fit and feel of both the handset and the player itself are exemplary. Indeed, everything about it suggests an expensive, audiophile design from some up-market manufacturer. Look around the back and the impression will be reinforced by the full complement of socketry, including a choice of balanced or single-ended outputs.

While I had the Katana at home, I played a little game. I asked people, based on the looks and operational feel of the machine, how much they thought it cost. Most guesses settled around the \$2000 mark, with a few much higher than that. In fact, the more hi-fi literate the observer, the more expensive they thought the player was. Of course, you know what's coming. The Katana actually costs a shade under \$1000. Which is astonishing enough until you realise that we're looking at the SE

version here. The standard model is externally almost identical and weighs in at just \$600!

Of course, there's nothing clever about producing fancy casework and kitting it out with basic parts (although this casework must have manufacturers in the UK and US wondering how they can do just the



metalwork for the money, let alone the electronics). But dig a little deeper and you discover that the internals on the Katana are almost as impressive as the bodywork, and that's impressive indeed. This machine falls into what could be loosely described as the co-operative model of manufacturing. The design of the internal workings has been extensively specified and modified by UK distributors Activ Distribution before production in the PRC.

Basic hardware is exemplary. Transport is Philips' VAM1202, a dedicated CD audio design rather than the increasingly common ROM drives found elsewhere. DAC is the Burr Brown 1732 monolithic chipset, a 96kHz 24bit up-sampling design, backed up with HDCD capability. Output is fully complementary, hence

the balanced socketry found on both the standard and SE models. Interestingly, given the potential issues with service and support on any product built in relatively small numbers, on the other side of the world, the Katana relies on proven digital technology rather than chasing the latest chipset and biggest numbers: I must say, it makes sense to me.

So much for the building blocks. What about the house keeping? The power supply is based on a sophisticated R core transformer complete with a copper sheet shield.

Separate, isolated power supplies are provided for the digital and analogue stages, and again, the internal circuitry is heavily shielded to prevent magnetic and RF interference, either entering or just as importantly, escaping the player to do damage elsewhere.

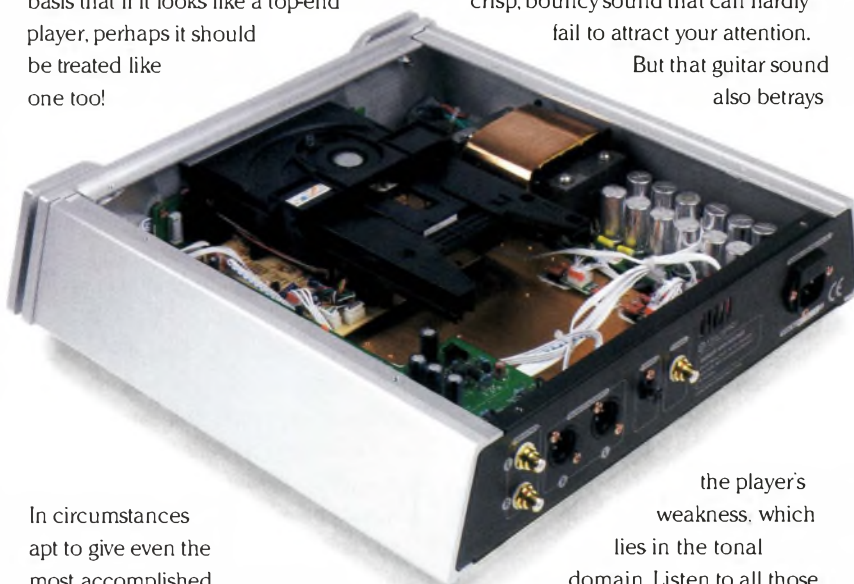
As well as the upgraded power supplies and filtering found in the SE, it also boasts significantly better capacitors throughout the circuit.

Similar care and attention has gone into the casework, which is designed to be far more than just a pretty face. The carefully profiled elements create a rigid and well damped, mass loaded structure that helps protect the delicate internals from mechanical interference. Look underneath, and as well as the on-off switch you'll find a pattern of mineral loaded ink that increases the RF shielding, further protecting



► products above which the player is placed. Given that the bottom of most machines is largely invisible and hence the first place that many manufacturers look to cut corners, it's reassuring to see the care that's gone into the chassis of the Katana. Also in the box you'll find a better than patch-cord interconnect just to get you started, an optical interconnect, and even a screwdriver that fits the battery hatch on the remote. Once again, it's the kind of completeness you'd associate with far more expensive machines. Incidentally, and not surprisingly, Activ Distribution will be using this basic chassis to house a host of matching components, with integrated, pre and power amplifiers on the way.

So the ingredients certainly seem impressive on paper, but as we all know, there's far more to making a decent sound than a simple list of fashionable ingredients. The Katana was well warmed up and then unceremoniously included into the system alongside the Wadia 861SE, on the perhaps spurious basis that if it looks like a top-end player, perhaps it should be treated like one too!



In circumstances apt to give even the most accomplished performer a case of the jitters (no pun intended) the Inca Design player didn't bat an eyelid. Sure, it didn't have the image specificity, dimensionality or natural tonality of the Wadia, but it didn't sound like cardboard cutouts either,

which is the way all too many CD players still sound these days.

The sound of the Katana is dominated by a slightly forward balance which makes it musically explicit and immediately engaging at the expense of depth definition and separation.

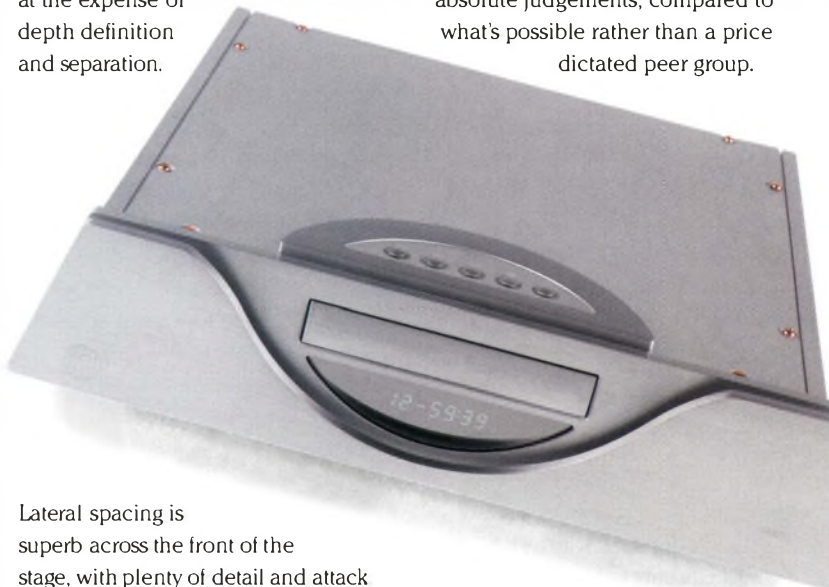
Lateral spacing is superb across the front of the stage, with plenty of detail and attack on multiple guitars, keeping their contributions nicely separated. It's a crisp, bouncy sound that can hardly fail to attract your attention.

But that guitar sound also betrays

the player's weakness, which lies in the tonal domain. Listen to all those leading edges and once you get past the speed and jump in the delivery you'll start to wonder what happened to the body of the instrument the strings are hanging on. Listen to a familiar voice and you'll get plenty of

breathy detail, but no real chest behind it. Tonally, it introduces a hollowness on instruments that robs them of a little warmth and body.

But, if you think that sounds damning then think again. These are absolute judgements, compared to what's possible rather than a price dictated peer group.



There are plenty of expensive CD players out there that share exactly these traits, many of them coming from the Japanese majors and quite a few of them wearing SE badges too. What it means in reality is that you need to be careful in matching the Katana. If we use the Johanos Rachmaninov *Symphonic Dances* (the Analogue Productions CD) as a case in point, then you'll see what I mean. The opening passage is beautifully spread, although the instruments take on a slightly piping quality. There's less air or depth than I get from the Wadia (now there's a surprise). As the stepped crescendoes build the emphasis tends to lie with the brass, layering the tuttis one on top of another, but lacking the body and bass weight that delivers real impact.

To redress the balance you need to use something a lot more forgiving than the Vibe, Pulse, RADIA set-up I use at home, a system which

► adds little or nothing of itself to proceedings. Interestingly, the elderly Lentek reviewed elsewhere in this issue proved a very happy match. It's slightly fruity bass quality and controlled delivery got a welcome tonic from the Katana's speed and dynamic zip, whilst helping to redress the balance issues with some unobtrusive padding here and there. I suspect that the warmer, sweeter run of current amplifiers would be just as successful – Audio Analogue Puccini owners form an orderly queue.



Is it worth spending the time and trouble to get the Katana working at its best? Undoubtedly. The comparison with the Rega Jupiter proved instructive, the two players coming from opposite poles on the sonic landscape. Whereas the British stalwart majors on musical structure and shape, the path of melodic and rhythmic progression, the Katana delivers detail, life and energy. In comparison to the Rega, it sounds busy and slightly disorganized, but at the same time it's vital and crisp, almost tumbling over itself in its musical enthusiasm. The real question is whether or not that undermines its ability to deliver not just the notes but a meaningful relationship between them. The answer to that is no. You can always tell where the music is going and perhaps more importantly, why. The Rega is very much the exception to the £1000 CD player

rule. Its reliance on getting the centre of musical notes in the right place even if it doesn't define their leading edges with the precision available elsewhere is both brave and unusual. The Katana where's its heart well and truly on its sleeve, explicit in its delivery and in the choices it's made.



Part of the dynamic verve and gusto that flows forth from this player will be down to its healthier than average output level. If ever there was a candidate for the fleshier tonality and rhythmic fluidity that come with an attenuated interconnect lead then this is it. Plugging a set of inline attenuators between the signal leads and the pre-amp input sockets produced a greater sense of space and control, as well as a slightly warmer balance. The chuggy rhythm of Eliza Gilkyson's 'Engineer Bill' took on a newly rooted quality, recovering the song's almost hypnotic charm. The rock solid drum beat took on more shape and character, pushing and controlling the tempo, whilst Eliza's distinctive vocals, front and centre, conjured ghostly images of the "one-eyed Ford" echoed in the Eddie Van Halen fuzz-box effect on the toy guitar (I kid you not).

At its considerable best, the Katana

will happily meet and match the best of its British born price peers. It will compete with run of the mill machines at far higher prices – as long as you get it right. Take insufficient care and you can provoke a reed thin, hectoring quality from the system. The bodywork is certainly distinctive, lending the machine a quality air of individuality and solidity. It operated without a glitch throughout the review period and the indignities that imposes. Indeed, the only problem we experienced was a refusal to read discs when we plugged it in once with the power switch in the on position. Rebooting the player quickly solved that. ➤+

#### TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	CD player
Transport:	Philips VAM1202
Chipset:	Burr-Brown PCM1732 (with additional HDCD and 24/96 up-sampling filters)
Outputs:	1pr balanced XLR 1pr unbalanced RCA phono 1x Tos-link optical 1x co-axial SPDif
Output Level:	2.0V
Dimensions (WxHxD):	400x200x350mm
Weight:	11kg
Price:	£995

#### UK Distributor:

Activ Distribution

Tel. (44)(0)1635 291357

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# Consonance a120 Integrated Amp

by Jimmy Hughes

Way back in the late 1960s, when transistors were starting to replace valves, many reasons were put forward for making the change. Transistor amplifiers could be made smaller, lighter, cheaper, and were claimed to be more reliable. They also ran cooler and were mechanically and electrically quieter. When respected names like Leak, Quad, and Radford introduced transistor amplifiers and phased out their valve designs, it seemed to be all over for tubes.

Yet valves never really went away. And so it is that nearly forty years later we still have a choice between solid-state and vacuum tube. But what about combining both technologies in a single design? Actually, virtually all modern valve amplifiers incorporate solid-state components in the power supply, so in a sense they're hybrids. But a proper hybrid is one that uses valves and transistors for different parts of the signal processing circuit.

The Consonance a120 is a hybrid valve/transistor design, utilising a Sovtec 6H30 tube for line level amplification. For amplifier designers of the 1960s, one of the most important benefits of going solid state was the elimination of the output transformer. At the time this was seen as a major limiting factor so far as sound quality was concerned – in theory if you could only direct-couple the output of the amplifier to the speakers, you'd get significant improvements in sharpness and control.

Er, right. It's a convincing argument on paper. Even the best transformers suffer from phase shift, saturation,

and other non-linearities. Naturally, the Consonance a120 uses a direct-coupled transistor output stage, avoiding the need for an output transformer. This saves space and cost. Yet it's arguable that much of the 'signature' of a valve amp is its output transformer; the spatial clarity, separation, and smoothness which characterises the best tube amps is down to the output being transformer coupled.



As chance would have it, a week or two before the a120 arrived, I'd gone back to using the Consonance Reference 8.8 all-valve integrated amplifier I reviewed in issue 29. Now this is a very refined performer, creating a sound that's smooth and extremely natural with no hint of false glamour or glossy exaggeration. For some tastes it's perhaps a shade understated. But it's definitely a grower; the more you listen, the more you like it.

Going from the all-valve Reference 8.8 to the hybrid a120, I found the latter produced a distinctly different sound in terms of extra sharpness and immediacy. It was akin to moving ten rows forward in the hall; suddenly everything was closer and more tactile - a shade brighter too - and more crisply focused. Yet the sound didn't lack space or ambience, being clean and attractively coherent. Although a shade less silky, the overall

presentation was still very clean.

The Reference 8.8 produced a more refined and sophisticated sound; it was relaxed and articulate in a smooth balanced fashion. The Consonance a120 was more attention grabbing: sharper, leaner, more incisive. Tonally the hybrid amp was a shade drier and 'harder': tighter and more controlled. Yet

although I preferred the Reference 8.8, objectively I could not say the a120 sounded worse - simply different. Opinion, for or against, would depend heavily on the rest of your system and personal taste.

In terms of rhythmic timing, the a120 seemed a shade faster than the Reference 8.8. The music felt more energetic and lively, with increased attack and immediacy. At the same time the presentation felt very coherent and together. Although the musical impression was 'faster' and more incisive, the ear was not assaulted by a welter of uncoordinated leading edges. Whether this was down to the use of a tube at the front-end is hard to say, but my guess is it had a lot to do with it.

Build quality and finish are both excellent. The a120's front panel looks simple and uncluttered, with crisp lines and clean styling. There's a button for power on/off, a volume control knob, input selection, and that's it. Volume level and the input chosen are displayed on a blue LED panel. The front panel is made from solid brushed alloy, and the knobs are solid too. All this creates an air of quiet reliability and feelings of high class.

Operationally the Consonance a120 is pretty straightforward. As soon as you switch on, the amp goes into

▶ standby and the motorised volume control returns to zero. There's a wait of about one-minute to allow the tube to warm up and stabilise. Then the amp is ready to use. During operation the amp runs fairly cool. With around 90W output it's very powerful, and seems to have bags of headroom. On a personal level I didn't care for the way the volume control reset itself to zero when you first switched on. I'd have preferred it had the amp remembered your previous setting. The volume control is motorised, but in an unusual way. Basically a slight turn of the knob increases or decreases output by one step. Even if you turn the knob quickly it still changes at much the same (slow) pace. The easiest way to increase/decrease volume levels quickly is via the remote handset.

Three conventional, unbalanced line-level inputs are offered using gold-plated

RCA phono sockets, plus a set of balanced inputs via gold-plated XLR sockets. There's two unbalanced pre-amp outputs which could be used to drive sub-woofers or an external power amp, but you've no phono stage. Noise is very low, being around 100dB below full output, and the other specifications like distortion, intermodulation, bandwidth, crosstalk

and phase linearity are all excellent. All this goes to show that, whatever the valve in the a120 might be doing, it's not producing pleasant additive distortion effects. On paper the amp measures as well - if not better - than comparable

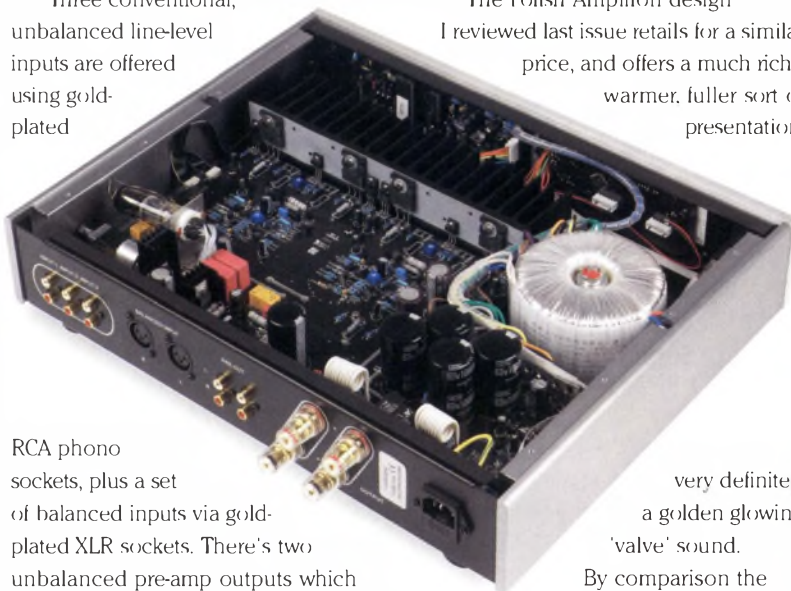
all transistor designs. But sonically there's a greater sense of air and space, making the music sound freer and more liberated. Certainly, I liked the sound of the Consonance a120, feeling it offered a nice half-way house between pure valve or transistor designs.

The Polish Amplifon design I reviewed last issue retails for a similar price, and offers a much richer, warmer, fuller sort of presentation,

very definitely a golden glowing 'valve' sound. By comparison the Consonance a120 sounded tauter and more immediate, with more obvious control and greater dynamic attack. I'd say it's sonically closer to the best transistor designs, rather than all-tube amps, but nonetheless there are

definitely elements of the best of both. Bass is very good: deep, powerful and firmly controlled. The specifications quote a very high damping factor of 500 or greater, indicating that the output has an impressively low source impedance. I happened to be using the a120 while ringing the changes with Chord's Blu CD transport and DAC-64, and was impressed by the way it revealed the various differences.

It seemed to mirror each change very faithfully, rather than imposing its own signature on things. The Consonance a120 is definitely an amp to add to your shortlist if shopping for something in this price range. It's involving and exciting to listen to, while remaining relatively easy on the ear. I liked it very much indeed, and found it a pleasure to live with.



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS	
Type:	Hybrid integrated amplifier
Input Valve:	1x 6H30
Inputs:	3x single-ended line-level 1x balanced XLR
Outputs:	2x single-ended pre-outs
Power Output:	90w/cn
Dimensions (WxHxD):	430x80x320mm
Weight:	15Kg
Price:	£795
<b>UK Distributor:</b>	
Alium Audio	
Tel. (44)(0)1273 325901	
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DAP-777

EMPHASIS

LOCK

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# Reimyo DAP-777

## Digital To Analogue Converter

by Roy Gregory

Combak Corporation's Reimyo CDP-777 received a rave review from AS in Issue 29. Combining the structural and vibrational theories that underpin the Harmonix accessories with the established JVC 20bit K2 converter technology employed to create the highly regarded XRCD discs, it redefined his expectations of the silver disc. There again, you might respond, at £9500 so it damn well should. And you'd have a point.

Of course, the other problem with products that rewrite your personal rulebook is that, by definition, it becomes difficult to place them in a meaningful overall context. So, having received the full effect of Alan's enthusiasm, undiluted by the intervention of the written word (and the opportunity it offers for reflection) it seemed sensible to investigate further. Which is when the notion of reviewing the Reimyo DAC first entered my head. I mean, good as the CDP-777 undoubtedly is, it's also pretty expensive, putting it beyond the reach of all but a lucky few. The DAC on the other hand, is considerably more affordable while promising similar care in its physical construction and the same digital to analogue electronics. At £3200, give or take a few pence, it promises stellar sound and the potential for even better value: especially as the £2500 to £3500 bracket looks set to become the hot price range for serious CD replay.

Like most DACs, the DAP-777 is housed in a slim casework. Unlike most, it's far from featureless. Beside the on/off switch, a four-position rotary switch on the left of the front-panel selects from the

four available inputs. These are, in order: an AES/EBU balanced XLR input, a 75 Ohm BNC, a 75 Ohm co-axial RCA/phono and a Tos-link optical input. A row of four green LEDs shows you which one you've selected. Next to those are another three indicators showing pre-emphasis, data lock and any errors. A final bank of three LEDs tells you which of the three available sampling frequencies is currently in use. And before you get all excited and start thinking high bit-rate signals, this is a straight Red Book DAC, so your options are 48K, 44.1K and 32K. That translates to CD and DAT. If you expect the DAP-777 to update your digital front-end(s) then you are going to be sadly disappointed. If however, you want to maximise your pleasure from CD replay, that is quite another matter.

The back panel offers the required socketry for the four different inputs, along with a choice of RCA/phono or balanced XLR analogue outputs. There's also an IEC mains input, a chassis ground connection (which I found necessary in order to achieve hum free operation in my system) and a small toggle switch that allows you to reverse absolute phase. Note that this is a one-time setting rather than the front-panel fiddle switch that you so often find on DACs. The cynic in me suggests that

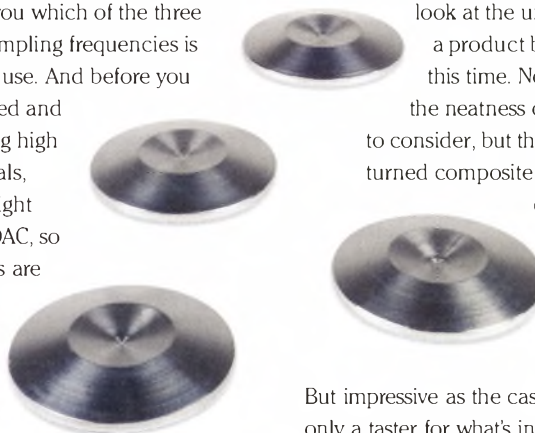
they're more a result of desperate designers trying to find something, anything to interest potential buyers, than because they are necessary or really useful. I'll take the Reimyo approach every time thanks.

The other thing to notice about the DAP-777 is the simple elegance of its casework. You might not normally

look at the underside of a product but it's worth it this time. Not only is there the neatness of the fittings to consider, but the beautifully turned composite feet whose conical profile engages a set of large, cupped discs supplied with the player.

But impressive as the casework is, it's only a taster for what's inside.

At the heart of the digital processor is the same JVC 20bit K2 chipset found in the CDP-777. It takes the 16bit input signal and converts it to 20bit resolution with 8x oversampling. A good starting point, it nonetheless depends for its results on the way it's implemented. There are no guarantees in audio, and fewer still in digital audio. Lift the lid on the Reimyo and you'll begin to appreciate what care and attention to detail really means. There are the obligatory separate power supplies for the digital and analogue sections, but it's the execution that really stands out. Each element is a work of art, linked by bespoke wiring. There may be better-built products out there but I've not seen one. Bear in mind too, that much of

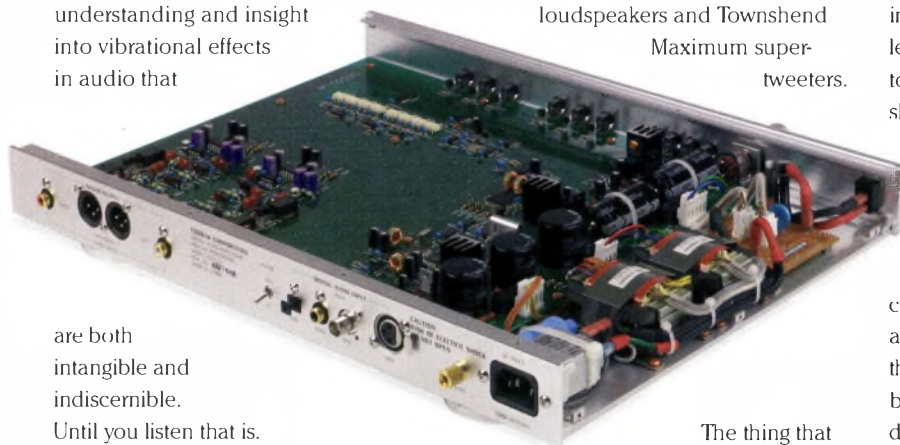


► the effort that's been expended on the DAP-777's interior is invisible. Essentially a co-operative effort, JVC supplied the digital electronics and expertise to Kyodo Denshi who actually built the boards, with overall design and structural details dictated by Combak Corporation. It's the latter's understanding and insight into vibrational effects in audio that

output of the Wadia 861SE for most of my listening, although Burmester's excellent CD-Player 001 and the Rega Jupiter also played their parts. The rest of the system relied on the Hovland electronics (HP100, HP200 and RADIA) hooked up with Nordost Valhalla to the Living Voice OBX-R2 loudspeakers and Townshend Maximum super-tweeters.

immediate apparent. It's an interesting example because it's one of those tracks that starts sparse and builds by stages to a single, climactic point, allowing you to play with both ends of the dynamic scale. From the opening phrases you'll notice how much more solidity and presence there is to the individual instruments. Listen carefully to the low-level percussion. What was a tinny drum top and a rattly cymbal take on body, shape and definition. You can hear the volume of air behind the drum skin, the subtle rhythmic interplay between the cymbal taps and the drum counterpoint. The spread and contribution of the two guitars is clearer, their relationship better defined, as is the structure of their chords. And the voice? Solid, fluid and smooth, with beautifully centred notes, picking out the deceptively simple, almost naïve melody.

While all that's going on you should take time to appreciate the quality of the blackness behind the instruments; a velvety density and presence that leaves the Wadia (no slouch in this regard) sounding grey and insipid. Here lies the root of that presence, founded in superior dynamic range and micro-dynamic definition. It makes the sound more immediate and louder, confusing direct comparisons.



are both intangible and indiscernible.

Until you listen that is.

The first few bars of the very first track will tell you that this DAC is doing something special. How can I be so certain in apportioning credit? Well, having played with a few of Combak's Harmonix accessories, I can vouch for their astonishing effects. So much of what the DAP-777 is doing comes from common ground with those experiences that Combak's influence has to be the common factor, either in how they do things, or in the clarity of the sonic goals they set. Either way, the results are extremely impressive, taking undoubtedly excellent ingredients to produce something even greater than the sum of its parts.

The comprehensive input options on the DAP-777 offer the opportunity to connect more than one transport component although given the limited decoding options this seems pretty unlikely. Instead, it's more a case of selecting the best one for you. I didn't try the TosLink optical input, but the rest were put through the mill before I eventually settled on the BNC in preference to the AES/EBU, the co-axial RCA input trailing in a poor third. I hooked the Reimyo up to the digital

The thing that becomes immediately apparent with the DAP-777 in circuit is that it brings an organic warmth and body to the sound. Not the cloying, rosy glow of an aging valve amp, but an inner colour and harmonic correctness that brings weight and presence, body and a natural roundness to instruments



without slowing their energy or clogging their acoustic space. Let's take the beautifully structured 'How Am I Different' from Aimee Mann's *Bachelor No. 2* (the Mo-Fi re-issue UDSACD 2025, playing the hybrid CD layer). The Wadia alone delivers an impressively stable, defined, mobile and involving performance. But add the DAP-777, connected via the BNC input and the gains are dramatic and

But careful matching with an SPL meter confirms that equal levels really are louder on the DAP-777 – if you see what I mean.

As the track builds you'll appreciate the extra, propulsive power and weight in bass lines as well as the way

► everything stays separate, regardless of level. The integrity of individual instruments is maintained without resorting to hyper-definition and the kind of over-damped, sat-on sound that seems to go hand in hand with musical control. The Reimyo is the proverbial iron fist in the velvet glove, allowing music to breath while keeping a deft bridle on proceedings, with a light enough touch that you don't even notice it. You simply enjoy the benefits. What took me by surprise was the depth of musical insight that resulted. *Bachelor No.2* is a nice recording, but it still came out of a mainstream rock studio.

Minimalist it isn't.

The DAP-777

lets you hear the studio, the way the album and tracks have been assembled. So as each layer gets added to the cake, building to the climax of 'How Am

I Different' you hear it drop into place, around the core of the close-miked vocal. Does that detract? Far from it, indeed, quite the opposite. There's the creative use of compression, used to give the impression of steadily increasing level. Does it offend? On the contrary, it allows you to enjoy the skill with which the whole jigsaw has been assembled into a musically coherent whole.

Minimalist acoustic recordings are even better served. 'Waltz For Debby' with the Bill Evans Trio (from the XRCD issue), familiar as it is, is rejuvenated by the DAP-777. Scott LaFaro's bass is present in body and soul, its internal volume and size apparent, the complex notes redolent with their natural harmonics and pellucid thumbprint. Pitch and placement are spot on, comments that apply to Evans' relaxed piano lines too. The weight, poise and pacing of his notes is so natural that they simply seem to fall into place, the convoluted lines built on the simple

theme extending effortlessly into the first up-shift. The insistent energy and staccato sprays of the opening drum patterns lock straight into the loose yet lucid rhythmic patterns and suddenly we're away, the bass picking up the pace to track the accelerating runs along the piano keyboard. It's a simple piece, but the weight and inner complexity revealed so easily by the Reimyo brings it vividly to life. Given the source material, perhaps it's not surprising that the DAP-777 turns in such a stellar performance, but to



transform

such a hackneyed old chestnut speaks volumes about the converter's musical rather than hi-fi integrity. It communicates on such a fundamental level that it easily overcomes the burden of familiarity.

The DAC does react to changes in transport. The Burmester 001 introduces a weighty, dynamic yet crystalline quality, which whilst dramatic, lacks the musical integrity and fluidity of line that the Wadia delivers. To some extent this complicates the overall judgement of the DAP-777, especially given the lack of an AES/EBU or BNC output on the German player. However, what we can say is that I've yet to discover a context in which the Reimyo isn't musically preferable. It's essential fluidity, combined with the harmonic complexity, weight and dynamic coherence that go with it, make digital as musically convincing as I've ever heard it. What this DAC would do with the Metronome Kalista transport, or

indeed, its own partnering front-end, could easily redefine my own expectations of digital replay. It's doing an impressive enough job on the end of the 861SE! If it has any substantial weaknesses, short of analogue levels of grace and intimacy, I've yet to discover them. Meanwhile I'm just happy to enjoy a product that, unfashionable as DACs might be, has seriously increased my enjoyment of silver disc. The DAP-777

leaps straight in at the top of my digital wish list.

Whether you're disenchanted with silver disc, or looking to improve your existing set-up, it should be at the top of yours too. ➤

#### TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Digital to analogue converter
Chipset:	JVC 20bit K2
Sampling Frequencies:	48, 44.1, 32kHz
Digital Inputs:	1x AES/EBU 1x BNC 1x RCA co-axial 1x TosLink optical
Analogue Outputs:	1pr balanced XLR 1pr single-ended RCA
Output Level -	
Single-Ended:	2.45V
Balanced:	4.9V
Dimensions (WxHxD):	430 x 65.2 x 363mm
Weight:	4.7 kg
Price:	£3200 inc VAT

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# The Living Voice Avatar OBX-R2 Loudspeakers or Little Speaker in the Big City

by Scott Markwell

"...breakfast in Los Angeles... macrobiotic stuff...". That is what it said, best that I can remember, in the Pink Floyd song that has been going round and round in my head ever since the last time I listened to that damn Atom Heart Mother album. The same thing happens with almost anything you play through the Living Voice Avatar OBXs: you hear the song or the piece once, and you are then forever humming it and hearing it in your head over and over for the next several days. With great clarity and mental rendition of detail. It is an uncanny thing, and one that forces me to really think about what these speakers are doing that is so different from so many others out there (that are just dirtying up the field for anyone who is seriously trying to make a better mousetrap). Kevin Scott of Living Voice has kept his focused gaze front and centre, avoiding the usual pitfalls of more pedestrian, mediocre loudspeaker design and has managed to hit the nail squarely on the head.

I have been ruminating on this for a long while, even as I crossed the Great Divide to get to my new job in California. Having heard these speakers with a wide variety of electronics, and in a very different room from the one in the house where I lived for the last year and a half in New York, allowed me to have a sonic memory on how to proceed once I got to my new home in Los Angeles (yet another cathartic

experience). First I had to move house, with all of the love/hate trauma that is associated with that endeavor, and then I had to find out that the lovely speaker in short pants and knickers that I had known and come to love on the east coast, had grown up and turned into a still reasonably diminutive, but now potent and self-aware, diva of stunning proportions on the west coast. One who now has her lungs and can belt it out like Garland or croon sweetly to you like Fitzgerald in a particularly sultry mood. Day after day, these loudspeakers continue to teach me new things about both my record collection and my own emotional state of mind. With the advent of my re-setting up in LA, it has become quite apparent to me that the Avatar OBX loudspeaker is both a reference quality domestic listening tool of the highest order, and a modern classic in terms of its apparent simplicity and clean, almost stark physical design.

Equally at home in a long and narrow, classic shoebox listening room as in a commoner, rather more squarish one, the OBXs evoke first and foremost a feeling of exceptional control and agility, both tonally and dynamically. Their basic tonal balance is at once instantly appealing and smacking of a definite "rightness". We have all listened to speaker systems that sounded perhaps phenomenally good in one respect or another: great imaging, soundstaging, bass impact,

ethereal high-frequency reproduction, or a beguilingly sweet rendition of female vocalists. But so many otherwise fine loudspeakers are marred by what turns out in the end to be unacceptable levels of coloration. The OBXs simply do not have that vice. They may err slightly on the side of a lightness of tone, but never at the expense of overall tonal balance. Instead their ability to project energy and define micro-dynamic levels brings vivid, lifelike colour to instruments and voices. What I'm referring to as lightness is more to do with a deft agility and speed of response than any loss of harmonic energy. They're just not clogged or bloated like a lot of speakers that squeeze ever more bandwidth from overloaded cabinet volumes.

