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Editorial

It always amazes me that something as pivotal to hi-fi culture as the product review can be so widely (and wantonly) misunderstood. Manufacturers want their products to receive good reviews, readers only seem interested in reading good reviews (apart from the passing distraction of a little blood-letting as some poor unfortunate is ritually slaughtered). Yet no one seems to stop and consider just what constitutes a "good" review. Instead, the natural assumption seems to be that anything that doesn't embrace the phrases "redefines the state of the art", "it scored 140 on my normal 100 point scale" or "sell your Granny to buy one" is not a "good" review. The problem is that too much audio journalism consists of the same old tired clichés and hyperbole. Which might sound hypocritical coming from someone who gushed all over a pair of \$60K speakers an issue or so ago. But my defence lies in the definition of the term "good". You see, I don't translate it as "uncritical" or "intemperately enthusiastic". If forced to define the term in the context of audio reviews I think I'd choose "useful". I think reviews should explain what a product does, how it does it and just as importantly, what it doesn't do. It's not enough to simply say a product sounds great. Describe why it sounds great and what effect it has on your musical reproduction and you are starting to get somewhere. Discuss the sort of space, care or system the product demands to work at its best and you are really making ground. Get as far as what job the product does and who it's going to do it for and that's pay-dirt. And that's because all that information is actually useful when it comes to appreciating the product and deciding whether or not you should short-list it for audition. It's also useful to manufacturers and dealers, because it delivers feedback on the product, places it in context and (hopefully) acts as a first pass filter on potential customers. Very occasionally, you can even extrapolate general conclusions about audio as a whole – which is where \$60K speakers come in. Now that's a good review!

A few years back someone said to me, "You know, the problem with your reviews is that they just aren't quotable!" It remains one of my proudest moments. There are no simple answers or silver bullets in hi-fi. If we pretend there are then we are being fools to ourselves.



Roy Gregory

Vienna
acoustics

Grand™ designs result from grand construction. Study closely the furniture grade cabinetry; let your eyes linger over elegant wooden veneers, hand chosen for their beauty. Reach out and touch the cabiner's face, revel in a surface so soft and luxurious final finishing requires six coats of lacquer.

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Vienna Acoustics, the decision is a grand slam.



*From the left:
Beethoven Concert Grand,
Beethoven Baby Grand,
Mozart Grand*

Grand. Slam.

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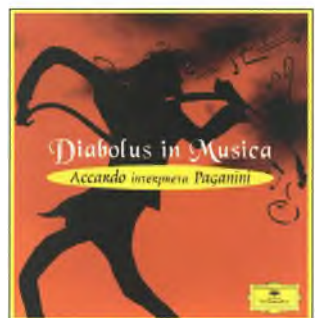
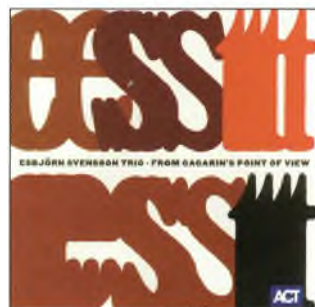
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Dear Sir,

Congratulations on a superb idea in issue 48 of *Plus!*

I am speaking of you swapping systems with each other, of course. I really hope this will be an annual event in upcoming Awards Issues.

Apart from the obvious – the ability to enjoy “the arts of recorded music”, this topic is a fundamental ingredient in at least my own interest in high fidelity music equipment. The versatility of the field, the vast amount of different solutions to a common goal (reproducing music in a truthful and enjoyable way) provides the tools to tailor systems to ones own preferences and budget. The matching, the overt experimentation, the fine-tuning, but also the compromising part and finally, taking into account your personal taste, is a never-ending story with new “actors” coming up almost every week. Of course you can take the easy way and go for the A-reviews and price-tags, but the results risk being disappointing.

Clever of you to base a system on a truly high-quality speaker of a size most people can house. Refining the “add-on” equipment to a least expensive/still satisfying combination can be extended to all levels on the cost-efficiency ladder, but a thorough knowledge of equipment matching (and of course, of how various components sound) is mandatory for success, and that is why your contribution is so welcome. Since most people would hesitate to add equipments at cost levels on a par with the Wilson Duettas your approach must be really satisfying for many a reader.

Perhaps it is time to bin the old wisdom regarding chains and weakest links? Instead let’s recognize that real strength lies in the quality of matching.

Best regards,

Jan Kährström

Sweden

Dear Sir,

Of what are you thinking (reading P97 of issue 490)?!

Your antithesis fails: at the ‘marriage made in heaven’ the gentleman WAS ‘marrying his sister’. The offspring continued the custom and from the incestuous beginning sprang the human race and all its consequent perversities. That is why your CD Player says ‘No Disc’ when you’ve just inserted one; why speaker units resonate like the boxes we put them in and the rooms where in we hear them; why foam surrounds fall

into the dust etc, etc.....

Never mind; you make-up for this error with that lovely rhyme Buddy Holly – Barbirolli – a delight. Thank you.

Apropos Barbirolli, I’m a little surprised that you find his *Tallis Fantasia* a helpful test. When I had the vinyl ASD I thought that item lacked top (and had extraneous noise of varied sorts). The other material, made elsewhere seemed much better.

May I commend an even earlier EMI Stereo (1956-57) of *The Planets* in Sargeants Kingsway Hall recording. It’s truly remarkable: super organ pedals at the end of *Saturn* and a magnificent *Uranus* which knocks many a later version into a black hole. The other items on the very good CD transfer (Classic For Pleasure) are fine too – though later and drier the cymbal clash (an EMI speciality) on track 5 at 1.35 is a real tweeter tester.

Many thanks for the indispensable Mag but I’m sorry you didn’t know about the heavenly Adam and his sister.

Yours truly,

Ronald Swains

Dear Sir,

I’m not a letters-to-the-editor kind of guy, but I just had to send my compliments to you on the magazine.

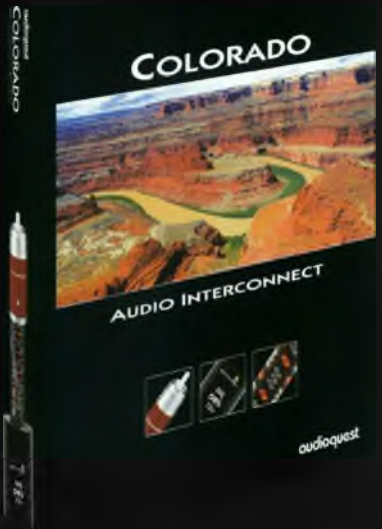
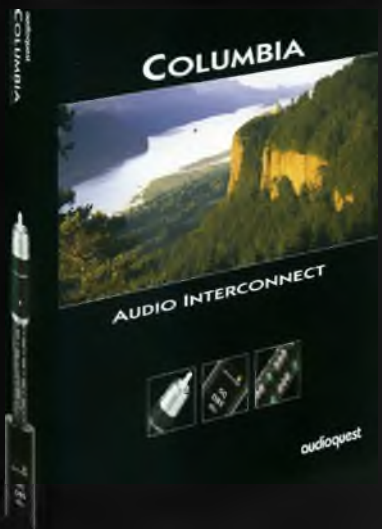
1. I love that it remains unchanged after *the Absolute Sound* merger. Nothing wrong with *Absolute Sound* (though *Perfect Vision* appears to have temporarily lost it’s way) but *Hi-Fi+*’s unique energy and passion remains. Bravo.
2. I have greatly enjoyed the set-up articles in previous magazines. Those of us with carefully set-up systems have learned that the devil IS in the detail. To “observe” experienced enthusiasts doing a set-up is hugely helpful and loaded with ideas for those of use that are still working for improvement (and who isn’t) without joining the preamp-of-the-month club.
3. New creative ideas continue to flow. The “Round the Houses...” project (I hope it gets fully digested by all your readers) really made it’s point about just finding a guru, however talented, and blindly following his/her equipment choices.

While I pick the book up at Barnes and Noble, you can certainly count me as a loyal reader since I discovered the magazine at Issue 9.

Doug Robinson

Omaha, Nebraska





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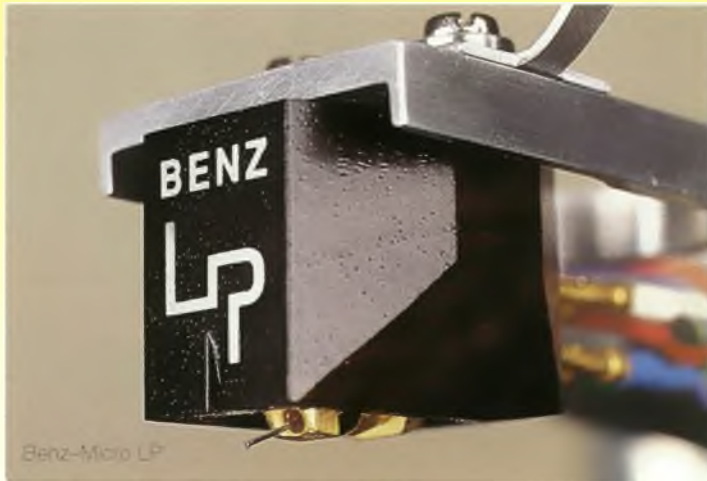
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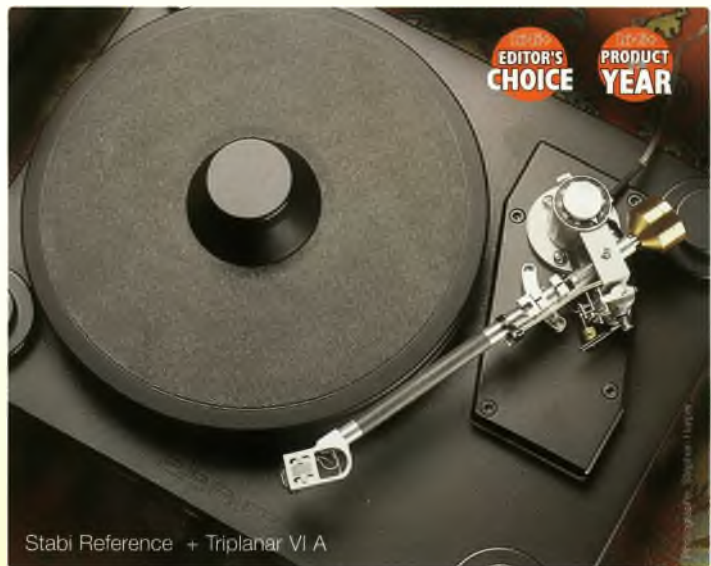
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Kuzma

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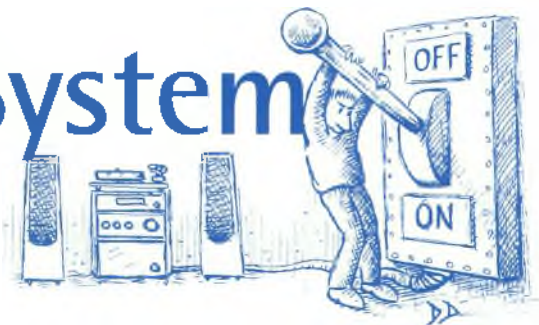
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Playing The System

by Roy Gregory



It's one of the oldest myths in hi-fi – and like many myths, regardless of the world to which they relate, at best it contains rather less than a grain of truth, at worst it's actively misleading. The idea in question? That dispensing with advertising will somehow free a magazine from manufacturer influence.

On the surface it's an appealingly simplistic notion; company A advertises in magazine B and thus guarantees that it receives great reviews. Get rid of advertising and you'll get rid of the 'problem'. In fact, it's such an appealing idea that magazines, from the early days of *Stereophile* and *the absolute sound* onwards, have subscribed to it, trumpeting their freedom from the taint of commercial interest and their resulting moral authority from whatever bit of the moral molchill they can colonize. Except that the 'problem', where it exists, has nothing whatsoever to do with advertising. And along the way you'll notice that both *Stereophile* and *tas* took on manufacturer's advertising really quite early in their lives, developing from low-circulation, subscription-only titles with lousy production values into real magazines with real pictures, production schedules (that they actually occasionally met) and more than a handful of pages and writers. That's right; they became better publications. The question therefore should be, did their content suffer along the way, and if so, why?

Let's look at this from another perspective. I like cycling; it's what I do for relaxation and to stay what passes for fit these days. It's also rather like hi-fi (except it's a lot cheaper). You build your bike out of a whole range of different bits and pieces, competing materials and technologies. Then there's clothing, shoes, tools, indoor, outdoor, on-road, off-road... you get the picture. So I read magazines to find out what's going on, what's good and what's not; magazines that, just like hi-fi mags, review equipment. But I don't just read the reviews and news pages. As my wife will tell you, I'll often spend hours poring over the adverts, getting the latest info direct from the manufacturer, comparing prices and availability.

So ads do two things: they provide an income stream that allows a magazine to function properly, and they also provide readers with information. After all, what's the point of advertising unless the magazine's readership is going to be interested in your product or services? Which is the point that most of the doom-laden anti-advertisers miss: there is actually

a positive relationship between readers and advertisers, the magazine merely provides the link. Instead they want us to believe that advertisers are buying good reviews. After all, we've all seen examples of products getting reviews they don't deserve, and as advertisers are paying money, that has to be the reason, right?

Well, let's take a look at the relationship that exists between an advertiser and a magazine – and then let's compare it to the possible relationships that can exist between manufacturers and reviewers (and vice versa). Most hi-fi magazines are going to run at between 30% and 50% advertising pages. That means that in a 160 page title there are going to be something like 70 pages of ads and maybe 200 individual advertisers. If you look at a title like *Plus*, no advertiser takes more than two full pages and any who take that much are getting their space at the best possible rate. Let's say that their invoice represents 3% of the magazine's ad revenue. How much influence do you think that really buys?



Advertisers who take more space still – maybe an eight or nine page block in a mag like *What Hi-Fi?* – are going to be paying proportionally even less per page. So the notion that threatening to pull your ad will guarantee a good review depends on the idea that a magazine can't sustain the loss of a single advertiser (as well as ignoring the fact

▶ that that advertiser's competitors will see his absence as an opportunity!)

Secondly, advertising bookings have nothing to do with writers or the editor of a magazine, most of whom have no idea who advertises anyway. As soon as you do the sums it becomes apparent that advertising is both a pretty blunt and largely ineffective instrument when it comes to controlling editorial content – as well as one that risks cutting off your own nose to spite your face. Pulling your ads can only be done after the event, besides being a good way to reduce contact with the magazine's readership, as well as reducing your chances of any more product reviews – good or bad. After all, nobody likes being bullied.

So how do manufacturers or distributors work in an attempt to ensure good reviews? The most effective efforts are made with the reviewer himself, including everything from setting the product up and providing background information on its technology and development, to offering matching ancillaries and advice. All of which actually contribute towards a more accurate review, reflecting both what the product is capable of and under what circumstances. So far so good – especially if we ignore, for the moment, the distinction between a 'good' review and an accurate one. That's another topic for another day...

But, problems can and do arise when the relationship between a reviewer and a manufacturer becomes unequal. Writers who are overly reliant for way too long on a single manufacturer or distributor's products are placing themselves in a vulnerable position. When all your electronics come from a single source (and have done for a decade or more) what will you do if that supplier sends you a less than wonderful product? The answer in all too many cases is soft-pedal the review. Why? Because a) you don't want to upset your friend and b) you don't want him to ask for his equipment (your system) back. Of course, spare a thought too for manufacturers who place themselves in thrall to autocratic reviewers. This, like most things in audio, can cut both ways.

But there's another, far more invidious influence at work; the fear that if you are less than complementary about one unit, the supplier in question won't give you another product to review. As magazines develop and the cost of the individual units under review spirals ever upwards, this becomes the real governing factor. Many high-end reviewers in particular, are petrified of being blackballed by the industry's movers and shakers. All you need is a couple of major distributors to decide you aren't worthy of their products and suddenly the context for your judgments has evaporated. Add in the effect of ego and the desire to get the most important products first (because their importance casts a reflected glow on the reviewer in question – or so they believe) and it's not a pretty picture. And that's before we

even get into the area of industry consultancy and product development, industry services and writing brochures... all of which goes on and all of which represent a far graver threat to the objectivity of a reviewer's copy than whether or not a manufacturer advertises or not.

So, how do we stop all reviews being corrupt? It's largely down to the editor of a magazine to monitor his writers and their relationships with manufacturers. Hi-fi is a tiny world and there are few secrets that stay that way for very long. Likewise, those manufacturers that push the boundaries of acceptable behavior are well known, as are those reviewers who take advantage of their situation. So a key part of the editor's job must be to choose his reviewers and choose which of them reviews what products, in order to maintain a balance of both experience and perspective. That's what guarantees the quality of content in a magazine – not fatuous claims about the absence of advertising, which are naïve at best and a gross distortion at worst. Likewise, all reviewers depend on loan equipment (another favorite source of corruption conspiracy theories). It is up to the editor to make sure that his writers (including himself) don't become overly reliant on a single supplier, whilst at the same time ensuring that they don't abuse the privilege, simply collecting equipment because they can – or forgetting who it actually belongs to. Where a long-term relationship does develop (and again, all reviewers rely on long-term references) back-check its conclusions against reviews by other writers. Are the opinions expressed wildly out of step with the rest of audio humanity? If so then investigate further: maybe it's a cause for concern, maybe congratulations. After all, seismic shifts in sensibilities don't occur too often, but when they do they have to start somewhere.

The simple fact is that most reviewers can borrow pretty much any piece of kit they want (assuming they're on decent terms with the supplier); it's the best endorsement a manufacturer can get. Which is why many manufacturers and distributors are queuing up to lend their products and are often reticent to collect them afterwards, a situation which makes loaning equipment a less than effective tool for influencing a writer – unless of course you loan him the best part of his system or allow him to dispose of the loan items for personal profit.

Just like everything else, what we discover is that advertising isn't necessarily good or bad. Nor is borrowing equipment from manufacturers or enjoying a friendly relationship with them. All these things are necessary – but each can also be abused, by both sides of the equation. There's no one 'answer' to making a good magazine. Quality writing and worthwhile reporting grow out of good practice and the mutual respect it generates over time. Which is why it's necessary to be transparent about how magazines function as well as discussing and ▶

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original design

▶ debating what we do and how we do it.

If we don't then we leave the field open to "black and white" explanations of the complex relationships that actually govern our activities – and risk ignoring far more fundamental conflicts. What should we make of a magazine that rejects advertising yet accepts promotional discs from an equipment manufacturer? Where does that leave its claims of moral superiority over other, 'commercially compromised' titles? What should we make of reviewers who also act as

industry design consultants or editors who sell diagnostic software to manufacturers? The idea that advertisers are buying good reviews is, frankly, simplistic nonsense – even if the conspiracy theorists' affection for it is understandable. The danger is that when the theory is promoted by people that should know better, it can start to smack of a smokescreen – and the trouble with smokescreens is that they inevitably encourage people to wonder just what's behind them? ▶+

Speakers Corner



by Paul Messenger

I was intrigued by Editor RG's "Playing the System" column in the last issue of Hi-Fi+, which began by commenting: "The astounding success of the Linn/Naim axis in the late '70s and early '80s owed more to their clarity of purpose than to the clarity of their products' performance".

It's an interesting point, with some validity, but when I think back to my own exploration of the emergence of the Linn/Naim phenomenon in the mid-1970s, I also recall that the UK hi-fi scene of the time offered very limited alternatives.

The poor state of the British hi-fi industry at this time had much to do with the staggering ineptitude of our political masters (plus *ca change!*). Dramatic economic events in the early 1970s, precipitated by 1973's huge increase in crude oil prices, the three-day week debacle (1974) and replacement of Heath's Government by Wilson's second term, led to a sterling crisis.

Chancellor Denis Healey's response was to increase the VAT on electrical goods from 8% to 25%, which was a reasonable enough strategy in attempting control galloping inflation; the naïve and stupid codicil that destroyed much of the British hi-fi industry was to delay its imposition for three months. For three months after the announcement, the market went bananas, notching up the equivalent of a year's worth of sales. Then prices went up and the market collapsed, for the best part of a year.

The smaller British manufacturers were quite unable to cope with this short-lived bonanza, but their larger Japanese rivals were very well placed to take advantage, diverting production from other markets to meet the surge in demand. At one point, Pioneer was shipping in three containers a day from its European warehouse. When the slump followed, the British brands, with relatively high dependency on their

home market, were the ones that suffered.

The casualties which either disappeared or changed hands is depressingly large, including, amongst amplifier manufacturers for example, such names as Rogers, Armstrong, Cambridge Audio and Ferrograph, along with several other less well known names. Indeed, the only long-term amplification survivors from my 1973 copy of the Hi-Fi Year Book were Quad and Sugden. (Leak was still nominally there, but never really prospered under Rank Organisation ownership.)

Both Linn and Naim were born around this time, and were therefore too small to be seriously affected by the Healey-inspired recession. And presumably because nature abhors a vacuum, several other key British brands made their debuts during the 1970s: Rega (1973), Arcam (1976) and Meridian (1977), to name just three more that helped fill the gap left by the clear-out. It's a credit to the creativity of all five that they still survive – indeed prosper – to this day.

Back in the 1970s, there was no such thing as a 'high end' in Britain. Absolute Sounds, Audiofreaks and other high-end distributors didn't really get going until we were into the 1980s. The first time I actually saw a genuine example of US high end was an Audio Research D150, in Ira Gale's Mayfair flat, sometime around 1977, while Krell didn't exist before 1980.

The sort of upmarket kit coming across the Atlantic at that time included Amcron (the famous Crown DC300A, a popular and reliable PA choice), Phase Linear (400 and 700), Dunlap Clarke, Dayton-Wright, and Acoustat, none of which eventually found itself inducted into the High End Hall of Fame.

As the above chronology clearly shows, the second ▶

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the Power of Perfection....

"What I dream is an art of balance, of purity and serenity" (H. Matisse)



WWW.ARGENTOAUDIO.COM

► half of the 1970s was a pretty chaotic time. It took a long time to convince the market that turntables could have a significant impact on the sound of a system. (The very idea that they might was memorably branded 'flat earthing' by Frank Jones in Hi-Fi News in 1976.) The marketplace of the day was heavily oriented towards low mass arms and ultra-high compliance moving magnet cartridges.

Quad was an incredibly dominant influence in amplification, and persistently repeated the refrain that amplifier sound was a figment of subjective reviewers' imaginations. Those of us that didn't agree were swimming against a strong flowing tide. Cable sound too was widely pooh-pooed.

In this climate, the fact that Linn and Naim got together to present a consistent and united front with systems built up from components that worked well together was a major advantage:

"In the kingdom of the blind, the one-eyed man is king".

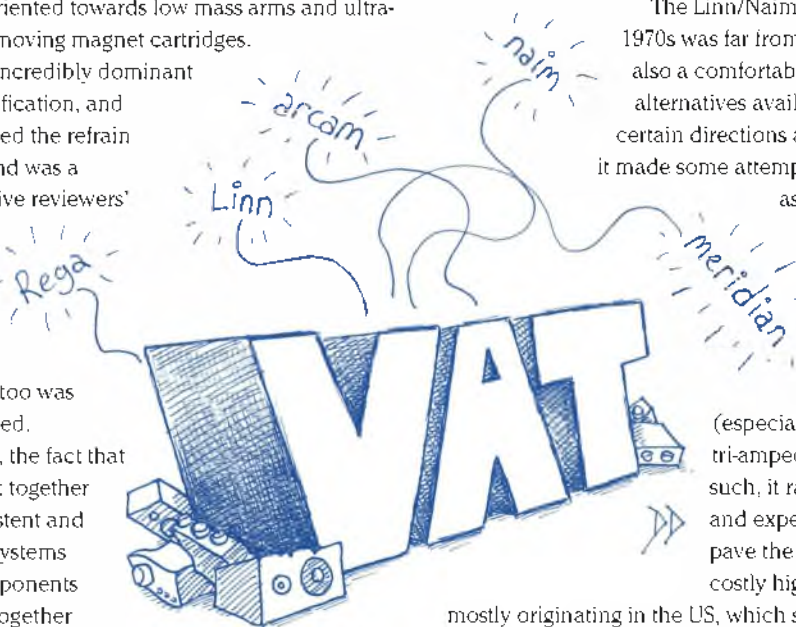
I suspect one reason for the sea change that occurred during the mid 1970s was to do with the changing face of music alongside the changing tastes of hi-fi customers. Prior to 1970, the whole industry, customers and manufacturers alike, was strongly oriented towards classical

music. By 1970, rock had become the more dominant force. And, unlike those of many more traditional competitors, one thing about those early Linn/Naim systems was that they knew how to rock.

The Linn/Naim system of the late 1970s was far from perfect, but it was also a comfortable cut above the alternatives available at the time, in certain directions at least, partly because it made some attempt to consider the system as a whole and give it coherent direction. It was also considerably more expensive than most of the competition around at the time (especially in its ultimate active tri-amped Isobarik form). As such, it raised the performance and expectation bars, and helped pave the way for even more costly high-end components,

mostly originating in the US, which started appearing a few years later.

Every serious and successful hi-fi manufacturer or designer starts out pursuing a personal vision of what he's trying to achieve. That in turn will be linked to the music he likes, and what it is about that music that particularly turns him on. We're all different in our responses to music, and therefore have different priorities. Vive la difference! ➤



Supra Cable Corrections



The Supra Sword interconnects and loudspeaker cables were rightly praised in the cable round-up in Issue 49. But whilst their sonic performance was certainly up to par, the details published alongside left rather a lot to be desired. So, once and for all, here are the correct specifics as they should have appeared:

0.8m pr. Sword-ISL Interconnect (phono – phono) £349
 3m pr. Sword Loudspeaker Cables
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The SME 20/12 Record Player

by Roy Gregory

SME Ltd. has been one of the few ever-presents in the UK hi-fi firmament. Since its inception in 1958, the company has built an unparalleled reputation for the consistent quality and longevity of its products. Indeed, in nearly fifty years of unbroken manufacturing, their products can (for the most part) be grouped into a mere four discrete ranges: the 3000 series (medium-mass, knife-edge bearing tonearms); the III series (ultra low-mass knife-edge bearing tonearms); the Series V tonearm and its derivatives; the Model 30 turntable and its derivatives. Indeed, the record players are relatively recent arrivals, appearing in the lengthening shadow cast by the commercial success of CD. Yet, despite the oft-forecast demise of analogue replay, it could be argued that SME hasn't enjoyed such a solid market presence or identity since the heyday of the '70's, a situation due in no small part to the strong family identity that binds the various products in its ranges. Even the uninitiated couldn't mistake the 309 tonearm for anything other than a close relative of the Series V. But beneath the skin the subtleties that differentiate one model from another are both carefully considered and very real.

Anyone familiar with the Model 20/2 turntable could be forgiven for assuming that the 20/12 is simply the stretch limo equivalent of the standard version, elongated to accept the company's 12" arms. Likewise, it seems natural to assume that the 312S tonearm is simply a derivative of the established 312. But both assumptions would be well wide of the mark. Time then, as we've never reviewed either the Model 20 or 30 turntables, to start at the beginning.

