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Issue 42

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I could have started this with a "Welcome to your brand new, bigger, better and shinier Hi-Fi+!" Or I could have started out by inviting you to "spot the difference?" Either way, you might well be left wondering what all the fuss is about. So here it is – Hi-Fi Plus has changed hands. The new owners are Absolute Multimedia Inc. the owners of American high-end magazine *The Absolute Sound*, a title we've long held in the highest regard and which has, in a very real way, shaped what we do here at Plus.

Change can be an unsettling thing, but not in this instance.

Hi-Fi Plus as you know it will remain unchanged, unchanged that is apart from a few developments to content which we've been itching to make. And that's the point. With AMI's financial muscle behind us we'll finally be able to complete plans that have been in the pending tray for far too long. We'll also be able to make greater inroads into the US market and increase our UK circulation, making Plus easier to find and ultimately increasingly frequent in publication. *Brave New World?* More like a lot of hard work, but the results will be worthwhile – at least we hope **you** think so.





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Contents

Equipment+

Regulars

- 5 Columns
- 20 Ring-a-ring-a-roses...
Autumn show reports from
London and Denver
- 32 Letters

Equipment Reviews

- 36 Nola Pegasus Loudspeaker
- 46 Moon Andromeda Reference
CD Player
- 52 conrad-johnson CT5 Tube Line-stage
- 58 B&W 802D Loudspeaker
- 62 Herron Audio VTSP-2 Vacuum Tube
and HL-1 Solid-state Pre-amplifiers
- 70 Arcam FMJ CD36 CD Player
- 74 JAS Orsa Loudspeaker
- 78 Focal-JMLabs Profile 918
Loudspeaker
- 82 MonoPulse 42A Loudspeaker
- 86 Nordost Frey Interconnects
and Loudspeaker Cables
- 92 Cheap But Definitely Cheerful..
The Rega Apollo, Harmon-Kardon
HD970 and Philips DVP9000S
digital disc players
- 98 Headfirst Into Headphones, Part II...
The Beyer DT880, Grado SR325,
Sennheiser HD595 and HD650
and the Stax SRS4040 system

Audio Smorgasbord

- 114 More digital amplification, this
time in the shape of the Nu-Force
Reference 9 mono-blocs,
EAT's Cool Dampers and a stunning
new super-tweeter from Elac.

Music+

Music Reviews

- 118 Pop and Contemporary Music
- 122 Anything but typical..
The talented Tamrah Aeryn
- 128 The overlooked legacy of Luiz Bonfá
- 129 Jazz
- 133 The History Man..
Warms to the subject of audiophile
300Bs; I'm sure there'll be more...
- 135 Audiophile Music Reviews
- 140 Journey To Germany..
Following the analogue
mastering chain

Departments

- 117 Binders
- 125 Subscriptions
- 126 Advertisers Index
- 132 Back Issues



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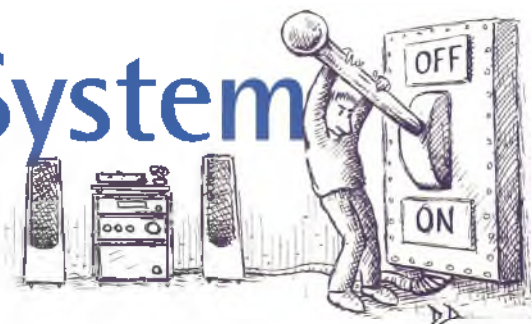
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Playing The System

by Roy Gregory



Taking a short break from heaving large bits of furniture about the place, I thought I'd talk about bi-amping in this issue. Mind you, at nearly 40kg each, the KR amps that got me thinking along these lines are hardly lightweights. Their substantial, squat dimensions seem to crouch close to the ground; pick one up and you could be forgiven for thinking that it was clinging on to terra firma! But back to the issue at hand...

The four-box, tri-wired configuration of the Nola Pegasus combined with its modest efficiency of around 87dB makes it a natural for bi-amping. Its wide bandwidth demands considerable control at both frequency extremes, a factor which places considerable strain on power supplies, while the sensitivity means that power delivery is also an issue. Enter onto this unpromising stage the 20 Watt per channel, single-ended KR VA320 Antares. Spectacularly forceful and emphatically musical with the 94dB OBX-R2s, an outing with the giant American speaker beckoned, if only I could overcome the power requirements. Mind you, the Antares does sound far more powerful than it has any right to, so ever the optimist I duly hooked it up. Unfortunately, even with the volume control wound out to the end-stops it was clear that, even if there was sufficient level, the amp really wasn't getting hold of the speaker. Rather than the power and authority that I'd so enjoyed with the OBXs, this was sluggish and disjointed, softened and dynamically slurred. But... there was just enough going on across the mid-band and with voices in particular to suggest that this was an experiment worth pursuing. Indeed, every time I've previously heard the speakers it's been with large valve amps (from Antique Sound Labs or Art Audio) both bristling with KT88s. That's when the bi-amping penny dropped, resulting in a quick call to the KR's importer and the rapid arrival of a second amplifier.

However, there's more to bi-amping than simply having access to suitable speakers and four channels of amplification. The actual way you go about it has a significant effect on the results, to the extent that it makes or breaks the whole process.

Rule One is simple; always use the same amps (and I mean identical). For a long time there was a fashion for mixing and matching amps in bi-amped systems. Use a nice sweet valve amp for the mids and some beefy, solid-state beast to drive the bass and you get the best of both worlds. At least that was the theory. In fairness I think it originated with large, multi-box speaker designs where the bass leg extends no higher than 100Hz. Whilst I still don't approve you've at least got some chance of success. In less extreme systems with bass extending up beyond the 500Hz mark, there's no chance, and with two-way systems, none at all. Incidentally, this rule also extends to cabling; you must use the same wire top and bottom.

Rule Two is an extension of Rule One; dispose your channels vertically not horizontally. Okay, I know that sounds confusing but here's what it means. In the scenario spelt out in Rule One, you end up with one stereo amp driving the bass and another driving the mid and treble. You have to do that because it's the only way to achieve a symmetrical arrangement (besides wanting the more powerful amp on the bass of both speakers). But once your four channels of amplification are identical you can arrange them how you please, which means that you can optimise the load seen by the amplifiers' power supplies.

Think about it this way: large transients, particularly bass transients, tend to be mixed to the middle of the soundstage assuming such flexibility exists. That means that their demands are met by both channels. Use a single stereo amp to drive both bass legs and nothing changes, but if you arrange the amps differently, with one stereo amp to each speaker then there's a big difference. Now, with its left channel driving bass information and its right doing the treble, a large bass transient only hits one of that amplifier's channels. It gets shared across both amps and their power supplies. The downside is that the amp might be called on to furnish simultaneous peaks at low and high frequencies, but these are far less common than the simultaneous peaks that occur across the bass.

Now, using the KR's, which are effectively dual-



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► mono, gets around most of these problems, but I still took the trouble to arrange the cabling in the vertical as opposed to horizontal manner. Having done considerable listening I thought I'd better check, so re-wired things horizontally. Sure enough, the dynamic range and impact were noticeably reduced, so I can only conclude that dual-mono or not, there must be shared elements somewhere in the power supply of the Antares. Without delving inside I can't be certain, but swapping cables back to the vertical arrangement convinced me that it was certainly the preferable configuration.

So, once you've got things hooked up correctly (and it's such an alien exercise that I strongly suggest the use of a test disc with channel and phase checks on it) what should you expect? That will depend slightly on the reasons behind the strategy, but if we assume the most common scenario, upgrading a system where a single stereo amp is already doing a capable job, the sonic dividend should be both immediate and obvious. What you've done by adding the second amp is made the amplifiers' job much easier. That's exactly what it sounds like. You'll get a serious increase in dynamic range and speed of response, a sense of ease and less strain, and much greater control at frequency extremes. With the latter, comes greater transparency and focus. The end result is that the system finds it far easier to track the demands of the signal – and consequently you don't hear it making the effort.

But there are also significant practical advantages. Bi-amping broadens the matching possibilities when it comes to pairing amps and speakers – actually allowing me a very satisfying result from the KR/Nola combination. It also allows the possibility of spreading the cost of your final system solution. And with most systems now running bi-wired cabling, it cuts down on redundant equipment and the depreciation that

goes with it. But the biggest practical advantage is the least obvious. Whereas generally speaking, simplicity in a hi-fi system is seen as a good thing and bi-amping seems more complex, look inside the amplifier's box and that isn't the case. As I said earlier, the sonic benefits come from making things easier for your amp's power-supply. It so happens that when it comes to building amplifiers it's the power supply that takes the lion's share of the component cost. Increase the power of the amplifier and that cost goes up exponentially, with larger, slower components and more complicated circuits. So, using two, smaller amps more than off-sets the increased cost of double casework. Factor in the sonic difficulties of building a bigger amp and you can begin to understand why two small amps can sound a lot better than one big one at the equivalent price.

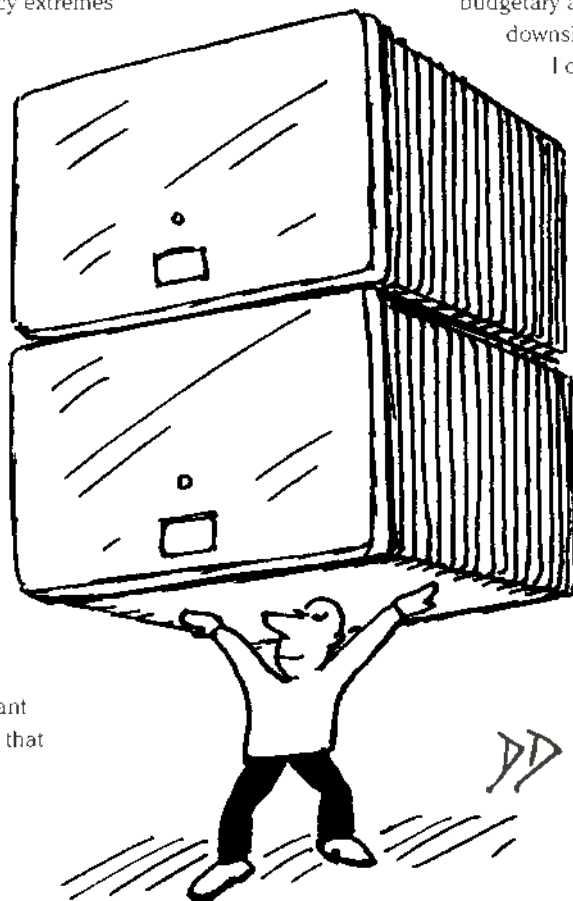
Finally, and for some reason I've yet to fathom, two identical boxes side by side always looks better than one on its own, no matter how ugly they are. Given the number of truly hideous amplifiers out there, this represents a massive bonus on the aesthetic front – somewhere this hobby needs all the help it can get.

So, with so many sonic, practical and budgetary advantages, is there a

downside to bi-amping? Not that

I can think of. You could argue that you're locking yourself into a limited amp and speaker combination that will be harder to change in the future, but I wouldn't agree.

The fact is that you should choose your amp(s) and speakers in combination anyway, and two small amps are a lot easier to sell than one big one. So, next time you get that upgrade bug, or worry about whether your existing amp can cope with those new speakers that you fancy, think about bi-amping as a solution – you know it makes sense. ►+



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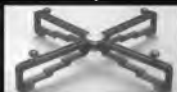
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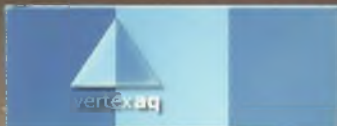
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Have we got turntables? Do bears... no, forget that. Of course we have!



We don't have a problem with turntables at all (some shops seem to have - how much choice do you see in your local hi-fi store, that is if they even sell proper hi-fi any more). This venerable way to reproduce music in your home still happens to offer the most realistic sound quality of anything available today. You can spend a fortune on the latest digital components to still only get a fraction of what even a relatively modest cost vinyl front end has to offer. You probably already have the "software" for it tucked away in a corner somewhere, assuming you're not a vinyl user already. And, the best thing is, it's not going to become obsolete - you won't have to worry like the digital aficionados do about the next miracle format and having to repurchase everything again! Provided you look after them, those vinyl discs contain an almost unlimited amount of information, and as you gradually upgrade your front end, you get to hear ever more of it.

Our advice on turntable/arm/cartridge matching is second to none (provided, obviously, you purchase from us!) and our subsequent building of your turntable will ensure you get the full performance from it (we see quite a few turntables purchased elsewhere or second-hand which aren't working properly). We also don't forget about you after you walk out the door, it remains important to us to keep your deck working to your satisfaction over the years. Just thought we'd remind you that vinyl playing is still our priority!

However...

Even we have to face the fact that more and more of you want decent digital disc spinners, and ironically (to us) people tell us they visit us for digital players specifically because of our enthusiasm for analogue. Er, yes. So, we have to be very careful what we choose. The Chinese have been making some absolutely superb digital products lately, you've all seen the success of Shanling, for example. Consonance also make some wonderful products, and the Consonance Droplet 5.0 (pictured) is the latest wonder from this company. Not only does it sound excellent, the styling is also a complete departure for this price range (the Droplet costs 995). You get a 24 bit / 192k upsampling DAC and a valve output stage, all in a unit which weighs just under an astonishing 30 Kg.



But it's not only the Chinese who're making digital waves, as it were. Our own home-grown favourite, Musical Fidelity, have come out with an astonishing two box player, a new model in their acclaimed KW series, the DM 25 transport and DAC. The digital and analogue sections are both effectively "dual mono", and although you can buy the units separately, there are very few other makes you can use them with because they connect using the esoteric dual mono twin cable system, a method only one or two far more expensive units use. The outcome is sound quality well ahead of what you might expect of the price tag - both units together cost 995. And, in case you were wondering, those things sticking out the top of the transport are levelling adjusters for the unique isolating feet, nothing more sinister!

And, just a little reminder about the superb Stirling Broadcast LS 3/5a loudspeakers. Now, we know these are about as unfashionable as it gets. Modern speakers are supposed to be big, bold, full of high-tech drivers, and with a multi hundred watt power handling tag. And indeed, most modern designs are just fine for purely electronic music, where tonal accuracy, subtlety, and even soundstaging take second place to sheer grunt. For acoustic music and spoken voice, though, these BBC designed mini monitors are absolutely unparalleled. Even when you hear them playing full orchestral music, or even rock, they are very special. Instruments sound as they were meant to, voices are utterly natural. These are a must hear design if you are a "serious" listener.



Finally, we now have the fantastic Hyperion HPS-938 loudspeakers on demo - sorry, no room for a piccie - book now for a listen.

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Music Matters



by Alan Sircom

I may be on the way to being burned at the tonearm for audiophile heresy, but I've been using an iPod. Or rather, I've been trying to get the best from an iPod, in a strictly audiophile manner.

Hardly a week goes by without a new Applevation, a new gizmo that once again revolutionises the iPod, or even a new iPod, now with extra added stuff. In a few short years, the iPod has shrunk in size and price, but gone through the roof in terms of extra disc space and functionality. The latest idea is to add a video component to the iPod, meaning the next generation of commuters will be peering into a tiny screen, catching up on EastEnders while stuck in a siding at Didcot Parkway. But, how much of this helps the musical reproduction of the original iPod concept?

Here's the thing. Apple's first generation iPods sound better than any subsequent edition. It may have no dock, it may have a battery that runs out after a few hours and may have a mono screen, but sonically the original has a distinct edge over later generation iPods. It's not a big advancement, but it does push the iPod quality forward slightly. So, you should seek out an old one, on eBay. Of course, the original iPod was launched as a part of Apple's revival – it's effectively quadrupled its share price recently – which meant comparatively few bought the original model compared to subsequent iterations.

While you are shopping for a 'vintage' iPod, try looking on the American eBay, instead of the UK or European one. Why? Because the US version has higher gain on the output, making life easier for the headphones used. This doesn't just mean extra volume, but better dynamic range and a less bright treble. We'll get on to the choice of headphone soon.

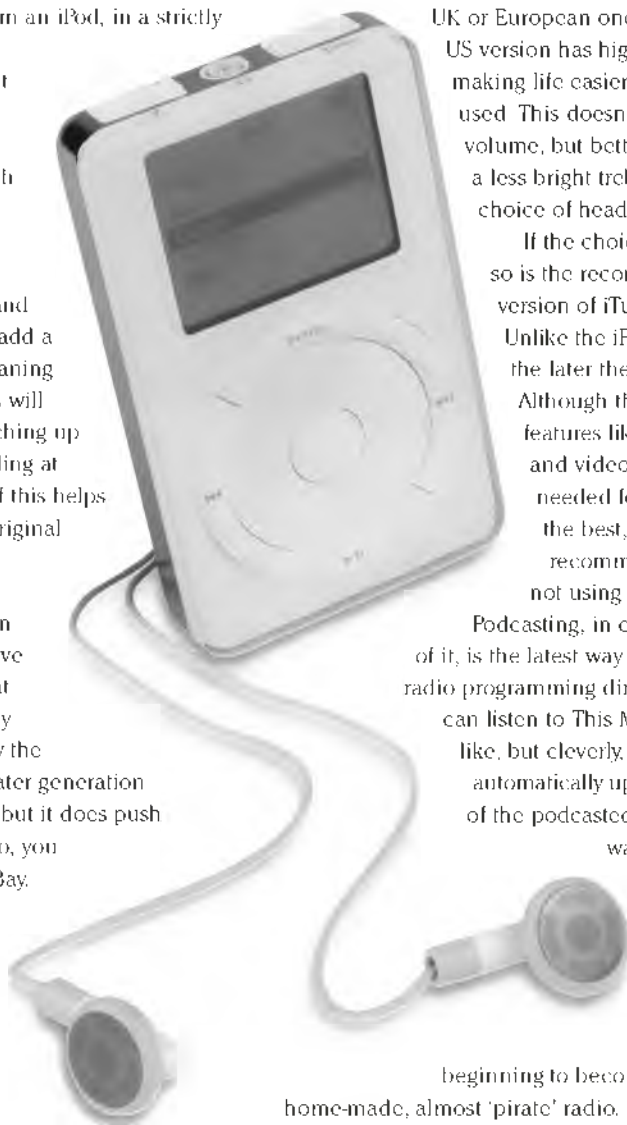
If the choice of iPod is important, so is the recording media. Which version of iTunes should you use?

Unlike the iPod itself, it seems that the later the codec, the better. Although the latest iTunes features features like podcasting (useful) and video downloads (not needed for older iPods), it has the best, latest codec and is recommended for anyone not using a stone-age computer.

Podcasting, in case you've not heard of it, is the latest way of getting time-shifted radio programming direct to your iPod. You can listen to This Morning at 7pm if you like, but cleverly, the iTunes software automatically uploads the latest version of the podcasted recording when you want it. The automation

process makes this an excellent addition to the Apple pantheon, especially as podcasting is

beginning to become the place for home-made, almost 'pirate' radio. Now that digital radio is making inroads and making pirate stations



► redundant, this could be the next best way of getting your message across.

Getting back to iPod music, there is only one way to go: Apple Lossless. Buried in the 'preferences' folder of iTunes, select 'Apple Lossless Encoder'. This immediately ties you into the latest variants of iTunes, but these can be used with any generation of iPod. Suddenly, the iPod ceases to be a store of tens of thousands of tunes, but the hundreds of tunes it can store have excellent and genuinely, virtually, CD-quality sound. Of course, Apple Lossless has a downside for those intending on replaying long, uninterrupted passages of music through their iPod; the file size is so large, you stand a chance of getting to the end of the buffer and the occasional stop may occur. But, for most listening, you'll never hear this.

Now we come to the hard bit. Headphones. The standard Apple in-ear things really aren't up to much. Instead, you need to go aftermarket. The problem is that few headphones are up to the job. In ear headphones are finny and because they let in noise from external sources, you end up having to turn up the volume and may damage your phones and ears in the process. Open backed cans aren't up to the job, because they need more power than the iPod can provide.

Which leaves us with two leftfield alternatives: The first is the Etymotic 6i headphones. Originally designed for foldback and preventing musicians on stage from going deaf in seconds, the Etymotic designs fit right into the ear canal itself and the plastic baffles prevent stray external sound from getting in. This works as noise suppression, not noise cancellation; there's no need for exotic phase-

inversion software, because the Etymotic plugs up your lug holes. The sound reflects the closeness between the listener and the transducer; it seems more direct than almost any other headphone, like the Apple things, but even faster and more immediate, with plenty of tight bass and good treble extension.

The other option is really, really out there. In a little known backwater of their catalogue, Stax have an electrostatic headphone for portable use. It's called the SR-001 and costs as much as a new iPod, and uses AA batteries like they are going out of fashion. It also means

you need to carry a separate energiser box, which is slightly larger than an iPod. This might defeat the light-weight object of iPod – you kind of need a Bat Utility Belt to carry all this stuff – but suddenly these in-ear electrostatics transform the sound of the humble iPod. There is more background noise than the Etymotic 6i, but the close, squidgy ear pads block out much of the surrounding sound and the extra distance from transducer to ear drum seems to give the SR-001 a transparency and fidelity that no other portable headphone can offer. It also has great weight and depth to the sound and almost none of that lateralisation effect where sounds appear to come from inside your own head.



Okay, this ain't just overkill, this is overkill on stilts. Carrying round an iPod, energiser, headphones and connecting cables, and using the player for optimum resolution not maximum capacity goes against the iPod ethos. But, this added complexity does make for audiophile sound, good enough to brighten up any journey. It might not be the spirit of high end, but it is true to the spirit of music. Enjoy it.



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Ring-a-ring-a-roses...

The autumn show-go-round and intimations of mortality

by Roy Gregory

In the movie *Field Of Dreams*, Kevin Costner's blind faith is finally rewarded. The corn he ploughed under to build his baseball field, the derision he attracts, the financial disaster he courts are all deflected in the final scene which sees cars queuing as far as the eye can see, just to visit his "little piece of Iowa". It's triumph clutched from the jaws of disaster as only Hollywood could write it. It's a story that's been nagging at the back of mind ever since I visited two shows on consecutive weekends, one in London the other in Denver, Colorado.

The latest installment of the Hi-Fi News Show saga was played out on the last weekend of September, and it's difficult to avoid the impression of an event that's teetering on the brink of disaster. The downward spiral of recent years seems to be accelerating, with this year's headcount in terms of rooms, exhibitors and brands represented approaching half the figure of last year, begging the question at what point the show's viability hits critical mass (or lack of it – if you get my drift). All indications are that that point must be fast approaching, not helped by the recent changes at Hi-Fi News itself, changes that have sent uneasy ripples shuddering through the industry. Despite encouraging attempts to offer a more interactive experience to show-goers, organisation of ticketing and scheduling of these public events was confused and frustrating for visitors. What's more, the organising title's new editor was conspicuous for his low profile and lack of approachability. Not exactly a recipe for success if he values industry and

reader input into the redesign of the magazine. Perhaps he should take listening lessons from Mr Blair – or perhaps he already has.

The cracks starting to appear and the £10 entrance fee (by the time you'd bought a show guide) don't bode well for the future, which is actually pretty ironic, given that in many respects this was the most interesting show for years. The welcome attempt to cooperate bore fruit in the shape of the HFN/HF+ demonstration, which once it overcame its Friday teething troubles was packed out and enjoyed by all those who attended, if only for the rare opportunity to put Martin Colloms on the spot! Elsewhere, presentations by Ken Kessler and Paul Miller were also well received, pointing the way towards at least one path to salvation. Sadly, the same can't be said of the car-audio exhibits, although the lack of cheap AV systems was certainly a blessing.

There was a more interesting than usual spread of kit too, with the likes of the latest Kondo equipment making a welcome return to these shores. However, for many, the most impressive and surprising demonstrations must have been those by Absolute Sounds in the shape of Ricardo's Studio and Audiofreaks with a full Zanden set-up. That the UK's two most influential high-end importers should both choose this time to branch out in new directions, and do so with such conspicuous sonic success, is far from a coincidence. And for every plus point there was a major name missing from the show guide to undermine the positives. The times they

are a changing and you adapt or get left behind, a lesson the organisers of the London show would do well to heed.

The contrast with events in Denver could not have been starker. Last year's Rocky Mountain Audio Fair grew out of the Denver Audio Society and kicked off with a loose amalgam of established high-end names (normally represented through local dealers), small specialist producers and downright hobbyists. Now in its second year it has blossomed out of all recognition, with well over twice the exhibitors and an 80% increase in public attendance. What's more, the quality of the attendees was consistently impressive, with knowledgeable listeners actually looking to spend money. All of which makes it a bigger and a more important show than London, supposedly the UK's flagship event!


Why the differences? I can only speculate, but several things seem clear, not least the obvious difference in dealer structure between the US and UK. Simple geography means that if you live States-side your local dealer is likely to be rather less than local, and once you get outside the major cities, the next nearest alternative could be a serious trek. Which makes the chance to compare and contrast multiple products and brands rare indeed. Less apparent is a growing dissatisfaction with the existing organised events. CES is simply massive, but despite opening its doors to the public, remains largely a trade event, with displays set-up for that purpose. The Stereophile shows are more nearly equivalent to the London event, but with the cancellation of the San

► Francisco show and the recent fiasco in New York, general mutterings about costs and politics have risen to a head. Suddenly, three or four different groups within the high-end community (renowned for its in-fighting and general cynicism) have all fastened on RMAF as a viable alternative, in the process making it exactly that. It's a remarkable example of just what can be achieved if even a few of us actually pull together.

Of course, you've still got to get the

event itself right, and here RMAF gets full marks for effort. The venue is excellent, with a reasonable supply of large rooms. Tickets cost \$15 a day or \$30 for a three-day pass, but that includes access to a full programme of seminars, panels and presentations, as well as five live music events spread across the weekend. That makes for outstanding value. And if there were a few minor gripes, at least exhibitors can be confident that they'll be sorted out for next year. The organisation team

might be on a steep learning curve but at least they are learning, and are eager for feedback.

The corn in Kev's field whispered "If you build it they will come" an instruction he accepted with blind faith. Well, Hi-Fi News have equal faith in their show. I'm just not sure that it is shared by the rest of the industry or the general public. In Denver the emphasis seems to be rather more on the "building" – a lesson perhaps we all should learn. 

Heathrow 2005

Photographs by Alan Sircom



Why bother with the traditional list of exhibitors, regardless of their contribution (sonic or technological) to the proceedings. Having long railed for more adventurous shows, with more mould-breaking products and better demonstrations, why not just ask the assembled HiFi+ writers to select their favourite rooms at the show? Seems sensible.

Big On Japan...


by Roy Gregory

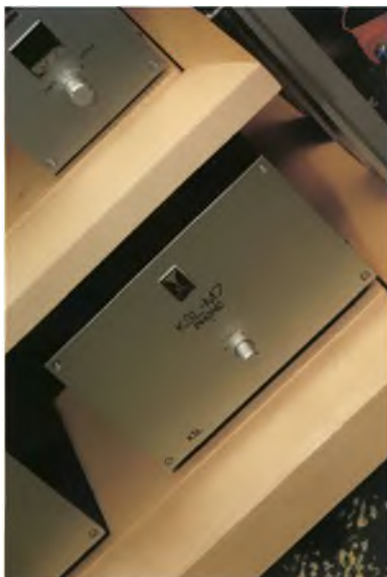
Asked to name my two favourite rooms from the show, I was surprised not only how easy it was, but also at the uncanny parallels that bind the two systems together – of course I got first choice!

In a display of conspicuous consumption that must have bordered on the world record for cramming the highest value hi-fi system imaginable into the smallest possible space, Definitive Audio went joyfully, extravagantly and flagrantly over the top. Of course, just starting out with the Kondo KSL electronics (the vrai production of Kondo San and not to be



mistaken) gives you something of a head start in the money no object stakes. But the inventiveness with which Kevin Scott pushed the envelope to breaking point boggled even my jaded mind. Leave

aside the £48K Gakuoh mono-blocks and the \$23K M77 line-stage. How about the Kuzma Stabi XL turntable, used with three arms (including a Kondo wired SME 5 and a Kuzma Airline). Of course, three arms means three cartridges, all Kondo KSL lo-Is naturally – at a mere £10K each! And don't forget the three step-up transformers and two M7 phono-stages to go with them, adding another £50K to the bill... It makes the Kondo wiring throughout seem almost trivial, while the Resolution Audio CD player looked extremely sheepish, lurking on a bottom shelf of one of the finite-element racks. 



► Speakers were an interesting variation on the Living Voice theme, the so-called KSLV. No prizes for guessing that this upgraded version of the OBX-R2 employs Kondo wiring amongst other, more subtle changes, while the show pair's satin walnut veneer seems set to reinvent this forgotten finish so beloved of the British monitor brigade. Priced at a mere £7500, the KSLV is claimed to offer a significant upgrade over the standard version, especially in Kondo wired systems. With the KSL-SPZ cable retailing for less than £500 a meter



(almost reasonable by today's standards) this looks like an interesting option for all those who've found it hard to surrender the OBX's virtues but know in their hearts that there must be something better...

Now all this heat and bluster would of course stand for naught if the performance wasn't there to match. Continuing his long tradition of getting great sound at shows, and doing it using real records of real music (as opposed to audiophile jingles) Kevin was clearly doing the business. The sheer energy and colour that suffused the music is a Kondo hallmark, as are the easy, unforced timing and expansive dynamics that easily overcame the diminutive dimensions of the tiny hotel bedroom in which this imposing rig was assembled. But sound and price aside, the thing that really impressed was the sheer joie de vivre, the mad abandon and simple passion that underpinned the whole enterprise. Two-hundred grands worth of hi-fi in a hotel bedroom? Why not? On this showing you might actually find yourself saying "why not indeed!" (www.definitiveaudio.co.uk)

Elsewhere, and also running true to form, Audiofreaks were producing understated excellence from a system that included the Avalon Acoustics Opus loudspeaker, driven by the familiar shape of the cj Premier 350, this year paired with the new CT5 line-stage, a unit that promises to make ACT2 type performance and technology available at a more approachable price. Whether or not that's the case you can establish in the review on page 52 of this issue. Sources also had a familiar look, the Stabi XL turntable (in a new all black finish) teamed with a Triplanar VII tonearm, alongside the Reimyo CDP-777 CD player. But there was also a real surprise in the shape of the new Magnum Dynalab MD109 tuner. Long recognised for their superb sonic performance, the Canadian tuners have always scored rather lower on the sartorial scale. Until now, that is. The

new 109 is sleek, classy and beautifully finished, finally usurping the Sequerra's last great claim to fame. The best looking and (probably) the best sounding tuner in the world, the MD109 doesn't come cheap, a fact that will be of little consequence to those who are getting moist at the mere thought of the possibilities it represents. And hey, at least the software's free!



But the system that really impressed I've kept for last. Audiofreaks devoted an entire room to the astonishing (and astonishingly expensive) Zanden electronics. The four-box CD player (reviewed back in Issue 38 – and haunting me to this day) was joined by the matching 3000 line-stage and the new 9500 Mk3 mono-blocks, the latter deriving 60 watts of class A power from a pair of push-pull 845 output tubes. If I thought that the digital elements were exquisite, just wait until you see the power amps. There's a holistic beauty to all the Zanden designs which combined with their flawless finish and choice of materials makes them genuine objets d'art. They also drove the Avalon Ascendant loudspeakers (not, you'd think, an obvious choice) with a subtlety, grace and commanding authority that allowed the system to traverse the musical range from the small and

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► intimate to the most bombastic with effortless and unintrusive ease. The natural flow and absolute lack of grain or mechanical allowed the music to live and breath in a way that escapes every system I've ever heard. Even those unimpressed by the choice of music that happened to be playing when they entered the room, couldn't ignore the fact that there was something really special and unusual happening, and show-goers from the

flattest of flat-earthers to the most SET in their ways, the highest of hi-enders to the hardest of cynics were talking about this system.

Interestingly, looking back it quickly becomes apparent that these three systems have more than a little in common, even if each sounds distinct and individual in itself. All put the musical performance ahead of the sonic one (or maybe they just make the latter serve the former – as they should!). All

used the finite-elemente Pagode HD Master Reference racks, all used coherent, single manufacturer cable looms and two used the Kuzma Stabi XL turntable, whilst the last used the best digital front-end I've heard by some considerable margin. Perhaps familiarity of product means as much as familiarity of approach – or maybe I just know what I like. Either way, it was interesting to see so much agreement on the point. (www.audiofreaks.co.uk) ►+

The numbers are starting to add up...

by Jason Hector

The editor pulled a bit of a fast one with this assignment. There was me thinking I was out for a relaxing visit to the show when he announces I'm to find two good rooms to write about, oh and the Definitive room is taken! That left me worried: the last few visits haven't really provided many good rooms and the standard seemed lower this year. So much so I thought I'd have to write about the Brasserie which (for once for a show) was offering reasonably priced tucker – but luckily there were some gems and to make it interesting the two rooms I have chosen couldn't have been more different...

Heed are a small company based in Budapest in Hungary and distributed by Robert Hay of TSource in the UK. They have had products reviewed in various magazines (including these pages) but these have mostly been of niche items like phono-stages or the unusual little amplifiers. They are also receiving good press for their turntable power supplies, especially as add-ons to the venerable Rega Planar 2 and 3 decks. But at Heathrow they were showing what they hope will be their assault on the more serious end of the market. The system playing consisted of a pair of their pseudo-omni Envoy speakers driven in a bi-amp configuration by two of the new



Stereo power amplifiers, fed from a prototype pre-amplifier and Questar phono-stage. Source components were a (slightly outclassed) Roksan CD player or the (unsurprisingly) far more impressive Roksan Xerxes turntable, arm and cartridge.

The Heed Envoy's dictated much of the sound we heard and are a three-way speaker with more than a hint of the Shahinian about them. Hardly surprising as Heed like me are fans of the American pseudo-omni – but like all good engineers they thought they could do better! The Envoy's are non-directional to use Heed's own language

and all of the drivers used in the Envoy are metal ceramic composite and offer wide dispersion. Mounting them in a sloping back baffle on top of the cabinet creates the non-directionality. Bass reinforcement is a combination of a transmission line and port and the speakers have a suggested selling price of £3150.

The amplifiers also boast some novel technology and are balanced from pre-amplifier input to speaker output. They are intended to retail at a competitive £2500 for the stereo power amplifier and £2000 for the pre-amplifier. Also on static display was a new integrated that re-launches many of the design concepts and the product name from the Ion Obelisk of years gone by. It certainly looked promising with plenty of neat design touches and the possibility to upgrade the power amplifier power supply section with the addition of another box, just like the original.

But it is the sound that was produced that gets the Heed room mentioned. Firstly they were totally happy to play any disc anybody had and I am afraid I monopolised the system for at least half a dozen tracks (which strangely emptied the room). Secondly while you could not say the sound was the best in hi-fi terms it was certainly one of the best rooms at communicating ►

► the musical message in a piece. Being critical, the system sounded a bit bright in the treble, although it was clear without too many nasty artefacts. But this was more than made up for with an overall presentation that grabbed the rhythm of a piece and built everything else on top. The omni-ness wasn't obvious, the system just sounded real and the drivers integrated effectively. The bass from the Envoy speakers was pretty extended in room but did not have a hint of lag or smear, staying tight and communicative even at high volumes with bass heavy material. No matter what was played I always felt I was hearing through to the artists intentions and all happening in a small hotel room to boot. This makes the Heed system very rare at the Heathrow show. After this exposure I aim to follow up with a full review of the Envoy speakers and amplifiers in a forthcoming edition. (www.heedaudio.com)

The second room I felt warranted some words was the dCS room. Over the years I have been exposed to a number of dCS demonstrations at shows and the results have always disappointed and seemed at odds with the rave reviews the gear received elsewhere. This year things were different. Firstly dCS have decided that they will handle their own distribution in the UK market and that they will also distribute a number of other products – namely the VTL range of amplifiers and the Verity Audio range of loudspeakers. Judging by the sound that they were producing in one of the larger rooms these are inspired choices.

The dCS room was the opposite of the Heed room. The system had the benefit of a large space but the limitations of a poor layout, with several large columns and very little else. They were also limited by the

amount of ambient noise coming into the room from the bar area which could be distracting during sotto-voce moments.

The system being played certainly showed the intentions of dCS. The full digital system was being demonstrated including the Verona master-clock that ensures that all the boxes necessary to extract the maximum music from a digital disc are



perfectly synchronised to each other. Similarly the VTL amplification system illustrated how to make a valve amplifier both look and operate like solid state. The pre and the power are full featured and have a user-friendly character. The 400W stereo power amplifier used at the show has automatic biasing and fault diagnostics with reporting through the front panel or via an RS232 connection. Swap the valves for transistors and this product could be a Levinson. Similarly the 7.5 Reference pre-amplifier (Reviewed by RG in Issue 41) offers more features than I have words in this article. The speakers used were the Sarastro monitor and bass unit combination. These speakers are

beautifully finished products and feature a wide bandwidth and reasonable sensitivity from manageable dimensions. The bass units have a rear-facing driver and this is the one area where the sound was a little lacking. Unfortunately the room, or at least the speakers position in the room would not fully support the very deepest bass and some boom was evident at higher volumes. Everywhere else we were treated to a glimpse of what I think the high end should be: Effortless power with transparency,

realistic tonality, bandwidth and best of all, entertainment. I fear that far too many companies in their pursuit of the former traits lose sight of the last one. I heard this effect in several rooms (plenty of detail but no link-up between the notes) and I am at a loss to explain it. I was starting to think I was too uncultured to appreciate these low distortion systems but hearing the dCS, VTL and Verity system with real music I am now confident that you CAN have it all... You just need deep pockets! (www.dcsLtd.co.uk)



New directions from the old guard...

by Paul Messenger

Fashion has long been a major force in the evolution of the consumer electronics marketplace – how else can one explain the current popularity of flat screen TV displays, which are costly despite poor performance? What applies to TVs is equally true of loudspeakers, and in the race to make loudspeakers that follow – or lead – fashion trends, performance is often sacrificed.

B&W, however, has built its reputation on the basis of supplying serious sound quality, and is unwilling to make substantial performance sacrifices in order to create a fashionable product. That probably explains why the XT-series has been a long time coming. Yet it also helps explain why the pair of XT-4s, demonstrated to trade only visitors at the September Heathrow show, sounded a whole lot better than one has come to expect from a slim-line, metal-jacketed, AV-oriented design.

The XT-series consists of just three models – the two-way stand-mount XT2, the three-way floorstanding XT4 and the XTC centre channel, priced at £699/pair,



£1,699/pair and £549 each respectively. These are far from budget prices, yet the speakers are clearly capable of delivering considerable more than budget performance – rather, they're likely to provide stiff competition for the company's wooden enclosure 700-series models which occupy broadly similar price slots. Their modest dimensions, however, inevitably mean that bass weight will be somewhat limited, and the addition of one (or more) of B&W's spherical £950 PV-1 subwoofers will provide a fine match visually as well as sonically, whether the XTs are used in stereo or multi-channel mode.

So what is it that makes the XTs special? The drivers are very much up with the state of B&W's art. The main driver here is a 130mm cast frame Kevlar cone device, and is used for bass (two in parallel in XT-4), for midrange (in XT-4) and as the bass/mid driver in XT-2. The externally fitted tweeter is almost the same as that used in the 805S. And while the single capacitor that feeds said tweeter is less costly than the Mundorf example used in the 805S, it was only chosen after auditioning twenty odd alternatives.

Aluminium alloy has pluses and minuses as a loudspeaker enclosure material. Its high stiffness and low weight give fine, clean bass performance with low energy storage, but midrange coloration is the potential problem that design engineer Krestian Pedersen had to tackle. The solution came through using relatively thick castings, in separate front and back sections (rather than as a complete tube), pegging the two together with a damping gasket in between.

At the same time as launching the XTs, B&W



introduced a new CM1, a cute little real wood veneered miniature based on substantially the same componentry as the XT-2, but housed in a slightly larger wooden enclosure with a conventional baffle-mounted (rather than external) tweeter. At £500/pair it's significantly cheaper than a pair of XT-2s because B&W has its own cabinetworks, and with much lower tooling costs than metal alloy, wooden enclosures are cheaper to produce. (www.bwspeakers.com)

Meanwhile, Naim had two major product launches at Heathrow. Pride of place must go to a new two-box



▶ high-end CD player, the CD555/555PS, which is expected to be available around the end of January. At nearly £15,000 for the pair, the total price is roughly twice that asked for the CDS3/CDX2 combo, whose place it usurps at the top of the Naim CD playing ladder. And if the two don't differ greatly in terms of basic ingredients, the new model incorporates a huge number of detail refinements, especially on the power supply side of things. The good news for CDS3/CDX2 owners is that they will be able to improve the performance of their CDS3 players substantially by inserting a 555PS in place of the XPS, which will at least allow the upgrading process to be done in stages.

The two-box format is therefore the same as before, with all the actual player components – disc drive, DACs and analogue only outputs – fitted within the CD unit, while all the multiple power supply bits are kept out of harm's way in

the PS section, the units linked by two special Burndy leads that keep analogue and digital leads separate. The player is strictly dedicated to CD replay only: on the basis that this simple approach involves the least compromise.



The CD555 is a striking affair, much heavier than CDS3 thanks in part to a very thick top plate. The central top-loading tray, covered by a motor-driven metal lid, is also much heavier than before, and its complex spring-decoupling arrangement now has sapphire bearings. The internal decoupled sub-chassis' are now 15mm brass rather than 6mm aluminium, improving vibration rejection and taking the total weight up to a massive 20kg. The power supply upgrades are even more important, with a 50 per cent increase to 65 separate regulators. The clock is now fed from its own separate

transformer winding – one of seven independent windings used to maintain best isolation. (www.naim-audio.com)

Naim's new nVi is a complete contrast conceptually – a one-box AV solution, totally stuffed with features and selling for around \$3,000. Naim reckons many of its stereo hi-fi customers will welcome a simple and compact AV solution built to Naim philosophies and either able to be integrated with the stereo system, or operate as a standalone unit in a separate room.