This balance is key to the loudspeaker's success. Already excelling in terms of agile dynamic response and transient behaviour, the OBXs manage to generate a well-crafted soundstage and a high level of dimensionality to boot. But their finely judged tonal balance and lack of any overt colourations lend them a neutral overall demeanor that tends to just disappear when you play them. They stand behind the music rather than between you and it. I have found that I can hear an amplifier, pre-amplifier, digital or phono component far easier than I can hear the loudspeakers. OK, if I turn off the



▶ sub-woofer I can tell that power response below about 50-60 Hz is being truncated, but there is no penalty otherwise. Astonishingly honest and impressively detailed, yet never ruthlessly revealing in a bleached or X-ray sense, the OBXs are capable, in a room of reasonable proportion (mine is such a one and measures 17' x 13' with an 8' ceiling) of convincingly reproducing a scaled-down facsimile of a full symphony orchestra or grand opera. What they do with pop, jazz, blues, chamber music, and smaller orchestral compositions is also convincing enough, to be sure, but it is with full orchestral fare that the R2s, for me, reach their zenith and fulfill their true potential.

These simple-looking, yet beautifully veneered and finished, sharply square-edged box speakers may seem like nothing special at first glance. Their relative lack of weight might perhaps suggest an overly-resonant or shouty box. Those hard edges might raise suspicions regarding strong diffraction effects from the front baffle. But on second look, and with naught but a quick listen, there is no doubt that this is a transducer that actually has a chance of getting it right. The two-per-speaker coated paper bass/midrange drivers are manufactured by Vifa, use a rather flexible foam surround, and are said to be well-matched as a quad set for a pair of speakers. Laid out in the classic D'Appolito arrangement, like the rest of the Auditorium series, the OBX stands out from its two junior siblings in the line in its use of the Scanspeak Revelator tweeter, one of the very best silk-dome tweeters

on the market, and one that appears in a fair number of serious flagship designs. This excellent tweeter really makes the package, and, along with the sophisticated crossover, is directly responsible for the

OBX's superbly smooth and detailed upper octaves.



The other and more obvious (and expensive) thing that sets the OBX apart from the two more affordable members in the Auditorium line is its outboard crossover. A premium-parts-

only roster of components inside the sleek, low boxes includes proprietary non-inductive wire wound resistors and Hovland discrete film and foil Musicaps. I confess that I used to be a bit sceptical about the differences that the use of particular brands and models of component parts in things like crossovers were said to cause. Then I got the chance to listen to a lot of different component designs and came to see that a truly clever crossover (or any other circuit) will almost surely sound its best if proper design is combined with knowledgeable and seasoned judgment when it comes to parts selection. Scott's outboard unit is transparent enough that I can instantly hear the differences in cables, partnering electronics, any change in the kit upstream of the speakers. He supplied some copper ribbon-type speaker cables for use with the speakers, and these did sound quite good, but in the end I found I preferred the system fully wired (as sparingly as possible) with Nordost Valhalla. This is, even when keeping lengths to a minimum, quite a costly, some would argue insane, undertaking over and above the cost of the speakers, but I can assure you that if you have the means to do it, the Valhallas indeed offer a considerably better glimpse into the performance of the OBX than any other cable I have tried so far. What "considerably" translates into in terms of pounds sterling will, of course, differ from person to person, but the real meat of the matter here is that the speakers and crossover are transparent and revealing enough that you can not only be confident you will hear exactly what your speaker cable investment is doing for you, you will have it handed to you on a silver (or silver-plated copper) platter. The only crossovers I have heard in the past ▶

► couple of years that allow something like this level of see-through quality are the ones that Carl Marchisotto is designing for his Alon speakers (soon to be known by the Nola name). I say that if these two can manage to design such fine, nearly invisible crossovers for their products, more should be able to figure it out. Seems simple to say, but I still hear plenty of loudspeakers that, if nothing else were changed, would reap serious sonic rewards from a better crossover design.

As I understand it, the latest version of the crossover that I got with these speakers is one generation farther along than the one that came with the set of OBXs that the Editor reviewed several issues back. The new version offered the opportunity for a second opinion on a product that's since become something of a benchmark, an opinion from someone coming to the speakers with no history or prior experience. When it comes to system matching, Scott's clever and effective crossover is just one of the factors that suits the OBX to lowish powered amps. He tends to eschew the really flea powered designs, where output power can be counted on the digits of a single hand, but move up to 20 or so Watts and the sound produced can have a devastatingly pure and addictive quality with certain types of music, if not the raw power to play at elevated levels. Crossover losses seem to me to be almost as low as if he direct-wired the main drivers to the amplifiers. Anything over 50 wpc with



these babies gets you into serious rock-and-roll territory. The sensitivity of the OBX is quite high at a rated 94

dB/watt, and with an impedance curve that comes in with a nominal value of 6 ohms, the speakers are remarkably easy to drive. In Los Angeles, I achieved excellent results with both a 30 WPC class-A Vaic 52B stereo SET amp and a Viva 300B amp using EAT 300BX valves that made the amp good for 23 WPC. Just for fun, I tried a 40 WPC Denon receiver and a 100 WPC Gamut SS

stereo amp, but the sound was best with the valves.

Admittedly, when I played an LP like Solti's Decca/London recording of Verdi's *Othello*, with its opening passages full of pounding, wind-swept chords and off-stage thunder, I could bottom out the two SET amps in the bass long before the rest of the spectrum gave up the ghost. But recordings like that, with almost supernatural power in the bottom octave, are relatively rare\* and with the vast majority of recordings of any format, true bottom-octave power and weight is something that does not have to be worried over most of the time. The point I am driving at here is that if your amplifier taste leans a bit towards the SET or other little (usually) weenie-sounding designs (despite the horribly high cost of some of the damn things), they'll still drive these speakers very effectively. So long as you can come to grips with the reality of volume constraints, really great small amps will sound really great, right up until they run out of power. So you have to use judgment and manage your expectations if you elect to run these speakers with really low-powered amps.

But if you run them with



an amp that dips below the 20 Watt level then

you risk missing out on the full dynamic envelope these speakers can deliver – and that's one of

In the case of CD and other digital formats, there are Rap recordings and the odd disc of whatever music that actually has a lot of real, extended bass; however, much of the time that vaunted "digital-quality" bass is nothing more than an embarrassing mess

▶ their massive strengths.

There is a separate issue of how well a given combination of amplifier and speaker will sound when partnered in a system. Bear in mind that many smaller valve amps, regardless of other factors, simply do not sound that great driving some speakers, and it most often has to do with a combination of the impedance curve of the speaker and how efficient the design is at turning electricity into sound. With the OBX the speaker is a benign enough load that most any amplifier can couple with it and produce music. But you will need more than 8 WPC if you expect to play any of it really loud.

Do not get me wrong: that *Othello* I alluded to above is a real butt-kicker in terms of bandwidth and dynamics. With the 30 WPC Vaic 52B amp in the system I can play it at a very respectable volume, to where the room rattles and shakes like mad (of course I cheat and use an Alon Thunderbolt subwoofer, but I digress). With 80-100 WPC available, you are actually capable of easily overloading the speakers in the bass, but the levels invoked at such power levels are way out of hand for anything but out and out abuse in a home setting. Trust me when I tell you that they will play loudly enough for most all of your needs.

I could go on all day and just ramble around with all sorts of descriptions of the OBXs' performance, but I think that I need to get a capsule around these speakers, make you understand what they do in a nutshell. Whilst you'd never mistake the OBX for an electrostatic, in one way at least it reminds me of the Quad. Just occasionally, once in a while and with a following wind, on certain notes and at certain times, it can almost fool you

into thinking, just for a moment, that a given musical sound is real. That is priceless in and of itself: That the OBX does it so often and with so little fanfare, just sort of slipping it under your guard is doubly impressive. This is a truly transparent speaker system, one that sounds tonally honest and dynamically uninhibited. The lack of compression and the superb aliveness that the OBX displays with all kinds of

software it is playing than of the speakers themselves. With both a human warmth and a more literal and unflinching ability to simply grab a note and explode it into the room, the OBXs allow you to forget about the process and go



music lends it an authenticity and communication that cannot be made up for in other areas. Above 100 Hz, the Avatar OBX is one of those rare birds that sings with a purity and even-handed frequency response that helps it to disappear from the musical picture. It makes you much more aware of the rest of your system and the

directly into Escape from Reality Mode. What sets the OBXs apart is their ability to encompass a complete musical performance and all its sense, not just parts

of it. Of course, you can't have compact dimensions, efficiency and deep, deep bass, although what the OBXs deliver is beautifully judged

▶ and more than sufficient for most requirements. If it fails to meet your needs then it's easily sorted with a quality sub. But even alone, many of you will find the bass of these speakers to be more than adequate, certainly in terms of quality. The steep transient attack and tactile feel and sound of a tuned bass drum is easily discerned, as is, almost more importantly, the decay of the note and the way that it resonates in the hall or room. Double basses have texture and air around them, helped by the speed and micro-dynamic precision of the speakers.

For some folks this will never be a serious high-end speaker. They aren't big enough and they certainly aren't expensive or exotic enough. They also won't play at the superhuman levels that some folks seem to need. They will not fill an absolutely huge room with high-level sound. For that you will

have to go to pure horns or the like. Perhaps right back to Living Voice for an Air Scout... And the OBXs are not going to be your first choice if you have a hard time paying for good things in a small package. Other than that, I am seriously hard-pressed to find any substantial criticism of these speakers. They are petite (which many would see as an advantage) and they are pricey enough to cause pause, but there is something so seductive in their natural tonal balance and their dynamic agility that they can easily win both your heart and your head.

This apparently modest offering from Kevin Scott seriously begs the question of when is less more? At first glance the seemingly simple and unadorned boxes that make up this system belie their ability to musically convince. But make no mistake.

At \$7995 in the USA and around \$4500 in the UK, the Living Voice Avatar OBX is a formidably good loudspeaker in a very manageably sized box, and must literally be heard correctly to be believed. When I say correctly, it's in recognition that revealing as these speakers are, they'll tell you with less than spectacular sound if the system doing the driving isn't up to the job. It might be poorly matched or poorly tuned, but either way the results will be the same. And many of you will blame the speaker because other speakers don't reveal the problem. Properly set up and on-song, these speakers are capable of the mesmerizing trick of allowing one, for a time, to suspend disbelief and simply revel in the music. Very few loudspeakers can deliver the musical goods, but the Avatar OBX is definitely one of them. ▶+

# Those Crossovers

by Roy Gregory

As Scot alludes, the R2 designation in the OBX's nomenclature refers to a revision in the external crossover. Along the way the veneers have been improved and the density of the cabinet material has also changed slightly but significantly. That might not seem like reason enough to conduct a complete new review, but if you hear the differences between the new and old designs then you'll appreciate that the R2 really does represent a totally different speaker. Also, given that it occupies a reference position for both JK and myself it has become something of a benchmark around here. Under those circumstances, a separate, completely external assessment (reality check) seemed like a good idea. The only problem being that, by definition, SM

had no experience with the older crossover and was thus unable to comment on any benefits accruing from the new one.

Putting the crossover in an external box is an obvious way to improve the performance of any loudspeaker. You isolate it from the magnetic fields associated with the drivers, and more importantly, you isolate it from the mechanical interference inevitable within the cabinet. After all, a loudspeaker cabinet is just a box with a number of vibrating elements attached to it. The whole thing is going to shake, along with the air inside it. All things considered, putting the crossover in another, separate box seems more than just a good idea. It could be considered essential to decent performance.

Why then isn't it standard practice?

Well, it's not without serious implications when it comes to practicality and cost. Given that the box is the most expensive (and problematic) part of any loudspeaker, doubling the cabinet count is very bad for the price of your product. Even using generic boxes doesn't cut costs significantly, and risks compromising performance through materials (down to things like eddy currents in aluminium extrusions) and just as importantly, aesthetics. Let's not forget that speakers are the one part of the system you really can't hide. Which brings us to the second issue which is the floor space required. One option is to stand the speaker atop the crossover cabinet, but the physical connection between ▶

▶ the two largely defeats the object of the exercise. It seems pretty dumb to take the time and trouble to go through all that effort and expense only to compromise the end result.

So, accepting the notion of a no-compromise approach means just that. You're going to have to accept the extra cost and the extra boxes that go with it. And finally, you're going to have to accept the cost of the extra cabling that runs from the crossover to the speaker. And don't think that you can get away with some piece of old tat that just happens to be lying around or left over. It is essential to maintain the integrity of the cable loom if you want to achieve the best results. Indeed, it is essential in order to achieve acceptable results! That means running the same cable from amp to crossover and crossover to speaker, which is another expense on top of the cost of the speakers and crossovers themselves.

By now you might well be wondering if the whole rigmarole is worthwhile. But return to our original premise and the primacy of performance and the benefits are easy to appreciate. Besides, for those that question the sanity of such obsessive behavior, Living Voice offer the more conventional Avatar. However, it's interesting to note that it is outsold significantly by the more expensive and complex OBX, so it seems fair to conclude that the benefits of the external crossover are both significant and readily audible.

All that before we even get to the issue of the new version versus the old one. As to the physical differences between the two, the newer one uses fewer components to achieve the same result. However, as anyone who has ever

built crossovers will appreciate, achieving that goal is a far from simple process and places even greater demands on component quality and selection. The main difference between the two crossovers is that the R2 version dispenses with the Zobel network employed in the original. Theoretically speaking, this capacitor/resistor network compensates for rising high-frequency impedance, making the speaker an easier load as well as maintaining a flat phase response. However, the OBX is unusual in that there is no series attenuation at all in the crossover. The subtractive element in the Zobel network was audible as a slight loss of air and energy at the extreme top of the speaker. But its elimination required the revoicing of the mid-bass

filter, a process involving the tortuous removal of windings from the in-house wound, air-cored inductor, a quarter winding at a time, and then listening to the results! The end result shares only two components with the original version.

The other major change is the relocation of the LCR network from a position at the crossover input to one between the filter and the drive-units. According to Kevin Scott this allows greater control and authority in the bass. Finally, where the crossover used to employ Clarostat resistors, these have now been replaced by a proprietary design produced specifically for Living Voice.

Externally, the box for the new version is identical to the old, the rack width cabinet being constructed from MDF and supported on three steel cones. Internally, the hard-wired circuit is built onto an MDF slab that sits on a thick layer of piano felt, loosely located by retaining slats. It uses the same, supremely practical five-way binding posts and the same colour coding for the speaker outputs, whose non-standard nature (while absolutely necessary) means that you need to exercise considerable care in making connections if you want to avoid getting something out of phase. Do it slowly, check it one step at a time, and then, ideally get someone else to check your checking. Alternatively, get your dealer to properly colour code your chosen cables and it becomes perfectly straightforward.

Listening to the two crossovers is a salutary experience, making you realise just how accommodating the ear can be as well as how critical crossovers are to speaker performance. We might get all excited about the far more visible drive-units and their technology, but they are poor slaves to the quality of the network they're connected to. It might be visually invisible but sadly, all too often, the same can't be said of its audible impact.

Changing from the old crossover to the new (and let's remember just ▶

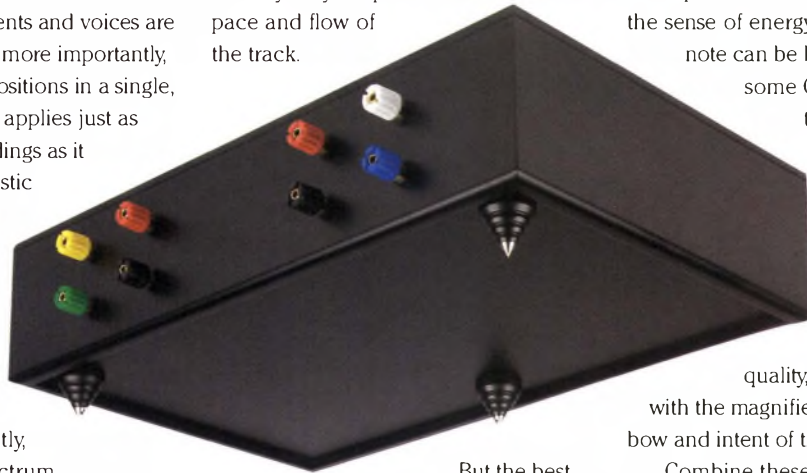


► how happy we were with this speaker in its original incarnation) produces an astonishing transformation. The first and most obvious difference is an increase in overall spatial coherence and transparency. Instruments and voices are far more focused, but more importantly, they take up proper positions in a single, complete acoustic. It applies just as much to studio recordings as it does to minimal acoustic ones, a fact that reflects an increase in evenness in the speakers' top to bottom frequency response, but much more importantly, its overall energy spectrum.

Okay, lots of fancy words and hi-fi terminology: what does it actually mean in terms of musical reproduction? Playing Eliza Gilkyson's haunting song 'Separated' (*Land Of Milk And Honey*, Red House Records RHR CD 174) with the old crossovers you are aware of a patchwork assembly of different instruments. With the R2 version, the guitar steps away from the left hand speaker, the bass steps back and the music starts to happen in the same plane, coming from the same place and at the same time. With a stark recording such as this the effect is stunning, rather like reassembling the shards of a broken mirror to recreate a single, familiar image. It speaks volumes about the increased phase coherence of the new design.

The new crossover is also far more expressive when it comes to the shape and distribution of energy within the note. There's a leaner, clearer quality to the bass that extends across the whole range (as noted by SM) but that simply reflects the rounded warmth and

emphasis of the original. Now you can hear the pluck and release of individual notes far more clearly, the shape the player gives them, the way they shape the pace and flow of the track.



But the best I've kept for last. Put these two qualities together and they deliver the mid-band and treble purity that so impressed SM. Gilkyson's voice becomes more focussed and precise, but it also becomes far more fluid and natural. It loses a grainy texture that overlays the older model, allowing the lyric to



communicate far more deftly and directly. The shape she puts to words, the feeling behind them is far more obvious and affecting. The four voices that make up the choir on 'Peace Call' are beautifully separated, not just in pitch and tone, but in vocal technique as well. The clarity and

natural energy spectrum that the R2 delivers gives instruments their own, distinct tonal identity and character. The harmonic structure and colour of the notes produced is vivid and individual, the sense of energy and intensity in a note can be breathtaking. Just play some Cello to marvel at the rich complexity of the music that swells and tumbles from the body of the instrument. It's a heady, intoxicating quality, rich and redolent with the magnified energy of the bow and intent of the player.

Combine these effects and what you have is a far more fluid and more naturally proportioned presentation. It makes the musical image easier to accept, the system easier to forget, the musical message much easier to understand. The magnitude of the improvement is out of all proportion with expectations, the results amounting to what is to all intents a brand new speaker.

In the process it elevates the performance to quite another level, making the current OBX an even more accomplished and refined communicator than the (already impressive) older versions. Yet the price for the basic finishes remains the same. The really good news is that the new crossovers can be added to existing speakers. The cost of the exercise is £1050 plus the return of your old outboard boxes, for which you receive a brand new set in return. Given the nature of the sonic benefits accrued, that represents a huge bargain and this upgrade should be at the top of every OBX owners wish list. Don't delay – hear them today.



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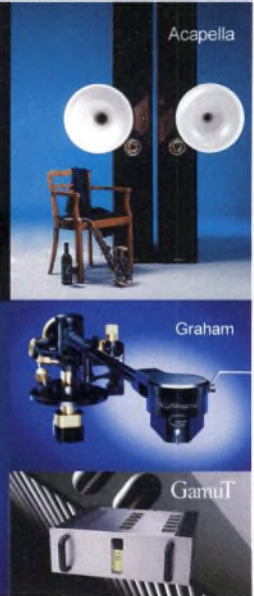
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# Krell KAV 400xi Integrated Amplifier

by Chris Thomas

For many people Krell are the archetypal American high-end audio company. They were really the first major player in the on/off British love affair with the American sound and offered a genuine, if somewhat expensive alternative to Linn and Naim, who were beginning to have things pretty much their own way back in the 80's. But, perhaps more importantly, they paved the way for a plethora of products from across the Atlantic that have come and gone with alarming regularity. One of the foremost amongst these was Mark Levinson who had achieved a small but growing market acceptance here, only to be left floating in audio limbo which is where they seem to be at the moment. When I think back over all the equipment that has crossed my path in the last 20 years it is somewhat surprising to me that there has been only one piece of Krell. I have heard various bits and pieces in other people's systems but my only real personal exposure to Krell came back in the mid to late 90's and that was a week or so with a KAV 300 which was their first foray into the integrated amplifier market. Now, audio memory can indeed be a fickle and misleading thing upon which to draw, but I remember this one particularly well as the person who loaned it to me was a massive and somewhat evangelical fan of the company. Its fanfare was that it showed a real glimpse of Krell's sonic abilities in a single, more affordable box and we've all heard that one before. Sometimes it's true but sometimes the badge ends up giving the product a degree of credibility that its performance just doesn't deserve. As I recall, I thought the single-box Krell to be a decent if uninvolved amplifier that left my consciousness as soon as it left my house. But the latest version of Krell's single-box amplifier is a different

proposition indeed and until something better comes along (and there are several contenders I still haven't heard, including the Lavardin), is likely to become something of a benchmark for all such devices between £2000 and £3000.

Efficient is a word often used when a piece of hi-fi is being damned with faint praise, but it can be used without cynicism to describe many things

about the impeccably constructed KAV-400xi, which is built around a huge 800VA toroidal transformer that occupies roughly half the internal space. For a start the simple but rather elegant construction of aluminium panels bolted together and finished with solid, polished corner pieces gives the amplifier an ultra clean and unfussy look, as do the front panel controls including the constant rotating volume control and the level indicator readout.

At the rear this Krell offers three line inputs plus a tape in/out and a pre-out, all via RCA phono sockets, plus a single pair of XLR balanced inputs while speaker connections are made through a single pair of high quality WBT connectors. It is though a bit of a shame that there couldn't have been a second pair of balanced inputs squeezed onto the rear panel, given Krell and other American manufacturers virtual obsession with this method of connection. All of these inputs are

controllable through the Theatre Throughput option whereby the level control of any selectable channel can be passed to a separate processor incorporating a pre-amplifier, thereby eliminating the need for two volume controls within the system. This ability is becoming de rigueur for integrated amplifiers in these days of home entertainment systems.

The remote handset is interesting and different. This pocket calculator sized unit with its lithium battery can provide remote operation for Krell

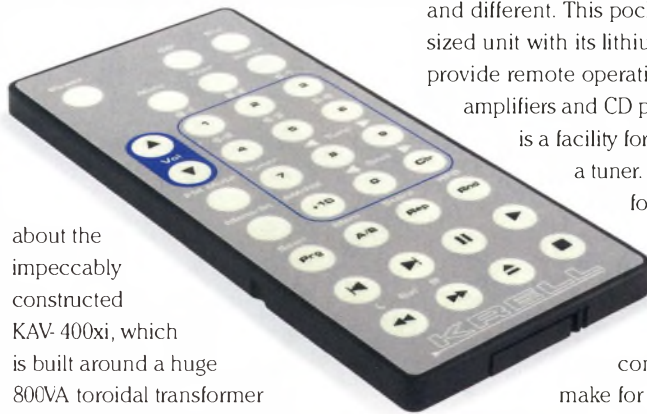
amplifiers and CD players, plus there is a facility for the control of

a tuner. All this makes for quite a lot of buttons all of which glow in the dark, but so many

controls seldom make for intuitive

operation though the layout here makes it easier than most. But without deliberately trying to be hair-splittingly overly critical I do feel that Krell have missed a trick here and should have designed a solid physical feature into the handset which would make it plain, without looking, which way round it was as it is inevitably the wrong way whenever you pick it up, especially at night. This, plus the amplifier's relatively narrow angle of acceptance, means that the remote control can become quite irritating quite quickly, although I was delighted to note that it operated my Naim CDS 3. This enabled me to temporarily dispose of the unsuitably poor remote that Naim are currently supplying with their flagship CD player.

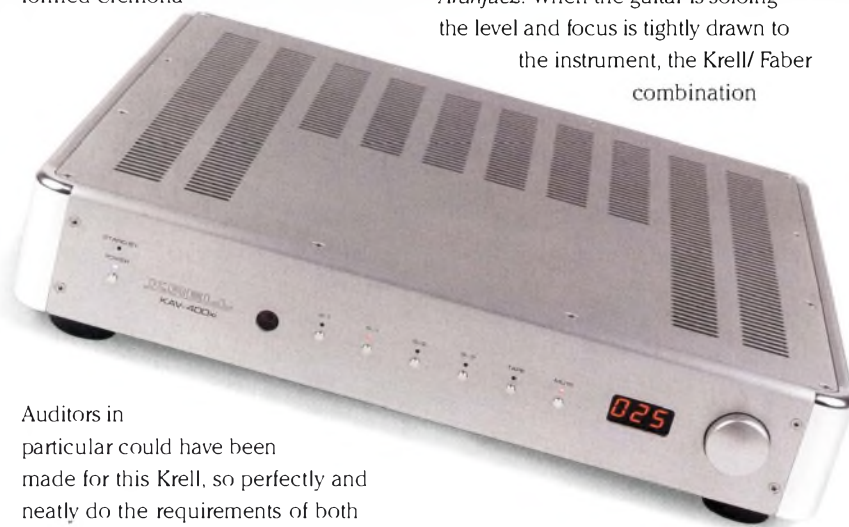
Those with inefficient speakers who regard integrated amplifiers as non-starters due to their generally low power need have no worries when



▶ considering the Krell, and its serious output goes some way toward defining its overall appeal. It will provide a healthy 200 watts into 8ohms and this doubles to 400 watts into a 4-ohm load. But don't think that Krell have built a powerhouse of an amplifier as a marketing tool or that the 400xi sounds like a bit of a brute designed to beat listeners into submission. Not a bit of it. My comment regarding its efficiency extends absolutely to the way in which it employs its healthy level potential to make music in the home and is one of the great successes of the design. Where a lot of seriously powerful amplifiers can sound as if they are carrying all that power around on their back, leaving them musically ponderous and unable to change direction quickly, the Krell never appears restricted by its output. This means that it behaves more like a smaller amplifier in that it is fast, agile and starts and stops with impressive speed. I admire the way in which it uses its power. It incorporates finesse and refinement with genuine grunt and is aided by the really excellent volume control that brings the level on slowly but surely, making it easy for all but the highest efficiency

Power without control is a recipe for audio disaster and both the Sonus Fabers and the Micros will punish amplifiers with rather insipid or limp performances. The small but perfectly formed Cremona

musically challenging arrangements of music I have heard for a long time. The balance and blend of orchestra and classical nylon strung guitar inevitably brings to mind the *Concerto De Aranjuez*. When the guitar is soloing the level and focus is tightly drawn to the instrument, the Krell/ Faber combination



Auditors in particular could have been made for this Krell, so perfectly and neatly do the requirements of both pieces of equipment match each other. Although the 400xi does not immediately sound like an American 200-watt amplifier the Auditor allows it to deliver its wattage with focus,

illustrates the tonal nuance and expressiveness of McLaughlin's note play and exquisite phrasing in a way that draws you toward the instrument and its natural warmth. Against the gentle sway and voice of the orchestral backdrop it doesn't sound small or thin at all, but taut and very pitch coherent. But when the orchestra opens up a bit and pushes, the sound and image swells so quickly and so cleanly that you are taken aback by the contrasting sense of power and impact. But the relationship between the two is never lost and the guitar is never swamped. And when you start to push the amplifier to higher and higher levels this sense of perspective and the contrasts between the relatively miniscule voice and range of the guitar and the sense of the orchestra's power both actual and latent, stays the same. It doesn't take long to realise that the way the Krell uses its power is somewhat different to many other amplifiers. The volume doesn't rush in and although it can go very loud, it never actually sounds it, as the levels of distortion especially around the leading edge are so low that it inspires confidence in ▶



speakers to be adjusted with precision and accuracy at anything from a whisper to an imposing weight of sound. For the purposes of this review I used both the Sonus Faber Cremona Auditor and the JM Labs Micro Utopia Be while the trusty Naim CDS 3 provided the source.

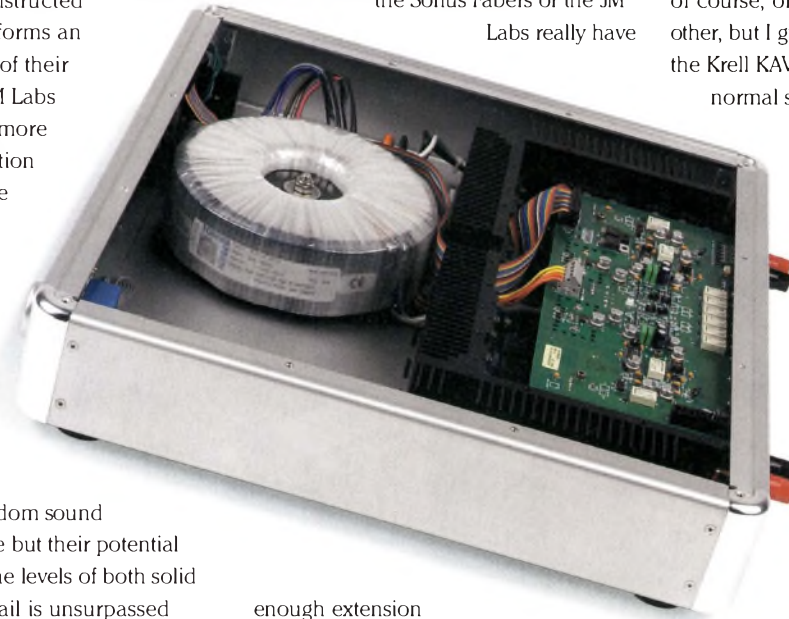
excellent image stability and pointed efficiency. It leaves you with the feeling that the amplifier is always holding ample power in reserve to cope with even the most violent of musical swings without any sense of compression or stress. *Thieves And Poets* is the latest offering from John McLaughlin, one of the greatest guitarists on the planet and certainly one of, if not the, most technically gifted. The orchestral tracks on this album contain some of the most complex and

► the system and this should not be underestimated.

Unlike most American amplifiers the integrated Krell does not immediately sound big, overly wide or notably spacious, unless the recording demands it. Where the Sonus Fabers always present a broad, deep and meticulously constructed soundstage that forms an undeniable part of their attraction, the JM Labs are a tighter and more compact proposition altogether, despite their greater physical size and bandwidth. The Micros will expose a system's mid and treble potential like nothing else I've heard. They'll seldom sound hard or aggressive but their potential to resolve fine, fine levels of both solid and ambient detail is unsurpassed as are their uncompressed transient capabilities and real-world high frequency extension.

So, while the Krell may not have the air, depth and sense of harmonic presence that you would expect from a £10K pre/power it is certainly not shy nor does it feel particularly bandwidth limited. It goes about its work with a real sense of purpose and resolution and this certainly includes its sense of rhythm and timing. It always feels in such control and it does so with such ease plus the fact that it delivers its power with such a natural sense of movement and transition mean that rhythm and tempo-wise it is always interesting though it could never be described as being overtly taut or compressively punchy. Having said that though I must admit that it does not have that pure sense of rhythmic vibrancy that the splendid little Moon I-3 absolutely excels at, nor that leading

edge vitality and foot tapping pulse that is still a hallmark of the Naim sound. But give it a bit of variable tempo to deal with and I doubt you'll be disappointed. With music where the bass drives the piece along the KAV 400xi is always firmly in control yet has an impressive sense of flow and movement. Neither the Sonus Fabers or the JM Labs really have



enough extension to truly assess the Krell's ultimate capabilities though weight and shape are definitely there. And at the other frequency extreme there is little to really complain about. It lacks only in terms of low level and ambient information and can certainly sound a little dry and flat at times. But its bandwidth integration goes some way toward making up for this. You won't find me complaining too much about the way it flows into the liquid mid-band though, which has a certain plain, unadorned and slightly lean charm about it that is refreshingly to the point.

I like this amplifier and I think it will win Krell a lot more friends than their earlier forays into the integrated market, especially in the UK. It is not above criticism of course but when you consider the price the flaws tend to become less significant. The fact is that it has no real apparent weaknesses and always feels on the side of the music.

This certainly means that it is demanding in the sense that it will not suffer the indignity of inferior source components, cables or loudspeakers without sonic protest. One of its very best points is the way it can use its not inconsiderable power in the interests of the music and not just in order to go loud. In a sense of course, one is a by-product of the other, but I guarantee that you will use the Krell KAV-400xi at higher levels than

normal should you obtain one. It will never offer the same level of performance potential that a top pre/power will, is not upgradeable and Krell have never been known for being cheap, but when you take a hard look and listen to the package as a whole, it is easily good enough to find a lot of admirers. ►+

#### TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Solid-state integrated amplifier
Inputs:	3xRCA line, 1x RCA tape loop, 1x XLR balanced.
Input sensitivity:	0.644 Vrms
Input impedance:	47 kOhms
Rated output:	200 watts into 8 Ohms, 400 watts into 4 Ohms
Dimensions (HxWxD):	89 x 500 x 432 mm
Weight:	16.4 kg (Shipped)
Finishes:	Black or silver.
Price:	£2698.00

#### UK Distributor:

Absolute Sounds Ltd  
Tel. (44) (0)20 8971 3909  
Net. [www.absolutesounds.com](http://www.absolutesounds.com).

#### Manufacturer:

Krell Industries Inc.  
Net. [www.krellonline.com](http://www.krellonline.com)



SUGDEN

Pure Class-A Power Amplifier

# The Sugden Bijou System

by Jason Hector

Being a bit of a “mans man” and failing to connect with my feminine side I have always liked to see my hi-fi as purposeful, robust or even masculine and I guess I’m not the only one who discounts boxes if they are a little too pretty. There is this tendency to assume that if looks matter at all then sound quality must be taking a back seat. A good example is hi-fi racking. There is an opinion out there that if the racks have a remotely furniture like appearance then that is exactly what they are rather than a performance optimised hi-fi rack, and as such they can’t possibly work. This is of course bullshit and the Bijou system I have been listening to and casting admiring glances at is the final proof that sound and looks are not as mutually exclusive as wealth and a gambling addiction. I think it might come as a bit of a shock to see Sugden releasing such an unusual looking system. They have never been regarded in the industry as great stylistic innovators preferring to stick with the tried and tested (putting the bravest possible face on things). The Bijou marks a very important change of direction for the company, opening up a new market and on looks they have succeeded, the purpose of this review is to see if the sound matches the couture.