Turntable performance can be characterized as the eternal conflict

between the need to isolate the stylus/groove interface from outside interference and the necessity to couple it closely to an extremely noisy motor in order to achieve decent speed stability. SME's solution is both elegant and unsurprisingly, based on sound engineering and first saw the light of day in the shape of the Model 30. The 'table was based around a heavily damped, four-point suspension which carried the tonearm and massive platter. The motor was mounted on the base plate and driven from an external supply. Nothing terribly revolutionary in that, but the execution was extraordinary.

A conventional standing bearing was employed, but massively oversized. This was rigidly coupled to an aluminium plate chassis supported in its corners by suspension towers. These dispensed with metal springs in favour of rubber O-rings as the suspension medium, their non-metallic nature banishing the risk of damaging high-frequency resonance, their sheer number ensuring consistent support and relatively low individual tension (as well as making replacement simplicity itself). The base of each tower constituted a dash-pot, the damping of the suspension adjustable through varying the ride-height, easily achieved via adjusters in the top of each tower. But the really clever thing was the way in which dropping the suspension for transit lowered the chassis over the fluid reservoirs, sealing them against leakage. And the practical touches didn't stop there. Bolts through the sub-platter locked it and the chassis elements together, while four captive bolts lifted the sub-platter and spindle clear of the thrust

pad, protecting this critical interface from possible transit damage while leaving the bearing itself sealed and free from the risk of contamination. The motor was positioned to one side on a compliant mounting, an O-ring on its outer edge linking it to the main chassis balancing the tension in the drive-belt, allowing much closer coupling of the drive-pulley to the sub-platter. A further O-ring stretching between the sub-chassis and the base plate, opposite the motor balanced the horizontal force that might otherwise have canted the suspension; simple and effective.



The heavily damped suspension provided an incredibly stable platform, while the much higher tension in the drive belt delivered superior speed stability – both critical factors when it comes to sound quality.

Not surprisingly, the Model 20 followed the same basic pattern, except that the massive chassis plates and platter of the 30 were slimmed down, the overall mass reduced (allowing fewer O-rings on each suspension tower) and the four damping pots in the towers replaced by a single one around the main bearing. It's this basic arrangement that we find in the 20/12, except that the elements have been beefed-up throughout. The sub-chassis and base plate are both thicker, the 6.5kg platter is oversized and half again as heavy and the diameter of the suspension units has been increased, allowing the use of 10 O-rings per tower in place of the 20's eight. The end result is almost twice as heavy as the 20, making this in many respects, a halfway house between it and the 30. ▶

► The extra width necessary to mount the 12" arm obviously adds extra mass, but the wider stance and increase in the physical proportions of the various elements makes this, to my eye at least, the most attractive of SME's tables.

One thing that hasn't changed is the hall-effect motor with its sophisticated quartz-referenced external power supply. This allows electronic selection and fine adjustment of 33, 45 and 78 speeds, the latter with a usefully wide range of 60 to 100 RPM.

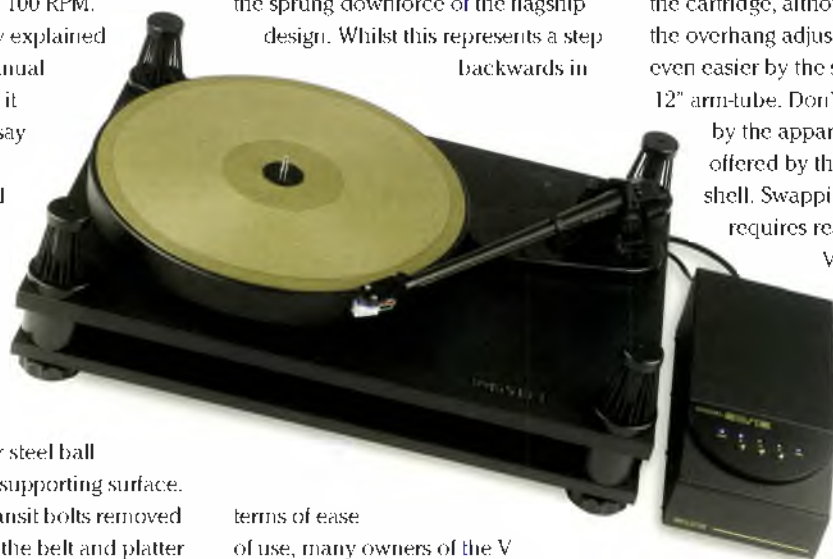
Operation is clearly explained in the excellent manual so I won't dwell on it here other than to say that it's extremely straightforward and precise.

Set up is simplicity itself. The base plate is supported on four adjustable feet. These offer a choice of rubber or steel ball interfaces with the supporting surface. With the various transit bolts removed or disengaged and the belt and platter in place, simply level the platter using the adjustable feet. Then raise the suspension to the recommended level (a feeler gauge is provided) and recheck the level of the platter. Indeed, the most fiddly part of the exercise is inserting the motor power supply plug, a tiny S-video type that inserts sideways between the rear of the base plate and sub-chassis. Those with fat fingers need to proceed with caution given the fragility of the connector's pins.

With the deck leveled and ready to run, it's time to install the cartridge. Assuming you've bought a deck that includes a tonearm, that will be already installed. The 312S supplied with our 20/12 differs from the 312 in several important respects. Most important is the material used for its arm-tube. Whereas the original 312 used an aluminium casting, the S version

employs a magnesium tube derived from the one used in the Series V, delivering a stiffer structure and one that's a third lighter. Unfortunately, it was impossible to manufacture a one-piece assembly of this length, necessitating the use of the detachable headshell. The S also borrows its ABEC 7 bearings from the Series V, along with the damping trough. However, the counterweight assembly is drawn from the 300 series arms, eliminating the sprung downforce of the flagship design. Whilst this represents a step

backwards in



terms of ease of use, many owners of the V actually prefer to use gravity to set VTF wholly or in part, feeling that the arm sounds better that way. Auxiliary slabs which can be added to the underside of the counterweight allow cartridges as heavy as 30g to be accommodated.

At first sight, the decision to use a detachable headshell might seem like a poor compromise, but SME's collet connection is about as secure as a detachable design can be, whilst also allowing proper azimuth adjustment, a critical alignment denied by one-piece designs and particularly important given the greater effective mass of a 12" arm. Add the reduction in tracing error to the simplified tracking force arrangements and you have an arm that in many respects represents possibly the best overall sonic compromise in the range. If you want to check that conclusion, the elongated oval

armboard of the 20/12 can simply be reversed allowing you to install a Series V or any of the other 9" arms. A brief comparison with the resident 309 resulted in a swift "no-contest" verdict – only to be expected given the difference in price between it and the 312S. Although originally only available as a package with the 20/12, the 312S is now also available as a separate item, at a price of £1408.37.

SME's familiar tools aid in aligning the cartridge, although in this instance the overhang adjustment is rendered even easier by the slim neck of the 12" arm-tube. Don't however be fooled

by the apparent versatility offered by the detachable shell. Swapping cartridges requires readjustment of

VTF, VTA, azimuth and overhang and is really only a practical proposition for those wanting to run mono and stereo versions of the same pick-up. Both internal and external wiring

is from vdH, but more on that later. One particularly welcome inclusion is a "lid" – or at least a soft cover similar to the ones that used to come with typewriters. In a world where turntable manufacturers have solved an increasingly awkward issue by simply ignoring it, SME provide a practical and effective (if not terribly attractive) solution.

Even a cursory listen revealed the superiority of the metal foot interface over the rubber alternative. Whilst separation, transparency and soundstaging all improved, the real bonus was the improvement in the shaping and weight of musical phrases, adding significant expressive depth to performance. In order to prevent long term dimpling to the top surface of the finite-element rack I used for ►

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▶ the review, I employed a set of finite's excellent spike shoes, which worked perfectly and without detectable sonic compromise. The other aspect of set-up that really repaid almost obsessive care was the precise setting of VTA. Using the threaded tool supplied by SME makes tiny incremental changes possible, but only in the upward direction, so start low and work up through the range, repeating the process once you've established your target zone. Once you hit the mark you'll be rewarded by greater inner clarity within the soundstage, but more importantly, an expressive coherence and emotional sweep that can escape the arm if VTA is incorrect. It adds up to a significant extra sense of musical involvement, the glue that binds the clarity, detail and poise into a meaningful whole. Yes, it's worth persevering...

And one other thing, when making speed adjustments during set-up, do it after the turntable has been running for an hour, with a battery powered strobe and preferably with the stylus in the groove* and the clamp in place.

In other words, in as close as possible a condition to the actual operating state of the table. So precise is the speed adjustment of the motor controller that all these factors affect the setting. Omit the record or clamp in particular and you'll set the speed slightly slow, adding a ponderous, almost lethargic quality to the sound.

Most readers will have some experience of SME's arms and turntables. Some will like them, some won't. Well, whichever camp you inhabit, prepare to be surprised by the 20/12. I may not have had every SME turntable in my home system, but this record

* If you don't own a suitable device, strobe discs and lamps available from KAB (Moth Marketing - 01234 741152) and Clearaudio fulfill all the necessary requirements. The KAB also gives a range of discrete speeds for 78 replay. I'd consider it an essential accessory for this record player.

player sounds like no SME I've used before. The precision, clarity and focus are all to be expected, watermarks of the SME sound. However, added to that solid, grounded quality the 20/12 brings something quite new and special. The inclusion of the 312S, as brutally revealed by comparison with the 309, brings a freedom to the music, allowing performers and the performance to breathe, so that despite the control and definition, the precision of the presentation, it never strays into the constricted or clinical. Instead, what you get is sure-footed and wonderfully positive articulation.

Play the Starker Bach *Cello Suites* and you'll see what I mean.



The structure and inner symmetry of the pieces will clearly play to the SME's traditional strengths, but the life and vivacious energy in the playing will surprise you. Starker's mastery of his instrument is immediately apparent, his awesome technique, but so to his love of and respect for the music he's playing. The latter are the kind of performance characteristics more akin to those claimed for the LP12 back when it was king and colouration was a necessary by-product of "genuinely musical performance". But listen to the woody, vibrant complexity of Starker's cello, appreciate how his breathing and the mechanical intrusions of his playing add to, rather than subtract from the reality and enthralling nature of the experience and you realise that here is a record player that let's you have your cake and eat it.

Nor is this performance limited to the intellectual rigour of solo classical pieces. The 20/12 took the jumbled layers of a recent Yes re-issue and sorted them with not just aplomb but genuine enthusiasm. The easy, relaxed lode of Neil Young's *Silver And Gold* never lags, the intricacy and fragile delicacy of its largely acoustic arrangements laid open but never dismantled. The almost bi-polar, sardonic optimism and reticence of Lloyd Cole's *Easy Pieces* is beautifully rendered, the busy mixes, effortlessly sorted. The rollicking tumble of 'Grace' segues naturally into the brooding, building power of 'Cut Me Down', the cleverness of the lyrics never

blunted or obscured by the heavy beat, the dense guitars and piano. The wonderful inevitability of the pulsing rhythm, the slow, almost imperceptible increases in tempo, the hanging pauses and weight and security of the trip-hammer beat that underpins the side-ender underline both the security of the 20/12's temporal grip and its tracing. No shortage of toe-tapping, singalong quality here.

There's an impressively holistic appeal to music replayed on the SME, but don't think that it's cuddly or forgiving, as it's neither. What it is, is supremely natural and imputable – as long as you've set it up just so. The problem (such as it is) is that it's so natural that even quite subtle deviations become glaringly obvious; hence the insistence on absolute accuracy when it comes to cartridge ▶

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► set-up, VTA and pitch adjustment. Thankfully, the engineering excellence of all things SME, the clear instructions supplied and the sheer clarity of the light the table shines on its own performance make optimizing this player a case of due diligence rather than the application of a black art. Plork it down with minimum care and it will likely sound dark, heavy and staid, worthy but uninviting. That's not the turntable you are hearing, it's the laziness and inadequacy of the installation.



Take the time and requisite care and the 20/12 will repay you in spades, with a musical dexterity and enthusiasm that is both infectious and addictive. Why is it so compelling? It's down to that rare combination of absolute security and musical coherence, the ability to hold with the lightest of touches, to protect without stifling. This isn't a sound that's designed to blow your socks off with sonic fireworks. In absolute terms you can point a finger at its absolute transparency and a slightly shut-in top-end that even the most painstaking adjustment never opens out. But that's to miss the point. The 20/12's evenness and coherence within the range allow it to stand aside, to disappear, to let the music speak with its own voice. Even when you are trying it's remarkable how quickly you stop listening to the turntable and find yourself simply enjoying the performance.

And that's straight out of the box. Such a high-resolution device lends itself to further optimization, both in terms of partnering equipment and ancillaries. I ran through three cartridges, each with impressive results, before I settled on the lucid delicacy and articulation of the Mysonic Eminent as the perfect partner. It's deft bass and top to bottom coherence suit the

20/12's self-effacing honesty perfectly. Likewise, of the phono-stages many and various that I had in house alongside the SME, it was the Groove Plus that cemented an almost uncanny partnership with the table. Swapping the vdH arm-lead for a Cardas Golden Cross wrought additional benefits, adding texture and shape at low-frequencies, richer colours and more body through the mid-band, banishing the incipient grain and grey tinge that characterizes the stock cable.

That's the real beauty of the 20/12. It's got the fundamentals so right that it offers the perfect foundation for further refinements, delivering maximum potential from carefully selected ancillaries. With a character that's best expressed in terms of the opportunities that it opens for the music, its security, neutrality and the stability of its presentation provides an unforced sense of musical authority that allows a musical performance to really speak,

irrespective of genre or scale. It doesn't impose, it never dictates. Instead it does exactly what a turntable should – and just as importantly, no more. This is, in the best sense of the word, a tool; one that unlocks the life and magic in vinyl grooves. Like all tools it demands care and responds to respect, but through good tools, carefully used, we realise great art. In that sense SME's 20/12 builds on more than one tradition. ➤

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Model 20/12

Type: Belt-driven, four point suspended turntable
 Motor: Hall effect
 Speeds: 33, 45, 78 – all user adjustable
 Bearing: 19mm standing
 Platter Mass: 6.5kg
 Suspension Medium: Fluid damped nitrile rubber
 Dimensions (WxD): 520x174x375mm
 Weight: 35.5kg

Series 312S

Type: Gimbal bearing tonearm
 Arm-Tube Material: Magnesium
 Headshell: Detachable, magnesium
 Effective Length: 308mm
 Effective Mass: 12g
 Fluid Damping: Yes (user adjustable)
 Tonearm Cable: vdH 502

Prices

Model 20/12 turntable: £9724.26
 Model 312S tonearm: £1408.37

Manufacturer:

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Clearaudio Performance Record Player

by Alan Sircom

Clearaudio, turntablists par excellence, seem unable to sit still for a moment. The range of products is vast and ever expanding (in the time taken to pen this sentence, three new arms, two decks and a half dozen cartridges have popped out of the German brand), and the technology lives up to the reputation. The company is 'into' almost every single innovation in turntable design of the last few years, implementing in new models and – where possible – retrofitting innovations into pre-existing designs and offering upgrades for users.

This is a new design, but demonstrates a significant development that applies across the Clearaudio board. Clearaudio's new Performance deck appears roughly mid way up the extensive range, yet is notable for being the first new product with Clearaudio's ceramic/magnetic bearing, engineering which is retrofittable right across the Clearaudio range, save for the entry-level Emotion (not the same bearing, of course; there are five different sizes for different decks and upgrades cost from £325-£725 if retrofitted, and from \$215 to \$475 if fitted with a new deck).

A magnetically opposed bearing 'floats' the platter, eliminating the thrust pad and should be a good idea in theory, but is often a dreadful idea in reality. The good part is that it drastically reduces friction and thereby mechanical noise in the bearing. The bad part is two fold: keeping the magnetic field even (a series of repulsing magnets must give an even field strength, otherwise the platter will start to wobble, pitch and roll – which wasn't a Bill Haley song) and keeping the magnetic field from influencing the

cartridge. This last is key; the magnetic field strength near the bearing has to be strong enough to keep the repulsor action going, but not so much as to send the cartridge crazy. Fortunately, Clearaudio managed to keep the good points and shuck off the bad points in one hit.

The trick is in the shaft and platter. The turntable main bearing shaft is non-magnetic. Clearaudio uses a ceramic alloy, claimed to be exclusive to the company, with a much finer surface than that previously used in bearings. This is claimed to reduce lateral friction in the bearing by a factor of 10, compared to conventional designs.

This also prevents magnetic field being transferred to the spindle itself while Clearaudio uses a special shielding material between the bearing housing and the upper magnet, to prevent stray magnetic field from influencing the cartridge. How does the platter help? The lightweight acrylic disc simply reduces the magnetic force required, making the side effects easier to deal with.

But there's more to a deck than a bearing and the family similarities are clear here. The shape of the deck is similar to the Champion range, with the free-standing motor housing sitting in a cut out at the back left of the deck. The plinth itself looks more like the Ambient (only without the separate motor and speed control block), as it's made from a sandwich of white Corian-like synthetic marble and MDF

(wrapped in a band of aluminium) with the trademark clear acrylic platter. The deck sits on three clear plastic squidgy feet.

The turntable was supplied as a complete kit, with the Satisfy Carbon Fibre tonearm and an optional Clearaudio Maestro cartridge (£410 on its own), but we went upmarket and opted for the £1230 Concerto.

All up, a beautiful package.



brilliantly presented, both solidly and cleverly built. It demanded big guns in the phono-stage stakes, so I went with one of the best; the excellent Karan Acoustics Phono 2.

The deck needs little running in. The motor takes a day or two to bed in, and the performance changes very slightly due to near imperceptible speed fluctuations during this time. But, that limited-contact bearing seems good to go from the outset and that's just the start. This is an infinitely adjustable set-up, especially when it comes to the arm and cartridge. Close inspection of the headshell reveals it to be nothing more than a cross-member, joined to the armtube by a single mounting screw. This makes adjustment of off-set, overhang and downforce all interdependent and all prone to inadvertent adjustment ►

▶ as you tighten that one screw. Cue hour upon hour of compensation, over-compensation and downright frustration. But it's worth persevering...

You see, the deck introduces a level of freedom to the sound of vinyl you'd be hard pressed to find from anything this side of a Platine Verdier (another mag-bearing deck). A whole noise floor we have all become accustomed to simply falls away, leaving behind... well nothing. No inky black silences or pellucid depths, just an absence of anything not on the disc. It's sort of spooky and almost vertiginous, like walking across a tall glass bridge. It seems those inky black silences people praise when discussing very good decks are a function of the turntable introducing its own character to the sound. Once that goes away, all you are left with is the recording studio, a squashed billet of vinyl and you.

This makes even grotty mid-1980s recordings seem alive and exciting. I suddenly found myself listening to *The Higsons* and



Half Man

Half Biscuit albums, just because that jarring rawness to the sound suddenly became honest no-bover studio work. Of course, putting those away and listening to Pablo Casals playing Bach *Cello Suites* on an original pressing is a far more edifying and moving experience, but there's something exciting about the

vivacity of those hitherto unlistenable penny dreadful recordings. On a good, live recording, the soundstage takes on exactly the proportions cut in production. No artificially big sound,

no slimmed down or beefed up



dynamics, nothing except what the disc has to say: What You Play Is What You Get.

Still more freedom: this time freedom from temporal imperfections. With a bearing that is, for practical purposes free from friction, the motor runs without stress and the speed seems more accurate than many decks. I'd be tempted to push the

envelope a little and swap the regular round section plastic belt for something altogether smaller, like a top E classical guitar string or similar. But as it stands, it's one of the most speed-precise decks you can buy without spending a fortune.

But there's such a thing as too much freedom:

the freedom to futz about with the 'headshell' of the Satisfy tonearm, coupled with the seemingly limitless performance potential of the deck meant that at times you seemed to be approaching the outer limits of LP replay, while at others it felt like you were roller skating on an ice rink. While drunk. And blindfolded. Despite that it's clear that the Concerto moving-coil is a honey. Clearaudio cartridges

still have the zing they had in the days of classics like the *Insider*, but now come with a richness and harmonic structure that is reminiscent of Benz-Micro designs. A good combination.

If you can bear to leave the arm alone, this player has the potential to deliver a brilliant performance.

The deck is a liberating influence, with a hard (non) sound to give up. All those points about musicality or dynamic range seem

to fall flat here, because the 'table just plays exactly what's on the vinyl and most other decks don't. Its performance needn't be hampered by the arm, but the potential for emerging obsessive/compulsive disorder must not be overlooked.



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Rigid turntable with standalone motor
Plinth:	Composite MDF/artificial marble
Bearing:	Magnetically opposed with ceramic shaft
Platter:	40mm acrylic
Speeds:	33/45 manually adjustable via pulley
Dimensions (WxHxD):	420 x 130 x 330mm
Weight:	9kg
Tonearm:	Satisfy Carbon Fibre arm
Type:	Gimbal Bearing
Effective Mass:	Medium
Bias Compensation:	Magnetic
Price:	Performance deck with Carbon Satisfy tonearm and Maestro cartridge - £1670

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—Richard Black, *Hi-Fi Choice*, July 2006

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Little To Large...

The difficult life of the nation's phono-stages

by Roy Gregory

The resurgent popularity of the vinyl record underlines the claim that it remains the preeminent high-fidelity source – at least as far as quality goes. But even its most ardent advocate won't deny that extracting the potential buried in those grooves is neither cheap nor straightforward. After all, the signal that comes out of a high-end turntable is between 500 and 1000 times smaller than that generated by the average CD player. Being so tiny, it's fragile as well as heavily equalized, making it readily damaged or distorted. If you want to recover it intact then you'll need far more than just a decent record player: precise set-up and leveling, the support surface and isolation, signal cabling and disc cleaning all play their part in maintaining the delicate musical thread. But once the signal reaches the phono-stage it's also reaching the first real obstacle in its path.

Up until now, the system has only had to pass the signal. The phono-stage has to amplify it, and amplify it by an order of magnitude more than any other single step in the system, making this a critical gate on absolute quality – a gate that defines whether the signal sees an inviting information super-highway or the electrical equivalent of a barely discernable, rock-strewn footpath. Of course, that's exactly why many analogue addicts rely on transformers to amplify the delicate output of their costly moving-coils, but



low-noise aside, these embody their own shortcomings when it comes to linearity and bandwidth. Increasingly, designers have turned to the various active circuit options when it comes to phono amplification – and various they are, embracing just about every possible option and varying in price from below three figures to several tens of thousands.

Phono-stages have also become, in this digital era, dedicated stand-alone options, divorced from their accompanying line-stage and making comparison significantly easier. The group we've assembled here starts at around the £1000 mark, the watershed

point at which phono-stages cease to be a significant limiting factor on system performance. It also allows designers access to their preferred technology, allowing us to weigh the competing attractions. Thus, we have assembled examples of pure tube, tube and transformer, discrete solid-state and i/c based designs, as well as a battery powered unit.

Moving up in price to what most people might consider a sensible ceiling, we've included the exquisitely crafted, European designed and built Martensen MPS, assessed in the context of the recently reviewed Audio Research PI17 and the latest version of that long term benchmark, the TEAD Groove Plus.

But there's always one – or in this case two – and by way of contrast with the fabulous Kondo KSL vinyl replay chain reviewed back in Issue 43, here we examine cost no object options from Japan in the shape of the latest evolution of the solid-state Connoisseur 4-2 PSE and the tube based Zanden Model 1200 Mk 2, which Yamada-san himself feels to be his best work! Scary though it may seem, these extravagant offerings are far from the most expensive out there – although in our experience they are certainly amongst the best, revealing both just how much there really is on a vinyl record and how important overall system matching becomes at this level of performance. ►



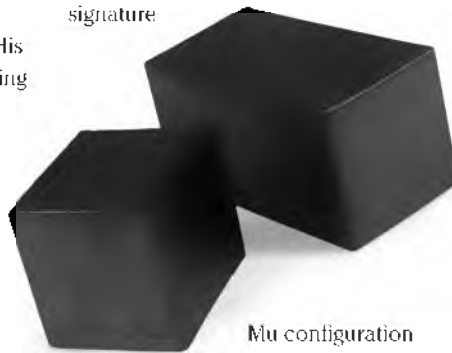
Mass Appeal...

Phono-stage solutions between £1000 and £2500

by Roy Gregory

The assembled cast represents the solid middle ground of phono replay – in all its guises. Perhaps we should start where moving-coil replay started, with the transformer equipped and appropriately retro styled Quad 24P (\$999), a Tim DeParavicini design. His track record with transformer coupling low-output cartridges dates back to the early '80's and The Head, and is combined here in a single chassis with a tube based RIAA and gain stage built around a quartet of 6111 sub-miniature twin-triodes. Of course, with transformers at the input gain isn't an issue and the 24P offers either MM or MC input, each with three input sensitivities selected via a rear mounted rotary control. The 24P will thus accommodate cartridge outputs between 1.3 and 5.2 and 0.13 and 0.52mV, a formidable range. The MM input loads the cartridge at 47k, while the MC transformers offer a 10 Ohm load. More unusual though, is the provision of a pair of optional variable outputs, controlled by the large rotary knob on the front panel, allowing dedicated analogue users to dispense with a line-stage altogether. The 24P was auditioned in both modes. Be warned that appearances can be deceptive and that the sleek exterior is not constructed to the same standard as Quad units of yore, the sleeve being quite a struggle to remove. That aside construction appears excellent and operation was faultless throughout the review period.

Staying with valves, the Modwright SWP 9.0SE (\$2695) eschews transformers in favour of a pure tube circuit based around two each of 5687s, 6N1Ps and 6C45s, arranged in the company's signature



Mu configuration gain/buffer stage.

A substantial, choke regulated and 5AR4 valve rectified power supply is augmented by FET regulation of the B+ supplies. The enormous toroidal mains transformer wouldn't disgrace a decent power amp. The SWP shares its large case with the SWL line-stage, but the circuitry more than justifies its dimensions. An internally bulkhead divides the audio and power supply segments, the nicely laid out and heavily populated circuit board filling the interior. Four front panel switches reminiscent of early ARC units control power, mute, mono and switch between MM and MC sensitivity, the latter delivering 66dB of gain. Rear panel dip switches allow the user to select 50, 100, 500, 1000, 47k Ohm or an individually selected load. However, two oddities stand out, the earth post is inconveniently located by the output sockets, which is far from

ideal, while with no other controls on the front panel, those undeniably attractive but slender switches are horribly vulnerable. Clearly a little care in handling and installation will be required. The significant material content and solid build quality go a long way to justifying the price-tag, the most expensive in the test, reflecting the inherent difficulty of achieving decent performance with MC cartridges from an all-tube circuit, something the Modwright achieves at what can only be considered an extremely reasonable price. As well as the silver fascia shown in the photographs, there's also a bright blue option for those of a more demonstrative bent.