Fitting a DVD player, audio processor and five channels of power amplification within a single unit has been quite a challenge, especially as space has also been found for an optional FM/DAB tuner module. Waste heat production is the most obvious difficulty; so Naim has elected to use five high efficiency 50W Tripath digital power amp modules, and also fitted the unit with a cooling fan.

The nVi might be compact, but it's not short of performance, with features like Faroudja progressive scan, and a DVI digital video output. Good flexibility and future-proofing is provided by six external inputs – three analogue and three digital – modular construction, and the ability to upgrade software via CD-ROM and website downloads. ▶+



Opposites attract...

by Alan Sircom

I must admit, I found the overall tone of this show depressing. There were less rooms, less interesting stuff and what on Earth is in-car entertainment doing in a show supposedly dedicated to the more subtle pursuit of high fidelity. Still, there were diamonds in the rough.

We were supposed to be discussing two rooms, and with less rooms on offer and many not up to the mark, this

should be easy. So, why is my first room four rooms? Simple, because the development of the Absolute Sounds quartet of rooms demonstrates how the high-end is still capable of increased refinement, year on year. For the past few years, Absolute Sounds has taken four rooms in the Park Inn; one a showcase for home cinema (this year Kroll electronics and speakers), a smaller

room showing what Martin-Logan speakers can do and a barn of a stereo room for showing off Wilson MAXX 2 speakers. The smallest of the four rooms normally demonstrates Copland and Sonus Faber kit, but this year it was dedicated to the new Studio range of components.

Okay, let's focus on just two of these rooms. The Wilson room was set-up ▶



► by the same team, same cables and using some of the same music as before, although the choice of amplification, source and speaker were all different. The electronics were all top-of-the-line Audio Research. Although the room is large, this could easily be overkill for a show; the MAXX 2 is a powerful design that can deliver the sort of bass extension and levels that can cause the stud walls and modular ceiling panels to rattle apart. But, despite these limitations, the system worked brilliantly (the ceiling panels started rattling, but this was fixed – scrubbling around the ceiling crawl-space to eliminate vibration... that takes dedication). It's not a sound for everyone – it's big, bold and extremely detailed – but the sense of dynamic, visceral scale makes this a tough act to follow, and a clear sign that even the biggest names in high-end hi-fi can turn up the heat in a year. Last year's system was so-so; this one was brilliant. Who knows what highlights this room will bring to next year's show?

The smaller room was very different, with all new components from WEGG3 and DarTZeel (among others) under the Studio banner. This system concept has been described before in Hi-Fi+, but this was the first time the set-up as a whole



was heard, and the first time ever for people to hear the new DarTZeel NHB-18NS pre-amp. Aside from the gold styling and the 'Pleasure Control' volume knob, what was pleasing about the system was that it was so, errr, pleasing. It had the detail, speed and spatial depth of giant high-end systems, combined with a fine mix of warmth and striking resolution, yet was capable of delivering this sound in a room smaller than most British living rooms. Expect much from the Studio. (www.absolutesounds.com)



One of the most consistently and fabulously quirky companies in audio didn't disappoint this year. 47 Laboratory, perhaps best known for its skeletal PiTracer CD transport, and uber-minimal four-box 'integrated' amplifier has come up with a turntable and cartridge to match its practical-yet-vaguely crazy RS-A1 tonearm. The Model 4724 turntable behaves very, very differently to all other decks; the horizontally mounted motor housing and the weird belt placement gives you some idea that something different is happening. In fact, instead of one solid platter, the 4724 has two, and they counter-rotate. That's right... the top platter turns as normal, the under-platter spins counter clockwise, both driven by the same rim belt. Like the EAR Master Disk, this prototype deck uses a magnetic bearing assembly.



Price has not been set yet, but the words "not cheap" were bandied about. There was also the Hotei loudspeaker, which features a 50mm ribbon tweeter alongside a 225mm Hartley polymer cone. This is very different from the usual single-driver Konus Audio loudspeakers most commonly seen with the 47 Labs equipment.

On a more down-to-earth level, 47 Labs also had a little jewel on show; the 4723 mc cartridge. At £800 this moving coil is Sakura Systems cheapest design to date, but if it delivers even a portion of the brilliant sound produced by the Myabi 47 Labs pick-up then it will be a bargain. Sealed in a little block of clear plastic, this wasn't on demonstration, but looks exquisite. What was on demonstration was a complete 47 Labs set-up, the so-called 'black system' (as reviewed by PR way back in Issue 11) that sits somewhere past the pared-down Shigaraki components but not approaching the more stratospheric pricing of the full-blown 47 Labs system.

The 47 Labs equipment represents – in many respects – the pinnacle of the high-end ethos. It's not user-friendly, not decorative and not designed to facilitate multi-channel audio or home cinema pictures and sound. Instead, it's a no quarter design studio producing the best possible sound from the best sources on offer. And it's curious to see the looks on the faces of those walking into the room; the audiophile has a 'Wow!' look, akin to the kid in a toyshop; the NASO (Non-Audiophile Significant Other), on seeing the plethora of odd-shaped boxes and black tubes, the random collection of spindly wires and the no-compromise layout, has an altogether different

► look. This look is usually accompanied with a groan and a look like a bulldog chewing a wasp. And that look is secretly exactly why we audiophiles love 47 Labs.

Of course, it also helps that the sound quality from the Midland Audio

X-Change room was sublime, too. The speed and directness of the system was hugely alluring and – if it lacked the frequency extremes found in some of the bigger, more overt rooms – the mid-band clarity was perhaps the most

immediate attractor to all who passed by the room. In fact, many couldn't pass by... and many couldn't leave; that turntable was an audiophile's honey trap, and the sound was truly beguiling. (www.midlandaudiox-change.co.uk) ►

Rocky Mountain Audio Fair, Denver 2005



Words by Richard S. Foster

Pictures by Richard S. Foster and Dennis Davis

I wasn't prepared for RMAF. It's one of the first shows I've ever attended where I just ran out of time. Although I arrived mid-week, setup didn't begin until Thursday and it was a long day for almost all manufacturers, importers, distributors and dealers involved in setting up active displays, leaving Friday as the first day I had to run around with RG and Dennis Davis. While this gave us sufficient time to have a peek at each and every room, the balance of the weekend was so busy with seminars and trying to revisit those rooms we thought promised good to great sound (as well as taking pictures and other magazine duties) I could have used one more day. Hopefully, next year the seminar schedule will change or at least, be less of a work load so I can devote more time to the rooms.

Having not attended last year's show probably didn't make any difference to what I was or wasn't prepared for. This Event was jam-packed. It certainly, as far as I was concerned, was the finest show in North America, this side of the CES. The fest must have been a success. Attendance

was solid – although on Sunday it was hard to compete with 27 degree Celsius temperatures and the Denver Broncos Football team playing at home – the buzz from almost everyone I talked with was that Rocky Mountain was a solid success. Those who displayed their wares would more than likely return next year. There were products from all over the World and as far as I was concerned, many were displayed to advantage. Add to this the number of good or outstanding sounding rooms and you had the basis for a great audio experience.

The entertainment was top notch too – the highlight for me being the Friday night Blues session with Big

George Brock, Jimmy D. Lane and the ever fabulous, Lazy Lester. Although it was Friday night in Denver, the night before was also Friday night in Australia where Lester played at the wedding of Jimmy Vaughan. This 73 year old just hopped on an airplane and flew to Denver, where he did this gig as if it's something he does every weekend. He didn't miss a beat.

Saturday and Sunday were Seminar days and these took place from 9:30AM until 6PM on Saturday and 10AM until 3:30PM on Sunday. Wally Malewicz of Wally Tools fame played to packed audiences on both days with his Science and Art of Cartridges, Tonearm and Turntable Set-up sessions. Richard

Rives of Rives Audio offered different Ideal Room Acoustic sessions for each day. I was involved with Saturday and Sunday panel discussions on The Strength of the Vinyl Format, Now and in the Future. Robert Harley, Editor of The Absolute Sound discussed The Future of High Resolution Digital Formats on Saturday only and RG offered an insight into



► The Equipment Review Process for both days. In addition to these seminars, Mike Pappas of KUVO (a Denver Jazz Radio Station) offered Live Multi-Channel DSD Recordings. All of this plus approximately 180 exhibitors encompassing more than eight floors of quality rooms meant you really had to plan your day!

When I attend shows, I initially pass rooms offering equipment I've seen or heard before. If there is nothing new in the room, I'll make note of this and return as I wrap up my visits just to double check I've not overlooked anything. After all, time is limited and I don't have the luxury of repetition especially as there were a variety of products I hadn't seen or heard before, and this always makes things very interesting.

The one product that really stood out for me was the Eminent Technology TRW 17 Infrasonic Woofer. This is new loudspeaker technology and a fascinating demonstration was offered by Bruce Thigpen, ET's President. First, let me give you some insight into this and the best way would be to partially quote the man himself:

"A new woofer technology unlike any other and a new product category for home audio. This is the first home audio woofer delivering true response to DC. The Thigpen rotary woofer (built around a fan) is the world's first true infrasonic home audio or home theater woofer. Conventional sub-woofers roll off rapidly below 20Hz. With no cone the rotary woofer achieves high efficiency at very low frequencies.

Most sub-woofers have a difficult time producing acoustic output below 20Hz at audible levels. They generally require large amounts of equalization, distortion rises rapidly, and even the most expensive available cannot produce significant output below 10Hz. Sub-woofer electronics usually contain a cut-off filter which sharply rolls off speaker content to the sub-woofer below 20Hz to protect the speaker.

On the other hand, the rotary woofer has enough acoustic output to move an opened door back and forth by half an inch at between 1 and 5Hz! It has enough output to find the resonance frequencies of walls and ceilings in a room. It requires no equalization to achieve a flat response to below 1Hz...."

Some of the specifications include:

- Amplifier Requirement
200 watts @ 8 ohms
- Impedance 8 ohms 0 - 40i z
- Frequency response 1Hz - 30Hz +/- 4dB
- Suggested crossover 30Hz @ 18dB/octave
- Sensitivity 90dB 1 watt 1 meter @10Hz
- Maximum acoustic output >110dB between 1 and 30Hz.
- Distortion typically 3% or less between 1 and 30Hz @90dB

The price is approximately \$12,900USD. Thigpen's demonstration of this 'rotary woofer' used two adjacent rooms, joined by a shared door. One room contained a large baffle terminating in and sealing the shared doorway in which the rotary woofer was installed. The other contained a computer with a signal generating programme. The 'blades' of the fan, paddles if you will, can fold inward and outward. This is one of the secrets of the unit. Picture a fan 'blowing' into a large baffle. You could install this in your basement or in your attic... possibly in a spare room if you had one. But be warned, we actually heard 4Hz sound that was literally shaking the walls in the hotel. This must be the ultimate sub-woofer and it was really an ear opening experience unlike

anything I've ever heard reproduced before and something I think you will hear more about in the future. Go to the Eminent Technology website to learn how this new type of loudspeaker works: <http://www.eminenttech.com/main.html>

Other outstanding rooms included the following setups:

The Stillpoints Room which displayed a complete line of Stillpoints component stands, ESS equipment racks, and Stillpoints, supporting an Audio Aero Capitale CD player with a David Berning Micro Soto pre-amp and Berning Ziegfried LTL single-ended Class A amp. Analysis plus cables connected all the components through Ambience Reference 1600 Loudspeakers. The sound was dramatic, open, airy and extremely natural. I



would have loved to have heard this system in a larger room, however, even in a standard bedroom the sound was really outstanding. (www.stillpoints.us)

The Galibier Design Room included the Gavia Turntable with Stelvio platter and Schroeder Reference Arm (with Ebony wand) carrying



▶ a ZYX Alay-3 cartridge. An Artemis Labs PH-1 phono-stage with external Audio Note transformer was playing through an Exception Line-Stage/Exultation 300B mono-bloc amplifiers and Exemplar Horn Speakers and sub-woofers... a really nice sounding system. The music was very involving and I was in analogue heaven in this room. There was great detail, speed and wonderful harmonics to back-up the involvement factor. I was listening to the system as a whole and not to individual components which is always a good sign and this was a room I could very easily live with (if I had a larger living space). (www.galibierdesign.com)

The Herron Audio/Balanced Power Technologies Room consisted of Herron's VTSP-2 Vacuum Tube Stereo Pre-amplifier, the HL-1/PH-1 Solid State Stereo Pre-amplifier with optional internal phono-stage, several M1 Solid

State Monaural Power Amplifiers all connected with Heron interconnects as well as prototypes of the VTPH-2 Vacuum Tube phono-stage, ESP1 speaker system and S118 Sub-woofers! Power cords were by Balanced Power Technology as well as their Iso-Base (isolation bases) with Clean Power Center AC line filters and Iso-Cones (stainless steel isolation cones). Sources were a modified Philips CD/SACD player and the VPI HR-X turntable. I'm partial to the Herron front-end as I own the VTSP-2 and the VTPH-1. I think Keith's speakers and sub-woofers helped create a very engaging, natural sound. This was another room where you found yourself listening to the music and not any one component, and as you know, I like that. (www.herronaudio.com)

ModWright's equipment setup consisted of the ModWright Denon 3910 with Universal Truth mods. Sony 999ES with Platinum Signature Truth mods with a ModWright Instruments SWL 9.0SE pre-amp and Channel Islands Audio D-200 mono-bloc amplifiers. Speakers were Penaudio Serenades with cabling by Jorma Design. AC power conditioning was courtesy of the World Power Power Wing with vibration isolation provided by Symposium Ultra platforms with Stillpoints component stands. This was one excellent sounding digital room. The Penaudio speakers sounded outrageously good and while there may

have been competition from some of the 'bigger rigs' on display, I felt, as did others, that this room offered extremely natural digital playback from realistically priced components. The sound was very clean, open with a great sense of rhythm and musicality; the ModWright line-stage looking to be a particular bargain that I know took RG's fancy. (www.modwright.com)

Axiss-Distribution was offering great sound with a pair of Tannoy Yorkminster Loudspeakers, driven by AirTight ATM-211 amplifiers, Airtight's ATC-2 Pre-amp an Accuphase DP 57 CD Player, a Transrotor Phono Pre-amp with a Transrotor Atlantis 'table and arm fitted with a \$20,000 Koetsu Blue Lace Platinum cartridge. Running Springs Duke and Jacko Conditioners and Tara ISM series cabling completed the set up. The room sounded very yummy and I spent some quality listening time with Robert Harley of TAS playing some very special vinyl (to whet your appetite: from Speakers Corner, the Mercury test pressing of *Ancient Airs and Dances*; Pure Pleasure's *Going Back to Acoustic* with Buddy Guy and Junior Wells as well as an offering from Glenn Armstrong's *L'Archet d'Or* which consisted of a special 45RPM of Maurice Marechal playing Fauré's *Élegie*!) Arturo Manzano of Axiss asked if he could borrow the Marechal recording for the rest of the show. I told him to get in touch with Armstrong and if he subscribed, he might have a copy for CES 2005. As you can imagine, this was a great sounding room delivering 100% musical satisfaction with any material I heard here. This room encapsulated my thoughts about what a well thought out set up should sound like. You wind up being drawn into the music and the system becomes invisible. (www.axiss-usa.com)

Both Acoustic Sounds rooms sounded fabulous. One consisted of the VPI Super Scoutmaster





Steve Leung of Vas Industries, US distributor for Cayin electronics was on hand and there were a variety of interesting and good sounding Cayin products in the room including the A-88T Integrated amplifier,

▶ Signature with JMW9 wired with Nordost (and as you may not know, the Signature series allows for Anti-Skate control)! The JMW was fitted with a Lyra Titan playing through a Sutherland PHD phono section and Sutherland Director Line Stage which fed Cayin 860 mono amps (70 watt ultra linear/ 35 watt triode) with Harbeth

the 265A 40 Watt Class A integrated, the SC 10 Super pre-amp and VAS Citation 2 mono-bloc amplifiers. These products



offer great sound at unbelievably affordable prices, while the Citation 2 monos take retro-cred to new levels of audiophile drool-worthiness. They looked great – they sounded even better. Meanwhile, an after-hours outing with the A-88T integrated, teamed with an Electrocompaniet CD

Monitor 30 loudspeakers. The Harbeth's were sitting on Sound 4 stands. Cabling was Audioquest Cheetah's and power conditioning was by Richard Gray.

Their second room consisted of Harbeth HL-Compact 7ES speakers with Sound Anchor stands. Playback was from a VPI Scout/JMW9 with SDS and a Shelter 501 cartridge. Cayin provided CD/SACD playback with their SCD-50T 2 channel player. Noblesse Furniture Design Stands and Racks with AcousTech PH-1P Phono Pre-amplifier and Richard Gray's RGPC 600C power conditioner with Audioquest cabling.

player driving the Eben-X3s in the Nordost room reduced the assembled group of vinyl die-hards to stunned



silence – and in some cases, tears. Look for some really exciting products from Cayin and VAS, representing stunning value for the audiophile. The best of vintage sound combined with modern construction and componentry and just enough schutzpa to keep things interesting: a three-channel Citation 1 pre-amp anybody? You heard it here first! (www.acousticsounds.com)

The High Water Sound room was offering the Horning Hybrid Pericles Loudspeakers with the Tron-Electric Super pre-amp (with phono section) and Tron-Electric 300B SE mono amps. The TW/Acoustic Raven AC turntable was spectacular with Da Vinci Audio Labs 12" tonearms. Cabling was by Da Vinci and Harmonix. The cartridge used was the Dynavector XV-1-S with the P75 Phono section and the Reimyo CD777 CD player. Here was another room where I got lost in the music. Now all I needed was a couple of very strong fellows, a van and about 30 minutes with no one looking in my direction. (www.highwatersound.com)

Excellent sound was offered by the delavilland/PranaWire/Nola room. This set-up consisted of the Metronome Transport and DAC with deHavilland Mercury 2 pre-amplifier and delavilland 845G Mono Blocks. The loudspeakers were the Nola Viper Reference. PranaWire provided Cosmos interconnects, digital and speaker cables, bi-wired of course. Power cables were PranaWire's Samadhi and Maha Samadhi's. Acrolink's 6N-P1030PC Power Cords and Acrolink's 7N-DA6100 digital cable were used. Sound Mechanics MC88 isolation cones, C100 isolation cones and C101 bases with their C1 Titanium and C1 Gold Vibration Transceivers were also in use. I know I've said it before, but when I stop in a ▶



on the first day of the show and didn't return, you missed the magic. The setup consisted of: Von Schweikert VR-9SE Reference Loudspeakers, darTZeel NHB Model One amplifiers (vertically bi-amped), the

darTZeel NHB 18NS Reference line/phono stage, EMM Labs CDSD Transport and DAC, Jena Labs Dream Dancer interconnects and speaker cables with their Fundamental Power One power cords and, finally, Grand Prix Audio Isolation Systems. Every aspect, each individual character of the music and recording was reproduced with this equipment. The orchestral sound we heard from a copy of the Mercury *Firebird* I recorded to CD-R was just breathtaking. The imaging, the speed of



▶ room and want to stay, it means there is a lot of good, natural sound. You forget about whether you're listening to analogue or digital... you just seem to know that the equipment is a delivery system for the music. Results like these take real attention to detail – hence the exhaustive list of accessories!

The systems listed above really stood out from a field of quite excellent sounding rooms. The show offered a wealth of set-ups that had very decent sound. All in all, I was really impressed with the sonic quality at the RMAF, testament to both the exhibitors and the choice of venue.

Sometimes we save the best for last. There were two rooms that shared my vote for the best sound at the show. The first was setup by Jonathan Tinn, President of Blue Light Audio of Portland, Oregon. The room was scary it sounded so good. This was one of those rooms that if you only went in




the orchestra, the ambience of the recorded venue, anything your heart desired, was recreated here. Now all I need is a rather large raise and a new listening area and I'd be in heaven. The room was a treat and I want to thank Jonathan for his hospitality. (www.bluelightaudio.com)

Meanwhile, occupying an equally big room, Lucien Pichette of Avalon

was debuting the company's new Isis flagship. Driven by a full set of Boulder amplification, including DAC and phono-stage, source for my listening was the latest version of the Clearaudio Master Reference. Natural? This system made my records live and breathe. Not only did the speakers flat out disappear, but the awesome headroom available from the monster Boulder amps banished strain (and restraint). The huge soundstage and dynamic range to match brought new tricks to the Avalon game of extreme detail and neutrality. Bigger than the Eidolon the Isis looks set to take on the new Wilsons on their own ground, with scale and impact I've not heard before from their pretty but modestly sized cabinets. Combine that with their tremendous subtlety and tonal finesse and you've got a sound to dive right into. Better increase the size of that raise (substantially) and add another room! The sound was undoubtedly helped by the massive amount of DAD room treatment deployed and once

again, you needed to hear it on the Sunday, but this was genuine high-end performance that defied the limitations of a show setting. (For those whose pockets won't stretch to Boulder and the Isis, the "budget" Avalon NP speakers were

simply stunning in the room next door.) (www.avalonacoustics.com)

I had a great time at Denver and certainly hope to return in 2006. I would suggest to any audio enthusiast to mark their calendars for next fall and find out when the next event will unfold. I'll be there and hope to see you as well. Check the Rocky Mountain website at: <http://www.audiofest.net>. 

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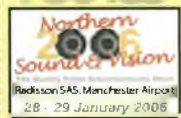
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If you want the best cables in the world there really is only one choice – the Valhalla Range of cables from Nordost.

With the unique Shadow Audio 30-day money back guarantee*, experience how the Ultimate Cable can improve your system beyond belief today!

VALHALLA interconnect cable

from Nordost makes the most neutral cable connection ever developed. If you want to hear transparency and musical detail with the most extreme accuracy that your system is capable of producing, Valhalla is the only choice. Valhalla has raised the standard of interconnect design to new heights. This is truly the extreme reference cable.

VALHALLA digital interconnect

represents another advance by Nordost in producing a reference digital cable of stunning performance and astonishing detail. This new cable utilizes a more advanced 'Dual Micro Mono-Filament technology' which improves upon the Mono-Filament technology Nordost have already developed.

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Speed, Detail, and an incredibly realistic presentation of the musical event are the qualities that set Valhalla speaker cable apart. This cable is the most neutral loudspeaker cable every developed. If you want to hear every nuance and musical detail with the most extreme accuracy that your system is capable of, Valhalla is the only choice.

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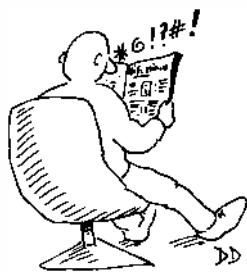
VALHALLA Reference Power Cord

from Nordost redefines the standards of performance in this category. The Valhalla offers a dramatic sound stage, tremendous dynamic range and superb articulation of the musical event. When used with video components; clarity, detail, and the natural depth of colours are revealed. Valhalla Power Cord uses our new proprietary 'Dual Micro Mono-filament' technology to enhance audio and video performance.

THOR Reference AC Mains Power Distribution

The Thor project has been a joint collaboration between Nordost and IsoTek. Thor is an elegant, full rack width, 6-way AC mains power distribution unit featuring sophisticated circuitry for dealing with mains noise and voltage spikes without limiting dynamic headroom. Thor is wired throughout with award winning Nordost Valhalla power cable to achieve optimum signal transfer and performance. Thor also features IsoTek's Polaris-X circuit technology which eliminates product cross contamination, effectively offering any hardware plugged into the unit a clean power supply.

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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

Dear Sir,

I have read your comments regarding VTA for some time now and whilst taking Notice have not been convinced – until now that is !!

One favourite Dylan LP of mine is *Oh Mercy*, however I have never been able to really enjoy it due too the amount of sibilance. Well that changed with the arrival of the Super Scoutmaster. Due to the easy adjustment of the JMW arm I am now able to at last enjoy this album. Why don't all manufactures include this simple, but so effective facility. You are also correct in that once you have heard the difference, like myself you will be making adjustments to counter different record thicknesses. It only takes a minute, but is well worth the effort. I have marked the collar with a pen to make this easier and more repeatable.

Is there any chance you might review the many different grades and types of pre-amp tubes. I currently use a PH5 and Pathos Logos and these use stock Sovtecs, six in total, as do most 6992 users. There are now so many tubes to choose from (Cryogenic Phillips, NOS etc) that I have no idea what's best and all of the dealers say something different. I guess because they want a sale.

Regards,

G Oakley

Via e-mail

We're working our way through various tubes, starting with output types. We will get to 9-pin valves in due course, but in the meantime don't be too disgruntled with the Sovtecs you have. Their original 6922 was a really solid performer which is one reason why it crops up in so many new pre-amps. Ed.

Dear Sir,

Will you be reviewing the Nordost Valhalla analogue interconnects with the WBT NextGen connectors and comparing them to the Valhalla with regular Neutrik connectors? I see there is a new interconnect in the Reference Series, the Tyr with dual mono-filament design, have you had a chance to audition it yet?

On the Nordost.com website the Tyr lies between the SPM and the Quattro Fil which precedes the Valhalla. You rarely see reviews of the Quattro Fil which from the site appears to be

second only to the Valhalla. I wonder how long it will be before the dual mono-filament design is introduced into the Valhalla analogue interconnect, it is already used in the Valhalla power chord.

Just speculating as I have enjoyed my Valhalla interconnect very much.

Thank-you for the fine work you do with HiFi+.

Cheers,

Kenn Tews

Brisbane, Australia

Via e-mail

You'll see the new Frey cables reviewed in this issue. Read the review and you'll see that the question of the old Valhalla versus the Tyr and the Valhalla terminated with the NextGen connectors is top of the agenda. You'll also note that there's an upgrade option for older Valhalla leads, replacing their Neutriks with the new WBT plugs. I think you can be confident of a considerable improvement in performance. However, there are two things to note. The Valhalla uses the silver (or Ag) version of the NextGen plug whereas everything up to and including the Tyr uses the standard copper (Cu) version. Secondly, don't be tempted to try re-termination yourself; the precise technique, materials and quality of the soldering all affect sonic performance to a quite remarkable degree. The few dollars you'll save won't compensate for the sonic damage you risk. Play it safe and get the job done properly by the manufacturer. Finally, I think you'll see Quattro-Fil, Red Dawn, SPM and the various other leads removed from the range: Heimdahl outperforms them all! Ed.

Dear Sir,

I really enjoy reading your magazine. The news and reviews explore equipment and technologies that are interesting to the Hi-Fi buff, and not just those that are being pushed by larger companies.

I particularly enjoyed the article on pistonic drivers (Issue 40). I feel that it would be good to balance this with a similar piece on single driver units, especially when high-efficiency drivers are coupled with lower power and simple amps, both valve and solid-state. This ethos seems the antithesis of the pistonic driver approach, and it would be interesting to present both perspectives. The conflict between simple signal path ►

▶ with single driver versus complex signal path with many drivers is a paradox that I am battling with at the moment.

I hope this suggestion takes root. I feel that it would be a discussion that would benefit both the magazine and its readership.

Yours,

Dos Stephens

Via e-mail

I'm glad you enjoyed the piece on the theory and practice of piston driver design as it is the first in a series of such articles. In Issue 44, MC will be looking at the issues surrounding the advent of diamond tweeters and their incorporation into existing designs. Next up, you guessed it, single-driver designs (both high-efficiency types and the less common moderate-efficiency kind as exemplified by the Eclipse "eggs"): Thereafter, the whole question of high-efficiency/low-power beckons. Ed.

Dear Sir,

Since reading your review of the EAT valves in Issue 34 (pages 104-107), I had resolved to buy a set for my Quad 240 mono-blocs. I have now done so. The - fairly sparse - guidance given for "burn-in" in the documentation enclosed with the valves suggests that this should be done cautiously; using e.g. CD or pink noise over an extended period starting at low volume and increasing to maximum (I assume the latter means increasing the gain to normal listening levels). This seems at odds with the procedure adopted for your review test in which the valves were put into service without burn-in. I quote: "Substituting the EAT KT 88s was something of a revelation: even without the luxury of warming up...". I would be grateful for your comments. Burning in valves seems to be a grey area. Quad recommend between 4 and 12 hours for valves from new, merely switching on and leaving for at least the minimum period. I have summarised the EAT procedure above. But you pressed the EAT valves into service without delay and suggest that warming up is a luxury! Incidentally, the price for the two matched pairs was roughly twice the implied cost given at the end of your report! That is not meant to be a criticism of what I thought was a very informative report - my question apart.

Yours sincerely,

John Harris

Via e-mail

Sorry, clearly some confusion between "burn-in" and "warm-up". When we use the terms, burn-in denotes the breaking-in of a brand new component, whereas warm-up refers to the time taken for a component to reach optimum working temperature. Therefore, you burn a valve in from new but warm it up each time you switch the amp on. The EAT KT88s were indeed burnt-in prior to the listening test, but making swift exchanges precludes the several hours necessary to get

a tube thoroughly warmed-up.

The cost difference you noted is the result of a change in distribution from a single supplier selling direct (as with most tubes) to a conventional distributor. Absolute Sounds. Whilst this undoubtedly affects the value for money factor of the EAT tubes, it should also allow listeners to hear them demonstrated rather than having to buy blind - swings and roundabouts I guess.

You don't actually mention whether or not you enjoyed the results of the EATs. I certainly hope so. Ed.

Dear Sir,

I used to, for about three years, read hi-fi plus on a regular basis but not any longer. The reason is rather simple. Recently I bought a pair of Eclipse TD 508 as monitors for my computer. They sounded so amazing that I bought a pair of dedicated Eclipse stands and they have now become my main loudspeakers. I remembered that you had reviewed the Eclipse TD 512 and dug through my pile of old magazines and re-read the review (may/june 2002) carefully.

If there was ever a biased review this is it. First Phil Ward does a hatchet job on supposed theoretical grounds and mentions some measurements off-hand, claims them to be poor (no graphs, no data) then you move in for the kill. I am all for doing measurements but you do not usually talk about measured performance at all in your reviews. Then I remembered that Phil Ward was involved in the Canon omni directional speaker - that was a bit of a flop. Sour grapes perhaps? Certainly not an unbiased party! I think you are trying to perpetuate the myth that the Japanese cannot design good loudspeakers. Well I don't quite subscribe to that view and you are not doing your readership any good either as some excellent equipment will get overlooked.

Regards

Dr. K. Fonseka

PS. I know 508 is not the 512 but 508 is much cheaper so I can only assume 512 can at least match the 508.

Phil Ward's prior experience was precisely the reason for having him assess the Eclipse; that and his role as a reviewer of professional monitoring equipment, into which category the Eclipse falls. Incidentally, loudspeaker reviews are the one area in which we consistently refer to measured performance. As to our bias against Japanese loudspeakers, I would point out our championing of both the Yamaha NS1000 (in Issue 40) and the TAD (Model 1) and FAL speakers, which were highly praised in our CES reports. Unfortunately, your objections seem to be based on the assumption that the TD512 must sound at least as good as the TD508 simply because it costs more. Perhaps you ought to check that out, as well as reading the upcoming reviews of the current (heavily revised) Eclipse design. Ed.



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The Nola Pegasus Loudspeaker System

by Roy Gregory

Some things are just plain simple and others are unavoidably complicated. But there's also another, more intriguing category of things that are simultaneously simple (normally in theory) and complex (in execution). The Nola Pegasus takes this duality to a whole new level. There's barely a single aspect of its history, construction or performance that could be described as straightforward. Whatever you say about it seems to require some form of qualification, a situation which presents the reviewer with an interesting duality of his own – there's plenty to say (which makes writing easy) but arriving at a concise distillation of the product's essence? That's far more difficult. But it's also necessary, because the Nola Pegasus does some things – important things – more convincingly than any other speaker system I've used. It's the how and the why that I'm having trouble with – partly because the speaker itself is only part of the equation.

The name Nola might not be familiar, but the brand's heritage lies with Alon, a company with a long history that includes both the compact, relatively affordable and really rather English (in sound as well as style) Lotus Elite models reviewed back in Issues 25 and 29, and the unmistakably American Nola Grand Reference, a massive, four-tower system that currently resides on the end of Harry Pearson's legendary reference system at Sea Cliff. I mention those products because the Pegasus exists in part at least, as an attempt to bridge the

yawning chasm that separates them: On the one hand, the compact, eight-inch three-way Lotus, on the other, the four, eight-foot towers, dozen or so bass drivers and six-figure price-tag of the NGR. Clearly, not everybody has the space or financial wherewithal to accommodate the latter, but there's also a substantial customer base who'd like a slice of its performance – demanding more than the Lotus can deliver. What's more, as different as those speaker systems appear to be, they do share certain fundamental design features that constitute a common approach, a design path that leads inevitably to the form of the Pegasus.

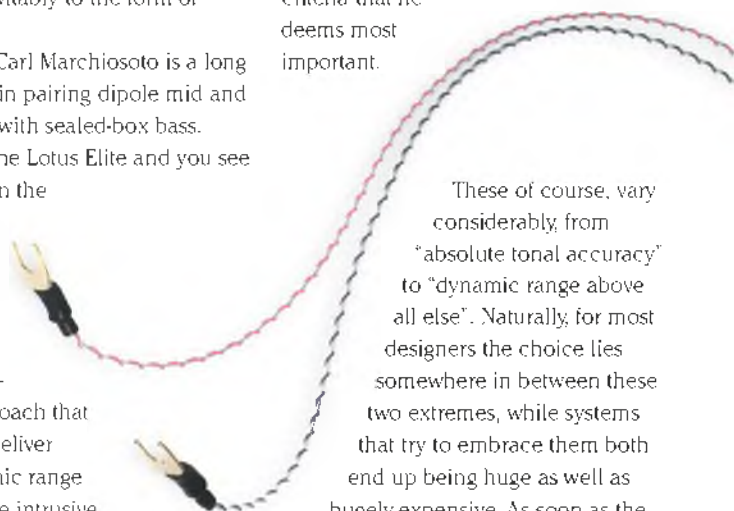
Designer Carl Marchiosoto is a long time believer in pairing dipole mid and treble output with sealed-box bass. You see it in the Lotus Elite and you see it, writ large, in the NGR. He also likes sharing the load between multiple drive-units, an approach that he feels can deliver greater dynamic range with less of the intrusive strain that makes systems seem loud when in reality they're just struggling. He also likes to get his cross-overs outside of the speaker cabinets, away from the destructive effects of vibration. These are all themes that appear in the Pegasus, but before we look at that speaker in

detail, let's just take a moment to understand the thinking behind them. After all, most of them fly firmly in the face of the smaller, simpler, neater dictates of current high-end fashion.

Whilst it should be a truism that high-fidelity loudspeaker systems are primarily concerned with accuracy, the reality is that most designs deviate so far from that ultimate goal that the question actually becomes accurate to what? To a large extent, it's the performance goals CHOSEN by the designer that inform his subsequent choices. In other words, the musical (and in many cases marketing) criteria that he deems most important.

These of course, vary considerably, from "absolute tonal accuracy" to "dynamic range above all else". Naturally, for most designers the choice lies somewhere in between these two extremes, while systems that try to embrace them both end up being huge as well as hugely expensive. As soon as the issue of actually trying to sell the product imposes a few practical and dimensional challenges, reality recedes a long way beyond the design horizon.

What Carl Marchiosoto wants from a speaker system is the sense of a live performance, a quality that dictates that instruments and voices be



► recognisable not just tonally but in scale and presence too. It means understanding both the message in the performance and the occasion itself, which means a convincing spatial portrayal combined with a musical performance that breathes. Hard to achieve from a speaker the size of a Lotus Elite, but stunningly realised in the NGR. To that end he seeks to keep all his designs as linear as possible and as even in energy propagation. Hence the smooth roll-off and wider bandwidth of the sealed-box bottom-end, the space and scale created by the dipole mid and treble, the lack of dominant colouration as a result of structural vibration (due to the separate crossover and elimination of the midrange box) and the dynamic ease occasioned by multiple drivers sharing the same bandwidth. Freed from practical considerations, the NGR can take the recipe to its logical extreme. Trying to render that mix more manageable as well as more affordable has resulted in the Pegasus, as fascinatingly revealed by the physical form of that product. It's also reflected in the attempt to simplify the concept and material content – and the complexity that's resulted.

The Pegasus is a large – no, let's make that huge, at least by UK standards – floor-standing dynamic loudspeaker system, each 170cm tall tower containing no fewer than 11 separate drivers. Then there's the 64cm depth of each cabinet, exacerbated by the need to accommodate the separate crossover box that must be placed directly behind each speaker. The final footprint is around 120cm deep, once the speaker is actually installed. Yes, it's big – but it's tiny in comparison to the NGR, mainly because the four-box format has been condensed through

the simple expedient of standing the main cabinet on top of what was the bass tower. Voila, two structures where there were four. If only it was that simple...

The base box (or should that be "bass box"?) stands 46cm high, extends the full depth of the main cabinet and contains four 200mm drivers, placed back to back in pairs across the cabinet.

Internally, each pair occupies its own sealed sub-enclosure, the smaller volume and cross-coupled drivers allowing greater control of low frequencies.



This cabinet's output covers the range from below 20 up to 40Hz. This cabinet in turn supports the upper one that handles the rest of the range. But remember the Nola stricture regarding colouration from unwanted mechanical energy? Those four drivers and their associated motors (eight if

you consider both channels) will deliver genuine low-frequency acoustic energy into the listening room. But that prodigious capability is reflected by an equal amount of energy driven back into the bass cabinet structures. The opposed drivers will result in some cancellation, but there will still be plenty of excess to go round and the last thing you want that spurious mechanical energy doing is modulating and smearing the higher frequencies, especially the absolutely critical mid-bass, handled by the drivers directly above.

The answer is to isolate the cabinets from each other and to this end Marchisoto has developed a ball-bearing isolation system similar to the Symposium Roller Blocks reviewed in Issue 41. Only here, there is no dip in which the balls sit. Instead they are supported between flat steel plates recessed into the cabinets, in each case, the front corner one being retained by gate bars to prevent the whole top box simply rolling off of the bottom one.

The end result is that the upper cabinet can actually move disconcertingly freely relative to its supporting base, at least in the horizontal plane, an arrangement that requires perfect levelling of the speaker if all the cabinet edges are going to line up – pretty much a visual necessity with cabinets this size, as well as a mechanical one if the isolation system is going to work properly. Fortunately, adjustable spikes under the bass cabinet make this surprisingly easy to accomplish – at least until you get involved with the cross-over, but I'll come back to that.

The top cabinet extends the full depth of the base box and is

▶ fronted by another pair of the 200mm drivers, arranged one above another and this time firing forward. These cover the range from 40 to 500Hz, although once again, the arrangement is far more complex than it first appears. The enclosed volume is not as deep as you initially assume, the rear baffle falling some 250mm short of the cabinet rear. What's more, a horizontal divider inside the cabinet creates two separate, non-symmetrical sealed volumes of differential dimensions (an approach carried over from the twin bass drivers in the Lotus Elite). The lower driver only runs up as far as 200Hz, the upper one covering the full range, an arrangement that further spreads the resonant signature of the system. But the really clever (or weird) part is in the back. Here, the open box left by the recessed rear panel is occupied by a horizontal baffle positioned at half height, carrying another 200mm driver, this time operating in free space.

Its output is limited to rear radiation and it operates across an incredibly narrow 80 to 120Hz range. Why is it there? In truth, I'm not sure even Carl Marchiosoto can give you a definitive answer to that. Ask and he'll talk about the dipole output from the driver giving a little air and texture to the mid-bass, a range he (rightly) considers especially critical to convincing musical reproduction, but the bottom line is far simpler than that: it just sounds better that way. Given that the driver runs off its own cross-over leg it's a proposition you can easily test for yourself. The effect is, I can assure you, far from subtle. Which only leaves the question, how on earth did he discover it?

From here on in things get a little simpler. The 40mm thick front face of the upper cabinet extends to create a flying baffle that carries a pair of 100mm plastic/pulp laminated midrange drivers and a pair of 25mm

System and set up...

The Pegasus is a physically large and visually imposing speaker system, although less so than the dimensions might suggest. The pale wood veneer of the review pair undoubtedly helped, as did the fact that they stand straight in the room, without any toe-in. I ended up with the baffles around 140cm from the rear wall, although such is the low-frequency power available from the speakers that this needs to be carefully adjusted to accommodate the specific bass character of partnering equipment. Although a full set of grilles is provided they should be discarded for listening; anybody making this kind of spatial and

magnesium alloy dome tweeters, all of which are arranged or vented to allow dipolar dispersion. The top edge of the baffle is sculpted to minimise diffraction effects and to relieve the otherwise block-like appearance of the speaker, again an echo of the Lotus Elite.



Less obvious parallels also exist, like the use of AlNiCo magnets throughout the system's drivers and the separate cross-over cabinet, although here again, the Pegasus takes things to new levels. Both the capacitors and the air-cored inductors employed in the five-and-a-half-way cross-over (count 'em) are proprietary designs developed for the NGR. In the case of the bass leg, that means a hand-wound, air-cored coil seven-and-a-half inches in diameter and weighing 17lbs; just anchoring it into the cabinet is a significant

financial commitment would be mad to compromise the sonic results – which is exactly what the grilles do.

The efficiency of the Pegasus is lower than the number of drivers might suggest, underlining the considerable bandwidth of the system. However, moderate impedance means that as long as sufficient power is available, most amplifiers will be surprisingly comfortable. I achieved excellent results from bi-amping with the KR Antares (4x 20Watts) and a single pair of Linear Bs (2x 55Watts). The Hovland RADIA, VTL 5400 and Moon W-8 power amps were capable of deliver

problem. And with so much bass energy generated by the system, simply removing the majority of the cross-over from the cabinet was deemed insufficient to protect it from structure borne interference, so the separate enclosure was provided with its own isolation system identical to the one that separates the base and top cabinets of the main system.

Obsessive I know, but I doubt that you've even considered the following: you are now faced with a speaker and cross-over that both float independent of each other, and which must both be levelled and have their interconnecting cables dressed in such a way as to

prevent interference with their isolation system. Oh, and did I mention that the whole thing needs to be tri-wired? Fortunately I'd arranged to have a set of Valhalla hook-up wires made with spades at each end, a perfect interface with the excellent copper binding posts on the Nola speaker components. Careful dressing of these stiff, individual conductors allowed them to provide a little stability in the lateral plane, which was a useful thing, but now you can appreciate why the cross-over has to be placed ▶

▶ behind and perfectly in line with the main cabinet.