The Bijou system sits outside of the mainstream Sugden components in styling but uses technology from both the standard and Masterclass range. The three Bijou boxes I have been using are the CDMaster CD player, the HeadMaster pre-amplifier (and headphone amplifier) and the newest addition to the Bijou range, the MusicMaster ClassA power amplifier.

A second power amplifier (AmpMaster) and a tuner (FMMaster) complete the Bijou line-up. Each box in the Bijou range is constructed along similar lines from high quality aluminium machined at the Sugden factory and pays testament to the workmanship and quality control at Sugden. The boxes themselves are made from large solid plates top and bottom and circular cross-section uprights at each corner. More plates form the sides. The result is a very solid and very expensive looking box. The overall aesthetic, while simple, only works because of the quality of the fit and finish Sugden achieves for each of the parts. Any machining error would be more obvious because you see and handle the surfaces directly without the smoothing help of a layer of paint. Each upright has a soft rubber foot which is pretty compliant and should offer some isolation and I found that these boxes didn’t seem to mind what they sat on. The construction also allows for the integration of the Bijou hi-fi stand. A simple and elegant solution, it consists of four circular cross-section legs that screw into the top of the uprights of the MusicMaster and a plate that bolts on top of this for the pre-amplifier, CD player and tuner to stack on. It’s very neat and keeps things compact. Purely on looks we should be seeing Bijou systems in the same sort of mainstream press articles as B&O and there isn’t much else out

there at these prices that that is true of.

The CDMaster features a Philips CD mechanism hooked up to an implementation of the mixed bitstream and multi-bit converter also offered by the Dutch electronics company. So nothing unusual there, but typically it is the detail where the devil lurks and Sugden have made use of their years of experience to extract as much performance as they can from this set of devices.



The output of the DAC is buffered by a high input impedance opamp which feeds a filter and the emitter-follower output stage.

Power is supplied to the various parts of the CD player via a total of six regulated supplies. The CD player offers the usual collection of functionality with basic controls on the front panel. Analogue outputs are single-ended to phono sockets, as well as a digital output, also via a phono socket. The remote control, which uses the RC-5 command set and also controls the volume of the HeadMaster, is an ordinary plastic affair which does seem out of keeping with the hewn from solid feel of the Bijou boxes themselves. Perhaps an optional all-metal Bijou remote is a money-spinner to far for the sensible guys at Sugden?

The HeadMaster Pre-amplifier ▶

► was the first Bijou component to appear and it was originally seen as a Headphone amplifier with a handy pre-amplifier attached. In this review I will be treating it as a pre-amplifier with a handy



headphone amplifier built in. The HeadMaster is an all ClassA affair and consists of a cascoded (to remove phase shifts) amplification stage driving a high current emitter-follower output all running from a single rail. The pre-amplifier outputs are switched off when Headphones are connected. As I mentioned above the HeadMaster volume is controllable from the remote while source selection is manual only with the front mounted knob actually controlling relays via a microprocessor. The HeadMaster features just three inputs (frankly too few for many people and my only gripe) and one tape output. The socketry is high quality, in keeping with the rest of the build of the product, and the feel of the knobs is reassuringly solid. Mains input is via the ubiquitous IEC socket and the power switch is round the back. The HeadMaster is intended to be left on at all times.

The MusicMaster is described by Sugden as the result of many years

of development. It features current feedback to maximise the slew rate and therefore transient attack, and cascode circuits are employed to ensure phase shifts are minimised. The amplifier is designed to give maximum output into a four Ohm load

and because of the nature of the distortion present (mainly second harmonic) should not sound fatiguing right up to its power limit. The exterior of the MusicMaster is kept simple with a single large on/off button round the front and an LED to indicate status. Round the back you'll find the IEC power socket,



a pair of phono inputs and two pairs of hefty multiway binding posts. The sides of the MusicMaster are different to the other components; they are all heat-sink but because of its ClassA operation the MusicMaster still gets hot, too hot to touch after a strenuous session, and care should be taken when positioning this amplifier. It should be switched off between listening sessions, to avoid electricity bills resembling those of a Las Vegas hotel. Luckily the MusicMaster only takes 10 minutes to return to its full capabilities after switch on.

The Sugden system, perhaps surprisingly, majors on speed and a rhythm driven sound. In most reviews of Class A amplifying components the reviewers continually bang on about the wonderful warmth (valve-like no doubt) and ignore the fact that the components lose the thread at the drop of a beat. The Sugden just keeps hold of the rhythmic structure of a piece and builds everything else on top. Yes the mid-band does have a deliciously rich and full sound but that is not at the expense of the pace or dynamics of a piece of music, thank the lord. I played a wide range of music on the Sugden Bijou and enjoyed it all. A Particular highlight was playing the Mozart *Requiem* where the whole



► system acted together beautifully to reveal the power and passion of a favourite and demanding piece of Music. All of the acoustic clues were there with the soloists positioned around the stage and the choir was suitably massive and formidable resulting in the total immersion experienced during a live performance. It is with results like this that the Sugden is very hard to criticise because it does nothing particularly wrong and an awful lot right. The Bijou with MusicMaster has to rank right up there with the very best at its price. Only in direct comparison to more expensive electronics are the following failings of this little system more apparent.

#### 1. Reduced deep bass.

This could be a positive boon in many systems and go pretty much unnoticeable if your speakers don't go deep with power. Mine do so I missed those lowest Hertz. The lack was most obvious with the Reggae influenced sounds found on the eponymous titled album by Merz, or Dreadzone. On the positive side the bass that is present has plenty of texture and the harmonic content is handled very well so the realism quotient is high and it isn't allowed to wallow uncontrollably.

2. Rounded transients. Compared to components at much higher prices I missed the really fast rail-to-rail dynamics of my usual boxes. The Sugden is no slouch and it does stop and start the speakers surprisingly effectively considering the paper power on offer, but kick drums or tympani

lacked the real drive I have gotten used to.

3. A degree of cluttering. This is caused, I think, by a lack of resolution and maybe channel separation which results in the system not opening the



space between the performers so that you don't get a solid sounding instrument but a smearing of the sounds into each other. Playing the relatively simple *Motherland* by Natalie Merchant or *Plumb* from Jonathan Brooke rather than listening to independent but interacting musicians you have

something closer to the "wall of sound" so beloved of Spector.

It is absolutely essential that these observations are kept in perspective. What is obvious through a pair of speakers costing more than the rest of the system combined will not be through something closer to the

Sugden Bijou components cost

and in spite of the

above this system

never failed to

entertain. Mind

you I wouldn't

recommend

skimping on the

speakers either.

The MusicMaster is

limited in ultimate

loudness when using

inefficient speakers

but partner them with

something in the 90dB

or greater range and be

amazed. I didn't bother to

use anything less than my

Shahinian Obelisks (89dB

but an awful load) because

overall the combination

sounded so damned good.

Play some Nick Drake or Leonard

Cohen and the subtlety of their

voices is plain to hear. All of those

little clues that a decent system

presents which allow more access

to the message in the songs (slight

changes of pitch, recorded ambience,

fretwork - you know the sort of thing)

are extremely well handled by the

Sugden, and this is one area where

it punches well above its weight.

But if that gives you a flavour

of the sound quality of the Bijou

components when used as a system

how does each box contribute?

CDMaster: The CD Master reiterates

the improvement seen in CD players

at this price point over the last few

years. This player offers good rhythmic

drive and the frequency extremes are

extended, but a slight wooliness in

the bass will be exposed by big ►

▶ full-range systems. While detail retrieval is good the final sound suffers some veiling but the player produces a big rich and satisfying sound. Simply put this CD player competes well in its price bracket and could form the front end of a very good system.

HeadMaster: A very pure sound characterises this bargain of a pre-amplifier. There is obviously great mileage in the KISS (Keep it simple stupid) principle when it is applied to pre-amplifiers: That and the trickle down of componentry and knowledge from the MasterClass components. Unfailingly easy to listen to this pre-amplifier really doesn't draw unwanted attention to itself.

It was more than transparent enough to show changes upstream. It is slightly scale challenged and when the going gets tough the sound loses focus and becomes a little confused. There is also a slight softening of transient attack but what do you expect for this money?

MusicMaster: The star of this little system and very good value if you have or are planning on buying a pair of speakers that will suit the power output. This amplifier offers a glimpse

of the real benefits of Class A operation with real world current delivery and bandwidth. The MusicMaster is the most revealing of the Bijou components and will be the one most likely to fit into a bigger budget system as it offers a genuinely seamless high-end sound with very low distortion.

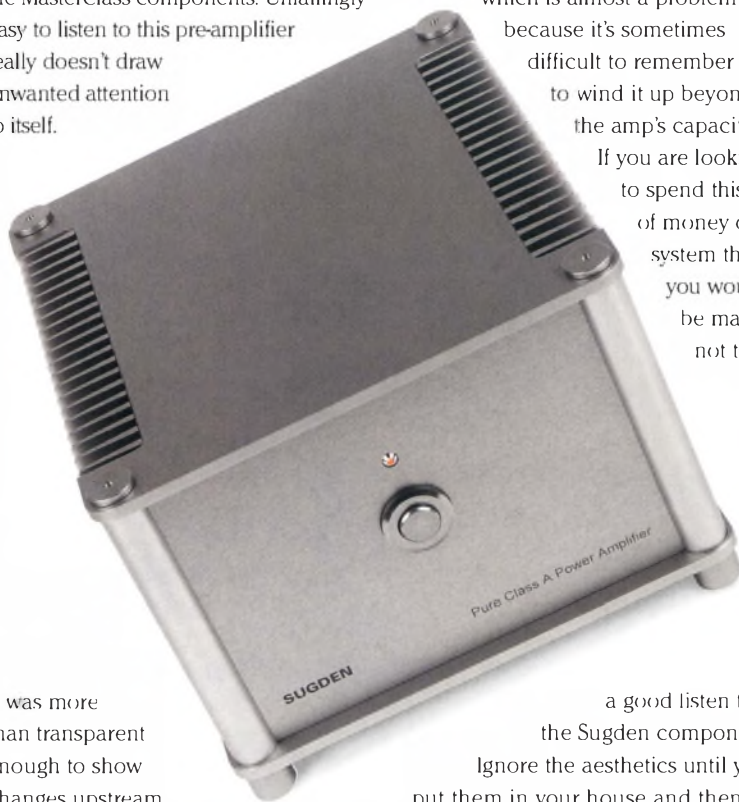
If you need a bit more power there is always the option of bi-amping with two MusicMasters! The MusicMaster stays clean right up to the point where it fails to drive the speakers. There is no hardening until the amp clips which is almost a problem because it's sometimes difficult to remember not to wind it up beyond the amp's capacity.

If you are looking to spend this sort of money on a system then you would be mad not to get

a good listen to the Sugden components.

Ignore the aesthetics until you put them in your house and then feel very smug because you have style to match B&O and the simplicity that delivers true high quality sound. Of course, there's more to these products than their combination as a system, and the HeadMaster makes an astonishingly good headphone amplifier for those whose system lacks the necessary. But, of the three components I tested for this review the MusicMaster amplifier is the star of the show and stands

comparison with many, much more expensive power amplifiers, as long as the speakers are well chosen. Well done Sugden!



#### TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

##### CDMaster

Front Panel Controls: Standby, load, play, previous, next and stop

##### Outputs -

Analogue: 1x single-ended stereo  
 Digital: 1x coaxial digital output  
 Output Level: 1.95 volts  
 Nett Weight: 8Kg  
 Dimensions (WxHxD): 230 X 140 X 267mm  
 Price: £1299

##### HeadMaster

Inputs: Three line level inputs  
 Input Sensitivity: 150mV in for 1 Volt out  
 Input impedance: 50K  
 Outputs: 1x stereo pre-out, 1x switched stereo headphone output, 1x stereo tape output  
 Output impedance: 4 - 56 Ohms  
 Weight: 5Kg  
 Dimensions (WxHxD): 230 X 82 X 277mm  
 Price: £659

##### MusicMaster

Inputs: 1pr single-ended phono sockets  
 Outputs: 1pr via speaker binding posts  
 Input Sensitivity: 900mV for full output into 8 ohms  
 Power Output: 16W/channel into 80hms, 16W/channel into 40hms  
 Weight: 9Kg  
 Dimensions (WxHxD): 230x170x290mm  
 Price: £1299

##### Bijou Stand

Price: £325

##### Distributor:

Audio Synergy  
 Tel. (44)(0)1924 406016  
 Net. www.sugdenaudio.com



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# The ProAc Tablette Reference Eight Signature

by Roy Gregory

It's amazing how far a bit of mid-bass body will take you. Voice it right, with just enough emphasis to add purpose but not so much as to slow things down, fast enough to maintain impact not so lean as to thin the mid-band, and you can achieve astonishing results from even quite tiny enclosures. Of course, here in the UK, where domestic space has always been at a premium, getting the biggest sound from the smallest box developed into something of a misguided and lopsided art form. In a trend started by the Celestion SL6, and emphatically trumped by Sonus Faber with their Electa Amator, bandwidth grew beyond the apparent physical possibilities of mere cabinetry. But as a wise man once said, when it comes to speakers then it's a case of size, efficiency and bandwidth – pick any two. All that bass extension was bought at a heavy price in sensitivity and the SL6 needed serious power in order to raise it from its lethargy, preferably with a few rough edges thrown in for good measure. The Electa Amator really only blossomed on the end of the humungous Audio Research M300s, in which instance each amp was approximately five times the size of the speaker it was driving!

Fortunately, sanity has prevailed since those days and sensitivity has risen inexorably back up the list of desirable attributes in a speaker. But the need for small enclosures hasn't gone away and ironically, it's the oldest designs that often seem to offer the best balance of virtues. The establishment choice has (predictably) been the BBC LS3/5a. But the cult favourite has always been from

another source – ProAc. Their Tablette adopted a different stance to the BBC compact, with a more explicit and tailored presentation, in part down to the choice of the Scan D2008 19mm tweeter. Teamed with a pulp coned 110mm mid-bass unit in a tiny,



reflex loaded cabinet, it delivered a quick and agile sound with great clarity, stereo and surprising dynamics at the expense of some refinement. It also established the fashion for cabinets that were deeper than they are wide. Common practice now, this aesthetically pleasing approach was revolutionary at the time.

Well, time marches on, and the upstart outlived the incumbent. What we have here is the latest version of the little Tablette, still recognizable as the same basic speaker that it was all those years ago. Not that things haven't changed of

course, but the essential ingredients are all still there. The diminutive cabinet dimensions remain the same as does the marine ply and bituminous pads used for its construction. It's still a two-way, and it's still reflex loaded, although there are now two narrow diameter, rear facing ports to replace the single, straw stuffed original. In a nice example of developmental symmetry the speaker also now possesses two sets of terminals to facilitate bi-wiring, or more importantly with any speaker of moderate efficiency, bi-amping.

The biggest change, unsurprisingly, comes in the driver department. The long dead D2008 has been replaced with a 25mm silk dome design that despite its modern pretensions still manages to look downright traditional when compared to the latest offerings from the likes of B&W or JMLabs. It still mates to a 110mm doped, pulp coned bass-mid driver, but this being the Signature version of the speaker, we get a far more sophisticated unit than in the standard Reference Eight. Built onto a heavy-duty cast surround, it features a Neodymium magnet and copper focussing rings in the motor as well as a solid copper central phase plug. The end result is a unit that costs four times as much as the one used in the standard model, and which delivers an additional 2dB of bass extension for the same 86dB efficiency. That might not sound like much, but considered in the context of the miniscule cabinet volume it's really quite remarkable. With a baffle only six inches wide and a little over ten tall, there's no option to use a



► bigger radiating area, which perhaps explains why ProAc resorted to a larger cabinet for the more AV friendly Tablette 2000 model. However, if sonic quality is your sole concern then it's the Reference Eight models that will interest you.

The other thing that separates the signature (apart from an engraved plate carrying designer Stuart Tyler's signature on the back panel) is the choice of premium



veneers on offer. The Tablette was always a beautifully crafted little speaker, but the Signature raises that to new heights. The choice of Ebony, Birds Eye Maple or Yew should offer sufficient scope when it comes to colour, while the finish of the review samples was absolutely exquisite. The cloth grilles are functional enough, but they are aesthetically unnecessary with a face this pretty. It's actually a shame to use them.

ProAc suggest that you can use the Tablettes on shelves or close to walls. I beg to differ. Push the speakers too close to the boundary and the bass becomes unruly, the mid-band thick and congested. What they need is a pair of

decent speaker stands and some room to breathe. I used a pair of IF Designs Tallis stands which worked extremely well, although the notion of the same company's Roger Stone Signature model, built with a matching Yew column could prove too enticing to resist were the little ProAc's to take up permanent residence. I ended up with

the speakers placed 18" from the wall, very slightly closer than I'd normally expect, with significant toe-in. In fact, toe-in was to prove absolutely critical to achieving the best performance, and it soon became obvious that the little Tablettes like to point right at you. Playing with lateral spacing was also instructive. With the speakers slightly further away from the listening position than I am used to, it's perhaps not surprising that they also like a little extra width. What I discovered is that they actually sounded best, in my room at least, at the points of a perfect equilateral triangle, just like the stereo textbook says they should. Now normally I reckon to place speakers apart on a ratio of 1 to 1.1 when compared to the distance from their centre point to the listening seat. The extra distance and width demanded by the Tablettes actually shorten that listening distance (proportionally

speaking) pretty dramatically, placing them well into the near-field. It's a placement that dovetails perfectly with their sonic characteristics and presentation.

I drove the ProAc's, bi-wired with Nordost Valhalla speaker cable, mainly with the Hovland Radia, Groove Plus, Vibe and Pulse. Source components were the Wadia 861SE and Burmester 001 CD players along with the Clearaudio Master Reference record player, equipped with both its own arm and cartridge, and the various Rega options and Origin Live Encounter tonearms. The coherent, integrated quality of the Tablettes certainly responded to the vinyl front-end, whilst also clearly defining the differences between the various tonearm and cartridge combinations.

Switching to the Tablettes from the larger, more efficient and much more expensive Living Voice OBX-Rs, I was surprised by the presence and sheer gusto of the little ProAc's. It's not that they sound big, more that they sound incredibly solid. Get the positioning and toe-in right and they throw an incredibly coherent soundstage behind and beyond the limits of the speakers. With early stereo recordings they really do just disappear, and I achieved spectacular results with a number of SXL 2000s as well as the latest Mercury re-issues from Speakers Corner. But I quickly learnt that there are certain, inviolable rules that must be obeyed to enjoy this performance. Let's take the Athena pressing of the Johanos/Dallas Rachmaninov *Symphonic Dances* as an example of what the Tablettes do well and what gets them into trouble.

I've already spoken about the coherence of the soundstage, but this recording really highlights its integrity. The atmospheric and spacious opening bars are beautifully rendered, but instrumental identity and colour is



▶ totally dependent on your distance to the speakers. If you listen at the apex of the triangle then you get tension, vibrance and immediacy. Sit even slightly further back and both the sound and the soundstage flatten perceptibly, the individuality of instruments being lost as well as their spatial separation. *The Symphonic Dances*, with their ramped crescendos actively encourage you to abuse the volume control. With the Tablettes in the system that would be a major mistake. Overdo the level and they start to shout, the soundstage becoming murky and instruments starting to clump around the speakers. Okay, you have to go some so we're talking pretty loud here, but just resist that "It's a small speaker, let's see what we can get out of it!" tendency. Excessive application of the volume control isn't going to tell you anything you really want to know.

Of course, it's entirely possible that more power than the 100 Watts I had on tap would solve this problem, or at least extend the envelope of acceptability, but that brings its own associated issues, not the least of which is cost. Getting a lot of Watts tends to be expensive, ruinously so as soon as quality becomes an issue, and rest assured that where the Tablettes are concerned, quality is definitely an issue.

What this exercise really demonstrates is that the little ProAc is a speaker that needs to be coaxed rather than beaten into submission. However, approach it on its own terms and it delivers not so much a startling performance as one that is deeply satisfying. The vocal presentation is particularly telling. Unlike many speakers, and small ones in particular, the Tablette isn't mid-prominent. Voices aren't thrown at you in an exaggerated parody of clarity and transparency. Instead they are lodged firmly in the soundstage, held in the same acoustic as the rest of the instruments. Listen to

Eliza Gilkyson's winsome ode to the addictive pain of emotional experience ('Separated' from the superb new album *Land Of Milk And Honey*) and feel the communicative quality in her voice, its presence and immediacy reinforced by the purpose inherent in the solidity of the well hit drums behind her. That's what these speakers do.



They communicate the substance and sense of the performance as a whole. Within that framework, you can listen in to individual instrumental detail, tease out the strands, but it's the whole that comes first, and the Tablettes can master surprising scale as long as you operate within their constraints. No, you aren't going to rock the house, but you can and will rock your soul.

Deep bass is beyond their grasp (despite the manufacturer's specs) and orchestral extravaganzas like the Rachmaninov have their nether regions hinted at rather than carved from stone. But as I suggested at the beginning of this review, the bass they have goes a long way with careful positioning, and is more than capable of supporting and

underpinning the vast majority of modern pop and rock recordings. The treble is genuinely extended, delivering plenty of air and space, although revealing too the high frequency inadequacies of poor recordings or amplification that's not up to the mark.

The Tablette may have evolved and gained considerable bandwidth over the original, but you can't deny the laws of physics, and in normal use (that means, devoid of 20 grands worth of amplification) it remains a mini-monitor. Overall scale is reduced, as is absolute dynamic range. But proportionally it remains true to the original, which is what makes its impressive midrange so convincing. That's where their real strength lies: What you might term core values. If you need real music in a smallish space and you have the time and trouble to meet their demands when it comes to the driving system, the Tablettes will deliver in spades. Don't expect a quart in a pint pot, ground shaking dynamics or bass extension. The little ProAc's trade in a far rarer and much more quietly impressive commodity – musical integrity. Sit back and enjoy, just not too far. ...

#### TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Two-way reflex
Driver Complement:	25mm silk-dome tweeter 110mm pulp coned bass-mid
Impedance:	8 Ohms
Efficiency:	86dB
Bandwidth:	38Hz to 30kHz ±3dB
Power Handling:	10 – 100 Watts
Dimensions (WxHxD):	152 x 266 x 228mm
Weight:	5Kg
Finishes:	Ebony, Birds Eye Maple and Yew
Price:	£899

#### Manufacturer:

Celef Audio  
Tel. (44)(0)1280 700147  
Net. [www.proac-loudspeakers.com](http://www.proac-loudspeakers.com)

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# Vecteur Club Six I-4.2 amplifier

by Alan Sircom

Last month, the fine French Vecteur L-4 CD player did the job as a good quality, not too overly priced disc-spinner. But, we've been saving the best 'til last. The matching £1,100 I-4.2 integrated amplifier is amongst the least expensive amplifiers ever to grace the pages of this magazine, but you'd never know it from first impressions.

For those who missed the last issue, the Vecteur products have a common look; big, square, solid and mostly black (save for a silver volume dial and bar across the panel for all the source LEDs and the controls).

The I-4.2 has four line inputs, one pair of tape outputs and a tape monitor loop, all featuring very solid WBT phono terminals. Each channel has two sets of gold-plated 4mm banana sockets and the IEC mains socket includes a rear mounted on-off switch, implying that the amplifier should be left in standby mode when not in use. Although there is no phono-stage supplied (there is an optional phono board mentioned in the literature, but it doesn't appear in the pricelist), the I-4.2 does include an earthing tag on the rear panel, which could prove useful for those with grounding issues or with cables that sport earth cables. However, given that the last cable that featured an earth lead that didn't cost almost as much as the amp itself was from Furukawa (Chord Signatures? Ed.) and was last seen a decade ago, it's more likely that this will help lower the noise floor of phono stages and the like. There is a case for earthing every component in the hi-fi chain, through

the amplifier; in theory it lowers the noise floor of the system as a whole. You might even want to experiment with taking a lead from the earth terminal to the equipment table (if itself is made of metal). Remember the earth tag is not in any way related to the earthing of the mains, though.

Under the thick cabinet there beats a 2x 80Watt (into eight ohms) heart.



There is also a Club Twelve model, which delivers 140Watts per channel. In this case the 80 Watts are delivered by a pair of output MOSFETs, in Class AB mode. As such, this is no lightweight amplifier (it weighs a healthy 12kg) and the centre of the amplifier is basically full of heatsink.

It has all the right audiophile credentials, too. The I-4.2 is packed full of 1% tolerance metal film resistors and high-definition Remar internal wiring for any of the parts of the circuit not placed on the thick Teflon epoxy boards. All the capacitors are polypropylene styroflex designs, while the large toroidal transformers are selected for their low noise, low radiation properties.

One of the big plus-points is the

large chassis, which is said to be filled with damping material. It certainly feels inert, and tapping the underside of the amplifier delivers a very dull thud; a good sign. I'm not sure about the styling, though. On the plus side, it's big, bold and superbly built, with that powered volume knob, thick alloy front panel and all the right butch credentials. On the other hand, the word 'dated' springs to mind, too. All that acreage of black and the big case gives it a look reminiscent of early 1990s hi-fi, not the stuff of the silvery and sylphlike 21st Century.

The remote, with all its square basic chunkiness and gold logo only adds to the historic looks. Not that there's anything intrinsically wrong with a slightly dated look – this review was written on a solid, functional and entirely blah looking IBM ThinkPad instead of some slick little Apple iBook – but style does count in the living room and this might be a tough product to get past Domestic Management without a fight. Saying that the I-4.2 is French and mentioning well-known French appeasers (such as champagne, chateaubriand or Chanel... but rarely camembert) might help.

Like the CD player last month, this amplifier rests on four hardwood feet, not unlike the Mpingo wood used so effectively by Shun Mook. Although not mentioned as such in the manual, hardwood feet will



► help to eliminate some stray resonance and this, allied to that anti-vibration solid chassis, seems to keep vibrational effects to a minimum. In fairness, a solid-state amplifier isn't that prone to microphony at the worst of times, so the deleterious effects of vibration aren't that easy to spot directly.

The logic operation – whether from the front panel or via the remote handset – is distressingly slow.

A headphone jack and changing the name of the recording loop to tape instead of DAT (remember DAT, anyone?) would be useful, as would a proper tape monitor circuit.

Like the CD player, the amplifier lives for a good long warm-up. Give it a week or more with juice connected permanently and the amplifier settles down to sound right. It still requires a half-hour of full-power mode to come to life, but the amplifier is soon on song once warm up is through. There is a characteristic sound to the

the complexity and dynamic range of the music begins to challenge the power supply. Cheaper integrated amplifiers normally fall foul of the thin line between 'detailed' and 'brash', especially when used in context with more up-market products. The I-4.2 has no such compromises, instead delivering simply that clean precision whether played at a whisper or a scream.

Cleverly, staying the right side of stark means the sound is always honest and tonally accurate. It's a surprisingly accurate, uncoloured presentation, which has a downside for those

who expect the perfect rock or classical sound. Often, presentations that stress the ideal rock sound or classical sound stray too far, accenting the rhythm over detail in the former, accenting the midrange over extremes of bass and treble in the latter.

For once at the price, the I-4.2 does neither making it ideal for any system, even if it lacks the obvious short term appeal that comes with a tailored tonal balance. The pay-off is in terms of long term satisfaction.

This neutrality has a downside for the hi-fi reviewer, too. Its absence of sonic signature makes it very hard to pin down, and often makes the review seem as if damning the product with faint praise. Nothing could be further from the truth, here; this is a sublime performance, capable of encapsulating much of what high-end audio provides without spending a fortune in the process. There is some mild synergy between CD and amplifier, but the two stand up in their own rights. Combined, though, the sound is exceptionally good value.

Despite praise from the critics, Morrissey's new *You are the Quarry* CD is hit and miss. But when it hits, ►



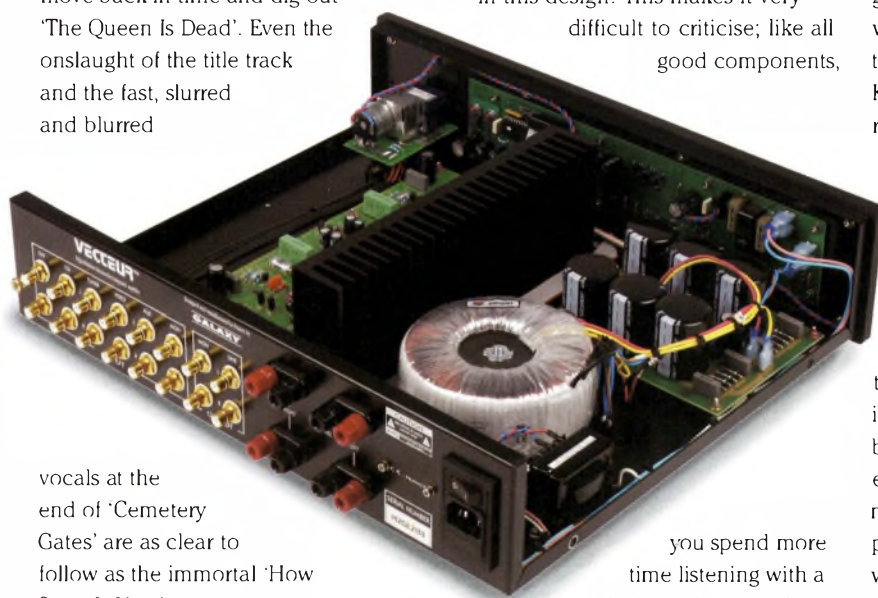
So slow, in fact, that you'll begin to wonder if the command was received, and press the same button several times. Then, the front panel will suddenly spring into life and whiz past your desired input. You get used to the lazy, laconic style of operation, and the amplifier does make a good case for the 'slow' lifestyle (slow cooked Italian food makes an even stronger case, however). Regardless, those used to instantaneous actions on receipt of a command code from the handset will find this frustrating, at first.

The small size of the controls is frustrating, too. There are just two buttons on the front; one for standby, one to select the source. There are then six small green LEDs that look almost identically sized to the buttons on the same plane. It's trivial, but many people instinctually attempt to press the source LED instead of the selection button. You get used to this, however.

Vecteur amplification. Don't expect a paragon of nice, warm relaxing sound; if you want warmth, you can add it to the mix with soft-sounding speakers or comfy cables. Instead, this is a clean and precise amplifier that is ideal to retrieve detail from a good quality CD player. And it's here, right out of the starting gates, that the I-4.2 shows its mettle as a top league performer without premier division prices.

Normally, precise and clean sounding integrated amplifiers this side of Krell's KAV range frequently sound thin and etched, especially in the treble. They also have an alarming ability to fold up under pressure, sounding progressively thinner and edgier as the volume level rises and

► it hits home. The superb 'Irish Blood, English Heart' and 'First of the Gang to Die' are the masterworks of the album, and highlight why this amplifier does so well. Mozza's whiny vocals are hardly the stuff of hi-fi legend, but any inarticulate electronics will undermine the diction and much of his dour lyricism gets lost in the process. The I-4.2 presents his lyrical wonders with such aplomb, it soon becomes mandatory for the listener to move back in time and dig out 'The Queen Is Dead'. Even the onslaught of the title track and the fast, slurred and blurred



vocals at the end of 'Cemetery Gates' are as clear to follow as the immortal 'How Soon Is Now'.

Soundstaging is a strong suit. The amplifier turns in a wide of the boxes soundstage that has some depth and no real height, but there is no sense of foreshortening or limitation. Instead, the I-4.2 simply presents a different flavour, with excellent soundstage width ideal for separating the instruments of a band or an orchestra. If you are weaned on valve-like sound, with plenty of image depth but not a lot else, the widescreen presentation of the I-4.2 may not prove that inspiring. For most of us though, this wide sound is what good hi-fi is all about. Close your eyes and the speakers will open up, making the sound extend way past the limitations of box or even room. This is rare at this price and only happens with the very

best equipment at the money.

This is an extraordinarily transparent sounding amplifier for the money. That is, if 'transparent sounding' isn't an oxymoron. Play a CD and there is simply less amplifier in the way than you might expect from an £1,100 design. It has that disappearing soundstage and correct tonal detail that amplifiers costing £2,500 would be happy with. There is less disruption of the soundstage or less coloration in this design. This makes it very difficult to criticise; like all good components,

you spend more time listening with a mind to enjoyment than critical listening.

It's almost inevitable to make the obvious links between this and other French products, most notably the Lavardin range. No, the Vecteur doesn't have the neutrality, drive or sheer entertainment factor of the Lavardin models, but something would be very, very wrong with the world if it did – Lavardin makes some of the best and not the cheapest amps around. However, there is a sense of Lavardin Lite, here; the L-4's crisp and direct approach gives a glimpse of what bigger and better can do, without leaving you hankering for more.

That's praise indeed, but it's not enough. This is one of those amplifier designs which makes so much musical sense (without costing as much as a

decent motorbike) that it behoves the reviewer not to compare it to more expensive kit. Even if it comes off very favourably, such a course highlights limitations that simply aren't relevant, given the price tag. And that's why the Vecteur I-4.2 is something special, up there with other budget high-end hi-fi legends like the Audio Analogue Puccini SE.

There is rare form of praise that gets bestowed on some products: It's good enough for the reviewer to miss when it gets unplugged. Normally, those products that are missed cost a King's Ransom; this is one of the very rare ones that doesn't. The Vecteur offers one of the first glimpses into true high-end audio sound without real mad high-end price structures. There's a strong Mini Cooper S analogy, here (I hope you're talking original! Ed.): The Cooper S may not cost as much as the TVRs and Nobles of this world, but it keeps its place as a sporting legend because driving one gives you a true experience of high-performance motoring at real-world prices. In short, proper high-end amplification starts with the Vecteur I-4.2. 

#### TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Solid-state integrated amplifier
Inputs:	Four line-level
Outputs:	Two tape outputs
Output Power:	80Watts per channel
Output Stage:	MOSFET, Class AB
Dimensions (WxHxD):	430 x 370 x 110 mm
Weight:	12 kg
Finish:	Black
Price:	£1100

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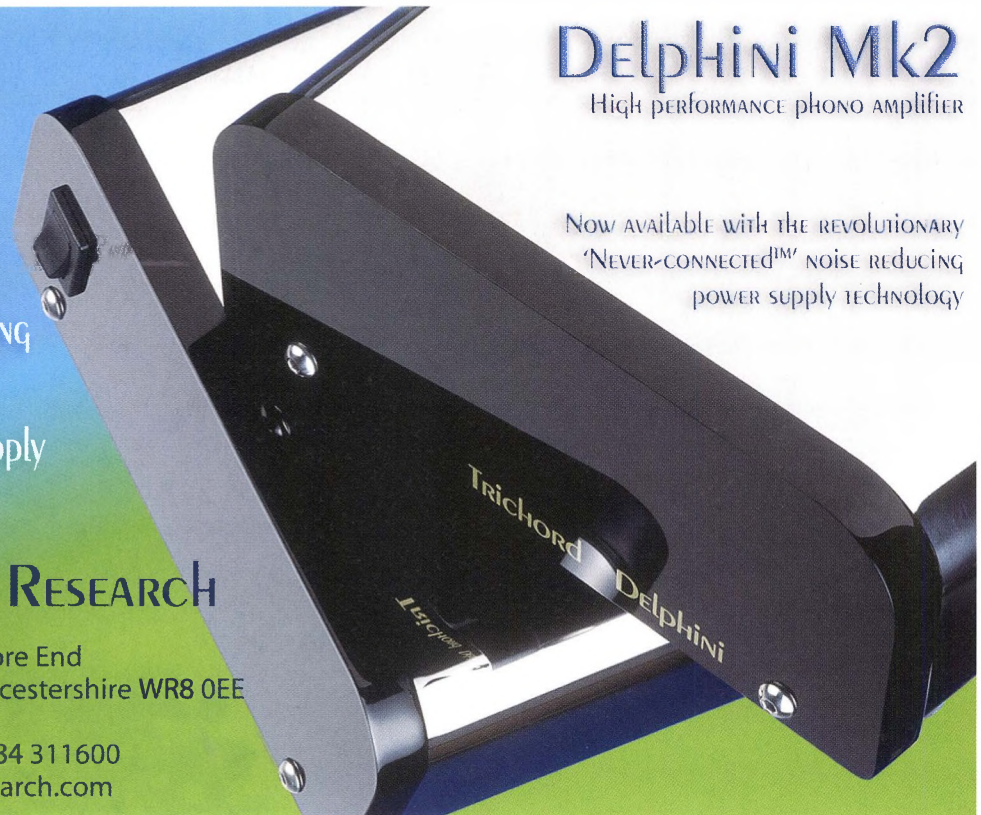
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# Densen Beat 800 Tuner

by Paul Messenger

Densen is, as the name suggests, a Danish specialist hi-fi brand, and one that has enjoyed a fair amount of success here in Britain, mainly through its mid-price Beat range of electronics. The Beat series started out with a B100 integrated amplifier that provided an 'affordable' alternative to the company's more upmarket 'regular' components. But its combination of good sound from 'zero feedback' amplification, alongside distinctive styling, classy finish and minimalist presentation touched a chord in customers and dealers alike. The B-100 is now in MkV form, and has spawned a full range of electronics, including a pre-amp, several power amps, two each of CD players and phono stages, plus this brand new £850 Beat 800 tuner.

Following the established minimalist Beat approach, the unit has a slim, full-width case, built up from flat panels of brushed aluminium alloy. Traditionally matt-black anodised, with either chrome or gilt buttons, Densen is gradually introducing a new Albino (silver) alternative at a modest price premium. Given that this is a radio tuner, I was a shade disappointed that there was no large chrome or gilt knob like those on the pre-amps for carrying out the actual tuning. No matter: modern electronic tuning doesn't need rotary knobs, and I guess the centrally situated frequency and function display is the most important element in the front panel. This is informative and nicely compact, so the frequency readout is quite legible without being too overwhelming, though the lack of any signal strength indication is perhaps regrettable. The six identical silver buttons on the fascia, plus a number of small black ones on the Gizmo handset,

permit the usual electronic tuning options, such as step, skip, preset and scan tuning. Toggle switches on the back allow the scan-stop sensitivity to be set. The back panel also includes an F-type aerial input (a 75-ohm coaxial adaptor is included), a phono pair supplying stereo audio out, 'Densen-link' connections, plus the capability to

personals around the country? I can count nine in my two-person household alone: all are in regular use; I have no wish or intention of replacing them all with DAB receivers; and would be very irritated if government interference stopped them working. Add in that the mobile phone operators burnt their fingers badly the last time the government sold off chunks of spectrum, and one must speculate whether there's still good reason for switching off analogue FM. I can't guarantee



accommodate a future external power supply upgrade.

There are those that will question whether it still makes sense to spend serious money – £850 in this case – on a tuner that's only capable of receiving analogue FM signals, since the powers that be want to convert us all to DAB digital radio; close down analogue FM; and flog the frequencies to mobile telecoms operators. Speaking personally, I doubt this will happen, for a number of very good reasons. In this location at least, FM sounds significantly superior 90+% of the time, so there are obvious reasons for the hi-fi fraternity to continue to support FM radio (though regrettably the hi-fi lobby has no clout whatsoever). More seriously, will any politician take the risk of switching off the signals feeding the 100 million or so analogue radios currently used in homes, cars and

it won't ever happen, but believe it's likely to be well into the future, after you've already had plenty of use out of what a good quality FM tuner can bring you from what is probably, here in Britain, the best radio service in the world.

When the Beat 800 first arrived, I searched in vain for the remote handset with which to drive it, and was a little exasperated to discover that you don't get one as a matter of course. Instead, you can control it with the elegant but pricey (£200) Gizmo handset that you bought to use with your Densen amplifier. (Whadayoumean you don't have a Densen amp?!) More than even the desire for coherently integrated styling, unified remote control



► systems have driven us towards 'one make' systems. Anyone considering the B800 as an independent tuner, however, will therefore have to find £1,050, and settle for a complex handset with a lot of redundant buttons.

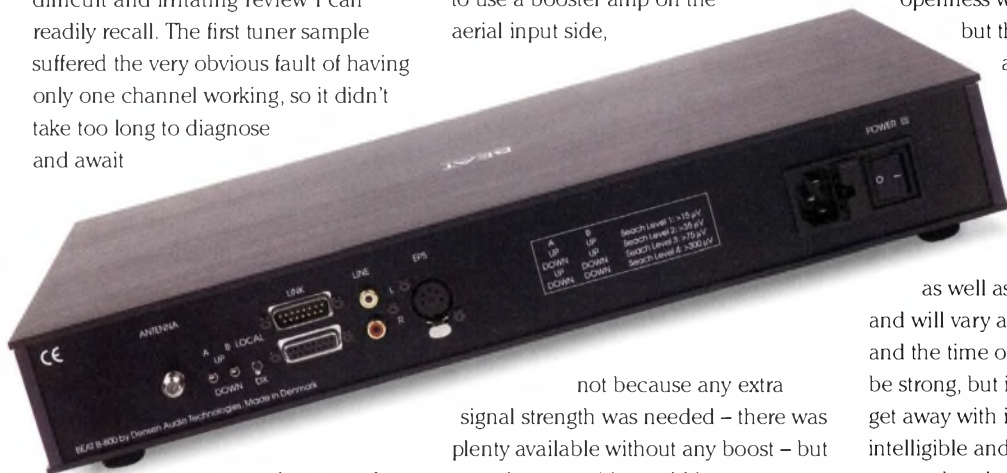
A Gizmo arrived in short order for me to carry on this review, but that turned out to be just the first of a series of difficulties that reared their head, during what was to become the most difficult and irritating review I can readily recall. The first tuner sample suffered the very obvious fault of having only one channel working, so it didn't take too long to diagnose and await

would there? My complacency seemed ill-founded yet again, as I started to notice some background noise. It was only just audible at first, but by the fourth day it had started to become irritatingly obvious, and seemed to be worsening all the time. By the fifth day the noise was making it almost unlistenable, and I suspected I might have got yet another faulty sample. I had one other trick to try, and that was to use a booster amp on the aerial input side,

nature of the musical experience is perhaps a little diluted. When *Late Junction* played the *African Sanctus Mass* recently, I was conscious that the Beat's image lacked a little depth, and that low frequencies lacked some of the coherence and homogeneity I hear with my Magnum Dynalab. But perhaps that's just the down side of its top end strength.

This tuner certainly tried my patience. I really started enjoying its openness when it was operating well, but the inconsistencies remain a matter of concern. I suspect the front end has been left 'wide open' to whatever comes down from the antenna – which these days can include plenty of garbage

as well as wanted radio signals, and will vary according to both the site and the time of day. The top end might be strong, but is clean enough to get away with it, so voices are very intelligible and complexities easily comprehended. It has very real strengths that are well worth investigation, but any endorsement must be qualified by the need to check it works well under the specific RF (aerial) conditions in which it will be used.



a replacement from Denmark. Delayed somewhat by both Christmas and influenza, a second sample did eventually arrive. The duff one was sent for photography, the review re-scheduled, and the second example connected up to aerial and system. I started out by listening to Radio 4, which of course is mainly speech and substantially monophonic, so it wasn't until I moved on to Radio 3 that I noticed there wasn't a lot of width to the stereo image. Moving a little closer and focusing my attention I then noticed that there wasn't any width at all. Although the display telltale read 'Stereo', it was lying: there was nothing stereophonic coming out of the tuner.

Heigh Ho! Another e-mail, followed by a hiatus of some months, and the third Beat tuner turned up. Once more unto the breach, dear friends, I mused while searching out the appropriate leads. After a couple of days warm-up all seemed to be working OK, and there surely wouldn't be a problem this time...

not because any extra signal strength was needed – there was plenty available without any boost – but more because this would impose some limits on the bandwidth coming down from the antenna.

Happily, that seemed to do the trick, since the background noise immediately disappeared. I don't know exactly why this was the case, and still can't say for sure that my third Beat 800 was completely 'au point', but feel that three cracks at getting a perfect sample should be enough for any brand. In any case, with the booster amp in line this tuner was actually sounding rather good, with a bright and open character that's both attractive and distinctive.

Tuners tend not to show dramatic variations in sound quality, yet this Densen definitely adds a little extra spice and edge to proceedings. If you like your radio to sound explicit and detailed, with crisp leading edges and strongly defined consonants and sibilants, this could well be the one. At the same time, the Beat 800 does have a tendency to focus on the fine detail, somewhat at the expense of the big picture, so the holistic

#### TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Remote-controllable analogue FM tuner
Input (aerial):	1x F-socket
Output:	1pr single-ended phonos
Dimensions (WxHxD):	444x64x310mm
Weight:	7kg
Finish:	Black, Albino; silver or gilt buttons
Price:	£850
Gizmo remote handset:	£200 extra

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# Ayre Acoustics P-5x Phono-Stage

by Roy Gregory

Charlie Hansen (main man at Ayre Acoustics) is a charismatic individual. Meet him and I can guarantee an entertaining and thought provoking time. Think carefully about what he says, and you'll discover that, behind the natural inclination to entertain there's an impressive coherence and consistency to his viewpoint. He clearly considers things carefully before reaching his conclusions, a trait that stands him in good stead when it comes to the coherence and consistency of his electronic designs. It also helps explain how such outwardly prosaic, downright sensible products can originate from such a flamboyant source.

Both CT and JK have been seduced by the charms of Ayre products. So much so that their CX-7 CD player carried off a Product Of The Year award back in Issue 29. It seemed like a good time to get in on the act, and where better to start than that trickiest of all electronic conundrums, the MC phono-stage. Many a talented designer has founded on the rocks of LP replay.

Ayre's P-5x phono-stage arrives in a slim and beautifully finished, full-width casework, solidly constructed from aluminium throughout. The base tray has extruded end-plates, top-plate and CNC sculptured front-panel securely bolted to it, producing an impressively rigid yet sensibly light-weight structure. The fit and finish of the casing demands special comment. The appearance and quality is indistinguishable from the parts employed on Ayre's flagship products, products that established a new benchmark for presentation at those elevated prices. Less a little CNC

work on the front-panels, their more basic products are equally impressive, and would sit perfectly happily beside their more illustrious cousins. It's a nice bonus at the price, and not without its sonic benefits: the aluminium structure offers the standard non-magnetic environment, but the bolted construction minimises the impact of damaging eddy currents, particularly disruptive of the minute signals generated by a low-output moving-coil.

Remove the top-plate and you'll find the interior of the casework and all the fixings finished to the same high standard, an unusual state of affairs made all the more obvious by the relatively small size of the circuit board that populates it. However, before you cry foul, that's far from unusual when phono-stages are dimensioned to match the rest of a full-width range. The circuit board is actually pretty big compared to the opposition, reflecting the totally discrete nature of the components employed. The circuit layout is mirror-imaged and dual mono, a layout repeated on the rear panel, surprisingly busy for a "mere" phono-stage. There are both balanced and single-ended inputs and outputs as well as a pair of small switches to select the input topology. Despite the double sockets, you can only connect a single input, and Ayre strongly suggest that you use the balanced option. Thankfully, they also supply comprehensive wiring diagrams to configure two or four wire leads, from either RCA or DIN connectors to a pair of XLRs; especially useful when it comes to ordering a set of specialist tonearm leads, something

I'd strongly recommend.

I'll be considering the balanced performance (in the context of a complete, balanced Ayre system) at a later date. However, in the UK at least, more often than not it'll find itself used in a single-ended set-up, connection wise at least, so that is how I used it for the purpose of this review. Just bear in mind that this is only half of the story. And while we're on the subject of wiring, one word of warning: The input socketry is well spaced. Very well spaced. Too far apart in fact for some of the captive tonearm leads on the market. Make sure the plugs carrying the signal from your tonearm can be sufficiently separated to reach the sockets without strain or set-up will be a frustrating experience. Of course, if you are using separate leads for left and right channels then you'll have no problem.

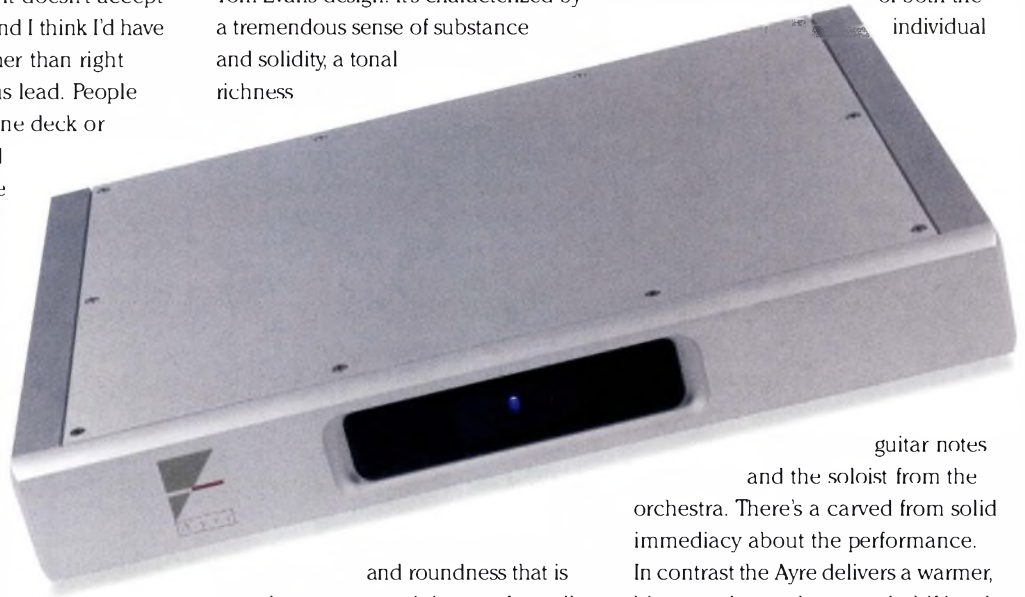
Also positioned on the back panel is a small port for each channel, at the end of which is a pair of small dip-switches. These allow the user to select the input loading from default settings of 47K, 1K and 100 Ohms. However, positioning the switches in the 47K setting also allows you to connect a parallel load via the unused input sockets. All that's required is a pair of good quality RCA/phono plugs or XLRs and the appropriate resistors to achieve the desired value. As you'll only be shelling out for a single pair I'd suggest you go for the best you can find. The other available adjustment is under the hood, a set of small jumpers on the circuit board allowing you to set the overall gain of the P-5x to suit high, medium or low-output cartridges. It's nice to see the median setting, ►

▶ allowing the user a better range of options regarding both cartridge and system matching. Other than that, the sole remaining feature is the earthing point, and for once it's a decent sized binding-post. Shame it doesn't accept 4mm plugs though, and I think I'd have put it somewhere other than right underneath the mains lead. People running more than one deck or arm are going to find that a real pain in the neck - literally!

Ayre are very clear that the P-5x requires considerable burn-in - a less than simple proposition with a phono-stage. However, I'm fortunate enough to possess one of KAB's useful little PreConLP devices, a small box that reduces the output of a CD player to LP levels, as well as applying inverse RIAA. I ran continuous CD through this for around four weeks, thus more than satisfying Ayre's 500-hour recommendation! I don't fancy your chances otherwise. With the chores completed I connected the P-5x to either the

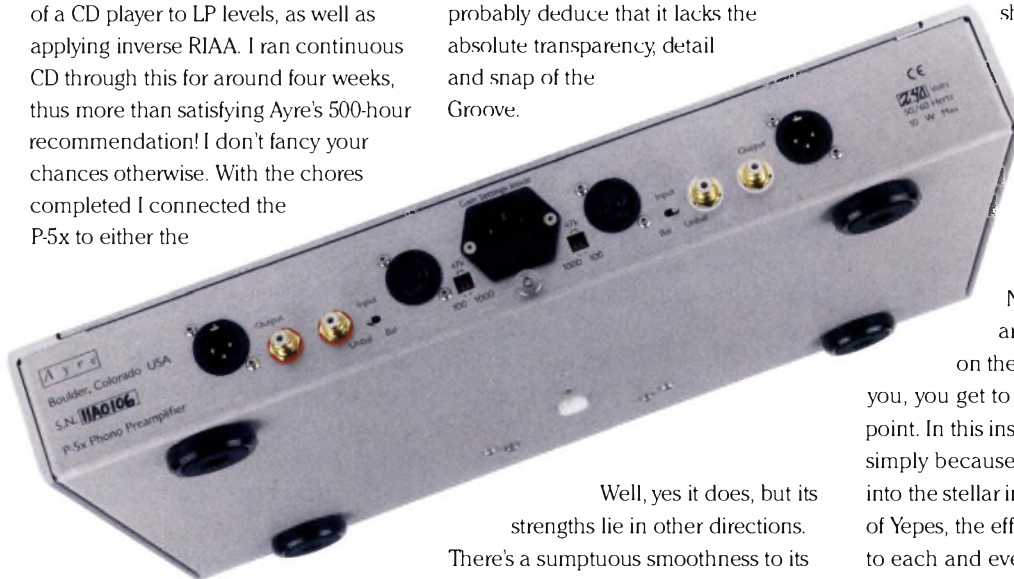
Any phono-stage that comes through these doors is inevitably going to end up being compared to the Groove sooner or later. The Ayre is in the happy position of offering a complete contrast to the Tom Evans design. It's characterized by a tremendous sense of substance and solidity, a tonal richness

(Argenta and the Orquestra Nacional De Espana on Alhambra SCLL 14000) highlights the differences between the Ayre and the Groove. The latter majors on the stunning attack and separation of both the individual



and roundness that is perhaps more reminiscent of a really good valve design than this most solid-state of products. From that you can probably deduce that it lacks the absolute transparency, detail and snap of the Groove.

guitar notes and the soloist from the orchestra. There's a carved from solid immediacy about the performance. In contrast the Ayre delivers a warmer, bigger and smoother sound, shifting the musical focus from Yepes and his note by note progression to the shape and structure of the phrases as a whole, the relationship between the solo instrument and the backing. Where the Groove separates the two, the Ayre brings them closer together. Which is right? Neither, and both. They are different perspectives on the same event and lucky



Well, yes it does, but its strengths lie in other directions. There's a sumptuous smoothness to its presentation that simply reeks of poise and refinement. It's not a lack of detail as such, just that the Ayre integrates its information into tremendously coherent elements within the sonic picture.

you, you get to choose your vantage point. In this instance I'd take the Groove simply because of the insight it offers into the stellar individual performance of Yepes, the effort and shape he brings to each and every note is captivating. But its hard to deny the respect that Argenta's orchestral direction is due when you listen through the P-5x. And that's the point. These two individually excellent phono-stages tell you different things. Change the record and the preference changes too. The superb ▶

Vibe/Pulse or Hovland HP200 and sat back to enjoy the results with both the Clearaudio Master Reference record player and the Titan, Triplanar, Stabi Reference record players.

Playing the second movement of the Narcisco Yepes *Concierto De Aranjuez*

► MoFi pressing of the excellent Aimee Mann album *Lost In Space* (MFSL 1-278) is a perfect example. The tracks are built on a power groove, an almost subterranean undulation that propels the music with the unhurried yet unstoppable momentum of an oil tanker that's just shut down its engines. The sheer substance and stability of the Ayre, its ability to cope with the copious low frequency information without allowing it to smear the mid-range or

familiar with the differences between Living Stereo and Living Presence will realise just how impressive a dynamic lift that is. Of course, play the Mercury and it's Maxell man time...

Dimensionally, the P-5x adopts a similarly stable and broad-brush approach, delivering a coherent whole rather than a clump of discrete, beautifully defined but disconnected individuals. It all comes down to that vital sense of structure and pace that defines the

different ways. Which puts the Ayre in very select company indeed. It responds to the Groove's incisive thrust with a graceful finesse and confidence that pays dividends in long term listening.

Which begs the question, just how far does balanced connection carry the performance? As it stands, in single-ended mode this is right up there with the most engaging and enjoyable phono-stages I've used, offering a half-way point between the superb textural intimacy of the Lamm and the super transparency and temporal exactitude of the Groove.

The best of both worlds? Could just be, especially I suspect, if you can provide the optimum, fully balanced environment. Well, time will tell... ►+



smother the wonderfully meandering vocal lines is key to really delivering the message buried in this densest of mixes. The Cadillac ride is all the more impressive for its emphatic sense and delivery. Where the Groove tries to penetrate (and fails, drawing attention to itself and the recording in the process) the Ayre simply cruises on through.

That sense of substance extends into the area of dynamics too. If the micro-dynamics are contained, making them less obvious than some, that same control extends to macro-dynamics, that swell seemingly without constraint but with beautiful definition, underlining just how loose a grip many phono-stages have on the loudest passages. The dynamic security and tracking at high levels that characterize the Master Reference were shown to spectacular effect, bringing impressive breadth and power to orchestral climaxes. The fire and substance injected into the Piatikorsky performance of the Dvorak Cello Concerto (with Munch and the BSO on Living Stereo) brings it close to the power and passion of my benchmark Starker on Mercury. Anybody

progress of the musical performance. In the same way that the Ayre holds and binds the individual melodic strands into a single, substantial whole that flows and breathes, the spatial cues are kept in perfect proportion. There's a nice sense of depth and width and a believable, no make that convincing, sense of scale. Height and air are a little curtailed, but so too is tape hiss and surface noise, a trade-off that's often worthwhile, especially if you're playing a lot of older or secondhand vinyl.

Used with a single-ended input and output, the Ayre P-5x delivers a coherent, solid and enticingly musical performance. If you want reach out and touch images, immediacy and speed then start thinking along the lines of the Groove. But if the whole is more important than the parts and you want a phono-stage that still delivers the "greater" element in the old adage while remaining unflinchingly musical, then the Ayre comes up trumps. Both these phono stages succeed, but in very

#### TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Discrete, solid-state phono-stage
Inputs:	1pr single-ended RCA phonos 1pr balanced XLR
Input Loading:	47 kOhms, 1 kOhms, 100 Ohms (user adjustable with parallel loads)
Gain:	44, 54 or 64dB (single-ended) 50, 60 or 70dB (balanced) (user adjustable)
Outputs:	1pr single-ended RCA phonos 1pr balanced XLR
Output Impedance:	55 Ohms (single-ended) 110 Ohms (balanced)
Dimensions (WxHxD):	440x70x350mm
Weight:	5.5 kg
Price:	£1895

#### UK Distributor:

Symmetry  
Tel. (44)(0)1727 865488

#### Manufacturer:

Ayre Acoustics Inc.  
Net.





# Chord Electronics Prima Pre-amp and Mezzo Power Amp

by Jimmy Hughes

If Chord have proved one thing, it's that good hi-fi doesn't have to be massively big or massively ugly. The Choral series in particular succeeds in marrying state of the art sonic performance with stylish good looks, small size, and superb build quality. Chord's Blu CD transport and DAC-64 DAC are, in my view, landmark products that collectively represent a new benchmark - not just for other CD players, but for Compact Disc as a medium.

But could Chord pull off something equally spectacular with their Prima pre-amp and Mezzo power amp? I was intrigued to find out. If nothing else, it was going to be very interesting to return to a top-flight direct-coupled transistor amplifier once again, after having lived almost exclusively with transformer-coupled valve designs these past few years. I wasn't sure I could go back.

True, I had a brief but enjoyable 'affair' with the Consonance a-120 last month. But, that's a valve/transistor hybrid rather than an all transistor design. So it sort of doesn't count! Hopefully, living with Chord's Prima balanced line level pre-amp and Mezzo power amp, was going to be a rewarding and possibly enlightening experience. Early impressions were of a clear, sharp, lucid/detailed sort of sound - smooth and clean; immediate and crisply delineated. Not bad!

It was pretty much what I expected, really. But as time wore on, I realised the Prima/Mezzo had a bit more to offer than just speed and attack. It certainly is a fast amplifier - 'fast' in the sense of sounding focussed and purposeful. It projects the music in a very precise controlled manner. There's not an ounce of excess fat anywhere; everything's honed to perfection. Although one couldn't describe the presentation as

warm or beguiling, at the same time it's not dry or lacking in richness or weight.

Tonally, the sound is natural and correctly proportioned. You're able to hear lots of changes between individual tracks - distinct spatial and timbral differences - rather than having everything sound much the same. Although the overall presentation is crisp and lucid, the sound remains well-balanced; there's no sense of the treble leading the mid-range and bass. The top-end is smooth, clean, and seamlessly integrated - so much so, you hardly know it's there.

This sense of integration is one of the qualities I like with transformer coupled amplifiers - most of which (for obvious reasons) happen to use valves. Direct coupled transistor amplifiers tend to sound sharper and more immediate, but sometimes this leads to a bright and overly-forward treble. Certainly, the Prima/Mezzo 50 combination sounds tactile and immediate. But it's not overly bright. Bass is impressively solid and powerful - sometimes surprisingly so.

The lower frequencies have real weight, yet bass lines remain

agile and cleanly defined.

Control is excellent,

but the bass doesn't sound

'tight' or lean in terms of sonority.

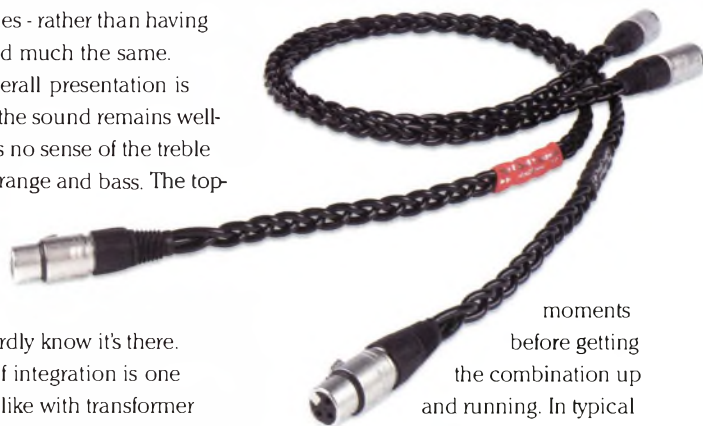
Mid-band is smooth and very liquid.

There's something very believable about the way the Prima/Mezzo makes music.

It's impressively neutral; truthful and accurate, adding/subtracting little or

nothing from the signal. This sort of presentation perfectly matches the qualities of Chord's Blu/DAC-64 combination.

Installation is fairly straightforward, but nevertheless I had a few anxious



moments before getting the combination up and running. In typical

Chord style, the various

input/output sockets are not marked. Seeing a set of unbalanced phono inputs on the Mezzo power amplifier, I naively assumed the Prima pre-amp would have a corresponding set of unbalanced phono outputs. Alas it doesn't! So I spent a frustrating twenty minutes wondering why I wasn't getting any sound...

When I finally did get the amp working it was on one channel only - the remote control had reset the left/right balance. More frustration! But curiously this demonstrated something important about the Prima/Mezzo combination; its very precise imaging. With only the left loudspeaker working, the sound really located on the left-hand side of the room - like it was locked in place. There was no sense of the sound spreading - no impression of a pool of sound. Instead, it was hard over on the left.

When I finally got both channels working, it became apparent that the amp imaged exceptionally well. The soundstage was not excessively extended in terms of front-to-back



▶ depth, but it gave a believable sense of space and distance. Nor was it exceptionally 'out of the boxes' in terms of holographic height. Yet, on vinyl sources especially, there was at times a palpable impression of vertical imaging, and it was certainly vivid in terms of width, creating focussed detailed stereo.

Again, the impression was one of precision and control,



allied to an attractive unexaggerated naturalness. The overall impression was one of an outstandingly clean uncoloured sound. Very small details could be heard - say, delicate overtones on a quietly played solo flute or perhaps a subtle cymbal stroke - without seeming exaggerated or underlined. The fine detail comes through naturally without damaging the flow of the music.

The pre-amp's lack of unbalanced outputs caught me on the hop slightly. Luckily I had a set of XLR to phono cables that got the combination up and running. But I knew that using the amp this way (balanced Out to unbalanced In) was very much a compromise. Fortunately, the Chord Company (the Salisbury cable manufacturers) came up with a set of their balanced Anthem XLR to XLR cables, allowing the pre-amp and power amp to interface in balanced mode.

Big improvement. The Chord balanced cables made a difference in several crucial areas. There was an increase in volume level, plus greater cleanness and purity. Put simply,

everything I played just sounded truer and more natural. And it seemed to be getting better. With amp and cables nicely run-in, I really felt I was starting to hear the Prima/Mezzo combination at its best. Yes, the amp had sounded pretty good right from the off. But now all its many good points seemed to be enhanced.

A recently-purchased 2CD set of Karajan conducting famous overtures with the Berlin Philharmonic on Deutsche Grammophon really highlighted this. The recordings span about two decades - from the mid '60s to the early '80s, and are a mix of analogue and digital. I knew all the recordings from the original LPs, some of which had been in my record collection for almost thirty years.

In particular, the '70s recordings, which enshrine Karajan and the Berliners at their incomparable peak. Alas, the recordings aren't easy to reproduce. The sound is spacious and detailed, but can be a touch thin and 'hard' tonally.



Specifically, the recordings from 1972/3/4 can (on unsympathetic equipment) paradoxically seem both forward and hard in climaxes, yet vague and recessed in the quiet passages. Writing in *Hi-Fi News* at the time, poor old Chris Breunig got into

big trouble with DG by saying the recordings were made in an acoustic suggesting a huge, empty, Luftwaffe aircraft hanger. Naughty..

So I was impressed to hear the Chord CD/DAC and pre/power amp reproduce these somewhat difficult recordings with consummate ease. All the individual characteristics came through, just as I remembered them from the original LPs. In retrospect DG were aiming for a very distinct and in some ways quite sophisticated sort of sonic presentation - spacious and atmospheric at middle and low levels, but crisp and detailed in climaxes. I recall the way these recordings sounded on the hi-fi equipment of the 1970s, and was gratified to hear modern technology doing such a good job. Always the strengths of the individual recordings were emphasised, not the weaknesses. And while the Blu CD transport and DAC 64 probably deserve the lion's share of any praise due, the Prima/Mezzo played an important part too, making sure the signal reached the speakers intact.

Owners of Chord's DAC-64 have a choice of using balanced or unbalanced cables when connecting up to the Prima. Using a set of unbalanced phono to phono cables is probably the easiest option, but for best results you should use balanced XLR cables. You'll get a bigger more dimensional sound, and increased subtlety and fine detail. In the case of the Chord electronics, there's always a big advantage with balanced connections - partly due to the outstanding rejection of common mode noise.

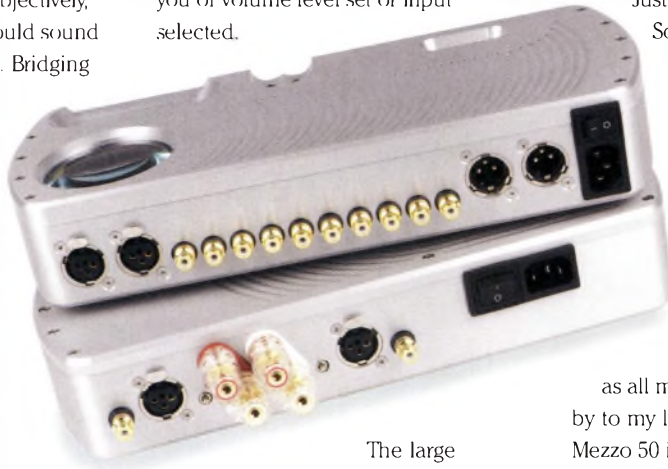
The Mezzo 50 power amp runs quite warm, and when first switched on a rather noisy cooling fan kicks in for a few seconds. Fortunately, the noise stops almost immediately, and I wrongly assumed the fan had switched off. But if you put your ear right up close you can just detect some fan noise. Some fan-cooled amplifiers are noisy; this one is virtually silent during normal use - ▶

▶ only if the amp got dangerously hot would the fan kick in hard... Subjectively the it sounds very powerful - more so than its specifications indicate. But if extra power is required it's possible to add a second Mezzo and use each amp bridged, increasing power output and improving sound quality. Subjectively, using two amps bridged should sound scads better than bi-amping. Bridging doubles the output power, but more importantly gives added weight and scale - the sound seems distinctly 'bigger', even at identical volume levels. (Not sure I agree with this, but Chord are supplying a second Mezzo, so we'll discover the truth in due course. Ed.)