At the opposite extreme, in terms of size and complexity at least, 47 Labs' diminutive 4718 phono-stage (\$925) employs monolithic i/cs built into a small but incredibly solid block to provide gain, with a separate power supply that's equally solid and only a little larger. The tiny chassis means that the socketry and earth post are inconveniently close together, making hook-up a fiddle, especially with WBT NextGen plugs (I wouldn't fancy trying it with 47's vestigial cable connections). There are no adjustments of any type, although you can choose between the 75dB gain A model reviewed here or the 90dB of gain delivered by the B version. Being a voltage source device (rather like the Dynavectors) loading is 0 Ohms. This device is as minimal as it gets – and I'm not just referring to the size!



▶ Acoustech's PH3D (\$1000 plus shipping, duty and 17.5% VAT) is a simplified and significantly cheaper evolution of the PH3 so enthusiastically reviewed by JMH in Issue XX. Once again this is the work of renowned solid-state designer Ron Sutherland and in common with its big brother,



runs on batteries – that's D cells, and not rechargables! Despite the "simplified" tag the PH3D still offers internal jumpers that permit users to select between five different gain levels (between 40 and 60dB) and 100, 200, 1k, 10k and 47k Ohm loads. Controls are limited to a front-panel on/off switch and an LED which doubles as a power and battery life indicator (simply replace them when it no longer lights). Talking of batteries, you'll be needing 16 of the large D cells. These cost me around \$20 – taking advantage of a 3 for 2 offer at boots – and should

The Review System

The phono-stages were auditioned in a system consisting of Connoisseur 4-2L SE and ARC LS26 line-stages, feeding a Howland RADIA amplifier and Nola Pegasus speakers, cabled with Nordost Valhalla cables. Source was the VPI TNT6 with the latest suspension upgrades, a JMW 12.5 tonearm with interchangeable anti-wands carrying Lyra Titan-i, Clearaudio Concerto and vdH Condor cartridges. I used Nordost Tyre and Discovery arm cables. The system was supported on finite element Pagode Master Reference and Stillpoints racks, while Stillpoints Component Stands, cones and Symposium RollerBlock Jrs were tried under each unit.

The phono-stages were well warmed-up and left powered throughout the review period. Once optimized each unit was listened to both individually and in a comparative context with its peers and the TEAD Groove Plus benchmark.

last for 1200 hours or a year, whichever ever elapses first. I haven't tried alternative battery types, but previous experience with Final Labs equipment suggest that the more basic the better, at least as far as sound goes. Thumb screws at each end of the chassis allow easy removal of the top-plate for battery replacement or internal adjustments.

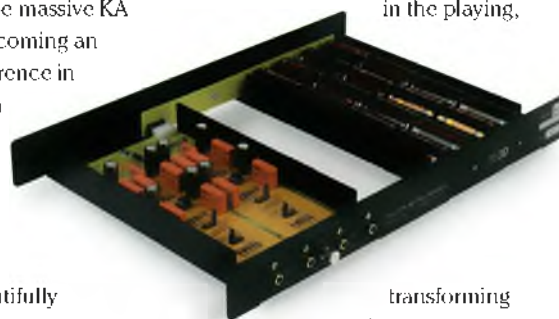
The Karan Acoustics KA Phono2 (\$2300) comes from one of the high-end's unsung heroes, but one whose reputation is rising rapidly. The massive KA M1200s are fast becoming an indispensable reference in the Gregory system while AS was bowled over by the astonishingly affordable KA S180 power amp

that shares its beautifully machined casework with the Phono2, and these slim-line units will soon be joined by a matching line-stage. Lift the lid and you realise that the quality is more than skin deep. The fully differential circuit is ultra wide bandwidth and beautifully executed in discrete components. Banks of internal dip switches allow user selection of gain (50 to 70dB), loading (100, 1k, 47k Ohms or a user selected value) and input capacitance (in 100pF steps). There's a single pair of high-quality input sockets and a choice of single-ended or balanced outputs. Despite being at the top end of the group in price terms, it's hard not to be impressed by casework and construction that matches the standards found on Karan's

\$24K mono-bloks. As we'll see, the Phono2 has more than just its looks in common with the flagship products.

The Listening

Quad's 24P presents a big, bold and powerful performance, redolent with drive and energy. Indeed, it has so much gain and is so quiet in operation that it's easy to overdrive the line-stage (or power amp) – which is a big mistake. Do so and the sound takes on a mechanical, relentless quality, losing subtlety and texture. But run the sensitivity switch at the correct level (Medium for the Titan and vdH, Low for the Clearaudio) and the sound gains significant flow and expression in the playing,



transforming the Starker Bach Cello Suites just as completely as the delicate simplicity of Neil Young's Silver and Gold. Further experimentation also revealed a marked preference for the Clearaudio over the otherwise superior Lyra and vdH cartridges, which has to be reflection on the German design's preference for the low impedance input provided by the Quad's transformers, a fixed parameter in this instance.

At its best the 24P delivers an energetic sound full of life and presence. The challenge lies in channeling that energy into a coherent musical strand, maximizing its direction and flow, integrating the solid low-frequencies. It's a balancing act involving choice of settings, system matching and selection of cartridge (all concerns which should inform a record replay system anyway). ▶

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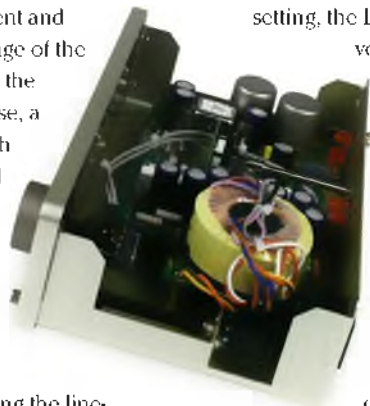
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► Get it wrong by using too much gain, the wrong cartridge or opening the window too wide (either at the input or the output) and the power and energy on tap becomes an uncontrolled and clumsy embarrassment. Get it right and you are rewarded with real musical direction and purpose.



Indeed, bizarrely, the Quad reminds me if anything of the drive and intent that comes from a good Naim set-up. Never the most transparent, delicate or subtle, it never fails to impress with its sheer solidity and presence; the rich body and woolly vibrance of Starker's Cello is a case in point. Auditioning is essential as the 24P is unusually system dependent. If things start to fall apart try dialing back the demands. In this case the Quad worked more happily with the relaxed refinement and smooth dynamic range of the LS26 than it did with the Connoisseur. Likewise, a brief experiment with the Classe integrated amp was also notably successful.

Running the 24P direct into the power amp was less beneficial than hoped. Removing the line-stage from the equation also removed significant control, separation and musical insight. The result might at first seem more coherent but that's because it's also more muddled. Unless your line-stage is of very dubious quality I'd be surprised if this offers any real



benefit – other than the opportunity to put that huge rotary control on the front-panel – which probably justifies its inclusion on styling grounds alone.

Modwright's SWP 9.0SE risks spoiling the ship for a happpeth of tar; fortunately it's an easy fix. The unit comes with damping cans for the 6C45 input tubes, while the 6N1Ps and 5687s are left naked. Initial listening, whilst promising showed an unexpectedly bland tonal palette that robbed the music of life and presence. Installing EAT tube dampers on the undamped valves wrought a significant improvement and frankly, should be considered an essential upgrade.

Unfortunately I had insufficient of the EAT dampers to use them on the 6C45s too, but I suspect there's another improvement to be had here. Needless to say, all listening was conducted with dampers in situ.

One other aspect of set-up proved critical; cartridge loading. The SWP seemed more critical than any of the other stages in this respect, the Clearaudio demanding the 50 Ohm setting, the Lyra 200 Ohms and the vdH 1k. Once optimized the music gained significant coherence and momentum, overcoming a slightly stilted quality if this parameter was neglected. With a commendably quiet output, users need have no fears about curtailing gain.

Sonically the Modwright treads a near perfect middle path between the vivid presence and body of the Quad and the expansive stage and pleasing perspective of the Karan Phono2. In many respects this is a textbook valve stage, offering

the colours and energy, spacious dimensionality and life that we've come to expect whilst the excellent noise performance and good transparency and resolution belie the technology's familiar Achilles' heel. The combination of impressive body and presence together with good musical flow makes for an involving performance, and one that is essentially well balanced. This evenhandedness allows the various contributions within music equal status, never for instance favouring the vocal over its accompanying arrangement, a solo instrument over the rhythm section underpinning it. The Modwright may lack the delicacy of the PI3D and absolute stability and transparency of the Karan, the sheer impact of the Quad or the overall coherence of the 47 Labs, but it comes a close



second in most instances making this an excellent all-rounder with an uncanny grasp of a note's leading edge and as a result its purpose and direction. You might start by noticing what it doesn't do but it's surprising how quickly you forget aspects of performance in favour of the performance. Swapping back to other stages immediately highlights their strengths – and equally as clearly, their weaknesses: there's a lot to be said for balance. This is a musically satisfying and versatile stage, which with its loading options and mute switch should satisfy all but the most demanding vinylphile. And those who want more are going to have to pay handsomely for it.

Intriguingly, those for whom the SWP 9.0 fits the bill might well be able to pay less. As impressive as the standalone unit is, the phono-stage ►

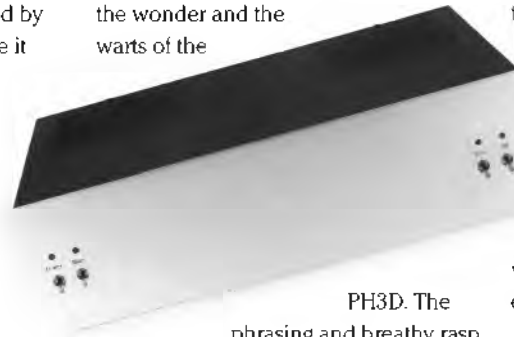
► is also available built into the company's SWL 9.0 line-stage – at the bargain price of £3195. I don't believe you get the same impressive power supply (there's a more expensive, external supply option) and only time will tell whether the combined arrangement can match the performance of the separates, but given the quality and high-value represented by the line-stage alone, this looks like it could be an absolute bargain.

Acoustech's PH3D has a simplicity and cleanliness that matches the elegance of its design. But once again, extracting its considerable best is something of a balancing act. On the plus side are a midrange purity and delicacy that are astonishingly seductive. On the downside are the limited gain and musical authority on offer. Any cartridge that puts out much less than 0.4mV is going to be marginal on noise grounds, while the need to add grip and control invites you to load the pick-up down, further limiting the available output. But don't be downhearted; it's well worth persevering.

With an easy, expressive, almost languid grasp of musical flow and line the PH3D has sinuous grace to burn. Always a stage that will seduce rather than command, its control at frequency extremes needs all the help it can get from choice of cartridge and input loading – indignities its musical coherence can easily accommodate. Listen to Starker and you'll hear a slightly more distant, inclusive presentation, a greater sense of acoustic, while the sound majors on the maestro's grasp of line and his awesome technique rather than the sheer energy of his instrument. The structure and phrasing of the Bach suites is laid effortlessly bare, their technical demands and beautiful compositional symmetry equally apparent. This sense of relaxed, unhurried ease allows music to develop in its own time and with its

own pace. Combined with the textural and temporal insights the Acoustech makes vocals come alive. Great singers capture the listener, be it Neil Young, Lou Reed or Ella, their subtle vocal inflexions and mastery of phrasing and placement making their voices captivatingly expressive.

Playing jazz brings home both the wonder and the warts of the



PH3D. The phrasing and breathy rasp of horns is breathtakingly real, while the bass line, whilst it never plods or drags, has no real bottoms to the notes, no real edges. It's not a destructive flaw, but a visiting bass player found it frustrating. It's a quality, along with the slightly cozy warmth that comes from the less than stratospheric top-end extension that you'll need to weigh against the beguiling appeal and musically addictive ease of the mid-band. For fans of vocal and acoustic recordings this could be a no-brainer. Those who simply have to have scale, authority and bandwidth, preferably allied to positively frightening presence and dynamic impact, will probably look elsewhere. With the PH3D you can sense the spit hitting the microphone, but you don't feel it on your face. If that comes as a relief then this could well be your phono-stage of choice.

The 47 Labs phono-stage is definitely the curate's egg of this particular group. With no adjustments, no tweaks and precious little physical bulk to show for your money it

challenges you directly; forget the fiddling and simply listen. And listen you will. From the very first note there's a compelling beauty, directness and immediacy to sound from the 47. So much so that you'll find yourself asking, "Why bother with anything else?" Listening to the glorious freedom of Starker's cello, its sure-footed progress through the most convoluted phrases, you wonder where else you can find such unimpeded, unencumbered naturalness in the music that flows from a system? The old adage of vocalists singing to you could have been made for the 47, the colours are natural, the general view and scale of the picture utterly enticing.

So where's the problem? In many respects this phono-stage reminds me of a really good 300B single-ended amp. It has all the qualities that people seek in such a device: tonal warmth and beauty, a directness of musical communication flowing from its inherent simplicity, an inviting balance that draws you into the listening experience. But it also has the failings. The 47 Labs excels with simple acoustic recordings: sonatas, girl and a guitar, four-piece pop and rock are all handled simply brilliantly. But the emphasis is on the simple. Larger scale works and denser musical arrangements underline the limitations of this device at frequency extremes, its lack of dynamic authority and the absence of a real acoustic space around performers. Really big orchestral pieces become congested, denied separation within both the soundfield and the composition, lacking drama and dynamic contrast as a result. The Milstein Dvorak Violin Concerto is a case in point. The perspective has plenty of width ►



▶ but little real height and precious little depth, the soloist collapsed into and swamped by the orchestra, the incredibly bold orchestral tuttis robbed of their substance, complexity and the emphatic quality they demand if the music is to make sense.

Rather like the original Quad ELS 57 the 47 Labs phono-stage delivers a select few musical attributes with such blinding brilliance and fidelity that for those who value them there's nothing else that will do. For others with broader based musical demands, it could prove a frustrating experience. Or to put it another way, the 47 Labs has editorial tendencies: if they coincide with your own perspective then, rather like a daily newspaper, you'll find it a reassuringly comfortable fit. As to the title at the head of the page, on that I'll not be drawn...

Which brings us finally (and by design) to the Karan Acoustics Phono2, not because it offers the "best" sound – a meaningless concept as should be clear by now – but because of the nature of the sound it delivers. Both in appearance and sonic character the Phono2 is the unit that most embodies what has become recognized (at least in America, and to a lesser extent by aficionados of American products) as "high-end" sound. Its wide bandwidth design is reflected in the expansive scale and incredible stability of its soundstage and associated acoustic. Nor is that stability disturbed by the most dramatic dynamic demands. Ironically, just as the Milstein Dvorak reveals the 47 Labs' shortcomings so it allows the Karan to bask in its strengths. Interestingly, this isn't a ghostly quiet phono-stage like so many of its peers, but nor is it one that holds the music with such an iron grip that it crushes the life and flow out of the performance. Indeed, its dynamic hold is deft enough not just to hold Milstein's instrument separate but to preserve the finesse and brilliance of his technique.

On smaller scale material like the Bach *Suites* it leans slightly towards the academic rather than exaggerating the player's flair, but this is in keeping with the inclusive nature of the more distant perspective and palpable acoustic. The structure of the piece is laid bare, the pacing and placement of the notes impeccable. Indeed, this is rather more Starker than the Modwright's Piatigorsky (or the 47's Du Pre).



The precision and control in his technique is simply awesome. Yet, at the same time the sheer dancability of Neil Young's *Silver And Gold*, the infectious energy and humour of 'Good To See You' remains undiminished. Indeed, in some respects the most remarkable feature of the Phono2 is the uncanny way in which it echoes the staging, stability, transparency and absolute dynamic integrity of the massive KA M1200 mono-bloks, with their unique combination of control and musical freedom.

Downside (such as it is) lies with the unit's self-effacing honesty and essential neutrality. There is no padding or rounding of awkward edges to make poor recordings more acceptable or to banish surface noise. If you want flavour then there's a veritable Baskin Robbins of alternatives out there, with a few reviewed here. But if it's honesty that you require, along with the ability to grow into or answer the demands of a full-range, high-end system, then the Karan's sonic qualities and balanced output option demand serious consideration.

Conclusions

This trawl through the bottom tier of top-end phono-stages has been an enjoyable and entertaining trip. It once again confirms just how critical this most prosaic of boxes can be in terms of overall system performance, whilst at the same time underlining the dangers of drinking by the label. Don't assume that a given technology will deliver predictable results. Once again we discover that there is no silver bullet – just a range of options one of which will best meet the demands of your cartridge, system and personal listening

bias. The vital importance of auditioning a unit in the context in which it will be used, of matching it to the cartridge in question and optimizing its adjustable parameters cannot be underestimated. We started by observing the fragile nature of the phono signal; any one of these units can wreak havoc on it if improperly applied. ➤

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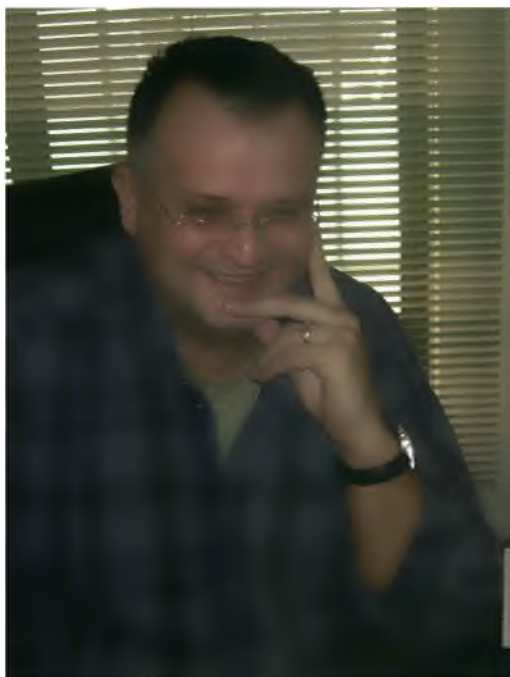
Roy Gregory interviews Milan Karan, the man behind the Phono 2 as well as the KA S180 and mighty KA M1200 power amps that have so impressed the reviewers at Hi-Fi+.

Roy Gregory: Karan Acoustics is probably best known in the UK for the excellence of your powerful, dual-mono, wide bandwidth power amplifiers. Designing a phono-stage must present very different problems and require different solutions. How does your approach to phono-stages differ from power amps?

Milan Karan: First of all, I have spent in the past, and am still spending, a lot of time thinking and considering solutions for designs of all sections of an audio circuit. This means voltage areas, current areas, and so on. A lot of attention is always given to seemingly small details, but I deem all those little things to be very important for the final outcome. I would like to hope that the ultimate results of such an approach are my own proprietary circuits and design solutions which not only give a quality sound, but are, at the same time, sufficiently versatile to be implemented in all my designs, be it a phono pre-amplifier or a large power amplifier. Depending on the application certain adjustments, of course, need to be made. But in essence I always try to employ tried and tested solutions that, in principle, work equally well in different applications.

To answer your question about phono-stages, my approach to the design of those is exactly the same, except for the specific requirements surrounding the precise, correct reproduction of RIAA equalization and the flexibility of the input values

and gain choices. Any phono pre-amplifier has to be suitable for as many different cartridges as possible without sacrificing the sound quality.



RG: Given the tiny signal levels generated by a low-output moving-coil cartridge, is there a risk that the sonic cost of the switches and circuitry involved in offering adjustable loading and gain might outweigh the potential advantages?

MK: Once the circuit and the components used have been selected for the best possible sonic performance, the most important area of design is the concept and execution of printed circuit boards. You might be surprised to learn that the general topology of printed circuit boards as well as the mutual interaction of individual passive

and active components relative to each other on any printed circuit board have a crucial influence to the final sound of the product. Unfortunately, apart from some basic rules, there are no predetermined ways in which to achieve the best results in this regard. Many hours of experimenting, listening and looking for optimum solutions is the only way to do it properly. Once again, I insist that any good phono pre-amplifier has to have a variety of input impedance and overall gain settings without any negative influence to the overall sound quality of the product.

RG: How big a part does noise performance play in the design of a phono-stage?

MK: Noise of any kind is of paramount importance for any audio component as it defines the actual resolving ability and the harmonic structure of the component in question. Not only that, but the level and character of any noise directly conditions the sound of that component in vital musical areas. The overall level of noise has to be well below the quietest registered tone or frequency on the sound carrier and, believe me, that is extremely difficult to achieve within a phono pre-amplifier circuit. Phono cartridges, especially moving-coil ones, generate a very small signal and the only way to get acceptable results is to start with totally uncompromised design of the power supplies that drive the actual phono-stage circuit. Such power supplies have to be absolutely noiseless with a ▶

▶ very low internal impedance so that their voltages and currents can be transferred across the printed circuit board to the active circuit without any additional noise whatsoever. Of course, power supply design is crucial throughout the system, if you are to achieve proper stability, soundstaging and acoustic resolution, but it starts in the phono pre-amplifier.

RG: Your products represent extremely mature, refined designs. How long has Karan Acoustics been producing audio components and what is your personal background and training?

MK: Karan Acoustics has been producing audio components for over a decade, although my personal involvement in the design of audio circuits goes back more than 20 years. As often happens, it all started as a hobby and, being an electronics engineer by education, that hobby soon became a profession. For a number of years I also worked with professional recording equipment and even PA systems. Today I'm still involved with the servicing and maintenance of electronic medical equipment which is, as you know, extremely complex and sophisticated. Not a bad sideline for an audio designer!

RG: With so many well-established, high-profile solid-state manufacturers on the market, what sets Karan products apart from the crowd? What combination of design elements and philosophy defines your approach?

MK: We are a small manufacturer who produces in short production runs. This allows us to produce all our products and sub-assemblies with considerable care and precision. Our philosophy is very simple and allows no compromise either in the area of design or manufacturing. Of course, I would like to think that we incline

towards audio components you "cannot hear at all". In other words, ones without any additives of their own to effect sound in general. To achieve this a significant number of passive and active components within our products are custom made to our specification which, again, seriously influences the final sonic result. This level of tuning can only be achieved through constant evaluation and listening. I also like my products to be as identical to each other as possible. Circuit diagrams, component selection, printed circuit boards, chassis and metalwork should all be closely related from product to product. What works well in one, will always work well in another, giving a continuity and overall balance to the sound. In addition to the importance I give to power supplies and balanced circuits that I have already mentioned, transient speed and wide bandwidth combined with low noise are also important. No coupling capacitors are ever present in my designs and all DC supplies in different gain blocks are precisely regulated. My circuits are extremely phase coherent as any phase shift severely undermines the three dimensional recreation of the sound stage. I think it is generally underestimated just how important this is to preserving the natural timing and structure of the music. In short, all audio components have to be designed to perform well beyond the expected bandwidth and level of performance.

RG: Currently the Phono 2 and KA S180 stand apart from the KA L line-stage as far as price is concerned. Will there be a matching one-box line-stage in the future?

MK: Soon you will see – the first prototype is undergoing testing and evaluations – a single chassis line pre-amplifier which will of course share the same design principles as all our other products, but should be much more affordable than the reference

KA L line-stage. It will be the ideal partner for the KA S 180 power amplifier, but also good enough to be used with the bigger KA S 270 model.

RG: How does a small, emerging company approach the global hi-fi market? What problems result from conflict or transshipment between markets? How do these effect the establishment of a high-quality brand image?

MK: Today's global hi-fi market needs to be approached with care and sufficient sensitivity towards the actual needs and requirements of those who we expect to buy our products. I firmly believe that the highest quality audio products will always find their place in enough homes and systems, although it can sometimes be a matter of time before it eventually happens. As the world market becomes more and more difficult, commercial pressures will produce more conflicts and illegitimate sales around the world, which in my opinion, will bring nothing good for the future. Sadly, the reality of life is unavoidable in any business or area of commerce, so our industry is no exception. How to organise good marketing and global distribution? I always saw myself more as a designer and manufacturer rather than a salesman. Consequently, I have chosen to let others who are better than me in those areas to represent Karan Acoustics' interests and that is the main reason why a few years ago we chose to appoint a worldwide distributor, based in the United Kingdom, to organise the global marketing and sales of our products. Slowly but surely, I am pleased to see an increasing number of markets expressing interest in our products and qualified audio press, distributors and retailers in those countries have already shown wonderful support for the Karan Acoustics brand.





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The Martensen MPS Phono-stage

by Jason Kennedy

I recently had a visit from a guy who works for Guildford Audio; Andy is his name and free jazz and the like is his musical game, but I won't hold that against him as he brought me a small brick of a phono-stage to try which has turned out to be very good indeed. It costs a lot of money and at a glance looks like AN other aluminium box with phono sockets in it but if you get a little closer you will see that it is finished to a standard that the Swiss would be proud of. I particularly like the tiny holes in the connection panel that let through pinpricks of blue light: that and the fact that the inscriptions are carved into the metal rather than being printed.

These details give some insight into the attention to detail that has been lavished on the whole MPS phono-stage. It was created by Lorenz Martensen, an electronics engineer who works in aeronautics. Fortunately for transparency junkies Lorenz is not just an engineer he is also a hi-fi nut and has been since the tender age of 13 (I don't imagine there's much chance of him getting over it!). However, his enthusiasm for sound led to a meeting with Willi Bauer who makes DPS turntables. Willi got Lorenz to build him both single and three-phase power supplies for his turntables and then persuaded him to have a go at a phono-stage. That was 12 years back and apparently the circuit design has not changed since, simply being refined and optimised in terms of parts choice.

So why does it cost £3,900? It has an outboard power supply in an equally well-finished box and a chunky 16 core umbilical cable which hooks up with a multi-pin computer style

socket, and while you don't see such things on many affordable products, they aren't reason enough. Apparently it comes down to the quality of parts and construction, particularly the main PCB. This requires 3000 0.1mm holes and is populated by hand because production runs are short. It features the best components that Lorenz can find, including silver



glimmer capacitors. Every part is ruthlessly selected for tolerance and the case-work has been designed to exclude RF at all costs.

Given the MPS' elevated price it's surprising to see nothing much in the way of controls or adjustability. You simply order it with a gain setting of your choice, or you can adjust gain

yourself by plugging resistors into the phono socket provided. Apparently Lorenz has such a low opinion of volume controls that he uses alternative resistors on the phono-stage to set gain for the system as a whole. In other words he plugs the stage directly into a power amp and tries different resistors until he finds the right level!

Impedance is fixed at 50 kOhms which also seems a little dogmatic, even peculiar in the context of a norm that is nearer 100 Ohms, but is based on Lorenz's analysis that "just as the cartridge's job is to measure the modulations of the groove, the phono amplifier's job is to first measure the output of the cartridge and should present the easiest load possible."

I can well imagine that there are MCs out there that might not agree but I certainly had no trouble with a van den Hul Coudor which ostensibly prefers a 1 kOhm load. Andy Craig, the distributor uses it with an Allacerts MCIB which is also said to prefer a lower impedance.