Which just about covers the physical details...

But before moving on lets quickly recap from a conceptual rather than material perspective. The Pegasus is a textbook example of form following function. The designer believes that several factors are key to the convincing reproduction of musical events and these are carefully dovetailed together in this design. He stipulates wide bandwidth and coherent spatial presentation, goals achieved through the use of a substantial driven area,



but one disposed in such a way as to still provide a minimal frontal area (the Pegasus is only 260mm wide) and carefully configured dipolar dispersion. Good power handling and dynamic capabilities are achieved through sharing the signal between 22 different drivers, yet all use the same (unusual, expensive and bulky) magnetic material and despite the sheer number of drivers employed there are only actually three different types!

Considerable effort has gone into the control of mechanical energy within the system's structure in order to prevent intermodulation distortion and colouration undermining the natural tonality of those AlNiCo motor units. And whilst the assembly of so many physical elements is necessarily complex, the dictum that in hi-fi, simplicity rules is reflected in the fact that despite the five-and-a-half way cross-over, the slopes are actually 6dB quasi-first-order, offering astonishing phase coherence from such a wide bandwidth transducer. Which I guess is where we started out, with convincing scale and coherent spatial presentation.

Like I said – conceptually simple but the execution is intricate in the extreme.

The personal, hands-on nature of the design is also unusual, given the material complexities involved. It's visible in those bespoke, solid-copper terminals, apparent in the proprietary cross-over components and underlined by the insistence that the rear-firing bass driver receive its own run of speaker cable. As extraordinary as that sounds, again, the benefits are clearly audible, whilst trying to replace the simple spikes provided with something more exotic also proved destructive to the system's integration. Astonishing though it might seem, literally ever aspect of this mammoth project has been carefully weighed and considered by the designer in an exercise that borders on obsession. Just take a look at the height of the tweeters – that can't possibly work,

can it? And two of them, so close together? Well, it does work, spectacularly well. How and why I can't begin to say (and nor, it seems, can Mr Marchiosoto). But what I can do is recount the effect, the sheer musical impact of this speaker system.

If the designer's intent was to bring the musical performance to life then he's succeeded – dramatically. There's a natural, utterly convincing sense to the music delivered by the Nola Pegasus. Time and again, incidental noises or little synth motifs will have you looking around for the person behind you or running for the phone. The individual sounds and instruments seem to escape the confines of the speaker and the recording, taking on a real, solid presence of their own. It's a hard effect to describe but an easy one to illustrate; just turn out the lights...

Time and again I've astonished visitors (the non-hi-fi variety compelled by the sheer size of the Pegasus, the aficionados driven by the same



logic but for different reasons) by playing them the Nolas under black-out conditions: the speakers simply disappear! As large and visually imposing as they are, remove the visual cues and those two imposing towers are replaced ▶

► by a single, coherent soundstage, peopled with discrete, real, breathing musicians. Play the right recording on the right source and the effect is spookily realistic. The favourite party piece has become the DCC re-issue of *Ray Charles and Betty Carter* (LPZ-2005) which, played on the Kuzma Stabi XL/Airline/Lyra Titan record player brings the performers right into the room. And it's a particularly interesting example because it gives some insight into just why these speakers pull you into the performance the way that they do.

First thing to note is that this is not a stellar recording in the stereo sense. It's too hard left and right for that. Ray and Betty are well to the fore the backing band well back (we wouldn't want to upset the status quo here!) so there's no, single, coherent acoustic on the recording, but that doesn't seem to matter to the Nolas. They present a coherent space, but more important is the nature of the images with which they people it. Betty stands to the right of the stage, a solid presence which captures both her power and her range of expression (just listen to her doing 'coy' on 'Baby It's Cold Outside'). You can tell she's standing from the way her voice is reflected from the booth boundaries and more importantly the floor, but also because you hear way down past her mouth and throat, past her chest, all the way to her diaphragm and a singer can't project power like that if they're sitting down. So it's partly a spatial thing but more to do with the tonality and nature of the voice – and it's the latter that the Pegasus captures so precisely.

Ray is seated stage left. Again, we know he's seated because he's Ray and he's playing the piano, but we actually don't need to compute that additional information – the cues are all there in the recording. Once again, the placement and acoustic environment

of the voice tell us everything we need to know, we can hear that he's seated and we can hear the reflections off the hard surfaces of the piano in front of him affecting the spectral balance of his voice. The speakers also centre it in terms of height and the way in which the energy expands, with a sharp cut-off in front of him. But most telling of all is the relationship between his vocal and piano lines, so tight, so intimate that there's no question that they were taped as one. The timing and humour



in 'Baby It's Cold...' survives because that relationship is preserved, and the Pegasus preserve it better than any other speaker I've heard this record on.

The brass tuttis that open the track are massively solid and present, but so too are the muted phrases that back it throughout. The cymbal work is subtle, but again it's stable and utterly solid in space. Betty is placed slightly outside the right-hand speaker, while Ray is well to the left of his. Everything is in proportion and the scale of the event is utterly convincing.

The spatial placement and environmental details are all things I've heard before, but what the Nolas do is both render them more explicit and make them make more sense. Combine it with the astonishing presence and solidity they bring to images and the results can be breathtakingly real.

Of course, the final effect depends on the music performed and the nature and quality of the recording. Ray and Betty are acoustic, they're on vinyl and they're of a scale that a system like this can match convincingly. The recording is one of those that sounds impressive on pretty much anything – although nothing has yet sounded as impressive as the Pegasus. A large-scale orchestral work won't scale the same dizzy heights of realism, simply because of the power and weight involved. But – and this is the important thing – the Nolas bring the same sense of natural ease and solid presence to proceedings, which in turn elevates the emotional scope and impact available from the recording in exactly the same way.

What is it about the Pegasus that makes its presentation so natural? ►

► After all, it's far from the most transparent, detailed or dynamically immediate transducer I've used. It can't match the sheer coherence and intimacy, the preservation and insight into the relationships within the performance that come with the Avalon Eidolon Diamond. Nor can it match the sheer information available from the Marten Coltrane or what they tell you about the recording itself. But what it has got (like those other speakers) is its own, unique balance of virtues, based on a combination of harmonic correctness and realistic bandwidth. The tonality of this speaker is spot-on (the one area in which I suspect that

notes and instruments, the impact of the acoustic space are reproduced with uncanny accuracy. It's especially noticeable in the way that voices don't just hold their character, but are allowed to breathe and emote. It's what makes Ray and Betty so impressive, but that throbbing life and energy that identifies and informs the human element in live performance is there

whether we're talking Chopin, Cannonball or Cure out-takes.

It's the creative tension and structure that transforms noise into music, and the Nolas preserve intact and in full.

It's tempting to place the credit for the harmonic accuracy of the Pegasus at the feet of its AlNiCo magnets and they doubtless contribute (as evidenced by prior experience with the various Lotus Elites and the Dynavector XVI-S cartridge, whose AlNiCo generator exhibits similar qualities) but that would be too simplistic. Contributing too, and generating the gulf in performance between this speaker and the cheaper Nolas, are the cross-over and the care that's gone into presenting the music's energy spectrum. I've already discussed the proprietary components and the inherent simplicity of the slopes employed in the network, key elements in preserving temporal and spatial relationships, but let's not overlook the way in which this speaker system handles both the energy budget and its nature. If you want to model (let alone match) the dynamic range of real life you are going to need to

move some serious air, simply to generate the necessary acoustic energy. Of course, doing so generates its own problems. You've got to deal with the back wave generated within the system as well as ensuring that the energy projected into the room mirrors both the quantity and quality of reality.

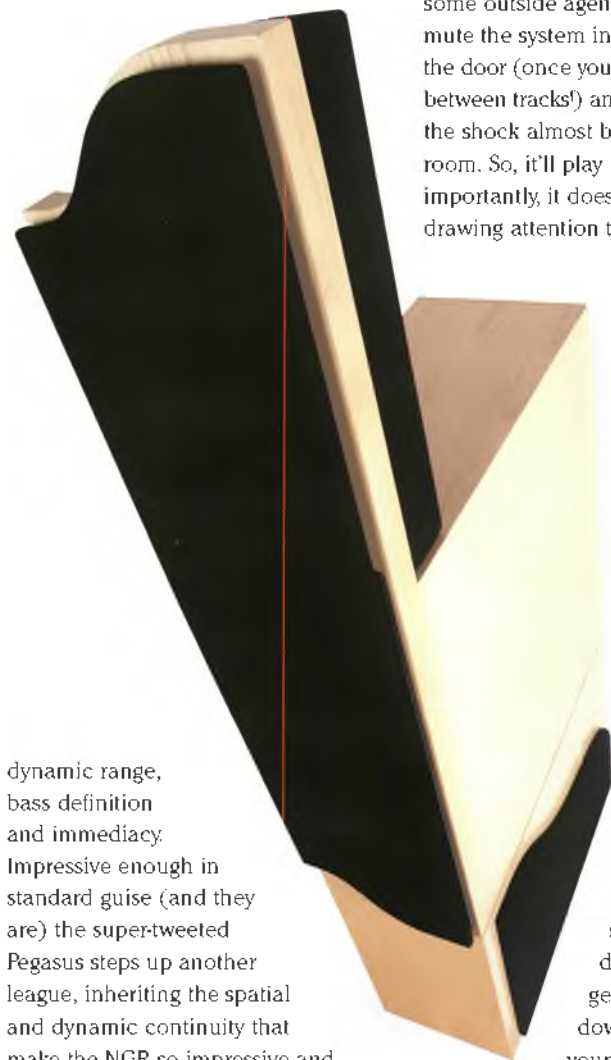
Let's take the unwanted energy first. It has to go somewhere and the last thing you want is it cropping up unexpectedly out of band. The lower the frequency the bigger the problem, and there's no point providing those musical foundations if the unwanted side-effects reappear to smear and muddy the frequencies built upon them. Hence the importance of Carl Marchiosoto's insistence on not just cancelling bass energy through the use of opposed drivers but also mechanically isolating the lowest frequencies, measures that clearly work. What is less obvious is his appreciation of the importance not just of the clarity but also the nature of the mid-bass. Disconnect that extra, rear-mounted driver and hear the magic, the presence and life, evaporate. Not only does the Pegasus provide clean energy through this critical and under-rated area of the musical spectrum, that extra driver provides the air that allows the bass to float and breathe.

But there is one area in which the Pegasus is unavoidably compromised: Those high frequency units and their positioning. Image height seems unaffected in some cases, in others – such as the violins in the Barbirolli Sibelius 2 – instruments seem to climb with frequency. It's not a major intrusion and it might well reflect both the recordings and my own inability to overcome my incredulity at the height of the tweeters, but it seems to be the one thing that mars the absolute spatial continuity of the picture presented. The other concern is their extension. With speakers ►



the Pegasus actually exceeds the NGR – a statement based on fleetingly brief acquaintance with the latter and thus shaky ground); it's neither lean or bleached, nor overly rich or warm. Instead, the harmonic envelope of

▶ like the Avalon and Marten, as well as a whole herd of B&Ws offering exotic tweeters, the limitations of the Nola's drivers, good as they are by conventional standards, are clearly heard. It's a failing underlined by the addition of a pair of super-tweeters, a simple expedient which elevates the speakers' performance still further in the realms of transparency, focus but more importantly,




dynamic range, bass definition and immediacy. Impressive enough in standard guise (and they are) the super-tweetered Pegasus steps up another league, inheriting the spatial and dynamic continuity that make the NGR so impressive and musically compelling. You can read more on this subject in the review of the Elac 4Pi tweets in Audio Smorgasbord, and it's a subject to which I'll return once I've investigated further. In the meantime, it's an avenue any prospective Pegasus owner should

definitely investigate.

There's one other quality that the Nolas bring to a system on which I've yet to touch and that's the sheer ease of their reproduction. Indeed, so devoid of strain are these speakers that they will play most music at most levels equally convincingly. Time and again I've found myself happily playing music at crashing volumes without realising it until some outside agency intrudes. You mute the system in order to answer the door (once you hear the knocking between tracks!) and when you return the shock almost blasts you from the room. So, it'll play loud, but more importantly, it does so without drawing attention to itself. I believe

this easy quality is critical, both to the expressive range that these speakers allow, but also to their absence of intrusion into musical proceedings. You simply don't hear them working or taking up the strain the way you do with most speakers – a factor that's crucial to maintaining the willing suspension of disbelief; or simply getting on and getting down, depending on your want.

Nola's Pegasus is as convincing an argument for expensive hi-fi as I can find. No special appreciation of nuance or hi-fi intricacy required here. These speakers deal in reality, a quality even the uninitiated

recognise. In fact, especially the uninitiated – one listen to these and they get knocked sideways. Isn't that what hi-fi is supposed to do? Isn't that what it used to do? Ever wondered why it doesn't seem to do it any more? Well, if you're tired of excuses listen to the Pegasus – treat them right and they'll give your system wings. 

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	5 1/2 –way hybrid, dynamic, di-polar speaker system
Bandwidth:	20Hz –25kHz ±3dB
Driver Complement:	2x 25mm magnesium alloy tweeters with AlNiCo magnet assemblies. 2x 100mm tri-laminate plastic/pulp midrange drivers with AlNiCo magnet assemblies. 7x 200mm doped paper bass drivers with AlNiCo magnet assemblies.
Crossover Points:	40Hz, 200Hz, 500Hz, 3500Hz with separate mid-bass driver operating between 80 and 120Hz
Efficiency:	88dB
Impedance:	8 Ohms nominal (4 Ohms minimum)
Phase Angle:	±30 degrees
Dimensions (WxHxD):	260 x 1670 x 640mm (+ Cross-over)
Weight:	90kgs
Finishes:	Merlot walnut, light ash other woods available
Price:	£39,000 standard finish

UK Distributor:

Nola (UK) Ltd
Tel. (44)(0)791 6176399
Email. michael-akutter@hotmail.co.uk

Manufacturer:

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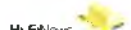
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The Moon Andromeda Reference CD Player

by Roy Gregory

This review represents a number of firsts: it's the first Moon product that I've looked at since the (impressively bulky, powerful and affordable) W5 power amp back in Issue 7; it's the first Moon CD player we've looked at (although we have an ongoing love affair with their amplification); it's the first product we've looked at from the new Andromeda flagship series (with pre and power amps to come). Yet for all that, there's an air of familiarity about the Andromeda CD player. The styling might be new but the two-tone finish (all silver fascias are also an option) horizontal heat-sinking and corner verticals are clear carry-overs from the existing products, hinting at refinement and evolution rather than revolution. And if the all up weight has increased and the feet are rather sharper then that suggests much the same. None of which is a bad thing – given the reputation those existing products have built.

The lasting impression left by the W10 was one of serious bulk throwing itself into the musical task with considerable enthusiasm. In a world populated with products that lean to the precise, dry and analytical, it was a distinct and welcome breath of fresh air. What it might have lacked in sophistication it more than made up for in sheer enthusiasm and value for money, offering a rare combination of the best of British and American attributes. On the one hand this Canadian company had captured the sense of drive and momentum so beloved of Naim aficionados, on the other, they'd incorporated the scale, stability and sheer power that comes from the best of the US thoroughbreds. It was a potent

mix, especially at the price, and a recipe that in many ways the Andromeda CD player seeks to emulate.

So, the two-box format we find here is laid out Naim-style, with the top-loading integrated CD player fed from a separate power-supply. And if the large, dot-matrix displays are reminiscent of Mark Levinson



Audio Systems designs, so too is the fully differential circuitry. However, given the material content (the pair weigh 35kg!) finish and presentation of the product, you'll be surprised to learn that the cost of ownership falls (just) the right side of \$9K. Whilst that's a long, long way from pocket-money prices, given the sonic performance, that's an awful lot of bang for your bucks and astonishing though it might seem, represents another step in the high-end's rediscovery of value for money.

In case you're wondering, there's a lot more to this player than just a pretty fascia. With CNC machining that high-end companies could only have dreamt of a few years ago now adorning budget amps from China, there's increasing suspicion attached to anything that looks constructionally too good to be true.

However, differential circuitry is inherently expensive (it uses twice the components) and look a little deeper and you'll discover that far from cutting corners, Moon have paid significant attention to the interior design of the Andromeda, whilst also adding their own particular slant to the structure and topology.

If we start with the power supply chassis, there are two separate transformers, a large 75VA one for the digital circuitry and a smaller 22.5VA unit that handles the analogue stage. Both are backed up by significant banks of reservoir capacitance, slightly more for the analogue section, which is only to be expected given the drive requirements it faces. Regulated DC is fed to

the main chassis via two umbilicals, one using an XLR and the other an Ethercon type eight-way connector. Once into the audio circuit proper you reach the final level of power supply isolation, with each and every chip or op-amp receiving its own, dedicated inductive filter; that's a total of 56 separate stages in all.

The top-loading transport mechanism consists of the tried and trusted Philips CD-Pro 2M mounted on Moons own Delta gel-based suspension to provide the necessary isolation. Digital filter is a Burr-Brown DF1704, while the conversion array consists of four PCM1704 24-bit chips in a dual differential arrangement with 16x oversampling. One significant



▶ advantage of keeping all the audio circuitry in a single box is that you can keep the clocking paths nice and short, with a resultant reduction in jitter. Moon claim that their proprietary phase-locked loop set-up delivers a jitter level of $\pm 5\text{ppm}$. The use of a complex four-layer board enables them to separate signal, ground and power planes for reduced internal noise and the shortest possible signal path. The circuit itself is DC coupled (so no capacitors in the signal path) and employs an in-house designed 6dB octave analogue filter.



finish which should stay looking good for a long time – an important consideration when you consider that the player's layout means that the top-plate will receive far more handling than usual. Not only is there the sliding drawer that covers the transport, but the main control functions are located here too, along with a repeater window for the track number.

The front panel contains the enormous and impeccably legible display – which thankfully can be dimmed or defeated altogether, springing back to life momentarily each time you press a button. The machine sounds better with the display in its sleep mode and this is definitely how I preferred to use it. Extra buttons on the front panel cover the “occasional use” functions like repeat and program, while a full-on “burglar deterrent” remote control is hewn from solid alloy and allows

The rear panel carries left and right channel, balanced and unbalanced audio outputs, as well as S/PDIF (BNC) and AES/EBU (XLR) digital outputs. There's also an RS232 socket for system integration and an additional BNC socket for an S/PDIF input. Each chassis is constructed from a mix of heavy plate and sculpted extrusions to provide a handsome and extremely rigid structure. The cone feet screw in to allow levelling and are seriously sharp.

Importers Redline can supply aluminium cups to preserve fancy surfaces or provide a better interface to glass shelves if necessary. Tot all that lot up, inside and out, and it should be clear that Moon have cut no obvious corners to hit that impressive price tag.

Externally, the main chassis is finished in a tough, slightly rough

you to run a complete Andromeda system should you so choose.

Talking of which, importers Redline supplied just such a set-up along with the CD player, ensuring that I could take advantage of the balanced outputs. Normally speaking I'm dubious about the musical benefits of balanced connection but past experience with the Moon amps showed that this is one company that does both the balanced and the fully differential thing properly (the latter being in my experience, a prerequisite for proper functioning of the former). Careful listening revealed that this was the case with the complete Andromeda system too,

although you could be forgiven for missing that fact as it took several weeks for the units to settle down, a period throughout which the single-ended outputs sounded consistently livelier and more interesting. It's all down to the bass and the fact that on first switch-on it sounds rather slow, weighty and rounded – a fact exacerbated by the balanced connections. However, once the player had really got into its stride it started to kick up its heels and those low-frequencies came with them.

Thoroughly warmed through and with the balanced outputs of the CD player hooked up to the fully balanced Andromeda pre-power combination, that bass weight and power finally starts to make real sense. Using the single-ended outputs had minimised the weight issue but never locked the low-frequencies to the rest of the spectrum. Running the balanced connections does exactly that, and whilst with the warm-up period complete the timing snaps in with the single-ended outputs too, it's what the balanced route does with the information that's so impressive.

In a word, we're talking foundation. Now, the spiel for balanced has always stressed lower noise and increased ▶

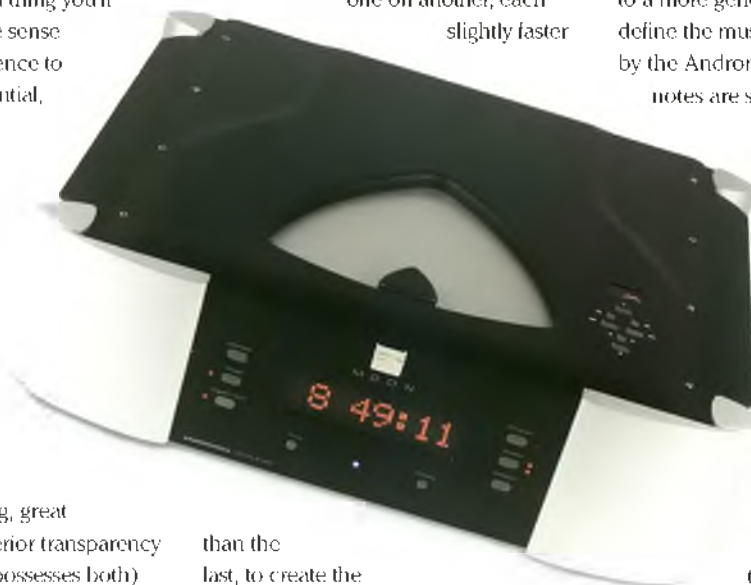


► dynamic range. Unfortunately it seems that the former arrives at the expense of the latter. Well, with the Andromeda CD player you can clearly hear both affects working in concert, just not necessarily in the way you might expect. The first thing you'll notice is the incredibly stable and well defined soundstage, plenty deep and possibly a shade narrow, but with a beautifully apparent floor and real height. That's the low-frequencies doing their thing. The second thing you'll notice is the incredible sense of substance and presence to the sound. It's a substantial, solid thing, not some ethereal shimmer at the end of the room. That grows out of the soundstage, but it's also to do with the way that the energy and information within the performance are presented – and here we reach the conundrum.

Generally speaking, great soundstaging and superior transparency (and the Andromeda possesses both) are accompanied by excellent resolution and separation of detail and low-level information. Well, in this case they aren't. What the Moon CD delivers is solid, present and in spatial and temporal terms, incredibly coherent: it's also set-back (a definite mid-hall perspective) and lacking the kind of low-level texture and micro-dynamic detail that comes from a player like the Wadia 861SE. So, if I play the Barbirolli/RPO *Sibelius 2* I'm rewarded with a deep, solid soundstage, beautifully stable, coherent and spacious (unusually so for what can be a murky sounding disc). Instruments have good colour and excellent spread and temporal integration, making Sir John's mastery of the score perfectly apparent. The muted pulsing that opens the piece has a latent, underlying swell that hints at tension and the coming drama, echoed in the lovely

horn theme that floats above it, the duration and spacing of each note perfectly poised along with their final decay, leading to the pause that builds into first string theme. Get that pause wrong, too short or too long, and you dispel all the accumulated tension that's just been created. Sir John gets it right and so too does the Andromeda.

Now listen to the ascending quartets of pizzicato bass notes that build, one on another, each slightly faster



than the last, to create the rising dynamic sweep into the first crescendo. Placement and pace are spot on; the dynamic steps are clearly defined, musically and emotionally effective. In short the bricks are all in the right place, the structure just as it should be. But here you'll also notice where the Moon player loses out to more detailed machines. Those individual notes that make up the *pizzicato* passage are perfectly centred and weighted, giving correct pitch and timing. But listen to the same passage on the Wadia and you'll hear the attack of each plucked note, making it more of a hold and release than a tuned thud. You'll hear more of each note's harmonic texture and more of the space and air around them, the air that's energised by those vibrating strings. Likewise, vague rustlings that impinge on the Andromeda clearly become pages

turning on the 861SE. There's no denying the musical effectiveness of the Moon, but there's an uncanny sense of captured reality to the Wadia's rendition, a musical microcosm preserved against the bigger background.

Of course, you might consider this somewhat academic, not being a huge Sibelius fan (and besides, there's always the Berglund/Bournemouth performance on EMI) but extrapolate the affect to a more general level and it starts to define the musical perspective presented by the Andromeda. Just as the bass notes are smoothed over and

rounded off, that same lack of bite and micro-dynamic discrimination carries across the whole range. It's less obvious across the broad mid-band but listen and you'll hear it. Just select anything with a well-recorded acoustic

guitar and the impact is obvious. Combine it with the mid-hall view and the result is a sense of distance that robs the performance of immediacy and intimacy. In its place you get substance and coherence, a holistic view of the event as a single entity, but that's the choice that the Moon presents. What you need to ask yourself is which way your personal preferences and prejudices lean?

Playing Eliza Gilkyson ('Not Lonely' from *Land Of Milk And Honey*) it's impossible not to notice the presentational differences between the Andromeda at one extreme and a hyper detailed machine like the dCS P8i at the other. So much so in fact that one's ultimate preference may well be dictated as much by programme material as other considerations. It's the personal that makes Eliza's work so wonderful, the intimacy in the recording that reflects the insight and experience in the ►

► songs. For that, good as the moon is in structural and dynamic terms, as ably as it encompasses the power and fury that can people the musical performance, the dCS cuts closer to the quick, the overall balance of the Wadia closer still. But then, maybe you don't listen to that much folksy female vocal. Switch discs to Kertesz leading the LSO through the Dvorak symphonic cycle, or the Cure's masterpiece, *Faith*, and the substance and surefooted structural navigation of the Canadian player come well to the fore, delving into the denser layers and overlapping swathes with ease.



And here's the thing, because the Andromeda doesn't fit that old cliché of being a "classical" player, or better suited to rock music. It's not even a question of scale particularly, rather one that fastens on the mode of expression. Some music is intrinsically sweeping and grandiose in nature, some intricate and delicate. Most fits somewhere in between and hi-fi systems, any hi-fi system, can only do so much. We can select or guide its chosen attributes and if we want it to satisfy us we need to match those attributes to our own aspirations. That's where understanding the Andromeda's particular view of events comes in, not least because, living at the front of the system the way it does, the character or gates it imposes can't be amended or corrected further down the signal path.

When it comes to expression within the musical performance few instruments can match the range or directness

of the human voice and that's where you should look if you want to get a quick handle on what this player does. Playing 'A Foggy Day...' from the *Take Love Easy* XRCD, Ella's voice is smooth, rich and sultry, held in a realistic acoustic space and naturally positioned above the seated Joe Pass. The guitar notes are smoothed and rounded, emphasising the shape and positioning of phrases as opposed to the attack and accent of individual notes. Both the voice and the guitar lack the texturing and detail that tells the listener how the performer is working their instrument, detail that's clear in the lighter touch of the Wadia. But the 861SE shifts the musical emphasis onto direct sound and attack. There's detail and immediacy to burn, but the impressive way that Ella shapes her lyric and the spray of harmonic decay that marks each run of notes from the nimble fingers of Pass offer a different rather than a more effective rendition of events. Yes the Wadia tells you more about HOW things are played, but the Andromeda leaves you in no doubt as to WHAT has been played. The question you need to ask is which tells you more about WHY it's been played. That's a question the Moon never ducks, and if you can live without the spit on the microphone immediacy and small scale intimacy demanded by the liveliest of acoustic sets or most pointed of rock vocals, then its stability, drive and grace under fire will certainly repay your investment. And bear in mind too, that a player like the dCS is way beyond the Wadia on this particular continuum.

The Moon Andromeda Reference CD player is a substantial product in more ways than one. With twenty-five years of solid company history behind it, reflected in a clearly defined family sound, it represents a reassuringly sensible investment. As I've pointed out, it's hard to fault the build quality or material content. Fit and finish are both

superb and surfaces have been chosen to deliver a long working life. But most importantly of all, it's a product that resolutely ploughs its own furrow in a field that's in danger of becoming a playground for me-too technical one-upmanship. In doing so, its ability to tease the sense and shape from the musical event stands as both a challenge to the status quo and a reminder of what hi-fi is supposed to be about. The Moon will appeal to those who are as confident in their musical tastes as they are in their ability to make their own decisions. Go forth and listen – and don't be surprised if you enjoy. ➤

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Integrated top-loading CD player with separate PSU.
Chipset:	BurrBrown PCM1704 24bit 16x o/s
Inputs:	1x S/PDIF (BNC)
Outputs -	
Digital:	1x S/PDIF (BNC) 1x AES/EBU (XLR)
Analogue:	1pr single-ended (RCA phono) 1pr balanced (XLR)
Output Level:	2V (single-ended) 4V (balanced)
Output Impedance:	50 Ohms (single-ended) 25 Ohms (balanced)
Weight:	35kg
Dimensions (WxHxD):	18.75 x 5.5 x 16.5 (CD player) 18.75 x 4 x 16.5 (power supply)
Finishes:	Silver or black and silver
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The conrad-johnson CT5 Vacuum-tube Line-stage

by Roy Gregory

The CT5 is an important product for conrad-johnson. In the great line-stage debate (an argument that's moved from "Which one's best?" to "Do you even need one?" in certain parts of the US press) it represents the latest and most affordable descendent of the legendary ART*, last undisputed champion of the world**. But as well as the evolutionary heritage it embodies, there are also the revolutionary aspects to its design, bringing conrad-johnson's proprietary Teflon capacitors, first seen in the Premier 17LS2, Premier 350SA and ACT2, down to less stratospheric prices as well as establishing a striking new aesthetic that carries over to the forthcoming LP70S and LP140M power amps.

A substantial, single chassis design, the CT5 certainly presents a bullish face to its challenges. The tall front panel is relieved by a semi-circular amphitheatre within which nestle a single pair of tubes, protected by Perspex fining that offers physical immunity from intruding objects as well as aesthetic continuity with the ACT2. The push button controls are pure c-j, familiar from existing designs, as is the circular display whose red figures spell out individual left and right channel volume levels. It's a combination of elements that's at once familiar and yet decidedly different, a difference that becomes even more apparent if you compare it to the slim-line form and enclosed casework of the (equally new) CT6 tube line stage. Certainly the images that adorn the web and promotional literature do it no justice and if you find yourself reacting against the looks I'd strongly advise you to suspend judgement until you see it in the flesh: This is one of those products

that just looks right, its bluff fascia and hard-edged shapes giving it a solid, purposeful air that instills confidence.

It's a quality that extends to the CT5's pedigree. The ART established c-j's composite-triode line-stage circuit, paralleling multiple devices to achieve desirably low output impedance. The ACT2 graduated to 6N30P twin-triodes, whose characteristics allowed fewer devices to achieve the same end, as well as introducing those Teflon caps. Now the CT5, following tradition, halves the number of tubes and cuts the price accordingly. Along the way it also loses some of the reservoir capacitance you'll find in the ACT2, but otherwise the circuit and parts quality remain the same.

You still get independent mains transformers for the tube and control circuitry, as well as damping rings for the tubes themselves. Control functionality is resolutely modern, with both a unity gain option for use with theatre processors and 12V triggers for remote switch on. c-j have resisted the onward march of the RS232 port and wisely so: I don't see the CT5 outside of dedicated two-channel set-ups, the multi-channel option playing a poor second for most users (not to mention that c-j have a dedicated 6-channel tube line-stage called the MET-1 to fulfill that function). You get five line-inputs, a tape-loop (labeled EPL 1) and the Theatre Loop. There are two sets of main outputs and the CT5, like all c-j pre-amps is phase inverting. Likewise, all connections are

single-ended via RCA/phono sockets, the false faith of balanced circuitry having yet to raise its head above c-j's horizon. The remote control adds balance to the other options and that, as they say, is all she wrote...

At this point it seems appropriate to introduce a brief digression. In describing their circuit as a composite-triode, c-j is impeccably correct. However, this could lead to some confusion amongst the uninitiated, due to the value-laden nature of the "T" word. Whereas triode is a meaningful distinction with real-world implications when it comes to the use of tubes in power amplifiers, differentiating the output mode



from pentode or ultra-linear type topologies for example, when it comes to pre-amps just about every nine-pin tube (that's the little ones they generally use) is a triode – or more normally a twin triode, two independent assemblies contained within a single vacuum envelope. All the ECC/12A type tubes as well as the 6DJ8s most commonly employed are twin triodes, as are the increasingly popular 6N30Ps. Some line-stages use larger, octal-based ▶

▶ tubes, such as the 6SN7s used in Rogue Audio's Model 99 and Metis pre-amps, but once again these are triode designs. Just occasionally you'll find a weird Japanese pre-amp sporting something like a KT88, but they are definitely the exception to the triode rule. As far as the composite-triode label goes it's the composite (as opposed to the triode) part of the equation that's important. As I said earlier, it indicates the use of parallel devices to reduce the output impedance of the line-stage and thus its ability to drive both long cable runs

Lyra Titan and feeding the Groove Plus phono-stage. Support, always critical with valve electronics, was provided by the finite-element Pagode Master Reference HD03 rack, with and without the excellent Stillpoints component stand – but for more on that, see the sidebar.

However, pay appropriate attention to the basics of set-up and you'll be rewarded with a performance that is musically powerful – indeed, compellingly so. Part of the problem with the CT5 used raw from the box is that its bottom end is so rich and weighty that it can cause balance problems, especially in a system

energetic and tuneful bass, this latest c-j succeeds in looking both forward and back; to the future in terms of its harmonic resolution and separation, to its heritage in the forgiving warmth and enthusiasm that it brings to the musical performance. No, it can't match the absolute detail and insight that the ACT2 delivers, but it is also easier on poor recordings and less demanding of partnering equipment than the flagship's self-effacing neutrality. Those solid low frequencies are founded on the core energy in notes, a quality that extends right up the range. The thrash guitar intro to 'Defending Ancient Springs' pulls its prodigious substance and impact from within, sheer presence rather than leading edge speed.

Likewise, Ptigorsky's cello is full bodied and redolent, swathed in harmonic texture and colour, the bowing and phrasing propelling the musical line, itself propelled by the CT5. In truth, if you want leading edge definition then there are other pre-amps that carve bass notes with sharper faces; but few imbue them with such purpose, shape or direction. The CT5 breathes a

natural sense of swell and pace into the performance, exactly the way the best tube designs always have, but a quality that has been sacrificed more recently in search of greater transparency, detail and speed. Which is why taking the time and (minimal) trouble to get the set-up just so is such a worthwhile exercise. In many respects, the CT5 is a product that allows you to have your cake and eat it. Combine that presence, colour and substance with the added transparency, separation, drive and grip that comes with the requisite care and you have ▶



and different power amps. Given the issues regarding the transparency of cathode followers (a difficult but not impossible problem to overcome) it's an important concern if you are going to eschew balanced connection.

Back with the CT5, I used it in conjunction with a range of amplification, including the Hovland RADIA, Linear B mono-blocs and the Moon Andromeda W8. Cabling was almost exclusively Nordost Valhalla, although the new and far more affordable Frey made an appearance, as did the Chord Co. Signature. Speakers were the Living Voice OBX-R2s and the Nola Pegasus, while the sources varied between the Andromeda, dCS P8i and Wadia 861SE CD players and the Kuzma Stabi XL/Airline record player, carrying the

voiced and weighted for the typically lean lower registers so beloved by high-definition solid-state designs. What's more it stands in stark contrast to the pinched, lean and bleached midrange that characterizes raw Teflon caps – before their lengthy burn-in period. Run the pre-amp and slowly, but surely the bottom-end tightens up and the mids fill out, but don't expect it to happen overnight. Several weeks of continuous use is nearer the mark!

By now, take the various elements that I've already mentioned and you'll be starting to get a picture of the CT5's sonic signature. Built on a deep, powerfully

Care and consideration...

In simplifying the circuitry and construction employed in the CT5 (as compared to the ACT2) c-j have dispensed with half the output tubes and also the internal suspension system employed in the more expensive model. The result is a higher – although not unacceptably so – output impedance and greater sensitivity to siting. They also lose getting on for half the purchase price along the way, so it seems churlish to complain. Besides, the good news is that with a little care the effects of these changes can be anchored if not entirely eliminated. First and foremost, run the CT5 on short(ish) interconnects and the output impedance becomes even less of an issue. Run it on cables no longer than three metres in length and you'll maximize its grip, transparency and air, all aspects in which the ACT2 excels. Secondly, as with their other pre-amps, c-j supply a pair of rubber O-ring dampers for each tube. Generally I've found

these unnecessary, however, with the CT5 I preferred the sound with the dampers installed, finding the increase in transparency, focus and bass control to be well worthwhile. Even better were the EAT Cool Damper devices, extruded heat sinks that are held against the tube surface by small rubber lips, seeking to both damp and cool the envelope. Playing the RCA SACD issue of the Patigorsky/BSO Dvorak *Cello Concerto*, the sense of the coherent acoustic space, the floor, rear wall and height of the soundstage were all far more apparent with dampers installed. Likewise, instrumental placement, identity and separation were all improved, especially in the powerful bass passages, energy that the un-damped CT5 allowed to get away from it. Where the extra cost of the EAT dampers told was in preserving greater weight and control at low frequencies, together with more natural pace and flow as a result. Try the rubber rings first. If you like what they do then experiment further...

with which it projects musical energy, just as forthright at high frequencies as it is at low. It's a quality that's expressed in the uncanny presence and body of percussive motifs and cymbal work as much as the woody, resonant volume of the cello; that embraces the performance (regardless of scale) as a single holistic entity, not a collection of disparate elements loosely bound. So, the fact that a wood block is struck to provide an off-beat accent only makes sense if the resulting "clack" is in the right place, at the right time and at the right level. That way it accents the right beat without drawing attention to itself, the same beat that the bass player is driving – and that's the point. Bands on the CT5 play together.

► a musical performance that combines the dynamic impact and authority of a pre-amp like the ARC SP10 with far greater extension, tonal range, separation and finesse than such vintage designs ever achieved. That lightness of touch, the depth of instrumental insight comes in terms of the energy envelope and the way the player drives the note into the acoustic space (something that the CT5 certainly shares with its bigger brother) rather than the starkly etched high-definition of more fashionable marques, but that's why it can achieve instrumental separation without undermining the presence and authority in the performance.

Going back to 'Defending Ancient Springs' this c-j doesn't match the best in terms of the absolute space within the opening soundfield, nor the pitch blackness of the background, which takes on a slightly blurred, velvety quality. But there's no faulting the isolation of the individual sound sources (tools, welding torches etc.) whilst the identity of each sound has rarely been so natural or easily identified, the shouts so intelligible. What's more, the pattern



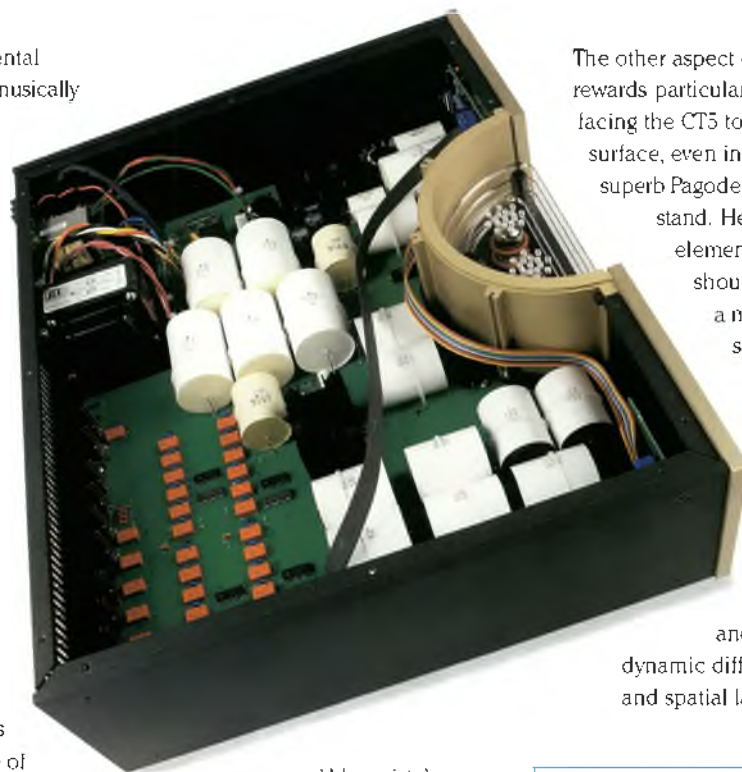
behind the construction makes musical sense, leading naturally into the music proper in a way that few pre-amps manage, and that leads us in turn to the CT5's least obvious quality but the one that is in many ways the jewel in its crown; musical coherence. Built on the seamless quality that extends from the lowest lows to the slightly, comfortably rounded highs, the key is the evenness

It's not something you tend to notice until you take it out of the system. There's just this easy, natural pace to proceedings, the music breathing with a living, inner vitality. This ability to track energy levels across the entire frequency spectrum is found in the better cable products, designs that seem to inevitably rely on Teflon as a dielectric element. It's a factor that weighs large in the performance of both the Premier 350 and the ACT2, and now in the CT5 as well. Whilst it's premature to attribute it to c-j's Teflon caps, this is certainly a question that bears further ►

► consideration, such a fundamental contribution does it make to a musically convincing performance.

Tonal colour has always been a *c-j* forte and it is perhaps in this regard that the CT5 best represents the "old school". The tonality of individual instruments is rendered perfectly distinct, but it's the identity and character of familiar voices that really impresses. If one was being picky you could say that it lends a little too much body and chest to singers, but it makes for a wonderfully convincing sense of physical presence that more than compensates for the last detail when it comes to diction. Likewise, phrasing is natural and makes equal sense of both libretto and lyric. In exactly the same way that there's a convincing shape and purpose to instrumental lines (and working through the Art Pepper back catalogue has been a particular pleasure) the point and meaning in a song is laid bare, the emotional context effortlessly drawn from the performer and performance.