The Mezzo is one of those strain-free amps that gives barely any indication of how hard it's working until you overstep its limits - then it distorts. Subjectively it's an amp you want to turn up loud because the sound is so clean and fresh - it encourages you to turn up the wick. Given loudspeakers of medium/high efficiency, it will produce very decent volume levels - certainly as loud as I would ever want or need - but clearly, power is not unlimited. Unusually, Chord provide the Mezzo 50 with individual phase switches for each channel. You'd make use of these switches when bridging of course - one channel is set negative to the other's positive. But the phase switches also allow you to experiment with positive/negative absolute phase - a useful feature seeing as Chord's DAC-64 has a phase-inverting output. Actually, I found the difference fairly subtle. But absolute phase is a subjective, system-dependant thing, so try it yourself and see.

The Prima is a balanced line-level pre-amp offering five line inputs (1 balanced, XLR; 4 unbalanced via phono sockets) and a set of balanced XLR outputs. Sensitivity is individually

adjustable for each input using a rather large and elaborate LCD remote handset. The pre-amp itself is a pretty simple 'minimalist' unit; volume and balance are set using rotary controls, while input and record out selection is via two press buttons. An illuminated display informs you of volume level set or input selected.



The large beautifully-made remote handset comes with its own 38 page instruction booklet - not a good sign! It offers comprehensive control for those with complete Chord systems, and can 'learn' commands from other remote handsets. To be honest I hardly used it, finding it somewhat complicated and not especially intuitive to navigate. You'd also use it in addition to the Blu's remote; so that means two remotes for the system, which seems a bit ungainly. Surprisingly, the pre-amp runs nearly as warm as the power amp. Actually, I shouldn't be that surprised really, as all Chord components generate a reasonable amount of heat. Both pre and power amp seem to need very little time to settle down; switched on from cold they're more or less optimum within five or ten minutes maximum. So there's not much point in leaving the items on all the time. Certainly, I'd never leave a power amp permanently switched on for fear it might go DC and burn out my speakers.

So - did the Chord Prima/Mezzo 50 change my prejudices on direct-coupled transistor amplifiers? Yes. It's certainly an amplifier I could live with. I love its

cleanness and neutrality, and at the same time find it very purposeful - capable of producing strong driving rhythms with plenty of power and presence. Despite its commanding presence, it's actually very neutral sounding amplifier; not warm, not cold.

Just natural and unexaggerated.

Sonically, it's an excellent match for Chord's Blu transport and DAC-64. Both amp and CD player highlight the other's strengths, producing an end result that's greater than the sum of the parts. I have reservations about the remote on a personal level, but then I rarely need to use such things

as all my equipment is situated close by to my listening seat. The Prima/Mezzo 50 is an outstanding pre/power combination - one that looks and sounds great. Strongly recommended. ▶+

#### TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

##### Prima Pre-amp

Type:	Solid-state line-stage
Inputs:	1x balanced XLR 4x unbalanced RCA phono
Input Impedance:	balanced unbalanced
Outputs:	1x balanced XLR 1x unbalanced tape
Output Impedance:	470 Ohms
Weight:	8Kg
Dimensions (WxHxD):	338x60x145mm
Price:	£2850 (including remote)

##### Mezzo Power Amp

Type:	Clan A/B solid-state power amplifier
Inputs:	1x balanced XLR 1x unbalanced RCA phono
Input Impedance:	100 kOhms
Outputs:	5-way binding posts
Rated Power:	50 Watts/8 Ohms
Weight:	8Kg
Dimensions (WxHxD):	338x60x145mm
Price:	£1900

##### Manufacturer:

Chord Electronics Ltd  
Tel. (44)(0)1622 721444  
Net. www.chordelectronics.co.uk



# Incognito and Discovery Rega Re-wire Kits

by Roy Gregory

For a while now, when it comes to the audiophile tinkerer's favourite pastime, re-wiring Rega tonearms, the Incognito kit has had it pretty much all its own way. At least as far as Europe is concerned. America is a slightly different story – which is a kind of ironic given that the Incognito kit itself is based on Cardas wire.

The reasons for the Incognito's success are not too hard to fathom. Whereas plenty of people have offered a plethora of different wires over the years, this was the first really comprehensive DIY kit that came complete with instructions, easily followed by even the most cack-handed of individuals. The first time I actually really examined an Incognito kit was while I was on a rather protracted phone call. By the time I put the

receiver down all I had left to do was solder on the cartridge tags. It really is that easy. But – and it's a big but – don't get fooled by the simplicity of the operation itself. There are still pitfalls to trap the unwary.

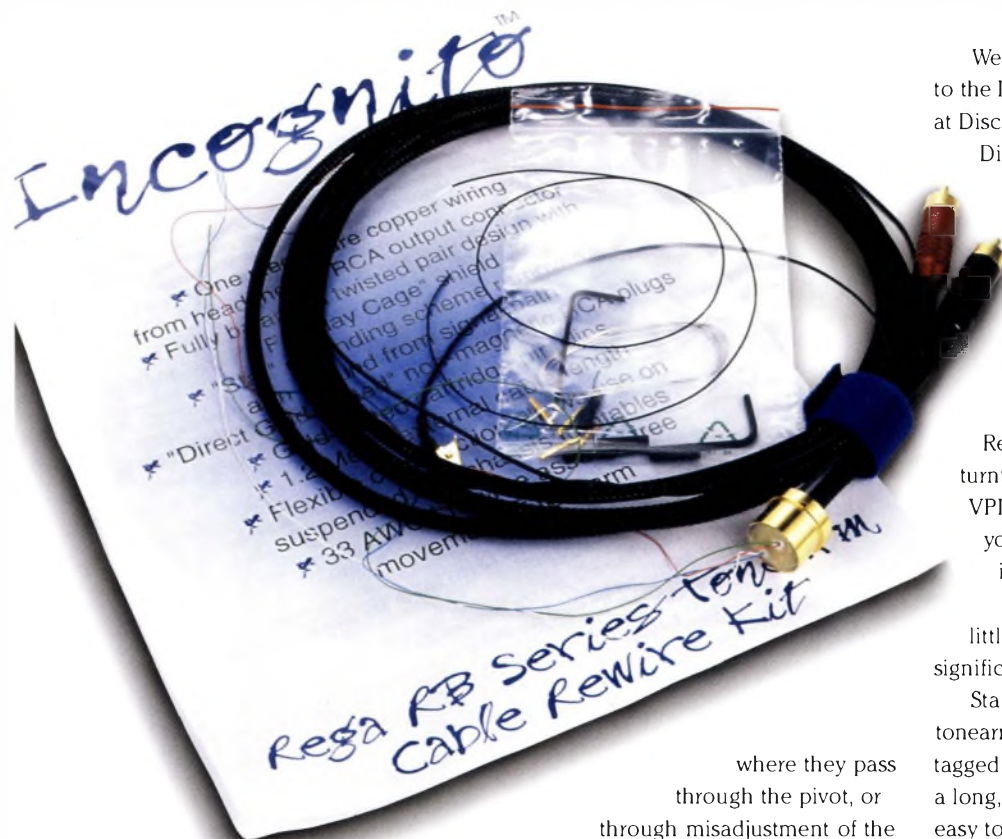
However, let's start at the beginning, with the other reason for the Incognito's success: It offered a single run of cable from cartridge tags to phono plugs, thus eliminating one of the

Rega's biggest weaknesses, the number of joints in its internal wiring. The cable arrives, stripped back for its internal run and neatly

reinforced by a turned brass plug that locates into the arm base. The solidity of this junction and the integrity it provides at the transition between the internal and external cable runs is reassuring to say the least. It also underlines the DIY intentions of the incognito kit. If you are going to

get it wrong this is where it will happen. What you end up with is 15" or so of internal wire, running through the base plug to around a meter or so of external wire, the conductors forming a single, uninterrupted run. The twin lead-out wires are reasonably flexible, albeit springy and resilient. They'll dress reasonably easily, making them perfectly viable for all but the most nervous of suspended sub-chassis designs. They're terminated in a pair of lightweight phono plugs that are sonically better than they appear. There's also a separate earth wire with a gold-plated crocodile clip





Well, now we have an alternative to the Incognito, from Joe De Phillips at Discovery Cables. In fact, US based Discovery have been supplying internal cables to many of the top American tonearm manufacturers for many years. I first came across them in the ET2, which gives you an idea just how many years! Along the way they've also been rewiring Rega based tonearms for turntable manufacturers such as VPI and Clearaudio. Well, now you can buy their rewiring kit in a package similar to the Incognito, although look a little closer and you'll find some significant differences.

Starting at the business end of the tonearm, the fine, internal wires are tagged together and connected to a long, single draw wire, making it easy to pull the cables through the arm structure without dismantling the bearing. The downside is that it's easy to over-tension the wires as they run through the housing, disturbing the vertical friction as previously discussed. The base plug on the Discovery is also rather smaller than that on the Incognito, and made of plastic. The latter point, of course, is actually a positive, but also leads us to the major structural difference between the Incognito and the Discovery. Just above the plug you'll find a small clutch of heat-shrinks. These protect the junction between the internal and external wires where they're connected. You see, the Discovery does have an internal joint in its conductors, but only one. Those exposed shrinks also need careful handling, and in this respect the Incognito is certainly more robust.

The Discovery loom relies on a single length of purple Plus Four lead-out cable that is far from ideally flexible, making it more suitable to rigid or the heavier suspended

► on the end, although personally I'd prefer a spade, or even better, a 4mm plug.

The headshell end of the cable requires you to solder the four (excellent quality) cartridge tags to the end of the wire, and then reinforce them with the colour coded heatshrink provided, the only fiddly part of the entire operation. So, the actual kit itself is both comprehensive and beautifully thought out, even down to the rim around the bottom of the base plug that serves to locate it. So far so good: The issues arise when it comes to the actual fitting and dressing of the cable. This requires the dismantling of the vertical bearing cage on all but the RB250, followed by the threading of the internal wires through the bearing housing and into the tonearm itself. In both instances, whether through the dressing of the cables

where they pass through the pivot, or through misadjustment of the bearings on reassembly, it is possible to upset the vertical friction levels in the arm, undermining any advantage to be had from the improved wiring.

This is the one fly in the DIY ointment. But worry not, help is at hand. Rega are only too aware of (whilst they totally fail to understand) people's desire to meddle with their tonearms. Consequently they are happy to provide the necessary training and jigs to individuals offering a rewiring service to ensure that, mechanically speaking at least, rewired arms perform to spec. The good news is that the straightforward nature of the work means that the charge for getting it done by one of the increasing number of qualified professionals, equipped with the correct tools, is surprisingly reasonable – normally in the region of £20. It's worth every penny. You can do it yourself, but getting it done properly will take the chance out of the process, delivering far more than £20 of sonic value into the bargain.

► decks. It splits near the amplifier inputs, although I'm not sure whether that involves a second break in the conductors or not. The cable is terminated with a pair of the excellent Discovery collet type locking phono plugs. With signals as small as the ones carried from a low output moving-coil, the additional connection integrity they offer is audibly worth-while. The cartridge tags supplied are not as easy to work with as the Incognito ones but match them for quality, both being light-years ahead of the standard Rega items. Discovery also supply

precise adjustment of VTA, the 'tables rigid structure undisturbed by the dressing of the lead-out cables. Swapping entire tonearms and cartridges is never easy or quick, but this is about as quick as it gets. The other big difference was the use of an RB300 for the Incognito modification, whereas the Discovery loom was fitted to an RB250, modified with a metal counterweight stub and

rewire were immediately obvious. The Incognito wiring loom delivers a major boost in terms of clarity, transparency and focus. Overall detail and the dynamic quickness of the sound both improve. Playing 'The Thing You Love Is Killing You' (Dolly Varden, *The Dumbest Magnets*, Diverse Records DIV 007LP) the first thing that strikes you is the separation, focus and sheer detail of the guitar combination that opens the track. The rattles on the tambourine and other percussion motifs are beautifully separated and held in space. Likewise, the voices, superimposed in the recording are superbly differentiated, Steve Dawson's being slightly below



you with a couple of spares and extra heat shrinks which is a nice touch.

Sit the two looms next to each other and it's clear that the Incognito was designed from the floor up with DIY fitting in mind. The Discovery is aimed more at the OEM market. Hardly surprising, but given the increasing number of trained installers and the desirability of employing one, that's actually less of an issue than it might appear. For the purposes of the listening, I relied on a pair of arms wired by the respective cable suppliers, ensuring that vagaries in installation shouldn't effect the sonic results. The arms were mounted on the second pillar of the Clearaudio Master Reference, its threaded armboard allowing

dropped counterweight. I know that Moth (the Incognito distributor) favour a similar set-up, so they may wish to offer their version for future assessment.

Starting on familiar ground I first mounted a standard RB300, carrying the Dynavector DV-20X I'd elected to use for the review. Once I'd got used to its performance (good as the Regas are, they offer no competition to the likes of the Triplanar or Master TQI) I was ready to swap it for the Incognitoed arm, carrying the same cartridge. Despite the time taken to effect the change, the benefits of the

and behind Diane Christansen's. There's never any question as to who's singing or how many voices there are at any one time.

The price you pay for all this detail and clarity is a slightly spot-lit treble, a thinness and slight grain to the upper-mid. Neither is intrusive or irritating, and they pale into insignificance compared to the murky depths and splashy treble of the standard arm, but treble detail can sound slightly detached or disjointed at times.

The contrast with the Discovery wired RB250 could not be greater. The astonishing immediacy and ►

► transparency of the Incognito is tempered, the tambourine a single source rather than a collection of distinct rattles. Nor is it set as far back or as well separated in the soundstage. It's there, but it's not highlighted the way it is with the Incognito – or exposed, depending on your point of view. On the other hand there's

Respighi *Birds*, beautifully repressed by Speakers Corner (RSF's ravings regarding these records are fully justified – these are great re-issues). In contrast, the Discovery offers a more compact and integrated view of events. The result is that the Incognito leans towards the startling array of

roundabouts here than is normally the case. The availability of the Discovery wiring loom does nothing to undermine the value or benefits of the Incognito. Instead it offers a more refined and less obviously spectacular alternative: One that anybody thinking of rewiring an RB250 or 300 should consider very seriously indeed. Ultimately, my feeling is that the Discovery gets you closer to the music and can be taken further in a system. Which option is best suited will depend



a sense of solidity and overall coherence to the music that is built on a richer tonal palette, with more colours, truer to life. That tambourine may not be as detailed but it's better integrated into the musical whole, its strikes falling precisely on the beat. Which is what makes this comparison so interesting, and direct comparisons valid. Everything that the Incognito does well the Discovery does less so, and vice versa. Diane Christiansen's voice, grainy and a little thin on the Incognito, is rich, solid and immediately recognisable on the Discovery. Yet the close harmonies with Steve Dawson are almost too close, the voices converging at times whilst the Incognito keeps them effortlessly separate.

Bass depth is pretty much on a par between the two arms, the Incognito offering a shade more attack and definition, the Discovery greater weight and texture. Soundstage on the Incognito is wide and deep, especially on a recording like the spectacularly good Dorati/LSO

sounds and spatial effects that characterize this piece, while the Discovery concentrates on binding all those bits into a single, coherent whole. There is no question in my mind that the Discovery route is the more refined and ultimately more rewarding, but individual preferences will be based on the balance of ones system, cartridge choice and your own predisposition to detail, separation and transparency.

Like so many things in hi-fi, this is not a case of a clear winner. Indeed, there are more swings and

on specific circumstances and in which direction your future plans lie. It's not that the king is dead, more that he's facing a serious insurrection. ►+

#### TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

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 Installed: £129  
 Complete with modified RB250: £274

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 Net. www.mothgroup.com

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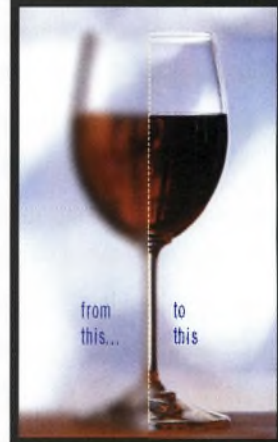
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# One Careful Owner...

## The Lentek Stereo Integrated Amplifier

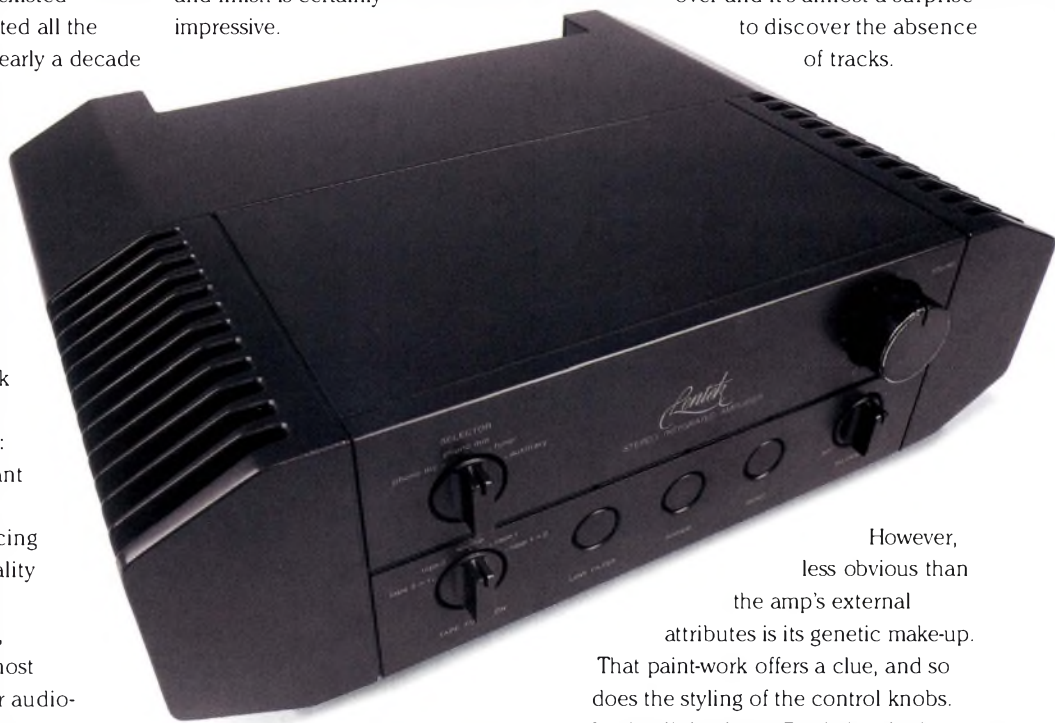
by Roy Gregory

Long before Krell finally pinned the tail on the audiophile integrated donkey, establishing in the process a product category that no serious electronics manufacturer could afford to ignore, there already existed a product that incorporated all the salient design features. Nearly a decade earlier, a small UK company debuted a product that marked a whole series of salient firsts.

The Lentek Stereo Integrated Amplifier looks more familiar in today's market context than it ever did way back when. Just check the list of relevant attributes: Powerful and load tolerant – tick; Built like a battle-tank – tick; Hernia inducing weight – tick; Sound quality to challenge pre-power combinations – tick. Oh, and lest we forget, the most important thing of all for audiophile credibility – a serious price tag, which the Lentek certainly had. Launched in 1979, it was priced at between £600 and £700, which was a lot of money in those days. Five years later in 1984, the Quad 34/405 combination came in at under £500 while the Naim 32/250 was around £1100: And that in times of galloping inflation.

The first time you see this amplifier, it's hard not to be impressed by its astonishing solidity and squat density. It seems to possess all the physical frailty of a breeze-block, while the fit and finish is certainly impressive.

shade that definitely belongs in the colour palette beloved of the German military in the late thirties. Indeed, with its weight, solid structure and contoured sides, turn the Lentek over and it's almost a surprise to discover the absence of tracks.



That sense of compact competence extends to the styling, which is a sort of amalgam of military communications and pro studio. There's the large, no-nonsense controls and operational simplicity of course, but I think the thing that really does it is the paint-work, a

However, less obvious than the amp's external attributes is its genetic make-up. That paint-work offers a clue, and so does the styling of the control knobs. Look a little closer: Don't they look familiar? Audiolab 8000 perhaps? Yes indeed, the Lentek represents the first outing for the Derek Scotland/ Philip Swift design partnership that was to deliver that ground-breaking product, which truly does establish it as the Godfather of audiophile integrations.

So much for the appearance, what does the Lentek actually do? Well, ►

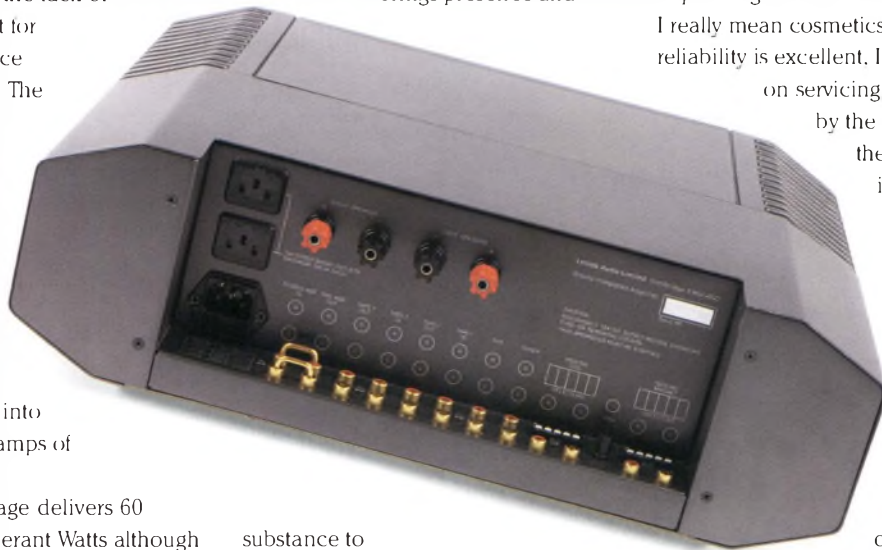
► it offers independent user configurable inputs for both MC and MM cartridges, set with rows of dip-switches on the rear panel. Those allow you to adjust impedance loading for moving-coils and capacitance for magnets. There are two line inputs and two tape loops with full dubbing options. In another step that was way ahead of its time, there's also a pair of pre-out/power-in links. You also get a balance control, mono switch and a rumble filter. Indeed, the only things that really betray its age are the lack of an allocated input for CD and the absence of remote control. The basic recipe and control configuration translated almost directly into the Audiolab 8000 and survives with the addition of remote control into the TAG/Mclaren amps of today.

The output stage delivers 60 extremely load tolerant Watts although overall gain isn't that great, meaning that the amp doesn't go as loud as you might think, given its overall weight. But fear not, because this design is all about control and the absence of strain. You really have to push things before the bottom-end starts to get out of hand, your first indicator that you're rapidly approaching the edge. For those who absolutely must have more power, the amp is bridgeable, assuming of course that you can find a second one. Parts quality and the monocoque construction were other things that were well ahead of their time.

This unit, serial number LA 0129, has had rather more than one careful owner, yet it carries the scars of its near 30 year life-span firmly on its sleeve. Those rigours have left it surprisingly unscathed, the patina

of use standing as testament to its continuing ability to satisfy on a musical level. All in all, something in the region of 500 units were built, and I'd be very surprised if most of them aren't still out there.

In today's terms, the Lentek sounds remarkably fresh and engaging. It has excellent control and good focus and separation, with none of the dryness that typifies the sound of the Audiolabs. Indeed, if anything it has a rather fruity and slightly warm bass, a quality that brings presence and



substance to proceedings if not the fleetest feet in the business. Like many older amplifiers, the Lentek wasn't intended for the 2.0V output level of the average CD player. Of course, the variable output on the Wadia means this isn't a problem, but in practice, the Lentek is surprisingly resistant to input over-load. Nevertheless, an attenuated lead (or reduced output) really opens out the soundstage and improves the musical fluidity. Combine that with the natural warmth and a smooth, sweet top-end and the Lentek becomes a serious tool for long term listening pleasure.

Capable of driving modern speakers of most persuasions, this amp really comes alive with higher efficiency designs that allow greater maximum levels. I ran it with various speakers (including the diminutive

ProAc Tablette Signature) but it was the Living Voice OBX-R that showed it off to the best advantage, the quickness of the speaker making the most of the Lentek's sinuous delivery. The spacious soundstage made up in intimacy what it lacked in air and absolute transparency, musically speaking a trade-off that's well worthwhile.

These amps are rare but they do come up, normally costing somewhere between £500 and £1000 depending on condition (by which I really mean cosmetics). Whilst reliability is excellent, I can't comment on servicing, but I'm assured by the designer that there's nothing inside that can't be replaced with a modern equivalent, so you shouldn't get left with a useless toy. However, I couldn't even work out how to get inside, and nor could CB who

earns money as a service engineer. The knowledge is out there, but you might have to hunt a bit to find it. That aside though, the socketry, input options, speaker terminals and every other practical aspect of owning a Lentek really is no different (or actually a lot simpler) than many modern designs. It's a model of clear, logical layout, with versatility to put its current competition to shame. Combine that with classic looks and the astonishing build quality and you have one desirable vintage amplifier. Way ahead of its time when launched, the Lentek can still hold its head up today. Strikingly timeless in both looks and sound it really does force you to question just how far we've come. ►✚

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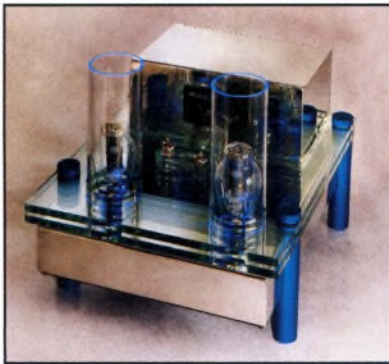
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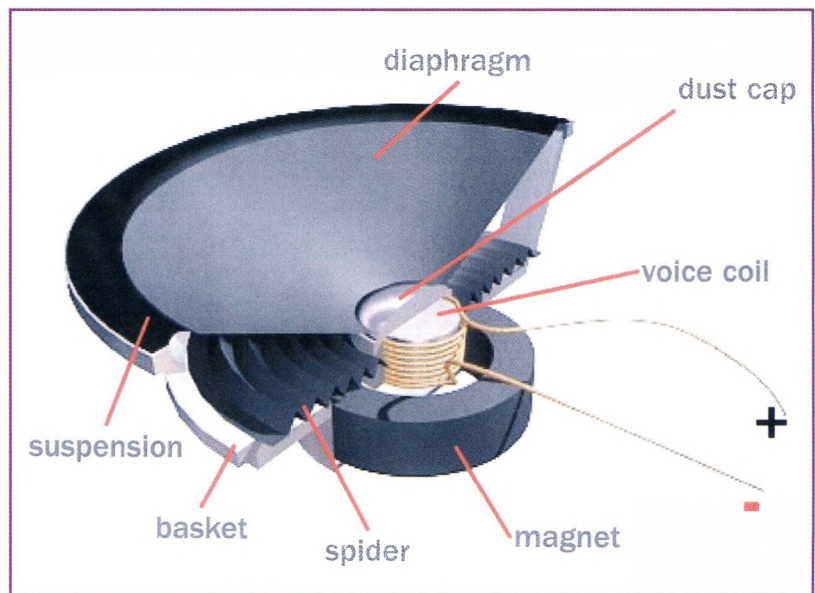
# The Next Big Thing... Field coil loudspeakers

by Chris Binns

At the time of my primary school education, most of my friends were into collecting football cards and/or dinky toys, in the way that most normal children do. Sadly, I developed an unhealthy fascination for loudspeakers at an early age, and collected everything from 2" pocket radio types (one Japanese manufacturer amusingly went under the brand name of Honkutone) through to pride of place for my record player, a Goodmans Axiom 12" unit mounted on an open baffle, courtesy of my long suffering father. The long suffering local radio shops were kind enough to give me the nod when they were due for a clear out, and I would spend hours in back alleyways ripping old televisions and radios apart. Now and again I would arrive to find that the rubbish lorry had arrived earlier than expected, and pedal furiously on my bike to meet it before its valuable load got buried at the local dump. Health and safety considerations aside, the old man in charge of refuse was not happy at the prospect of me clambering all over the land fill site, but we somehow struck a deal – any loudspeakers that I found which didn't have permanent magnets I gave to him. He presumably made some money out of selling the vast amount of copper wire used in making the field coils, which suited me fine as I wasn't interested in units that needed power supplies to make them work. At a time when a lot of people were getting rid of old radios from the 40's and 50's, there were quite a lot of loudspeakers that were 'mains energised'. I well remember when a

complete Westrex speaker system turned up from the old town cinema, only to be disappointed that it did not use permanent magnets. These days that would be quite a find.

I am of course referring to triodes in their various forms and horn loudspeakers. Field coil loudspeakers are very much from the same genre historically, while at the moment what



But what is the significance of all this? Well, there have been stirrings within various quarters of the hi-fi industry as to the effectiveness of different magnetic materials used in loudspeaker manufacturing for some time now. Paul Messenger touched on the subject in his column in the last issue, while my own (somewhat different) investigations have led toward a similar conclusion. The last couple of decades have seen quite considerable shifts in attitudes within the hi-fi industry, not least of which has been the re-emergence of technologies perpetuated by a few die-hard enthusiasts into the mainstream.

little research is taking place falls into the same category, mainly I think because of the potential benefits of efficiency, which of course plays a major part in the use of low powered amplifiers and horn loudspeakers.

While PM has already outlined some of the history of field coil loudspeakers, it is worth describing the basic operation of a moving coil device for other considerations to make sense. The AC (musical) signal is applied to the voice coil which is attached to the diaphragm, while the resulting magnetic field produced interacts with the flux of the 'permanent' magnet to produce mechanical energy in the ►

► form of repulsion or attraction, and ultimately, sound. If you're not familiar with the internal workings of the average moving-coil driver, just take a look at the accompanying diagrams to appreciate the fundamental structure of a conventional drive-unit.

At the time that 'moving coil' drivers were introduced, it was nigh on impossible to manufacture permanent magnets of sufficient strength to realise any useable efficiency, probably due to

a then lack of knowledge and experience as to what materials were good at retaining magnetism. An electromagnet consisting of copper wire through which a current is passed wound on to an iron former was able to provide more than enough energy to make the moving coil unit viable, and it is worth noting at this point that although iron will not 'hold' magnetism, it is a very good conductor of it. Ironically, the less pure the iron, the more it will retain magnetic energy, which is highly significant in terms of the development of permanent magnets. Thus other materials were to play a major part in the

story, in particular aluminium, nickel and cobalt which were constituents of the ubiquitous AlNiCo magnets that were the mainstay of loudspeakers from the second world war (which accelerated development) up until the mid sixties. Unfortunately, these constituents were both expensive and highly subject to price fluctuations influenced by world events, and much research went on to come up with a cheaper alternative. Which arrived in the form of ceramic magnets; consisting of a Barium Ferrite powder that is compressed and sintered,

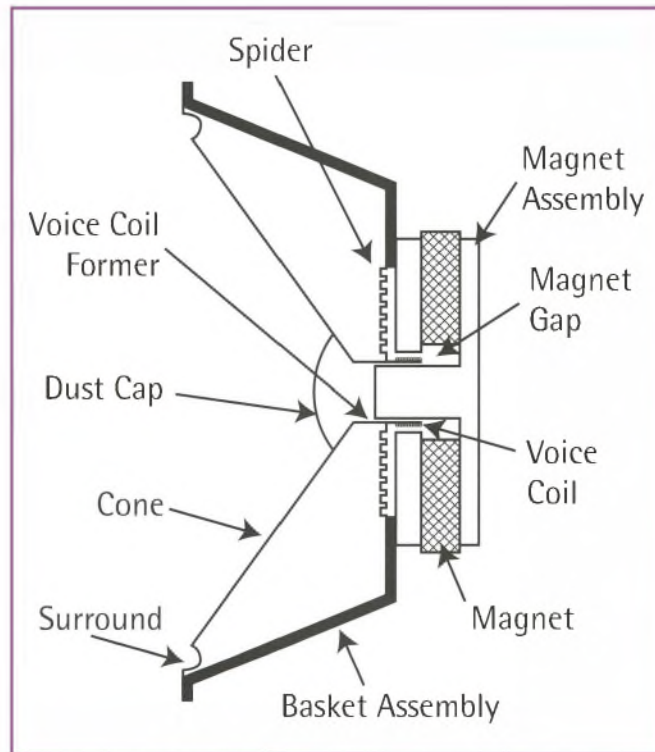
due to this construction the magnetism can be orientated along a preferred axis, allowing a shallow and more compact structure that was particularly important in the manufacture of portable commercial equipment in the 60's and 70's. The fact that they are that much cheaper to produce is borne out by the fact that about 95% of units now use this type of magnet.

So the development of permanent magnets swiftly rendered the field coil

valve circuits incorporated a choke. By placing the field coil in series with the HT supply, it 'smoothed' power to the valves, while also providing the necessary current to generate a magnetic field. This meant that musical peaks that took the (usually single-ended) amplifier out of class A provided a small but welcome boost to the loudspeaker, the downside being that as the valve aged and drew less current so the speaker would lose

sensitivity. Professionally, field coil drivers hung in there somewhat longer due to the requirement of larger (and thus more difficult to manufacture) magnets. Particular for cinema applications, efficiency was still a very high priority, finding the juice to power a field coil was not. A small point of interest; in 1952 JBL were concerned as to the supply of materials for their Alnico magnets due to the conflict in Korea, and so started to build a small number of units with field coils, namely the D130 E.