The more observant reader will have noticed that the phono sockets are WBT Next Gen types with their distinctive spiral of metal and plastic. At the opposite end of the case is a large SCSI connector for the power supply, the latter being built into a sharp edged aluminium case that is as well finished as the stage itself and twice as large. The supplied cable is over a metre long, making it easy to store the supply out of sight though it seems a pity to hide such

▶ a classically minimalist casework.

The stage itself is inconvenient inasmuch as it has the power supply coming in it at one end and the turntable and line out cables attached to the other. This makes it a little tricky to site on a conventional component support without cables sprouting out the sides. As with all phono stages it is still sensitive to electrical fields from amplifiers and the like so the further away the better.

That said this is an extremely quiet phono stage, possibly the quietest I have encountered outside of matched systems where cartridge, tonearm and phono-stage have been

made for each other. The whisperingly low noise levels of the MPS help to endow it with what is simply huge dynamic range. Lorenz puts this down to the heavy filtering he has incorporated into the power supply. The musical result is sometimes quite shocking. When the band lets rip after the quiet intro on King Crimson's *Larks Tongues in Aspic*, even though you know it's coming the difference in level produced by the MPS increases the power of the transition. This is followed by the sheer intensity and distortion of Fripp's guitar in full effect, something this stage is equally adept at revealing thanks to uncannily wide bandwidth that lets seemingly everything through and a degree of transparency not previously encountered.

This level of dynamic range seems to bring with it an ability to find the energy in vinyl that one normally

associates with tube electronics. I can't be alone in noticing that valve systems seem to require less tweaking of the volume control to achieve the right playback level for each recording, but it's not something I've come across with a solid-state phono-stage before. Yet I was often able to play six or seven LPs without altering the level setting on the pre-amp.

This is complete transparency, not just an ability to reveal detail or bone crunching bass, but across the board



clarity that revels in imaging, energy and timing. So yes it does have a solidity in the bass that one doesn't expect of vinyl and it also delivers the vitality of a live performance with ease. What sometimes surprises is that some albums don't have the depth of bass that you expect. Instead they are nice and phat at the frequencies where most speakers start to join in, but don't go down much further. But put a better recording on, like Burnt Friedman and Jaki Liebezeit's *Secret Rhythms*, and the air starts to move as well as the floor and the furniture.

The key to the power and resolution of this phono-stage is its remarkable speed. It's on the ball at every moment, notes stopping and starting with absolute precision. For this reason it's possible that some might find it lacking in traditional vinyl romance but it can't of course change the inherent character of the

format and while not as warm and cosy as some stages it lets all the warmth of the source come through. It also makes things like VTA abundantly clear. In fact those inclined to worry about the set up of their turntable might best be advised to avoid this level of resolution. Either that or ensure they have the means for record by record adjustment.

RG told you all about the Audio Research PH7 when he reviewed it in Issue 45 so I won't go into all the details save to say that it is the brand's top dog stage, is a hybrid J-fet/tube device and has the luxury of remote control for muting, power and impedance changes. The PH7 is also a fixed gain MC stage with no means of user adjustment in this department. As such it presents an interesting context and contrast to the Martensen.

I found the Audio Research extremely musical and engaging. It has a knack for drawing you into the music, be it an old favourite or something less well known, this tube-powered stage brings out the message that the artist is trying to communicate. Next to the MPS it lacks a little bandwidth and as a result is not quite as revealing of the fine details that are fleshed out by the treble in particular. It's all about sense and intent, the purpose behind the performance. The Martensen is about the performance itself. The MPS produces more transparency and detail, revealing deeper reverb and more of the acoustic space and atmosphere of a really good recording such as Rickie Lee Jones' phenomenal *Flying Cowboys*. The reach out and touch clarity produced had amazing, almost physical impact.

These two phono-stages are essentially chalk and cheese. The Audio Research is musically gripping and extremely revealing of the emotional drive behind and within music. It also has impressively low



'arc angels'



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**"THE SOUND OF THE PH7 IS WHAT COUNTS AND
IT'S A STUNNER"**

AUDIO RESEARCH REFERENCE PH7 VACUUM TUBE PHE AMPLIFIER



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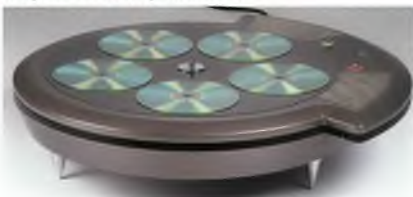
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Ultra High Fidelity Magazine Feb 2006



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POSITIVE FEEDBACK ONLINE—ISSUE 9

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► noise for a tube device. The MPS on the other hand delivers greater transparency and actual detail but at the cost of a less cosy balance. Which you prefer will depend on your cartridge and the rest of the system, speakers in particular. The bass-head will always choose the solid-state solution



even if it doesn't match the midrange fluidity of tubes, while those inclined to get to the message and meaning of the music will find that valves offer a highly convincing argument. Both stages are near the top of the real-world market. If the MPS had

the dealer support and wider availability enjoyed by the Audio Research then I suspect that the prices would be closer.

Both are glorious devices, supreme in their individuality.

I have my preference but there's no saying that you'll share it.

In absolute terms, comparisons are,

as they used to say in the fourteenth century, odious. **+**

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	MC/MM phono-stage
Gain:	62dB (user reducible)
Input Impedance:	50 kΩlm
Input Capacitance:	1nF
Output Impedance:	164ohm
Bandwidth:	20Hz - 50kHz +/-0.25dB
Equalisation:	RIAA
Connections:	WTB Nextgen silver
Price:	£3,900

Distributor:

Transcendence Systems
Tel. (44)(0)1252 328936
Net. www.transcendencesystems.com

Manufacturer:

Bauer Audio
Net. www.bauer-audio.de

Casting The Net Wider Still...

by Roy Gregory

As much as anything else, any equipment review should try and place a product in a wider context than just a single reviewer's 'reference' system. I was sufficiently intrigued by JK's obvious enthusiasm for the Martensen MPS to ensure first, that he got access to the ARC PH7 which so impressed me when I reviewed it (a cat of quite a different colour, I was sure) and then to lay hands on it myself with a view to close comparison with the latest version of Tom Evan's Groove Plus, an ongoing voyage of electrical discovery if ever there was one. I'll be assessing this latest addition to the TEAD line in more detail shortly, but here's the brief intro:

revised front-end circuitry and i/cs make this latest Groove quieter still, and cut distortion in the input stage by half.



small banks of dip-switches located beneath the input sockets allow owners to select nine discrete loading values, sensibly spaced between

112 Ohms and 1 kΩhm, as well as five different input

capacitance values (more applicable to moving-magnet designs but hey, there are a few low-output MMs so why not?*)

But the really clever part is that the circuitry **►**

The other big news is that Tom has finally (after nearly 20 years of badgering) developed a user adjustable loading option. Four

* Tom points out that in this circuit the capacitance will also trim the high-frequency rolloff, allowing some balance correction if necessary or desirable. I've not had a chance to play with this, but will examine the affect in the upcoming fu I review.

▶ that allows the loading variations is in parallel to the signal path, finally overcoming Tom's objection to placing any kind of switch in such a critical location. The mods are applicable to both the standard Groove and the Plus, the SR front-end adding £600 to the price the X adjustments a further £200. A fully loaded Groove Plus SRX now tips the scales at a not insignificant \$4400.

In combination, the current Groove upgrades deliver greater substance and solidity to the sound, as well as a tighter field of focus. Images are more dimensional, with greater physical volume, while tonal colours are richer and better differentiated. Dynamics start from a firmer footing making for greater weight and impact, while the sound is more solid, the intent in music more assured. The soundstage is more natural too, with greater depth but more importantly, a greater sense of spatial congruity with the music – instruments aren't just placed, they actually sound and the music sounds as if that's where they are. It's an odd revelation, but rather like wandering images in digital playback, it's an effect that you don't notice until it's gone; then you realize what it was you found so unsettling.

All told, the latest upgrades to the Groove mix make it a pretty tough act to go up against, but if the Martensen is to succeed then it needs to be capable of competing with the likes of the SRX and PH7 on more than just price. Lining the two solid-state contenders up beside each other might be brutally Darwinian but it's also instructive.

The first thing one needs to take into account is the difference in

gain; 62dB might be fine for direct connection to a power amp, but the Groove Plus delivers a lot more than that, so careful level matching is essential. And don't be fooled by the MPS's incredibly low noise levels either! With this detail attended to, listening can commence and you'll quickly discover that JK is dead right about the Martensen's resolution. The space that it finds around instruments, the layers it



reveals within the soundstage are exceptional, underpinning just how transparent this unit is. Focus is superb and separation of instruments is even better than the Groove's. Where the Tom Evans unit scores is in terms of scale and presence. Its presentation is bigger and bolder, more dynamic and more emphatic than the MPS's, making the silver clad contender sound small and a bit under-nourished. In many ways it's the classic solid-state/tube dichotomy. Where the Groove has evolved over the years, assuming more of the virtues of the valve competition, the flow and musical presence of products like the PH7, the Martensen is resolutely solid-state, reveling in the precision and control that that implies. Which is right? The answer is neither (although if pushed I'd actually throw my hat in the direction of the Groove's revised and slightly more fulsome balance). Instead, the

question is which do you prefer, and for those who prefer the virtues of solid-state then the Martensen makes a powerful case. Can it compete with the best in its class? On balance I have to say yes, although it does so by being unashamedly single-minded in its approach. I can't share JK's enthusiasm for its appearance but I

can easily understand him being besotted by its sound. However, its utterly particular blend of strengths and weaknesses means that for every listener who takes it to their heart there'll be others whose heads are turned by the

Groove or the PH7. One thing's for sure: the market for serious phono-stages that don't cost a second mortgage has never been so healthy, and any of these three would grace a serious high-end set-up. But if variety is the spice of life, then Martensen could well be the seasoning you prefer. ➤

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Tom Evans Audio Design
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Net. www.audiodesign.co.uk

Audio Research PH7
Absolute Sounds
Tel. (44)(0)20 8971 3909
Net. www.absolutesounds.com

A Nice Pair...

The Zanden Model 1200 Mk.2 and Lyra Connoisseur 4-2P SE Phono-Stages

by Roy Gregory

Each time I revisit the whole issue of phono-stages I discover anew just how critical they are to system performance – and just how breathtakingly wonderful a really good one can be. Faced with the double challenge of being first up in the electronic line of fire as well as having to deal with signals that can be 1000 times smaller than any others in the system, the humble phono-stage faces a hard time. But the greater the challenge, the greater the opportunity, and the best phono-stages have the chance to move you closer to the music than any other single unit in your system; even closer than the record player itself, because as hard as the turntable, arm and cartridge have to try and as critical as they are of set up, it's the sheer fragility of the signal they produce that constitutes the system's greatest stumbling block. A great phono-stage can produce astonishing results from even a run of the mill turntable (so long as it is functioning properly). Try feeding the signal from a \$10000 turntable into a basic phono-stage and take a listen to what comes out of the other end... You'll soon get the point I'm making.

To date, the best phono-replay systems that I've heard (by some margin) come from Lyra Connoisseur (reviewed in Issue 16) and Kondo Japan (reviewed in Issue 43), the latter a complete electrical chain from stylus tip to line-stage inputs, involving a cartridge, cabling, step-up transformer

and tube MM stage with RIAA equalisation. Of course, Connoisseur users also enjoy the potential benefits of a "matching" cartridge in the shape of Lyra's Titan-i (or Olympos), although this doesn't come close to the continuity of having exactly the same conductor throughout the chain, including transformer windings!

Well, now there are three: a new stellar performer has appeared on my radar – and it too emanates from the Japanese high-end. It comes in the elegant shape of the Zanden Model 1200 Mk.2 and, like the others already mentioned, it adopts its own, distinctly individual approach to the problem. It also eschews the help of partnering elements, at least upstream of its inputs, and represents a genuinely standalone, universal solution – although it clearly represents a key element in the complete Zanden amplification chain. But perhaps most interestingly of all, it is rated by Yamada-san, its designer, as his finest work – a mouth-watering prospect given my ongoing love affair with his CD transport and DAC.

The Kondo is fixed firmly in recent

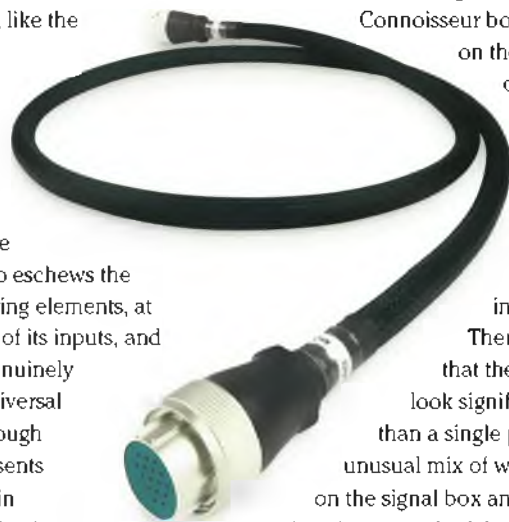
memory; not so the Connoisseur, which is one whole listening room as well as umpteen equipment changes (and its –2 and SE updates) in the past. With that in mind I started what was to become a fascinating process by extracting the latest version from importer Symmetry. When it comes to extreme personal gratification I'm not proud and I feel no need to defend the combination of cajoling, wheedling and veiled threats this entailed. The ends more than justified the means, resulting in another pair of

Connoisseur boxes nestling on the shelves

of the finite-element rack, beside the 4-2L SE line-stage (also reviewed in Issue 43).

There's no denying that the four together look significantly nicer than a single pair. Whilst the unusual mix of wooden casing on the signal box and the metal faced case-work of the power supply enjoy a surprising visual congruence, adding a matching unit of each type definitely extends the motif and underlines the exquisite fit and finish.

Collectively, CT and I have spent considerable time on the philosophy that underpins the unique



► construction of the Lyra Connoisseur products. Despite the stratospheric pricing, the original 4.0 units represented an earnest attempt to make production more manageable and the cost more attainable. To that end, both the line-stage and phono-stage employ the same basic, hand-built, air-dielectric gain blocks, one per channel in the line-stage, two per-channel in the phono-stage, a configuration that carries over to this latest iteration. Whilst this used to result in a slightly unusual gain structure if you employed the units in isolation (too much gain in

Eminent and vdH Condor. The excellent ARC LS26 was also on hand to help gauge the 4-2P SE in isolation, as well as in the context of its family group.

Which brings us finally, to the Zanden Model 1200 Mk.2. Built into the same beautifully crafted casework as the Zanden Model 3000 line-stage, this hybrid tube/transformer design is also a two-box unit with a separate choke input, valve rectified power supply. Zanden actually produce three visually and topologically similar phono-stages

to its power supply. The circuit is a zero-feedback, constant impedance bridged-T type, based around a trio of carefully gain-matched 6922 twin-triodes. Like all Zanden products, the 1200 relies on the refinement of a fundamentally superior circuit to achieve its performance. Whilst the internal components are selected with an obsessive attention to detail, those looking for name-brand audiophile parts and “silver-bullet” solutions will be disappointed. This is all about attention to detail, so the critical inductors for the bridged-T networks are wound in-house, the point-to-point wiring is ultra-pure single-strand copper and a PCB is employed to keep signal paths as accurate and short as possible.

Where the Zanden gets really interesting is on the front-panel. As well as the on-off switch and low/high gain control, there's a third, three position rotary knob that allows the user to select different replay equalization. It's a long forgotten fact, preserved on the fascias of vintage valve pre-amps, that each record label or country tended to have its own preferred replay curve for micro-groove LPs. It was a practice that long survived its inclusion on hi-fi equipment and helps explain why certain labels (Philips and DG being the obvious examples) have long been held in such low esteem by record collectors; we're replaying them wrong, with incorrect balance at the frequency extremes! Some phono-stages, like the FM Acoustics 222, have long provided the necessary adjustments, but they are a distinct minority – and obtaining correct information about the curves used by different labels at different times can be a complex and frustrating affair.

Zanden adopt a simpler approach to the problem, by providing three generic curves that mirror the most popular and important historical



the line-stage, not enough in the phono section) this has been corrected in current versions, with a far more normal 11dB in the line-stage and 69dB in the phono-stage. There are no loading options and no gain adjustment, so you are stuck with the 10kOhms input impedance, although at least this is lower than the 4.0's 47k! But what hasn't changed is that the essentially identical circuitry used throughout the Connoisseurs means that the benefits of using them in combination are exponential, the whole becoming considerably greater than the sum of the parts. For the purpose of this review this is how they were predominantly used, in combination with the Lyra Titan-i cartridge, although the VPI JMW 12.5 arm also allowed easy exposure to other pickups, including the Mysonic

of which the Model 1200 is the dedicated, low-output MC compatible version. The Model 1000 is optimized for MM replay, while the 1100 is a specialist mono stage with all the necessary rumble and roll-off adjustments for that purpose.

As you'll have gathered by now, the 1200 is a transformer coupled design. There are actually four separate, encapsulated transformers arrayed along the back of the PCB, providing two different gain settings for each channel. These offer either 68dB of gain (with a 4 Ohm load) for low-output cartridges, or 56dB of gain (with a 40 Ohm load) for higher output devices. As well as the two sets of inputs you get a single pair of single-ended outputs and an earth post, and a heavy duty, multi-pin umbilical which connects the signal circuitry

TRACK 15 TOTAL 55:20

5	6	7	8
9	10	11	12
13	14	15	

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 Mint, boxed £ 425
 Nr mint, boxed £1295
 Mint £1195
 Ex-dem, mint, boxed £ 550
 Ex-dem, mint, boxed £3295
 Ex-dem, mint, boxed £ 895
 Superb £2695
 Mint £2995
 Ex-dem, mint, boxed £ 495
 Ex-dem, mint, boxed £1795

▶ examples. As well as the now dominant RIAA curve used by the majority of US pressing plants and labels (and now by the whole industry) there are also two other options labelled 'Decca' and 'Columbia'. These reflect the alternative curves selected by various European and American labels. There's a listing in the manual that breaks your record collection down by label and country of origin and then recommends the appropriate curve. So, for instance, the list separates UK and US pressed Deccas, recommending the 'Decca' setting for the former, RIAA for the latter – which helps explain the fierce controversy amongst collectors when it comes to the question of the relative sonic merits of Wide-bands versus Blue-backs. Is the list exhaustive? Far from it, and nor is it sub-divided by age – which is actually the point. It's only intended as a guide. With three options to select you can simply click through them and which ever sounds best is best. You'll soon get the hang of it, the thumbprint of the different curves becoming quite recognisable over time especially as the "right" setting is so obvious.

The key performance attribute of the Zanden phono-stage is its naturalness with acoustic recordings. When you listen to a live acoustic performance, be it classical, folk or jazz, one of the qualities that is immediately apparent (and which separates it from the vast majority of hi-fi systems) is the absolute clarity with which you can hear each instrument, loud or soft, regardless of pitch. It's especially true at low frequencies, where most speakers really struggle to separate instruments and hold them in space, cushioned by the air around and beneath them. Just listen to double bass live, be it a jazz band or an orchestra and appreciate the ease

with which you can hear what's being played and the vital importance of its relationship to the performance as a whole. This in turn reflects the holistic quality of what you are hearing; the fact that it really is a single performance in a single space – and a world away from the muddy, confused and subdivided effort presented by most hi-fi systems. The Model 1200 gets you closer to that sense of coherence and clarity than any other piece of hi-fi I've ever used. I'll go into greater detail in a moment, but first, let's just appreciate the contribution the switchable replay curves make to its performance.



In order to appreciate what these curves do you'll first need a selection of older, original pressings (180g re-issues will all be RIAA, as a quick listen with the Zanden will confirm) from various labels. I armed myself with various DG, EMI, Decca and Columbia classical pieces, as well as Verve jazz and Reprise pop albums. Sitting down for what I thought would be a bit of a chore – after all, systematic comparison is hardly commensurate with musical enlightenment – I was astonished to discover how obvious and musically important the differences were. Far from weighing heavy, the "exercise" became a voyage of (re-) discovery. I've never had much time for Karajan (opera aside) although I've accumulated a fair collection of his

records. Surprise, surprise – play his early Tulip label DG pressings on the Decca setting and the tubby thickness in the bass and piping treble that you expect, the mechanical tempi and stolid structures you've got used to all disappear. Instead you hear a single, seamless whole, tonality restored, with natural instrumental weight and a wonderfully coherent soundstage. But best of all, suddenly the poise, drama and humanity of the performance are back. Astonished, I reached for later pressings with simple White Ring labels.

Exactly the same result: where the RIAA position gave a lumpy, disjointed and frankly tedious presentation, switching to the Decca position restored the tonal quality and musical coherence of everything from the *Brandenburg Concertos* to the *New World Symphony*. And the opera recordings that I've always enjoyed? They were made for RCA who adhered to, you guessed it, the RIAA standard.

Results are just as impressive whether you look at Decca, EMI or Columbia. A favourite performance of the Penderecki *Violin Concerto* (Stern, Skrowaczewski and the Minnesota) whose dreadful, murky sound had failed to stifle the magnificence of the reading, was transformed into a dramatic and moving emotional tour de force – exactly as it should be. No more apologies for sound quality here – this was breathtaking music beautifully captured. The impact ▶

► on the rhythm, pace and chemistry of jazz recordings was similarly impressive, while even Neil Young gained a spring in his step. Finally, old favourites like the Decca *La Fille Mal Gardée* became even more impressive, the balletic fireworks bound tighter to the melodic themes, bringing greater structure and coherence to the performance – more real music, less sonic spectacular.

Is this a make or break facility when it comes to record replay? Despite the impressive musical results, the

may well do the same with Zanden's equalization switch. But adjusting replay curves is just like arm height (and record cleaning) – the easier it is the more likely you are to do it, and it doesn't get easier than this. Classical or jazz fans, especially those who attend regular live concerts, will find this facility a revelation – and once discovered, one they'll be reluctant to do without. Given the price of the Zanden phono-stage, just how relevant is it? Few will be lucky enough to own a unit as exquisitely

irrespective of size or level; the second part of that equation is the way in which it manages to preserve the positional and musical relationships between them. After all, the last thing we want is for it to dismantle the piece as a whole. The Zanden presents a wonderfully holistic soundstage, a single coherent acoustic space, with definite boundaries and within which the instruments are naturally and effortlessly arrayed. So much of what this phono-stage achieves is down to the sheer ease with which you can hear what is happening within the recording. In turn that depends both on the extraordinary separation and the fact that instruments are placed exactly where they should be, a factor which is reflected both in the coherence of the acoustic and the ease with which your brain can detect and define it. Thus the physical spacing of the instruments adds to the experience rather than becoming another obstacle to decode and overcome.

Switching to the Lyra Connoisseur after listening to the Zanden provides a fascinating contrast. The 4-2 SEs are pretty much as straight-line as electronics get, devoid of every adjustment save volume and input select. Yet in its own way the Connoisseur phono-stage is as impressive as the Zanden, with its own particular realm of excellence, the portrayal of the musical dynamics and energy spectrum of voices and instruments. Compared to the transformer/tube Model 1200, the all solid-state Connoisseur greets the listener with a dramatic sense of presence and immediacy, life and vitality – in fact, the very attributes I'd normally associate with a really good tube amplifier. After the 4.0, the deeper bass and increased authority of the 4-2P SE comes as a bit of a shock. The dynamic expression is that much more emphatic, the player's technique both more grounded and more definite. But don't get the idea that this is all! ►



answer has to be no. After all, set the switch to RIAA and leave it and you're no worse off than the vast majority of your fellow humans. But it does make a real difference and in the case of acoustic recordings in particular, that difference is significant: the difference between enjoying a brilliant performance or having it submerged beneath the limitations of the storage and replay systems. For those with an extensive collection and who love to explore the older repertoire, be it classical or jazz, early blues or rock, this facility will further broaden the musical horizon. If you hear changes in VTA between records, you'll use these curves as an essential part of playing records. If you simply set your VTA and leave it then you

engineered and presented as this, but adjustable equalization is also available at lower price levels. What the Zanden does is put it firmly and resolutely on the agenda. Hear the results and it may well be on your agenda too...

Of course, all the adjustments in the world are useless if the product can't perform its basic function, but have no fear, Zanden's Model 1200 is a genuinely world class performer. I said earlier that it can take you closer to the experience of the live event than any other unit I've used and I stand by that statement. It puts you in the audience and it does it through two means; its clarity and instrumental separation and the coherence of its stereo perspective, both of which are astonishingly natural. I've already described the way in which it holds instruments apart from each other,

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It tracks micro-dynamics better even than it used to, based on the firm foundation of its low frequency authority and stability, the same bedrock that provides the launching pad for sudden, wider shifts in level. It's this combination of capabilities that gives the Connoisseur its peerless physical and tactile substance, its pace, agility and vivacity.

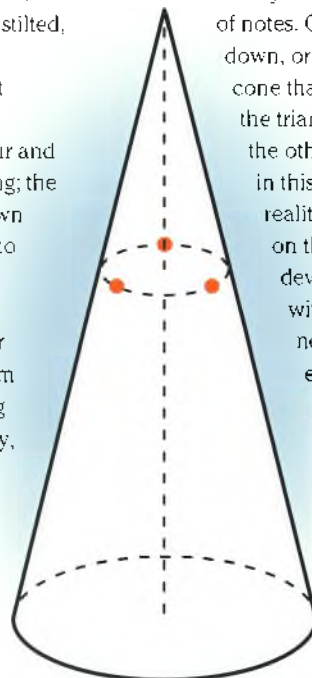
Which brings us to the semantic niceties that separate life from live. For all its appealing energy, the directness of its communication, its sheer musical impact, the sense of real live people and real, vibrant instruments, the Connoisseur can't match the Zanden's ability to recreate the actual event. It's as if the Lyra is concentrating on the sense in the music, the Zanden on the event itself, the Lyra fastening on the way in which the musicians work, the Zanden on their output as a whole. Except that that's a crass over simplification suggestion that one fastens on the individual strands,

the other on the final product. Which isn't the case at all. Either of these two phono-stages will deliver a significantly more convincing musical totality than any other

I've used, save the Kondo. Superb midrange products like the Tom Evans Groove Plus, the ARC PH7 or the Martensen, as good as they are, sound stilted, pale and constricted in comparison. That's what makes the comparison between the Connoisseur and the Zanden so fascinating; the fact that each, in its own way significantly closer to the holy grail of sonic reality than lesser units, yet they are so dissimilar from each other. Far from performance converging as we get closer to reality, the discrepancies become all the more obvious. The differences here are really quite subtle, their effects are not.