The CT5 is, in most physical respects, a cut-down version of the superb ACT2, promising much of the more expensive design's performance at around half the price. But it's a more complex beast than that simple equation suggests. The ACT2 takes no prisoners; whilst putting the music resolutely first it also reveals shortcomings in a recording or in partnering equipment. Whilst its manners are far too refined to point a finger and jeer, it leaves you in no doubt as to exactly what is what. The CT5 cannot afford such a haughty standpoint. It too puts music first, but in this instance trades the core message for inner detail and resolution. Warmer, rounder and kinder, it's easy to assume that it has simply retreated into "traditional" valve sound – but in that



you'd be mistaken.

Yes, there's the body, presence and colour, but there's also separation and that ability to project and preserve musical energy right across the spectrum. Every time you think you've got the measure of this pre-amp it goes and surprises you with a glimpse of textural finesse, an uncanny halo of space around a spray of notes, the realism of some almost incidental detail. This is no broad-brush Chagal or heavily textured Van Gogh. It's more the surprising detail and vivid hues of a Kandinsky. It's also a very carefully considered balance of virtues. It would have been easy to retain resolution and definition at the expense of musical coherence and communication: It's the choice that many designers have made over the years. To turn it on its head is brave and in this marketplace, risky – especially given the time-lag between promise and delivery. But work with the CT5 and give it that time and you'll discover a product that sets out for the heart of the performance. The other things you discover along the way are simply the icing on the cake.

The other aspect of set-up that rewards particular care was interfacing the CT5 to its supporting surface, even in the case of the superb Pagode Master Reference stand. Here, finite-elemente CeraPucs should be considered a minimum standard, the Stillpoints cones or Component Stand better still, each delivering significant improvements in clarity and transparency, dynamic differentiation and spatial layering. ➤

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Vacuum-tube line-stage
Valve Complement:	2x 6N30P
Gain:	20dB
Inputs:	5x single-ended line-level 1x single-ended tape (epi) 1x single-ended theatre (unity gain)
Outputs:	2x single-ended main out 1x single-ended fixed (epi) 1x single-ended theatre (unity gain)
Output Impedance:	800 Ohms
Maximum Output:	10V
Absolute Phase:	Inverting
Dimensions (WxHxD):	19 x 5 x 15.5
Weight:	14kg
Finish:	As shown
Price:	£7450 inc VAT

UK Distributor:

Audiofreaks Ltd.
Tel. (44)(0)20 8948 4153
Net. www.audiofreaks.co.uk

Manufacturer:

conrad-johnson design Inc.
Net. www.conradjohnson.com

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B&W 802D Loudspeaker

by Jason Kennedy

If I had a pound for every wag who's said "It looks like a Dalek" in the last few months, this reviewing lark might actually become fiscally viable. They have of course been referring to the B&W 802D, latest incarnation of that company's Nautilii (a much better name for the Doctor's nemesis than "Dalek" if you ask me). Besides which, quite how anyone could think that the 802 looks like a Dalek is beyond me. For a start it's got no sink plunger and secondly it's a completely different shape and colour. It seems that all that's required for Dalek likeness is a rounded form on top of a column type deal... Oh, and a drive unit that looks like a big eye. But Daleks didn't have eyes, did they?

All of which tends to distract from what is actually a great speaker – an extremely great speaker in fact. Thanks to the fancy diamond tweeter and paired bass drivers, all housed in extremely stiff enclosures, it has useable bandwidth that few other speakers this size can match. Then there's the midrange driver with its peculiar lack of stiffness but stunning levels of resolution, delivered in an unforced, almost restrained fashion. The balance of the speaker has not changed, which means that it remains a little reticent in the mid and that means that you still have to lean on the volume in order to get it to sound lively. But, more importantly (and unlike its predecessor) it now times in a wholly gratifying, foot tapping fashion too, which underlines the 802D conundrum: whilst it looks externally almost identical to the 802S model that preceded it,

the D is 80% different in design. The impressive thing is that in the process of that redesign B&W have succeeded in retaining the strengths of the original concept whilst putting most of its weaknesses to the sword.

Many of the changes are less than obvious, even to the practiced eye. The Company has switched the capacitors used in its cross-over networks to new designs developed in cooperation with Mundorf in Germany. Whilst they are unwilling to speculate on the reasons why identically specified



caps should sound different, they're not about to ignore the fact. Indeed, they place a large slice of the credit for the sonic improvements squarely on the shoulders of the new caps, reasoning they're only too happy to demonstrate.

One of the critical differences between the 802D and the range topping 800D takes the form of a single capacitor, albeit one the size of a big baked bean can. Too big to fit in the base of the 802D, it helps the rather dearer 800D maintain a significant advantage in terms of sound quality. I had a brief session listening to the 800 series in B&W's development room and heard not only the reduction in high frequency

distortion when switching between S (aluminium) and D (diamond) tweeters but also the drastic improvement wrought by the 800D over the 802D. Inconveniently the 800D is too massive to get up my stairs so I had to make do with the 'smaller' model at a mere 80kg. But fear not, far from constituting a hardship, it has been an absolute riot.

For something that seems so exotic, the diamond diaphragm that fronts the 802D's tweeter looks decidedly ordinary. Its extraordinary hardness makes it an ideal material for the creation of a pistonic driver (see MC's piece in Issue 40 for the theory behind this) although the competition in



France claims that Beryllium is better suited to the job because it is lighter and thus more easily controlled. To these ears at least, the diamond approach seems the more relaxed and natural, but that could be to do with implementation as much as materials.

Overall, the shape of the speaker hasn't changed and the 'head' is still made of Marlan. The midrange drive unit within it still operates in a fashion described by another respected designer as "no excursion allowed/ maximum deformation of the cone"; B&W describes this aspect of Kevlar's behaviour as a means for the cone area to reduce as frequency



► increases without the problems of each impulse reflecting back into the cone from the surround. For the full technical reasoning behind this radical approach, and it is radical in the context of loudspeakers as a whole, see B&W's comprehensive website.

While the cabinet is still a remarkable work of laminated wood the bass drivers (150mm cones in 200mm chassis) have changed in at least two important respects:



the cones are made using carbon fibre and Rohacell foam in a fashion that's not a million miles from Focal's glass and foam sandwich construction, and they also now have softer roll surrounds which doesn't seem all that significant until you ask the designer why the timing has improved so markedly and he ascribes it to this particular detail. The switch to a first-order crossover network is also beneficial although this only applies to the

4kHz crossover point between midrange and tweeter. This approach required reversal of the phase alignment of the tweeter, which now sits further forward than in the N800 series, a clear trade off against traditional time alignment.

In terms of driveability the specs look fairly kind on paper; sensitivity is 90dB while impedance doesn't drop below 3.5ohms. That said it does hover in this region for much of the midrange so this is not exactly an easy load. When B&W recommend a minimum of 50 watts they're not kidding and if the bass starts to lag then the chances are that more power is what's required.

In standard form this speaker's cast aluminium base is fitted with large castors which make manoeuvring them easy but do not confer the highest sonic standards. For this purpose a heavy-duty spike kit is available and we tried both the pointy and rubber capped ends; the latter gave the best results on my carpeted, suspended wooden

floor. I hooked them up with the usual Townshend DCT speaker cable and things sounded pretty good, until Steve Pearce (B&W's 'ears') suggested trying the Audioquest speaker cable he'd brought along, which revealed that the



Townshend was rolling off the treble quite dramatically. I guess if any speaker is going to reveal this it's one

with a tweeter that extends to 33kHz but nonetheless it was a sobering discovery to make about ones reference speaker cable.

Despite the treble resolution and extension what really hits you when using this speaker is the quality of the bass.

It's easy to forget that frequency extremes do of course affect one another, the attack and pace of bass notes being defined by the treble harmonics that relate to them. This was abundantly clear with the 802D. The articulation and definition it brought to the bass on Led Zepplin's 'Nobody's Fault But Mine' was explicit and backed up by tremendous power. Not quite as much power as I get from the ATC SCM150As but they have 200 watts connected directly to the drive unit.

I've not heard passive bass do a better job than active and don't really expect to.

Nonetheless the body and weight that the B&Ws brought to what often seems a thin recording was extremely gratifying.

Tom Waits' *Troubles* *Braids* revelled in the newly discovered slam while the restrained nature of the mid-band (something that changes as the level is pushed) ►



▶ lean an unusually laidback quality to the track.

Ultimately this is an extremely transparent, low colouration loud-speaker that lets you hear right into the mix without resorting to a bright balance to give the impression of plentiful detail. The diamond tweeter blends in perfectly without drawing attention to itself. Rather, it serves the music in an understated way, so clean that it sounds almost dull until you realise the wealth of nuance and microdynamic detail that's contributing to the precise, three dimensional soundscape.

The effect this has on your records is to let them show you more of the atmosphere and attitude involved in their making, Tortoise's debut album reveals a tension that is positively electric, the instrumental compositions revealing their grungey top end and crunchy bass, encouraging you to push up the level that little bit more so that you can really feel the music. Played at the proper level it is well nigh on impossible to take off.

The level of transparency on offer reveals a lot more than simply what's in the groove. It also shows you the character of the source and amplification so effectively that once you've heard these speakers with a great amplifier, going back to something relatively mundane is a huge disappointment. I had the good fortune to review Gamut's new DI 150 integrated while the B&Ws were in situ. The partnership proved a magical one, the B&Ws lapping up the effortless dynamics and resolution of the Gamut, the high frequency performance in particular rising a couple of decent notches above the result achieved with a Briston BP25 and a Mk1 D200. The energy coming off Fourtet's *Pause* album positively fizzing with life, and I mean that in a positive sense – this is an electronic album, it should fizz. The insight into John Fahey's playing also jumps to the point where you can

hear all the texture of his zingy new strings and the extraordinary variety of sounds he manages to extract from them. Yet even with all this high-frequency detail, the sound never strayed to the bright, remaining relaxed and inviting.

The treble roll-off issue displayed by the Townshend cable left me searching for something less restricted, a search that ended in a single wire set of Kimber 8TC.



This proved rather better suited to the speaker, revealing even more clearly its most obvious difference to the N802, namely that superb sense of timing. Great timing is still an illusive quality when it comes to high-end hi-fi; designers all too often get distracted by imaging or dynamics and let this fundamental property take care of itself. Not so with the 802D. It brings the fun back into great sound thanks to this sensitivity to tempo. Of course, this is a speaker SYSTEM, and it's the range and variety of the changes that have been made that

underlines how all aspects of a design must work together to achieve the desired result. Most of what the 802D does was present in the N802 – it's just that now it hangs together. Whilst it's the tweeter that's going to attract all the attention, it's something far more basic that has ultimately transformed this speaker, and that's its sense of overall coherence. Sometimes you can throw all the technological expertise in the world at a problem and still miss the goal. With the 802D, B&W has used its powers wisely and created a speaker capable of tremendous resolution and an even greater power to thrill. ➤+

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	3-way vented-box system
Drive Units:	25mm diamond dome high-frequency 150mm woven Kevlar cone FST midrange 2x 200mm Rohacell cone bass
Crossover Frequency:	350Hz and 4kHz
Bandwidth:	34Hz - 28kHz \pm 3dB 27Hz and 33kHz \pm 6dB
Sensitivity:	90dB
Impedance:	8 Ohms nominal 3.5 Ohms minimum
Power Handling:	50W - 500W
Dimensions (WxHxD):	368 x 1135 x 563mm
Net Weight:	80kg ea.
Finishes:	Cherrywood, rosenut or black ash real wood veneers
Price:	£8,000
Manufacturer:	B&W Group Ltd
Tel. (44)(0)1903 221800	
Net. www.bwspeakers.com	



Balance

B 12/12

12:14

Volume

Mute

Alarm

Over

Be

Sleep

The Herron Audio VTSP-2 Vacuum Tube and HL-1 Solid-state Pre-amplifiers

by Roy Gregory

I doubt that either Herron Audio or designer Keith Herron will be familiar to too many readers in the UK. Nor can I promise that that situation is about to change with the line being picked up and heavily promoted by some big-noise distributor. But back in the USA where these units are built (St. Louis, Missouri to be precise) the Herron products have been quietly building quite a following. Not in itself a reason to review them you might well point out – and I'd have to agree. Which begs the question – what makes Herron Audio so special?

I've always maintained that we should review products because they're interesting. They might be interesting for a number of different reasons, or even a combination of them, and that's the case here. The tabloid version is pretty simple: Herron offer a pair of externally and operationally identical pre-amplifiers, except that one is solid-state and the other uses tubes. One costs \$5000 (the one that glows) and the other \$3500. Then there's the option of adding an internal phono-stage to the solid-state design, which lifts the price back to the \$5K mark. It's all too symmetrical, too perfect a contrast to ignore. However, there's also a sub-text and it's about the way the high-end is going in the US. These Herron products are surprisingly low-key and low-cost for American designs with genuine high-end aspirations. Yet their reputation places them in company with some of the most august and revered names around, in a market where reputation is everything.

Small, neat and nicely rather than ostentatiously finished, there's an air of self-contained competence about these products. Operationally there's also a refreshing lack of foibles, a calm confidence about the way they go about their business. Plenty of thought has gone into the facilities on offer, plenty of care into the casework, and that attention to detail extends to the electrical design and



performance parameters too. You just know that Keith Herron is one of those guys who'd be driven insane by switching noise or hum levels, unpredictable interfacing or a remote control that only works within touching distance of the unit's fascia. Technically, electrically and functionally there's only one word for these products and that's "sorted". Which, when it comes to the high-end, is all too rarely the case. I've already described the VTL TL7.5 as a benchmark product, waxing lyrical about its completeness as a design. The Herrons are smaller, cheaper and visually less substantial, but the underlying philosophy is exactly the

same: Expensive hi-fi, if it's to justify its price, needs to perform both sonically and functionally. Products that get weirder and wackier the more they cost are a dying breed, and it's products like these Herron pre-amps that are killing them off.

As I've said, both the VTSP-2 and HL-1 are identical in feel and function when purchased as line-stages. A large, oval volume level display dominates the centre of the front-panel, flanked by a pair of small, rotary controls for volume and balance. Either side of these are five push buttons with LED tell-tales above them. Switch them on and the unit identifies itself, flashes all its LEDs at you and then goes through a 60-second (30 in the HL-1) soft-start countdown, at the end of which it sets the volume level to 10. The volume range goes all the way to 100 and the numerals are large and super legible. The five left-hand buttons select the five inputs, the ones on the right offer mono, mute, phase invert, tape monitoring and adjust the brightness of the display. Press the video button for two seconds and the input switches to unity gain for inclusion in a home-cinema set-up, the display letting you know what you've done. If there's anything else you're likely to need I can't think of it, and all these functions except balance and the unity gain option are available on the dinky little remote control. This works really well, but I can't help feeling that its propensity to disappear could prove frustrating!

Round the back there's RCA/phone sockets for the line inputs, tape ▶

▶ loop and two sets of main outputs. There's a ground post and in the case of the solid-state HL-1, the option to install an internal, fet-based MM/MC phono-stage. Sensitivity can be changed by holding down the phono selector switch on the front panel; once again, the unit identifies its setting and goes through a 20-second countdown. Both units also feature a rocker switch that enables the user to reverse the mains polarity. An often overlooked yet valuable tweak, I wish this facility was much more common.

Internally, the Herron products display similar clear thinking and attention to detail. Keith Herron prefers to keep his power supplies close to the components they're feeding, hence the one box logic.

micro-processor what it's controlling and away you go. As I've already intimated, both these units are a joy to use, but one thing stands out in particular. The volume control used for both the HL-1 and VTSP-2 tracks perfectly, even down to the lowest levels, the control logic is beautifully weighted and the display can be read from the other end of the house, let alone the listening seat. The fact that you can dim it means it doesn't even light up the room like cosmic afterglow (unless you want it to – or are still playing DSOTM on a regular basis).

time and that generates distortion: distortion alters the energy spectrum and that results in colouration. It's a circular logic that's as undeniable as the financial benefits of shared casework. The problem is in developing the circuits and products that deliver the linearity and phase coherence it demands. When Keith starts talking about "correcting distortion" and "the coloured tints of boutique capacitors" it's like an echo direct from the Welsh mountains. Above all he stresses accuracy and natural sound – and that's exactly what you'll hear.

Let's start with the cheaper, solid-state HL-1.

In a world where too many pre-amps seem to do more harm than good (why else would the bizarre obsession with passive controls survive?) the baby Herron is a breath of

fresh air. Here is a

unit that does everything right in operational terms and very little wrong in musical ones. Teamed with the Tom Evans amps it forms a spectacular partnership that is natural, open and musically forthright, in a wonderfully unobtrusive, unobstructed way. It simply lets the music get on with things. Indeed, for a long time I preferred its performance to that of its bigger brother. Further listening with the other amps on hand helped to sort out the true nature of the combination. The HL-1 majors on getting stuff in the right place at the right time. It is inviting and sweet, musically eager with a natural tonal balance that, if anything errs slightly to the warm and rounded whilst softening leading edges slightly, especially at low frequencies. Indeed, in many ways it sounds like an exceptionally good valve pre-amp, ▶



Likewise, input and output topology has been engineered specifically to avoid external interference with the audio circuitry. Internal interference is taken equally seriously, with circuit boards painstakingly designed and laid out by hand. The extensive micro-processor control circuitry is extensively shielded while the display elements and LEDs are constantly lit (rather than multiplexed) in order to avoid RF artefacts. The financial logic of sharing casework and control circuitry between two different products should be obvious. Simply change the main board, tell the

Well thought-out and superbly executed, it serves as a metaphor for the products as a whole.

At Keith Herron's insistence I tried his two pre-amps with a whole range of matching power amps, including those from VTL, Hovland, KR Audio and Jadis, but it was the Tom Evans Audio design Linear A and Bs that really clicked (and later, the RADIA, but more on that anon). Not surprising once you get talking to Keith about his design philosophy. He stresses three interlocking criteria: timing, neutrality and low-distortion. Get one wrong and you get a knock-on effect in the others. Colouration means spurious energy which disturbs timing; poor timing puts things in the wrong place at the wrong

▶ with its sense of colour and presence, broad soundstage, easy flow and expressive, responsive rhythmic quality. Team it with the super fast, super transparent and wonderfully even Linear A and you get just the lift it needs in terms of attack and immediacy.



It's a potent combination that punches well above its weight.

Turning instead to a worst case scenario, in this instance the KR Audio Antares (which is rather too similar in overall balance)

rhythmic snap and absolute transparency, underlining the pre-amp's ordered, even-handed and unflustered approach to music.

Believe me, this is a very good "worst case" indeed. Which tells us that the HL-1 represents that rarest of beasts, a full-facilities pre-amplifier that manages to sound excellent without costing a fortune. In fact, in sales terms, its greatest weakness might well be that it is so un-flashy and undemonstrative, exactly the areas in which the Linear A helps out. Add in the option of a very good, switchable



and even with a set-up that might be considered to provide rather too much of a few good things, the HL-1 manages to keep things together. Not as spectacularly and obviously successful as with the Linear A, listen longer and you realise that the Herron/KR combination actually only loses out in terms of

sensitivity internal phono-stage and you're looking at an audio bargain that delivers really solid musical values at a very realistic price, which places it in very select company indeed.

For a long time that's how this review was looking. In comparison to the HL-1's honesty and sense of presence, the tube driven VTSP-2, whilst offering greater resolution and neutrality, lacked the body and substance to compete. Admirable enough, it didn't quite quicken the pulse the way the easy lope of its solid-state brother did; didn't quite let the music breathe and live in the same way. Just as the

HL-1 seemed clothed in tube characteristics, so the VTSP-2 seemed to represent a beautifully turned out example of solid-state bland – nice, unquestionably polite but ultimately lacking musical balls.

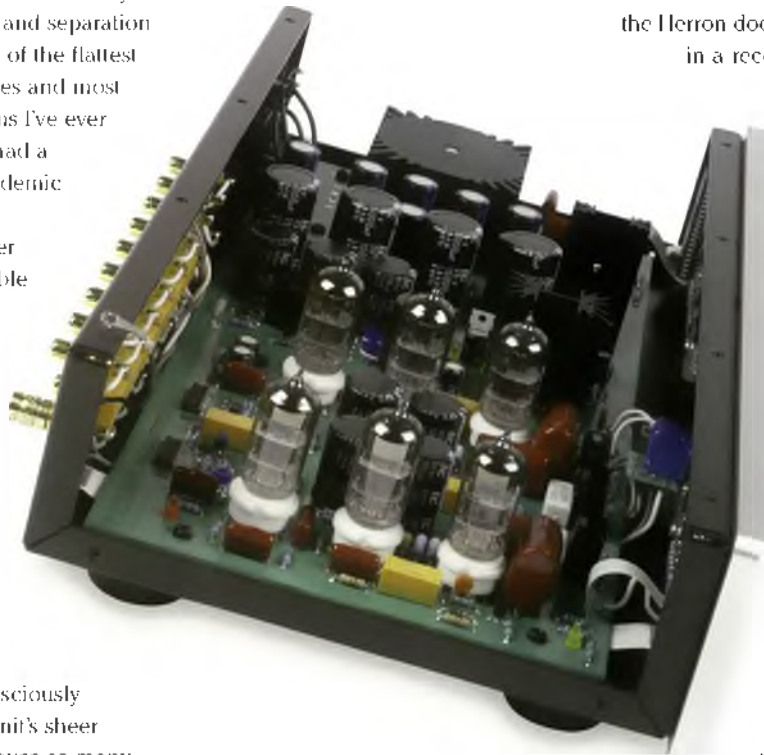
But then this review, which was originally scheduled for Issue 41, got held over. Which was just as well because in the intervening period of time a wonderful (but rather irritating) thing happened. Already well run-in, I didn't see the point in removing the Herrons from the system as there was room enough to accommodate them. That allowed them another couple of months of passing a signal, otherwise undisturbed. Returning once again for further listening before settling down to write this copy, imagine my surprise when the VTSP-2 promptly blew the HL-1 into the weeds. Now, nothing else had changed apart from one thing: cables, partnering amps and supports were all identical, as were the source components (Wadia 861SE and Kuzma Stabi XL/Airline and Lyra Titan). The one difference was the arrival of the Nola Pegasus, a speaker with greater bandwidth ▶

► and neutrality than the OBX-R2. This alone doesn't account for the change, although a swap back to the OBXs demonstrates that it makes it far more obvious. Instead, I can only conclude that the VTSP-2 has an unfeasibly long, undoubtedly inconvenient and unconscionably frustrating burn-in period. The only consolation is that the resulting performance is well worth the wait.

Whilst the tubed Herron always had detail, neutrality and separation to burn, allied to one of the flattest top to bottom balances and most even energy spectrums I've ever come across, it also had a restrained, almost academic stance that left music sounding rather matter of fact. As near invisible as any pre-amp I've used when it comes to tonal character, it simply seemed to lack the spark that fired music into life. Whilst I admired its positive qualities that ultimate shortcoming was easy to accept, perhaps even subconsciously associated with the unit's sheer accuracy, simply because so many super-accurate, super-flat pre-amps of the past have fallen at the very same hurdle.

Now though, the sound is very different indeed. The accuracy is there, as is the even-handed invisibility of the unit (accentuated by the increased bandwidth available from the Pegasus which underlines just how flat the VTSP-2 is, from very bottom to extreme top) but whereas before it was almost as if the pre-amp was standing astride the signal, subtly muting its dynamic expression and rhythmic windings, now it's as if it has simply stepped aside. Music

flows and pulses in an utterly natural and unrestrained way that brings performances to life, imbues instruments with energy and vibrance to fill out and illuminate their harmonic shades and structures. The bass goes deeper, with more weight and dynamic range, the mid-band is more transparent and focussed, cleaner and more immediate. The walking bass that underpins Steve Dawson's soul



homage 'Love Is a Blessing' is deep and mobile, the notes natural and tactile as they establish the funkier of grooves. The duet that centres the meltingly beautiful 'Sweet Is The Anchor' is effortlessly and deftly separated, drawing the last ounce of expression from its fragile delicacy, without disturbing or intruding on its almost telepathic inner balance.

And so the examples go, from the deepest bass, right through the mids and up to the highest treble, time and again instruments and voices take on a new independence and

identity, almost as if the Herron pre-amp is freeing them from the constraints of the system and recording. I've heard this before from the Connoisseur 4.0, a line-stage that brings recordings close to reality. The Herron can't match the esoteric Japanese unit's presence intensity of energy and life, but then the Connoisseur can't match the VTSP-2's versatility or remote control and costs three to four times as much. But what the Herron does is allow the elements in a recording their own

identity, separate from the fabric that constitutes the sound. Or to put it another way, rather than presenting the music, which is constituted from these various instruments or voices, it delivers those instruments and voices and allows them together, to create the music. That might sound like a semantic nicety, but think about what it means. Suddenly, each player's intention and contribution is writ clear, his or her part in

the whole laid bare, whilst at the same time, the chemistry thus revealed keeps the whole greater than the sum of the parts. The results are impressive, engaging and informative in equal measure, allowing the listener full rein to explore the complexities or simply beauty, whatever the music. The holistic quality this brought to the music is shared by and proved spectacularly compatible with the RADIA, a combination that had sounded thin and bleached before ►

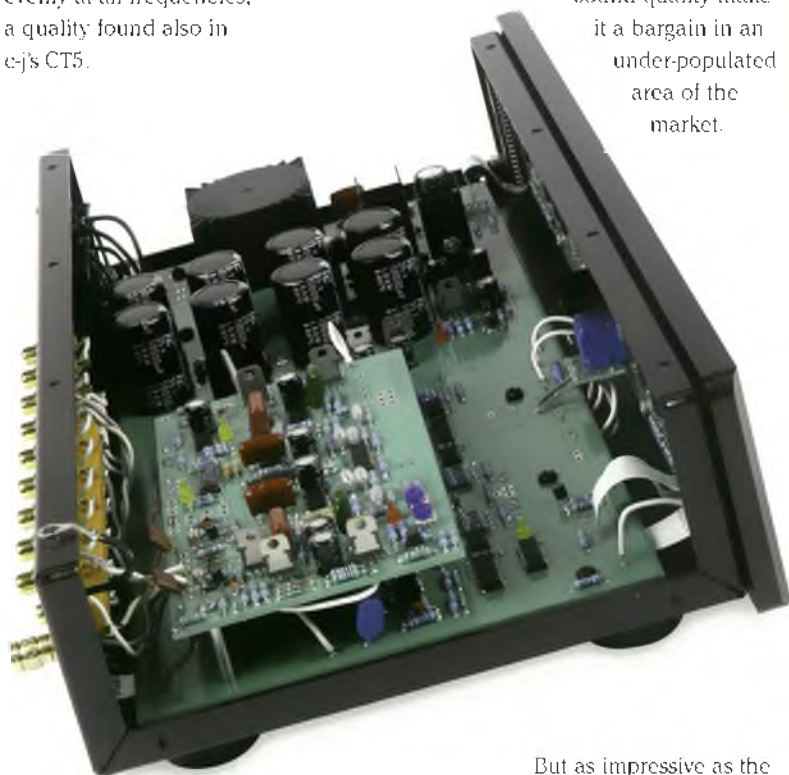
▶ the Herron's transformation. Now, the life and colour of the pre-amp seemed preserved by the power amp's articulate delicacy, creating music of breathtaking yet utterly unforced intimacy.

The best products have a sense of inner balance that keeps the music in proportion. That ruler flat top to bottom linearity and neutrality are built on the ability to project energy evenly at all frequencies, a quality found also in e-j's CT5.

putting the music ahead of its means of reproduction.

These two units offer convincing yet contrasting performances that defy the presuppositions that attend their different technologies. The HL-1 is an engaging and entertaining performer that backs up its enthusiasm with a solid technical and operational basis. Its unusual combination of

versatility and honest sound quality make it a bargain in an under-populated area of the market.



The Herron can't match the sheer substance and vivid colours of the connee-j but it exceeds its resolution and separation as well as its instrumental textures, while the evenness of its more modest dynamic impact still allows it to project convincing dynamic shadings, swings and authority. Its naturalness extends to its stereo perspective, with broad spacing of images and convincing depth that suggests actual placement rather than a reconstructed acoustic. Once again we find the Herron

But as impressive as the HL-1 undoubtedly is, there's a quality to the VTSP-2 that sets it apart as something really rather special. Its sonic invisibility allows the subtle textural details in a recording to emerge, delicate facets that let the music breathe, conjuring the instruments and singers to life. There's an immediacy and directness to performances, a lack of obstruction or interpretive fabric to distract or confuse the listener. For once, accuracy is not a dirty word. Just be aware that you'll need similarly fastidious ancillaries to enjoy the full compass of the VTSP-2's performance.

It's burgeoning reputation is well deserved, even if the reasons for it might not be immediately apparent on first acquaintance.



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Herron HL-1

Type:	Solid state pre amplifier
Inputs:	6x inc-level (RCA/phonol) 1x MM/MC phono (optional)
Input Impedance:	100 kOhms
Gain:	14dB 44dB (MM, 47 kOhms) 64dB (MC, 47kOhms)
Outputs:	2x main out (RCA/phonol) 1x tape out (RCA/Phono)
Output Impedance:	250 Ohms

Herron VTSP-2

Type:	Vacuum-tube line-stage
Tube Component:	6x 6922
Inputs:	6x line level (RCA/phonol)
Input Impedance:	100 kOhms
Gain:	14dB
Outputs:	2x main out (RCA/phonol) 1x tape out (RCA/Phono)
Output Impedance:	100 Ohms

Both

Dimensions (WxHxD): 458 x 89 x 267mm

Finishes:	Black or Silver
Prices:	
VTSP-2	\$4995
HL1	\$3495 (\$4995 inc. optional phono stage)

Manufacturer:

Herron Audio
Tel: (001) 314 434 5416
Fax: (001) 314 434 6629
Net: www.herronaudio.com

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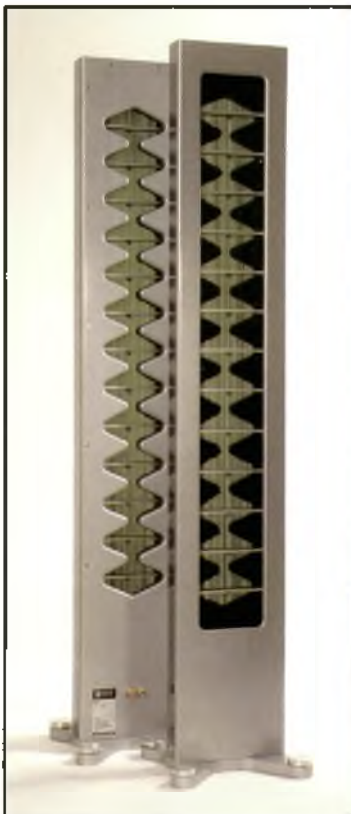
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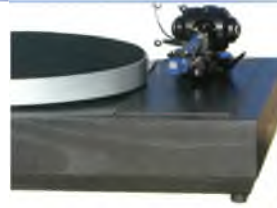
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The Arcam FMJ CD36 CD Player

by Alan Sircom

Arcam's had a busy few years. First, there was the management buy-out, then came the Solo, Arcam's new direction product. Now comes the slew of new product revitalising the existing lines. The CD36 is just one of those products. But not quite.

You see, the CD36 is Arcam's FMJ player, the Full Metal Jacket design, the flagship CD player from a company that – for the last decade and a half at least – has set the benchmark for CD spinning at \$1,500 and below. The CD36 comes in at £1400, hardly 'flagship' by Hi-Fi+ standards, where we will happily fork out as much for a reference-quality mains lead, but nevertheless, the CD36 represents the stratospherically high end for the vast majority of hi-fi buyers. What's more, to these impecunious, cash-strapped or maybe just canny enthusiasts, Arcam (the brand) represents the pinnacle of what British hi-fi is all about, these days; no-nonsense product, designed and built in the UK (or, sometimes, designed in the UK, built in China) to produce the best possible sound, without fancy design frills or superfluous extra features. And Arcam doesn't disappoint on the build quality or basic design fronts; remote aside, unless you look closely, you'd be hard-pressed to spot the differences between this player and any FMJ model of the 21st Century or before.

But it's what's under the skin that counts. Or even, the skin itself. Arcam's FMJ casing does great things for the performance of the player, even before the internal gubbins are taken into account. That solid, heavy and critically damped Acusteel casework now sports

what Arcam calls Stealth Mat technology. This internal meshing (claimed to come from stealth fighters) is used to help damp electromagnetic nasties from raising the noise floor, as well as making aspects of the CD36 invisible to radar (always a useful bonus).

You can only go so far with a chassis. You need to have good electronics to back it up. Arcam doesn't disappoint here, too. The power stage has been radically rethought, with 10 different



supplies feeding key sections of the player, with a pair of toroidal transformers feeding the DAC section and the control stage. Mechanical shielding, used to keep sensitive components magnetically unsullied, further enhances the isolation of power supplies. Coupled with that Acusteel chassis, this effectively eliminates any noise – mechanical or electrical – that could emanate from the transport mechanism.

The key to any good CD player is its DAC. Arcam uses a quartet of Wolfson WM8740 converters on a four-layer PCB. These use analogue averaging in an effort to lower distortion and raise linearity. The DAC then upsamples to 192kHz, 24-bit, the supposed gold

standard filtration for CD replay. Factor in a third-harmonic clock oscillator to deliver low jitter, very precise data-streams and its clear Arcam mean business, here. As a bonus, the player even supports CD-text, even if this particular optional extra seems pointless to most audiophiles, as the function came with the transport, it's good of Arcam to include it.

Like almost all Arcam players to date, the CD36 hardly bristles with outputs, but it keeps the basics covered. The player sports two sets of phono analogue outputs alongside coaxial (phono) electrical and optical (Toslink) digital outputs. There is no provision for XLR balanced connection; this has not been a problem with most Arcam amps until recently, although the latest top end Arcam pre/power sport balanced connections. But, for those wanting to stick the CD36 into a multiroom setting or wish to use it with fancy Crestron-esque remotes, the player does sport two remote mini-jacks.

Perhaps the biggest physical change has been to the remote control. Fortunately, Arcam abandoned its truly awful long, thin and ready to fall apart remote some years back. The new one – similarly long and thin – is more like the one used by Linn and Loewe these days and is far more intuitive, easy to navigate and the buttons won't fall down the sofa so readily. This is no small change to the Arcam ergonomics; the older remotes were so poor, alternatives (such as physically moving) were deployed. But such things cannot be countenanced in the 21st Century. ►

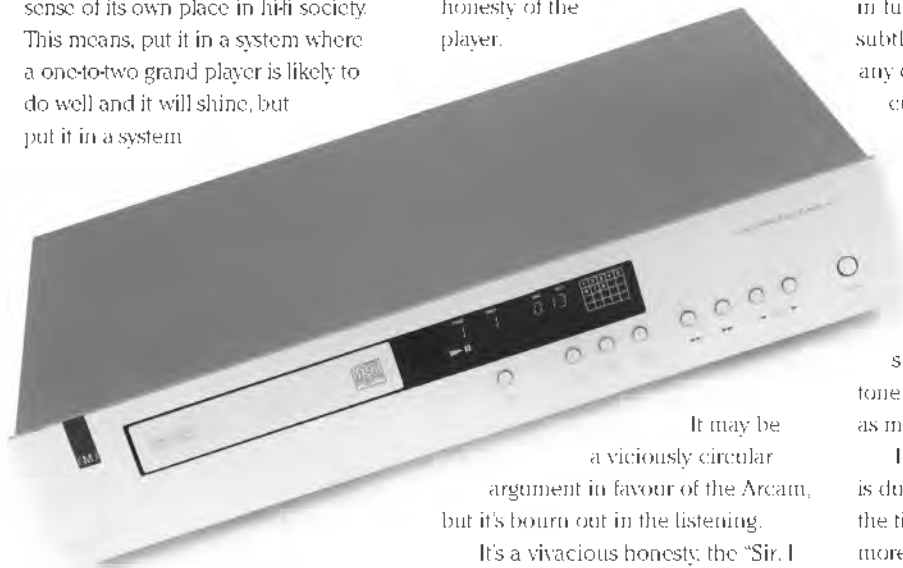
▶ as that would constitute exercise, which as everyone knows is currently outlawed by the Couch Potato Institute.

It may read more like 1926 than 2006, but the Arcam CD36 is the perfect manservant, the Jeeves of 16-bit audio. It tries to surpass itself, yet has an innate sense of its own place in hi-fi society. This means, put it in a system where a one-to-two grand player is likely to do well and it will shine, but put it in a system

a contradiction in terms because the two are rarely bed-fellows, but here the two are almost oxymoronic. There is no way you would be able to think of the honesty of the Arcam without thinking of its lively nature, and yet that lively sound springs from the honesty of the player.

Then, there's the dynamic range of the player. Put simply: in the right setting, the scale of the player is such that it leaves you with nothing to discuss, it simply does all that's asked of it... and then some. It manages to swing the huge swells of an orchestra in full Tchaikovsky, brings out the subtle nuances of voice and guitar on any of those moody singer-songwriters currently popular (the ones that all get annoying at once, usually when you are sitting in Starbucks, the ones with the middle name 'Bloody', like Damien 'Bloody' Rice or James 'Bloody' Blunt). Best of all, it also deals with those subtle changes in the shape and tone of sounds, commonly referred to as micro-dynamics.

Part of this micro-dynamic resolution is due to the way a CD player controls the timing of the digital data, but on a more prosaic level, it's down to sheer detail retrieval.



It may be a viciously circular argument in favour of the Arcam, but it's borne out in the listening.

It's a vivacious honesty: the "Sir, I cannot tell a lie" vivacity that will endear the Arcam player to all who hear it in the right context. People assume honesty is a passive element in

where a five grand player should sit, and you may hear where the extra four grand would have been put to good use.

It's petty to destroy this player for not being an Audio Research, a Wadia or a Townshend; it doesn't pitch itself against those lofty icons... it's merely the top end player of a company best known for good, honest mid-priced players. And, viewed in that context, it does exceptionally well.

At the helm of a system costing around \$5,000, the Arcam more than delivers the goods. It's preternaturally neutral, delivering a tonal accuracy and honesty that is utterly without artifice or sheen. It merely tells it like it is, without grace or favour. But, also without that boring, flat and vaguely tired sound many honest-sounding players at the price turn in. It may be tonally accurate, but it accurately sparkles when playing music of all waters. 'Lively honesty' sounds like



It's here that the Arcam excels. It pulls more information off the disc than its peers; even if the likes of the Cyrus CD8x appear to deliver more detail, this player has a better overall tonal balance, suggesting the detail retrieval of the singing shoebox is pitched slightly treble-wards by comparison. Here, it digs into the pits of the disc like a Shakespearean actor doing his best ex-Nazi dentist impression. Everything is exposed, which can be raw in the wrong system, but also ▶

a product's sonic arsenal; it is something that, by stripping away all those layers or artificiality just occurs as a by-product. This product demonstrates that is incorrect and that it's something to strive toward. The honesty here is active and comes out of the interest and excitement this player engenders in the listener.

▷ means the Arcam leads the data-hound field at the price point.

This makes itself clear in the way it manages to delve into comparatively difficult vocal passages and serves up some articulation to help. Tom Waits at his 'the piano has been drinking' slurriness, Bob Dylan at his most nasally-protesty... all delivered accurately and with greater understanding. I'll hold back on saying it makes sense of Joseph Spence or Wesley Willis – no player's good enough to make sense of Willis' 'The Chicken Cow', or what lyrics Spence thought he was singing when vamping to 'Santa Claus is Coming to Town' – but non-schizophrenic singers are well resolved, at least.

Perhaps more than any simple identifier, the soundstaging of the player sets it apart from its peers. The Arcam presents a wonderful image from a well-recorded CD: the sound is wide of the speakers, both deep and capable of coming forward (a very rare quality at this price, most CD players here tend to stay at or behind the speakers, Arcam manages to place images right into your lap and back past the limits of your room. Soundstage height is also well dealt with, the size and depth of the orchestra is dealt with perfectly, with a great deal of layering in the soundstage that makes you feel like you are sitting in the seventh or eighth row of the stalls.

It's strange, rhythm is not strong on the notebook, but the player would not be considered to be out of pace with the best. Instead, it merely lacks that driven, almost overpowering sense of rhythm that permeates those who make a big play of temporal aspects of sound. Perhaps if your sole aim in music is to delineate the beat, pushing every other aspect to a distant second, the Arcam will not make first choice in your selection process. But, again this is about balance, and those who

consider the detail, dynamics, imagery and articulation to be on a par with the rhythm will appreciate the Arcam all the more.

Context is all, here. That honesty becomes too stark in the wrong setting, the sparkle is swamped in others and the easy, unforced dynamics can sound bland.



Worse, the stereo separation the Arcam strives so hard to deliver so well can be cast aside. Under these circumstances, the Arcam player shows its limits. It has such an absence of character, this can come back to haunt the player when some character is required (as in cheaper systems requiring a lift) or expected (such as high-end systems that demand more than just accuracy). But, perhaps this is using the Arcam out of context.

What's missing compared to the very best players is a better sense of musical coherence, but only just. It's this 'just' that justifies (pun sort of intended) the difference between a player costing as much as the Arcam and one costing as much as a BMW. The Arcam's overall coherence is very good, extremely good for the money. But, where the Arcam makes individual instruments sound coherent within a musical piece, the very best players have a form of meta-coherence where

the individual instruments work together as a cohesive unit and the music takes on another level of fidelity. This is a very subtle, transitory thing and not something that can be in any way expected from equipment outside the high-end. It's why if you compared this player against an Audio Research CD3 Mk II through a £1000 amp and a pair of \$500 speakers, you might not hear much of a difference in performance between the two, but if you did the same test through \$10000 worth of amplification and \$5000 speakers, you would be able to parse the changes instantly.