To come back up to date, surely a magnet is a magnet, and providing it has sufficient strength for the job in hand, that



obsolete, although there were mitigating factors that slowed its decline into obscurity. In commercial radio sets of the time, the coil of wire that was used to energise the magnet also served another purpose; given that the power supply to the valves was pretty unrefined, due mainly to the relatively small values of capacitance being available (typically 8 - 16 microFarads) the use of a series choke helped enormously in providing hum free operation, as was indeed the case with amplifiers - almost all of the 'classic'

should be the end of the story... but that's a bit like saying that one cone material is as good as another. As I have already intimated, there has been increasing interest in different magnetic materials, not only in loudspeakers, but cartridges, and in the recording world, microphones. The problem is that the subject is shrouded in a degree of mystery, and even basic understanding is not easy to come by, while detailed analysis would seem to require a deep knowledge of physics at an atomic level. My own (extremely

limited) understanding and investigation has revealed a few interesting facts, the first of which is that guitarists have long known what the hi-fi industry is just cottoning on to. There is a general consensus amongst players (and I am not talking about the Marshall noise mongers with their 4 x 12 stacked cabinets) – that amplifiers using loudspeakers with AlNiCo magnets are better at representing the sound of the instrument. A player's sound is both guitar and amplification; and it is to do with the way in which the harmonics are reproduced and interact with one another when two or three strings are played together, as well as more elementary factors such as attack and bite. Is this beginning to sound like a hi fi review? Bear in mind also that many guitarists never gave up on valve amplification, and kept it going through the dark ages, so don't be too dismissive. My own experiments over many years with different instrument loudspeakers bear this out, and believe me, it is much more obvious than some of the effects I have heard listening to differences within hi-fi systems. My own favoured loudspeakers have up to now been variations of a JBL unit, and the differences between the later K series drivers that use an obscenely large (and heavy) ceramic magnet compared to earlier D or E versions with AlNiCo are quite pronounced, despite identical voice coils, cones, surrounds and chassis.

To complicate the issue further, I have recently been loaned a pair of 12" field coil drivers. Dating from the early 60's, I had no idea that anyone was still making non permanent magnet types this late on, but there are a number of points that echo a similar theme to the guitar scenario. Not least of which is the fact that It transpires that Hammond – the company who make organs and from where these units originated – carried on using them considerably longer than anyone else, the reason

being that having supplied product with more up to date permanent magnet units, the general consensus amongst players was that they were not as 'musical' and lacked a degree of life. Playing various different guitars through them revealed a performance that was just as much a leap ahead as the AlNiCo was over the ceramic; playing just one chord at low to medium levels there was categorically more interaction between the instrument and the loudspeaker resulting in a longer natural decay with greater interaction of the harmonics.

While these speakers are most definitely PA, I couldn't resist trying them with the hi-fi. Mounted in rudimentary open back cabinets, they sounded pretty excruciating running full range, with lots of ringing and peaks all over the place. With some fairly basic filtering to tailor the response above about 1.5 KHz, and augmented with a pair of Dynaudio tweeters – the only thing I had that would run satisfactorily low with a simple crossover, the results were interesting. Unrefined and brash, but outstanding in presenting detail, and more interestingly, micro dynamics on certain pieces of music that I didn't even know existed, in a similar fashion to a good horn design. And very efficient. Was this a valid experiment ? I think so. I do not claim to have evolved a suitable crossover in the space of a couple of evenings, although some basic amplitude measurements suggested that the response was reasonably flat, and one must not forget what these drive units were originally intended for.

It would seem as though given a set of technical parameters for a magnet, the differences lie in the shape and quality (?) of the field they produce. Creating a uniform area of flux for the voice coil to sit in is one thing, how it reacts under dynamic conditions may well be another. Presumably the field is distorted by the current through the voice coil as it moves. I have heard that it is easier to create a more uniform field with AlNiCo. It is also possible that the

electrically conductive nature of the material has a beneficial effect with eddy currents that are produced during operation. I'm sure a drive-unit designer would be able to answer these questions. The field coil does have a couple of fundamental advantages, however – the magnetic energy is constantly being topped up by the current in the coil, and putting an ammeter in the power supply circuit confirms this as there are small fluctuations as you drive the loudspeaker. I also noted that the voice coil is wired in with the field coil –perhaps a small amount of the audio signal is mixed in with the magnet coil?

Another aspect that has me wondering is about the heat generated within the gap – permanent magnets loose efficiency at elevated temperatures, and with modern voice coils designed to work at temperatures of several hundred degrees, I wonder if, again under dynamic conditions, the field coil has an advantage.

There are a number of companies that are currently making field coil drive-units, a lot of which seem to emanate from France, while the Japanese audiophile community is, as you might guess, absolutely nuts about them. But most of what I have seen is very much in Lowther territory, i.e. high efficiency full-range drivers aimed toward use in horn enclosures. There have been a number of cases where a fresh look at old technology has been a real eye opener, and sometimes show that our endeavours for progress have not necessarily taken the right turn when it comes to performance. While the interest in field coils currently resides firmly with the anorak brigade, I look forward to somebody producing a more real world loudspeaker (as opposed to a corner horn) which investigates the technology. Maybe it will never happen...or maybe one day there will be a Nautilus 800 that you plug into the mains.





# The Home Entertainment Show 2004, New York

by Roy Gregory

It used to be that hi-fi shows mapped the year like monuments. Well, not any more. The proliferation of new shows and the transmutation or demise of others leaves one feeling slightly dazed and confused: It's Friday so it must be New York – unless of course it's Munich. And there's the rub. Once was that the two, trade only CES shows were the twin centres of the US year. Then that number dropped to one, the winter CES in Las Vegas. That opened the way for the "home install" CEDIA show, and it wasn't long until Stereophile also got in on the act, offering their own event, but this time, it was open to the public. Of course, enthusiastic punters had been blagging their way into CES for years, but Stereophile effectively turned the tables, with a public event that actually encouraged participation from dealers as opposed to simply inviting manufacturers to exhibit.

Since then Stereophile the magazine has been acquired by Primedia, while Stereophile the show (arguably the main point of interest for the publishing conglomerate) was combined with the empire's other titles (Home Theatre, Stereophile Ultimate AV, Connected) to create the Home Entertainment shows. Well, Primedia, after doing one spring show a year have finally gone bi-coastal, with an event in New York followed later this year by another in San Francisco. What's more, in a move that could be

described by turns as bold, inept or just plain dumb, they positioned the New York show on the same weekend as the biggest show in Europe, itself newly moved from Frankfurt to Munich. Brave, if nothing else, I can't help feeling that everyone might have been better served had they managed to avoid the clash.

Having said that, New York at least is a market



big enough in and of itself to support a fair few of the smaller hi-fi companies on its own, a fact reflected in the presence of so many cottage industry exhibitors at previous shows in the city. Ironic then that the nature of the event this year was notable for the absence of exactly that element. This was a distinctly multi-channel/digital event, with two channel systems in the minority, and analogue rarer still. It also seemed smaller than in 2002, both of which things made it a less interesting show for yours truly. However, it was

not without its moments and its share of good sounds, even if most of them were from familiar names.

Two encounters with old acquaintances proved particularly enjoyable. Local boys Lamm were present, using their L2 Reference line-stage and P2 phono-stage to feed two pairs of the ML2 mono-blocks. At the front-end was the Walker Proscenium while the speakers were from Kharma. Having enjoyed the Lamm amps driving the enormous Exquisite Reference 1Bs some years ago, it was nice to hear the marginally more modestly dimensioned (though seemingly equally expensive) Exquisite Reference Midi 1A-DE, now newly minted with a diamond tweeter. The large ceramic dish of the midrange driver is joined by a pair of 9" Eaton carbon-fibre bass drivers, all housed in Kharma's massive, laminated and internally sculpted cabinet. Two holes drilled in the ceramic diaphragm are claimed to reduce the ringing inherent in such structures and once again I was struck by how successfully Kharma manage to combine drivers of such different materials and construction. The audio band was wonderfully smooth and coherent top to bottom, with no audible clues to the crossover points. Air, clarity and detail were all superb, although ultimately, the system paid a dynamic price for the low efficiency of the speakers. ▶

► Would more power have helped? Not if my experience with the ML2s is anything to go by. Like many systems this one chose its balance with care, delivering precision, transparency and focus of the highest order, the price in dynamic immediacy and timbral richness being one many listeners would be happy to pay. Whilst I marveled at its strengths and enjoyed its performance I'd have liked more musical energy to achieve real long term satisfaction. ([www.kharma.com](http://www.kharma.com))

Many years ago I heard

a Goldmund system driving a small pair of Epilogue speakers in a very large room at the Paris show.

They provided the best sound there. But what was more impressive was hearing exactly the same system a month later in a tiny room at Frankfurt, where it also delivered the best sound at the show.

Here again, in a small, New York bedroom the Goldmund system sounded beautifully balanced and unforced. Playing a demanding Quartetto Italiano recording of Beethoven *String Quartets*, the poise, timing and dynamic dimension of the playing was superbly captured, conveying the all important balance and counterbalance within the playing. Tonality was also excellent, with no confusion between the instruments, while stereo was natural and unobtrusive rather than stark and attention grabbing: Even the dyed in the wool valve lover sat next to me was surprised by the convincing musical communication and vibrant intensity of the performance. At around £15K/box (and that's a DAC, transport, pre-amp, and amplifiers as well as the speakers) this is certainly an expensive system but it's more compact than most of the competition and exquisitely

finished and styled, with clean, cool Euro looks as befits its Swiss heritage. This is definitely one for those with nothing to prove. It would be wonderful to see these products back in the UK. ([www.goldmund.com](http://www.goldmund.com))

Down in the basement, the big story was the first chance to hear conrad-johnson's new ACT2 pre-amp (£12000). Quite the prettiest unit the company has ever produced, it manages to combine their legendary practicality with innovative and individual styling in a single box



design that comes in at £4K below the price of the ART. Given recent advances in the sound of their power-amps, I was expecting great things from the new line-stage and I wasn't disappointed. It was being used by Alon/Nola (don't worry, I'll get to that in a bit) to drive their Proteus, which was especially interesting as these loudspeakers, driven by an ART/Antique Sound Labs Hurricane set-up delivered one of the best sounds at CES. But in New York, the ACT2 and a pair of Premier 140s did an even better job, allowing the speakers to completely disappear. No mean feat given their substantial size and the dozen or so drivers they use in each twin cabinet. The sound was open and delicate, dynamic yet unforced. I could certainly get used to this. ([www.conradjohnson.com](http://www.conradjohnson.com))

Meanwhile, Alon have transmogrified themselves into Nola,

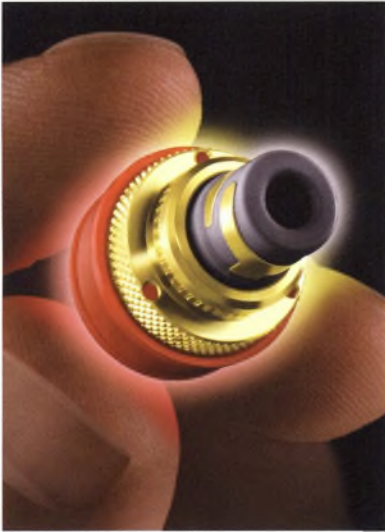
following a split with their erstwhile cabinet maker. As with all these things the truth will out in time, however, the speakers designed and marketed under the Alon name will henceforth be available badged as Nola. I believe prices and technical details should remain unchanged.

Another familiar face was Zandan, whose beautifully crafted digital electronics were driving the Audiopax amplifiers and speakers to wonderful effect. These expensive, hand-built units offer the best standards of

Japanese fit and finish combined with top-drawer styling that no photo can do justice to. Not since I saw the Connoisseur 4.0s have I been so impressed by the sheer class oozing out of inanimate objects. The Model 2000 Premium CD transport and Model 5000 Signature 16-bit DAC are comprehensively equipped two-

box units. They are also the most stylish digital products I've ever seen. They're distributed in the USA by Avantgarde, which should tell its own story: Look, listen and drool. ([www.avantgarde-usa.com](http://www.avantgarde-usa.com))

Cyrus were exhibiting with Wilson-Benesch and showed a new two-box line-stage and standalone phono-stage. Housed in their familiar shoebox chassis, they promise to extend the reach of the Cyrus system even further up the range, matching the performance of the mono-blocks so beloved of CB. Review samples will be winging their way this way at the earliest opportunity. Likewise a new, smaller sister to the MM Da Capo that I admire so much. These were being driven by a dramatically restyled version of the ASL 1009 that we reviewed back in Issue XX. Re-housed in a solidly constructed, machined ►



▶ alloy cubic case, each mono is now more stylish and more compact; Quite an achievement given the pair of 845s and all the associated transformers that go with them. There's even a chrome wire cage to fend off prying fingers, although I prefer the darker, more Metropolis looks that go with the bare chassis. What's more important is that this is further evidence of Chinese manufacturers getting sonic performance, engineering and presentation into balance, all without damaging the astonishing



value they deliver. It might be a steep learning curve, but the world had better lookout because they're climbing fast.

However, the most interesting thing I saw at the show was a humble phono plug. WBT revolutionized connector design with their WBT 0101 locking collet design, a plug that redefined the appearance and engineering of audio connectors. Having said that, I never much liked the way they sounded, even while I admired the construction quality. I always preferred more



minimalist designs, typified by the Kimbers and latterly by the Eichmann Bullet Plug, which started a revolution all of its own. Its minimal construction and point-contact earth deliver superb sonic performance at a bargain price. The downside was that the sonically superior plastic construction was mechanically prone to failure, especially if mishandled, a flaw that has led some companies to offer bullet plugs on their cables if a customer requests the , but on the understanding that they'll carry no guarantee.

Well, now WBT have taken up the challenge. Their new Nextgen 0110 phono-plug uses a moulded plastic body to support its minimalist copper or silver

contacts, carefully formed to prevent eddy currents. The central pin is sprung to ensure a tight contact, while the single earth contact is in a spade form. It's flanked by two moulded plastic flanges

that together create WBT's trademark locking collet. The sleeve that tightens the flanges onto the socket is machined from a lightweight aluminium alloy that is of very low-mass, but still maintains a shielded construction. The nose section is a separate, free turning ring, to prevent damage to the flanges. Strain relief is provided by a wide mouthed barrel and a Torx fit grub screw. WBT even offer a torque wrench to prevent over-tightening of the grub screw and compression of the cable. The construction delivers a true 75 Ohm impedance, particularly vital in digital cables. There's also an impressive looking socket to match, the 0210, which maintains the 75 Ohm standard. It's spiral earth contact again helps prevent eddy currents.

Whilst the 0110 plug and 0210 socket were really designed with 75 Ohm digital transmission in mind, it has quickly become apparent that the sonic benefits extend into far wider applications. We'll be reporting shortly, but in the meantime this looks like it could be the plug we've all been waiting for. ([www.wbt.de](http://www.wbt.de)) ▶+

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# Record Reviews

## How To Read Them
















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

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

The reviewers are identified by their initials.

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


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-  XR
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-  DVD
-  SACD
-  Hybrid SACD
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-  150g LP
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-  Vinyl Double Album
-  45rpm



Jane Siberry

### Teenager

Sheeba Records Sheeb 1 

Canadian singer-songwriter Jane Siberry is the kind of musician that I have plenty of time for. She is a fiercely independent, enterprising and individual voice who has since the early 1980s crafted a unique body of work that falls squarely within an "Americana" category. I freely admit to having trouble with albums like the Juno nominated *Hush*. The reworking of traditional songs and spirituals like 'Streets of Laredo' and 'Sweet Chariot' with a double layered new age style vocal twist was too sweet for my tastes. So I have instead chosen the first release on her own Sheeba Records label for review.

*Teenager* is a folk album that revisits the songs she had written during those formative years and only felt able to record as she neared her forties. Yes these are exceptionally personal and quite intimate vignettes. There is no escaping the warm recollections of 'Oh My Sister' or 'Song To My Father' but it is a sense of innocence rather than youthful naivety that permeates them. Others like 'Angel Voyeur', 'Trumpeter Swan', 'When Spring Comes', and 'The Long Pirouette' (an incredibly cinematic song about skating) are heavily draped with poetic imagery. The simplicity of their arrangements for guitar, piano and vocals lets the beautifully flowing language breathe without clouding their meanings with unnecessary and intrusive instrumental mixes. Youth perfectly tempered by maturity.

RP

RECORDING   
MUSIC 



Seaman Dan

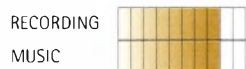
Perfect Pearl

Hot Records HOT 1094 

Torres Strait pearl diver and Australian fishing industry veteran, Seaman Dan breezes in with an album of laid back ballads that reflects the gentle pace of Polynesian island life in another celebration of its cultural and musical diversity. His sun-tinged lyrics and that languid warmth of the vocal line has a syrupy sweetness that suits the maritime themes of 'Watching the Weather', 'Minna Murra Moon', 'Going back Home', the title track and 'Magic Carpet of Pearls'. Dan is simply an old fashioned crooner mining a lifetime of experiences for these exquisite insights and irresistible moments of local colour whether its working aboard the luggers, fishing off the reefs or watching the brightly lit passenger ships make harbour. Yes, this invites us upon a singular and affectionate journey, with its lightly textured jazzy rhythms gyrating to a Hula beat, but this rootsy twelve-track disc does occupy a distinct musical niche and soaking up its rich guitar-based melodies offers unique pleasures. In the process arrangements featuring ukulele, banjo, accordion and bamboo flute atmospherically galvanises those idyllic island-hoping images drawing out unqualified joy and contentment from an earlier less complicated age.

Supplier: [www.hotrecords.uk.com](http://www.hotrecords.uk.com)

RP



Bobby Charles

Last Train To Memphis

Proper Records PRPCD016 

Bobby Charles might prefer to shun the limelight but the same can't be said for his timeless songs. This man has penned classics like 'See You Later Alligator', 'Walking To New Orleans, and 'I Don't Know Why I Love You, But I Do'. Million sellers for other artists and a healthy pension for Mr Charles. This fabulous collection is a double CD; disc one has 15 previously un-issued recordings and disc two contains 19 tracks handpicked by Charles himself and all culled from 3 previous albums. The packaging is absolutely gorgeous and comes with an informative booklet detailing the musical personnel – and what an amazing list of names it is! Neil Young, Fats Domino, Sonny Landreth, Maria Muldaur, Geoff Muldaur, Willie Nelson, Clarence 'Frogman' Henry and Delbert McClinton all drop by to lend their considerable talents to this project. One of the constant highlights is the exquisite playing of Sonny Landreth, who definitely exists on a different planet when it comes to emotion soaked slide guitar – the solo on 'The Jealous Kind' is so good it defies description. Charles doesn't have great range to his voice but it does have an endearing quality, sounding something like a cross between Ray Charles and Waylon Jennings. All in all, *Last Train To Memphis* represents a fine retrospective of this reclusive singer/songwriter, and as it's packaged at a single disc price, fantastic value for money.

AH



Woody Herman

Blues In The Night

Hitchcock Media CD-0303 

Live big band jazz is invariably something special. When it's Woody Herman and his Thundering Herd you have every right to expect an electrifying and adrenaline filled concert and *Blues In The Night* does not disappoint. Recorded for WAZE Radio at the Ft. Harrison Hotel, Clearwater, Florida in front of a small but appreciative crowd on the evenings of April 25th & 26th 1971 it opens with the slow burning signature tune 'Blue Flame'. Then moves seamlessly to the livelier 'Keep On Keepin' On' and 'Adam's Apple' in which a core group of original band members and all the new blood excel. There are generous solo opportunities too like that for trombonist Bobby Burgess on Alan Broadbent's 'Love In Silent Amber' and of course cementing the whole thing together is Woody directing the Herd and playing clarinet, alto and soprano saxes. Half way through in a lovely intimate moment Herman addresses the audience giving a priceless reminiscence about Igor Stravinsky, his *Ebony Concerto* and that great composer's relationship to Woody and the jazz swing band movement. Like those marvellously swinging and spirit raising tunes this is compelling and insightful entertainment.

RP





Sharon Shannon

Libertango

Independent Records IRL001 

Irish accordionist Sharon Shannon has with *Libertango* created an album whose distant Celtic roots have become intertwined with musical influences from across the globe. True, certain tracks like a jaunty Duncan's, or an Irish-American Hogs and Heifers and the traditional 'Anachie Gordon' and chanting 'Seven Rejoices of Mary' that features Sinead O'Connor, retain their identities through the scoring for mandolin, fiddle and low whistles. But elsewhere there is sometimes a kind of "Buena Vista Meets County Clare" feel to this music that doesn't quite gel. I am thinking of the late Kirsty MacColl who lends her vocals to the Latin flavoured title track and an Egyptian singer Roisin Elasafty (and family) who deliver a highly political song, 'An Phailistin', that charts the Palestinian people's suffering over the past fifty years. A daring arrangement of Peter Greenwood's 'Albatross' probably won't win over too many converts either but you still have to admire their ambition and execution in this song. Shannon, though, is definitely at her best when she taps back into those home spun tunes of 'The Wishing Well', or a humorous and waltzing 'Burst Mattress'. A disc for the devotee that might just be worth an entrance fee for the beautiful singing of Pauline Scanlon on the Jimmy Spillane penned 'All The Ways You Wander'.

RP



Grace Griffith

Sands of Time

Blix Street Records G2-1007B 

Way before Eva Cassidy became a star, she could be found at many of Grace Griffiths' concerts, an adoring fan who appreciated the spiritual beauty of this supremely talented singer. Grace became aware of who she was and could later be found amongst the crowds at Cassidy's concerts, eventually recommending her to the production team at Blix Street Records ... The rest, as they say, is history. For *Sands Of Time* Grace has linked up with Eva's producers Chris Blondo and Lenny Williams, along with instrumentalist Marcy Marxer. Don't make the mistake of thinking this is just an attempt to recreate the Cassidy sound though – it's not. Although Griffiths' music shares an intimacy and warmth found in Eva's, the two are markedly different. Grace doesn't have the power that Cassidy had but she has a purity and deftness of touch that taps into your senses, and she paints masterpieces with her voice. The ethereal drift on 'Almost Like Being In Love' as it wafts through your emotions on a heady mix of electric bass, congas and guitar, and 'Rebirth' (A 1000 year old Vietnamese poem) is hauntingly beautiful and worth the admission price alone. Listening to Grace Griffiths sing can be likened to the sound of a wave caressing the shore on a warm summer's evening – it takes you to a place of soothing tranquillity and indescribable beauty. She's a singer who rings the bells of heaven.

AH



Doc watson

Home again

Cisco Vanguard VSD 79239 

Many Watson aficionados would argue *Southbound* - Vanguard vsd 79213 - to be his stronger album, but I have great affection for home again. Fortunately whichever you prefer, both of these 1966 records have been given superb treatment by the folks at Cisco Music and I am grateful to have them on ultra clean quiet pressings. This is country/folk/bluegrass at its' authentic best. Watson can sing without any accompaniment as is demonstrated on the opening cut of side one, 'Down In The Valley To Pray'. Watson's unique style is quite infectious and there is no doubt this man's a genius. He learned to play banjo from his father and even though he's been blind since the age of one, it all makes sense when your thoughts turn to the blind minstrels of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. He's still with us and is approximately 80 years old! Sometimes we get stuck in the types of music we listen to and I'm glad Cisco has released these to remind me, and I hope others, what a diverse world of recorded history is available. Sonically and musically this album does everything right and nothing wrong. If you have the slightest feeling this may be your cup of tea, rush to your nearest retailer and buy *Home Again...* and while you're at it, pick up *Southbound* also. You won't be sorry.

RSF





Flamin' Groovies

Flamingo

Buddha Records: 74321716912

Jagger and Richards justifiably hold down a place in rock 'n roll history, as do Daltrey and Townsend and Tyler and Perry, but two names that never get mentioned in the same breath are Cyril Jordan and Roy Loney, the chief songwriting partnership in San Francisco rock legends the Flamin' Groovies. Formed in 1965, it took a while before the Groovies hit their creative stride with this marvellous album and the equally brilliant follow up *Teenage Head*. When vinyl was the chief format these two albums were often packaged as a double header, and at one point even had Keith Richards proclaiming them to be better than the Stones' own masterpiece *Exile On Main Street*.

The Groovies weren't into fancy recording tricks, they preferred to go into the studio and get the job done fast, and they cut this little baby in five days flat! It's raw, unpretentious, earthy rock n' roll with a rich melodic groove and with its foot firmly to the floor, the mood only interrupted by the psychedelic trippiness of 'She's Falling Apart' and the countrified 'Childhood's End'.

This welcome re-issue contains the original 10 ass-kickin' tracks and adds a further 6 bonus tracks that were left over from the *Teenage Head* sessions. The re-mastering is of the highest quality so don't delay - get down to your record store and purchase this and *Teenage Head* before they withdraw them again.

AH



Ditch Croaker

Secrets of the Mule

Fine Corinthian Records COR 007

Ditch Croaker are a noise rock trio formed in Hoboken, New Jersey in 1992, whose sound is built around the three "Timothys": Tim Barnes on drums, Tim Floyd playing bass and keyboards and Tim Newman strumming guitar. All of them provide suitably grungy vocal support for songs with titles like 'Meat Grinder', 'Angry Wino', 'Library Shrine' and 'Riverside Estrangement' that promise much but deliver very little lyrical substance beneath these headlines. *Secrets Of The Mule* (1996) was their first album proper following hard on the trail of their cult debut EP *Chimpfactor* which gained credence in some circles with the track, 'Monkey Wild'. But as this coarse-grained brand of musicianship and those raw and undisciplined voices annihilate every melodic or harmonic opportunity you have to ask yourself why a record of this kind appears on 180g vinyl. A gritty sounding flexi-disc would be much more in keeping with their particular brand of angst. Yes, they enjoy themselves, but no amount of enthusiasm can make up for its musical and technical shortcomings. As a latter day philosopher was once heard to remark, "You can't polish a turd".

RP



Mary Chapin Carpenter

Between Here and Gone

Columbia 5172132

Ten Albums on and fifteen years in the business and we're still waiting for the definitive Mary Chapin Carpenter album. Every release brings a cluster of treasures but she never seems to keep it going for the length of the record.

*Between Here and Gone* gets off to a mediocre start with two mid-paced country rockers before Carpenter begins to hit her stride with the plaintive 'My Heaven'. Following hard on its heels is 'Goodnight America', One of those "I don't belong here, I don't belong anywhere" ballads she does so well, and then comes the title track; A song asking the question 'Where are we from and where are we going to?' Beautifully sung, it's one of Carpenter's finest moments.

Fingerpicked acoustics and brushed drums roll gently through 'One Small Heart', an ebb and flow ballad which fades out on some gorgeous guitar interplay between Mary, John Jennings and Dean Parks. 'Beautiful Racket' kicks harder than anything Carpenter's done before but I think the quieter approach suits her better, as it does on the sublime 'Grand Central Station', a jewel of a ballad with a lush, highly memorable chorus. So, she does it again; 12 tracks presented, of which seven or eight are of the highest quality and the others just make up the numbers. I guess we'll have to wait for album number 11 to see if she finally breaks the mould.

AH







Eliza Gilkyson

Land Of Milk And Honey

Red House Records RHR CD174 

Ever wondered what happened to the great American tradition of protest singing. In the wake of 9/11, Afghanistan and Iraq, US writers and singers seem to have been cowed by the accusation that to criticize is unpatriotic, even subversive. Just witness the reaction to Michael Moore. Suddenly, the traditionally liberal arts community seem to be falling over themselves to demonstrate just how down-home American they really are – at a time when the US is jarringly out of step with World opinion and needs them (and their observations) like never before. That’s the background to this, the sixth album from Eliza Gilkyson. But this is no anguished or persecuted anti-war rant. This is a document of the American condition; that looks inside America for answers. Along the way it deals with not just the current xenophobia, but wider issues too: social justice, being a woman alone as the years creep by, love and loss in the face of experience. The result is a strikingly rounded and thoughtful appreciation of the States she finds herself in. The powerful lyrics are front and centre, sung with the deceptive, steel cored delicacy that marks Gilkyson’s voice. But it’s their combination with the range and beauty of the music that makes the music so affecting. A remarkable piece of work, you’ll not hear a better album this year.

RG



Josh Ritter

Hello Starling

Setanta SETCD 138 


Just 27 years old, Josh Ritter sounds like a seasoned veteran with a 10 album back catalogue, such is the assuredness and quality of his song-writing. Born in the late 70’s to neuro-scientist parents, Ritter was more into sport than music in his formative years ... until he discovered ‘Nashville Skyline’. “Hearing that record the first time was like meeting the person you know you’re going to marry” was how he described the experience in a recent interview. He was also quick to describe the effect Nick Drake had on his music. “I’m the first to admit that I owe a debt to so many musicians, and Nick Drake is one of them” he muses, adding “While I’m not a fan of all his songs, he really tapped into something pretty...” Josh Ritter taps into something pretty damn good too; this second album is full of thoughtful, introspective songs that display a remarkable maturity. ‘You Don’t Make It Easy Babe’ would sit comfortably alongside any of the songs on those early Bob Dylan albums, as would ‘Rainslicker’ and the terrific ‘Wings’, a track Joan Baez recorded on her recent covers collection. After one of the songs from his previous album charted in Ireland he became an overnight cult celebrity, and even has his very own tribute band in Cork. Some people are born to be stars and Josh is one of them. World domination beckons.

AH



Patti Smith

Land (1975 – 2002)

Arista 07822 14708 2 

It’s 1978 and Patti sings ‘Because The Night’ and the world of rock will never be the same again. This is woman with power, confident in her self and her majesty. The album *Easter* is a triumph, but it’s a pinnacle based on the striking foundations laid three years earlier with *Horses*. Smith, raw and abrasive, devoid of artifice and illusion yet disturbingly sexual was riding the alternative wave that would blossom into punk. It was a female persona and voice that was to evolve and develop, first as far as *Easter* and then far beyond, until the present day. Patti has a new album out, just as challenging and arresting as her others. But before you visit it, stop here first. *Land* is a double album that covers the first 27 years of her recorded output. Disc 1 has 17 tracks embracing what might be termed (at risk of the Trade Discriptions Act) her greatest hits. But once you get past the familiar it’s Disc 2 that’s the more intriguing. 13 tracks, mainly live recordings, chosen by Smith herself to represent her art. Alongside the hits (‘Because...’, ‘Gloria’, ‘Ghost Dance’ and a stunning cover of ‘When Doves Cry’) you can discover ‘Piss Factory’, ‘Higher Learning’ and the astonishing ‘Dead City’. Parental advisory? Absolutely: every parent should ensure regular exposure. That’ll sort out the Christinas and Britneys!

RG



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# Have Songs... Will Travel. Mark Gillespie And His Band

by Reuben Parry

Discovering new bands or even recordings by old friends like Richard Thompson that you never knew existed is one of life's pleasures. One of the best tools in this relentless search for music of quality and distinction is the Internet. Musicians across the Globe have been empowered by its reach to a point where they are now just as likely to form a record label to market their music as they are a band to play it. This makes sense because with the fall in CD production costs the benefits of distributing your own music or cutting out the middlemen to sell albums direct to the public through a dedicated web site is good business. But this is not just about the bank balance. Putting a little bread on the table in this way allows those performers who instinctively resist typecasting to avoid the lure of the main record labels, find an audience and yet still retain a discernible degree of artistic integrity. The big boys have been responsible for far too many of those bland commercial animals out there in chart land. Originality and the freedom to experiment are healthy by-products of this Internet revolution and the independence it offers can be made to work for both an established artist and the up and coming band as well. If for example Richard Thompson, who has in the past been signed up to one of the major labels, were signed to a Sony or Warner subsidiary then would they have willingly released his last, innovative album *1000 Years of Popular Music?* (Incidentally a disc that is only available through the Thompson web site). The answer is no, probably not.

It is also worth noting that many musicians have taken the opportunity to privately release discarded studio material or live performances made in concert venues or at intimate club gigs. Taping direct from the console for the

live sets and then exercising some quality control with an officially sanctioned CD contrasts greatly with those often poorly recorded pirated discs which regularly surface at record fairs around the country. The insights they offer into the art of making music outside of a studio are priceless.

Sometimes we overlook the obvious in a quest to be entertained. These are the kind of performances that inherently rely upon the interaction between musicians and their relationship with an audience – and all without an editing suite in sight. Occasional reminders that music exists as an organic, living and spontaneous medium is no bad thing. Again, the Internet deserves praise for this.

The exponential growth of Internet usage is also a godsend for those "nearly bands".

I'm thinking here of the singers, songwriters, sessions musicians, backing and support groups who regularly play the clubs, pubs and festivals but who never quite achieve greater prominence. Along the way they invariably establish a local notoriety or cult status but rarely manage to broker that elusive major recording deal. Their fan base while small is often fiercely loyal. They (the fans) at least know talent when they hear it. Say what you like about these men and women, they are committed performers with strong musical instincts and even better techniques and most do deserve a moment in the sun. All they have ever really needed was a better hairdo or to be in the right place at the right time - something that still only happens to a lucky few. I believe anyone who listens to live music will have at one time or another felt this sense of iniquity that lies at the heart of an industry which worryingly is far more concerned about image than it is with substance. Enter e-mail, music and ►



▶ band web sites and suddenly the thought of some form of national or international exposure is now no longer the pipe dreams of these journeymen musicians. For a neglected or niche genre, and that wealth of anonymous talent around the world, this is a priceless development. Which by a roundabout route brings me to the "ex-pat" singer, songwriter and guitarist, Mark Gillespie whose band has been a beneficiary of the Internet phenomenon.

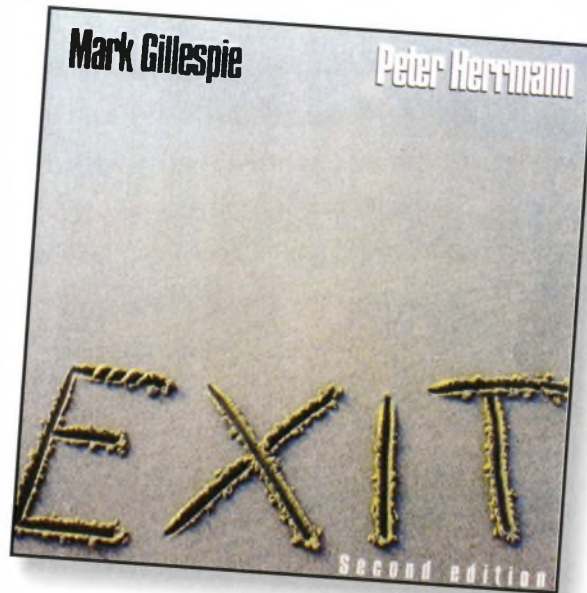
Mark's own songs and his thoughtful cover versions don't conveniently slot into any particular idiom.