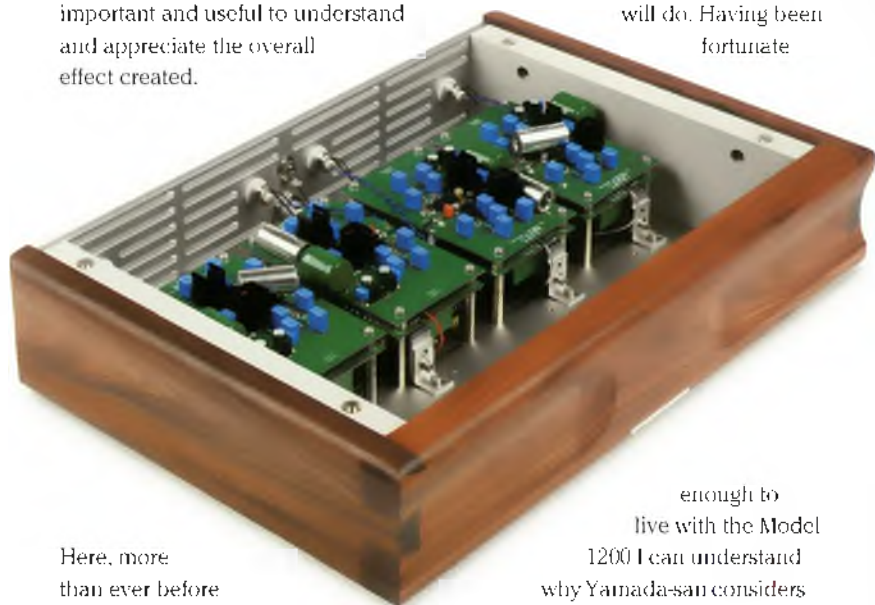
Let's bring the Kondo KSL chain into the equation in an attempt to elucidate. These three approaches are, as I've already said, the three finest phono replay systems I've ever used – the only three that can stand comparison with each other. Now, generally speaking, if a reviewer talks about three products at once he tends to speak in terms of a single continuum, the three units spread along a single line, two bracketing the one in the middle. Well, when it comes to the Zanden, the Connoisseur and the Kondo, that model doesn't apply. Think instead in terms of a triangle, or even better, a three-sided pyramid, its pinnacle being the live event, its height the distance by which the contenders miss the mark, but each with its own distinct performance emphasis that moves it in a particular direction. The

Connoisseur embraces dynamic expression, the Zanden a natural acoustic and stereo perspective. In contrast, and to the same degree, the Kondo captures the harmonic identity of instruments, the duration of notes. Continue a pyramid on down, or turn it instead into a cone that intersects the points of the triangle, and here you'll find the other phono-stages reviewed in this issue, their distance from reality defining their height on the cone, their specific deviations their position within its footprint – the nearer the edge, the more extreme the shift. The point is (if you'll excuse the pun) the nearer you get to the top, the smaller the acceptable footprint becomes, the greater the impact of even subtle changes to the



► musical presentation. Here we see tiny variations in emphasis or distance altering the view significantly but not in simple ways. So the Zanden has phenomenal instrumental separation and clarity, the Connoisseur brilliant dynamic discrimination, the Kondo supreme harmonic complexity and insight: where does one quality stop and the next begin? Rather than breaking down the individual aspects of performance, an act that will in itself tend to exaggerate the degrees of difference, it's actually more important and useful to understand and appreciate the overall effect created.

performers. Used with its matching line-stage in particular, the sense of purpose it brings to performances can be captivating. The Zanden is by far the most versatile unit here (and I'm not just referring to its replay curves but also to its standalone integrity) its clarity and easy grasp of stereo perspective and acoustic detail transports the listener back to the live event; for record collectors with extensive collections who regularly attend orchestral concerts or smaller recitals, I suspect nothing else will do. Having been fortunate



Here, more than ever before in my experience, listening bias or preference will dictate choice. These are all fabulous phono-stages and any of us would be pleased to own any of them – but to move the listening experience from the great to the truly sublime will require a final selection. The Kondo is the most complete chain and also thus the least versatile option, but the coherence of its materials and approach give it a holistic harmonic rightness, a breadth of tonality and complexity within notes that's achingly beautiful. The Connoisseur 4-2P SE almost seems to pulse with life and vitality, presence and energy, commanding attention, thrilling in its dexterity and the dexterity of the

enough to live with the Model 1200 I can understand why Yamada-san considers this his finest work.

Ultimately, whichever of these products appeals, if you value vinyl replay you owe it to yourself to experience just what the medium is capable of. It's a hackneyed cliché to say that we keep finding more and more in those grooves. In fact, we've been getting it out for a while – we've just been losing it between the stylus and the speakers. Hearing these phono-stages, you'll realise just where most of the damage is being done. You could say they make more sense of the signal but I don't think we need to be that specific. To me, for vinyl lovers with deep pockets they just make sense – they no longer seem expensive once you've heard them!

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Zanden Model 1200 Mk.2

Type:	Tube/transformer phono-stage
Tube Complement:	4x 6922, 1x 6CA4
Inputs:	1x high-gain (68dB) 1x low gain (56dB)
Loading:	4 Ohms – high-gain 40 Ohms – low-gain
Equalization:	RIAA, "Decca" and "Columbia"
Outputs:	1pr single-ended RCA/phono
Output Impedance:	3 kOhms
Dimensions (WxHxD) –	
Phono-stage:	398 x 103 x 354mm
PSU:	155 x 163 x 336mm
Weights –	
Phono-stage:	9kg
PSU:	6.2kg
Price:	£13950

UK Distributor:

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

Manufacturer:

Zanden Audio Systems Ltd
Net. www.zandenaudio.com

Lyra Connoisseur 4-2P SE

Type:	Solid-state phono-stage
Inputs:	1pr single-ended RCA/phono
Gain:	60dB
Input Impedance:	10 kOhms
Outputs:	1pr single-ended RCA/phono
Output Impedance:	50 Ohms
Dimensions (WxHxD) –	
Phono stage:	400 x 96 x 314mm
PSU:	400 x 94 x 270mm
Weights –	
Phono-stage:	5.5kg
PSU:	11kg
Price:	£16000

UK Distributor:

Symmetry
Tel. (44)(0)1727 865488
Net. www.symmetry-systems.co.uk

Manufacturer:

Lyra Co. Ltd.
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A Little Of What You Fancy...

by Roy Gregory

There can be little argument that the low-output moving-coil cartridge has become the de facto standard for high-quality vinyl replay. The approach might have originated with the likes of Ortofon and Grado, but since the emergence of the various, popular Supex models the technology has never looked back, strolling to almost total market dominance. But whilst journalists and the well-beated might wax lyrical about the wonders of increasingly rare and inevitably expensive flagship designs, often with price-tags running close to five figures, it's the £500 to £1000 sector of the market that represents the coalface of record replay and even in these digitally dominated days, there's a plethora of options to choose from. With that in mind I've assembled a few of the best known and most available options, just to give you a feel of what's available and what differences you might expect between cartridges at these two price barriers, one the starting point for serious moving-coil designs, the other as much as many people can ever see themselves spending on something that wears out!

With so many cartridges to hear, each requiring careful optimization of alignment and playing parameters I opted to use two different record players for the listening. First up was the VPI TNT6 with its JMW 12.5 tonearm, the latter's interchangeable arm tubes and micro-adjustable VTA allowing easy swaps on the fly whilst maintaining totally precise overhang, offset, tracking force and height settings. The other was the Kuzma Stabi XL fitted with an SME 309 tonearm. With seven headshells available (courtesy of SME) I was able to effect reasonably quick cartridge swaps despite the need to reset tracking force each time. The Kuzma's free

standing arm-tower with its adjustable height and digital readout took care of VTA and eliminated that variable, while allowing easy correction of overhang. Phono-stage used for the listening sessions was the Groove SRX, chosen for its copious gain, simple loading adjustments and benchmark status – at least in this house.

This list of exotic analogue equipment clearly presents a rather daunting price mismatch to a £500 cartridge, but I was interested in finding out just what the various pick-ups under test were capable of and I didn't want set-up to be a limiting factor. Thus, interchangeability in the arms chosen was essential, as was accurate VTA adjustment. That dictated the JMW and, at a more representative price, the SME 309 in tandem with the Kuzma's arm-tower. By way of a justification for these choices I'd suggest you experiment with a record player and cartridge combination, making known errors in the overhang, offset and tracking force of the cartridge. It's remarkable how destructive even quite small inaccuracies can be. Just don't try this at home unless you are confident and equipped to restore the optimum arrangement! Having experienced this degree of difference, factor in VTA and cartridge loading too and you can see how the listening conditions could easily invalidate the whole exercise if insufficient care is taken. Before listening commenced each cartridge was run for around 100 hours in an auto-changer turntable before its transfer to the test rigs and careful optimization. Settings were then noted/preserved and proper listening could commence. Finally, each cartridge was given a day or so of uninterrupted use

to assess it on its own merits.

The values for tracking force given below refer in each case to the specific samples that I was listening to, while the loading values are those I selected from the options available on the Groove Plus. In other words, don't bust a gut to set tracking force on your sample to 1.83g, or to achieve a 168 Ohm load. These are just for information and will vary in any case with different samples and systems.

The Lyra Dorian

Price:	£495
UK Distributor:	Symmetry
Tel. (44)(0)1727 865488	
Net. www.symmetry-systems.co.uk	
Type:	Open bodied design
Cantilever:	Boron rod
Stylus Profile:	Micro-ridge
Weight:	6.4g
Compliance:	12cu
Output Level:	0.6mV
Tracking Force:	1.82g
Preferred Load:	112 Ohms
Stylus Guard:	Yes

The Dorian is Lyra's entry-level cartridge and, colour aside it is virtually indistinguishable from its more expensive stable mates. Its deep red anodized body manages to combine the sonic benefits of open construction with a fair degree of protection, a really solid mating surface for the headshell and an excellent, fully enclosed stylus guard. Threaded mounting holes and well spaced, clearly colour-coded connecting pins finish off a package that scores high



► on practicality. Installation is easy, helped by the clear stylus guard and easily visible cantilever. However, the low mass (although ideal in arms like the various Rega designs) may cause problems, with the SME close to minimum adjustment and the JMW using its lightest counterweight, so be aware of this.

Sonically speaking, the Dorian is immediately recognizable as a Lyra, with the brand's trademark clarity and articulation well to the fore. It's quick and agile, but don't be fooled by the price into thinking that you can take liberties with it. VTA is absolutely critical to achieving the best performance: even a shade too high and it will become glassy and mechanical, too low and it gets muffled and loses focus. Tracking force is equally critical (and will of course vary with sample and system) needing a careful touch to balance weight and presence against loss of speed and attack.

Working at its best this is an incredibly impressive performer for the price. The corners cut in its design involve a lightness in the deep bass and a slight loss of spatial resolution and detail. The balance errs a little to the cool side, with a smoothed gloss to the treble, which isn't in any way offensive but robs the upper registers of solo violin of bite and texture. Really deep bass dynamics want for body and impact, but in the course of general listening you'll seldom notice, the cartridge covering its tracks with its explosive mid-bass weight and speed. Soundstage, though deep is relatively vague, especially when it comes to resolving the space between and around instruments.

However, the upsides offer substantial compensation. The pace

and life the Dorian brings to music makes for engaging listening and exciting performances. Timing, rhythm, structure and phrasing are all first class, the little Lyra putting musical shape and dynamic contrast ahead of harmonic warmth and texture. Vocals are a particular strong point, with "girl and guitar" albums really playing to the cartridge's strengths.

The subtleties of Allison Krauss's phrasing and vocal dexterity on *Forget About It* were unraveled with ease, and despite the clarity and speed on show, the Dorian never, ever sounds forced – probably as a result of its higher than average output. It presents a carefully chosen balance of virtues ideally suited to extracting the maximum benefit from more affordable record players. It's a level of performance at this price that we could only have dreamed of a few years ago.

Ortofon Rondo Red

Price: £300
 UK Distributor:
 Henley Designs
 Tel. (44)(0)1235 511166
 Net. www.henleydesigns.co.uk
 Type: Fully enclosed
 Cantilever: Aluminium pipe
 Stylus Profile: Nude elliptical
 Weight: 10.5g
 Compliance: 15cu
 Output Level: 0.5mV
 Tracking Force: 2.25g
 Preferred Load: 168 Ohms
 Stylus Guard: Integral, flip up

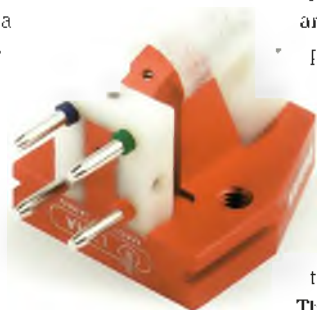
The Red is the cheapest of Ortofon's three Rondo cartridges, differing from its more expensive brethren mainly in terms of its tolerances, the sophistication of its cantilever and stylus profile, factors

reflected in its bandwidth, separation and channel balance. The attractively squat, faceted body is molded from resin mixed with powdered wood and feels suitably inert. Mounting holes are threaded and the pins well spaced (but could be more clearly marked) although like all enclosed cartridges of this general shape, the cantilever is well hidden underneath, making really accurate alignment more difficult, a factor not helped by the flip up stylus guard.

At 10.5g and 0.5mV output, accommodating the Rondo Red in most systems should present few problems. Tracking force was preferred slightly lighter than the manufacturer recommended, which helped balance the full, rich tonality. Likewise, VTA was noticeably better with the cartridge very slightly nose down. Although nowhere near as critical in this respect as the Dorian for instance, any tendency to drop the rear of the cartridge quickly reduced it to plodding sluggishly through the grooves. Likewise, loading it down too far was detrimental, a value of 168 Ohms delivering a pleasing sense of air to the sound and freedom to phrasing.

As I've already hinted, this is a big, bold, warm sounding cartridge. Lacking a little high-frequency extension, soundstage depth and focus, it nevertheless delivers excellent width and good solid images across the front of the stage, underpinned

by real weight and warmth at low frequencies. Orchestral bombast like the Massenet *Le Cid* is delivered with impressive bottom-end detonations and presence. General momentum is good, carrying music along with a purposeful air, although it certainly lacks the ►





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C. Reimyo PAT-777
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E. EMT JSD Cartridge
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G. Basis PSTT Cables

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M. Harmonix HS-101 SLC
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Hazelmere T. 01494 865398
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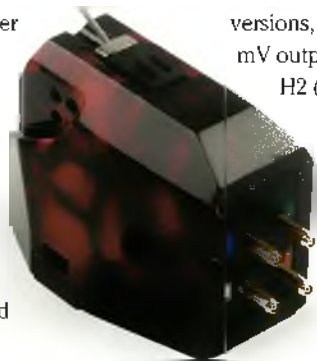
The Sound Surgery T. 01392 662920

► pace, clarity and agility of the quicker transducers here. Likewise, resolution of fine detail could be better. Instead the Rondo Red is all about sheer presence, body and nicely rounded leading edges. Big dynamic swings are handled well, although it doesn't really do micro-dynamic discrimination. Conversely, textures are good and the tonal palette is also bold and colourful.

Compared to the best cartridges the Red can't trace leading edges and can't carry the same musical intent, it can't match their transparency, detail, separation or focus. But it succeeds in that neatest of tricks, never offending but also never disappointing. It has a winning enthusiasm about its delivery that somehow embraces rather than reveals its flaws. The musical results are certainly enjoyable enough, although they work better on the broad brush, large-scale end of the spectrum. Real musical intimacy is asking just a little too much, and if that's your staple diet the Ortofon's robust charms could pall in time.

Benz Glider M2

Price: \$650
 UK Distributor:
 Audiofreaks
 Tel. (44)(0)20 8948 4153
 Net. www.audiofreaks.co.uk
 Type: Open bodied design
 Cantilever: Boron rod
 Stylus Profile: Line contact
 Weight: 6.8g
 Compliance: 15cu
 Output Level: 2.5mV
 Tracking Force: 1.9g
 Preferred Load: 1 kOhm
 Stylus Guard: None



The Glider comes in three different versions, L2 (0.3 mV output), M2 (0.8 mV output, reviewed here) and the H2 (2.5mV output) and is a metal bodied cartridge, although in this latest version the traditional can has been reduced to a simple pair of side plates offering some protection for the armature and fragile wiring whilst still affording the benefits of open construction.

More expensive models employ open shrouds fashioned from various different woods, while the cheaper ones are built into attractive faceted plastic bodies. The open presentation and lack of a stylus guard might not appeal to the clumsy or those lacking confidence, but in fact the threaded mounting holes and clearly labeled (though closely spaced) pins make installation a breeze, while the prominent cantilever makes accurate alignment equally easy.

The 0.8mV output of the Glider M2 gives plenty for the phono-stage to get hold of, although the weight is again slightly on the low side, so check the weight range of your tonearm. VTA is not super critical, just so long as you don't get the back of the arm too high. If you do the sound becomes stark, thin and gutless, but tracking right slap in the middle of the recommended range and with the arm level or very slightly lower than that the tonal balance and weight distribution should be spot on. Likewise the Glider proved tolerant of loading, but definitely gave its best into a 1k input.

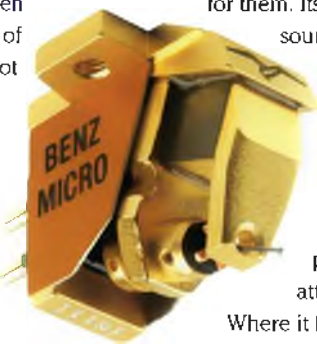
This cartridge delivers a beautiful

balance of virtues. Not only are the top-end air and bottom-end weight and extension perfectly in balance, the easy unforced clarity and crisp detail and dynamics allow you to back off the loading, bringing an attractive freedom to the sound that really lets the music breathe. Imaging is excellent, with good separation and nice solidity to voices and instruments. But the thing that makes the Glider special is the deft coherence it brings to detail, making music delicate and intimate but powerful and dramatic when it's required. In fact, it is inherently so well balanced that its failings tend to pass almost unnoticed unless you go looking for them. Its detailed yet integrated

sound worked wonders on the Ricci *Carmen Fantasie*, capturing both the technique in the bowing and the drama in the music and its performance. Bass notes, particularly pizzicato ones, have a tactile attack and realistic texture.

Where it fails, its sins are of degree rather than omission, the acoustic isn't as apparent, the soundstage as precisely defined or dimensional as the best cartridges. In short, it does what the top-flight pick-ups do – just not quite as well.

The glider proved particularly at home in the SME 309, even if the counterweight was virtually hard up against its forward stops. Its air and flair for the dramatic suited this arm perfectly, while the essential neutrality of the combination delivered beautifully natural instrumental colours and textures. Never obvious or pushy, the Benz succeeds in focusing the listener on the music, making its ability to respond to explosive dynamics all the more shocking and musically impressive. An underrated classic. ►



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5. Living Voice OBX RW (Santos) £7200 **6.** KSL Kondo Ongaku integrated Amplifier £49,000 **7.** Magnum Dynalab 106T Valve Tuner £3600
8. KSL Kondo Gakuoh 300B Mono Amplifiers £48,500 **9.** Resolution Audio Opus 21 CD Player £2950 **10.** KSL Kondo V-z (1m) Interconnect £750

Dynavector DV17D3

Price: \$595
 UK Distributor:
 Pear Audio
 Tel. (44)(0)1665 830862
 Net. www.pearaudio.com
 Type: Fully enclosed
 Cantilever: Diamond rod
 Stylus Profile: Micro ridge
 Weight: 5.3g
 Compliance: 15cu
 Output Level: 0.3mV
 Tracking Force: 1.9g
 Preferred Load: 168 Ohms
 Stylus Guard: Yes

Dynavector's Karat series cartridges are the latest evolution in a truly venerable family. This latest incarnation applies the softened magnetism and flux dumper of the earlier iterations in tandem with a redesigned front yoke that improves focus of the magnetic field and increases (believe it or not) the output to 0.3mV! If anything was going to give away the age of the basic design it's that single spec. What hasn't changed is the unique wide-set, angular body and the incredibly short 1.7mm long cantilever. Despite being well forward in the nose of the beast visibility is always going to be an issue when it comes to precise alignment. The other issue is the incredibly low mass. There are plenty of arms that will struggle with a cartridge that only weighs 5.3g – and the SME 309 is one of them. Strategic application of the auxiliary forward gravitational actuator (otherwise known as a small blob of Blutak) soon solved the problem but it's hardly a long-term solution so consider arm choice and matching with some care. Also, DV17s are notorious fluff gatherers and the D3 is



no exception. It must be something to do with the short cantilever, but record cleanliness becomes a matter of necessity rather than nicety if you live with a Karat, which also demands slightly higher than normal bias values.

So, you'll need the right arm, a phono-stage that's comfortable with the low output, fastidious record care and damn fine eyesight: is the DV17D3 worth the bother? In a word yes, or it wouldn't be included in this group. Since day one, the various Karats have always excelled when it comes to speed, detail, attack and leading edge definition. Pace, spatial coherence, transparency

and texture are all first class. But the really clever bit is the way that each subsequent version has progressively ameliorated the tonal and low-frequency weaknesses.

The range of tonal shadings and contrasts that sprang forth from the D2 were a revelation compared to the bleached expanse of previous editions, moving the short cantilever models much closer to the likes of the Te-Kaitora and XV1-S in terms of overall balance. The D3 continues that trend, adding worthwhile extra weight and substance to the sound without cramping its speed or musical insight.

No, it doesn't support the wonderful acoustic definition and tonal differentiation that you get from the flagship, but at a fifth of the price what do you expect. Certainly there's nary a hint of rising top-end or thinness. Instead the sound is engaging, immediate and precise – and surprisingly explosive when necessary, living proof that a little bit of extra weight can go a long way.

Once the exclusive preserve of speed freaks and those who demanded detail uber alles, this latest DV17D is a far more balanced and accomplished performer, completing a transformation that started with the D2 version. If you want warm, sumptuous and cozy then you should look elsewhere, but if you crave clarity and immediacy without the thinness and glare that so often accompanies those qualities, you want a lack of excess baggage or spurious colour clogging up the works, then the Dynavector's lucid musical presentation should be right up your street.

Ortofon Kontrapunkt C

Price: \$675
 UK Distributor:
 Henley Designs
 Tel. (44)(0)1235 511166
 Net. www.henleydesigns.co.uk
 Type: Fully enclosed
 Cantilever: Tapered aluminium pipe
 Stylus Profile: Nude FG 80
 Weight: 10g
 Compliance: 12cu
 Output Level: 0.47mV
 Tracking Force: 2.2g
 Preferred Load: 144 Ohms
 Stylus Guard: Yes

The Kontrapunkt series are Ortofon's most recent midrange moving-coils, the C being the latest addition to the range. Using a nude Fritz Geiger stylus mounted on a tapered aluminium cantilever, the generator is housed in a slim, compact and incredibly solid stainless steel body. This makes the stylus and cantilever surprisingly visible, ▶



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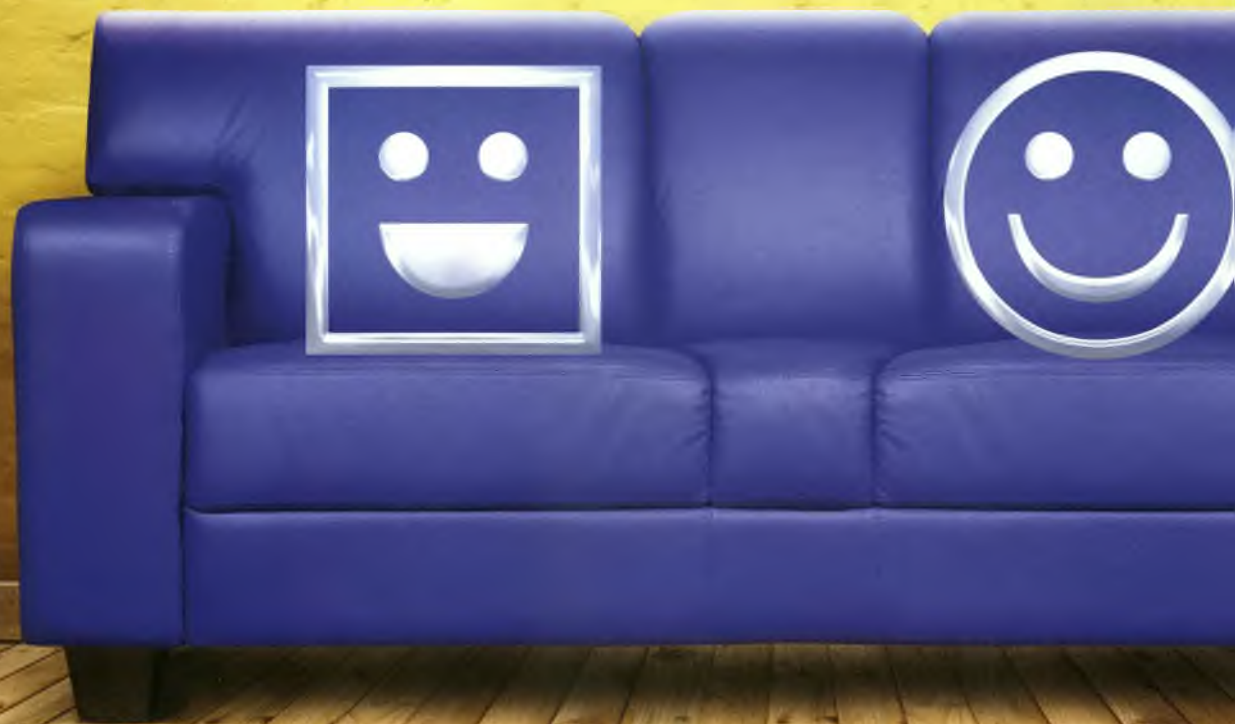
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▶ while a range of mounting screws ensure that the blind mounting holes should present no problems. Indeed, the biggest problem with installation is the shrouded pins, which are fiddly to connect tags too and somewhat confusingly identified. A little care, good light and the correct tools should suffice.

The 10g mass and average output level mean that system compatibility should be no problem. VTA was best set dead level, but does reward some care, while loading proved critical to getting this cartridge to open out and let the music breathe. Ortofon recommend a load no higher than 200 Ohms and it's a recommendation I'd take seriously.

Exceed that value and what is a distinctly relaxed balance tips over into lazy and unfocussed. As you'd expect from Ortofon this cartridge has a textbook technical

performance and it's matched by an impressively neutral and surefooted musical presentation. Unhurried and definitely unflustered, it's the complete opposite of the speed and dynamic fireworks delivered by the Dynavecator, the clarity and micro dynamic detail of the Dorian. Instead it offers a picture founded on its rich tonality, substance and stability. Its soundstage is open and well defined, enclosed in a convincing acoustic, with impressive depth and focus to the back of the stage. This is about grace and poise rather than brute force and histrionics. Of course, the latter might be just your ticket, but if you instead prefer smooth, sophisticated sound, full of colour and effortlessly swelling power then the Kontrapunkt C will

be an appealing option. I'm loath to label it a classical cartridge, although its strengths certainly come into their own with that type of music. The combination of impressive imaging and sweeping drama bring bowing to life, basses and cello throbbing convincingly. Voices are subtle and intimate, seductive in their sweetness. Ultimately this is a cartridge to caress and seduce rather than to impress with impact and authority. What you need to decide is whether that is what you want – or what your system needs. If it needs a kick up the nineties then there are other contenders. If it needs some TLC and a trip to finishing school then look no further.