This shouldn't put anyone off the Arcam CD36, though, unless you are planning to use it as a high-end giant killer. For more level-headed and balanced systems, the Arcam represents the acme of current thinking. This is the player that sets the standard for the majority, the player for anyone who wants the best sound without the encumbrances of being an audiophile. ▷+

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Integrated CD Player
Formats Supported:	CD, CD-R/RW, CD-Text
Chipset:	4x Wolfson WM8740 DACs
Outputs:	1pr RCA/phono Analogue 1x RCA co-axial digital 1x TosLink optical digital
Output Level:	2V
Dimensions (WxDxD):	430 x 85 x 290mm
Weight (net):	6.5kg
Finish:	Silver
Price:	£1400

Manufacturer:

Arcam
Tel. (44)01223 203200
Net. www.arcam.co.uk



The JAS Orsa Loudspeaker

by Chris Thomas

I have been expecting this product to arrive for a while now. Not this exact one you understand, but one very, very like it. Over the past couple of years it has become increasingly obvious that the Chinese have both the technology and the financial clout, due in part to cheap labour costs, to start making some serious inroads into the cosy audio markets dominated by Europe, Japan and the US. Their problem has been that, although the products have always looked good and the pricing has been ultra competitive, they just have not been up to it sonically: Almost – but not quite.

Bear in mind though that here I am talking about those components designed and built by Chinese companies and marketed as such and not those built in China for UK or European-based outfits, of which there are more and more. When I reviewed the Aurum Cantus loudspeaker about a year ago I was left feeling that, sound wise, it was very close to being right and when the Chinese companies did finally crack it there would be a few worried looks on the faces of the directors of companies who designed and built their products here. Put simply, the overall quality and finish of the Chinese goods are exemplary and very hard, if not impossible, for any existing market to compete with price-wise. As soon as the JAS Orsa emerged from its box I wondered if this would be the speaker that would finally convince me that the Chinese could build a truly excellent sounding product. It has all the credentials.

JAS were founded back in 2002 in Hong Kong by a group of audio enthusiasts who wanted to build high-end products for budget prices. Heard it before? Of course we have. In the UK it is a pipedream as has been proved over and over. But in China, armed with such low production costs, it had a chance of becoming reality and now, only three years later, it might well have done so. The Orsa is one of a series of loudspeakers and tube amplifiers from JAS that are now being imported into the UK.

The first thing that hits you when you extract them from the impressive packaging is the sheer amount of lacquer that the Chinese consistently and liberally apply to their loudspeaker cabinets. To me the review samples look like a birds-eye maple, the kind of finish you might well see on a Japanese electric guitar of the 80's. Furniture guitars I call them and with such lustrous depth of shine the Orsas do carry more than a hint of furniture about them. There are of course other rather less obvious finishes available and of those I have seen in pictures, the rosewood looks a more restrained option. But I have to say here that, despite my personal reservations, others loved their piano-like glossy boldness. I wonder if they offer a plain matt black?

This is an unusual two-way stand-mount design that provides each driver with its own cabinet, bolted together and separated by 4 half-inch spacers. To my eyes these should be black but, in keeping with the statement made by the gleaming finish, are in a rather garish gold. Thankfully they are not too obvious. The lower, larger cabinet houses a 6-inch treated paper-coned Morel bass/mid driver on its angled

front baffle, while tapered, bevelled edging lightens its appearance considerably. The top box carries the unit that totally defines the quality of the Orsa, a deep-throated aluminium LCY twin-ribbon tweeter. Unusually and possibly uniquely, both cabinets are vented by opposing ports firing into the slot between them. This seems to help when it comes to the positioning of the speaker near room boundaries and may go some way to explaining the excellent, broad dispersion of the ribbon which is the first I have heard that has both real high frequency extension and "air" yet does not beam in the horizontal or the vertical.

To the rear there are a pair of quite excellent gold-plated WBT-type connectors, which allow for the connection of just about any cable configuration with any termination while internally the wiring is solid silver. Rather more surprising is the presence of a switch, operated by a key, ►



► which allows the speakers to be set in either Reference or Dynamic mode. Even more intriguing is the fact that no mention of this is made in the manual. A little investigation revealed that while Reference is the standard setting, Dynamic reduces the impedance between 2-3.5Khz giving a more forward shape to the sound



Pathos Classic hybrid though, judging by their catalogue. I believe that the JAS designers probably envisaged them being used with an all tube integrated design.

Siting them is fairly straightforward. I used them about two and a half feet from the rear

wall although they will work with as little as a foot if space is tight, but the distance between them is critical. In my room they liked to be closer together than the Micros with less toe-in and I would urge lots of experimentation. Very small changes bring huge differences in the clarity of the sound-stage, but once you get them right the whole left and right of the picture clicks into coherent focus. But too close and they become congested through the mid-band.

The manual recommends a 200-hour burn-in period so when you first fire them up don't be surprised that there is very little bass. But that tweeter leaves you in no doubt that when the bass finally does get going you are going to be listening to something a bit special. This is a great little driver by any standards and has much more in common with the superb beryllium unit in the JMLabs Utopia Be range than any tweeter you are likely to find in other comparatively priced speakers. It too will grow both looser and more refined with use but it has such open and expansive clarity and so little compressive

harshness, even from new, that it literally breathes life into the sound. In fact the Orsa will need all of the recommended run-in time to really come up to full bandwidth strength and speed and even then they always seem balanced slightly on the light side. But this again is likely due to the impressive amounts of detail, uncompressed energy and pure high frequency extension that this tweeter excels at.

I have always liked Fourplay and though their studio recordings are mite over-produced there are few bands that can move so effortlessly through a technically demanding piece with quite the same sense of calm. *Heartfelt* (BMG 63916-2) is not the easiest of discs for most mid-priced systems to cope with.

It often sounds far too processed with the top of the drum kit in particular sounding thin and splashy. The title track is a mood piece that moves very gently through a number of subtle tempo shifts and features some great understated playing.



The Orsa allows so much space between the instruments and so much insight into where and when each player contributes. Liberal amounts of digital reverb enhances the broad, deep soundstage while at the same time removing any semblance. ►

and apparently, lower noise. Having switched between them many times and noted the subtlety of the changes I'm not sure that this is a necessary inclusion. I left them in Reference mode and found that there was more variation and reward to be found in their positioning than in this switch.

No stands were supplied but they are a perfect fit on the JMLabs Micro-Utopia Be stands. In fact their dimensions and general size are very close to the Micros and their tonal balance and efficiency are both very similar too and as the JMs are my home speaker it was perhaps inevitable that, despite the large price differential, comparisons were made: But more of that later. The amplifiers I chose to drive them with were the solid-state Moon i-5, which has become something of a reference product for me and the sweet little

► of a natural acoustic. But this only adds to the atmosphere. There is delicacy, tonality and texture to the guitar, piano and cymbals and though the time changes are low tempo you will notice with the Orsa that they are often accompanied by very gentle instrumental pushes or just a slight increase in playing pressure from a band member.

I was slightly disappointed with the bass which I thought was a mite too soft at times and this could rob the music of its foundation. Because, although the Orsa has decent low frequency extension for its cabinet size and is generally fine through the lower mid-band it just needs that bit more shape and control in the low bass. This, plus the fact that it is so very good

at the opposite frequency extreme tends to throw this into sharp relief more often. But, having said this, I am also mindful that the review pair are still relatively new and may well improve in this area over the coming months.

I normally end up with an Alison Krauss CD playing before too long and her collaboration with Union Station on *Lonely Runs Both Ways* (RRCD-525) will give any system a severe workout. This is another studio album but with big, booming acoustic guitar chords, string bass, close vocals and the Dobro of Jerry Douglas pushing into the room. The Orsa was startlingly good on the opening track as, after her vocal intro over some lovely guitar picking, the band kicks in and the drummer strikes that first cymbal. It should breathe a sustained open-mouthed metallic shimmer and not just sizzle as I hear from so many speakers. Here it was very impressive, right from initial impact and through its

natural decay. And it has a feeling of complete independence and clarity that extends well down and gives the Orsa an enviable sense of vocal and instrumental articulation, helped by the tight and focussed soundstage. It also helps with its rhythmic agility too, which is generally very composed. But there are a couple of areas that this CD highlights the Orsa's limitations. Pump too much high tempo

mid-band information through them and there is some confusion and they slightly lose that rhythmic focus that, on less demanding music, seems so solid. It seems to occur though in quite a narrow frequency band.

I also noticed it on other material, particularly close-miked recordings, where you could lose track of some musical threads as the complexity of the arrangement grew.

But I really don't want to make too much of this. The Orsa is such a good all round speaker that I often found myself comparing it with my Micro Utopias Be's which is both totally unfair given the large price disparity yet still a compliment. But, in so many ways, they do remind me of the JM's. Their tonal balance, sensitivity and general bandwidth is very similar and they both have superb, open, textural tweeters. The JM is much more refined of course, has considerably more top to bottom body and strength and harmonic development is quite a bit better. But, put the price differential into the equation and the Orsa begins to look pretty awesome value for money.

In some ways it always feels more rewarding to review a product that punches above its weight and this is



a special little speaker that sets a price/performance yardstick that is hard to beat. That tweeter really defines them and sets them apart and although they work extremely well with this Morel bass/mid driver I could easily imagine this ribbon finding its way into speakers costing thousand of pounds more than this one. It gives the Orsa a real sense of class and means that they can operate successfully on the end of a much better source and amplification set-up. At the end of this review I hooked them up with a very high quality pre/power combination and was very impressed with the way they responded. The speaker easily accommodated the mega increase in dynamic information and some of my criticisms lessened, sorting the mid-band and tightening the bass a little. No, the Orsa isn't perfect, but find me a speaker, at anywhere near the price, that doesn't have even starker limitations

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Stand mounted, 2-way, 2 box reflex loaded
Drivers:	11cm Aluminium twin ribbon tweeter 16cm Treated paper cone bass mid driver.
Sensitivity:	88db
Impedance:	8ohm nominal
Connections:	2 gold plated 4mm/binding posts
Crossover:	2400Hz.
Dimensions (HxWxD):	42x23x34cm.
Finishes available:	Check with importer.
Price:	£1399 per pair.

UK Distributor:

Shadow Audio.
Tel: (44)(0)1592 744 779.
Fax: (44)(0)1592 744 710.
Net: www.shadowaudio.co.uk

Manufacturer:

IAS Audio, Hong Kong.
Net: www.ias-audio.com





The Focal-JMLab Profile 918 Loudspeaker

by Paul Messenger

Dozens of speaker brands are busy competing for our attention, but few have the resources or expertise to match France's number one exponent of the art, Focal-JMLab. The company might not be sure what to call itself these days, hence the double-barrelled name, but a little confusion over nomenclature only highlights a history of rapid growth and burgeoning reputation. It actually started out as Focal, making raw drivers for sale to other speaker builders (such as Wilson Audio) and for the in-car aftermarket. Later on it began making its own complete speaker systems, introducing the JMLab name (after founder and chief engineer Jacques Mahul) to keep the operation separate from its OEM business. This has proved so successful – JMLab is now number two amongst European manufacturers – the company has virtually ceased supplying drivers to other brands, and has started reverting to the Focal name for all its products.

Since its roots are firmly planted in drive unit country, where the company can claim responsibility for a number of substantial innovations, it's not that surprising that the engineering and marketing of its speaker systems has also focused on that driver technology, ahead of factors like industrial design and enclosure styling. Until now, that is, because the new mid-price Profile series, which includes this \$2,000/pair floorstanding 918, feature styling that is strikingly original as well as attractively discreet.

There are just three Profile stereo pairs so far: alongside the 918, there's a larger three-way 928, and a 908 stand-mount. (There's also an SW908

subwoofer and a CC908 centre channel.) As a group they sit in the middle of the five ranges of speakers, above the Chorus and Cobalt models, but beneath the Electras and Utopias. In fact they've actually taken over market slots that were previously occupied by the last series of Electra models, because the Electras have just been completely redesigned and moved upmarket, reflecting the fact that they now come equipped with a beryllium dome tweeter and a Be suffix.

What you get with the Profile 918 is a speaker that borrows some of the drive unit technology originally developed for the Electras, and combines this with a newly developed aluminium/magnesium alloy dome tweeter, and an impressively elegant enclosure. In configuration it's a port-loaded two-and-a-half-way design, based around two similar (but not identical) 165mm cone drivers. The upper bass/mid driver has a 40mm voice-coil and a specially shaped concave pole-piece extension to smooth the sound up near the top of its operating range. The lower bass-only driver, operating below 180Hz, has a 32mm voice-coil and a conventional concave dust cover. Both these drivers use Focal's proprietary 'W-sandwich' cone technology, which combines layers of woven glassfibre and structural foam to achieve the optimum

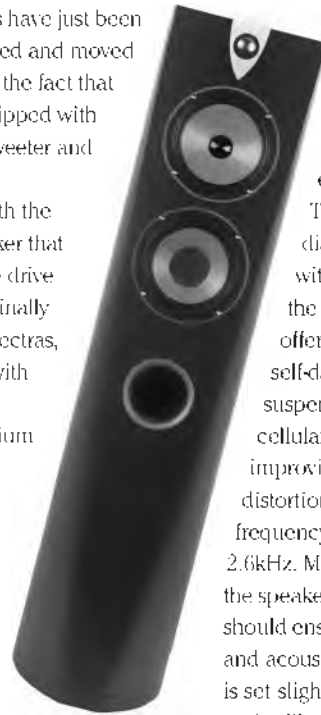
blend of stiffness and damping for the specific application.

The new tweeter follows the Focal tradition in using an inverted (concave) dome diaphragm, which has several potential advantages over the conventional convex dome approach, notably the ability to use a smaller diameter

voice coil, which lowers the inductance and hence increases the bandwidth, reduces the coil mass and also transfers its motion more evenly to the diaphragm.

The earlier Electras used a diaphragm made from titanium with an oxide surface layer, but the aluminium/magnesium alloy offers similar stiffness with superior self-damping. The surround/suspension is now made from a cellular urethane foam called Poron, improving linearity, lowering distortion, and allowing the crossover frequency to be moved down to 2.6kHz. Mounted right at the top of the speaker on a cast alloy shield that should ensure fine mechanical integrity and acoustic distribution, the tweeter is set slightly forward from the baffle and grille, presumably to assist time-alignment.

The enclosure is arguably the most interesting feature of all. Viewed from above, it has a curvaceously elliptical base, but the top surface is just a semi-ellipse, as its front half has been cut away to accommodate a backward-tilted front panel that slices only the tiniest arc out of the base. The grille is cunningly shaped to make this flat driver-mounting front baffle look concave, while the tweeter is left exposed at the top. ▶



► Some brands create curved cabinetwork by cutting a series of small fillets out of one side of an MDF sheet in order to wrap it into a curve, but Focal believe this approach severely compromises the mechanical integrity of the enclosure, so instead it forms the enclosures by using layers of 2.5mm MDF that are thin and flexible enough to be bent into shape and then laminated together. Connection is made via a single pair of high quality



WBT terminals, fitted conveniently low down on the rear (Focal don't believe in

bi-wiring). The base accommodates four spikes, which are rather inadequately fixed by difficult-to-tighten thumbwheels, and didn't really have a sufficiently large footprint to aid stability – a diamond layout rather than a square might have worked better here.

In-room measurements more or less confirm the manufacturer's claims, with sensitivity generous enough at around 90dB but somewhat compromised by the very low minimum impedance. (Quite how anyone can claim 8 ohms

nominal impedance alongside 3.2 ohms minimum remains a total mystery!) Indeed, on my measurement the impedance actually drops a little below 3 ohms at 100Hz, a figure that could well pose problems for some amplifiers. The port is tuned to a low 30Hz here, so good bass extension is pretty well guaranteed, and the in-room far-field traces show a fine overall bass alignment, provided the speakers are kept well clear of walls. Indeed, while the overall response could be smoother, it's pretty well ordered right across the band – except through the presence region, either side of the crossover point, where there was an obvious lack of output, notably between 2kHz and 4kHz.

That lack of presence energy is a crucial factor that does much to define the character of the Profile 918. The inevitable consequence is a sound which is fundamentally laid back and restrained, for all its fine qualities elsewhere. There's plenty of fine detail here, because the treble proper is strong, clean and sweet, helping to provide those leading edges that supply much of the vital information about instrumental timbre and musicianship. The presence restraint has two obvious consequences. On the one hand it does allow aggressively recorded material to be played at high levels without sounding unpleasantly edgy – great for playing System of a Down at the sort of volume it deserves! At the same time, low-level speech is a little compromised, requiring slightly higher volume settings than usual for full intelligibility.

The bass and midrange might not be particularly smooth, but it is beautifully well ordered, with a natural neutrality that deftly avoids emphasising any particular instruments when reproducing orchestral material. Cellos are given due weight and warmth, yet there's no tendency towards thickening or honk, while the main voice band is also refreshingly free from colorations.

Indeed, the complex cabinet

construction is undoubtedly very successful in minimising any boxiness and keeping coloration under tight control, while also promoting fine 'out-of-the-box' stereo imaging, all of which lends itself particularly well to naturally recorded classical material.

The Profile 918 is above all a relaxing speaker to live with, as well as to look at. There's something very non-threatening about the tilted back styling and rounded enclosure, and this is bound to win it a good share of friends in the marketplace. Whether the laid back presence will be as well received is harder to assess – it's a little too restrained for my personal taste, though my partner was much more complimentary, and as ever personal taste comes into the frame. The top-end – long a Focal strength – is strong but notably sweet, while the broad bass and mid-band are impressively neutral and free from boxy effects. There remain grounds for criticism over the difficult load through the bass region, and the rather ineffective spike arrangements, but on balance this speaker has much to commend it, particularly to those who prefer equipment that is discreet and undemanding. ➤

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Two-and-a-half-way, floorstanding loudspeaker
Bandwidth:	40 – 30,500 Hz ±3dB
Sensitivity:	(2.83V/1m) 90dB
Power Handling:	200 watts
Nominal Impedance:	8 ohms
Minimum Impedance:	3.2 ohms
Crossover Frequencies:	180Hz, 2,600Hz
Dimensions (HxWxD):	990 x 230 x 350 mm
Weight:	19.5kg
Finishes:	Classic, Style, Signature
Price:	£2,000/pair

UK Distributor:

Focal-JMLab (UK) Ltd
Tel: 0845 660 2680
Net: www.focal-fi.com



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The MonoPulse 42A Loudspeaker

by Paul Messenger

I doubt many listeners will have encountered MonoPulse, as it's a relatively new operation, and consequently still has only limited distribution. It's yet another start-up company hoping to achieve success in a crowded loudspeaker marketplace, but at least this is one example that includes much more than its fair share of originality.

The man behind the brand is Allan Hendry, a hi-fi enthusiast of long-standing, but one who has spent much of his working life as an engineer working in the field of pulsed, phased-array radar systems. That background, in which phase relationships and coherence are a prime ingredient, provided the inspiration to experiment with loudspeakers, and to try and achieve a design which placed the maintenance of phase linearity high up the list of priorities, including the problematic crossover transition. The ultimate consequence was the decision to manufacture the range of MonoPulse loudspeakers for commercial sale.

The range today is made more complex by variations and options, but basically consists of four models, codenamed 22, 32, 42 and 82, all based around a common engineering and cosmetic theme but growing progressively larger. The 20 litre 32A was the first to come to my attention, some two and a half years ago, and about six months back I tried the larger 40 litre 42A for the first time. Both impressed me a great deal with the sheer vividness of their music making – "the shock of reality" was how I described that original 32A.

For all its virtue, I did have one or two criticisms when I initially tried the 42A. Allan has taken these on board, and made a minor crossover change to increase the relative treble output by about 1.5dB. He has also recently increased the price to £1,295/pair.

Although the speaker remains decent enough material value for money, irrespective of sound quality judgements.

The cosmetics are very unconventional. Our samples came finished largely in black cloth, with grey foam covering the back and a silver steel inverted-U wrap reinforcing the sides; a wide variety of options, including a choice of ten colours for the full height grille, are available. The basic carcass is MDF, almost square in plan cross-section, and the whole thing is damped and reinforced by the etched, rolled steel wrap. This is 7mm thick and 100mm deep, and undoubtedly contributes to the very solid build and 28kg total weight. A vibration-damping steel bar is set into the front panel, either inside or outside the grille, to break up that panel's main vibration mode. The whole thing sits on little steel feet that accommodate 8mm spikes and keep the ported base clear of the floor. Although it's quite tall and not particularly deep, the whole thing feels reassuringly stable.

In engineering terms this is a large, 40 litre two-way, port-loaded through its base. It has a 210mm bass/mid driver – significantly larger than today's norm. This uses a moulded frame and doped paper cone, and is positioned vertically very close to the 25mm fabric dome tweeter. The latter is mounted on its own sub-baffle, set back by a small but precise amount, in order to establish the precise phase integrity. The twin terminal pairs on the rear, permitting bi-wiring or bi-amping, seemed a rather slack fit for my 4mm plugs.

The spec claims a generous sensitivity of 92dB, alongside an easy (minimum 7 ohms) amplifier load. Both these claims were confirmed on test, indicating that this speaker should make a fine partner for low power valve amps. The port is tuned to 37Hz, which should ensure good ultimate bass extension, though the impedance also reveals a rather obvious enclosure resonance at 180Hz, which corresponds to a pronounced dip in the measured frequency response. Although there seems to be plenty of internal damping, this is presumably the vertical box mode.

Apart from that 180Hz dip, and a peak around 280Hz, the overall frequency balance looks pretty good. The bass alignment favours keeping the speaker clear of walls, and the overall bass level is a little dry, but that's partly because the mid-band is a just little too strong. And if the treble output was a little too restrained when I first checked this speaker out, it seems just about ideal now.

The 42A doesn't deliver the smoothest sound around, but it is pretty well balanced overall, and the vital crossover transition is handled impressively well.

When assessing a loudspeaker, it's always difficult to ascertain just how much of the sound it makes is down to the inevitable balance anomalies – there's no such thing as a truly 'flat' loudspeaker. The 42A does have a measure of mid-band emphasis, to be sure, but that doesn't disguise the remarkable immediacy of a



▶ performance that clearly has minimal time-smear and fine transient integrity. MonoPulse calls this aspect of the performance 'transient synchronism', which is as good a buzz-phrase as any for something that really does bring a crispness and a very welcome dose of realism to the proceedings. Furthermore, by preserving good leading edge integrity, dynamics somehow seem to sound punchier and more believable. In some respects I am reminded of the very special immediacy that one finds with speakers using single full range drivers, and if the 42A doesn't go quite that far in terms of absolute coherence, it doesn't sacrifice performance at the frequency extremes in the way that single-driver systems invariably do.

If superb transient integrity is its main claim to fame, there's very little to criticise elsewhere in the performance. My original complaint of some lack of treble has been entirely overcome, and the whole mid-to-treble balance and transition now sounds beautifully smooth and well ordered. Perhaps the most obvious consequence of the mid-forwardness is a perception that

the bass end is a shade lacking in weight, warmth and authority, though there's plenty of deep bass extension here, and output throughout the bass region is relatively smooth and even.

That measured perturbation around 180Hz doesn't seem to have unpleasant

audible consequences, and coloration levels in general seem pretty well controlled, especially considering the relatively large main driver and shallow enclosure. There are some 'paper cone' and 'cupped hands' artefacts, most audible with speech, but in my experience the subjective consequences of colouration are much less obvious in a speaker like this, where time-smear and overhang are both very well controlled.

Imaging is impressive, giving notably precise soundstage focus and good depth resolution, albeit without

the 'in the room' spaciousness one tends to find with very small speakers or those with external tweeters. Interestingly, and tending to confirm the claims regarding superior phase coherence, the image focusing is very sensitive to head position, rather in the manner of panel speakers. If imaging's your thing, take extra care in setting up these speakers, making sure they're truly vertical, similarly oriented and exactly equidistant from your listening seat. The payoff makes the effort well worthwhile.

The very essence of this speaker is simply that it makes listening to any source unusually easy and interesting. Speech is very intelligible, even at low listening levels, and individual accents and inflexions come through very clearly. Music sounds beautifully coherent and free from artifice, so that one is rarely conscious of any intrusion from the

speakers themselves, while the brain focuses instead on the subtlety and delicacy of the music making process. All kinds of music seem well served, the 42A proving just as adept at conveying the texture of orchestral strings as it is with punchier and more percussive pop and rock material – indeed, drum solos come across as particularly convincing.

I daresay the cosmetics will not find universal favour. In a marketplace dominated by a stereotype that comes clothed in a choice of real wood veneers, a speaker wrapped in polished steel over a cloth background will always look a little strange. And the lessons of history suggest that we tend to be a rather conservative lot when it comes to choosing loudspeakers. But those who take the trouble to audition this MonoPulse design could well find themselves seduced by the sheer speed and integrity of its music making, and the sheer dexterity with which it handles the most complex material. This is a genuine audiophile product at a very realistic price. 

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	2-way, reflex loaded
Drivers:	25mm soft dome tweeter 210mm paper-cone bass-mid
Frequency response:	28 - 22,000 Hz ±3dB
Sensitivity	92dB
Minimum impedance:	6.7 ohms
Power rating (continuous):	65 watts
Music power rating:	130 watts
Dimensions (HxDxW):	1090 x 260 x 250 mm
Weight:	28kg
Price:	£1,295/pair

Manufacturer:

MonoPulse Ltd
Tel. (44)(0)7785 558238
Net. www.monopulse.co.uk

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Michael Fremer, *Stereophile*, April, 2003

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 June 2003

For prices and product availability, please contact:

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North Midland. – Acoustica (Stafford) 01785 258 216

Midlands – Griffin Audio (Birmingham) 0121 224 7300

Suffolk – Signals (Ipswich) 01473 655 171

Surrey – Infidelity (Kingston Upon Thames) 0208 943 3530

Southeast – Guildford Audio (Guildford) 01483 537 577

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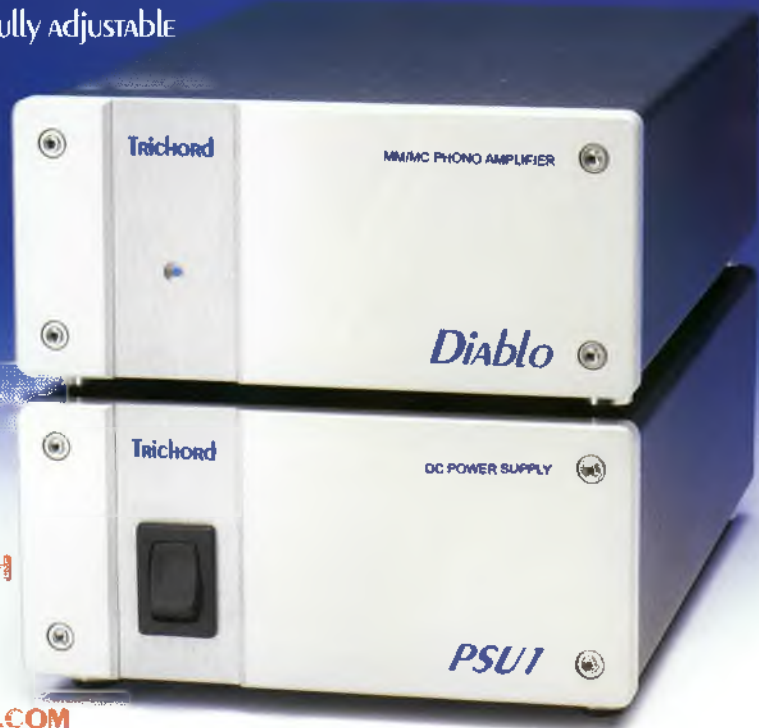
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Cheap(er) But Still Cheerful...

The Nordost Frey interconnects and loudspeaker cables

by Roy Gregory

It seems rather odd to describe Nordost as part of the cable “establishment” but looked at in the cold light of day, that’s exactly what they are. High profile and unquestionably high-performance, both the company and its products are amongst the most visible and respected on the market. So why the surprise? Well, it’s partly a case of just how far they’ve come and how fast, and partly how quickly that time has passed. Firstly with Flatline Gold and SPM and then later and even more emphatically with Valhalla, Nordost shook the cable market to its very foundations. Prototypical young Turks, their approach was different and so were their products. But it was an ethos that captured the imagination of public and press alike, with demonstrable benefits over and above the status quo. But as astonished and surprised as we were, few of us realised quite where that first exposure would lead. Seven years on, well over four years into the lifespan of Valhalla, and with the king’s unruly offspring about to take the stage, it’s time to take stock.

What Nordost achieved with the Valhalla was nothing short of revolutionary. The governing notion of “cable as tone-control” was exposed for the rickety dam on system performance it truly represented – and duly swept aside. Extending the concept of the “no-cable” first established by the performance of SPM, the introduction of mains cabling and finally

distribution, underlined the concept of the holistic cable loom constructed with shared materials and technology and its critical function as a foundation stone for system potential. In the process, it removed cable “sound” as a hobble on ultimate system capability; allowing us to see and hear further into both the music and the means of its reproduction; no mean feat for a mere



wire! But its true importance is in some respects less obvious. Firstly, and like any real breakthrough, it forced other cable manufacturers to re-examine their products and respond, a process that has seen the demise of more than a few dinosaurs and the parallel rise of other, vibrant young companies. Secondly, it represented the opening shot in an internal civil war which has seen the gradual undermining of the

massive (and massively over-priced) but under-performing products that previously held sway in the high-end. Suddenly, real dynamic and spatial coherence were available from smaller, simpler systems; the sonic equivalent of taking a car and running it on asphalt rather than across a ploughed field - not surprisingly you can get much better performance with a lot less power, shorter travel suspension and smaller tyres!

In effect, the step change in cable performance revealed the error of our ways. Re-evaluate and reallocate your budget and you’ll get a huge improvement in actual musical results. But hold on; isn’t that just saying spend the money on cables rather than amplifiers? You could be forgiven for thinking that, but in actual fact the sums work out quite differently. Ludicrous though the proposition is (given its price and accessibility to the average enthusiast – even one who has made the necessary paradigm shift) Valhalla really isn’t that expensive when compared to the competition. In truth, at the outer reaches of the high-end people were running crazy expensive electronics through even crazier priced cables – and generally achieving considerably less performance as a result.

Unfortunately however, that fact doesn’t make Valhalla any more affordable in reality. The reasons for the price are actually three fold. Firstly there’s the complexity of the mono-filament construction, in



which a fine spiral is wound round each conductor before the multiple wires are then arranged and encased in extruded Teflon, all the while maintaining the air-gap around each individual strand. The development of the tooling and machinery for such a process, as well as the process itself, is far from cheap. Second is the cost of the materials themselves and ensuring that the product (and just as importantly) its termination is consistent. Finally, the relatively short runs and low volume production of any flagship cable exacerbate all of the above factors, further adding to the cost of the final product.

But, as I observed earlier Valhalla is four years old, time in which production techniques have been perfected and refined. Combine that with reduced material costs (as a result of physically smaller and fewer conductors) as well as the much longer runs justifiable for more affordable products and finally it's possible to offer mono-filament cables at more approachable prices. How approachable? Well, current costs on Valhalla run out at £2200 for a metre pair of interconnects and £5700 for a three-metre pair of bi-wired speaker cables. Compare that to £300 for a metre pair of the Baldur interconnects and £1175 for the three-metre Heimdahl speaker wires. That's one-seventh the price for the interconnects and around a fifth for the speaker

cables, bringing the interconnects in particular, squarely into consideration for even the cheapest genuine hi-fi systems.

The new range of cables consists of four different models. As already suggested the Baldur, resplendent in translucent blue Teflon, is the cheapest, its interconnect consisting of a pair of shielded 26AWG mono-filament conductors, terminated with Neutrik plugs. The matching, bi-wire speaker cable uses six 28AWG wires for each leg, although these are conventional rather than mono-filament. Temper your disappointment with the fact that this makes it the spiritual equivalent of the SPM – which at £875 for our notional three-metre pair represents a considerable saving.

Next comes the red tinted Heimdahl, which doubles the number of conductors in the interconnect and adds WBT's excellent NextGen plugs. It also represents the first of the mono-filament speaker cables, with six 24AWG wires per leg. Prices are £370 and £1175 respectively. Third in line is the purple Frey (six 26AWG conductors in the interconnect, seven 24AWG in each leg of the speaker cable) which will set you back £550 for the interconnects and £1775 for the speaker cables, while Tyr sits at the top of the new hierarchy, tinted grey and replacing the existing Valkyria. Costing £1100 for the interconnect and £3750 for the speaker cable, it also offers a glimpse of the future, its interconnect consisting of four 24AWG conductors, but in this instance employing the dual-filament technology (in which the spacing filaments are themselves twisted to further reduce di-electric contact) first introduced in the Valhalla mains and digital cables. The speaker

cable is also beefed up, its five conductors per leg being 22AWG mono-filaments

Of course, Valhalla remains at the head of the range, although it now also features the silver version of the NextGen plugs. Existing owners can have their cables upgraded by the factory, but the cost and turn-round time for this exercise will depend on location. I'll be making some direct comparisons betwixt the new and old terminations for Valhalla shortly, although past experience with the copper NextGens indicates significant benefits for the comparatively modest outlay so I'd suggest that existing users get themselves in the queue as soon as possible. Don't however be tempted to do it yourself; termination quality and consistency is a vital and oft underestimated aspect of cable performance and you risk spoiling the ship for a ha'peth of tar. The other comparison that awaits the return of the re-terminated Valhalla involves the dual-filament Tyr interconnect and it will be fascinating to see just how close it gets to pinching the monarch's crown.

The other thing that goes without saying (given the Nordost style of demonstration) is that the various cables in the range constitute a coherent ladder of performance benefits, each clearly superior to the one below. With all the options in mind, and balancing the need to both assess the performance of the new cables and place their achievements in the context of both the market and the Valhalla benchmark, I opted to start with the Frey. At around a quarter of the flagship's price it is significantly more affordable than Valhalla whilst still offering a full mono-filament solution. The question is what proportion of the big cable's performance are you getting?

The answer is – a surprising amount. From first listen this is unmistakably a Nordost cable. ▶

► All the hallmarks are there: the astonishing evenness of the energy spectrum from bottom to top, the uninhibited dynamic range, the uncanny presence and separation. Oh, and the ridiculously long burn-in period too. Even after a solid two weeks on the Cable Toaster you can still hear the Frey gaining polish and subtlety as it works in the system. If you want to hear what this cable can do it needs to be thoroughly run-in – and I don't just mean used in a dealer's show room. If it sounds brash, bright and lean then it needs more time, but given that time it will fall into balance.

How does it differ from the Valhalla? Close comparison (and I do mean close) between Frey and old-style, non-NextGen Valhalla reveals the flagship's superiority in terms of bass depth, weight and definition and more importantly, micro-dynamic resolution right across the range. It's a subtle effect but it's enough to bring added sonority to Basie's left-hand chords as he plays the beautifully hesitant intro to 'Beaver Junction', an ease and delicious flow to this fractured musical line, reaffirming that this is a master at work rather than a system failing to keep up. Likewise, there's a natural quality to vocal inflexions, an added inner transparency that resolves space around and between instruments and voices, all of which brings a recording to life. It's an easy confidence and grounded stability that the Frey can't quite match. But then it's not without tricks of its own.

The astonishing inner textures and subtle tonal shadings of Valhalla might be beyond the junior cable, but it makes up for it with superior immediacy and front-of-stage clarity. The Frey displays more sheer presence and greater impact than the Valhalla. Like I said, the differences are subtle, but it's enough to tilt the cheaper cable's balance of virtues away from

the low-level subtlety of Valhalla and towards sheer life and musical enthusiasm. Play Lucinda Williams' *Car Wheels*. . . track seven, 'Can't Let Go' and just love the purpose and intent in those angry, frustrated, chopped



guitar chords, the power in the vocal. Yes, you sacrifice a bit of depth and some weight, but it's a trade that many a listener will deem worthwhile for the added drive and presence that you get instead (not to mention the added weight in your wallet). An impressive performance made doubly so by the impressive pricing.

I suspect that much of this immediacy and life comes courtesy of the NextGen plugs, known performance benefits of their use. It's enough to significantly narrow the gap betwixt these two cables, eroding the Valhalla's erstwhile crushing superiority and making its value somewhat programme dependent. Play the Piatigorsky Walton *Cello Concerto* (from the RCA SACD) and you'll love the tonal subtlety and rhythmic sleight of hand of the Valhalla. Play *Faith* and the choice becomes far more difficult, especially given the cost differential. Play the Basie and the Frey's ripping brass tuttis are awfully attractive, even if Basie's own contribution is diminished.

All of which makes the Frey an extremely attractive prospect.

Ultimately it fails to match the Valhalla, but then it is around quarter of the price! And what of the other new cables in the range? Tyr looks especially interesting, although I suspect that the all mono-filament and NextGen Heimdahl is the bargain in the bunch. In the meantime, Frey has significantly raised the bar when it

comes to cable performance at this price point, as well as lowering the price of serious, top-end cable performance in absolute terms. It stands as a stunning endorsement of mono-filament technology. Nordost's range used to have something of a top-heavy "Valhalla – then everything else" look to it. With the introduction of mono-filament technology right down to the bottom rung of the serious hi-fi ladder, all that has changed. Now everybody can enjoy the considerable benefits and appreciate what all the fuss has been about. So, how close does Frey get to Valhalla? Close enough to change updating my own leads to NextGen status from a luxury into a matter of considerable urgency! ➤+

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Prices:

Frey 1m pr. (phono-phono) - £550

Balanced XLR – add £34.95/pr. of cables

Frey 3m bi-wire speaker cables - £1775

NextGen upgrade to existing Valhalla leads:

In the UK - £300/pr. of cables (inc return shipping to the USA)

In the US - \$500/pr. of cables

Contact local distributor or if in the US, sales@nordost.com for details and lead-time.

UK Distributor: Activ Distribution

Tel. (44)(0)1635 291357

Net. www.activdistribution.com

Manufacturer: Nordost Inc.

Tel. (00)1-800-836-2750

Net. www.nordost.com

Audio Destination
Tiverton, Devon
01884 243 584

Audio Venue
Maidenhead, Berks
01628 633 995

Doug Brady Hi-fi
Warrington, Cheshire
01925 828009

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Stockbridge, Edinburgh
0131 226 6500

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0141 221 0221

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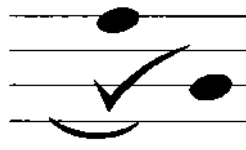
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Cheap But Definitely Cheerful...

Budget CD players from Rega, Harman Kardon and Philips

by Paul Messenger

It's very easy for reviewers to get their mitts on the sort of upmarket CD players that most hi-fi nuts merely dream about. While it's certainly important to establish the benchmarks and appreciate what is ultimately possible from a prime music medium like Compact Disc, the four- or five-figure players that represent the state of CD replay art are well beyond the reach of the vast majority. Furthermore, rather more than most components in the hi-fi chain, there's no denying that CD replay quality and technology is continuing to advance, so that a state-of-art machine from five years ago could well be matched by something much less costly today.

It's with those observations in mind that we decided to gather together three likely contenders for budget CD honours. Hi-Fi+ doesn't do group tests in the normal way, so don't expect a group test in the normal way. Rather, we started off by paying attention to the rumour mill, in order to find out which amongst the latest budget players were likely to offer something a little bit special. Then we assembled our choices to compare and contrast their various strengths.

I got a sneak preview of Rega's new Apollo CD player a couple of months back. It's the company's new 500-pounder, replacing the long established and well respected Planet. While it looks very similar to its predecessor, the underlying technology is both different and original, and in a brief listening session, it completely blew away the company's more

costly Jupiter, from the Planet generation, and a player I have always held in high regard.

Second on the list is a very elegant CD-only machine from one of hi-fi's biggest players, Harman Kardon. The super-slim-line \$300 HD970 recognises the fact that,



despite the alleged general enthusiasm for multi-channel and AV sources, even multi-national manufacturers recognise that a healthy demand for machinery that's dedicated to two-channel CD replay remains. Putting the very considerable resources of the Harman Kardon empire to work on creating a high quality CD player at modest cost seems to have paid dividends, as the 970 won the CD player category in 2005's prestigious EISA award (voted by magazines from a number of European countries).

The third of our CD players comes from one of the biggest consumer

electronics brands in the world. The very stylish new Philips DVP9000S actually does the whole DVD thing, as well as SACD, so CD replay isn't its first priority. However, it replaces the same company's 963SA, which RG was somewhat surprised to discover did an excellent job of basic stereo CD replay. Since then it's become something of a cult machine, making it a hard act to follow. The DVP9000S carries an official pricetag of \$400; unlike the other two (which only distribute through traditional hi-fi outlets), it can be found for significantly less via internet sellers.

All three cost less than \$500, yet come from very different backgrounds and resources. Rega might be the minnow of the three, but its impeccable specialist hi-fi credentials have been established over more than thirty years. And the story behind the development of its new generation players is certainly one worth telling.

All the British hi-fi brands involved in CD players purchase key components like disc drives from much larger companies, such as Sony and Philips. However, many strategies were thrown into disarray about three years ago, when Sony Europe announced it would shortly stop supplying such crucial components to its numerous European clients. Rega was just one of a number of British companies, including Arcam, Creek, Exposure, Myriad, and others, which were using Sony mechs, so much head-scratching resulted, as all the affected brands had to start looking for

alternative approaches and sources.

However, what looked at first like a potential



► disaster could well prove to have been a blessing in disguise, as each company has had to work out its own solution to the predicament. This has resulted in much greater diversity in the core components from which rival players are built, bringing a greater range of choice to customers, and hopefully worthwhile improvements to boot.

A number of brands have stuck with Sony building blocks, sourcing them via their connections in the Far East. Rega was probably the last to make the change from Euro-sourced Sony components, since the company continues to make its products in Britain, and prefers to work with local suppliers. It was pure serendipity that, in an era where emphasis has long shifted towards DVD rather than CD replay, Rega came across a British software company that was just finishing the development of new CD drive chip set. And once a prototype had been put together, the results were sonically very promising indeed.

The reason probably lies in the inexorable progress of computing itself. This new chip set has much more memory and computing power than those developed some years ago – more than 20Mb, in fact, alongside 32-bit operation. This not only allows full 'Red Book' compliance, it also avoids any need to compromise between the demands of signal processing and error correction, to the benefit of both. Used to control a Sanyo-sourced laser and drive mechanism, this UK-designed chip set forms the basis of the Apollo (and also the Saturn, which will replace the Jupiter). Other technical ingredients include the latest 24-bit dual-differential Wolfson DAC, plus a Class A bootstrapped cascode pair analogue output stage – a technique borrowed from the valve era.