Elements from folk-blues, modern pop and rock music genres echo within them, creating a versatile and accessible contemporary sound along the way. It certainly does enough to delight audiences especially those at the gigs and festivals in Germany where he has made his home after a decade of busking on the pavements of towns and cities throughout Europe. Humble musical beginnings back in England at the Higginshaw Centre for the Performing Arts, the busking and an archetypal road trip in a knackered old van

playing street music on the continent will have a familiar kind of ring to it for many hopeful musicians. Throw in any number of chaotic attempts at management, backing work for groups like Jethro Tull and a first band proper in The Blue Jars - all before the age of thirty-three - and you sense that a thorough rites of passage has been experienced. The diversity of musical influences including Portishead, Pink Floyd, Counting Crows, Simon and Garfunkel, Matchbox 20 and a raft of acid jazz is reflected within a maturing body of work, spanning the six albums released between 1996 and 2002. Excerpts from all of which can be accessed via MP3 at the band's web site, though I must admit to discovering these CDs by an old fashioned means: word of mouth. The UK distributors just happen to be my local bookshop, *High Street Books* of New Mills in Derbyshire. Archie (Mark's father) cold clocked me when I was in there one Saturday morning, thrusting a copy of the 1998 album, *Exit*, into my hands, which I duly felt obliged to listen to.

On the surface this live (partly unplugged) CD brimming with covers by a band I'd never heard of was not such an eye-catching proposition. Well, they say not to judge a book

by its cover and I say, "Don't judge a CD by its liner notes". Amongst the ten tracks here were some heavyweight covers in 'Wish You Were Here', 'Tears in Heaven', 'The Drugs Don't Work' and 'Come Together'. Of course anthems like these just arrive on your CD player replete with a whole cargo hold full of baggage of their own, courtesy of the originals. So it's not easy for other performers (even the well known ones) to carry them off with style and still keep their dignity intact. However, this disc does in fact open up with a Gillespie penned original, 'I Miss My Mummy', that launches Mark's darkly handsome, open and strikingly rugged voice upon



your unsuspecting ears. The song as its title suggests has a soft and slightly indulgent emotional underbelly that thematically ranges across the topics of illegitimacy and abandonment. Yet those coarse grained, expressive and warm-sounding vocals together with a wicked sense of humour – he also says how much he misses the cat, the dog, the rabbit and the hamster – not only convinces you of this song's merits but helps to give the covers that really distinctive bite as well. Paving a way to the next track, 'Tears in Heaven', which is a fine example of his interpretative abilities. It's

delivered with plenty of feeling but not to a point where we get so misty eyed that you will stop enjoying the sinuous and muscular dimension brought out by Gillespie's engagingly textured vocal line. Nor on this album should we overlook the role of the band's elder statesman and bass player, Peter Herrmann, a self-acknowledged perfectionist inspired by the likes of Miles Davis, Peter Gabriel and Gustav Mahler, who's purposeful, sympathetic and uncomplicated supporting role is especially telling on these more than familiar melodies.

If you want more of this exciting and spontaneous mix of original and cover songs then look no further than the confident performance of a dozen numbers recorded in concert for the *Live at the Traumstern 97* album. Here it is an expanded band including Burkhard Mayer (electric guitar), Claudia Zinserling (keyboards) and Hans Kreuzinger (saxophone) who join Mark, Peter and drummer, Markus Leukel to eloquently flesh out Sting's 'Seven Days', the timeless Bill Withers standard 'Ain't No Sunshine' and that classic Hendrix track, 'Little Wing'. Elsewhere those MGB songs about frustration, longing, uncertainty and the

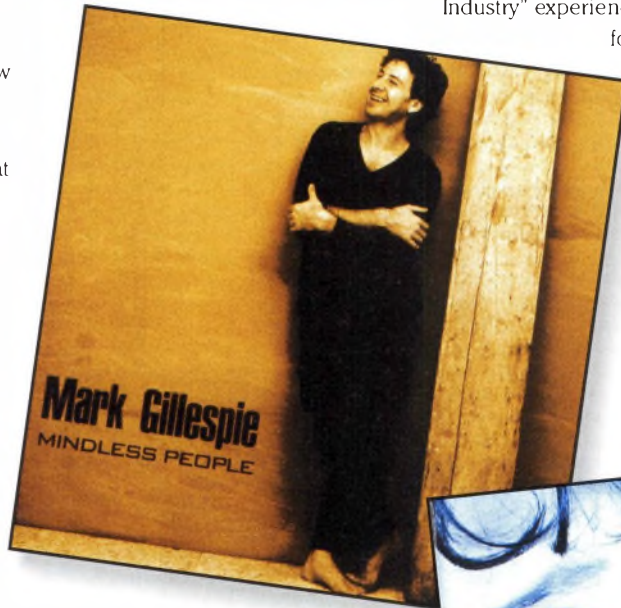
► darker sentiments, which exist out there on the boundaries of a relationship, are memorably explored. But what of their studio recordings where artifice and production values are greater?

I can't comment on Mark's prophetic debut CD, *Give It Time*, because it's currently out of stock on the web site and I simply couldn't lay my hands on a copy from other sources. A healthy sign of success, if ever there was one. But I do know that the Mark Gillespie Band was formed when he wanted to cut a new album. It reached a stage during the recording process at Peter Herrmann's Chocolate Factory studios when Mark and all the session musicians involved felt that what had began as a simple working relationship should be allowed to develop beyond the studio. So a band was formed around Mark, Peter, Markus and the guitar and keyboard playing of Thomas Dill. Live performances to appreciative audiences followed.

Dill's inclusion in the regular line up has brought the band some much needed discipline - the fruits of which can be heard on their 1999 album, *Mindless People*. Three months in the studio yielded an expertly crafted collection of thirteen songs mostly concerned with those age-old tensions that stretch romantic entanglements to breaking point. Sting-like harmonies, backing vocals, sympathetic instrumental arrangements, that careful scoring for saxophone on the title track and the fluid Hans Kreuzinger flute playing for 'Sha La La La' tease out the bittersweet moments as relationships unfold or split at the seams. Classy and perceptive musings about dominant personalities, all those put downs and an understanding of loneliness in 'Nothing', combined with the piercing hurt, a sense of elusiveness and crunching emotional sacrifices that permeates 'For Your Love' and 'April Sun' are lyrically reconstructed. The words resonate because they are so tightly worked into a rhythmic delivery of lines such as, "You can walk. You can fly. You can cast your vote to send us back in time. You can crawl out of your sea and you can dance your dance of hypocrisy". While this may not seem

to be the most cerebral of Mark's observations, it sort of captures the allure and false promise that lies behind the allegorical 'April Sun'. For Gillespie this softly worked obliqueness translates into a poetic and quite graceful composition. Perhaps mirroring and then lifting the veil on those unusual directions that an interaction between men and women everywhere has taken. This is also a song that could be said to encapsulate the frustrations of the "Music Industry" experience. One that ultimately convinced him to

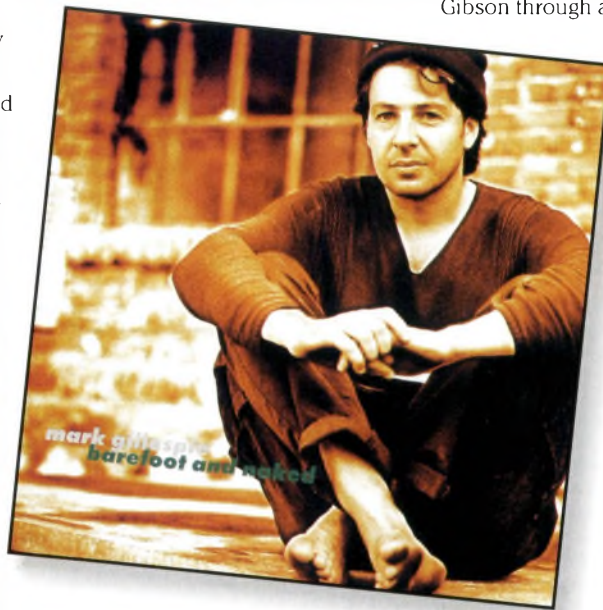
form the Chocolate Factory label about which he likes to say that, "After years of disappointment with small labels and publishers, I decided to form my own Record Company, and since then have relied on word of mouth and Internet distribution for CD sales. Compounded with festival and club gigs in and around Germany, this has provided enough to pay the rent up until now. Although I wouldn't say no to a million pound deal with a major!"



Again, the control that this kind of independence affords manifestly allowed the group to spend another four months spell in the studio between June and October 2000 without any interference from moneymen. In perfecting these arrangements and mixes until they had consciously produced a rock album with intelligence and the hooks to match, the Mark Gillespie Band have noticeably taken a tougher line than had been previously heard. *I Believe* is an assured and confidently delivered eleven track CD whose songs are driven by ►

► vocals that increasingly sound like a beefed up Sting - I hope Mark will allow me to make this easy comparison without too much criticism or hard feelings. He is after all still very much his own man. One who in an opening 'Feel Let Down' develops a terrific bass line and hard nosed guitar licks to reinforce that twisted pathway of love formed by lyrics which roam across images touching upon exorcism, stalking and crucifixion. Descriptive and provocative writing that one does not usually associate with these romantic themes. There are those songs too like 'Send You Roses' which explore the difficulties us blokes have with expressing our emotions, while elsewhere there is the exploration of open emotional wounds and the melancholia that unavoidably leads to an undisguised outpouring of feelings in 'Hold Me Still'. Here when Mark treats us to falsetto singing of such rare quality it just seems to heighten our senses to the romantic fall out which constantly surrounds his characters. He is never over indulgent when writing this expressively about a subject that will without doubt remain his stomping ground for the foreseeable future. There is even time for a rhythmically rockin' and unashamedly catchy tune about the pitfalls of promiscuity - love of a very different kind - in the track 'So Damn Young' which would make a worthy single release. On the technical front this is an excellent recording. Wiry guitars have the appropriate volume and bite. Dynamic shifts, even those subtleties introduced in the Jose J. Cortijo timbales and percussion playing in those songs on which he guests, have that right amount of resonance and decay. And the vocals, well, they are precisely and transparently reproduced, making this album an extremely attractive all round proposition.

Mark's most recent CD: almost an hour of music spread across fourteen songs treads well worn territory - but I love it all the more for that - from its wonderfully perceptive name, *Barefoot and Naked*, right down to the witty closing busking number, 'Little Song' that's hardly a minute long. The title, rapier-like, strikes to the heart of the matter. Slide off your shoes sometime and walk outside. You feel every contour and sharp edged piece of gravel with each step taken. Suddenly you're conscious of even the slightest shift,



break or unevenness in the ground. This is the kind of heightened degree of awareness and sensitivity that Mark wants us to experience at a musical level and his lyrics achieve it. Meanwhile the nakedness is an honest peeling away of a veil, one that can smother the expression of our closest kept and innermost feelings. And then, wrapping things up, there is 'Little Song'. A final pertinent, precise, succinct and funny reminder of where his musical roots lie and the enjoyment we should take from even the tiniest of those insights.

Innovation aplenty as well with an arrangement for the Suzanne Greschus cello on 'New Dimension' and some scene-setting and weird guitar effects created by playing the Gibson through an organ simulator for the eerie

'Daydreamer's Son' which successfully develops the sense of moodiness. Add a reverberating and quite darkly coloured acoustic, one in which the instruments are fleshed out to match the vocal direction and you strengthen those nicely observed moments in a track like 'Metro Man'. A song concerned about an unexplained small voice within all of us that quietly draws you ever closer towards the edge of a railway platform or makes you dangerously lean over balcony railings. Romantic causes too, some lost, others retrievable, are pursued in 'Giving It Up' and the

muscular 'I'm So Tired'. And there are more ruminations about the advice given by well meaning friends who always seem to know what is best for your career - the songs to write and the clothes to wear - but who perhaps forget that musicians must follow their own paths along 'The Road'. There's also enough time left for an obligatory and engaging eight-minute acid jazz jam, 'The Way Things Go', music that Mark clearly adores.

Mark Gillespie, his band and the host of supporting musicians who've graced these recordings are a real find. Part of me wants to say, "keep it under your hat", just in case greater exposure blights their music making, while the rest of me wishes them all every success especially on the forthcoming tour. In that grand tradition of unsung ingenious heroes they're putting the bus together as I write.

Net. [www.gillespie.de](http://www.gillespie.de)

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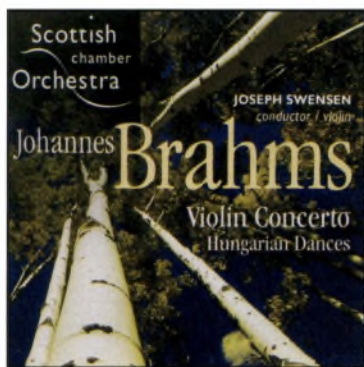
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**Brahms**  
**Violin Concerto / Hungarian Dances**

**Scottish Chamber Orchestra / Swenson**

Linn Records CKD 224 

This contribution to the audiophile digital software debate is worthy both for its dual SACD & HDCD format and the programme lengths of these classical CDs. Whereas the admirable JVC XRCDS often barely run beyond the forty-minute mark Linn's discs extend to well over seventy minutes of music. Moreover, their association with the SCO and its principal conductor Joseph Swenson, which began two years ago, is certainly producing some excellent recordings. On the surface the choice of repertoire does not appear particularly radical or challenging. Most will be familiar with the Brahms *Violin Concerto* and his earlier *Hungarian Dances*. The twist in the tale here comes from the performances because we are accustomed to hearing these works played by a full symphony orchestra and not its little brother. The Scottish Chamber musicians guided by Swenson give dynamic, technically assured and intimate readings overflowing with the subtle touches and flourishes that are effectively retrieved by both the SACD and HDCD processes. Swenson, who rarely performs nowadays as a soloist, is quite beguiling in the Concerto. In the first movement he eases through the elaborate writing in a good-natured and quite endearing way. There is plenty of warmth in a lyrical and gently melodic second movement and for the



final virtuoso section where he raises the spirits further with an exuberance that draws deeply upon the colour, flair and persuasive rhythmic calling of Hungarian gypsy music. The kaleidoscopic instrumental hues and those syncopated and crossing rhythms of the *Dances* also underlines a sense that there is a special rapport between this conductor/soloist and these Scottish musicians-making them very satisfying to listen to as well.

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**Mendelssohn**  
**Hebrides Overture, Violin Concerto, Symphony No.3 Swenson / SCO**

Linn Records CKD 216 

Joseph Swenson's tightly knit; sympathetic and quite innovative approach to some of the best-loved classical works began with this Usher Hall, Edinburgh recording in July 2002, although it's worth noting that a closer artistic relationship was formed much earlier with some of these players when they performed chamber music together. That was before Swenson had exchanged his bow for a baton and stood astride the podium. He now only returns as a soloist to play concerto repertoire when the orchestra is one that he has had a long standing association with as

a conductor. His rendition here of the famous *E minor Concerto* on this Philip Hobbs /Caum Malcolm recording is delivered with the beautifully rich tone of a 1715 Stradivarius. Warming to the task in a lyrical slow movement, he gracefully and sensitively reveals the principal melody to us. Elsewhere, playing with considerable bravura he still doesn't indulge in any unnecessary showboating of the kind which can ride roughshod over a work. It makes this a solid and likeable account-one which is unaffected by Swenson's dual role because of that rapport which obviously exists between the soloist conductor and his orchestral rank and file. For Felix Mendelssohn's *Hebrides Overture* the rolling inevitability of that familiar melody is carried along with an understated degree of affection making this an engaging and involving account which is strong on musicianship, colour and evocative seascape imagery. The '*Scottish*' *Symphony No.3* inspired by an assembly of bagpipers at Holyrood Palace heard during an 1829 walking tour of the Highlands is heavily scored for strings throughout and on this release we can hear the delightful precision, eloquence and clarity of violins, cellos and violas. Sensitively moulded phrasing, good tempos, delicacy of tone and a highly evocative interpretation sustain the composer's vision for this work. The instrumental detail, securely positioned images and great warmth extended across the soundstage enhance another very likeable SCO rendition.

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## Grieg Norwegian Dances/Symphonic Dances/Lyric Suite

Bergen P. O./Ruud

BIS-SACD-1291 

Edvard Grieg's *Symphonic Dances* are terribly underrated, despite being his largest orchestral work. Like the *Norwegian Dances*, they are largely influenced by the folk music of the composer's homeland. Here they receive a most captivating performance by the Bergen Philharmonic and Ole Kristian Ruud, with the finale given wonderfully animated rhythms and a forward momentum that simply makes this the most interesting rendition on disc, despite a modest basic tempo. In fact the rhythmic qualities and tempos employed throughout this release are superb, never hurrying or overemphasising, but simply letting the music flow in a most natural manner. The playing is also exemplary, but the wind section deserves special praise, especially in the *Norwegian Dances*. The results are enchanting, as is the *Lyric Suite*. Not to be outdone, the engineers have produced a most natural sounding disc, offering an excellent balance between clarity and dynamic range. The only drawback is a slight lack of impact compared with the very best recordings, a point that may be particularly noticeable on some surround systems, as no subwoofer channel is employed. But this is a minor point on an otherwise exquisite issue of some of Grieg's most charming music.


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## Tierney Sutton

### Dancing in the Dark

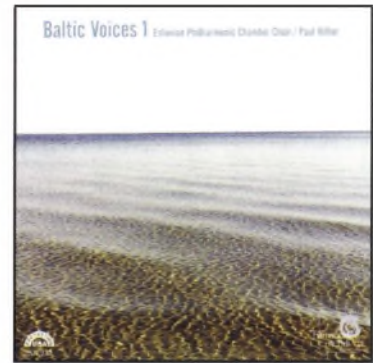
Telarc SACD-63592 

Tierney Sutton is much more than just a plunging neckline. She possesses perfect pitch and a languid, reflective, and wonderfully dignified voice that radiates warmth and beauty as she recalls the gently swinging and intoxicating tempo of an earlier age where Sinatra is her muse. Sammy Khan, Irvine Berlin, Alec Wilder and Johnny Mercer could put a song together and big Frank really knew how to deliver them. Tierney is no Sinatra. She irons out the bittersweet creases that make his versions of 'All The Way', 'What'll I Do', 'I'll Be Around' and 'Emily' so distinctive and irreplaceable to produce a more homogenised, but exceptionally pretty collection that air brushes lighter tones into the darker recesses of these songs. It's left to the brilliant jazz musicianship and striking arrangements of Christian Jacob (piano), Trey Henry (bass) and Ray Brinker (drums) to suggest that there is a less comfortable underbelly to the relationships of 'I Think Of You', 'Fly Me To The Moon' or 'Last Night When We Were Young'. They tease and then fully expose these tensions in an articulate performance that creates a delectable contrast with their jazz diva's beguiling vocals.

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### Estonian Philharmonic Chamber Choir/Tallin Chamber Orchestra/Hillier

Harmonia Mundi HMU 807311 

Celebrating Paul Hillier's selection as conductor of the Estonian Philharmonic Chamber Choir, this is the first disc in Harmonia Mundi's three-year project designed to explore the music from countries bordering the Baltic Sea; from Norway (although it does not actually have a Baltic coastline) to Russia, but with an emphasis on the choir's native Estonia. The opening *Psalms of David*, by Cyrillus Kreek, reveals the influence of that country's traditional folk music, but the album also focuses on the contemporary composers who are Kreek's aesthetic and spiritual heirs. There are works from composers such as Arvo Pärt and Einojuhani Rautavaara, but for the most part the music is by composers unknown to most listeners. All the works here come from the 20th Century, and this disc offers no less than three world-premiere recordings. The rich and opulent textures of the music suit the purity of performer's voices well, with the choir proving themselves first-rate singers in all areas, and this is enhanced by the engineering that produces an open and reverberant sound. From this inaugural issue of the Baltic Voices project, it is clear that Hillier's new appointment is already a successful one.

SG

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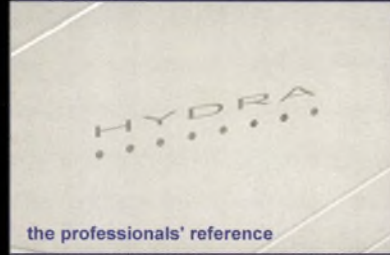


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## Copland Three Latin-American Sketches /Quiet City/Concerto for Clarinet

Nashville C. O./ Gambill

Naxos 8.559069

The Nashville Chamber Orchestra may not be the most fashionable name among the world's orchestras, or for that matter American ones, but with their home city being a major musical centre there is no shortage of talent employed among its players. Copland's music is full of complex rhythms, but the performers offer some impressive accuracy, especially in the string section. Paul Gambill obviously understands the composer's perceptions, supplying interpretations that offer a splendid balance of simplicity and warmth that is enhanced by a wonderful clarity of tone, as well as a beautifully clear recording. The outstanding performance comes from the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra's lead clarinet, Lauren Arden, whose masterful playing of the *Clarinet Concerto* is particularly lovely; supplying sonorous tones in the lyrical opening and revealing the distinctive jazz qualities of the finale. For a chamber orchestra, the ensemble produce an astonishingly full sound, especially in *Appalachian Spring*, where Gambill manages to sustain the flow of music in the slower sections as well as anyone. In fact, despite not being the obvious first-choice in creating a great recording, their city's musical heritage has helped the Nashville Chamber Orchestra create a most notable CD.

SG



## Death and Devotion Solo Cantatas by Buxtehude, Tunder, Weckmann and Ritter /The Netherlands Bach Society/ Van Veldhoven

Channel Classics CCS SA 20804

While Dietrich Buxtehude is best known for his organ works and for his influence on a young Johann Sebastian Bach, his vocal compositions can be a revelation, deserving far more attention, not only for historical reasons but for pure listening pleasure. Likewise, his father-in-law, Franz Tunder, produced music that can stand alongside that of any other composer of the 17th Century. In fact, his use of texture, his effective shifts of mood, rhythm and tempo, and the beauty of his vocal lines put his work among the most glorious for solo voice ever written. The wonderfully warm and expressive performances match the sublime music, as does the excellent recording. Soprano, Johannette Zomer, commits her most eloquent singing to disc to date, while bass, Peter Harvey, is always worth hearing and produces a most commanding performance, especially in his effective dialogue with Zomer in Weckmann's compelling *Wie liegt die Stadt so Wüste*. The instrumental playing, whether individually or collectively, is exemplary throughout. While this release is essential listening for fans of the German sacred repertoire, it will also reveal to many that the music world before Bach was a beautiful and thriving place.

SG



## Dubugnon Chamber Music

Royal Academy Wind Soloists  
Daniel/Dubugnon/

Naxos 8.555778

Swiss-French composer Richard Dubugnon was born in 1968 and only took up the study of harmony and his chosen instrument, the double bass, after earning a history degree at the age of twenty. His compositional work certainly looks back, with obvious links to the composers of pre-1940 France, but there is a particular beauty as a result. His writing offers great warmth, exhibiting a colourful tonal palette and characteristic expansiveness, especially in the *Piano Quartet* and *Incantatio*, for cello and piano. The performance of *Trois évocations finlandaises* for double bass, by the composer himself, simply explains why his playing has won a number of awards. The second half of the disc then turns to works for wind instruments in solo and chamber settings, with the *Cinq Masques* for solo oboe revealing a particular moodiness, before a busier, more disjointed *Canonic Verses* and a similarly styled *Frenglish Suite* close out the collection. While it may be a touch of hyperbole on Naxos' account to include such new works under their "20th Century Classics" banner, these compelling pieces do indeed hark back to the works of Debussy, Fauré and Ravel, and are therefore recommended to all fans of 20th Century music.

SG





**Dvorák**  
**Piano Concerto in G minor/The**  
**Golden Spinning Wheel**  
**Aimard/Royal Concertgebouw**  
**Orchestra/Harnoncourt**

Teldec 8573 87630-2

Dvorák's *Piano Concerto* is as fine a late-romantic work as any, featuring wonderful interplay between orchestra and soloist, although lacking the all-out virtuosic displays of many other concertos. The pianist's job is more of a collaborative one and Pierre-Laurent Aimard displays great zeal for his part, supplying a supremely colourful performance of drama and vibrancy, combined with a fair amount of refinement. He offers poignant renditions of both the slow movement and the finale, with its hauntingly lyrical second theme, revealing the most idiomatic of piano writing. The piano playing is matched with some spirited conducting, but the real excitement begins with *The Golden Spinning Wheel*, where Nikolaus Harnoncourt's discernible devotion and an utter understanding of Dvorák's work results in a symphonic poem full of energised rhythms, clarity of texture, and rich colours. His sensitivity to the music, as well as the fine recording that convincingly reveals the expanse of the Amsterdam Concertgebouw, allows its contrasting moods to be perceived with ease. Add to this the tremendous orchestral performance, especially in the woodwinds, and you simply get two of the finest performances of these works on disc, and a most satisfying addition to an already fine Dvorák series.

SG



**Elogio per un'ombra**

**Makarski/Larcher**

ECM New Series 1712 465 337-2

For the curious listener, ECM's catalogue is often a voyage of discovery. This disc of works mainly for solo violin (two have a piano accompaniment) is no exception. American violinist Michelle Makarski creates an intelligent and thoughtful program by composers who, on the face of it, are either Italian or have ties with Italy. Many have ties with each other, but it is the sonata by 18th Century composer Giuseppe Tartini that is the key to a connecting thread that runs through the program. Makarski has interspersed the modern pieces among the sonata and some of its variations, revealing that many of the 20th Century works borrow from it, and making the Tartini sound rather contemporary. There are subtle, often gentle changes - variations of light and dark - punctuated with more stark and surprising moments of atonality that provide a fascinating series of colours. While occasionally abrasive, at times almost surrealistic, the music is more often beautifully lyrical. The results are surprisingly accessible, although sometimes uncompromising, but never uninteresting, and like its label, this disc certainly provides the listener with a discovery of the unexpected, confirming the legitimacy of melding new ideas with older forms.

SG



**Guillaume de Machet -**  
**Motets**

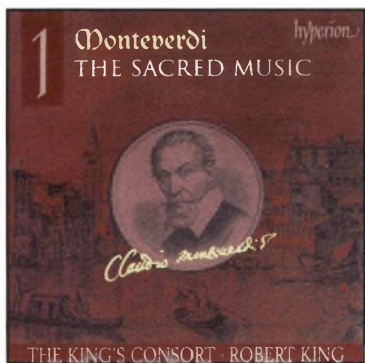
**The Hilliard Ensemble**

ECM New Series 1823 - 472 402-2

14th Century composer, Guillaume de Machet has left us with about two dozen of his motets. This recording presents eighteen of the most thematic, referring to subjects such as love, war and politics, incorporating a vast gamut of emotions through their mainly French texts. They are performed with ravishing beauty by the Hilliard Ensemble, who have now been setting the standard for early-music vocal groups for thirty years, and they bring out the wonderfully intricate phrasing through the expertly balanced use of textural contrast and their immaculate tonal beauty. They do perform some of the pieces a touch slowly, enhancing the harmonic sense of each work, but the results lack some of the contrast that would have enlivened some of the musical and poetic rhythms. This rhythmic quality is also disrupted by the acoustics of the St. Gerold monastery. While exhibiting particularly atmospheric sound, the recording is on the resonant side, and the clarity of the interplay between the five voices is therefore lost to some extent. Having said that, these are minor quibbles, and this CD remains a beautiful and poignant release that effectively identifies and projects human feelings and touches our most personal emotions.

SG



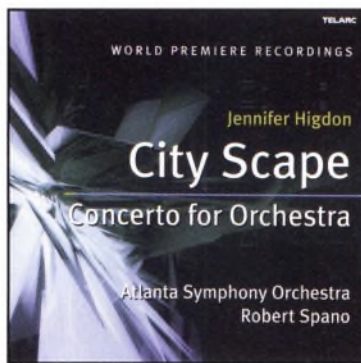


**Monteverdi**  
**The Sacred Music Volume 1**  
 Various Soloists/Choir of the  
 King's Consort/The King's  
 Consort/King

Hyperion CDA67428

Until now, with the exception of the 1610 Vespers, the sacred music of Claudio Monteverdi has lacked a fitting number of dedicated releases. With their highly regarded recordings of Vivaldi's sacred writings already well underway, Hyperion's new enterprise promises much. This first volume's music comes mainly from the *Selva morale e spirituale* of 1640/41, with two additional pieces, including a lovely four-part *Mass*, concluding the program. As with the Vivaldi output, the Monteverdi performances are being delivered with absolute aplomb by Robert King and his charges. Much depends on the soloists for this music to be successful, and King has assembled an excellent array from the very best early music singers. Add the world class talents of the choir and the instrumental ensemble and the project is off to a winning start. With assured leadership throughout, all the performers sing or play with great precision, exhibiting tremendous articulation and expression, as well as the subtlest of phrasing. Such expertise is obvious from the outset, and allied to a splendid energy and vibrancy, they create the most balanced of performances. With such an outstanding first release, the complete project can only become an entertaining and significant addition to the catalogue.

SG



**Higdon**  
**City Scape/Concerto for Orchestra**

Atlanta Symphony Orchestra/  
 Spano

Telarc CD-80620

Although now residing in Philadelphia, Jennifer Higdon spent the first decade of her life in Atlanta. Thirty years on she received major commissions from the orchestras of both these cities, although it is the Atlanta Symphony that produces the splendid platform here from which her music is so convincingly portrayed. The *Concerto for Orchestra* was written for the Philadelphia Orchestra's centenary, and provokes plenty of excitement. It produces a vast array of textures, and offers a number of opportunities for all the principals and their sections to really shine - with the percussionists having almost a complete movement (the fourth) to themselves. *City Scape* is a three-movement portrait of Atlanta, with a hymn-like, more rural impression sandwiched between two vistas of a modern, thriving, urban landscape, with the opening *Skyline* full of towering force and spirited vigour. Again, this work is eminently exhilarating, and while some may find both pieces a little flamboyant and overly confident, in a particularly American way, there is an undeniable stature to the music. Robert Spano has done a great job during his Atlanta tenure, producing an orchestra now at their peak. This is made all the more clear by Telarc's fantastic engineering that is simply state-of-the-art.

SG



**Szymanowski**  
**The Complete Mazurkas**

Marc-André Hamelin

Hyperion CDA67399

Karol Szymanowski's *Mazurkas* follow-on from where Chopin's left off. They are intricate, yet idiomatic works, full of harmonic sophistication and a wealth of feelings, but with an impression of the sensual residing just beneath the surface. Marc-André Hamelin is the perfect pianist to champion the composer's work. He has already endorsed many pieces that lay just outside of the central body of piano repertoire, and through his tremendous dexterity is able to tackle Szymanowski's technical demands. He plays with the utmost control, utilizing split-second timing and great precision to bring forth the harmonic structures of each piece, whether in the most ravishingly soft moments or playing more dynamic, full-blooded sections. He may just lack some colour and rhythmic drive, allowing the melody to find its own way, but as far as sophistication and absolute prowess are concerned, he has no immediate rivals. This is all made the more clear by a fine recording that places the instrument naturally, centre-stage, and offers plenty of detail. From this release it is also clear that Szymanowski's *Mazurkas*, as well as the *Valse Romantique* and *Four Polish Dances* also included here, should be classed alongside Chopin's piano compositions.

SG



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keeping the music alive

**Eric Clapton: *Me and Mr Johnson***

The album is a reworking of some of the gems from the Robert Johnson songbook. From weary down beat blues to swinging almost ragtime numbers and up-tempo slide guitar rave ups this is an album with more variety of moods and tempos than one at first sight might expect. Eric plays some fine electric guitar and his careworn vocal style suits the material perfectly. The band are top notch players - Billy Preston, Andy Fairweather Low, Jim Keltner and Pino Palladino will be familiar all those who read the credits on album sleeves.



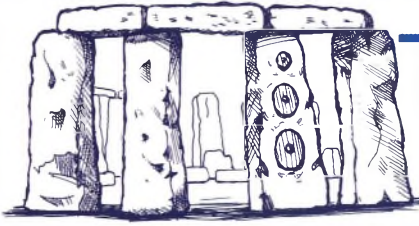
*Me and Mr Johnson* brings Eric back to where he belongs fñthe blues. Good album.

14 tracks including *Traveling Riverside Blues*, *Come On In My Kitchen*, *If I Had Possession Over Judgement Day*.  
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# The History Man

by Richard S. Foster

As a reviewer it's always important to get a reality check: As a human being it's important to share your fascinations. As an audiophile that means getting your buddies round – in this case, a few other members of the Phonogram list.

Jeff and Peter subsequently wrote the experience up and posted it on the Phonogram site. As we were playing with some of the stuff I've been writing about recently, I thought you might enjoy their 'second opinions'. RSF

I was up that morning at 4AM, and on my way to the Ft. Lauderdale airport by 5AM, in plenty of time. First departure at 7:30, a layover in Newark, and the second leg commenced. I arrived in Toronto Thursday afternoon, March 11th at around 1:30. Took the limo to RSF's and arrived there a bit after 2:00.

Once at Richard's, we talked a bit and listened a bit, and while the turntable and cartridge warmed up with a couple of iterations of an organ record side, we listened to CD. I got a sneak listen of the CDROM of Helikon Mono versus Titan Mono comparisons - aural memory is a lot less reliable than a good CDROM.

Having heard the differences between the stereo counterparts of these cartridge lines, I was prepared, I guess. I confess: I had hoped that the difference would be equivocal, not a clear winner, even though the stereo Titan had been a clear winner in that contest.

The Titan mono, compared to the Helikon: the vestige of harshness on peaks with the Helikon (by comparison!) are gone. On a Joan Baez cut, the acoustic guitar had more body, more of those subtle body resonances that are a real part of the instrument's sound. Joan's voice was smoother, and in the upper ranges at higher levels, did not take on a harsh edge. Other accompaniment that was only at times 'visible' in the mix with the Helikon were just all there with the Titan. It was the aural equivalent of watching a movie with and without the houselights.