47 Laboratory Model 4723 MC Bee

Price: \$900
 UK Distributor:
 Midland Audio Exchange
 Tel. (44)(0)1562 731100
 Net. midlandaudioexchange.co.uk
 Type: Open cruciform
 Cantilever: Aluminium alloy
 Stylus Profile: Elliptical
 Weight: c. 4g
 Compliance: 12cu
 Output Level: 0.3mV
 Tracking Force: 1.85g
 Preferred Load: 500 Ohms
 Stylus Guard: None

In a world where cartridges habitually come with little or no paperwork or instructions, 47 Labs' catchily named 4723 sets a new low. Delivered beautifully presented and apparently suspended within a solid acrylic slab it takes minimalism to a new level, a philosophy that extends to its construction. The generator is built onto a resin spine that is pierced at right angles by a steel rod, itself



pierced in the vertical plane by two threaded holes that are used to clamp the cartridge securely to the headshell. It's a conceptual approach that I've also seen adopted by Lyra in their new-generation Skala design and one which certainly offers theoretical mechanical advantages in close coupling the generator to the headshell. But one downside is that the resulting cartridge is incredibly light. The JMW struggled, the 309 was a non-starter without a series addition to its business end. This cartridge is significantly lighter than the Dynavecator – around 4g at a guess.

Aside from getting the arm to stay where you put it, set-up is an absolute doddle, despite the skeletal nature of the cartridge.

The exposed cantilever makes alignment simplicity itself, the pins are clearly identified and the threaded holes in the rod engage easily.

I started life with the 4723 tracking at 1.75g and slowly increased it to the 1.85g mark where it seemed most comfortable. Loading was preferred at 500 ohms, adding just a touch of focus and stability (not to mention

emphatic dynamics) to the expansive soundstage. And expansive is the word: this is the only cartridge here that approaches the dimensional definition, scale and transparency of top-flight transducers. That it also matches that capability with superb textural detail and tremendous substance is ▶



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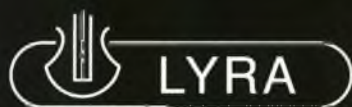


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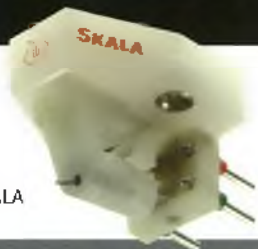
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► impressive indeed. In fact, the one area where it falls down is in its range of tonal colours – which aren't bad but lack the sheer vibrance and vividness that the textural detail suggests. Adding extra tracking force simply weighs the sound down, although it might be interesting to try it with a 47k input so that you get the weight without the inhibited dynamics – for dynamic range is truly one of this cartridge's glories. Orchestral crescendos simply explode with energy and life, the separation and textural definition maintaining their complexity. The *Cid* was genuinely awesome. Vocals are similarly communicative, the 4723 capturing each and every nuance and intonation with a winning combination of intimacy and immediacy. This is not the easiest cartridge to find (or use) but I included it here because it is most definitely worth the effort. Like everything that 47 Labs do it carries music in its soul. Unlike some of the other products in the line it does so without deviating too far into romance, making its astonishing musical vitality far more widely applicable. All it needs now is to gain a few grams...

The Moving-Iron Alternative...

Having said that moving-coils are the de facto standard for high-quality vinyl replay, there is actually a valid alternative in the shape of the Cartridge Man's Music Maker 2, based closely on the Grado variable reluctance principle. At around £600 it competes head on with this group of coils, but why would anyone consider it? Well, there are a number of reasons...

First up is its healthy output, which obviates the need for a moving-coil stage, saving money as well as

a whole extra amplifier in the sonic chain. Indeed, for many valve pre-amps it's the only viable approach unless you want to invest in a stand-alone coil stage. Secondly there's the sound, a refined development of the Grado Signature sound of old. But where the Grados tended to be great fun in a meaty, beaty, big and bouncy sort of way, the MM2 has retained that energy and enthusiasm but added a healthy dose of refinement. Those who find moving-magnets terminally lacking in detail and transparency should listen again; the MM2 will surprise you. It also tracks like a bloodhound at what would be an unfeasibly low tracking force for a moving-coil. So where's the catch? There has to be a catch...

Well aside from the plastic body and the low audio self-esteem you'll suffer in the face of derision from more "informed" moving-coil users, the only real downside is purely practical – the same reason it doesn't feature in this test. The MM2 has a much higher compliance than equivalently priced moving-coils, making it incompatible with the majority of medium mass tone-arms on the market today – including both the JMW and the SME 309, and although either will work at a pinch with appropriate damping it's never going to be the ideal answer. The Cartridge Man does have a solution in the shape of the revived Hadcock, a combination with serious giant killing potential, but one that commits the user to buying a new

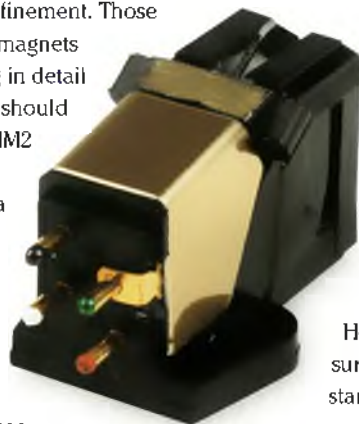
tonearm. The audio Gods give with one hand while they take with the other...

But for those who like the sound of the MM2 or who need the benefits of its higher output, fear not, it's a genuine contender, especially in the right arm.

The Cartridge Man

Tel. (44)(0)20 8688 6565

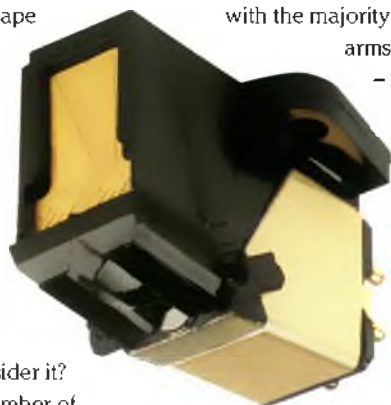
Net. www.thecartridgeman.com

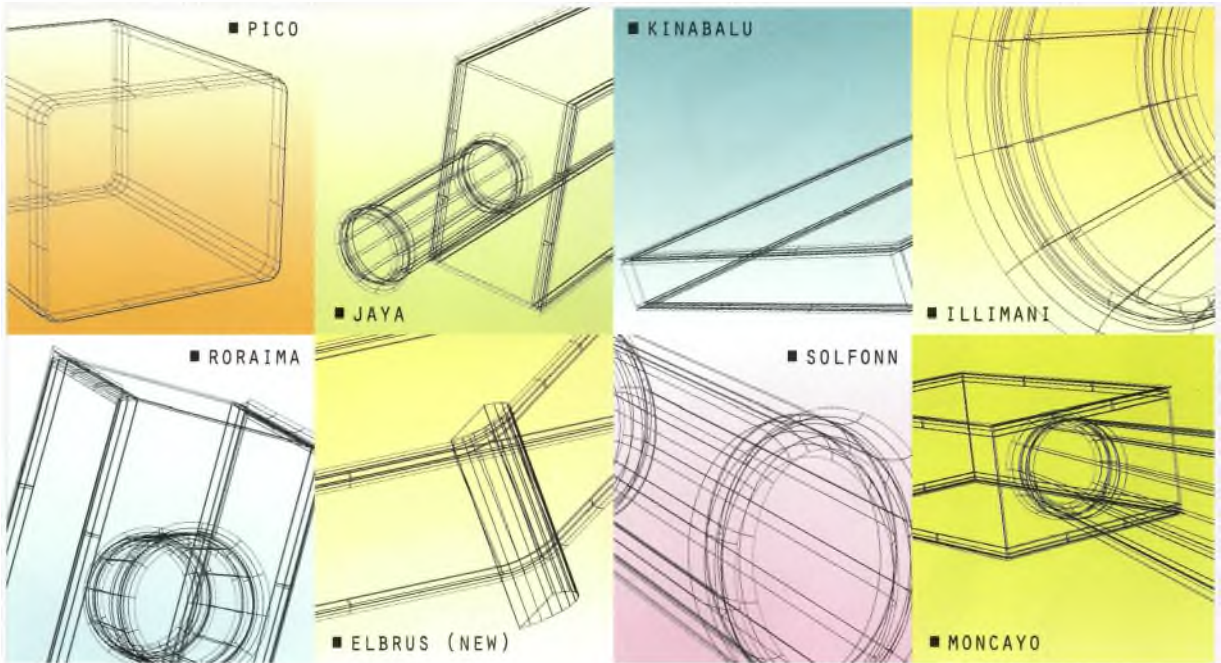


Conclusions

On the face of it (and despite the entertaining all-round performance of the Rondo Red) the basic proposition that moving-coil performance really comes into its own at around the £500 mark has survived intact.

However, I was seriously surprised by the overall standard of performance available – performance that would have cost vastly greater sums not so long ago. Whilst each cartridge, as is the want of transducers, brought its own particular taste to the process, allowing listeners an element of choice and tuning, two models did stand out – the Benz Glider for its overall poise and balance (astonishing at the price), the 47 Labs for the sheer intensity of its musical presentation. Those are my (purely personal) preferences: different ears and a different system will doubtless discover their own set of values. Either way, hopefully these sonic snap-shots have provided enough of a flavour to narrow the field as well as excite the taste buds. It really is incredible just how much music these needles drag from the grooves. In the next issue I'll be looking at what happens when you drop below the £500 barrier, or climb higher into four-figure territory. Oh, and we'll be investigating the attractions of losing a channel along the way!



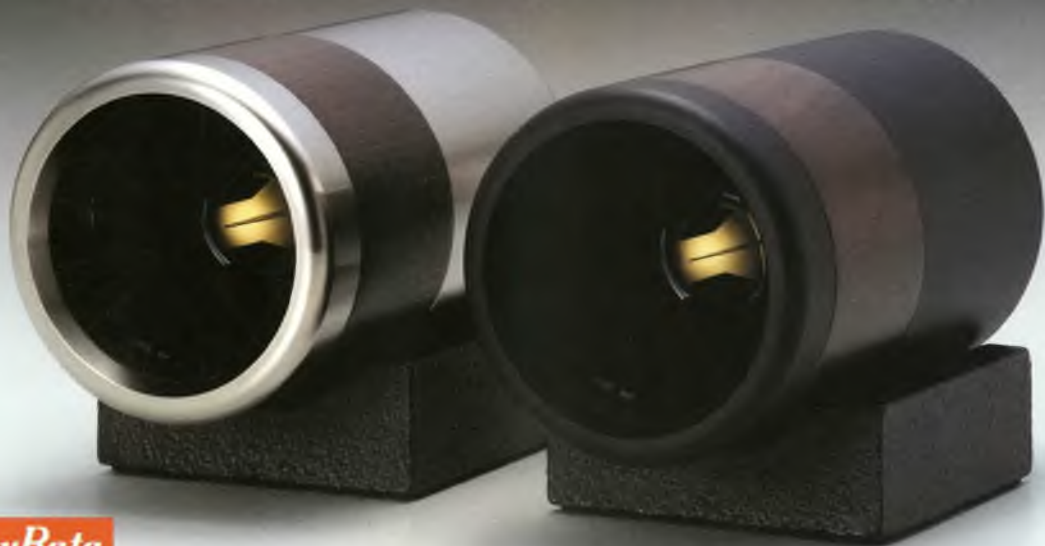


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The Audio Research LS26 Line-stage

by Roy Gregory

Back in Issue 45 I was summarily bowled over by the performance of ARC's Reference 3 line-stage (not to mention the PH7 phono-stage). It marked for me, a welcome return for the brand to the forefront of pre-amplifier performance, the field in which it made its first great impact in the UK. At a "mere" £9K it also significantly undercuts most of the competition, whilst bringing its own particular mix of virtues to the cutting-edge mix. Chief amongst these are its expansive and preternaturally stable soundstage, built on a foundation of rock solid low frequencies. Combined with an astonishing transparency (marred in the initial review sample by a noisy tube) it makes for a clear and lucid performance that is disarmingly easy to listen to.

Now comes the LS26, to all outward appearance a chopped down version of the Ref 3 – with an attractively chopped down price-tag to match. It's an impression that ARC are understandably anxious to reinforce. Costing £5300, on the surface the junior model appears to give little away to its more illustrious cousin. Virtually identical styling and layout underline the similarities, while it actually offers an extra input and adjustable input sensitivity, as well as tape monitoring, over the more expensive model.

But under the skin you'll find a different story. For a start the cheaper model weighs almost two-thirds less than the Ref 3. Lift the lid on the LS26's slimmer chassis and you discover that the rigidly constructed and internally

partitioned construction of the Reference product has been replaced by a conventional bent metal enclosure containing a single, large circuit board. Likewise, the Ref 3's all-tube audio circuit and valve regulated power supply have been superseded by a solid-state regulated, hybrid tube/J-fet layout. But before you start crying foul, just remember that the designers have managed to lop £3.7K off the price and that saving has to come from somewhere.



What makes the LS26 so impressive is that, despite the significant differences in construction and circuitry, it retains so much of the Ref 3's character and performance – and that where it deviates the differences might actually make it a better product, at least in a lot of circumstances.

Taken in isolation, the LS26's lower front panel and slightly smaller display make for a more balanced appearance, while the adjustable input sensitivity, driven from the excellent remote control is a welcome addition. Electrically it loses a tiny amount of top-end bandwidth to the Ref 3, has a lower input impedance on single-ended and a slightly higher output impedance on both sets of connections – which

is pretty much what you'd expect. It's also slightly quieter (possibly due to the solid-state power supply) which is impressive indeed, given the ghostly silence emanating from the Ref 3. All connections are available both balanced and single-ended and as well as eight line inputs (including a tape loop) there are paired main outputs, a unity gain option for use with an external processor, phase invert, balance and mono facilities – all available on the remote. A 12V trigger and an internal clock to monitor tube life complete a package that includes just about everything you could reasonably want.

In use, what does the LS26 give away to the Ref 3? Well, it can't match the bigger unit's huge soundstage or absolute stability and low-frequency authority, factors related

to the structural integrity and valve regulated supply in the more expensive design. But the Ref 3 sets the standard in these respects and the 26 gets surprisingly close. It's also close to matching the lucid clarity and easy musical access of the Ref 3, helped by its low noise and transparency. But things get interesting when you consider what the LS26 adds to the mix and how it interfaces with a system. The leaner bottom end makes for a quicker, more immediate quality, with greater musical drive and purpose. Where the Ref 3 sounds incredibly unforced and relaxed, relying on its massive dynamic range and presence to deliver the drama in music, the 26 imbues events with greater pace and impetus. ▶

► Put the two units into a system and how do these differences effect the musical results? The answer of course depends on the system and that's the crucial thing. At least as far as the UK is concerned, the smaller speakers with which most of us live, as well as the cultural history of our hi-fi development with its emphasis on rhythm, pace and timing, mean that for many of us the benefits of the Ref 3 will be lost in translation. What's more, the price differential also dictates that few who hear the 26 will be seriously considering the more expensive model while those who do are also likely to have the full-range speaker systems necessary to appreciate its performance.

Sandwiching the LS26 between the matching ARC CD7 and the Hovland RADIA was an instant and hardly surprising success. The pre-amp's warmth, presence and easy sense of time and pace allowed the best to flow from digital sources. Matching to phono-stages proved far more critical. In the absence of the PH7 (with its rollicking, high energy ride) I tried both the Connoisseur and the Groove Plus SRX. Despite the superior energy and presence of the former, it was the adjustable loading of the latter that proved decisive. Running the Titan-i at 200 Ohms (rather than my more normal 100) allowed the sound to ease a little, adding flow and pace to balance the definition. The 10K load of the Connoisseur lacked the necessary grip in this instance, allowing the music to err towards the lazy side of relaxed, robbing performances of tension and overall shape.

Used with the preferred sources and driving the Nola Pegasus Signatures, the Audio Research delivered most of the superb spatial definition and separation I've come to expect from the Ref 3. Add that to the physical substance and rich

hues it brings to notes and images and you have a unit that manages to sound immediate and musically compelling without ever sounding forced or forward. It's this blend of virtues that makes the LS26 a product for the long haul rather than flavour of the month. The ease with which you can hear into a band or a performer's playing keeps you interested while the absence of strain in the music equates directly to an absence of strain in the listener: qualities that should not be underestimated.



Listening to the Yepes Rodrigo, the strummed chords that open the second movement; the separate identity of each string and the sense of the hand's motion across them is almost ghostly. The body of the guitar is a physical, vibrant volume, as is the air in the acoustic. Where the 26 loses out to a unit like the Connoisseur 4-2 LSE or the Vibe/Pulse, is in the overall shape of the ensuing melody, the player's progress from one note to the next. But it gets close and the notes themselves... their colour, envelope and the way they expand into the space around the instrument is just wonderful.

Substituting the ARC VS110 power amp for the RADIA was also an interesting exercise. With its easy dynamics and real sense of power and substance, so reminiscent of great ARC amps like the D115, the 110's musical muscle and expressive generosity proved a perfect foil for the grace, space and easy progression of the 26. The vitality and solid scale of the pairing made orchestral

recordings like the live du Pre Elgar *Cello Concerto* a vivid, communicative presence in the room, making them an extraordinarily cost-effective and versatile combination for any music lover seeking that elusive balance of colour space and serious musical impact. The amp has just the right amount of life, bounce and boisterous energy to fire the line-stage to greater musical heights, the perfect counterpoint to what might be considered a touch too much politeness in certain circles.

Even with the 110 in tandem, the 26 can't quite match the thunderous authority of the REF 3, or its stunningly stable and transparent sound-stage. But without the much more expensive unit for immediate comparison you'll neither know that, nor should you care. Just revel in the musical glory that is the LS26 and the access it opens on your musical collection. ►+

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Vacuum tube line-stage
Tube Complement:	2x 6H30P
Inputs:	6x line-level 1x tape monitor 1x processor
Outputs:	2x main out 1x tape out
All connections both single-ended and balanced	
Gain:	6 – 24dB, user selectable 0dB processor input
Input Impedance –	
Balanced:	120 kOhms
Single-ended:	60 kOhms
Output Impedance –	
Balanced:	700 Ohms
Single-ended:	350 Ohms
Dimensions (WxHxD):	480 x 134 x 305mm
Weight:	7.5kg
Price:	£5300

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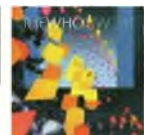
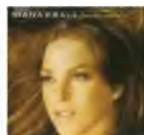
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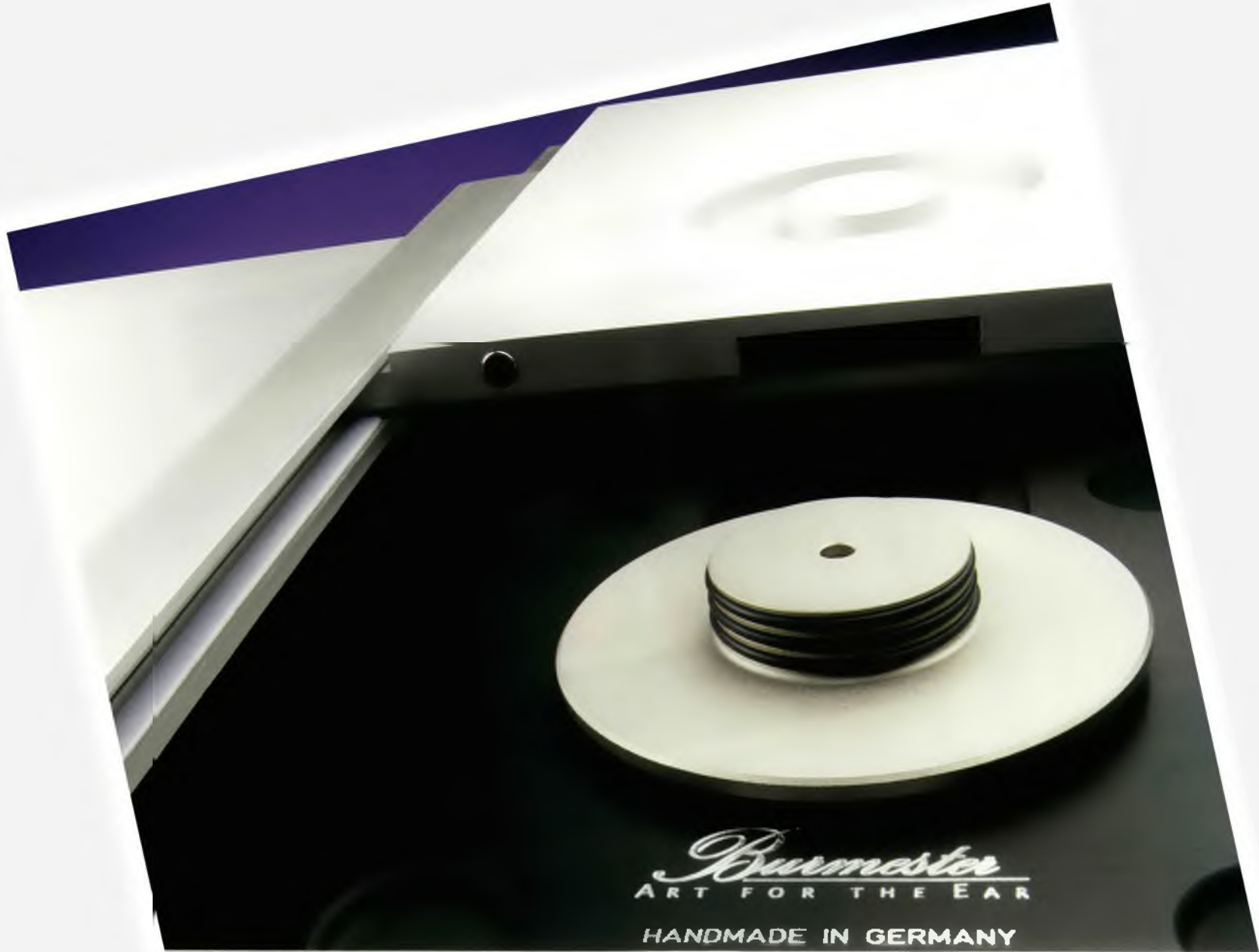
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Burmester

Burmester 061 CD Player

by Chris Thomas

For those who don't know, Burmester are a very serious audio company based in Germany which manufactures an impressively large range of Teutonic-looking equipment. I must admit that, until I got hold of their catalogue, I had no idea just how comprehensive that range is. Within it there are several performance tiers like the Reference Line, Top Line, Classic and Rondo as well as separate sections for home theatre products, loudspeakers, not to mention equipment racks, a power conditioner and even a custom in-car installation for that most desirable of all supercars, the Bugatti Veyron. As you may have guessed none of it is remotely cheap, but you do get what you pay for as it is all beautifully built. Yet, in the UK it still remains quite rare. PM reviewed their impressive 001 belt-drive CD player back in Issue 31 and I was fortunate enough to use that very player for a few months last year. I can commend it as just about the easiest sounding high-end player I have ever lived with.

The 001 remains part of the Top Line while the newer 061 sits in the Classic range just below, but Burmester refer to the 061 as the

What's in a number...

Burmester's nomenclature is somewhat different to other manufacturers. Take the case of the 001: this derives from the year of introduction which was 2000 (00) and the 1 indicates the first player released in that year. So, as you've probably worked out, the 061 refers to the first CD player released by Burmester in the year 2006. With six years interim development I was interested whether the gap between them had closed.

001's little brother, a statement borne out visually at least as, at first glance, they do appear very similar. Both are medium-sized top loaders and have that unique and distinct chromium faceplate, a Burmester trademark since the introduction of their 758 pre-amplifier. They also share the Philips CD2 Pro transport although in the 061 this is used in standard direct drive form. Everything about the player exudes a quality feel. Just slide back that door on its silky Teflon rollers and you'll soon get the idea what this machine is all about. Whilst it has a whiff of the "lifestyle product" about it, it is in fact a very versatile, high-end unit that can be employed in a number of ways. You could use it as a straightforward CD player connected up to an analogue amplifier through either balanced or single-ended connections. Burmester make a point of recommending the balanced option and having tried both I would agree that it does have the edge. It can also be used as a processor for other digital sources like DAT players or other digital sources. Its digital inputs can process PCM data with a sample rate of up to 192kHz which is switchable from the standard 96kHz via the remote control. Naturally, digital outputs are also available. Additional connections can enhance the player's versatility even more within an all-Burmester system. There is an MMI slot that

will enable the user to integrate any future developments for the 061, like a multi-media interface and a method of controlling the whole of your system by computer, called a Burlink. Also, as with other complete manufacturer systems, you can hook the 061 into other Burmester components via a mini-jack, making it the slave or the master for switching purposes. The remote control is a heavy, stainless steel affair that is complex and not particularly intuitive, but with 47 buttons it could



hardly be anything else. It is a full system remote so some of the buttons are irrelevant to the 061's operation but, even after a couple of month's continuous use, I still have to look to locate the transport functions. Discs are held in place by a fairly high-mass clamp and the player is supplied with a dedicated Burmester mains lead.

As if to remind me of the excellence of the 001, Burmester sent one along for comparison and to give a performance yardstick against which to measure the 061, but both machines needed some pretty intensive running-in. So, after a couple of weeks on continuous play both were installed side by side and the listening began. I spent a few days with the 001 first to reacquaint myself with this



► excellent player. I remembered that when I used one last year it drew as many admiring comments as the Lyra Connoisseur pre-amplifier across a remarkably broad spectrum of listeners with long-term Naim users particularly enthusiastic and fulsome in their praise. Everybody loved its rather unspectacular way of making music and I was continuously struck by its free-flowing, liquid, rhythmic abilities. It wasn't the most obviously detailed

and I was fascinated to know how close to this stellar performance the 061 could get.