The Apollo looks very like its Planet predecessor, with the same alloy casework in silver or black. A centrally

placed top-loading tray sits above a modest but clearly legible red LED display, and just four fascia control knobs, while a conveniently slim and lightweight new handset provides plenty more operating features. One visible difference is that the cantilevered lid no longer incorporates a rotating disc clamp, as the new drive grips the disc using a clever low-inertia chuck with three small spring-loaded ball bearings. Less visibly, Apollo will also handle heavily compressed MP3 discs, as well as full PCM-coded CDs.



Harman Kardon's HD 970 is an exceptionally slim, if rather lightweight drawer/front-loader, the fascia split 60/40 horizontally between transparent black plastic and silver finished metal. An informative, dimmable and very legible dot-matrix display shines through the black on the right hand side. A row of discrete pushbuttons (plus the loading drawer) are situated along the junction between the two sections. All these controls and more are duplicated on a nicely shaped lightweight handset, with useful button shaping, though reading the legends here requires a magnifying glass.

Under the bonnet, the 970 features the latest 'series III' version of Harman's 'real-time linear smoothing' (RLS) conversion technology, with increased computing power and integration over earlier implementations, over-sampling the data to 384kHz and applying 24-bit processing. Precision local clocking integrates the audio DSP and DAC, prior to feeding a wide-band, low feedback class A analogue output stage.

Over and beyond all the usuals, the feature roster includes displaying CD

Text (when the disc contains it – I went through six before finding one with text data), compressed MP3-coded disc playback, and a couple of digital inputs that allow other digital sources to use the player's advanced digital decoding. One negative, however, is that the 970 comes fitted with a captive mains lead, preventing the ability to use special mains leads – short of surgery.

Inevitably, in view of its DVD replay capability, the Philips DVP9000S is a whole lot more complex than the two CD players examined here. Those seeking high quality DVD reproduction could well be tempted by the impressively extensive roster of processing techniques and connection capabilities that this player employs in an effort

to make a silk purse out of what this reviewer humbly considers a sow's ear of an AV format (I won't turn this feature into a rant, but in my experience the quality of both video sources and displays has steadily declined over the past twenty years, following the introduction of digital techniques – not that anyone appears to give a damn!)

While I can confirm that the DVP9000S does indeed do a fine job of replaying DVDs,



and presumably performs as advertised in multi-channel sound modes, for the purposes of this feature I've treated it just like any regular two-channel CD player. And if the multitude of video features take pride of place in the propaganda, it's also quite clear that Philips has gone to some lengths to ensure that the audio side is also able to achieve high standards ►

► of performance

This silver finished slim-line player looks very good indeed, and feels pretty solidly built too. Dominated by two large illuminated circles, one at each end, the fascia has elegantly curved edges and is bisected horizontally by the loading drawer and a row of discrete pushbuttons. The illuminated circle on the right highlights a control cursor, while the corresponding disc on the left is the multi-mode display – an attractive back-lit LCD matrix affair – gives plenty of info but is rather small to read from a distance. All the fascia controls and a whole lot more are duplicated on a slim but rather clumsy and decidedly complex handset – handicapped by the inclusion of numerous AV functions, and the capability of controlling four different types of equipment.

Technically, the audio side up-samples CD's normal 44.1kHz data to the 192kHz used in the DSD (direct stream digital) coding employed by SACD – though this is a switchable option via a menu sub-routine, not the default condition. High-grade internal components, chosen for their superior sound quality, include Cirrus Logic's top-of-the-line CS4398 DAC, Analogue Devices AD18066 high-band low-noise op-amps, and Nichicon 'fine gold' capacitors.

The feature list is predictably enormous. Even ignoring the video side of things, and taking a purely audio perspective, the DVP9000S is capable of handling every conceivable format except DVD-Audio. Besides CD, the most relevant are compressed MP3 and both stereo and multi-channel SACD. A useful audio-relevant feature is the ability to switch off the video-related circuitry; though the lack of a 'fast forward' mode when playing CDs came as a surprise – 'scan' on this player is actually an 'intro-scan' feature which plays the first ten seconds of each track.

To start evaluating and comparing the sound qualities of these three very different CD spinners, I started off trying to create identical conditions for each.

Each was placed on identical Naim Frain supports, connected via identical Neutrik-terminated Klotz cables to my Naim NAC 552 pre-amp. This was followed by a NAP500 power amp, feeding a pair of B&W 800Ds via Vertex AQ Moncayo speaker cables and bi-wire links. The Philips and Rega received mains via a Powerigel, though the HK necessarily used its own lead. I subsequently auditioned each individually and sequentially, placed on a Vertex AQ Kinabalu platform and connected via WBT NextGen equipped interconnects, taking care that each was properly warmed up before connecting it into the system.

All three acquitted themselves very respectably; though it took quite an effort to extract the full potential of the Philips machine. Let's go through them in alphabet order, starting with the Harman Kardon, which has a lovely overall balance with fine dynamic range and superior low-level resolution. The bass end is particularly good in the way it drives music along with pace, drive and enthusiasm, the wide dynamic window through this region always helping to create impressive tension. The mid and top is a little less convincing, showing a slight loss of delicacy and fine detail, alongside the sort of mild congestion that seems to be a characteristic of digital processing. Leading edges lack a little precision, so that the applause on a live album like the Grateful Dead's 'Reckoning' becomes a little amorphous.

The complexity of the Philips DVP9000S holds a number of traps for the unwary, necessitating careful scrutiny of the equally complex manual and handset to achieve the player's full potential. First there's the 'audio direct' button to find, and pressing this adds a very subtle improvement in top end air and sweetness. That done, I still wasn't particularly happy with the sound the DVP9000S was making, which seemed

to have a rather thin overall character, tending to emphasise an admittedly sweet top end, but lacking warmth and richness through the bass and lower midrange.

However, that's by no means the whole story. Scrutinising the manual revealed that a whole collection of extra options were available via a menu system that necessitated connecting the player to a video display. Lurking on page 32 was a description of the sound menu options, which included the ability to select between three alternative up-sampling options: 88.2kHz, DSD (192kHz), and 'off'. I connected the player up to the TV and puzzled for a while at the lack of



any visible image.

Eventually the penny dropped: I turned off 'audio direct', pictures appeared and I started navigating the menu. The player had been set to – and initially auditioned – at 88.2kHz, but changing this up-sampling rate produced quite obvious differences. And ironically, the one that worked best, by a comfortable margin, was the 'off' setting.

With the up-sampling removed and 'audio direct' again engaged, the thin quality noticed when the player was first connected had been banished and the DVP9000S now delivered a much more coherent sound with fuller and more convincing bass delivery. What had initially seemed a rather disappointing performer now revealed itself to be a very competent player indeed, even if over-complexity did nearly defeat it. The treble might not have the obvious sweetness heard when the up-sampling modes were selected, and a trace of mid-band congestion adds a touch of artificiality to the proceedings, ►

▶ but the bass now has real authority, poise and subtlety, and considerably improved timing. The top end could be sweeter and airier, and the sound as a whole can be a little matter of fact and mechanical though broad mid-band is very good indeed.

The Philips is the only player that counts SACD replay amongst its many accomplishments.



The editor pointed this out to me, and seemed a little surprised when I replied that as far as I was concerned the 'high-band' formats were irrelevant. I'm sure there are some fine recordings out there on both SACD and DVD-A – people tell me that's the case. Trouble is, they don't seem to coincide with either my musical taste or the retailers I use.

In the five or so years these formats have been around, I've probably bought well over 100 CDs: just one has been an SACD hybrid – and I only bought that (which I already owned on vinyl) for the express purpose of trying out an SACD player! I've been sent a few examples too, but the music really hasn't been to my taste. And while I'll happily confirm that the SACD layer of *Let it Bleed* does sound significantly better than the CD layer on the Philips player, I remain sceptical that this actually proves anything. Rather I'll simply point out that when I go shopping for music, I choose the music I want irrespective of format, and that high band material has yet to appear on my radar.

As the range of applications used by 120mm optical discs has proliferated, so the start up time of CD players has slowed down, presumably to give the time to figure out what sort of data they're being fed. All three of these players took significantly longer to get


going than players of a few years ago, but the Philips was much the slowest, presumably because of its much greater versatility, and I have to say I found its slow reaction times operationally a little irksome, and the mechanical clunks emanating from its mechanism a little perturbing. Furthermore, it also proved more susceptible than the others in suffering mistracking effects when

playing damaged discs – hardly a fair test perhaps, but a significant factor nonetheless, as discs do get damaged and digital glitches are just as annoying as vinyl scratches.

Although the HK and Philips are both capable of fine sound quality, particularly in view of their modest prices, the new Rega has the edge over both, turning in an exceptionally musical and communicative performance, especially through the mid-band and top end. Its harmonic richness and overall naturalness just makes digital discs of all kinds uncommonly interesting to listen to, and unusually easy on the ears. Even the Chemical Brothers' *Push the Button* – a CD I regularly refer to as one of the more unpleasantly compressed and edgy amongst recent acquisitions, and to which I often turn when checking the aggressive nature of a loudspeaker – managed to sound remarkably listenable. Though still quite fierce, the sound was no longer unpleasantly aggressive, and the essence and intentionality of the music seemed to come through more clearly than I'd previously experienced.

At the opposite end of the musical spectrum, the Apollo seemed equally adept at handling the finest and most delicate detail. The very subtle percussion work on the title track of Laurie Anderson's *Life on a String* seemed to fit perfectly into the whole, with a very superior coherence that helps the whole performance and composition make good sense. The bass balance might be a little dry for some tastes, and a little more authority would have been welcome at times, but this is less of a complaint than an observation, and there was further

encouragement when placing the Apollo on the Kinabalu platform and connecting with the NextGen cables brought an obvious extra improvement. As further icing on the cake, the Rega proved exemplary at tracking discs that had caused the other players some hesitation.

However, the purpose of this feature is not really to establish a pecking order amongst these three players, but rather to investigate how good some of the current generation of CD players can be. And if the Philips offers far greater format versatility including high quality DVD and SACD replay, its sluggish responses and tiny display did prove rather irritating compared to the simplicity of the two audio only CD/MP3 players. But the bottom line is simple – all three are capable of giving surprisingly fine sound quality when replaying CDs, and are certain to provide serious competition for more costly and pretentious machinery. 

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Harman Kardon HD970
 Finish: Silver/black fascia
 Formats Supported: CD, MP3
 Size (WxHxD): 440x63x332mm
 Weight: 4.6kg
 Price: £300
Contact:
 Harman Kardon
 Tel: (44)(0)20 8731 4670
 Net. www.harmankardon.com

Philips DVP9000S
 Finish: Silver
 Formats Supported: CD, SACD, MP3, MPEG, DD, DVD-V (PAL/NTSC)
 Size (WxHxD): 435x79x315mm
 Weight: 5.3kg
 Price: £400
Contact:
 Philips
 Net. www.philips.co.uk

Rega Apollo
 Finish: Silver or black
 Formats: CD, MP3
 Size (WxHxD): 430x85x270mm
 Weight: 5kg
 Price: £500
Contact:
 Rega Research
 Tel: (44)(0)1702 333071
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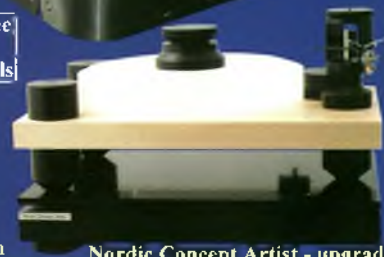


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SR325

GRADO LABS

Head First ... into Headphones, Part II

Taking cans to the next level – with models from Beyer, Grado, Sennheiser and Stax.

by Jason Hector

This article is the second part in my attempt to get to grips with the array of options on offer for headphone listening. In the last issue I concentrated on establishing some benchmarks, both for headphone amplifiers (a prerequisite for serious headphone listening) and for phones themselves. Having got to grips with driving the beasts and having embraced two of the most popular models in the Sennheiser range, now it's time to put those models up against the competition.

One of the main issues with reviewing headphones is that, just like reviewing speakers, other factors play a large role in determining the result. In the case of speakers it's the room; in the case of headphones it is the comfort level of the various options. Comfort is even more personal and as important as the sound these headphones produce. While none of these products is particularly uncomfortable, unsurprisingly some are better than others and over an album or two those small differences can add up to make a big difference. I would recommend investing a modest amount of time in an extended demonstration to ensure that comfort as well as sound matches your expectations. I have aimed to divorce comfort from the sound in my comments below but I realise I could only be partially successful. Please

bear in mind that it doesn't matter how well a particular headphone performs, if it does not fit you then in the long-term it will not deliver.

Surveying the market it quickly becomes apparent that serious moving coil headphones, at least those from the seriously well-known brands (other than a few esoterics) inhabited the \$200 to \$300 price range. That realisation quickly inks in the names on the test sheet: the SR325 from Grado, the DT880 from Beyer and we would stick with the HD650 from Sennheiser. Couple these to the headphone amplifiers from last time and you are looking at a headphone system costing up to \$960; not a small amount of money but dirt cheap compared to high-end speakers and amplifiers. Anchoring the lower end of the group are Sennheiser's slightly cheaper HD595s. These were all driven by the Naim Headline with NAPSC power supply or the Sugden Head-Master. Last but, as we shall see by no means least, are the Stax SRS4040 electrostatic headphones. I was surprised to discover that this legendary product range is not priced nearly as exclusively as I'd previously believed. Of course, the requirement for an energiser pushes the price up, but then it also doubles as your headphone amplifier. Combine the 4040s (themselves far from the cheapest phones in the range) with

the expensive SRM006t valve energiser option and you wind up with a package price of \$995, which puts this combination right in the ball park, cost wise. It also constitutes the brand's best-selling combination, which tells its own story.

To provide the best signal possible my CD player directly connected to the inputs of either the energiser or the headphone amplifier in use, while the output of the pre-amp tape loop allowed access to vinyl.

So, in alphabetical order then...

Beyer DT880 – £199

Beyer have a very long and distinguished history in headphones and claim to have made the first dynamic headphone way back in 1937. The DT880 reviewed here is a heavily reworked version of a product first produced in 1980. The Beyers were late arrivals and therefore did not participate in as many A-B type tests as the others. But I did get plenty of hours on them and I am glad I did because the first, straight from the box, listen was disappointing. Initially I was concerned that they were completely outclassed by the other products but after listening longer and after gaining more experience in this field their strengths became apparent.

The DT880 is an open backed headphone with a simple but solid band over the head and earpieces ►

▷ that can tilt around for comfort, and can be extended over a decent extent to achieve a good fit. The ear pads are large, soft and comfortable and the headphones themselves are light and unobtrusive. In terms of fit the Beyer's fall somewhere between the Grado's and the Sennheiser's with some grip to the sides of your head but less than with either of the Sennheiser's. I preferred the Beyer's in this regard; they proved very comfortable during longer listening sessions. However, the metal pieces that slide into the headband and secure the earpieces are not finished to a high enough standard for a component that needs to be grabbed quite firmly to permit adjustment. More care in manufacture of these parts would complete the finish of a well-made product.

The signal lead is of good quality and only enters the left hand earpiece which makes them easier to wear without getting yourself tangled up and they are also supplied with an extension lead so you can comfortably sit far away from your system should you wish. The drive units feature the ubiquitous Neodymium magnets and are a semi-open design. The Beyers are supplied in a thin, bent metal box that frankly belittles the product and does nothing to enhance the ownership of these high specification headphones.

Characterising the sound of the DT880's is simple; they are middle of the road all around. Whether we think tonally, rhythmically or anything, with the exception of their spatial abilities, they sit in the middle ground. Spatial representation is the one thing that does set them apart, an area in which they excelled provided I positioned them correctly. For some reason the

sound quality of the DT880's was more dependant than the others on precise location on the ear. If optimally positioned the sense of space was really excellent, the equal of the best here, but place the headphones incorrectly and that feeling of open space collapsed.

They exhibit a slightly muddy mid-range but, importantly, they have a very neutral tonal balance that is more

less well suited to portable use. Strangely and bearing in mind the lower sensitivity and that this is Beyer's top of the line headphone product, the 6.3mm jack unscrews revealing a 3.5mm one within. While this is a well-constructed and gold plated adapter I am sure that placing more connections in the signal path can only be detrimental to sound quality.



A better solution would be to have a 3.5mm adapter that screws on over the 6.3mm main plug.

akin to the Stax than the other dynamic headphones here. The muddiness comes with some extra mid-range warmth and body that is quite pleasant but also quite false. This made the DT880 an agreeable and forgiving headphone to use across a wide breadth of music with a variety of recording qualities. They seemed happy at any volume although not as persuasive as the Stax or Grado phones when asked to produce music quietly. The Beyers were the least efficient of the moving coil headphones which makes them

Dynamics and overall transparency were impressive and though they are not as capable as the better, more costly headphones, they competed well with the HD595 in transparency, losing out dynamically while bettering them in terms of tonality. Rhythmically the Beyer's are an interesting listen but the HD595 is more capable of moving you for less money. The DT880's don't sound remotely as exciting as the Grado's but produce a solidity of sound and instrument that is seductive. When listening to a band playing together it is pretty ▷

► clear how the musicians are interacting. While that isn't the be all and end all for many people it is damned important to me and is one of the things that keeps you listening to album after album.

The Beyer's showed a definite preference for the Headline with its upfront presentation being tempered by these headphones warm mid-range. The HeadMaster had a tendency to flatter the DT880's but at the same time resulted in a bit too much honey glaze.

The main problem with the Beyer's in this company is that their presentation of dynamics, rhythm and tonal balance are not going to impress in a quick demo; where they do reward is in the longer term however. I am well aware that the middle of the road description I used above for the Beyer's could be seen as derogatory but it isn't meant to be. The reason I am not enthusing more is that every product in this review demonstrates high performance and quality and by spending a bit more than the DT880's asking price (in absolute terms not as a percentage!) you get a major leg up in quality.

Grado SR325 - £279

Grado have been a family owned company since 1953 when Joseph Grado started producing cartridges off of his kitchen table. Their first headphones were designed during the late 1980's. The SR325's reviewed here are top of the prestige series and stand out from the lesser products by sporting metal driver

enclosures. Grado also offer two higher "reference series products" that house the drivers in beautifully finished wooden enclosures.

The SR325 can be summed up as idiosyncratic: they both look and sound unlike any of the other headphones. The basic design has been a Grado trademark for more than a few years. A very simple,



unpadded, headband connects to some hard plastic blocks which grip a thin metal rod or pin which in turn attaches to the earpieces, very basic, simple and effective. This assembly allows easy adjustment of the position of the earpieces (rotation and length) and makes these headphones simple to get as comfortable as possible. You know you'll have to start again after putting them down though, because there is no great restriction to the earpiece movement. The signal lead seems to be well constructed and is

sent to each earpiece but it is easily tangled because of the freedom of the earpieces to rotate right around. The earpieces themselves are solidly constructed from metal (a very hard non-resonant alloy which is treated to avoid ringing). While this makes them look and feel great, they are quite heavy and with only slight pressure applied to the ears by the headband they exhibit a tendency to fall off if you lean forward or back. That said the SR325's are comfortable.

The drive units themselves feature neodymium magnets, a low mass polymer film (that is chosen to avoid any break-up below 20kHz) and voice-coils wound from high purity long crystal copper. Grado has found this combination to "yield the clearest transmission and lowest colouration possible". It all works but everything apart from the driver housings does a damn good impression of an unfinished prototype. Taken as a whole it is clear what you are paying for is the earpieces and the drive units inside



► As I mentioned the Grado's sound is unusual. They have a frequency balance that is tipped up in the treble and down a bit in the bass. This has some pro's and some cons. They sound very transparent to the source and detail is emphasised and thrown at you and there is a tendency for stridency at higher volumes with less competent recordings. This tonal balance obviously affects the emphasis that is placed on different parts of a recording as well. In one instance a harpsichord, which was not greatly obvious with the other headphones or my speakers, became the main focus of the instrumentation with the Grado's. Similarly where a voice and piano dominate on the other headphones suddenly it is the percussion that is more obvious with the Grado's. It could be that the Grado's are being more truthful but if that is the case then everything else is wrong. In terms of absolute resolution the Grado's do well, while not quite equalling the Sennheiser HD650's. Musical organisation is a definite plus and the Grado's are the most rhythmically committed of all of these phones. They portray drama, tension and suspense beautifully and are neutral enough to get out of the way of simple acoustic music. You get the message even if it has a slightly different (but always entertaining) emphasis to the one you hear elsewhere.

The Grado's were impressive at giving a sense of the acoustic of a recording. If anything they slightly over emphasise the space, walls seem further away and the performers almost seem to have spread out, which is quite satisfying and helps counter the "in the head" sensation. Other than the Stax headphones they sound the least headphone like with good overall dynamics and excellent transient attack. The SR325's were pretty linear with sound pressure level and very

enjoyable with reduced volume where their treble boost affect keeps details conspicuous. Dynamic contrast is well preserved at low sound pressure levels but their already weaker bass output compared to the treble tended to make them sound thin and a bit pinched whilst at higher volumes they are more fatiguing than the group leaders: the Stax. Combining the Grado's with the Naim Headline creates a pairing that is too intense at times

balance and rhythmic intensity using a pair of SR325's could best be described as strapping a pair of Linn Kans to your head, albeit rather lighter in weight. You will either love them or hate them but they are certainly a quality product and properly matched they always entertain.



with a tendency to induce listener fatigue even while the sound is thrilling in many ways. The Grado's thrived on the open sound and excellent tonality of signals from the Sugden HeadMaster which created a more even sounding combination.

Taking into account their tonal

Sennheiser's

Sennheiser is a serious organisation where headphones are just a part of a wide-ranging product portfolio. Started in 1945 and renamed Sennheiser in 1958, they have always focused on sound recording, transmission and reproduction. Despite the long history and obvious current success many would say that their headphone creations culminated in the now discontinued Orpheus electrostatic that is still spoken ►

▶ about in lush, reverential tones. In this review we have two products from their high-end range, the HD595 and current top of the line HD650.

HD595 - £150

The HD595 is a well-constructed attractive looking headphone where the large earpieces and headband have obviously been carefully designed. Both of the Sennheisers discussed here look more finished and considered than any of the other headphones, meaning that the HD595, while being the cheapest headphone here, definitely doesn't look it, in spite of being mostly plastic. The amount of adjustment on offer is useful and they should fit anybody although the headband, while well padded, is too rigid, inflexible and too strongly sprung for my (largish) head which means the earpieces grip pretty firmly, at least for me. The velour ear-pads proved comfortable against the skin and they resist falling off. But I found them to be excessively grippy and they became obvious during longer listening sessions.

The HD595 is an open backed design and like the Beyer's has a single cable to one earpiece. Unlike the Beyers the wire to the other earpiece is artfully hidden within the headphones' construction. The HD595 makes use of a neodymium ferrous magnet system which means lots of magnetic strength in a smaller lighter magnet assembly. The voice coils are lightweight aluminium and aim to create high efficiency and excellent dynamics.

Continual exposure to the HD595

since starting this headphone review has not greatly changed my opinions, but I know I have a better context in which to place this product. The HD595's are the cheapest headphones here and while they don't really show it physically, sound is a different matter altogether. The 595 is closer to the Grado's than the other Sennheiser's in terms of its exciting presentation and they offer a superior sound for those, like me, who want their music upfront and rousing. Compared to their nearest price rivals, the Beyer's, they sounded more

persuasive at lower volumes and I put this down to their natural drive and excitement and a relative reduction in the level of their weaknesses. Conversely at higher volumes they started to shout, lose some cohesion and distortion artefacts become more obvious. Their linearity was found wanting in this company and dynamics ended up a touch squashed, so if you want it loud these may not be the best choice. But bear in mind that the better choices are going to cost quite a bit more.



intimate with a better portrayal of rhythm; they almost drive the music into your ears. In contrast however, the performers and instrumental lines bled into each other within a smaller acoustic space resulting in less obvious separation of strands and a reduced scale while their portrayal of space and acoustic they are the weakest phones. What they lack is the solidity and composure of the more expensive phones, demonstrating a tendency to sound a tad hollow although bass response is extended and very fast. The HD595's are very

By the end of the reviewing period I started to prefer the HD595 in combination with the Sugden headphone amplifier rather than the Naim Headline. The Sugden was better able to counter the slightly hollow sound, firming up the mid-range but still exploiting the HD595's speed, pace and rhythm.

While these headphones are only £50 less than that Beyer's it is an important \$50 that you may not want to spend, especially if you are after an edgy, exuberant sound. Overall the HD595's are a bargain at their price; they are really fine ▶

▶ rockers; and they are fun. It's just that they show their limitations in this elevated company.

HD650 - £299

The HD650 shares significant design themes with the HD595 but takes the best of everything Sennheiser know about headphones to create their flagship product, and it shows. While the HD595 and HD650 have

after two albums.

The HD650's are a very grown up product. They exhibit many of the positive traits of the Stax headphones but generally at a reduced performance level. Transparency is the best of the moving-coil headphones and they stayed very composed at high volumes. At low volumes they did not fare as well. They relished being driven quite hard and some of their laidback character

everything else tidy and controlled. Of course, you still don't get the physical impact of this bass but you emphatically can't get bass this deep and tight from loudspeakers without spending massive sums of money. Their handling of large-scale volume swings was also impressive and that makes them the best here for portraying macro-dynamics.

Spatially and in terms of separating the performers they fall behind the Grado's. So while the resolution of what performers are doing is excellent, the space between them is less than I would prefer. The perceived sound-stage makes you think that everyone has huddled together and that you have been moved ten rows further away. Conversely instrument timbre and texture was notable in its superiority and piano in particular was well handled, largely through the consistency of sound right across the octaves.

Unfortunately the snag with the HD650's is that they do sound a tad slow, with a lack of drive and excitement. Unlike the Stax, which on a first listen sound similarly unhurried, or the Grado's, they do not manage to communicate the energy and excitement of music as persuasively. Comparing the two amplifiers quickly identified the Naim as being preferred and I have not deviated in this view over subsequent auditioning. The Naim adds some much needed liveliness as I said in the previous review.

The HD650 is widely reckoned by much of the headphone fraternity to be the pinnacle of moving coil based headphones at any price. These are strong claims and I guess with this much expectation it is unsurprising that I was slightly



similar magnet systems, similar voice coil and similarly well finished product design and manufacture, the HD650 is distinguished by even better quality materials and construction. Sennheiser hand-select the drivers for each pair of HD650's to create a matched headphone system with very tight tolerances (± 1 dB claimed). They also feature a specially developed OFC copper cable which is Kevlar-reinforced and designed to be insensitive to handling noise. It is worth pointing out at this point that many find a purpose designed Cardas cable a significant upgrade over the stock one and I hope to explore this in a future article. The HD650's were pretty comfortable but like the HD595 the headband is quite stiff resulting in a lot of pressure on the sides of my head. So while they don't fall off at the slightest provocation, I found I was quite glad to take them off

was ameliorated by increased sound pressure. They also gained extra punch with volume and their lack of distortion meant that high levels were pretty much as clean as the source and amplifiers could manage.

Their one deviation from total neutrality was a slightly heavy and overly warm upper bass but emphasis here is on the "slightly". This balance, while subtle, is the inverse of the Grado's and could partially explain their weakness as the volume is reduced. The bass response of these headphones was the deepest here, with plenty of power. They really plumb the depths while keeping

► underwhelmed. Technically they are undoubtedly a superb moving-coil headphone – but they are also too laid-back for me.

Stax SRS404 Signature system 2 with SRM006t energiser – £995

Stax have been making headphones, or earspeakers as they prefer to call them, for forty-five years so you might expect them to have got it right by now. Unlike the moving coil designs, which can be driven by any headphone amplifier or socket,



the electrostatic Stax require a combination of an energiser that generates the high voltages needed and the headphones themselves, although no additional headphone amplifier is required. The high voltage, in this case placed on each side of your head, is 580V, which is a sobering thought, although I don't think they would have managed those forty five years if there was any history of frying audiophiles brains.* Stax offer an array of headphones and energisers and while they are pretty much mix and match there are some preferred combinations

* If that's not scary enough for you, how about the IN EAR electrostatics discussed by AS in his column this issue!

sold as systems. The SRS404 Signature System 2 reviewed here is one such combination and sits at the higher end of the range. It sets itself apart from the cheaper systems by having a more advanced version of the basic Stax headphone (the SR404) and by including the cheapest valve based energiser (the SRM006t). The total cost of a whisker under \$1000 places them above even the most expensive headphone and amplifier combination discussed so far – but only just. So, since the valve energiser is reported to be something

pretty special we included it in this quintet.

The Stax headphones have a wonderfully retro look that wouldn't have looked out of place 25 years ago. In fact looking at the website it didn't look out of place back then and they don't seem to have changed the external design in 25 years (if it ain't broke why fix it?). The energiser continues the theme with its front finished in champagne (what else?) while the rest of the box is a non-descript black. I think this look is back in again although if you are less (more?) fashion conscious the front of the energiser is also available in black.

The SRM006t features a pair of 6CG7 valves as its output stage and is operated in class A. The valve outputs are direct coupled to the headphone drive units, a better, more direct system is hard to imagine. In operation the energiser does get hot even though the folded sheet body contains plenty of holes, and it needs to be kept well ventilated. Two switchable inputs are provided, one of which can be configured as a balanced input using XLR sockets while the single-ended only input offers a feed through output. Turn on is achieved by pressing the power button on the front and waiting for the energiser to settle down. This takes about 20 seconds and while this occurs the power light flashes. The volume control is a large, weighted knob that is split to allow each channel's volume to be adjusted independently. Friction locks the two controls together during any overall volume adjustment. Three outputs are provided to run headphones in parallel

if you so wish and Stax offer an extension cable if your comfy chair is inappropriately located.

The headphones are open backed and with their large ear-pads, which can twist and tilt, they completely enclose the ear. Despite being heavy and large the enclosing ear-pads combined with the adjustable two-part headband make them the most comfortable 'phones here for long periods of listening. One ergonomic gripe is that the serious multi-strand high-voltage cable does have a tendency to try to tug the headset from your head. Construction, on the whole looks a bit cheap, with lots of plastic, while the ear-pads are finished in an artificial leather which is more comfortable than

► it looks or sounds. However, compared to the Sennheisers in particular, their construction is basic.

From the first piece of music I played through the Stax headphones it was abundantly clear that they were playing by different rules to the moving coil designs. They generate a sound that is very real and natural sounding. They simply allow you that much closer, in pure sound terms, to the real thing. This goes some way to alleviating the in your head feel of all headphones,



unexpected bonus given the fine results I have had with balanced connection between my CD player and pre-amplifier. If you want to hear true transparency then I recommend getting a listen to a pair of these. They reveal much more musically important detail but not obviously presented or thrust at you. Instead you can listen into the recording and follow any strand at will without conscious effort but still manage to experience the overall performance cohesively.

The only potential fly in the Stax usage ointment is found in this transparency; the Stax system is too accomplished to not run it

particularly the HD650s and the Grados, but to nowhere near this extent.

While the Stax headphones are agile to changes in level they seem slower, especially compared to the speed freak Grado's. This opinion soon fades as you become used to their presentation and you realise just how relaxed, unhurried and totally composed they are irrespective of program material; they simply flow with the music. The integration of musical motifs is another impressive attribute to their sound. Although they are not as superficially "edge of your seat" exciting as the Grados or HD595s, but they do have a poise, ease and realism that the others strived for but could not match. A complaint that might be levelled at this system is that

macro-dynamics were less impressive, with a slight smoothing of impacts compared to the HD650's even with the preferred single-ended connection, but as a compensation the Stax's handling of micro-dynamics is wonderful.

They are not just in a league of their own; they are competing at a different sport. The Stax system was superb at low volumes; in fact they sounded virtually the same at all volumes and it was the very low distortion and total transparency that characterised their sound. Not at all showy but incredibly listenable over the long run, these are now the only headphones I would consider for serious use.

Summary:

All of these headphones offer a high quality of sound and they are all products that will allow you to enjoy and explore your music collection, but you would and I did find favourites. Of the moving-coil ►

in other words it is easier to forget that it's headphones that are producing the sound. Tonally they are pretty much perfect. The balance between bass and treble energy, even though both seemed curtailed compared to some of the others here, helps to explain this utterly realistic and organic sound – it's not that the information isn't there, it's just less obvious (or should that be exaggerated?).

When setting these up I immediately went for the balanced connection – which turned out to be a mistake. Balanced connection sounded a smidgen laidback and slightly dynamically challenged. Changing to the single-ended restored some excitement which was an

directly off of the source component of interest – and it absolutely demands quality. Anything in the signal path is obvious and I am pretty sure I reached the absolute limits of my CD player: I was hearing everything it was (and was not) capable of. If you are considering a Stax system, and you really should, do not think you can stint on partnering electronics because you will hear their weaknesses very clearly. I did also hear this with the other phones,

► headphones I found the Sennheiser HD595 the best value. While being flawed they offer more than a glimpse into the upper echelons of headphone listening with plenty of vibrancy while being incredibly keenly priced. The Grado headphones were my favourite moving-coil design irrespective of cost, offering a totally unexpectedly individual sound. They are not neutral and they could be fatiguing (choose your partnering electronics with care!) and while these are not the best headphones to relax with they are great fun and constantly excite you! The Sennheiser HD650 is a very neutral and resolving pair of 'phones and I can sort of see why they receive so many rave reviews. They have started to grow on me in the last five months but they are a bit too laidback to warrant a blanket recommendation, especially at lower volumes where they don't actively draw me far enough in. They should definitely be auditioned however as they are class leaders in many areas, especially in terms of tonality and bass response. Last (and by no means least) of the moving coil headphones is the Beyer DT880. These are real contenders at a reasonable price. They are totally in the middle of the road in performance without either the pros or the cons of the personality filled Grado's and this makes it hard to get excited about them. Their lack of exaggeration does mean that they will reward somebody with a wide-ranging music collection over the long haul. They deserve a serious audition to see if you think they are worth the extra \$50 over the HD595.

The Stax SRS4040 system stands out in many ways. It is electrostatic, it uses valves, it looks awful and it sounds sublime, the last point making them my clear favourite solution. The Stax proved to be transparent, balanced, neutral, natural and enjoyable. They are also the most

comfortable of these 'phones and did not fatigue at all, but they are also the most expensive solution here and the headphones don't look the money on the surface. But it is the sound quality they offer that makes it worth looking an idiot and paying a bit more. They have

become my reference for what is possible in headphones and it is going to take something pretty damned special (and probably ludicrously expensive) to beat these. Mind you, the possibility beckons, with Stax's own flagship amongst the contenders. ►+

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Each of the companies involved has a different take on how much technical information is important so here it is:

Beyer DT880

Transducer type/operating principle:
dynamic/semi-open

Nominal Frequency response: 5Hz to 35kHz

Nominal impedance: 250 Ω

SPL: 96 dB

Nominal THD: < 0.2%

Power handling capacity: 100 mW

Sound coupling to the ear: circumaural

Headband pressure: 2.8 N

Weight without cable: 270 g

Contact:

Tel. (44)(0)1444 258258

Net. www.beyerdynamic.co.uk

Grado SR325

Transducer type: dynamic

Operating principle: open

Frequency response: 18 Hz to 24 kHz

SPL: 98 dB

Normal impedance 32 Ohms

Driver matched (dB) +/-0.05

Contact:

UK Distributor:

Amour Home Electronics

Tel. (44)(0)1279 501111

Net. www.amourhe.co.uk

Manufacturer:

Net. www.gradolabs.com

Sennheiser HD595

Nominal impedance: 50 Ohm

Contact pressure: 3.5 N

Weight w/o cable: 270 g

Transducer principle: open, dynamic

Ear coupling: circumaural

Cable length: 3 m

Frequency response: 12 Hz to 38.5 kHz

Sound pressure level (SPL): 112 dB

THD, total harmonic distortion: < 0.1 %

Sennheiser HD650

Nominal impedance: 300 Ohm

Contact pressure: 2.5 N

Weight w/o cable: 260 g

Transducer principle: open, dynamic

Ear coupling: circumaural

Cable length: 3 m

Frequency response: 10 Hz to 39.5 kHz

Sound pressure level (SPL): 103 dB

THD, total harmonic distortion: 0.05 %

Contact:

Tel. (44)(0)1494551531

Net. www.sennheiser.co.uk

Stax SRS4040 Signature System2

SR-404 (Signature) Headphone:

Type: Electrostatic/Open back/Push-pull driving

Frequency Range: 7 Hz to 41 kHz

Capacitance, including cable: 110pF

Sound Pressure Level: 100dB/100V r.m.s.

Earpad: High quality artificial leather

Weight: without cable 300g, including cable 472g

Colour: Brown

SRM-006t Driver Unit

Type: Vacuum Tube Class-A DC direct Driver Unit for Car speakers

Maximum Output Voltage: 300V r.m.s.

Input Sensitivity/Impedance: 100mV/50KOhms

Frequency Range: DC-44,000Hz

Harmonic Distortion: 0.02%/1kHz

Gain: 60dB

Dimensions: 195(W)x103(H)x370(D)mm

Weight: 3.4kgs

Valves: 2 x 6C67/6HQ7

Contact:

UK Distributor:

Symmetry

Tel. (44)(0)1727 865488

Net. www.symmetry-systems.co.uk

Manufacturer:

Net. www.stax.co.jp

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Audionote MB with phono, remote (new) **£9995**
Audio Research SP14 **£1495**
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The Nu-Force Reference 9 digital mono-blocs

by Roy Gregory

Here we have another of those dinky little digital power amps that claim to deliver apparently absurd output levels from diminutive dimensions. I'll pass these along to MC (who reviewed the Flying Moles) for comment as regards power output and the claimed unique nature of the circuitry, which Nu-Force dub analogue switching, but here are the highlights as far as the spec sheet goes. The Reference 9 mono-bloc is claimed to deliver continuous power levels of 160 Watts into 8 Ohms, 300 Watts into 4 Ohms and 350 Watts into 2 Ohms, with peak outputs of 325 Watts, 650 Watts and a whopping 1200 Watts respectively! This from a box that measures 216 x 46 x 356mm and weighs a shade over 3 kg. That makes it little bigger than a box of chocolates – and we're talking a Mother in Law box here, not Wife with Newborn Child. Which should be enough to get your attention, in every sense of that phrase.

Beautifully turned out in glossy, extruded casework, the Reference 9 mono-blocs are a slightly bigger, slightly more powerful and much prettier version of the same company's cheaper Reference 8 model. They also offer switch selectable single-ended or balanced inputs and a pair of WBT type shrouded binding posts for the speaker terminals. The overall effect is compact and precise, offering the sort of neat package that you just want to like. Indeed, with the power on offer you might well ask what's not to like? However, in use, things are not that simple.

The Reference 9s will certainly play loud – of that there's no doubt. But there's a difference between power



and potency, the latter depending on dynamic range, the ability to jump in level between quiet and loud which allows music much of its impact and presence. Listening to the Nu-Force amps it became increasingly obvious that whilst they were happy enough reproducing steady state signals and responded reasonably well to full spectrum dynamic shifts (all instruments getting louder at the same time) they were far less capable of dealing with jumps in level by individual instruments and sudden changes in dynamic density. As a result, dynamic contrasts were largely emasculated, while separation and the low-level micro-dynamics that define instrumental texture were both impaired,

leaving the soundstage muddy and congested. Voices and instruments failed to project or separate properly from their acoustic environment, leaving them sonically wrapped and restrained in a dynamic straight-jacket. The overall effect was

like viewing the music through a dynamic letterbox – you could look up or down but the view was always narrow.

It's not like I didn't try with these amps; different pre-amps, different cables, different speakers – even d/i from the Wadia. Choose simple material or compressed modern pop and they cover their tracks quite well. But as soon as they are confronted by more complex music or better recordings their shortcomings become painfully obvious. And once recognised they're hard to ignore. Interestingly, their short-comings seem to be shared with the Flying Moles (I've not had the two side by side) and whilst it's way too early to declare this a generic weakness in the breed, it certainly ▶



▶ warrants watching.

There's an old saying that if things look too good to be true then they probably are. Unfortunately that's exactly how I feel about the Nu-Force Reference 9 amps. Fabulously cute in appearance they simply don't cut it musically as far as I'm concerned, their dynamic limitations severely curtailing the expressive range and emotive qualities available from a system. All that power doesn't translate and unless you've got

horribly inefficient speakers then you'd be better off with a Sugden a21, an amplifier whose 20 Watts will sound significantly beefier and deliver much more musical impact than this digital alternative. If you must have the power then look to a Rotel, because try as I might I can't raise any enthusiasm for the musical delivery of the Reference 9s.

Which is a crying shame, because as I say I'd love to love them... ▶+

Price: £899 each

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www.nuforce.com

EAT Cool Dampers...

A tube damper (and cooler) that actually works!

by Roy Gregory

The tube damper: how can something so prosaic prove so problematic? On the face of it the concept's simplicity is exceeded only by its obvious common sense. Here you have a thin glass bottle containing a skeletal and far from rigid metal structure, through which you are passing a delicate audio signal. First you attach it to a chassis that generates its own internal source of vibration, then you place it in a system where it generates a significant amount of external (acoustic) vibration. Add to that the fact that the operating temperature is such that the device degrades over time and you have a less than optimum situation as regards audio fidelity.

Well, hi-fi has never been short of lateral thinkers, many of whom have translated their theories (and I use the term loosely) into various after-market accessories. Unsurprisingly, the humble valve, sticking up like the proverbial sore thumb, has presented an obvious target and many an attempt and much energy has been expended over the years in attempts to improve its mechanical lot. These have extended over the years from the disastrous (the Sorbothane tube rings that melted) to

the inventive (the excellent but unwieldy Pearl Coolers) to the simple and elegant (the Sicomin and Duende Creatura rings). Of these the Pearl devices, annular copper bellows that clamp around the tube with external O rings to hold them in place were extremely effective, both cooling and damping the device, but few amplifiers had space around their valves to allow their use. The Sicomin carbon-fibre rings worked but I have doubts about their surface coverage, sufficient I suspect to raise the working temperature of the tube. I've used the Pearls wherever practical, recently augmented by the elegant Duende Creatura teflon dampers, small rings held in place by peripheral titanium springs. Now comes an alternative solution, at least as far as (the smaller) nine-pin tubes are concerned, and one that promises the thermal advantages of the Pearl Coolers without their dimensional challenges.