On an Ellington cut (from I think *Uptown in Hi-Fi*), cymbals and high-hat were a bit too bright and a bit smeared with the Helikon, yet pristine with the Titan. Toms and snares were rendered differently too: with the Titan, the skin tone of the tom was present and the vibration of the skin just 'there', and both were all but missing with the Helikon - unfortunately a pale offering. The snare that was blurred with the Helikon was very well defined with the Titan, on the initial attack of stick on skin, of snare snapping, of the decay of these sounds – it sounded very genuine. All instruments sounded more

authentic, with more punch - kick drums too were more palpable. And the ensemble was more focused.

On a larger scale, attending ensemble rather than individual instruments, things are focused more clearly and coherently, rather than being (again, by comparison only) something of a jumble. Sounds are taut in the way that these sounds are taut in vivo. As suggested above, with the Titan, everything in the mix is there, and in proper proportion. It is simply more precise and more coherent and less idiosyncratic, in the same way the Titan stereo is compared to its Helikon sibling. The folks at Lyra apparently know what they're doing. How am I going to get myself one of these?

But of course we were simply listening to a CDROM of these differences. In due time, I would hear the Titan mono in the flesh.

After we listened, we went for dinner at a nearby Indian restaurant and Richard had his first vindaloo experience!

The next day (Friday) was the day of experiments and revelations. One of the first things tried was to play a record on the VPI TNT as a baseline, and replay it with the Noiseblock activated. (The Noiseblock was an isolation product offered by Immedia, using Newport Technology modules to pneumatically isolate components from their supporting shelf.)

It is astounding just how much difference isolation actually makes.

With the Noiseblock, the feeling that there is a mechanical source to the proceedings just flatly disappears, replaced with a smooth, effortless and relaxed presentation. Noise is reduced, and even the odd tic or light scratch is less present, while the music is more delicately etched in the sonic landscape. I've experienced much the same thing when inflating the

Townshend 3-D seismic sink stands – it's really an uncanny result, but a wonderful one. It is interesting to me that as good as the table's air suspension towers are, that improvements are still possible with the

▶ Noiseblock or Townshend sinks. Vibraplanes [with real glycerine vibrafoam?] reputedly offer similar gains.

The next experiment was a power cord shoot-out. Changing the AC cord on the line-stage only, we first tried one of my homemade cords that used silver solder. We then moved on to a DiMarzio, and finally to the Nordost Valhalla cord. As it turned out, this also was the order of the ranking, from lowest to highest.

What was heard? The DIY cord was predictably a bit bright (Ag solder), and was a bit closed-in compared to the DiMarzio, which was also smoother and less bright. The differences here were noticeable, but not so great as when the Valhalla went in.

That was a shock (no pun intended). The whole character of the system change, and all for the better. It was now much more open and spacious, with a wide lateral spread, improved focus and depth, and the timbre of instruments improved markedly. Within the same sonic window, one could hear delicate nuance from one instrument and from another loud attacks (say, percussion) that never got edgy. The sound was rich with a natural spread of harmonics, with sound that decayed cleanly and never obscured the tail of the decay. This was really a notch up. These Nordost cords are really synergistic with their interconnects and speaker cables - very impressive. At this point, almost everything in Richard's

### "How Much Are These Things?"

I am a record person. More than 30 years ago, music played on the most rudimentary equipment swept me into a devotion that has continued to this day; if I had to choose between my record collection and a serious downgrade of my audio system I wouldn't spend much time on the choice. That being said, for me it is also undeniable that given a good system, the details matter. Even small changes in those details can make for significant (and at times infuriating) changes in what I hear.

The effects that some

system changes

have made intuitive

sense, such as a change from

push-pull to single-ended tube

amplification. At a recent listening

session at Richard's, not long after Jeff Bernhard's

visit, we spent some time comparing the alternative push-

pull and single-ended modes of operation offered by Richard's

Manley Neo-Classic 300B mono-block amps. We selected two tracks

from a vintage French 10" T-Bone Walker LP (*Blues No. 2*, Atlantic

332006): 'Two Bones and a Pick', a clear attempt at a barrelhouse

jukebox instrumental with Barney Kessel (!) taking a solo as well, and

'T' Bone Shuffle, a lighter bit of lively blues with a smaller group.

The effects of push-pull and single-ended operation on both tracks was

obvious, but for me, neither was superior in both cases. The barrelhouse

'Two Bones and a Pick' was robust and dynamic in push-pull,

a presentation perfectly suited to the music. By comparison the music was

a tad too polite and soft in single-ended. The lighter 'T-Bone Shuffle' in

single-ended just had a that much more natural presentation of T-Bone's

voice, and a more infectious swing. Push-pull was relatively four-square

and heavy on its feet.

The differences were again in evidence on the performance of 'Monk's

Mood' on my first pressing of *Thelonious Himself* (Riverside RLP 12-235).

In push-pull the interplay between Monk and John Coltrane was drawn in

clear lines, with a precise and involving delineation of the relative dynamics

of Monk's piano and Coltrane's tenor. In single-ended the lines of the

drawing were slightly less distinct, but softer and sweeter in an attractive

way. Either mode had its charms in this piece, although for Richard single-

ended was "too fat".

The infuriating part of the session came when we entered into the Great

Valhalla Controversy that has been brewing in these pages. Notwithstanding

my appreciation of proper set-up and its contribution

to our hobby, I am wary of snake oil, hype and

twaddle. (I wish someone could tell me what

"continuousness" means in an intelligible

fashion.) In particular, I have cast a

jaundiced eye on the subject of power

cords. Although I have heard the difference

a more substantial cord can make on some inexpensive

equipment, my general impression has been that once the

equipment is of a certain quality, the difference the power

cord makes is nominal at best.

Happily, I am not hurt by being proven

wrong. At Richard's, we extracted a single

Valhalla power cord from the system (the

one on the line-stage) and replaced it with

a heavy duty product from a highly reputable

high-end manufacturer. The music immediately

became flatter, less detailed, less dynamic:

in a word, less alive. This was one power cord! The

reintroduction of the Valhalla snapped everything back

into place.

The Valhalla experience is the sort of infuriating set-up change I referred

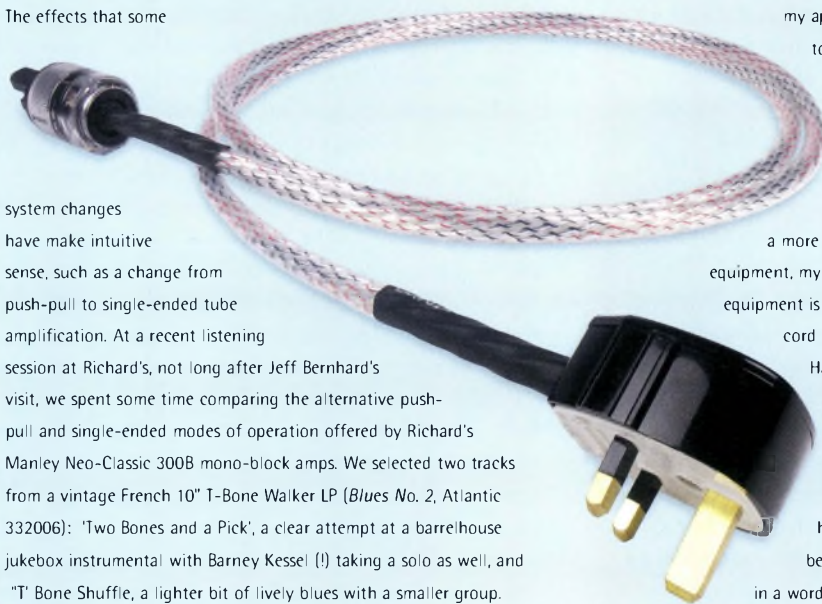
to at the outset. I know technical explanations for the Valhalla effect are

sorely lacking, but I couldn't care less. My visit to Richard's left me with

only one question (which I have had to ask only too often after visits to

his place): "How much are these things?"

Peter Downard





► system is wired with Nordost, and most of that is Valhalla. Some Nordost Vishnu AC cords are in use for the table's motors and the SDS, the amps and the Yamaha CDR; the Thorens has its own captive cord, and the Yamaha has Essence interconnects.

The last tweak of the day was to put some Walker Valid Points under the amps. I've never used tiptoes or other similar products - all of these tweaks are just too much to follow, and I've often wondered if their purpose was simply to distract one from the real problems. Well, here was an opportunity to try them, in a system that was already sounding very fine indeed.

I lifted the Manley Neo-Classic 300B SE/PP amps, and Richard installed three Valid Points under each - two at one end, one at the other. We then fired up the amps, put on the same cut we had just heard before the change, and sat back.

I fully expected to hear little or no difference. Within seconds it was clear to us both that this was not a subtle change, but rather a substantial improvement. How so? What I noticed first was in the bass. A string bass that before had been quite distinguishable, now sounded like it was much more in the room, rather than in another one. I mean that each note, up and down the scale, was consistent, sounding like it was coming from the same instrument, hearing the contribution of the string and the body of the instrument. Before the Valid Points, you got part of this, and it varied in degree with the pitch of the note played.

It was also clear that the top was even more pristine - there was more snap and decay, strings were more smooth with better saturation of tone color...I was truly surprised by the magnitude of the change, and its scope.

At this point, there were no more surprises in the bag of tricks, nor need for any. The sound was very smooth, and very coherent from top to bottom. The clarity and transparency were astonishing. Everything matters... (The Micro Utopia's tweeter, shared by all Utopia models, has been felt by some to be aggressive, and I've shared that feeling at times. I'm now convinced that this is not the tweeter's fault, but grunge, grain and grit upstream.)



From that point, we stopped tweaking and just enjoyed the fruits of those labors, listening to mono and stereo LPs. We listened to some Rameau harpsichord sonatas played by Scott Ross that I really liked, and a whole host of others. Saturday Faizal Ali and Frank Grover were the first to join us, followed by Peter Downard, John Mah, Warren Tremain and Murray Allen. Faizal was the new guy, on the list for a little while but none of us had met him - a very knowledgeable and enthusiastic list member.

It was good see everyone - most of these characters I hadn't seen since the Toronto convention. It was perhaps a bit crowded, but fun. John and Peter discovered the Fantasy 45 rpm re-issues, and we listened to a bit of *Saxophone Colossus*, and it seemed those familiar with this great record were duly impressed with the re-issue. Maybe not quite as warm as an original, but nicely balanced with oodles of detail that didn't make it on to the original.

There were also other things, not all audio, in this very enjoyable trip (including the Japanese dinner had afterwards by most of the attendees, but it is the music and the company that will be long remembered.

Jeff Bernhard

# Tidying Up The Loose Ends

First thing I'm going to say is I don't want to hear one more word about my vindaloo experience. Let's just say that my ex-wife wasn't all that adventurous when it came to dining out... end of story. (You can't imagine the 'heat' I've taken from friends laughing about this, not to mention ye olde editor also having his dig . . . so no cards and letters please!)

Let me clarify a couple of the records that Jeff mentions:

Scott Ross playing Rameau on French Stil 2107 2 75, a four record set containing some of the most realistic harpsichord you've ever heard. The Ellington was from *HI-FI Ellington Uptown* U.S. Columbia CL 830. There are actually two earlier releases, without the HI-FI in the title and all three albums contain different tracks. This is a great, great record. Just listening to Louis Bellson's drum solo on 'Skin Deep' or Betty Roche's vocals in 'Take the A Train' and you are a fan of this music forever.

From an equipment point-of-view, I know there is always some 'single-ended' flavour going on with these Manley's . . . but I'm here to tell you that these amplifiers mate so well with the JM Lab Micros that the superb quality of sound I get in the room is total insanity. Sure, all the components in front of the speakers and amps are at the head of their classes and the Nordost is doing a stunning job . . . but I still get amazed at the quality of the sound coming from those Micros. In all instances, except when Peter was here alone, I listen in the push-pull configuration. I find it offers greater control, tighter bass, and less of that single-ended flavour (which I'll admit is very seductive). I have a different take on what I heard compared to Peter in the specifics of the vinyl we played, but I attribute that to

his love of the single-ended triode. Nothing wrong with that at all - it's just that we have different tastes.

I'm going to close with a brief mention about how important I think it is to really mate your amplifier and speakers. This is the basic audio component marriage and can't be taken too seriously. Take your time finding the right mates...that way they'll live happily with you for a long time.

I also think it important to get friends over to share your listening experiences. It's great to have extra pairs of ears to hear the same things you do. As a reviewer people may tend to think you have biases toward a certain manufacturer - and to some degree there is a modicum of truth in this. Much of this is dismissed when others hear the same things you do. One speaker manufacturer

gave me a piece of advice that has proven to be a great benefit over the years and I'll pass it on, "Never be afraid to try something different in your system - don't prejudge what something will sound like. You just never know." Wise words.

We've spent quite a bit of time discussing the Nordost power cords. I don't know what to say other than they work. And they work damn well. Do yourself a favour and check them out. Regardless of whether you try Shiva, Vishnu or Valhalla, you're going to improve your aural pleasure. Last but not least...after all these wonderful changes and improvements, based upon the excellent review by CT and several conversations with Chris and RG...the Micros are now the Micro Bes! Everything Mr. Thomas wrote is true...and more.

RSF



RSF, Jeff Bernhard, Warren Tremaine, John Mah, Peter Downard.



Peter and John discover 45RPM vinyl heaven.





## Salzedo Sonata for Violin & Viola and String Quartets No.2 & No.7

### Archaeus Quartet

Dutton Laboratories CDLX 7113 

Although they are better known for their historical transfers Dutton Labs have with the CDs in this 24-bit Epoch series put down a marker in terms of repertoire and recording quality. Here it's a Tony Faulkner engineered collection of chamber works by the London-born composer/violinist/conductor Leonard Lopes Salzedo while elsewhere in the catalogue York Bowen, Cyril Scott and Edmund Rubbra feature. Salzedo's *second string quartet* is a youthful piece that has undergone several later revisions but remains highly original in nature with a blend of styles from the classical quartet form to jazzy syncopation. For *String Quartet No.7* which is dedicated to the memory of the composer's father his deeply personal and contemplative score draws quite strongly upon rhythmic Spanish dance tempos that were only hinted at in the second quartet. The passionate and substantial *Sonata* was actually written for the first violin and viola of the Archaeus Quartet. After a melancholic opening it progresses through a fleet-footed scherzo into the pulsating instrumental interplay of the third movement and then to a technically demanding and virtuoso climax that is broadly melodic and jazzy in style. The playing is exquisite throughout.

RP



## Grieg/Schumann/Chopin Piano Concertos & Allegro

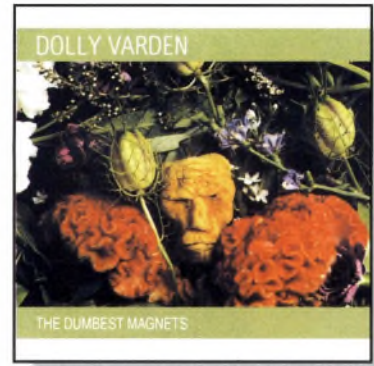
### Galliera, Philharmonia, Arrau (Pno)

Testament SBT 1233 

Big tunes from that eloquent and charismatic Chilean keyboard dictator, Claudio Arrau are delivered with an uncanny blend of power, intensity and flair. Extravagant for a glittering realisation of Chopin's encore piece the *Allegro de Concert in A* that richly rewards the bravest and most vigorous of pianists. Arrau is then searching and quite spiritual for a keenly observed rendition of the contrasting Schumann *A minor Piano Concerto* in which he literally caresses the keys to penetrate the emotional heart of this score. And on that oh so familiar tonal palette of the Grieg *Concerto* he gives a performance based upon immense strength in a forceful and hugely evocative mix of dark, brooding and vividly painted scenes. The recording of these works (Abbey Road and Walthamstow Town Hall were the venues) is illuminating. Phrasing in both *Concertos* is spacious and the formation, shape, vicelike grip and natural decay of the piano notes are beautifully presented. This is tactile and nicely detailed work from the engineers who also create a sympathetic and very supportive orchestral balance.

Supplier: [www.vivante.co.uk](http://www.vivante.co.uk)

RP



## Dolly Varden

### The Dumbest Magnets

Diverse Records DIV 007LP 

*The Dumbest Magnets* was recorded at Alex The Great studios, Nashville in 1999 and re-mastered for LP by Ray Staff at Sony in London earlier this year. Clothed in Cardiff with the sumptuous artwork that was first seen on a CD single release of 'The Thing You Love Is Killing You', it is now an even more tactile showcase for this striking and genre defying band. Their roots based songs rotate upon an impressionistic lyrical axis oiled by the empathic singing of husband and wife team Steve Dawson and Diane Christiansen. They are witty, thought provoking, visually striking, deftly handled and packed with lines like "...the jokes have made my conscience ill, look at the photographs, that's me choking down a pill" (Along For The Ride). Or "...your headlights shoot out into the desert like rage" (Apple Doll) that are underpinned by layered guitars and the simple rhythmic propellant of Mike Bradburn's bass guitar and the drumming of Matt Thobe. A better dose of counter culture that freshens up tired romantic themes and gritty social observations is hard to imagine. Outstanding.

Supplier: [www.diverserecords.com](http://www.diverserecords.com)

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RP





**Schumann**  
**Fantasy, Faschingsschwank aus**  
**wien & Kinderszenen**

**John Lill (piano)**

Green Room Productions

GREENPRO 4001 & 4002



Green Room Productions is a new all analogue label fronted by sound engineer Tony Faulkner who has been in the music business since the early 1970s and has several thousand commercial titles under his belt including many fine classical recordings for the Warner Enigma subsidiary. Tony is a brilliant technician and true analogue enthusiast. He has a real engineer's eye for the kind of finite detail that gives musicians the very best support. The beneficiary here for these remarkable Schumann solo works is the sixty year old Moscow competition prize winning pianist John Lill who had first worked with Faulkner and producer John Boyden on a Classics for Pleasure recording of the Beethoven *Emperor Concerto* some thirty years ago. The first point of note is the venue. Southwark's Henry Wood Hall even over three dreary London winter days in December 2003 is an exceptional venue from which to record the craft, imagination, depth and passion of a real performance. Peter Salisbury's painstaking efforts perfectly tuned the piano, a 1964 Steinway, to Lill's exacting demands for each piece. The microphones, a pair of original Neumann M50 tube models, were located to achieve an exquisite balance and in the monitoring suite the dynamism, bite, clarity, presence and richness of the piano tone

was captured in purist two-channel stereo on the Tim de Paravinci modified Studer A-80 tape machines. Once these renditions were in the can the tapes then went to Stan Ricker for a transfer to disc using his half-speed Ortofon cutter. Importantly, the LPs pressed at RTI in the States generously spread the repertoire across four sides. It is these shorter side lengths which keep the grooves away from the centre of the disc and offer significant physical advantages when attempting to consistently reproduce the full effect of the dynamic shifts present within this music. The result is a wide-ranging and exceptionally open sound.

But what of Robert Schumann's music, I hear you ask? The composer's mental illness, debauchery and that emotional turmoil experienced when these pieces were written in the late 1830s are well documented and provide a telling back drop to the whole fabric of these readings. Lill bears all this in mind for a liberated and completely assured take on all three compositions. His playing has warmth and tonal consistency, is rhythmically solid and possesses plenty of muscle, snap and dexterity as well as offering the subtlest of inflexions when required. Lill, opening with the *Fantasy in C major OP.17* whose three movements are spread over the first two LP sides, takes Schumann's indulgent outpouring of feelings for Clara, the lively march and an introspective and dreamy finale in his stride. Sparkling, ambitious, precise and dramatic solutions coursing through his fingers for these varied emotional textures. Next is the five-piece suite, *Faschingsschwank aus Wien OP.26* (carnival jest from Vienna), where a joyous *Allegro*, *Scherzino* and *Finale*

are punctuated by the lyrical, pensive and beautifully written *Romance* and *Intermezzo*. Music that is brimming over with the kind of interpretative and virtuoso opportunities that a concert pianist of this stature thrives upon. This is a thoroughly fluent and engaging reading during which the soloist has his keyboard skills pushed to the limit but is never found to be wanting so secure is his technique. The final piece, *Kinderszenen OP.15 (scenes from childhood)* divides into thirteen evocative and quite candid miniatures that make great play out of the fairy stories, children's games, nursery rhymes and a creative imagination that comes so naturally to the young. The shortest of these, *Hasche-Mann (Blindman's Buff)* is barely thirty seconds long while the longest, *Traumerei (dreaming)* stretches to a little over three minutes to comfortably fill the fourth side. This is an appealing representation of the World as seen through the eyes of a child but there is nothing naive, unsophisticated or small-minded about them. They were conceived and written for an adult audience (possibly one with a short attention span) but Lill delivers an appropriately serious and convincing exploration of these states. This album of solo pieces is a superb introduction to what promises to be a new chapter in British audiophile recordings. I look forward in anticipation to forthcoming releases that include a Gustav Holst *Planets* with the new Colin Matthews *Pluto* movement, early vocal music sung by Emma Kirkby and the Bach *Cello Suites*.

Supplier: [www.vivante.co.uk](http://www.vivante.co.uk)

RP

RECORDING  
 MUSIC





**Rachmaninoff  
Piano Concerto No. 3**

Janis, Dorati, LSO

Speakers Corner/MERCURY SR90283 **180g**

Recorded by the Mercury team in their June 1961 London sessions at Watford Town Hall, this is a precision reading by an expert pianist, Byron Janis. Dorati and the LSO create a perfect blending of soloist and orchestra and C. Robert Fine's three-microphone technique has captured one of the great performances of all times.

Original early releases of this - the US issue that is - are not all that easy to come by in mint condition. This performance was well received by the critics of the day and many early copies you find are just too noisy to enjoy. This record even became one of the dreaded Columbia record club releases. There are plenty of these around, but all the dynamics have been removed so they could play on the cheapest portable Columbia record player. These can easily be identified by the letters CC, CT, CF, CP or CB before the RFR and stamper number.

The re-issue is on absolutely dead quiet vinyl with no tape hiss to get in the way of those who like their blacks black. Only Kai Seemann would go to the trouble of releasing this LP with the original 35MM banner across the front of the jacket as was the case with the original release. This was usually ripped off by the new owner and these banners appear on just a handful of the earliest 35MM issues.

RSF



**Alison Krauss & Union Station**

So Long So Wrong

Mobile Fidelity Sound Lab MFSL - 2-276 **180g**

I've been a fan of this group since I first woke up and heard the union station release by Diverse Records, and now, out of left field mobile fidelity has blown me out of the water with an absolutely stunning release on two LPs of AK & US's 1997 hit CD.

Mofi has pulled no punches in the mastering of this album. While the cd is approximately 48 minutes, they 'could' have squeezed this onto one record but instead felt if they were going to do it, they were going to do it right! And they've done it right. This is an 'in your room' release and I have to tell you that you won't believe what your ears are going to tell you when you cue for the first time.

I know people have had some not-so-kind words about some of the selections mofi released in the past. Well, under new management, this two record wonder should put those naysayers to bed. This is fabulous material, well recorded by Rounder and superbly transferred by mofi and is one of the best-of-the-best vinyl releases to come along in a long time. If you had any concerns about Mobile Fidelity being able to deliver the goods, this will end your doubts once and for all.

RSF



**Thelonious in Action**

Thelonious Monk Quartet with Johnny Griffin.

Acoustic Sounds/Riverside Stereo 1190 **45**

Most jazz aficionados would opt to buy this album in its mono form. I wouldn't blame them... but that's because they haven't heard the great job that Gray and Hoffman have done with the stereo tapes. I'd probably agree that a mono recording would be the way to go on Monk's first live recording, but boy, this record, in stereo, really holds its own.

I've always been a big Monk fan, but sadly I now own few of his albums in original pressings. Years ago I had to make some collecting decisions and a couple of my "friends" scooped up some nice Riverside recordings I'd decided to let go. Hey, you can't collect everything, and I'd probably have done the same. But it doesn't mean I've forgiven them...

Standout tracks are 'Rhythm-a-ning 'and' Blue Monk', the latter allowing Johnny Griffen's tenor and the drumming of Roy Haynes to really shine. Side four's 'Evidence' and its interplay with 'Skip to Milou' woven into the melody, is a real toetapper. Yeah, I'm sure the mono is a great record - and given what these remastering engineers have given us here, they could probably score a big hit with a mono redo-but I'm glad to have the stereo version and I think you'll enjoy every minute of this piece of history. Strong Recommendation.

RSF

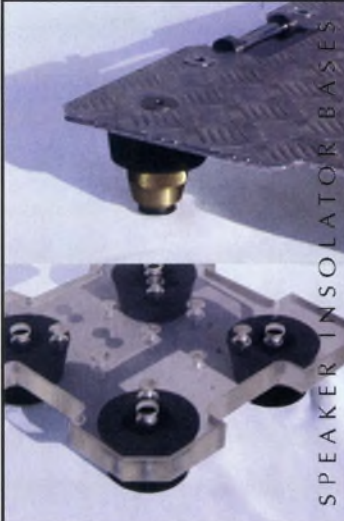




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# Mercury Living Presence, A Perspective: Part Three

by Richard S. Foster

In issue 30 when these articles began, I mentioned how excellent the U.S. Mercury Living Presence records were . . . not only from a unique sound point of view, but also that it should be made clear how many excellent performances they offered. Who would have imagined that orchestras from Minneapolis and Detroit could play with the best of the World class orchestras anywhere in the 1950's and early 1960's? Who would think that music students from Rochester, New York would offer so many unique recordings for both the Eastman Wind Ensemble led by Frederick Fennell and the Eastman-Rochester Orchestra conducted by Howard Hanson. Then there's the wonderful recordings of Dorati and his Philharmonia Hungarica, especially his Bartok and his Respighi *Ancient Airs and Dances*.

There is a wealth of delight in the recordings by Fennell, especially the playful pieces by Leroy Anderson. I could go on regarding Hanson's own compositions which are extremely interesting, but I think you are all getting the picture loud and clear - Mercury was a unique company at a special point



in time offering exceptionally unusual repertoire. I hope the glimpses I've provided into their catalogue will encourage you to explore some of their wares, if not through originals or re-issues, then perhaps through the compact disk and SACD releases.

George Gershwin is ably represented on two Mercury's: SR90002: *Concerto in F for Piano and Orchestra*, *Rhapsody in Blue*: Howard Hanson leading the Eastman-Rochester Symphony Orchestra with the pianist Eugene List.



List was born in 1918 and there are some sources who state that he made his first public appearance at 10 and others at 12. Regardless, it was with the Los Angeles Philharmonic. List was a very able pianist who enjoyed a successful recital career prior to World War 2. He continued playing the recital circuit after the war, and was also a teacher at the Eastman School of Music. He does an

excellent job with the *Piano Concerto in F* and I would hold his performance up to almost anyone. He later ▶



Howard Hanson and the ERO and a fine performance of *An American in Paris* with Dorati, this time with his Minneapolis Symphony. On the used marketplace, this album sells for less than \$15 and is well worth seeking out.

▶ recorded some wonderful piano works of the American composer, Louis Moreau Gottschalk for Vanguard.

Mercury released a couple of "re-issue" series in their main catalogue and these have generally been ignored by collectors "in the know." One of their later series proudly advertises, "This record contains 60 minutes of music"... which is as you might imagine, in a word, compressed.

An earlier series entitled *Curtains Up* contains mostly re-issues of previously released material. However, there is at least one gem with some new material: SR90290: *Gershwin Favorites*. While it does repeat the *Rhapsody in Blue* mentioned above, it contains two additional pieces, *Cuban Overture* with



One of my favourite American composers is Charles Ives. While many consider Aaron Copland THE American composer of the 20th century, I definitely think it's Ives. The man was a genius and I am glad to have his symphonies and individual works conducted on several labels by Stokowski, Bernstein, Tilson-Thomas, Ormandy, Schuller, Ozawa (yes even Ozawa), the Juilliard String Quartet and a special Mercury, SR90149 with Hanson and his ERO performing *Three Places in New England* and *Symphony No. 3*. His music is thought

provoking and in some cases made up of 'fragmental' movements taken from every day American life from pre Civil War days to late in his life, even gathering material on walks in the park with his wife. Ives is a truly fascinating composer that you should definitely explore: His music is dynamic, exciting, unusual.



Another surprise in the catalogue, known only to the real Mercury collector, is SR90256, *Ballet for Band* with Frederick Fennell conducting the Eastman Wind Ensemble in three masterpieces: Rossini's *La Boutique Fantastique*, Gounod's *Ballet Music from Faust*, and Arthur Sullivan's *Pineapple Poll*. The performances are as good as anyone who's recorded the works and once again, there are no superlatives to match the exceptional sound quality. I consider this one of the



▶ all time top Mercury's ever produced. Robert Fine's ability to capture the true sound of wind instruments has made this disc one of my reference recordings. First pressings exist with FR1/FR1 stamper numbers and I'm still searching for a promo copy I know exists - anyone have a spare copy you'd like to trade? Another must own record that I hope gets the Speakers Corner treatment.

There is a very special recording released with Stanislaw Skrowaczewski and the Minneapolis Symphony (he took over after Dorati went to London). It's Mercury SR90060 and is the Shostakovich *5th Symphony*. There are many fine readings of this work in the catalogues including those of Bernstein, Haitink, Berglund, Svetlanov and even Kertesz. I'm sure there are more modern readings available on CD I am totally unaware of, but I guarantee you two things with this record: A great performance and fabulous sonics. This is definitely one of the VERY best from Mercury. Earliest stamper numbers for this are RFR1/RFR1.

We've discussed previously what the critics of the day made (and by the legacy left, how right they were) of the recordings of Paul Paray and his Detroit Symphony Orchestra. SR90177, contains a reference performance of Florent Schmitt's *La Tragédie de Salomé*. If you think that is not enough, the disc contains outstanding interpretations of Richard Strauss' *Dance of the Seven Veils from Salomé* and Edouard Lalo's *Namouna: Suite No. 1*. Based on a poem by Robert d'Humières, Schmitt's composition follows the text closely offering five movements: *Prelude, Pearl Dance, The Magic of the Sea, Dance of Lightning* and *Dance of Fright*. A stunning performance with sound quality to match, you'll be gripping your listening chair tightly as Paray drives his

orchestra into an exciting frenzy!

*The Dance of the Seven Veils* is another great moment in time preserved on this disc but although I love Lalo's *Namouna Suite*, my heart belongs elsewhere: I think for pure sound quality you would be hard pressed to better Ansermet's reading on Decca SXL 6302. From a beautiful

performance point-of-view, and although the sound is not Decca quality the reading is sublime, Jean Martinon's rendition on Deutsche Grammophon 2530 106 is also top notch. There is something about *Namouna* that just captivates me and these are all recordings that I cannot live without.

The absolute best-of-the-best of the Paray discs has to be to SR90313. It contains works by Maurice Ravel and Jacques Ibert. Ravel's contribution to this Paray/Detroit collaboration consists of some

of the finest, if not the finest readings of *Rapsodie Espagnole, Alborado del Gracioso, Pavane Pour Une Infante Défunte* and the best *La Valse* I've ever heard. Ibert's *Escapes (Ports of Call)* gets, as would be expected, a fine reading as well. I've offered up so many superlatives about these recordings, I'm sorry if it seems to be repetitive. There

is no doubt that this is the finest sounding record to come from Detroit and is clearly in the top half dozen of Mercury's finest ever. Not only is this a 35MM recording offering phenomenal clarity, the record contains, as I said above, some of the finest interpretations of these works ever committed to vinyl. The only way to hear ▶



► this record is to find an original. First pressings have the RFR1/RFR1 stamper number notation and my green label promo really cooks on all cylinders. No re-issue could ever do this masterpiece justice - and sadly it will not be re-issued by Speakers Corner, although Classic did produce a version in their short lived Mercury series.

We've already mentioned some of Dorati's contributions, both with Minneapolis and London. He truly was a fine conductor and quite underrated at the present time. We've yet to mention his work with the Philharmonia Hungarica. There are a handful, six or seven records I believe, and while they're all excellent, two stand out for me at the head of the class. Recorded in Vienna in the summer of 1958 these are SR90183, an all Bartók disc containing *Dance Suite*; *Deux Portraits*, *Op. 5*; *Mikrokosmos: Bourrée*, *No. 117* and *From the Diary of a Fly*, *No. 142*. There is not much to say about these works that you probably couldn't figure out for yourself. This is a truly winning combination of Composer, Conductor and Ensemble all from the same country (Hungary) playing music they've known all their lives. It's an incredible record that I hope sees a new light of day.

Here we go again: Another of my favourite Dorati recordings is SR90199: Respighi's *Ancient Dances and Airs for Lute 1, 2 and 3*. The Philharmonia Hungarica performances are first-rate. The works combine earlier compositions by French and Italian composers of various periods into these three suites (two for orchestra, one for strings.) Respighi is just the right orchestrator to pull this off

and this is another start to finish reference quality work. Even Stravinsky 'lifted' some of the melody which can be found in his *Fulcinella*. Do seek this out in a first pressing FR1/FR1. One of the problems I encountered with this record was that I had heard a copy which actually had a solid bass (albeit string) foundation. It took me an awfully long time to finally get a copy that could live up to that first

listening experience.

Many records in the 1950's and 1960's were not treated all that well, and all it takes is one pass with a stylus/pickup arm either not set-up properly or containing too worn a stylus, or perhaps tracking too light or too heavy, to destroy the delicate grooves. Had I not heard that original copy, I never would have known that the bass was really there... and it makes a difference - a big

difference. If you take the time to find this record in its original form you'll not be disappointed - although you will be quite a bit poorer. If Speakers Corner can deliver the goods on this one with their planned re-issue they'll really be doing everyone a favour: doing exactly what a great re-issue series

should do. Making

available legendary performances from an earlier era.

I'm going to end this piece now, but maybe not permanently. It's time to move onto other music and other catalogues, but I hope that I've whet your appetite to explore this interesting and unique example of American recorded history. The end... for now.



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Roy Gregory Hi Fi + Issue 9

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