So, I put the 001 to one side and still using the balanced outputs began to listen. I wasn't quite prepared for how different they were. The 061 was immediately less sumptuous in its balance and more forward in its presentation. You just couldn't miss the extra tautness in the sound and the increased impact that the music gained. Where the 001 has this smooth flowing quality to the rhythmic energy and tempo, the 061 has more transient grip and

its bandwidth as it drives the music with real high-impact precision. But it never becomes fatiguing, as its overall tonal balance is so good. *Consequence Of Chaos*, the new album from Al Dimeola (Telarc 83649) really highlights the 061's abilities when it comes to getting musical information off the disc and into the room. Al, of the twinkling fingers, is a technique guitarist for me. High on pace, often doubtful on taste, he always has his inspirational moments but on this CD he must be on tranquilisers as he actually manages to restrain himself a little more often and play some interestingly melodic lines – although he can't resist the temptation for

long and soon ends up tearing the fret board to shreds before vanishing up his own backside in a blur of note-play. As always though he uses the very cream of American musicians so the playing is of an extraordinarily high quality. The 061 deals with the intensity of this

music with contemptuous ease and never drops a stitch, even when the rhythmic and tonal threads grow ever more dense. The degree of separation and transient recovery it manages to maintain is remarkable and allows you to concentrate on any one of a million small details. You don't only hear what is being played but appreciate how it is being done. The sheer articulation of the percussion and the way in which it has been incorporated into the fabric and style of the music brings you into close contact with the physicality of the playing. It goes way beyond just hearing the sound of the instrument ►



player I had heard, in fact it could sometimes seem a little soft around the edges, but I always enjoyed listening to music through it as it was composed, tonally expressive and I could play it for hours on end and never be disappointed. For once it was a product that didn't sound the way it looked. I was expecting it to be rather brash, detached and shiny like its case, and a model of cool, detached German efficiency – but what I got was a rather cuddly and very emotionally involving musical experience. The new 001 was just the same only this time I used it with the Vitus SS-010 amplifier and employed the balanced outputs. It was a winning combination with the JMLabs Micro Be's, Nordost Valhalla speaker cables and Tyr balanced interconnects (I didn't have any balanced Valhallas which I know would have sounded even better)

initially seems faster and more authoritative. It appeared as if this was a more dynamic machine altogether though, even at the early stages, I noticed that there seemed to be less low-level ambient information. It was almost as if the 061 was the more detailed player with high frequencies having more presence and vitality even though it is unquestionably leaner and a touch harder.

As the memory of the 001 faded I began to listen to the 061 as an individual and less as the little brother. I find it quite different in its sense of momentum and the way that musical energy is employed. The 061 must be one of the tightest CD players I have ever heard. It really gets a grip on the bass and is articulate through

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► and into the world of technique and phrasing where you really get the message that these are serious musicians, at one with the musical idea and feel of the track.

The Burmester is so focussed and dynamic that it always seems to have headroom in hand and can surprise with the impact it manages. But its abilities run far deeper than just the imposing and dramatic side of music as it is equally at home with sweeping orchestral vistas or vocals.



I've grown really fond of Alberto Iglesias's musical score for *Talk To Her*, the film by strange but interesting director Pedro Almodovar (Milan 36005-2). On 'Hable Con Ella' I loved the way that the 061 showed such a full range of instrumental textures and flavours as it meanders musically through the Spanish countryside constantly counterpointing sweeping Iberian-flavoured passages with delicate yearnings from the violin and the hint of flamenco haunting the background as the wonderful Vicente Amigo suggests the religious overtones of Rodrigo in both note and tonal colour. As the music flows it paints a picture of Spain in sound (and I don't mean Benidorm) that is as evocative as anything I've heard for a while. This is the beauty of film music and in this case, the genius of Iglesias. I've heard this disc on quite a few systems now with varying degrees of enlightenment

but the 061 really showed the structural poise and sense of poignancy that makes the experience so special to me.

What lies at the heart of this performance is the clean, high-resolution nature of the Burmester and as long as it can remain rhythmically on the ball, that is never going to be a bad thing for any quality audio component.

This the 061 manages with aplomb, combining high levels of detail with speed and real agility. It has that taut grip and control over the music that puts me in mind of the Teac Esoteric X-01 and while it

can't quite manage the extraordinary levels of micro information that pour from that exceptional player, it has a sense of energy and musical progression that sets it apart from many other sub £6K designs. It would be very easy to hear the 061 on a single type of music and reach the wrong conclusions about it. It really does deserve to be auditioned with very high quality ancillaries and I can see it working in many systems put together with different philosophies. I think that Burmester have gained an unfair reputation in the UK. Every time I mentioned that I was reviewing one of their products, one of the first things that came back was the word "expensive". Well, having lived with both the 001 and the 061 for a while now, I cannot agree. I should make it

clear that I still prefer the 001 to the 061, but the fact that the former is over six years old and still puts in such a completely satisfying performance speaks volumes for the depth of quality found in Burmester's designs. To date I have only heard a couple of machines that I prefer to the 001 and they were both considerably more expensive. Now consider that the same quality of engineering and finish goes into the 061, spend some time with it and then compare it to other, similarly priced CD players and I think that, like me, you'll realise that it does indeed offer excellent value for money. Add in its versatility and it actually makes offerings from several other high profile

manufacturers look seriously expensive. Burmester, and the 061 CD player in particular, are well worth serious investigation. ➤

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Single box CD player/processor
Transport:	Phillips CD2 Pro
Digital Inputs:	2x RCA 1x Optical (Toslink)
Digital outputs:	2xRCA 1x Optical (Toslink)
Analogue outputs:	1xXLR (balanced) 2 x RCA (unbalanced)
Dimensions (WxHxD):	482 x112 x 340mm
Weight:	9.6 kg
Price:	6990 Euros. (Approx £4695.)

Manufacturer:
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Denon DCD-2000AE stereo SACD player and PMA-2000AE amplifier

by Alan Sircom

It's easy to imagine that there is a genuine resurgence in industry interest in two-channel. But, in fact, most manufacturers and dealers will admit (if pushed) that their interest in stereo comes simply from it being harder and harder to make a buck churning out home cinema kit. Prices in AV aren't simply devalued, they are non-valued – in a market where it's possible to buy DVD players for about the same price as a newly released disc, it's hard to justify the need for \$1,000 machines, because a hefty chunk of the market is simply not discerning enough to care. In addition, there is a reluctance to invest in upwards of nine speakers in the living room, where two are just about acceptable in certain circumstances.

Even that great cash cow of the home cinema market – the flat screen – has gone from the cost of a small BMW a decade ago to the price of a good camera today. Compared to so fluid (that's fluid as in 'flushed away') a market, hi-fi is mature and considered. You may not have the million-seller product, but neither will your million seller today be undercut by something costing 1/100th the price tomorrow. Slow and steady wins the race.

Of course, Denon never really went away from hi-fi. It's just its focus was elsewhere. The legendary budget tuners and amps survived and the CD players too, if you don't mind minimal change over a half-decade period making them all but legacy products. That all changed a year or so ago, with Denon starting to launch new two-channel products at the budget end of the market. Then the behemoth SACD 1-series player and amp appeared and people began to sit up and take notice.

Now it's the mid-market's turn, thanks to the DCD-2000AE stereo-only SACD/CD player and the PMA-2000AE integrated amplifier.

If we value products based on their build quality and weight alone, then these two are well under priced. Remember that at just \$1,200 a piece, these products are going head to head with slim little lightweights from Creek and Arcam. And these things weigh big. Especially the amplifier – if Agatha Christie were still alive today, she'd have a great-aunt pinned under its 24kg bulk and Miss Marple would be sniffing round the volume control. The disc player has been on a lighter weight-training routine, but is still a steroid-fuelled 13kg. Both are beautifully built... not just for the money; beautifully built, period. The amp is the larger of the two, but they have a similarity about their appearance which makes them very much of the same family. In fact, there's more than a passing resemblance to the heads of that family – the SA1 models – except these bigger buggers cost five grand a piece and weigh even more.

There's a reassuring solidity about the transport mech of the DCD-2000AE. It's still plastic, but where today's CD-sleds are flimsy, cheap feeling affairs, this Denon-made product feels well damped and like it has good motors behind it. It's little touches that separate the DCD-2000AE from the rank and file. It's a stereo player – there are only two phono sockets for output of both CD and SACD sources (although the CD

data-stream can be squirted out of a co-axial phono or optical digital output) – but then the current thinking among SACD enthusiasts seems to be go for two first-rate channels instead of six second-rate ones.

The transport sums up the main tenet of the player, if not both products, perfectly. It's solidly built – rather than radical – engineering. What you get in this player is good belt-and-braces disc playing design, but without the bleeding edge craziness. So, inside are dual-differential Burr-Brown chips to code the CD and SACD datastream and the nearest we get to 'rad' is the 'Advanced AL24' processing, which essentially up-samples the PCM data-stream to 24bit precision. This is deeply fashionable (every player seems to up-sample today), but it's worth bearing in mind that Denon got there first with its Alpha processing, and Advanced AL24 is the latest development of this technology.

Naturally, there's more to the DCD-2000AE than just a transport and decoder. That hefty case isn't just ballast; it's designed to help minimise vibrational effects from within and without. Also, the power supplies for the digital and analogue stages are entirely separated and there is a high precision DAC master clock to cut back the demon jitter. These are the fundamental building blocks of a good player.

For all its size and heft, the PMA-2000AE is no powerhouse.



► It delivers 80 watts into eight ohms: adequate, but hardly Krell megawatts. But, a sure sign of a good amplifier is one that doubles its power as the impedance shifts from eight to four ohms. Sure enough, the PMA-2000AE punts out 160 watts into four ohms. This is thanks to what's known as a 'stiff' power supply in the amp and is pretty much as good as it gets.



Well, sort of...

Denon are not too keen about using sub-four ohm loads with the amplifier, but in the context of a £1,200 unit, amp-crushing two-ohm impedance loudspeakers should not be on the menu.

Denon uses ultra-high-current MOSFETs in its output stage, which explains why the heatsink block takes up so much space inside the chassis. Fortunately, heat dissipation is very good and the amp does not run too warm in practice. These are in a standard push-pull arrangement, but this is no feedback-free device (once again, conservative engineering comes into play). Individual power supplies and power transformers feed the pre-amp and power amplifier stages, completely separating the two sections within the one chassis.

Round the back of the amp are two sets of loudspeaker terminals. These are permanently connected, designed for easy bi-wiring instead of A/B connections. There is even a good quality MM/MC phono stage – well, 'good' by integrated amplifier

standards – it's no match for a dedicated phono-stage, but it's quiet and surprisingly detailed. If you take your vinyl seriously, you'll need better, but if your turntabling is now down to 'legacy' replay on a £1,000 deck, this should be more than good enough. There are also six line inputs (two of which are tape monitor circuits)... and something extra.

Both products have a 'pure direct' mode, but the behaviour of the button is different in both cases.

In the player, it disables the display and digital output. In the amplifier, it turns off all the pre-amplifier stages, barring the volume control, and necessitates using a separate set of phono inputs. In truth, the difference

between the standard pre-amp routed sources and the pure direct mode was minimal; a testament to the quality of the pre-amp stages, perhaps. Also, disabling the display and digital output didn't seem to add a great deal to the performance of the player. Regardless, both products bristle with the best quality components throughout, which might explain why the two are comparatively unfazed by impure thoughts.

The two share similar looking remote controls. These are beautifully built and nicely weighted, but they aren't entirely identical. To access full functionality across the board, you need both handsets, and they

look so similar, you will spend time trying to dim the display of the player using the amp handset. Still, they really do look the part and fit the style and heavyweight construction of the products very well indeed: They look alike, they are equally well built and they sound very good together... so why break them up? There is no magic synergy to connect player to amplifier, but there's little to quibble about when the two are used as a team. In fact, they are so well-matched that can't point to one of the two as being the superior device; they are both alpha males, but comfortable in one another's company.

Taken separately or together, then, the Denons deliver a tightly analytical sound, pulling the detail out of any disc with exacting precision. In the company of the wrong disc or the wrong speakers, that precision can be a bumpy ride, as that analysis can seem forward and bright. But, when it all comes together, all things are forgiven. This is an exceptionally honest and blindingly accurate presentation. The two create a tight bolus of sound between



the speakers, but within that close-knit image is plenty of inner detail. You might not have the holographic imagery of ultra expensive equipment, but curiously it does not sound like the musicians have all bunched together or suddenly shrunk in size – instead, it just sounds like all the musicians are in the space between the speakers and happy to be there. There is width and depth to the soundstage – and even ►

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▷ some height – but this is not where the Denons focus their attention. Instead, what you hear is what's going on inside the music itself.

It's the microdynamics of the presentation that are so well delivered. All those subtle clues that differentiate a living, breathing orchestra from a motley collection of musicians,

whole: a guitar, for example, is divided into a very detailed upper, middle and lower registers, but there is often seemingly little connection between the three sections. Here, the sound of an acoustic guitar flows together as it does in reality, and the limitation is removed to the performance of the loudspeaker. Also, if the mix is not of the best, then the Denon duo (and this time I will pick out the player for particular praise)

can delve deeper than many at the price and communicate what the musicians are doing back there.

Despite my misgivings about separating these two, it's important to do so, because not everyone's going to buy disc player and amplifier at once.

If this doesn't confuse matters still further, the DCD-2000AE sounds like a BBC LS3/5a with more bass; where the PMA-2000AE sounds like a Spendor BC1 with slightly less bass. Put them together and you end up with a sound that's somewhere between the two. Incidentally, the classic British monitor sound is a perfect partner for the Denon duo, and anyone looking for electronics to pair with a brace of Harbeths or Spendors or similar could do a lot worse than the Denons.

There's a final ace up the sleeve of the DCD-2000AE; SACD replay. I am not a big classical listener and am critical of 'audiophile' recordings. Nevertheless, those SACD albums in my collection (mostly Dylan, Rolling Stones and Pink Floyd re-issues) came to life. There was a sense of rightness to the sound, and that coherent flow about music the player had on CD was even more pronounced on SACD.

Moving back to CD was depressing for a disc or so, the coherence seemed artificial by comparison and the music mechanical.

This is a lovely return to form for Denon. It is one of those systems that you could happily listen to for years on end. A good thing too, because this pairing is so well made, it will last a lifetime. In all, fantastic value for money from a product pairing that delivers detail aplenty. ▶+



are portrayed extremely well here. Yet, and this is one of the key bonuses of the Denon duo, this is not performed at the expense of the overall musical performance. The music itself flows from passage to passage comfortably, and the Denon pair gives you the macro and micro view of the performance. If you want to take in the gestalt of the musical presentation, no worries! The Denon duo serves up a detailed and musical treat. But, if you want hyper-analysis of the playing of a particular player, no worries too! The Denons presents all the information laid bare. Ultimately, perhaps the two move more toward analytic focus than musical (especially rhythmic) integrity.

But this is more than compensated for by being able to hear into the recording with ease, and the fact that every part of the musical whole is beautifully coherent, from top to bottom. Often, a highly detailed pairing tends to 'chunk' music into hugely detailed components of the greater

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

DCD-2000AE	
Type:	CD/SACD stereo disc player
Transport:	Denon-built disc drive mechanism
Decoding:	Advanced AL24 Processing DAC master clock design Burr-Brown D/A converter
Outputs:	1pr analogue RCA/phono 1x co-axial S/PDIF 1x optical S/PDIF
Size (WxHxD):	434 x 137 x 335mm
Weight:	13.3kg
Price:	£1200
PMA-2000AE	
Type:	Solid-state integrated stereo amp
Inputs:	6x line-level MM/MC phono-stage
Power amp in	
Outputs:	Pre-amp out 2prs binding posts/ch
Power Output:	80W + 80W (8 Ohms) 160W + 160W (4 Ohms)
Output Stage:	UHC-MOS Single Push-Pull Circuit
Size (WxHxD):	434 x 181 x 480mm
Weight:	24.0kg
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Referring to the "musical clarity and coherence" of the Ringmat Pure Power Mains Cable, Pure Power Speaker Cable and Pure Signal Premium Blue Interconnect, with the "excellent" WBT connectors, in Issue 49 Roy Gregory, Editor of Hi-Fi +, reports that "they offer a superbly balanced and extremely musical solution which is well worth seeking out".



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Duevel
Planets

The Duevel Planet Loudspeakers

by Jason Hector

How to start a review about a speaker that looks like the Duevel Planets? Their bigger brothers, the Bella-Luna's, are interesting enough but the Planets suggest that, contrary to national stereotype, the guys from Duevel have a wicked sense of humour. It is initially hard to get away from the feeling that the Planets are just an arresting and attention-grabbing design exercise, but form really is following function. The two polished metal balls are suspended directly over the upward facing drivers and act to spread the acoustic energy in the lateral plane creating the omni effect. Almost as surprising as the appearance of the Planets is their suggested retail price – just \$800. This is a very competitive price for any floor standing speaker and it has been a long time since an omni-directional design was offered at anywhere near it. Even more surprisingly, I have been assured that the Planets are made in Germany. According to the distributor Duevel want to expose more people to what an omni can do and are perhaps relying on people buying into the brand and upgrading to the higher end Duevel speakers at a later date. Whatever the business justification, it is great to see something so distinctive at this end of the market place.

Beyond their balls the rest of the Planets are pretty straightforward. The drivers are a small 5" woofer and a 1" horn loaded tweeter. Cone material for the bass/mid is treated paper with a rubber surround while the tweeter is a plastic membraned device. The cabinets are mirror imaged and the manufacturers' instructions suggest that the speaker should be placed with the tweeters on the outside. The cabinet

is a chipboard box covered in plastic laminate. Utilitarian? Yes, but also tidy, economic and available in a variety of colours. The balls are suspended from a framework of solid bars. The speaker rests on simple plastic feet that create a gap under the cabinet which allows the two large ports in their undersides to breathe. A dividing brace inside the box has an acoustic loading effect on the bass/mid driver as well as strengthening the carcass. Electrical connection is via some good quality binding posts, tidily positioned in the bottom of the speaker.

The pair of Planets I had for review were brand new and clearly benefited from some loosening up.

Straight out of the box they didn't seem to have any bass; a few hours later there was far too much. Thankfully, after a while the speakers settled down to a more even balance. The treble is somewhat recessed and appears to roll off a little early, suiting brighter electronics and rooms. The result of this response is very apparent when playing something like Dexys Midnight Runners *Geno*. The all important brass is robbed of its piercing power; the trumpets and trombones still sounded brassy, just not Dexys brassy – they don't sound on the verge of exploding! The rest of the instrumentation is in scale and very much in time with the easily identifiable

vocals from Kevin Rowland, while the live ambience is impressively portrayed. The bass goes pretty deep and is a bit loose; not too flabby (room and amplifier permitting) but loose compared to a typical scaled speaker of similar dimensions. There was also some unwelcome bloom at my room's resonant frequency, which must have been close to the

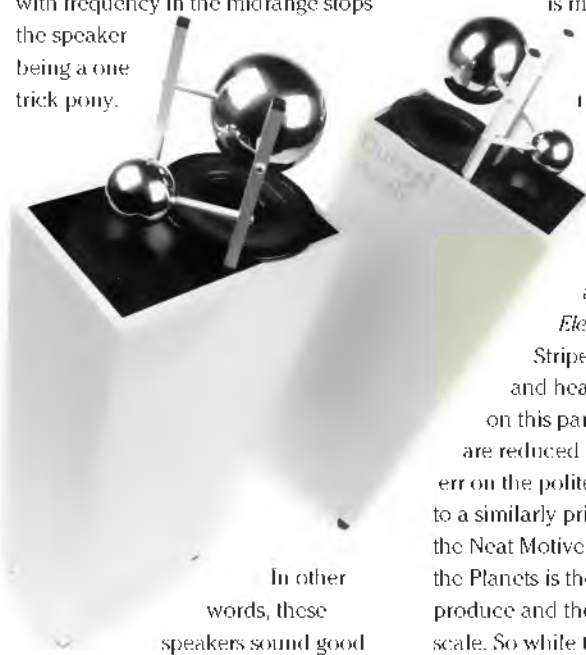
Planets' port resonance.

I solved this with some tweaking and by placing a carefully chosen slim paperback under the ports, which reduced their output at the critical frequency. An unorthodox solution but very effective in this case.

The Planets strongest suit is their very articulate, transparent, open and grain free mid-band (for the money). This allows them to make the most of acoustic recordings. They reveal plenty of detail and instruments are presented with their harmonic richness intact. Voices in particular are rendered truthfully, revealing considerable emotional cues and meaning. Play Joan Baez or the excellent Jessie Sykes and everything has believable size and loads of subtlety and feeling. Spinning my favourite albums through these speakers was a continual pleasure and I rarely felt I was missing anything. This was because the Planets managed to reproduce the rhythms and timing, the subtle phrasing in a ▶



▶ performance, that elevates musical reproduction beyond the mundane background noise too many systems produce. Take a Richard Thompson album, say *Rumour and Sigh*, and just enjoy the guitar work, the way he can sustain several themes on separate strings, and the way he weaves the distinctive vocal around his often deceptively simple sounding, ingenious instrumental accompaniment. With a system terminated in a pair of Planets you can enjoy the brilliance over and over again. What part of the Duevels performance allows this intimate musical resolution? I believe it is mainly due to good transient capability, but a careful balance of treble and bass allied to consistency of sound level with frequency in the midrange stops the speaker being a one-trick pony.



In other words, these speakers sound good because they do most things well across the midrange, as long as the dynamic range is not too extreme. This is a lot more that you can normally ask from an £800 speaker.

In spite of the 85dB sensitivity and nominal 4 Ohm impedance, the Planets are reportedly kind to low power amplifiers. I was certainly happy with the result when driving them with a Creek 4140 amplifier. The system delivered thoroughly enjoyable music,

although the tendency for the bass to lose focus and become one note was more obvious with the smaller amp. Again, this result is pretty par the course. Similarly, there are limitations with a 150mm diameter main bass driver which can only move so much air. In my smallish room they went loud enough, but they are not going to take too much power and in a big room they will struggle to develop serious sound pressure levels. Push them too hard and their sound softens, which

is mainly a pro but also a bit of a con. The pro is that the Planets do not fatigue but the con is that music loses force and edge, most noticeably when the speaker is driven with dynamic aggressive music like *Elephant* by the White Stripes. The throbbing bass and heavily distorted guitars on this particular slab of power are reduced in impact. The Duevels err on the polite side when compared to a similarly priced speaker, like the Neat Motive 2. What elevates the Planets is the huge sound they produce and their presentation of scale. So while the dynamic crunch might be reduced, they can immerse you in a huge acoustic space. This is particularly enjoyable with big scale classical music like the Vivaldi *Gloria*. But the scale, for want of a better word, scales, and something like the excellent, beautifully executed and intelligent *My Secret is my Silence* album from Roddie Woombles is naturally rendered with vocals and instruments appearing in proportion to the minds eye, the total result very

convincing and pleasurable.

I am well aware that I risk becoming typecast as the *Hi-Fi+* omni reviewer, but as long as the omnis I review sound this good I really couldn't care less. The orbiting balls of the Planets do mean they run the risk of not being taken seriously. Judging from their performance in my room and system, that would be a mistake. While they flatter

lesser electronics, they happily revel in and handily reveal much higher quality sources and amplifiers. If you are interested in trying out a pair of omnis I cannot think of a more cost effective starting point. The Duevel Planets are a great pair of speakers and whilst it is early to be saying this I will be surprised if I hear a better value component in 2007.



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Omnidirectional 2-way-loudspeaker
Driver Complement:	1x 150mm paper cone 1x 25mm horn-loaded plastic membrane
Impedance:	4 Ohm
Sensitivity:	85 dB
Power handling:	50 W RMS
Dimensions (WxHxD):	260 x 156 x 830mm
Weight:	10 kg
Finishes:	Laminate, various
Price:	£800

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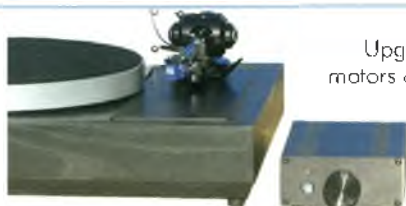
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The Arcam A70 Integrated Amplifier

by Alan Sircom

Jeremy Clarkson has famously cited Porsche as having the laziest product designers on the planet. He must have forgotten about Arcam. What separates this \$500 Arcam DiVA A70 amplifier from the earlier (but still current) A80 – and the bigger A90 – is mostly on the inside. Even then, there are some common building blocks internally – although you might expect that, to keep a 'family' sound. But hey, so what if the design is functionally identical to previous models... why tamper with a good thing? The layout of the DiVA chassis is hardly thrown together; it's a timeless design with everything on the front panel falling to hand simply and easily. It just feels 'right'. This new amp may look identical to the A80 on the outside, but under the skin, it has plenty in common with Arcam's more up-market FMJ range too. It sports the spookily named Mask of Silence technology, which includes Stealth Mat material. These are advanced materials (spin-offs from the might of the military machine) fitted internally to the amplifier, with no external signs of their presence... so perhaps that should be the Invisible Mask of Silence and the Really Stealthy Stealth Mat. This stuff is designed to reduce electromagnetic interference, help damp internal vibration and can be used to help Invincible Man defeat Doc Neutrino in his hidden lair. Sadly, Arcam's literature fails to inform us whether or not the Mask of Silence can resist the mighty Thong of Noise. We shall see...

Like the A80 before it, the DiVA A70 is a processor-controlled product that looks and behaves almost exactly like standard 'pots and knobs' amplifiers, but with the convenience

and functionality electronic switching entails. This means funky features like a text display that tells you what you are listening to and volume control, but it also means a shorter signal path, with fewer components in the source selection and gain adjustment sections of the signal path to boot.

It also means the volume control is listed as 'studio grade' and channels are matched to within an exceptionally good $\pm 0.05\text{dB}$.

To gain access to its higher functions, you need to tap in a combination of 'enter', 'select' and the volume control. Those who break into a cold sweat at the thought of a telephone menu system ("You are in phone Hell, please press 'one' for hot coals, press 'two' to be ripped apart by hungry wolves...") might panic at this, but in fact it's reasonably simple and most are fit-and-forget settings. Driven by a menu structure on the front display, pressing these buttons control the resolution of the volume control (good for those who have very sensitive or insensitive loudspeakers), the balance, the input trim (for products of different sensitivity), the record output level, whether the amplifier works in partnership with a processor and the start-up amplifier volume. It's all well explained in the manual, which is remarkably clear and easy to follow.



This 50 watt design has six line inputs (one of which is a tape loop) and a fair MM phono stage; good enough for the Rega and Pro-Ject decks that are common partners with amps at this price. The power amp is a current feedback design fed by a surprisingly large toroidal transformer for so svelte a case; the layout is poached from the more up-market A90 amplifier and put to good effect here. As is now standard with all amplifiers, it comes with mini-jack triggers for multi-room applications, plus a second (switchable) set of speaker terminals. And it comes with the standard Arcam remote control.

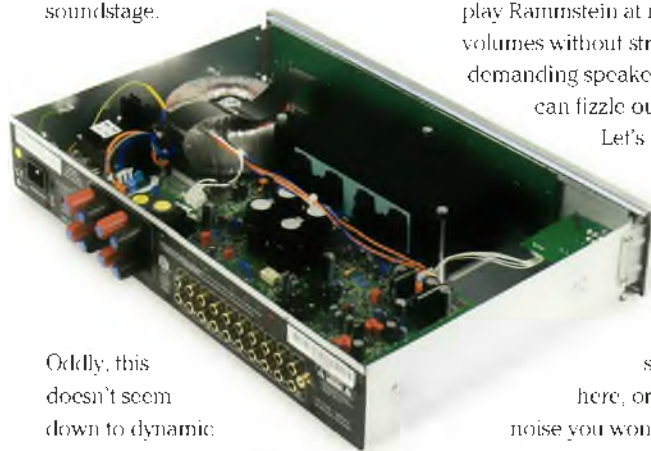
Build quality is exemplary. It doesn't feel like a \$500 amplifier, although in fairness it's no Krell either. It's a weighty and substantial feeling thing and if you get past the Web of Intrigue, through the Dungeon of Distress and into the Fortress of Solitude, you reach a densely packed, single-sided main PCB, positively bristling with surface mount components. You'd be hard pressed to find better construction and obvious R&D spend this side of a £1,000 design.