EAT, producers of premium valves, most notably their excellent KT88 reviewed in Issue 34 and the 300B discussed elsewhere in this issue, are now offering the Cool Damper, a device whose function should be self

explanatory. The form however, is less so. It consists of a cylindrical aluminium extrusion, finned to form a heat sink. The result is 34mm in diameter and 23mm tall and simply slips over the tube to be treated. The clever bit is on the inside faces of what is actually a hexagonal internal profile. Starting in each corner, there are three equidistant grooves extruded into the inner walls of the heat sink. Each Cool damper arrives with six teflon-carbon composite strips, one side circular to interface with the grooves in the heat sink, the other a pair of lips that extend into the space between damper and tube, thus providing mutual support. The teflon-carbon strips damp the glass envelope as well as providing a gap between the heat sink and the tube surface maximizing the chimney effect and hence the thermal efficiency. But the really clever bit is the provision of three grooves for each spacer. Move it along the face away from the corner and you move it closer to the centre of the hexagon and thus the valve wall. By this simple expedient, tubes from 19mm to 23mm in diameter can be accommodated, which covers most eventualities. If the Cool ▶

► Damper slips down the tube in use it needs the strips adjusting. That aside, installation is a cinch. All you need to do is decide whether you want ostentatious red or the more subtle grey versions. The Cool Dampers cost £15 each and if required, a rather nice storage box that will hold up to 12 Dampers beneath its magnetically retained lid will set you back another £25. Why you'd want this item is slightly beyond me, as once you've heard the Cool Dampers in your system, the last place you'll want them is sitting in a box.

I used the Cool Dampers with the c-j CT5 and also in place of the Pearl devices which are a permanent fit on the input tubes and phase splitters of the JA30s, thus employing them both in pre and power environments. I had insufficient to try them with the EL84s in the Linear Bs but that is an attractive alternative application which I'll investigate if and when I can prise 16 Cool Dampers out of EAT/Absolute Sounds.

In use, the EAT dampers run hot, which speaks volumes for their thermal efficiency. At the end of the day I can't comment on their impact on the longevity of tubes, but Pearl have convincing data on the subject of their devices. In the end, the efficiency of any heat sink depends on its area and the Pearls, with their much deeper fins score in that regard. Whether that difference is critical is hard to say, especially when you consider that in many instances the demands they make on space precludes their use. In the case of the CT5 they would only fit if the perspex finning that guards the tubes were removed, an unlikely and visually reductive step. So the EATs score big on practicality with no issues regarding installation. Indeed, my only concern would be using them on horizontally mounted tubes where

the lack of chimney effect might actually result in the device running hotter!

Sonically, the EAT Cool Dampers are a conspicuous success. Compared to the Duendes in the CT5, they delivered a fuller, more powerful sound, with greater weight AND definition: no trade off here between energy and definition. Playing Steve Dawson's superb soul homage 'Love Is A Blessing' (from the Dolly Varden front-man's new solo album Sweet Is The Anchor – Undertow CD-UMC-026) the bass is deeper, more tactile and far more



pitch precise, underpinning the funk groove that drives the track. Texture and attack on acoustic guitars

is far more individual, with better definition of harmonic structures. Voices are more natural, both tonally and in terms of diction, which with the better localization and separation allows them to project better, with greater impact and meaning. The separation of the close harmonies on the title track is breath-taking in its fragile beauty. In short, the sonic impact is wholly positive, while the promise of greater consistency through a longer working life is an added bonus. The

results were consistent too across the various amps and applications. In every case, separation and detail were improved without robbing the system of energy or impairing musical flow. In fact, the cleaner, more precise bass gave a welcome boost to the pacing and momentum of tracks, further reducing the mechanics of reproduction.

The EAT Cool Dampers are one of those accessories that at £15 each are cheap enough to simply buy on a whim. Perhaps that's a good thing – perhaps not. Don't make the mistake of simply installing them and leaving them alone. They deserve the time and attention required to listen and assess their impact properly. They're surprisingly beneficial to the point that I can't see their cost ruling them out, even in the case of the most budget conscious valve electronics – perhaps the arena in which they'll have the greatest influence. Tube outputs in Chinese CD players anyone?

As with all devices that influence the mechanical/environmental aspects of system performance, results will vary with different situations, but if they even begin to approach what I've heard here they'll deliver ample reward for the funds and time invested. What's more, they might just go some way to restoring your faith that genuine, musical benefits don't have to cost the earth. An early audition is enthusiastically recommended. ►+

EAT Cool Dampers
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Onward And Upward... Elac's 4Pi Plus.2 super-tweeters

by Roy Gregory

As a long-term fan of high-frequency extension, the flurry of super-tweeter designs occasioned by the arrival of SACD was one fashion of which I thoroughly approved. Of course, as a designer you can get the same result by simply extending the response of your standard high-frequency transducer – hence the simultaneous (re-)emergence of high-tech diaphragm materials like beryllium and diamond. However, those of us at the other end of the supply chain who already own expensive speakers* making replacement a costly and impractical option. For us, the add-on super-tweeter is a far more sensible alternative. But, start playing with the various offerings and you quickly discover two immutable laws:

- Not all super-tweeters are created equal.
- They work best when balancing (or balanced against) similarly extended low-frequencies, a situation in which their benefits are multiplied exponentially.

What this means in practical terms is that the super-tweeter's natural partner is the sub-woofer, a truth that becomes clear as soon as you use the two in tandem, the high-frequency extension sharpening bass clarity and timing, the low-frequencies adding air and space to proceedings. It's a fascinating inversion of expectation and I've lost count of the number of demonstrations I've conducted for experienced

listeners that have left them in an initial state of slack-jawed incomprehension until they get their heads round which bit of the system is contributing what.

Having said that, like any after-market addition, integrating a super-tweeter and sub into a system is the key to realising their benefits. Indeed, as a friend of mine is fond of saying "Integration isn't the most important thing, it's the ONLY thing". Which brings us to the vexed question of the Nola Pegasus speaker system reviewed elsewhere in this issue. I'll get to a detailed discussion regarding my investigation of super-tweetering this design in the context of other tweaks to its already outstanding performance, but suffice to say, as a long-term user of the Townshend Maximum super-tweeters, the sight of that substantial sub-bass arrangement teamed with a conventional alloy domed tweeter set my antennae twitching. Sure enough, experiments with the Maximums revealed significant improvements but also the impracticality of their application. Basically, they ended up perched on shelves, beside the Nola's flying baffle, their supports constructed from a stack of VPI bricks and CD jewel cases. Ugly and unsafe, I also shudder to think what effect this block of material was having on the rear-dispersion of the di-polar mid and treble drivers! The search was on for a more practical alternative, the happy impetus that led me to the Elac 4Pi Plus.2, a superb and snappily (no!) named device from the German masters of all things weird and generally wonderful when it comes to top-end technology – in frequency terms at least.

What initially attracted me to the expensive but exquisitely presented Elacs was their basic format. A substantial, mushroom shaped cast construction, the omnidirectional output of their horizontal ring ribbon transducer meant that not only could I stand them on the rear of the Nola cabinet, well behind the flying baffle, but that their dispersion would more nearly match the di-polar output of the main speaker. Larger than you'd expect from illustrations, and much heavier at around 4Kg each, the Elacs immediately inspired confidence, while even a quick and dirty set-up demonstrated their potential; this was going to work! It's so nice when a plan comes together.

Of course, the onerous task of integrating them properly still beckoned, but biting the bullet I plunged straight in. Imagine then my surprise when the calibration of the beautifully positive rotary controls positioned to the 4Pi's rear proved to be spot on. Every other super-tweeter I've tried has been a case of suck it and see, generally using the level control near the lower end of its range and the roll-in to taste. The danger lies in playing them too loud, which results in an etched and mechanical quality, a risk exacerbated by the uninitiated looking for effects at the top as opposed to the bottom-end of the range.

With the Elacs placed as far back on the cabinets as possible (giving them an unobstructed view of the listener, phase was checked before settling down to the all-critical setting of level via the five-pole switch. If I was concerned by the apparent ►

*It doesn't matter what they cost, if they're as much as you can afford that makes them expensive.

► course-ness of this control, I needn't have worried. Stepping from 84 to 92dB output level in 2dB increments, its performance seemed to be calibrated perfectly. Set initially at the 88dB (or ± 0) setting to match the Pegasus, it slotted straight in, with adjustments in either direction obviously destructive to the overall effect. Chalk one up to German engineering. That only left the choice of 10, 12 or 15kHz activation, with once again, the middle figure providing the best balance.

used to the slightly Dan Dare looks (which I rather like) they look a lot less like an add-on than the much smaller Maximums. They also sound better too.

a satisfyingly realistic rip to its tone. Overall timing was also improved, with musical phrasing making more sense. The 4Pi's brought a relaxed sense of natural flow to proceedings that allowed vocals to breathe, while the natural pace of the intricate and varied guitar work on Steve Dawson's new solo album *Sweet Is The Anchor* was meltingly seductive. Never have

his sublime harmonies with Diane Christensen sounded quite as telepathically connected, the chemistry as breathtakingly fragile.

This Elac supertweeter extends the performance available from existing speaker systems in a significant and musically important way. High-frequency extension is no optional tweak – it's a musical necessity, making your system more natural and more naturally communicative. It brings an effortless quality to the pace of a performance, fast or slow, that simply sounds right. Yes, you need to take care when it comes to integration and overall balance, but the 4Pi makes these aspects of installation significantly easier and more predictable than other supertweeters I've used, as well as out-performing them sonically and musically.

I've long hankered after a pair of the legendary Sequerra Metronome ribbon supertweeters which flitted through my fingers in the late '80s. Well – no more; the Elacs have come, seen and conquered, at least as far as this listener is concerned. ➤



In both cases the Elacs provided superior results to the Townshends (as they should at around twice the price). Transparency and image placement were both improved, while the tonality and harmonics of mid and high-frequencies were both significantly better.

Percussion detail was more natural, the nature of the instrument more apparent. But it was the texture and tonality in the lower-mid and bass that really impressed, with much greater definition and detail readily apparent. Dynamic speed, precision and substance were all improved along with the shape and duration of individual notes, making dynamic contrasts more emphatic and musically effective. This increase in presence extended across the entire range, brass in particular gaining body and

Of course, this experience only encompasses a single, distinctly exotic speaker system, but additional investigation with the Living-Voice OBX-R2 (in tandem with a Velodyne sub) demonstrated similarly predictable and easy set-up. The flat footprint and substantial weight of the Elacs makes them perfectly at home sat atop a conventional cabinet. They are also beautifully finished in a sensibly neutral slate grey, which means that once you get

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Finally, the Hi-Fi Plus accessory of the year 2004, the Maximum Super Tweeter sits on top of your existing speakers on special brackets for Quad 57 and round/sloping topped speakers. "The difference was staggering" Hi-Fi World, Jan 04

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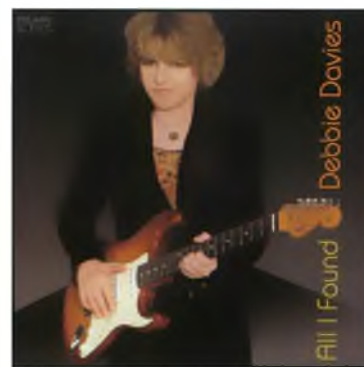

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Record Reviews

How To Read Them



Debbie Davies

All I Found

Telarc Blues CD83626

Debbie Davies has been around some real blues heavyweights on her rise to stardom, but none more influential or inspiring than the legendary Iceeman, Albert Collins.

"Working with Albert has definitely affected my playing" she remembers fondly, "what I learned from him is that everything that comes out has to be wired to your soul". You can hear Albert's influence quite distinctly in Davies' guitar tone and the effortless control she administers over her instrument.

On *All I Found*, her eighth album as front woman, Davies offers up her most accomplished set yet, playing with a fluidity and burning intensity that sings the ears and tugs the blues strings around the heart. She coaxes a rich, fat sound out of her strat on the funky instrumental "So What" and chops it up wickedly on "Comfort Zone", which also highlights her ever-improving singing. The rhythm section of Noel Neal (bass) and Per Hansor (drums) keep the beat rock solid, and the addition of Shemekia Copeland's rhythm guitarist Arthur Neilson enhances the sound without cramping Davies' style. This is a well honed unit, a band in every sense of the word who know what's required of them and who attack it not as a job, but as a labour of love. Sometimes recordings sound a little forced but not this one; they're all in it to have fun and that comes across loud and clear.

AH



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:- Dave Ayers, Tim Britt, Mark Childs, Richard Clews, Dave Davies, Dennis D. Davis, Peter Downard, Richard S. Foster, Roy Gregory, Simon Groome, Jason Hector, Andrew Hobbs, James Michael Hughes, Reuben Parry.

Key to Icons

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- Vinyl Double Album



Kasey Chambers

Wayward Angel

EMI 7243 8 60923 2 8 (CD)

Chambers' unconventional image – her pierced lip and gothic style spiky jewellery and chains – throws down an immediate visual challenge to dyed-in-the-wool country music fans. So will unsettling songs such as "Pony", it combines her deliberately girly vocals and a child's eye view of the world with the slightly disturbing fantasy that when she's all grown up this little girl not only wants "a pony" but then in the next breath "a baby" and finally "a cowboy" as well. The striding baritone guitar and those classy country lap steel licks from Bill Chambers musically taps into the tradition but at the same time with these vocals Kasey's lyrics become an ironic undermining expression of that burning lack of ambition found out on the farm. It gives this song a unique edge. Though from here on in this album works really hard to rebuild its "cowboy" credentials with powerful songs about heartache, two timing lovers, love's hard earned lessons and some sad reflections on life. The song writing drips with intelligence and the playing by family members, friends and session musicians is impeccable. A revealing Nash Chambers production, sparse arrangements and the Bob Ludwig mastering at Gateway lovingly recreates Kasey's quirky voice and a variety of instruments including mandocello, banjo, mandolin, Hammond, piano and guitars

RP

RECORDING
MUSIC



A

Teen Dance Ordinance

London Records 50467-8585-2 (CD)

A have been making harmonic skate-punk records for a good while now, but have somehow managed to remain out of the media spotlight whilst simultaneously building up a huge fan-base. If you're not familiar with their previous albums A bend American punk with close harmonies and superb melodies; think Green Day meet the Beech Boys. Their last album was heavily criticised for relying too heavily on American culture and influences, taking them too far from their roots. This album, their fifth, keeps a lot of the good parts of this foray into pure Americana, but pulls their influences closer to home. *Teen Dance Ordinance* is something of a rarity these days. It's just a rock album; twelve songs and no gimmicks. In audio terms the album is, at times, overly compressed to produce a wall of sound with almost no dynamic at all, but don't let that put you off. The production makes the songs full and broad, but tempers what would otherwise be a seriously heavy album. With the dynamic controlled more attention can be paid to the harmonies and melodies, producing something more akin to pop than metal. But all this is simply skirting round the main point, this album is easily their best, easily their most coherent and easily their most consistent.

MC

RECORDING
MUSIC



Tab Benoit

Fever On The Bayou

Telarc Blues CD83622 (CD)

Flicking through *Billboard* one day, I happened upon an advert for Tab Benoit's debut album *Nice and Warm* on Justice Records. I was attracted by the sleeve's tapestry of images, in particular the one of the beat up Fender Stratocaster. I took the plunge and purchased it and was flat out, bowled over by the contents, especially the guitar sound. I must have played the title track six times before I listened to the rest, such was the impact it had on me. I fell hook, line and sinker and have purchased everything Benoit's done since, and I've yet to be disappointed. *Fever On The Bayou* carries all his usual trademarks; fizzing guitar solos, that unique voice and excellent self-penned songs sitting comfortably alongside some hoary old chestnuts. True to form, opener "Night Train" gets you reaching for the repeat button. Over a thumping beat Tab rees off some stinging lead. His voice spitting venom – it's a song in a serious hurry and a great way to start an album. "I Smell A Rat" is seven minutes of earthy slow blues and the title track dishes out a heady Zydeco flavour, which more than hints at his roots. The recording is up to Telarc's usual high standards but I'm loath to say it's Benoit's best album because he's just so damned consistent.

AH

RECORDING
MUSIC





Mark Gillespie

Supersonic Wednesday

Chocolate Factory Records 04CF002 (CD) (DVD)

Live, Mark Gillespie is certainly something special. On Wednesday the 9th of June 2004 in front of their adoring fans he and his seasoned band of like-minded performers (including the brilliant percussionist Jose J. Cortijo) gave their all in one of those atmospheric and quite memorable evenings that those lucky German audiences have come to expect. Mark's powerful, rugged and emotion-filled vocals for *Supersonic Sunday* have soul. While the skilful arrangements for 'Roses', 'Easy' and 'Mindless People' reinforces that passion he feeds into a lyric. 'The Road', a song about how other people will try to rule a musician's life if he lets them, chooses its targets and knocks them over in a contemporary display of artistic individualism and assertiveness – themes musically underpinned by an enduring Peter Herrmann bass line and the euphoric Thomas Dill guitar that closes out the groove. 'I Miss My Mummy', a laconic crowd pleaser to end with, not only finds generous solo opportunities for Herrmann but also for keyboardist Ralf Erkel as well. He is another rare talent drawn into Mark's inner circle. But it doesn't quite stop here. Three minutes into the silence and there's a terrific buried track encore. The DVD too is worth having for the documentary insights and a brilliant live "busking in the street" version of 'Give It Time'.

Supplier: www.gillespie.de

RP



Augustine

Acorns Up!

Quality pop albums are like buses, you hang around for ages waiting for one to turn up and then two come along at the same time. Firstly the Sequoia album restores faith in the art form, to be swiftly followed by this gorgeous slab of harmony-inflected brilliance. The history of Augustine's members covers a rich spectrum; the Blue Aeroplanes, Washeatic, The Slits, Cousteau and Grand Drive are a few of the bands to benefit from their considerable skills. John Douglass and Steve Hogg, Augustine's principal songwriters, have worked together for years but this is the first time they've pooled their collective songwriting skills, and it's been well worth the wait. Right from the offset it becomes clear this collaboration has the hallmarks of perfect pop heaven, from the crispness of the melodies to the sweetest of sweet harmonies. If the mark of a priceless pop song is measured by its ability to stick in the head then 'Acorns Up!' scores a perfect 10: 'Phase Of Angels', 'I Won't Be There', '...To Be Sad', 'Drift Away' – all of them contain the necessary magic ingredients. Messrs. Cowell and Louis whatchaname can carry on with their nonsensical quest for talent, me. I prefer to satisfy my pop lust with the real thing. Top marks, guys.

Available from www.sons-of-art.com

AH



Warchild

Help: A Day In The Life

Independiente ISOM59 (CD)

Ten years ago Warchild set out to make an album in a week. That speed gave the album a superb sense of reality: this was music at its most raw, capturing the moment in a way few albums can. A decade on they set out to do it all again, but with today's technology they wanted to do it in just one day. *Help: A Day In The Life*, released the same day as recorded to download and then on CD a few weeks later, is a collection of covers and original songs by a wide variety of artists. Just like its ancestor it has all the benefits of being sparsely produced and quickly recorded, with the true sound of the instruments much more obvious and with no extraneous backing tracks. As might be expected, this formula works best when it is combined with artists that can use it to their advantage. Hard-Fi and Maximo Park producing particularly good tracks. Belle and Sebastian and The Manic Street Preachers take this to its extreme and turn in tracks that sound a most like demos, and each make one of their best songs yet in the process.

Twenty tracks ensures a good body of work that will be familiar with a handful of tracks to stretch your tastes. *Help: A Day In The Life* is everything a good album should be.

MC





Mary Gauthier

Mercy Now

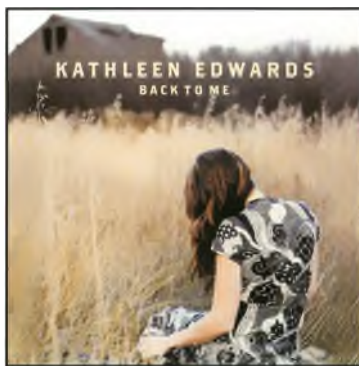
Lost Highway 800035/0-01 **180g**

This is one of the finest country blues albums of recent memory. Drawing heavily on her personal life, Mary Gauthier's unflinching music faces down its demons with beautiful but often quite dark imagery, all of which is underpinned by a smoke-cracked and weathered voice permeated by the kind of raw emotion that is only learned from having lived through these torrid and tempestuous experiences. It is hard to believe that Gauthier did not write her first song until the age of thirty five when such a gritty and uncompromising track as 'Falling Out Of Love' opens with the lines "It's a cheap hotel, the heat pipes hiss. The bathroom's down the hall, and it smells like piss" to concisely uncover a lurid vision of the world. Painting pictures of a fractured family life, the crushing relationships and all the emptiness and loneliness one could imagine is such a brave and deeply honest step to take that because it exposes Mary to the closest of examinations. This is compelling storytelling that in many ways with her inimitable vocal delivery going far beyond singing in its normal sense, keeps you totally engrossed whether its reflecting upon failure and frustration in 'Mercy Now' or making wry observations on alcoholism for 'I Drink'

Supplier: www.vivante.co.uk

RP

RECORDING
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Kathleen Edwards

Back To Me

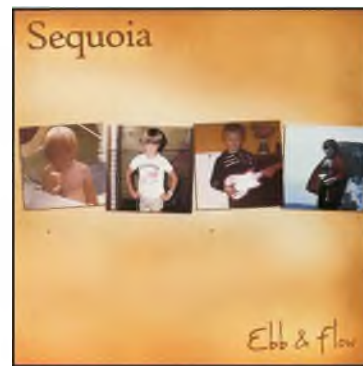
Zac Records ZUF 104 / **120g** (CD)

This follow up to 2003's album, *Failor*, brims over with more of those finely gauged and powerfully lyrical Kathleen Edwards songs. More "Americana" than country, with a rugged rock strewn groove thrown down for tracks like 'In State' that so memorably recalls a woman's love which is ridden rough shod by her man's habitual life of crime. Underneath it all though there is the old country wardrobe of washed out denim and faded sundresses to evoke an atmospheric and often nostalgic past in a softly enunciated 'Pink Emerson Radin' or ephemeral 'Summerlong'. Kathleen has that uncommon and uncanny knack of combining those memories of pecked paint and clapboards with the kind of tenuous relationships that teeter on a knife-edge. Edwards is one of those sensitive yet strong-willed singer songwriters whose style of reflection takes its scalps but does so intelligently through its tactile imagery. With lines such as "All the words you had planted seeds inside your head" from 'What Are You Waiting For?' or "I've got ways to make you strange - drug you up and drag you home" lifted from the title track 'Back To Me', she develops themes and emotions that you can taste, smell and touch. Great musicianship including Edwards on acoustic, electric, six and twelve string guitars completes another excellent release in the new wave of North American music.

Supplier: www.vivante.co.uk

RP

RECORDING
MUSIC



Sequoia

Ebb And Flow

We like to put things in their place and categorise or label them, especially when it comes to music. I'm no different to any other reviewer and use the comparison thing liberally, mainly so people can gain an idea of what a band sounds like before they part with their hard earned cash. With Sequoia the task becomes a little more precarious because they don't fit comfortably into any particular field. To call them a pop band doesn't fit the bill as it might suggest they write throwaway ditties that no one will remember 24 hours after hearing them, and that's certainly not the case. These songs are definitely pop songs but finely crafted ones, songs with longevity which have a way of creeping into your psyche and remaining there like the memories of a perfect summer.

According to lead vocalist Andy Sterman the song always comes first, there isn't room for over-inflated egos and the less is more approach always takes precedence over everything else. The lyrics are crafted in the same manner too, they have substance and eloquence and a beautifully poetic way of getting the message across. No point in a track by track breakdown because all the songs shine with a zestful brilliance. Sequoia have the credentials to fill the aching pop space left by Crowded House - they really are that good.

AH

RECORDING
MUSIC





Anything But Typical... Introducing Tamrah Aeryn

by Andrew Hobbs

years later embarked upon a one year piano course with Sheryl Thousand, a woman she cites as her biggest influence and inspiration. Sheryl taught Tamrah how to read music and was hugely impressed by her willingness to learn - but more importantly by her considerable talent. Tamrah honed her skills playing at weddings, cabarets and recitals, and after graduating at high school got accepted at the University Eau Claire, an establishment with a first class reputation for music. Tamrah stayed for three years but found the experience too restricting. The tutors insisted on a technical approach which had the effect of stifling her creativity, but at least the university

number, not really expecting to hear from him again, but Lionel was impressed by what he heard and invited her to England to begin work on what would become the album's final tracks.

During the recording Tamrah fell ill, poisoned by the delights of the local Kebab house, but kept going until she was too weak to stand. (Incidentally, the track 'Weak' on the finished album is the same version she laid down in the studio whilst close to death.) At this point she was admitted to various hospitals but was badly treated by our beloved NHS, but we won't get on our high horse about that one; suffice to say she recovered and went on to complete the album.

In a recent interview I asked Tamrah about her earliest musical recollections and she told me the story of how she used to create songs on her guitar at the age of 6 with her 2 cousins. She performed the harmony parts whilst the others sang lead and then committed it all

to tape on her parents recorder.

I also took the opportunity to ask what comes first to her - the words or the music. "Everything with me is spontaneous" she replied, "I keep a notebook and hand held tape recorder and they go everywhere with me."



Tamrah Aeryn's album might be called *Typical Gurl* but in reality she's anything but.

Born in Wisconsin in 1981, Tamrah grew up in the township of Lynn around a man-made lake surrounded by 100 acres of woodland. Her father created the lake and as a thank you his mother donated the plot where the family home now stands.

Her father and brother are pilots who work for an aerial images company commissioned to take photographs of properties all over the USA, and the young Tamrah could often be found in the skies wielding the camera and occasionally taking the controls as co-pilot. Her passion for music was aroused by listening to her mother playing folk songs on the guitar and hearing albums by The Moody Blues, Simon and Garfunkel and Yes, but Tamrah also developed a love of classical music and would listen incessantly to Beethoven, Bach, Eric Satie, John Berry, and especially Rachmaninov.

At the tender age of nine she composed her first piece of music on the family piano, and three

gave her a taste of life in a band (the charmingly named The Sky Is Falling). She became lead female singer/guitarist at the tender age of 17 and would often perform solo when the band took a break at gigs. Tamrah took leave from college intending to return at a later date, but fate was about to take a hand in her life. In a nightclub in Minneapolis she met Lionel Hicks, drummer and producer with heavy rock band Balance Of Power, who was in town laying down the final mixes for their latest album. They got talking and Tamrah handed him a four-track demo (containing some of the songs to be found on *Typical Gurl*) and left him a contact

Songs aren't a conscious thing and I don't always write from start to finish, often I write something down and come back to it later - unless of course I get an idea ►

▶ I latch onto and then everything else just goes out of the window. I'm not inspired by anything in particular, but I do believe the songs come from a different place."

That last statement hinted at a deep spirituality, a side to Tamrah that became more evident as she continued talking. "Back in the USA I got working with Terry Hisk and Chad Lewis, two paranormal investigators who were in the process of writing a book on haunted places in Wisconsin. I helped them with their work, attending expeditions and taking pictures of electro-magnetic fields; It was a fascinating time and some of the findings were quite extraordinary." (More on this can be found at www.unexplainedresearch.com).

This is obviously a subject close to Tamrah's heart and she goes on to explain the background to her favourite song on the album, 'Valley Bridge': "Lionel's family come from Scarborough and on a visit there he took me to a local suicide haunt called Valley Bridge. It was 10.00pm on a cold winter's night and somehow we got separated and I ended up underneath the bridge on my own. Although there was a crying sound in the wind I didn't feel scared - just nostalgic. It was as if the people who had thrown themselves from the bridge had left all their negative energy there and it had become like a whirlpool, to which I felt drawn in. The negative energy can make you feel depressed and as I sat there a sense of emptiness and desperation began to stir inside of me."

Valley Bridge had left its mark and ended up as the last song on the album, a fitting tribute to all the lost souls who still reside there, and the futility and despair they must have felt when they jumped to their deaths. Tamrah was so moved by the bridge's dark history she decided to write a book about all of the ghosts trapped in its jaws. This remains a work in progress.

On a lighter note, I asked her how she felt about all the Kate Bush/Tori Amos comparisons and what the main differences were between the US and UK music scenes. "It's funny," she replied, "I get the Kate Bush thing thrown at me a lot,



but hand on heart I'd never even heard of her until I came to England. I'm a fan now and it's a big compliment to be likened to such an individual talent - as it is to be likened to Tori - but I don't base my style on either singer. The main difference between the US and the UK is live music; Americans love to go out and experience the live sensation which means that local bands can be hugely successful without ever moving away from their homebase. Also the Country/Americana/Alt-Country arena is much bigger at home - as is the Christian scene, so if you fall into those categories there's a good chance you'll be successful."

Although *Typical Girl* has only just been released in this country through Proper Records it's been out in Europe on the Massacre label for a while, so I asked Tamrah how work was progressing on the follow up. "Oh, loads of material has been written and the new album should be along soon" she mused. "This time there's going to be more of a theme, I want the songs to flow into one another. It will have a Celtic feel and it is inspired by the fresh waters of the great lakes - a really peaceful, in touch with nature vibe. I am a perfectionist in the studio and have a habit of changing the chords around a lot, so I hope the musicians can keep up!" Now that the UK distribution is set up Tamrah is looking to take *Typical Girl*'s songs out on the road, so the chance to see her in a live setting shouldn't be too far away.

There are many, many female singer/songwriters trying hard to get a foothold in this most fickle of industries, but Tamrah Aetyn shines in different ways to the rest. She has a hugely distinctive voice, her songs have a strange, almost ethereal quality and her lyrics go way beyond the usual boy-meets-girl, boy-loses-girl mentality. She's humble, walks this earth as a very old soul, has a unique ability to communicate through words and music and is most definitely a star in waiting. I leave you with 'Assembly', one of many beautiful poems she has been writing since the age of six. What a kaleidoscopic talent - I am in awe

'ASSEMBLY'

Never ending
Root descending
Coppice green
Make room to grow,
Decided mind
A favourite find
A golden sun
Is cloaked with snow.

Eclipse of tide
Their minds abide
All are one
And no one hears,
A piece of dirt
They ail convert
All will shout
Who have no ears.

All are right
And all are wrong
All is seeped
In perfumed wells,
The "man" has grown
And "he" has shown
The "ONE" is but
A billion cells.





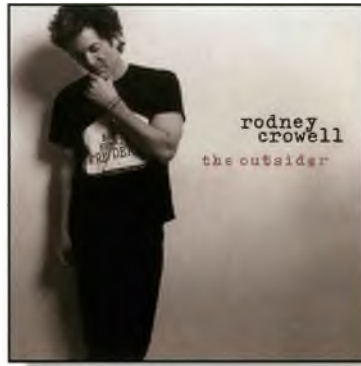
Sonny Landreth

Grant Street

Sugar Hill Records SUG-CD-3994 (CD)

Slide/blues guitarist Sonny Landreth with David Ranson on bass and drummer Kenneth Blevins produce a big and compelling sound at the Grant Street Dancehall, Lafayette – a regular gig for them in front of an enthusiastic audience – that holds us to ransom with its vibrant and blistering zydeco styled guitar playing on grooves like ‘Blues Attack’ and ‘Pedal To Metal’. A trade off for all this inspired interplay is a live recording that doesn’t really stretch out in the same way as the performances it hopes to capture. The engineering has muscle but lacks a certain delicacy and refinement when reproducing those moments of perfect and intuitive music making that this trio effortlessly delivers with some regularity in ‘Broken Hearted Road’, ‘Wind In Denver’ and a smartly titled ‘U.S.S. Zydecoldsmobile’. Rising above it is Landreth, a fantastic guitarist and formidable vocalist, one who can and does have the capacity to rip it up in a time-honoured fashion that has wooed audiences worldwide. The chemistry and raw power is there for all to hear and it only takes just a few bars from an opening ‘Native Stepson’ to ensure that any sonic reservations you may have are overhauled.

RP



Rodney Crowell

The Outsider

In the 80’s and 90’s Rodney Crowell released some fine country rock albums, as good as anything around at the time. His song writing skills are undeniable; he’s had many tunes recorded by artists as diverse as Emmylou Harris and The Grateful Dead, and his standing in Nashville is as high as any artist could possibly wish for, but Rodney’s an artist who refuses to stand still. He took the art of song writing to new levels with 2001’s *The Houston Kid* and 2003’s *Fate’s Right Hand* and has unbelievably raised the bar a couple of notches with *The Outsider*, 11 songs of quite breathtaking diversity offering proof (if it was ever needed) that he remains one of the most expressive wordsmiths working today. The guitars play a big part on this album, crashing and burning when called for but also stripped back and sensitive too, as they are on ‘Beautiful Despair’ and the tender ode to prejudice ‘Ignorance Is The Enemy’, with its spoken chapters by Emmylou Harris and John Prine. Crowell likes to dip his toe in the political pot occasionally (‘Don’t Get Me Started’) but the real jewel here is ‘Glasgow Girl’, conclusive proof that you can take the ring roads, Camden Town and the cities of Sheffield and Glasgow and romanticize the crap out of them. Brilliant.

AH



The Subways

Young For Eternity

Infectious Records 2564624842 (CD)

The Subways put out a handful of superb singles last year, and toured almost non-stop. Having played as an unsigned band at Glastonbury they picked up a contract and set out to conquer the world. Their previous singles had sounded like demos, recorded in a garage, lacking body but driven by pure adrenaline and determination. Onstage the chemistry between their female bassist and male guitarist (both take vocal duties) gives the band an electric tension and their obvious glee to be performing makes them a must-see. But a full-length album is a different matter. Could they really take on a long player and do it justice? Young for eternity is a beast of a record. It would be natural to expect their sound to be fuller, harder and with more body, but this record is something else. They’ve gone back and re-recorded their previous singles, and the change is unbelievable. But it’s the title track where they really show their full power. Perhaps the most surprising thing about the album is its production. The hard, fast garage songs are deeply compressed and solidly recorded, but the acoustic numbers are handled with a more delicate touch and sound just superb. This may be an album of pure garage rock, but it’s well produced, with techniques appropriate to the individual songs and you can’t say fairer than that.

MC



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Alternative Audio	116	Focal JM Lab	2	Simply Stax	44
Argento	19	Guildford Audio	127	Sounds of Music	117
ART Loudspeakers	57	Hazlemere	97	Sound Venture	34
Audio Atmosphere	127	Heatherdale	108	Spendor Audio Systems Ltd	45
Audio Craft	116	Hififorsale.com	109	Strub	117
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Audio Images	138	Integrated Eng. Solutions Ltd	97	Tannoy	116
Audio Reference	57	KEF	6	The Cartridge Man	126
Audio Republic Ltd	127	Loud and Clear	68	The Chord Company	14
AudioFreaks	4	Midland Audio Exchange	115	The Emporium	117
Audiolincs	44	Musicology	68	The Right Note	91
Audiophile Club	51	Neat Acoustics	69	The Sound Practice	117
Audio-T	18	Nordost	ibc	The Sound Surgery	8-9
Aurum Acoustics	51	Noteworthy Audio Ltd	138	Townshend Audio	116
B&W	obc	Oranges & Lemons	138	Trichord Research Ltd	85
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A Hidden Seam Of Gold...

Discovering the oft overlooked legacy of Luiz Bonfá

by Dennis Davis

All records are not created equal. The worst of the lot are never played through and are unceremoniously returned, traded or simply forgotten. The best are played so often that their slightest nuances become imprinted in memory. The best of the best, dare I say the perfect records, are so haunting that they not only beckon to be played, but insinuate themselves in your bloodstream and become part of your consciousness.

What does it take to make a perfect

recording? Certainly, there must be a great performance by a gifted artist, coupled with exceptional sound quality. It must be a recording that does not wear out, no matter how many times you have listened to it, a recording for all seasons so to speak. An LP or a CD that you have played dozens, if not hundreds of times, depending on the age of the

recording and the age of the listener. A few relatively new re-issues by one of my favourite artists have caused me to reflect on this subject and to wonder why certain recordings are so good that they rise above the tide of my other records that, while good enough to remain in my collection (which I thin out relentlessly) collect more dust than playing time. Of the thousands of records I have at my disposal, there is only a handful that I could put in the "perfect" category. One of them is by the great Brazilian guitar player and composer Luiz Bonfá.

Bonfá was born in 1922 in Santa Cruz, Brazil and took up the classical guitar at the age of 11, studying with master guitarist Isaias Savio. Bonfá gravitated to playing and composing Brazil's popular music forms, which were being influenced by American jazz. He first recorded as a leader in 1945, and turned out a remarkable string of albums during the 1950s and early '60s, mostly on the Odeon label. In 1957, he travelled to New York, where he was soon "discovered" by singer Mary Martin, who set him up on a lengthy tour. He spent much of the next 13 years in the United States, his time there coinciding with and contributing to the bossa nova craze.

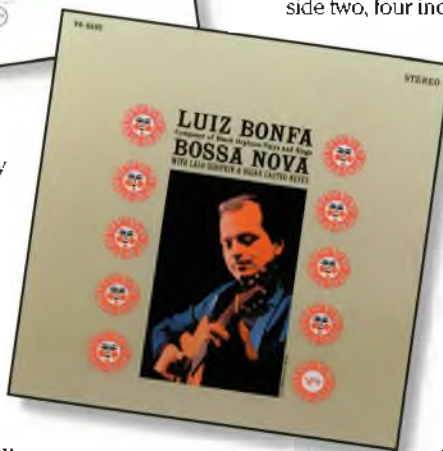
He returned home in 1971, although he continued to tour outside Brazil occasionally. He recorded into the 1990s.

Speakers Corner has released two Bonfá albums recorded by Verve during his stay in the United States. *Luiz Bonfá Plays and Sings Bossa Nova*, on Verve V6-8522, was recorded in New York City in late December 1962, and includes both small group numbers and large orchestral settings conducted by Lalo Schifrin. The small group numbers include some of Bonfá's signature compositions, 'Samba De Duas Notas' (Two Note Samba) and 'Manha De Carnival' (Morning of the Carnival). The cover is a replica of the original foldout, and it unfortunately includes the original liner notes, some of the worst to ever grace a record jacket ("When the crudities of the Twist no longer lured writhing hordes. . ." What did he say?). Side one of the album is devoted to these small group settings featuring Bonfá singing. Side two features Bonfá's guitar playing. Of the seven cuts on side two, four include string backgrounds as

interludes to the guitar work. Several have an unidentified female singer. The female vocalist is not the only musician not identified. Except for Bonfá, Lalo Schifrin and Oscar Castro Neves, the album does not credit any of the other players. The album is in some ways two different records. Side one is an excellent album of Bonfá standards. Side two is more experimental, although a

couple of the arrangements are too saccharin sweet for my taste. Nonetheless, this is a thoroughly enjoyable record. The sound of the original is excellent and Speakers Corner has done a splendid job of reproducing the record.

The other Speakers Corner release is *Jazz Samba Encore!* on Verve V6-8523, with Stan Getz playing tenor sax, Antonio Carlos Jobim doubling on guitar, and Maria Toledo, a vocalist Bonfá recorded with on several other occasions. The album includes seven Bonfá and three Jobim compositions, and was recorded at three different sessions with similar small groups in February of 1963 by recording engineers Bob



► Simpson and Ray Hall (both of RCA fame), and Phil Ramone. This is a much different album from *Plays and Sings Bossa Nova*. It is more a Stan Getz album than a Bonfá album, and is very much in the vein of Getz's ground-breaking Bossa Nova albums, *Jazz Samba*, *Getz/Gilberto* and *Getz Au Go Go*. This is an excellent album in every way. The music is on par, and in some ways superior to, that on the Getz bossa nova albums of greater sales and notoriety. It is well recorded, and has a studio sound much like those albums. I enthusiastically recommend that you add this record to your collection. Speakers Corner has done a fine job on this re-issue, and it compares favourably with the original. Unlike the other Verve bossa nova albums led by Getz, this one is not common and finding a clean original requires some industry. Bravo to Speakers Corner for issuing a first class album that deserves greater recognition.

However, neither of these albums are the "perfect" album I alluded to earlier. For that, I look back in time to Bonfá's classic 1950's solo albums. In 1959,

Emory Cook recorded 31 tracks of Bonfá playing solo in Brazil and released 17 of the tracks on his Cook label (LP 1134) as *O Violão de Luiz Bonfá*. That hard to find album was re-issued this year by Smithsonian Folkways Records as *Solo In Rio 1959*. The CD is widely available (£11.99 on Amazon.co.uk) and includes 14 unreleased tracks in addition to those issued on the original LP. To cut to the chase, no CD or LP has received more play-time in my system during the last six months than this CD. All but three of the tracks are Bonfá compositions and his playing on this album is relaxed, romantic and yet accomplished to the point of dazzling the listener. The album satisfies on every level. It is music making that repays close attention. Much of the playing seems uncomplicated, and hence of slight value, until you listen carefully and marvel at all the subtle details, the percussive effects, the brushing effects on the strings, the range of technical devices applied to develop complex results from seemingly simple ideas. On the other hand, the CD also succeeds as background music. I can think of no record in my vast collection other than Charlie Haden and Pat Metheny's *Beyond the Missouri Sky* that I would reach for instead of *Solo in Rio 1959* if I were looking for a "date" record. Indeed, this has become one of my wife's favourite records,



and I can think of only one houseguest who has not wanted a copy after only a few minutes of listening.

Emory Cook recorded between 1952 and 1966 with special attention to making demonstration quality records. This recording is no exception to that level of attention and the sound quality is outstanding. My copy of the original LP suffers somewhat from inferior quality vinyl, and I must say that the added bonus of the unreleased tracks has made me reach most often for the CD. Cook donated his master tapes to the Smithsonian in 1990, making the re-issue possible. The CD includes an excellent booklet with an Anthony Weller essay on Bonfá and a detailed description of the recording sessions, as well as notes regarding each track. One area where the CD falls flat is its cover. The

original LP contained a very campy 1950's style cover with Bonfá playing guitar before an adoring and buxom female, tastefully bathed in faded Technicolor. The CD opts for a photo rendered in more modern and stylish subdued brownish tones.

For those who share my opinion of these newly re-issued albums, Bonfá's earlier albums from the 1960's offer a lot of room for exploration. A fabulous tool for exploring the Bonfá discography is the excellent

website found at <http://kanji.zinbun.kyoto-u.ac.jp/~yasuoka/Bonfa/index.html> which provides as complete a listing as could be hoped for. My own favourite early Bonfá albums, in addition to the Cook album, are *Ritmos Continentais* recorded in 1958 on Brazilian Odeon MOFB-3020 (I have the second issue

renamed *Melodias Das Americas* on Imperial 30.009) and *O Violão E O Samba* on Odeon MOFB 3295 from 1962. But there are a dozen more that would give equal pleasure. For those wishing to explore Bonfá's mature playing, Chesky Records recorded him in a small group setting in 1989 and released an audiophile CD *Non Stop To Brazil* as Chesky JD29. This is a very well recorded session, which caught Bonfá in a more deliberate mood than his earlier recordings. While it may lack some of the fire of his earlier playing, it compensates with an extra share of grace. Bonfá plays fifteen of his own compositions, and is accompanied by Brazilian percussionist Café and, on three tracks, guitarist Gene Bertoncini.





Nina Simone

And Piano!

Speakers Corner/RCA LSP-4102 **180g**

Few would argue that Nina Simone divides opinions; defies categorization. As surely as she isn't jazz, she really doesn't sit comfortably in any other generic pigeonhole either. Various producers have dressed her up in different musical clothes but none has managed to disguise or obscure the uniquely off-kilter musical heart that beats within. Trained as a classical pianist, it is Simone's singing for which she is most renowned. Yet her playing informs her vocals and underpins their wilder excesses. *And Piano!* is a Nina Simone solo-album; just her and piano (and an occasional overdub). This is as close to her musical essence as you are likely to get.

Recorded in 1969, with Simone at her most confident and popular, the sound is big and direct and straightforward. With no arrangements to clutter events, the full expressive range of her soulful, blues voice is all the more apparent, the security of her rhythmic wanderings rooted in the structure and easy formality of her playing. The relaxed ease with which she shifts from one song to the next, treating each in a different (and often surprising) way, is never more apparent than on familiar material like a mettingly beautiful 'I Get Along Without You Very Well...' From spiritual to blues to jazz standard, she brings her own special touch. Whether you are a committed advocate or simply wondering "Why?" this is an album that will provide new answers.

RG



Art Blakey And The Jazz Messengers

Keystone 3

Pure Audiophile Records PA-008(2) **180g**

Art Blakey's *Keystone 3* has always been one of my favorite releases on the Concord Jazz label. The Messengers were a breeding ground for young talent, and this version featured Wynton Marsalis on trumpet and his brother Branford on alto sax, amongst others. This is not the Wynton you are familiar with from his own later records, but a fresh and aggressive bebopper version. The session cooks and it cooks on high heat. It was recorded live at the now defunct Keystone Korner in San Francisco in 1982. Blakey's Concord albums reflect a comeback for the Jazz Messengers after more than a decade of decline, and they belong on your shelf alongside the earlier Blue Note releases. This was a demonstration quality record in its original release, which I liked to pull off the shelf to show friends what could easily be found for a few pounds. Is the improvement reflected in the new release worth the cost of this deluxe re-issue? Pure Audiophile has released the original album, plus one bonus track from New York Scene, spread across two 180 gram red vinyl discs, half-speed mastered by Stan Ricker and pressed at RTI. The results are impressive. An already great sounding album now sounds spectacular. I encouraged Pure Audiophile to release this album and I love what they've done.

DDD



Gene Krupa, feat. Anita O'Day and Roy Eldridge

Drummer Man

Speakers Corner/Verve MGV-2008 **180g**

Recorded in '56, this album reunited the principal players from the halcyon days of the Krupa big band. Thumping, jumping and swinging their way through a well-chosen collection of established Krupa favourites, mainly arranged by Quincy Jones (eight of the 12 tracks, including high-point 'Wire Brush Stomp'). But don't go getting the wrong idea; driven rhythms aside this is not a drumming album. Indeed, Krupa is quite happy to sit back and let O'Day's vocals and the sublime trumpet of Roy Eldridge hog the limelight. Every so often he pops in a quick, almost apologetic break or a salvo of signature, thudding beats. Like Anita says "nobody kicks those skins quite like him". But this session is about the whole, a big band operating as one, players familiar in each other's company, able to propel the loudest tutti or relax into the gentle smooch of 'That's What you Think' – backing another beautifully judged vocal from O'Day. The sound is glorious mono, its drive and substance perfectly suited to this high-energy music and the powerful band delivering it. A brilliant encapsulation of Krupa's style and command as a band leader rather than a spot-lit soloist, you'll enjoy playing this music as much as the band enjoyed making it. Fabulous.


RG





Charles Mingus

Charles Mingus Presents Charles Mingus

Candid 9005 

I can think of no other label that produced such a consistently great records as Candid Records during the years 1961 to 1963, and the three Mingus Candid albums with Eric Dolphy are among the best of the best. These albums memorialize the end of the relationship between Mingus, Dolphy and trumpet player Ted Curson, and what a creative and fiery musical relationship that was. This record is required listening for any lover of jazz, even those who are generally shy of the more avant-garde sound of Dolphy mixed with the creative genius that always defined Mingus. It is a classic that deserves a place on the shelf along side of more accessible and better-known Columbia classics *Mingus Ah Um* and *Mingus Dynasty*. In addition to first rate Mingus, the record throws in some of my favourite Dolphy and Curson at the top of their game.

Bravo to Tony Hickmott and Pure Pleasure Records for bringing the Candid catalog back to life in living vinyl. This second Pure Pleasure Mingus album joins Abbey Lincoln's *Straight Ahead* in the Jazz arena, along with the several fine blues titles that have been reissued. Like



everything coming out of Pure Pleasure, the mastering of this disc is of the highest level, and the pressing from the Pallas record plant is as good as anything being done today. The mastering of this disc was by Graeme Durham at The Exchange in London, and his efforts are on a par with the handful of first class mastering labs in Germany, California and elsewhere in London. The original Candid pressings were first rate, and this re-issue combines all the strengths of the original with a better mastering chain and superior vinyl.

DD

RECORDING 
MUSIC

Chet Baker

Picture of Heath

Pacific Jazz PJ-18 

This album was originally issued as *Playboys* in 1957 and re-issued in 1961 as *Picture of Heath* (one of the song titles). I suspect that the magazine, which shared the original title's name, had more barristers than Pacific Jazz and convinced the label to switch titles. Like all Pacific Jazz recordings, this is "West Coast" jazz, but with a more star-studded line-up than was

sometimes the case for that label; Baker is joined by Art Pepper on alto sax, Phil Urso on tenor, Carl Perkins on piano, Curtis Counce on bass and Lawrence Marable on drums. A record with titans Baker and Pepper should sell itself and no one that buys this LP will be disappointed. While it may not be the very best that either performer left us, it's certainly in the front rank. Baker had yet to descend into his lifetime drug habit, and Pepper was recently back from doing prison time after a drug bust. The participants' personal problems do not intrude on this session, which almost defines the smooth sound of the "West Coast". The sonic quality of this LP is outstanding, largely due to the unstinting efforts of Pure Pleasure for whom this is a first re-issue from the Pacific Jazz label. They have done a fine job. Pacific Jazz records typically have an up-front honest sound that, while not quite the masterpieces of recording sound turned out by competitor Contemporary Records, are well recorded time capsules of a jazz style that I cannot get enough of. This was an inspired release on the part of Pure Pleasure. Originals of *Playboys* are rare and bring serious money on the used market. This re-issue should satisfy any collector who values music and sound more than original cover artwork.

DD

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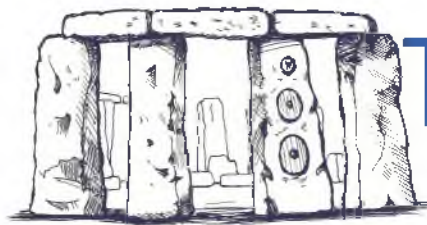
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The History Man

by Richard S. Foster

The Euro Audio Team 300B

I love transistors; they do so many things right. It's just that I finally realized that tubes do even more things right – at least sonically speaking. Right about now, a few of my long time friends are probably rolling on the floor and laughing their heads off. Clearly, I wasn't always a tube person. Sometime in the early 1990's I had this operation you see...

The last 35+ years have been quite an interesting path for me as a hobbyist. The learning curve has been tremendous and along the way one of the most important things I've learned is that tastes definitely change. Today I'm living with a system I truly love but one that a few years back I'd have bet big money I would never, ever own. I've gone from a very large listening room to a much smaller one, an equally massive set-up to a (physically at least) much more modest one. I've gone from transistors to tubes – and within the tube family, I've been able to enjoy the fruits of KT99s, KT90s, KT88s, Tung-Sol 6550s, Svetlana/Sovtek 6550s and now 300Bs. It's my recent experiences with the latter that I'm going to share, starting with the epiphany represented by Euro Audio Team's version of this venerable design.

My current amplifiers are strange little beasts. They are Manley Neo-Classic SE-PP 300s and they allow you to switch from push-pull to triode mode. Yes, you read that correctly: You can even do this 'on the fly'. In other words, mute the amps, flip the toggle and you can hear the transformer whining (in every sense of the word) as it switches from either triode to push-pull or vice-versa. If, like me, you're at a loss to understand how this is achieved then I refer you to the Manley website which offers considerable insight into the design philosophy of the amplifier. As I'm principally concerned with tubes here, that's the place to find the answer to the "what is he talking about?" dilemma I've just posed.

(<http://www.manleylabs.com/containerpages/seppneo.html>)

Let me state right now how much I love these amps. I spent considerable time listening to a variety of amplifiers to match my JMLab Micros. As we've said many times, the amp /speaker interface is one of the most critical in the system and never more so than with a ruthless little mother like the Micro.

Yet the moment I hooked the Neo-Classics up, I knew they were a perfect match and I've never regretted that decision. I have all the power I need for these speakers (now the Micro Be's) and the best part is the amplifiers do not heat up my room in the hot and humid summer. There's nothing worse than an indoor barbecue with lots of glass as the cooker. Believe me because I say that as someone with 16 KT88s running simultaneous overtime in his past.

The Manleys run a single pair of 300Bs per side (there's also a 6SL7 input tube, a 6SN7 driver tube and a pair of 5U4 rectifiers). They deliver 25 watts in push-pull mode and 12 Watts single-ended. They also arrived equipped with Electro Harmonix tubes (all save the rectifiers). Now, tube quality varies and some OEM suppliers are more reliable than others.

The Sovtek 6922 and 6550A are good examples of dependable product that's been around for a while and I had no reason to be suspicious of the Electro Harmonix items that issue from the same supplier.

Let me first say that I'd been living with the original tubes in the amplifiers since mid-2002. The crackle/noise issues began in 2004 and this is when I decided – with the help of my friends – that it was time to do something about the glassware. Initially, it was a noise issue with the input and



▶ driver tubes. Advice and experience has led me to a 'Black Base' Philips 5691 as the input tube (6SL7), and a Sylvania Mil Spec 6SN7WGTA for the driver tube. The crackle I'd occasionally suffered is now history. But the other (sonic) benefits made me cast a jaundiced eye in the direction of the output tubes, so, later that year when I was offered a quartet of EAT 300Bs by Ms. Jozefina Krahulcova, President of Euro Audio Team, I was quick to accept.

Changing tubes isn't a plug and play proposition. I took a day last fall and installed the EAT tubes. Biasing on this amplifier is set between 490 and 510 mVDC. Initially I turned the biasing almost off when the tubes were installed. I brought them up to level after allowing them to warm up for about an hour. I was very surprised over the next few days as to just how stable the tubes were. Only the smallest of adjustments was necessary and now I check them perhaps once a week with almost no adjustment necessary.

Well, with the tubes installed and stable, I was excited to say the least. I'd read the excellent review by Chris Binns in Issue 34 of their KT88's and so I had high expectations for the 300B. Let me also say that the visuals on this tube are quite imposing. It's about an inch or so taller than other 300B tubes I've come across and looks great!


The moment of truth was at hand and I duly cued up something familiar – the Speakers Corner re-issue of Mercury SR90153, *The Birds*. I still remember the moment the stylus hit the opening grooves... and my jaw hit the floor. The amplifiers had been literally transformed into these Fire-breathing Dragons with seemingly unlimited power and authority! I couldn't believe what I was hearing. I sat and listened transfixed to the entire side. Then it was on to the Willem Makkee re-mastered copy of The Doors' *LA Woman*. This time it was the whole record I played. And it continued like this for days. All the records I listened to were transformed. Joan Baez, on Cisco's magnificent reissue of *Farewell, Angelina* had a purity of tone I'd only dreamed was on the record. Where it had been closed in (which I only heard after the change to the EAT product) her voice now held this power and openness that was nothing short of astonishing.

I am now hearing what the amplifier is capable of delivering: pure, open, effortless sound with absolutely no apparent restraint. Only after I switched to these tubes did I realize that the Electro-Harmonix product was so weak and closed in. Now more than ever, the match that I thought I was getting for my speakers is truly secure.

These tubes, in my amplifiers, not only give me seemingly limitless headroom, there is a speed and clarity I never expected from a 300B. I listen mostly in the push-pull configuration, however I occasionally play in the single-ended mode and even then find that these tubes offer outstanding bass control. Where the Electro-Harmonix was thin sounding, suffering a bit of glare or harshness on vocal tracks, the EAT is

rich, solid and crisply defined, cleanly handling dynamic steps at both ends of the scale. I've found that in either PP or SE, the EAT tubes have a transparency and focus, a see-through quality with none of the syrupy mush and added softness one tends to associate with the number 300B. The tube is fast, leading edge transients being beautifully traced. Yes, that's right. It's got great dynamic swing and fabulous control, wonderful neutrality and is amazingly even from bottom to the very top. There's no pear shaped sound here, no flabby bottom or rounded and rolled off highs. It's a very natural and musical product, one I'd expect to give years of listening pleasure. If it lasts as long as the solid construction suggests it should, then the sonic benefits make it an extremely cost-effective upgrade on stock tubes.

To be fair, this is not my final word on the 300B. Impressive as the EATs undoubtedly are, the huge gap in performance between them and the OEM Electro Harmonix tubes makes me wonder how they stack up against the other audiophile offerings out there. I now have another three quartets in house and you can expect the news shortly as to how the EAT compares to the Western Electric 300B and Gold Dragon's 4300BC and 300BM.

The difference is that now it's a matter of interest rather than musical necessity. The EAT 300B has been a 100% totally reliable product. Whilst initial impressions with the alternatives suggest that there are definite differences in presentation I really couldn't be happier and I have absolutely no reservations in recommending this tube to anyone looking for a great sounding, reliable 300B. As a benchmark it sets the bar awfully high. 

Manufacturer's Technical Specifications:

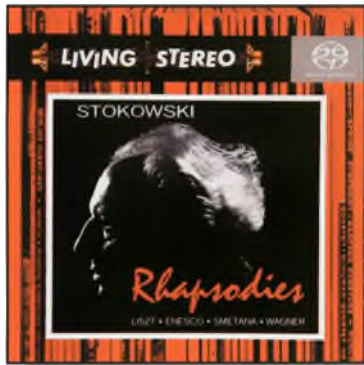
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Filament current:	1.25 Amps
Cathode:	Oxide, directly heated
Maximum Anode Dissipation:	36 W
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Measured Value If:	1.1 A
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Rhapsodies: Music of Liszt, Enesco, Smetana and Wagner

Stokowski, RCA Victor SO, Symphony of the Air.

Sony BMG/RCA Living Stereo 82876-67903-2 

Produced originally by Peter Dellheim with Robert Simpson and Lewis Layton as recording engineers, this smorgasbord of fun is right up the alley of that Wizard with a baton, Leopold Stokowski. The first track in this multi-channel recording is Liszt's *Hungarian Rhapsody No. 2 in C-Sharp Minor* and this sets the tone for the remainder of the disk. This performance gets the full-blown Stokowski treatment (fortunately, not too over-blown). The engineers have given us spectacular, demonstration quality sound of the highest order. Everything contained in this release is music that is dramatic, fun, somewhat outlandish – at least in Stokowski's hands – with a riveting 75 minutes of WOW! If you know anything about Stokowski, you know how he loved to embellish. Not so much in re-writing the composer's notes, but perhaps in over-dramatizing the score. He loved to experiment. While this may not be for those who demand absolute adherence to the original, he certainly earned that "Wizard at Work" reputation. Just wait until you hear his interpretation of "The Moldau" from Smetana's *Ma Vlast!* We're also treated to some super exciting Wagner from *Tristan und Isolde* and *Tannhauser* that only Stokowski can deliver. Under no circumstances do you pass this disk by. You'll be forever sorry. Absolutely the highest recommendation and out of this world.

RSF

RECORDING
MUSIC



The Edgar Winter Group

They Only Come Out at Night

Mobile Fidelity UDSACD 2011 

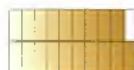
This is a stunningly good recording of an American classic (kudos to the mastering team), and the red book version comes close to the SACD layer.

This is so good that I can easily imagine myself, front row center at an Edgar Winter Group concert. I got goose bumps listening and this doesn't happen often *chez Britt*.

Originally released in '72, this album quickly became double platinum, partly because of Winter's use of synthesizer sound: He was the first to actually put a neck strap on a keyboard and play whilst roaming the stage. Wow! The two most famous songs on the album were "Free Ride" and "Frankenstein". Winter's work is relevant even today, with lyrics from "Free Ride" that go "All over the country I've seen it the same. Nobody's winning at this kind of game. We've got to do better, it's time to begin. You know all the answers must come with within." And "Frankenstein" is the musical equivalent of PRAI: If it doesn't get your feet tapping then you don't have a pulse. *Rolling Stone* noted at the time that "Only time will tell whether this ambitious work is truly great..." Well, I can assure you it has withstood that test: Edgar Winter understands that rock & roll is vaudeville. Highly recommended for your rock collection!


TB

RECORDING
MUSIC



Mahler Symphony No. 4 in G.

Reiner, CSO. Lisa Della Casa, sop.

Sony BMG/RCA Living Stereo 82876-67901-2 

This was the master tape I heard on my visit to Sound/Mirror in Boston. It's every bit as exciting at home as it was in their studio. This is taken from one of the RCA three-track stereo tapes, and if you have the ability to playback multi-channel recordings, you may enjoy this in either two or three-channel mode. The down converted CD layer is outstanding; the SACD is an absolute stunner. The original recording was engineered and produced by the team of Lewis Layton and Richard Mohr. I was impressed with it in Boston and am still impressed with it in Toronto. Reiner has a strong flare for Mahler and this is one of a handful of outstanding performances everyone should have in their collections. The acoustics of Orchestra Hall are present for all to hear. There is wonderful depth and corner fill and quite frankly, this is as good as you're ever going to get from a digital recording, especially from tapes that are getting close to being 50 years old. I've listened to this performance several times since receiving this disk and I hope that you will get as much pleasure from this as I am. Reiner is one of the great conductors of the last century and I for one cannot get enough of his work. Highest recommendation.

RSF

RECORDING
MUSIC





Brahms
Horn Trio in E flat major Opus 40.
Sonata No. 2 in A major for violin and piano, Opus 100.
Szigeti, Horszowski, Barrows

Speakers Corner/Mercury Living Presence SR90210 **180g**

An exceptionally elusive recording, this is one really wonderful record originally taped by Mercury. Joseph Szigeti was 67 when this album was commissioned. While on several of his other performances for Mercury – the Brahms violin concerto in particular – he was far below the skill level he once enjoyed, there is no hint of that in these performances whatsoever. For whatever reason this has always been a very difficult record to find and mint copies with the proper stamper numbers definitely exceed the £150 mark. Willem Makkee and Kai Seemann have delivered another outstanding sonic release with fabulous surfaces by Pallas on 180 gram vinyl. Not often recorded, and while there are fine performances in the EMI and RCA catalogues of the *Horn Trio*, nothing, in my opinion, even comes close to this record for both performance and sound. The *Sonata No. 2, Opus 100* is also quite excellent, and again while there is much competition for this work, I feel you will be very satisfied with this performance. For Mercury collectors, I'm sure that the rich, sonorous sound given us will be a real treat, making this disc highly recommended.

RSF



Shostakovich
Symphonies Nos. 5 & 9
Valery Gergiev, Kirov Orchestra

Philips 470 651-2 **SA**

The *Ninth Symphony*, completed shortly after the end of World War Two was not the popular, expansive or great patriotic and celebratory flag waver many had expected. This concise, witty, relatively restrained and sparingly scored work has a lightness of touch which rather than grandly basking in the defeat of Nazism seems to be much more an expression of considered relief. It is as if Shostakovich had weighed up and questioned the cost to Mother Russia, including her prospects for the future, and let slip a knowing smile. Valery Gergiev's interpretation snugly dovetails with this view. For the more conventionally structured *Fifth Symphony*, Gergiev of course faces very stiff competition from both his Russian contemporaries and Western performances like an outstanding Andre Previn LSO version cut in the mid-1960s for RCA. However, this superb Philips recording, with its wonderful dynamic range, transparency and vibrant presentation of the varied instrumental orchestral colours, is not shamed when making these comparisons because, as with the finest of accounts, amongst other things fills that enormous sense of space created in the score with powerful emotion. The exhilarating and triumphant finale coming after the tension, desolation and conflict of the earlier movements, is also particularly well handled and adds to what is a wholly satisfying reading.

RP



Music of Leroy Anderson
Frederick Fennell, cond. partially performed by the Eastman-Rochester "Pops" Orchestra.

Mercury Living Presence 475 6942 **SA**

Featuring selections from the first MLP LP of three performed by Fennell featuring the music of Leroy Anderson, this offers an enjoyable cross-section of Anderson's sense of rhythm and style. It is very leisurely, light 'classical' fare and should suit just about anyone's taste. While Anderson may not enjoy the popularity in today's music place, those who ignore his works are missing out on one of the great American composers. This was popular music. Anderson had a tremendous flare for telling musical stories in a few short minutes. Many times these stories incorporated clever 'sound effects' some, percussive instruments of the orchestra we don't often hear, but others were unique. 'The Typewriter' for example actually incorporates a real typewriter in the score with Fennell at the keyboard. However, the 'ding' from this bell is definitely not from that typewriter. I've always enjoyed the original releases on the US records (SR90009, 90043 and 90400) and while the sound of this SACD is not in the league of the original LPs, it's still a pleasure to have this music in such a convenient format. If you're not familiar with Leroy Anderson, I don't think you're going to find a better selection anywhere short of searching for the original Living Presence records.

RSF





Otis Spann IS the Blues

Otis Spann, vocals and piano with Robert Lockwood Jr. vocals and guitar.

Candid/Pure Pleasure Records 180g

Anyone who has the slightest knowledge about the blues knows how fabulous Otis Spann really is. His repertoire is seriously diverse, his performances ooze quality. He's one of the greatest blues piano players of all time and his skills shine on this album. Lockwood is the perfect match for Spann and his experience is a welcome addition to this set. Spann was just a little over 30 years old when this record was made and he was already an accomplished star whose presence exudes confidence, style and a sound that is truly his own. The sonic quality of the album is outstanding. Beginning with 'The Hard Way' on side one, we move to a Lockwood song and then into a great piano solo entitled 'Otis in the Dark'. Which makes it all the more amazing that this is Otis Spann's first album! While Lockwood hadn't recorded for a number of years, he really does compliment Spann wonderfully. Otis had been playing since he first auditioned for Muddy Waters at the ripe old age of 17. This is a very special album with exceptionally talented artists. A must own Blues album.

Highest recommendation!

RSF

RECORDING
MUSIC



Beethoven: *Symphony No. 7*, *Leonore Overture No. 3*
J.S. Bach: "Air" from *Suite for Orchestra No. 3*
(also from *Cantata No. 156*)

Cisco/Scera CD

Entitled "Ormandy in Russia" these works, which were recorded live in the May of 1958, are the first set in a six disc series of Philadelphia performances made in the Soviet Union. While it may not quite have captured the imagination in the same way as those famous Mercury sessions did, they do nevertheless represent vivid, highly evocative and beautifully proportioned readings. Of course the *Seventh Symphony* and *Leonore Overture No.3* have those exceptionally stirring climaxes but their roots are nourished by very different rhythmic patterns. The *Overture* encapsulates the themes of a typical operatic drama while the *Symphony* possesses that controlled and sustained intensity found in a variety of dance forms. The audience is certainly appreciative of both although they are surprisingly ill-disciplined and noisy at the opening of the Beethoven *Seventh*. It can be argued that these inner details give it a large dose of the "you are there" realism and immediacy to proceedings. The Bach-Ormandy transcriptions (quality encore pieces) are nicely handled and played in a fashion that rightly leaves you hungry for more. Steve Hoffman's work on the master tapes is as always sympathetically executed with an emphasis upon nuance and subtle interpretative insights.

Supplier: www.vivante.co.uk

RP

RECORDING
MUSIC



Stevie Ray Vaughan and Double Trouble.

Couldn't Stand the Weather

Epic Records/Pure Pleasure Records PPAN 39304 180g

Before you go "ho-hum, this has been re-issued before", let me tell you that what you may have thought you heard, is nothing compared to what is on these two, that's right, two records. Tony Hickmott of PPR has mined the Epic vaults and has found for us previously unreleased material. Ray Staff at Alchemy has, once again, delivered a brilliant sounding all analogue release. This is the finest sounding Stevie Ray Vaughan album you will ever hear! While there are those who may snub their noses at Vaughan, if they're smart enough to buy this release and sit through it, there is no doubt they will be converted by one superfine guitarist and singer whose time here was nowhere near long enough. I have to admit to being lukewarm when I heard this record was coming out. While I liked the original, the sound was so-so. However, based upon some of the other Pure Pleasure releases, I admit my curiosity was tweaked. Well, I'm here to tell you this is another winner for PPR. It's shockingly good sonically and certainly does cement my feelings about just how good Vaughan really was. This was his second album for Epic and it certainly solidified his place in electric blues history. Not to be missed. Sheer magic.

RSF

RECORDING
MUSIC



- Vinyl
- Audio Note IQ1 & IQ3
- Rega Planar range
- SME tonearms
- Clearaudio range
- Opus Continuo & Danus
- Project RPM5 & RPM9
- Roksan Radius 5
- Michell Gyrodek mkV CD Players
- Audio Note Dac2.1 Stig
- Shanling CD1100
- Sugden CD21 player
- Heart CD6000 valve output
- Amplifiers
- Audion Silver Night amps
- Audio Note valve amplifiers
- Moon Audio integrated amps
- Vardar Control B pre amp
- Consonance Amplifiers
- Speakers
- Living Voice range
- ProAc Reference D3B
- Rehm horn speakers
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Journey To Germany...

Following the analogue mastering chain

by Richard S. Foster

In Issue 40 I outlined my trip to Hannover and a visit to Das Emil Berliner Haus.

As well as experiencing the mastering set-up and issues behind the Mercury SACD releases, that short trip to Hannover and Diepholz, as well as the time spent with Kai Seemann of Speakers Corner Records allowed me behind the scenes at Speakers Corner Records, Universal Music and one of the World's premier pressing plants in Diepholz: Pallas-Group GmbH.

At Universal, Bernd Moldenhauer, Head of Preservation/Archive, was kind enough to give us a general tour of the Studio and went as far as explaining many of the historical photographs that line the walls and the equipment encased in glass display cases. It was quite a treat. There were several venues for listening to playback material as well as a couple of large main equipment rooms where many of the amplifiers, tape machines, digital equipment and all other such gear was housed in climate controlled rooms. One of the most interesting aspects of this tour was seeing one of the vaults at the studio, home to in excess of 400,000 tapes. When you think of the conglomerate of companies that now fall under the

would imagine, is a state-of-the-art, climate controlled facility. Having said that, there are problems with tapes from various eras. Different formulations and sometimes less than satisfactory storage facilities in their past have taken their toll on some of this material. We've previously discussed some of the problems encountered by Andrew Wedtman and his team with the Mercury Living Presence three-track master tapes while he works his way through the catalogue to bring us the new SACD releases. Some of the issues Moldenhauer outlined are just as severe if not more so. Take for example some of the 1960's and 1970's Philips tapes. While many of these master tapes are in satisfactory condition, some are not. In fact, some of the original masters produced on Philips' own proprietary tape have disintegrated. That's right... some of the performances are gone forever. What's even scarier is that some of the U-Matic tapes used in the 1980's and 1990's which contain digitally recorded material suffer from severe drop outs and oxide loss which means the only way you can get a copy of an original, is to make sure you have the originally released compact disc of the event! I don't envy the job Moldenhauer and his team have ahead of them.

We finished the very informative visit and moved into Willem Makkee's analogue mastering suite. It was a great pleasure to meet Willem as I have been quite a fan of his work for the Speakers Corner/Mercury project. I knew he'd cut other lacquers for them, but my focus on 'all things Makkee' didn't really begin until I was exposed to his Mercury work. Looking around his studio was a visual treat... it kind of reminded me of what Santa's workshop must be like before Christmas morning! Lots of toys including a Neumann VMS80 with an Ortofon SX74 cutting head. There were Ampex tape machines and perhaps the most exciting was seeing the various boxes of Mercury Living Presence tapes 'scattered' around the room.

It was getting to be lunchtime so Willem took Kai and myself for a leisurely lunch in the employees cafeteria. We had a general discussion of things vinyl and as you can imagine, Makkee is a strong proponent for things analogue. He has been cutting lacquers since the early 1960s and began at what is now Universal in the early 1970s. He's a firm believer in not using any compression whatsoever in the disk cutting process. He is also against using limiters. The latter he feels ruins the dynamics of the music. ▶



Just a part of the Universal Archive.

Universal umbrella, the history and depth of material from those companies, the number above is only a drop in the proverbial ocean. People were in the process of scanning and cataloguing and archiving the material, much of which had been scattered all over the World and now, is just beginning to find a home at the Hannover facilities. It is a daunting task and one that will keep them busy for years. The vault, as you



Mr. Makkee and a few of his toys...



▶ After lunch he demonstrated the process of cutting a lacquer for me. When necessary, Makkee will increase (or decrease) the level control (gain riding) to optimize the sound quality during the tape to lacquer transfer process. Quite often he will cut several lacquers from the same tape. This is done specifically so that he can hear which one sounds the best. These will then get shipped overnight or by same day courier to Pallas where they will be plated and made ready for test pressings. Makkee explained that it



"Take me home, Richard, take me home..."

may take a day to cut one side that he's really happy with. This takes a lot of patience and an incredibly good ear to 'get-it-right'.

While we discuss the process – and the lacquer is being cut – it is explained to me that all the tapes Makkee has been using have been the 1960's three-track to two-track mix downs created by Wilma Cozart Fine. These seem to offer superb sound quality and have made life much easier for Makkee and Seemann than Andrew Wedman. Without these tapes available, we certainly wouldn't have the outstanding sonic results we've been hearing from the finished products. But don't underestimate the contribution of Makkee, who is one of the great mastering and cutting engineers working today.

Around four in the afternoon, Kai and I jumped in his car and drove about an hour and a half to Diepholz, where we stayed the evening which gave me the chance to explore Seemann's musical philosophies.

RSF: When you started, what was your goal or strategy for the company?

KS: Actually - there was no such thing as a strategy. At the time when the idea to re-release vinyl LPs came up in 1993, I was a happy part owner of a well established hi-fi shop. We were selling tons of Linn turntables, and the people were asking for software to play on them. We took every opportunity to buy remaining available vinyl and overstock from various sources. We participated seriously in the Linn "Select" program you might remember. But this was not enough, the people kept asking and asking. This was the time that the prices of original SXLs, ASDs, LSPs, and MLPs started to climb to ridiculous heights AND the release of the first Mercury Living Presence CDs hit our shop. Just combine one and one (and remember my story how we always admired the MLPs), and the idea was born.

However, since the whole idea was the subject of a lazy summer afternoon, it was not planned as a continued business but just to release four titles in a package, using it as a marketing tool for a cooperative effort with several German hi-fi shops we worked with. The four titles (Decca SXL 2011, 2012, 2110, 2289) were released just in time for the Frankfurt High-End show in August 1993 - and were sold out immediately. (By the way, this was one year ahead of Classic Records). Without any activity from our side, a lot of distributors from abroad contacted us too, so we thought, okay, let's do a second set of four titles (SXL 2114, 2136, 2252, 2266), which were released December 1993 and they too, sold equally well.

At that point it was obvious that this could be a stable business and we signed an exclusive contract with ▶

► PolyGram Germany to publish two titles from their catalogue each month. In the first year we released DECCA's only and then in late 1994, started with Verve. So, as you can see, there was no strategy, it just grew by itself...

RSF: (with a chuckle) Have you followed this "strategy"?

KS: The hi-fi-studio was founded in 1982 - the date, as you certainly can remember, CD was introduced to the market. We spent years and years showing how bad digital was (at that time). Without a doubt we had a great time. We grew to be one of the largest Linn-Naim dealers in Germany and had fun, in a fairly small city like Kiel, just being different from all the others.

Starting the negotiations with PolyGram in 1993 gave us the opportunity to meet people that were so enthusiastic, like Tony Hawkins or the former president of DECCA Mr Kommerell, that this seemed to be at least as much fun as running the hi-fi business. I must say, this hasn't changed during the years - it is still fun, I am still meeting great people, and I am pretty grateful that I have a job which satisfies me so much, and earns my living, too. Therefore I must say that I have met my goals in full.

RSF: Why did you gamble on the Ella box? What made that project so important to you?

KS: Although we hadn't a real strategy at the beginning of our company, we had some plans later... One of these were to re-release the complete series of Ella's *Songbooks*. We started with the *Cole Porter Songbook*, which sold very well. This encouraged us all the more. I started to buy originals of the other *Songbooks*. Then I realized that the *Gershwin Songbook* contained not only five LPs plus a 10" record, but a 56 page hardcover book as well. The series wouldn't have been complete if we would drop that title, so we really had no other choice.

However, I noticed soon that re-creating records was one thing, but re-creating a book is a completely different subject. We were shocked by the initial costs, but maybe you know the feeling: the larger the problems become the more you start to fight. As you know, the result was satisfying and I will not tell what I still was unhappy with. Commercially it was successful also.

Besides that, although there are very often projects which demand extraordinary attention or work, creating such a collectors item is just something special.

RSF: Why do you release records that have great music, but not always audiophile sound?

KS: We never had the intention to establish Speakers Corner as an audiophile label. We all know, even the

most dedicated audiophile, in the end the music comes first - and we are happy if the sound is great, also. It is our policy to re-release musically important titles as faithfully as possible (including recreating stickers, etc., if necessary) with the best possible sound. There is somewhere a line, obviously, and it is a hard decision if we have to neglect musically important material due to unacceptable sound quality. For example, we had the plan to release a multiple LP box set of the most important recordings of the *Jazz At The Philharmonic* series, but the vast majority of the material is re-recordings from 78s - and this would have gone too far. One or two titles, okay, but not seven-eighths of the material...



The Urbane Mr. Seeman.

On the other hand, our company name has a new meaning as well. It was picked as the shop started as a DIY-shop for speaker-builders, located at a corner. In the meantime it has a closer affinity to the same named place in London: we offer musically important messages, being as faithful and truthful as possible. Instead of remember "the sound" our slogan would be more likely remember "the music" or "better remember the feeling".

RSF: What is your philosophy about records and music?

KS: When you listen to music at home, you do this completely of your own free will - as opposed to what is played in shopping malls, lifts, bars, etc. If it is correct to call that still music... If one does this, it should enrich one's life: it should change your mood, give you pleasure, connect you to the artist, etc. With the amount of

► information provided by an LP this is easier to achieve than with any other sound carrier.

As far as my personal music collection is concerned, I only own LPs which say something to me. I never try to collect ALL titles from an artist, if they are not ALL relevant to me. I don't have several copies of one and the same title, I am happy with just the one I regard as the most "communicative" one. An exception is classical music. Here I very often buy the same works but different performances, but I keep just the one I like: the one that talks to me the most.

For my business, I have more or less the same standards - obviously I can't judge everything by my personal taste. We invite (on our website) customers, collectors, the press, our dealers, etc. to suggest titles. If somebody takes the effort to contact us concerning the re-release of a title, it is obviously something that is dear to him. And if there is one, there might be others... This is the reason that we sometime releases titles which are not an obvious pick.

RSF: What are your favourite types of music?

KS: I own a collection of some thousand LPs and naming my favourites is pretty difficult - and would probably be different depending on the mood I am in. I tend more toward classical, but I'm not afraid of 20th century music. I listen to Jazz also, and although my main interest ranges between mid fifties and early seventies I have a feeling for avantgarde, as well. Concerning pop, I left interest in new developments somewhere in the early eighties. I still attend concerts of a lot of different kinds of music every year.

RSF: Do you have a home system? If so, what is it?

KS: The turntable is a German product, just called "Der Plattenspieler" (The Turntable) with a Schröder unipivot arm (also German) and a Dynavector cartridge. The complete electronics (phono-, pre- and power amp) are manufactured by Dynavector from New Zealand, and the speakers are Shalinian (American). So it's a pretty international assembly. Pure stereo (no multi-channel) and no digital sources. I sometimes use a top-flight Linn system in our shop to double check critical test-pressings.

RSF: I know you only listen to CD in the car, true?

KS: As far as personal use is concerned, yes. I don't have a CD-player incorporated in my system, but in the system at my office there is one installed. In addition to that, I obviously have access to the gear in our hi-fi-studio if the need arises.

RSF: What do you attribute your success in the marketplace to?

KS: I think we owe this mainly to our dealers/distributors and the press. From day one we got excellent support from all sides, actually it was not very difficult for us to reach the point where we are right now. Of course I could mention the outstanding quality of my product, the excellent repertoire provided by our contract-partners, etc, etc - but this is nothing if you don't have some support. What certainly helped is the wide variety of our repertoire. If you take just the classical material in account, our catalogue offers almost everything possible: symphonic works, concertos, opera, recitals (vocal & instrumental), requiems and masses, 20th century works, chamber, mid-age dance-music - I think I can say, none of our competitors can offer this variety.

RSF: Where do you see Speakers Corner Records in five years?

KS: I guess that we will do pretty much what we do right now. In the meantime, I think we all agree that SACD and DVD-Audio have by far not met their expectations, so I regard the future of vinyl as even more positive than some years ago. Of course it all depends on the repertoire, but we did pretty well in the last years. We have an excellent reputation amongst our repertoire-owners and there are still so many treasures in the vaults. We still explore new markets - it is difficult not to be optimistic. However, if we can again achieve a growth of 56% as in the past five years I'd be pretty much amazed. I even might need another employee then...

The following morning we pulled into the parking lot at Pallas and had a quick look around. This was the main building where all the vinyl manufacturing was handled, while across the street was the manufacturing plant for CD and DVD production.

Walking into the lobby, we were met by the President, Holger Neumann. Pallas is a third generation family owned business that began pressing 78's in 1948. Vinyl production began in 1960 and music cassettes in 1968. The factory still manufacturers, two days a week, music cassettes for various companies. In 1986 CD production was started with additional facilities in Singapore as of 1989. I learned that in 2004, Pallas pressed over 3.5 million records. I'll bet there will be more manufactured for in 2005. We then went on a guided tour of the factory (which is extremely impressive). Obviously the general process of 'how to manufacture a record' was similar to that discussed in Issue 41 when I visited RTI in California. ►



Plating baths at Pallas.

► The major difference was the scope and scale of the manufacturing facility at Pallas. It's huge. Neumann talked me through 'their process' for vinyl manufacturing.

The plating process was similar, the microscope where you align the vertical and horizontal crosshairs so you can find the center hole of the Father was similar, cutting the excess silver electroplating off after the baths... all this was very much in keeping with what went on at RTI.

But one of the areas that intrigued me was an office where one of the personnel had the duty of looking through a microscope at the grooves of a finished Mother. He has special tools he uses if there are pieces of plating in the grooves to remove them, and also a turntable he uses to 'playback' the Mother. This was very interesting (albeit, I would go insane after one day of doing this work)... but looking through the microscope at bits of plating and then listening to the Mother, of course you could hear the noise. After a few seconds of detail



Record production on an industrial scale...

removal, the Mother was replayed and the surface was silent. Fascinating... and very tedious!

The next area was where the presses are and there were at least three-dozen in operation. This is quite a factory. Specialty records – coloured vinyl – used for picture disks or children's records, have their own special location in the factory. It was interesting to see the different machines, from different periods, handle the vinyl product in various ways. Some presses stack the finished product and require manual bagging while others automatically place the record in the paper sleeve.



Just one of the many presses.

There is an area in the plant for lithography/label making as well. One of the surprises for me was the portion of the factory that still manufactures music cassettes for various businesses, schools and commercial enterprises. The day I visited this was not in operation but I was able to get a good look at the inner workings. Another fascinating sight and one I'd not seen before. Pallas is a very impressive factory and they were extremely busy the day I visited. I even spotted an area where several presses were producing Speakers Corner products.

This trip was a fascinating experience, allowing me enormous insight into both the digital and analogue mastering processes, and just how influential the journey from tape to disc is in what we finally hear. Everyone involved was hospitality personified and went out of their way to make me welcome and answer my questions. I came away with a new respect for their commitment and efforts, as well as renewed optimism for the future of high-quality recorded music.





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