It punches above its weight, too. This is an immediate sounding amplifier, full of sound and fury, but this time that's a positive thing. It's a very direct sound, with plenty of excitement and rhythmic energy, almost as if it were a Naim design. Music hangs together perfectly, although you tend to veer toward the rhythmic part of your music collection when playing the A70: Little Feat – 3, Ligetti – 0.



Fortunately, it holds back from the common failing of pacy-sounding amplifiers, in that it does not have a good sense of rhythm at the expense of information. Music is portrayed in an up-beat manner, yes, but the level of non-rhythmic information on offer at the same time is insightful and impressive at the price. It's certainly open enough to hear into the mix of even complex music. It's exceptionally clean sounding, too, entirely free from grain and emphasis, save for a slight lift to the top of speech sibilants. This isn't strong enough to make people sound lispy, just brings the voices a notch forward in the mix.

There's a good but understated soundstage here. With speakers that could dig out the stereo imagery in a sine wave, it will make a good attempt at three dimensionality. With most speakers, though, the A70 has a slightly foreshortened and small-scale soundstage.



Oddly, this doesn't seem down to dynamic range. The amplifier is good at swinging a current round a recording, the swells and musical tumult of a Wagner overture are handled with terrific scale and insight. It's just that, although the relative scale is right, the size is a bit smaller, as if every musician was playing on

instruments 0.95x normal size. This isn't a major consideration – it's not comedy tiny-fi and music doesn't sound like you shrunk it in the spin cycle – but the sound seems slightly smaller than usual, slightly curtailed at the bottom end and a touch insubstantial,

next to the sort of riveted to the floor solidity of genuine high-end designs. But this is not a high-end design, it's a £500 product and here we are criticizing it for failing to match £3,000 expectations.

Perhaps the only place where the Arcam shows its price-led limitations in context is in the power output. This isn't a powerhouse on paper or in practice and you won't get to play Rammstein at neighbour-scaring volumes without strain; a big room or demanding speakers and the Arcam can fizzle out dynamically.

Let's put this into context, however. At that all-important £500 price break, rival amps will either do the same as the Arcam here, or fill the room with noise you won't want to live with for any length of time. And what you do get with this model, which you will struggle to find in its class, is an overall sense of rightness to the music played through the A70. It risks damning the amp with faint praise, but this is a 'nice' sound. Not too taxing, not too demanding of CD player, speaker

or listener. You could play sounds through this amp for days on end and never once get bored or tired. And you do get the fireworks too, but only when fireworks are really called for. All of which would seem awfully bloodless, were it not for those rhythmic abilities. Arcam has always excelled at making good, first-rung products, and the A70 amp is no exception.

That mixture of easy configurability with an unforced, natural sound more than makes up for any power limitation at the price. Add in that easy, peppy rhythm and snap to the music and you'll see why the DiVA range remains a popular choice, especially for those after good rock or pop replay. If you want your singer-songwriters to come to life in your living room (what a dreadful thought), this is a superb choice at the price. ➤

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Solid-state integrated
Inputs:	6x line-level 1x MM phono
Input Impedance:	22k
Input Sensitivity:	250mv (variable)
Rated Output Power:	50W/8 ohms
Dimensions (WxHxD):	435 x 83 x 275mm
Weight:	9kg
Finishes:	Silver or Black
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Their Mutual Friends...

Rotel RA-05 and Creek Evo amps

by Steve Dickenson

What is the starting price for hi-fi? \$300 per box, perhaps more? \$200, possibly less? Sometimes it seems as if every time somebody lowers the cost bar for entry level hi-fi, somebody else comes along and limboes under it. It's a crucial question – most audiophiles start out with a budget system. But get it wrong and you may be lost to the cause forever. It's easy to miss the point if you can't hear the music properly.

In issue 491 I reviewed two quite different but well-executed CD players from budget stalwarts Rotel and Creek. Both would come within a broad definition of budget models, each costing under \$500, and both gave very creditable performances at their own price points. These are their respective amplifiers, costing exactly the same as the CD players and clearly intended to work with them as part of a system. So do they, and what are they like on their own terms?

The first thing to keep in mind is that the two amps don't bear direct comparison. Apart from almost £150 price difference between them, the Creek has over twice the rated output (85 Watts against the Rotel's 40), fewer inputs (4 line-level and tape versus Rotel's 4 line-level, tape, plus built in mm phono-stage) and fewer facilities (the Rotel also features treble and bass controls, plus balance adjustment and two sets of speaker terminals). It would be fair to infer that the Creek has been designed for a pretty focused audiophile brief, while the Rotel is aiming to appeal to a much broader potential market. Moving-magnet, or moving-coil phono boards are available for the Creek as extra cost options but of course this pushes the price some way beyond the notional £500 budget.

As for the tone controls on the Rotel, these are normally out of circuit and have to be switched-in for use, rather than being generally connected but with a defeat button, so sensitive audiophiles need not be offended. In sheer value terms, round one to the Rotel.



The Creek Evo is from Creek's entry-level range, designed here in

the UK but, like so much budget hi-fi nowadays, manufactured in China. Connected to my regular Rega Jupiter CD player there were no real surprises here. If you read the Evo CD review, then the Evo amplifier exhibits much the same strengths as its partner: an agile, articulate performer with a fresh and extended treble and a winning way with dynamics. The generous power output surely helps, allowing the Evo to keep a tight grip on bass with plenty of headroom for broad and fast dynamic shifts, without overpowering more subtle shading. My regular speakers have paired mid-bass drivers, d'Appolito style, which halves their effective impedance so the overall load is nearer to 4 Ohms than the traditional 8. The Creek proved to be a good match with these: bass was never flabby, overblown or intrusive.

As with the Evo CD player, musicianship was shown to great advantage. The Evo amp has an enthusiasm for demonstrating just how the performers are working together to make music. It's not just about timing, or soundstaging, both of which are

exemplary at this price, but the subtle changes of inflection, the ebb and flow, give and take that exists between talented and skilled musicians working closely together. 'My Funny Valentine'

from the Bill Evans and Jim Hall *Undercurrent* album (Blue Note, 7243 5 38228 2 8), where the rapport between pianist Evans and Hall's guitars is almost telepathic. This was entirely convincing through the Creek amp, with a very good sense of interaction and excellent timing. Similarly, Antonio Forcione's 'Alhambra' from *Ghetto Paradise* (Naim, cd032) was quick and articulate, with very good micro-dynamics – subtle little changes of volume were well followed in what can be a very busy piece.

However, a possible weakness began to emerge at this point. If I had to sum up the Creek Evo amp in one word, it would probably be "crisp". There's an immediacy and liveliness, together with an attack which calls to mind certain Flat-Earth brands from the eighties. Unlike those, however, the Evo also does tonal colour. The leading edges of notes are right on the money, but the rest of the note is not simply thrown away to make room for the next. But, on some types of music, there's a suggestion that these leading edges might get a wee bit over-emphasised for my taste and quick, percussive guitar is just the sort of material to point this out. There was never a point in my listening where it all got a bit too much and to be fair I found the entire time with the Creek very enjoyable indeed, but I suspect that if you partnered this amp with a brash or unsubtle front end, you might find yourself spending more time with Dean Martin than Dave Stewart.

Coming back to the tonal colour ▶

▶ thing, the Arvo Pärt compilation *Alina* (ECM 1591) features three versions of the luminous *Spiegel im Spiegel*, two conventionally scored for piano and violin and one with the violin part transposed for cello. The music is quiet, slow and utterly mesmerising. Deceptively simple but very demanding on the performers, for whom total control of timing and timbre is everything, the Creek handled it with great delicacy, rare at this price.



Finally, large-scale material was convincingly and effectively dealt with, Saint-Saëns' *Piano Concerto no. 5*, with Pascal Rogé and the RPO/Charles Dutoit (Decca 443 865-2) kept an excellent balance between orchestra and soloist. It was clearly pointed out how much the orchestra and soloist interact in this piece, the band is not just a backdrop, there's much the same intimacy and interplay you'd expect in a jazz trio.

The Rotel RA-05 is at a considerable disadvantage here, as it was in the CD review. Costing almost £150 less than the Creek, it would be surprising (or a serious cock-up on Creek's part) if it didn't cede some territory to the more expensive product. That it wasn't quite so clear-cut was instructive, the comments below reflect differences between the two which are mostly, as you'd expect, to the Creek's advantage. Nevertheless the differences are closer

to fag-paper thickness than a gulf of clear, blue water.

There are some obvious presentational differences; the Rotel is clearly softer focused than the Creek. There's a mild dulling or, perhaps more accurately, a rounding-off of leading edges which gives the little amp a more relaxed temperament.

I'd say it's the defining attribute, just as the slightly shy midrange defined the CD player.

It's not unlike the difference between steel strings or nylon and, as you'd expect, guitar pieces again highlight the effect. Antonio Forcione sounded more legato, but this didn't seem to affect speed or timing to any serious degree and the little Rotel retains a good sense of flow. Do you prefer Constable or Turner; Velasquez or Manet? Sauvignon Blanc or Chardonnay; espresso or latte? It's less a value judgement, more a personal preference. Other shortcomings are minor. Compared

to the Creek, tonal colour is a little less vivid: there's the merest hint of hiss, a white noise just beyond proper audibility that washes a little colour out. In terms of soundstaging, there's a tendency for higher volumes to pancake things out in front of the listener. Imagine if you will that the

volume control doesn't play louder, it just brings all the performers a bit closer. Turn up the wick in an orchestral piece, and you can almost hear the scraping of chairs as the band all shuffle to the front of the stage. Cue fiddlers' elbows in horn bells, and tips of bows up oboists noses... Prime suspect: the lower power output and my efficient-but-low-impedance

speakers, I think an easier load in a more appropriately priced loudspeaker would fare better. But oddly enough, it doesn't greatly matter. It is still easy to relax and enjoy the music. If this is proper entry-level hi-fi, and I think it is, then it's a convincing introduction – the gatekeeper is still diligently guarding the portal.

What the Rotel does, is accept what it's given and treat it kindly. There's a telling feature on the amp's front panel; a 3.5mm stereo jack input for an MP3 player. Before you dismiss this, read back a few paragraphs: I have my doubts that the Creek amplifier would be gracious with a compressed audio signal, it would simply point out the vastly inferior quality of the source. The Rotel, however, has the forgiving nature necessary to accept an MP3 signal and bring forth some music. It's capable of making a decent fist of anything from

Now That's What I Call Anodyne
Pap, volume 68



to Wagner's *Ring Cycle* without offending. And this is where I think the Rotel has got it right. It allows the Playstation generation to hook up their music and play it through the rest of ▶

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▶ a decent separates system rather than the plug-in “boom and tizz” dedicated MP3 modules. And in so doing, hint that there’s, like, loads more to be had if you make the effort by, for example buying CDs and putting them through a proper player. One piece in particular brought me up short. I was listening to the Peter Gabriel compilation *Shaking The Tree* (Virgin PCTVDR6) track 5, ‘Mercy Street’ and the atmosphere and colour was coming across beautifully. The track ended and I left it running while I made notes. ‘Shaking The Tree’ began and I just had to sit up and take notice. Although I’ve only had the album a few weeks I’ve obviously played this track before, but this time the vital, African rhythms, the atmosphere and pace, that whole dusty, sweaty world-music thing, just demanded my full attention. It’s now one of my favourites. And that’s hi-fi in a nutshell for me, the seemingly simple capability to bring music properly to life, to show you stuff you might otherwise miss.



The Rotel is therefore a first rate introduction to the possibilities of real hi-fi for those used to boom-box, MP3 or “lifestyle” products.

As with the CD player review, direct comparisons between these two products are invidious. At this level, the price differential is too great to disregard. Used as a pair, the Rotel RCD-06 CD player and RA-05 amplifier give a warm-hearted, easy-going performance that works well. The slight midrange dip of the CD player effectively offset by the amplifier’s softer bass and treble. It’s a mellow, undemanding sound but far from bland. It definitely retains

the capacity to surprise and delight, if not shock and awe. Partnered with budget speakers and cabling, and the overall performance could be very pleasing. The Creek pairing was altogether



more vivid, colourful and “hi-fi” and much to its benefit.

But, it will surely tell you if your cables or speakers aren’t up to snuff. So you have to consider the cost of suitable cables, I used Chord’s excellent Chorus interconnect and superb Epic Twin speaker cable throughout and both sets of equipment thrived on that diet, but a half metre stereo interconnect is about £150, and the speaker cable is £40 per mono metre, so while that’s entirely proportionate for the Creek, it could well be budget-breaking for the Rotel. As with the Creek components, it is clear that the Chord cables can take

you considerably further up the ladder before you’ll need to change them, but you’ve got to take that first step, and it’s a smaller one with the

Rotel. Looked at in those terms, an entry-level Rotel system could be running for perhaps £1000-£1100 including loudspeakers, budget interconnects and speaker cables, where the Creek system is unlikely to cost less than £1500, possibly £2000 depending on ancillaries.

If this were a comparative review, then it’s clear the Creek would emerge victorious, get the stars, the swing-tag, the tick-and-smiley-face. But it’s not, it’s an exercise in seeing what you can get on the sort of first time buyer budget we all started out with. What you get with the Rotel is a friendly, feature-packed, well-executed system that won’t intimidate a newbie while offering

plenty of satisfaction in its own right. The Creek will cost more, but offers rewards beyond the price difference if you can make the stretch. If you can’t, the Rotel is a safe and carefully considered combination. Unless anybody can show me differently, I think real hi-fi starts here, at about £350 a box. ▶+

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Rotel RA-05	
Type:	Integrated stereo amplifier
Power Output:	40 watts per channel, 8 Ohms
Inputs:	4 x line level 1 x tape loop 1 x m-m phono
Input Sensitivity:	(Line level) 150mV (Phono) 2.5mV
Input Impedance:	(Line level) 24 kOhm (Phono) 47 kOhm
Output types:	2 sets of loudspeakers (switchable), 5-way binding posts Pre-amp out
Pre-out Impedance:	470 Ohm
Remote control:	Yes, system remote
Dimensions (WxHxD):	437 x 72 x 342mm
Weight:	5.9 kg
Price:	£349.00
Manufacturer: Rotel (UK) Ltd Tel: +44 (0)1903 221500 Web: www.rotel.com	
Creek Evo	
Type:	Integrated stereo amplifier
Power Output:	85 watts per channel, 8 Ohms 170 watts per channel, 4 Ohms
Inputs:	4 x line level 1 x tape loop Optional m-m or m-c phono card
Input Sensitivity:	415mV
Input Impedance:	8 Ohm
Output types:	1 pair loudspeakers, via binding posts
Preamp output	
Power consumption:	340 Watts
Remote Control:	Yes, system remote
Dimensions (WxHxD):	430 x 80 x 340mm
Weight:	8.6 kg
Price:	£495.00 line-level only version £49.00 m-m phono card £59.00 m-c phono card £79.00 special edition (high-gain) m-m or m-c phono card
Manufacturer: Creek Audio Ltd Tel: +44 (0)1442 260146 Web: www.creekaudio.com	



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Focal Chorus 807V Loudspeaker

by Paul Messenger



The final sentence in my review of Focal's little floorstanding Chorus 714V in the last edition of *Hi-Fi+* read: "The one unanswered question lurking in the background is whether the stand-mount Chorus 706V, with its solitary but larger 165mm main driver, might not have greater purist appeal."

Well, I didn't get to play with the \$379 706Vs after all, or the \$500 806Vs for that matter. Instead a pair of \$629 Chorus 807Vs arrived. This model is quite similar to, but a little larger and better than either the 706V or 806V, and costs \$50 more than the 714V – and that's without including anything for the obligatory stands; Focal can supply some MDF ones at \$125, with neat retractable spikes, a decent footprint, and the facility to bolt the speakers in place.

Focal-JMLab is France's number one hi-fi speaker brand, and a major player on the international scene. Just twenty-five years old, it's still run by founder Jacques Mahul in St. Etienne, France's equivalent to Sheffield. The core engineering heart of Focal has always been its drive unit technology and Jacques was previously head of the development department at France's leading driver manufacturer, Audax.

The budget sector of the speaker market has been somewhat depressed (or should that be "depressing"? Ed.) in recent years, so Focal's decision to create and launch ten stereo pairs (plus AV add-ons) in two separate ranges during 2006 was a brave move. All the stereo pairs from both ranges feature distinctive V-shaped grilles, and tough, tapered enclosures. All use main drivers with paper cones coated with glass 'micro-sphere' damping – or Polyglass in Focal speak. The type-TNV tweeters have a version of Focal's familiar inverted dome, here made from an aluminium/magnesium alloy, with a claimed bandwidth to 28kHz. The drivers used in both new Chorus ranges are still made in France.

But the 807V stands apart from



▶ the other Chorus designs in one significant respect: it is the only model of the ten to use a 180mm main driver. The crossover networks of the 800-series also use superior components over the 700-series models and the enclosures look and feel more substantial too, with a high gloss laminate finish.

Whereas the 807V's Polyglass cone is 125mm in diameter, giving a cone area of around 4000 sq mm, the twin 100mm cones used in the 714V add up to 5000 sq mm, so the difference is significant but not all that great. Interestingly, the 807V actually has about 2dB more low bass output than the 714V, presumably because its port is tuned to 47Hz rather than 54Hz. What is less surprising is that the two-and-a-half-way floorstander, with its smaller driver operating up in the mid-band and presence region, has a rather smoother output as it approaches the tweeter crossover point.

Sensitivity is pretty similar for both models, the 807V having a slight advantage, though 90dB looks a more realistic figure than the 92dB claimed. The load falls to a fairly demanding 4.5 Ohms in the bass region and also presents a fairly complex impedance characteristic, while the pair-match is pretty good.

The 807V is best kept a little way out from the wall – a 70cm gap behind the speakers worked best in my room. There's not a lot of bottom octave bass below 40Hz, but the upper bass and lower mid-band, where many rivals tend to have weak output, is powerful, which ensures decent tonal warmth and richness.

The speakers were mostly auditioned on the end of my regular Naim-based system, with Chord Company Anthem interconnect and Signature speaker cable. Although Focal's attractive matching MDF-based stands were tried, they did perceptibly

'soften' the sound; more rigid metal affairs such as my regular Kudos S100s offered significantly improved precision. I also kept the 714Vs on hand for direct comparison between these two speakers



with somewhat similar ingredients arranged in different configurations.

No less interesting is the fact that the comparison closely follows what theory and measurement might lead one to expect, and that in turn means that the stand-mount holds most – but not all – the high cards.

The 807V sounds dynamically more expressive, more open, and has less time-smear and a smoother treble than the 714V. And probably because there's much less enclosure, with clear fresh air underneath as well as above and to the sides of the speaker, you get to hear more of the music and less of the box.

The cabinet is very well controlled for an inexpensive speaker, though some mid-band coloration is audible on speech, adding a degree of nasality and a slightly shut-in and 'pinched' effect. However, good dynamics give speech enough realism and expression to more than compensate for a bit of extra colour. The laid-back, almost muffled vocal style found on the Be Good Tanya's excellent *Hello Love* album makes it quite difficult to

decipher lyrics, but the 807V showed very good intelligibility, thanks in no small part to the excellent tweeter. This sounds very clean and sweet, while adding the fine detail and coherence that makes vocals easy to understand.

Deep bass isn't really on the agenda here, as I found when digging out Massive Attack's *Protection* for a spin. But although there's some lack of weight and authority compared to a full-bandwidth speaker, the 807V drives the music along really well. It definitely knows how to swing, bringing a fine sense of purpose and direction to rhythmic music.

This is a fine compact speaker with good free-dom from boxiness and an exceptional top end. Its bass alignment worked really well in my room, making a very strong case for the stand-mount option in preference to an equivalent floorstander. Since the marketplace seems determined to opt for the latter, isn't it about time some clever designer came up with an integral stand that really works. ➤

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	2 way ported stand-mount
Drivers:	180mm Polyglass bass/mid 25mm TNV Al/Mg inverted dome tweeter
Frequency Response:	50 Hz - 28kHz \pm 3dB 41Hz (-6dB)
Sensitivity:	92dB (measured 90dB)
Nominal Impedance:	8 ohms
Minimum Impedance:	4.2 ohms @ 160Hz
Dimensions (HxWxD):	448x237x333mm
Net Weight:	10.1kg
Price:	£629

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Blast From The Past...

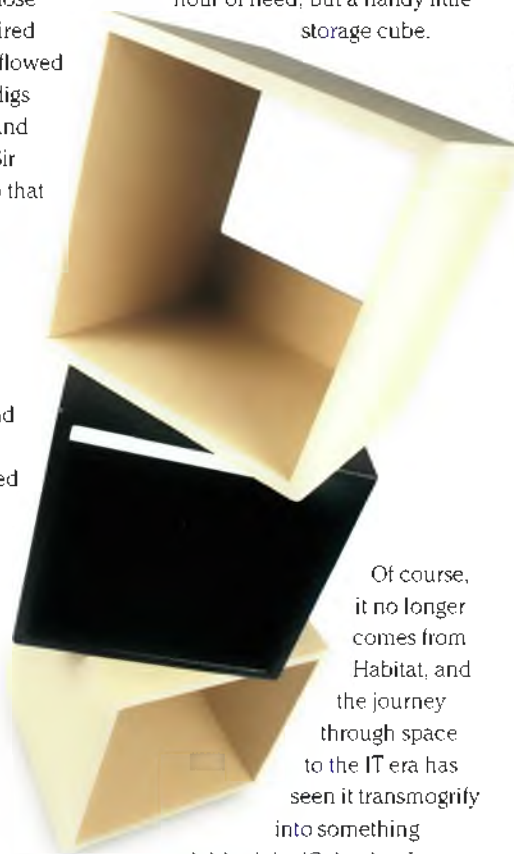
The fall and rise of the record storage cube

by Roy Gregory

In a time long, long ago, and in a universe (seemingly) far, far away – you know, the one where an honest to God stereo system was number two priority on the list of household purchases – there lived a race whose record collections, lovingly acquired through their teenage years, overflowed the storage provided by student digs and rented flats, council homes and high-rises. And then there came Sir Tel and his new religion, know to that world as “design” and worshiped at the house of Habitat. And Tel was bountiful and sold unto his followers, molded storage cubes, stylish, abstract and unquestionably modern, that just happened to be 13” on a side. And so were housed the records of a grateful nation – until they spurned the true faith, turned to CD and made Tel even richer in the process through their insatiable appetite for highly decorative but lamentably low capacity storage systems for their glossy new digital beer-mats!

In truth, you couldn't enter a house in the late '70's without tripping over at least one of those Habitat cubes, it's low, black shape lurking beside the sideboard with the Dual 505 on it, it's vicious corners waiting to gouge unsuspecting shins. The dividing shelf even acted as a record separator when placed in the vertical position, while 5mm holes in the middle of each side optimistically promised to stabilize stacked cubes with 1cm plastic dowels. The sheer numbers sold tell you that this was the right product at the right price at the right time. Sadly, it's also long gone...

Fast-forward through the years and across the galaxy to 21st C. Earth – and an analogue revival as persistent as it once seemed unlikely. And what should heave into view in the record lover's hour of need, but a handy little storage cube.



Of course, it no longer comes from Habitat, and the journey through space to the IT era has seen it transmogrify into something dubbed the iCube, but I suspect that even Lazarus wasn't as warmly greeted as this baby will be. What's more, evolution has also played its part, and the iCube of today is a far more sturdy and satisfactory beast than those Habitat cubes of old. Gone are the central shelf and the flimsy plastic carcass (you did not want to carry one of those old cubes when it was full of records). Gone too is the ridiculous hole for the joining dowels. Instead, the body of the iCube is glued and stapled

from 18mm MDF, making for a far more substantial structure. There's an inset baffle at the back which acts as both a stop (so your records don't go straight through) and a brace to make sure the box will take the weight and be strong enough to stack, while the internal dimension is 300mm, allowing enough room to get fingers over the top of standing albums easily, something of a problem with the earlier incarnation from Habitat. Pulling an arbitrary selection of assorted albums off my shelves demonstrated a capacity of 86 assorted single and gatefold albums and three smallish box sets – so around 100 single albums per cube I'd guess (maybe 95 to allow a bit of wiggle room).

The iCube comes in a choice of raw MDF to be finished by the customer and at a price of £29.99, or black crackle paint (just to prove that it hasn't left that earlier era totally behind) at £34.99. Postage will cost you \$4.99 for anything up to four cubes, buy seven and you'll get one free! They're sturdy, have nicely contoured edges, are thick enough to allow secure connection to other iCubes and cost the right amount. For those with burgeoning rather than established record collections it's an ideal solution. For those whose sprawling collections demand alternative accommodation, it makes for perfect ready-use storage next to the system. Cubism – it's definitely on the rise and you can worship with iCube between 8AM and 8PM GMT, at:

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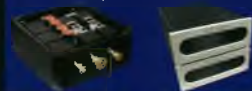
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Firm Foundations...

Coherent Systems mix Pure Sound, Focal and a touch of individual flair to stunning effect

by Roy Gregory

This system, based around the understated musical excellence of the Pure Sound A30 amplifier (previously known as the Bewitch) bears a more than passing resemblance to the one I put assembled around the Wilson Duettos back in Issue 48. In this instance the small but high quality speakers are Focal's 1007Bes, perched on the company's matching stands, while front-end also comes from Pure Sound, the CDP A800, first cousin in both material and sonic terms to the CD120 Linear that I employed, although in this case using a tube output stage and up-sampling. Coherent Systems' stated interest in the importance and contribution of the fundamentals that under-pin system set-up is reflected in the choice of what most people might consider ancillaries, although for this exercise they'd dialed back their input to a more real-world starting point, so that although the Townshend VSSS suspension rack and isolation cradles under the electronics and speakers might be considered somewhat tweaky, cabling was restricted to Chord Signature interconnects and Epic Twin loudspeaker cables, used with bog standard mains leads, exactly the sort of kit (arguably a cut above what) you'd find in many a domestic set-up.

This is a far from shabby starting point and I was intrigued to see what steps CS planned to elevate what was already a pretty enjoyable performance. First up was the installation of one of their own Connoisseur mains cables (£450 for a 2m length) on the A30 amp. Built in-house from conductors first discovered in a previous life (well, occupation at least) this comes from the middle rung of a three tier cable range specced entirely by CS. Only available from them, the cables employ rhodium plated, alloy conductors in an innovative hybrid dielectric. They are all heavily shielded with a proprietary braid and employ

the best connectors that CS can find, Furutech or Oyaide on the mains leads, WBT NextGens or Eichmans on the interconnects and either Eichman plugs or Furutech spades on the single-wire speaker cables. CS are not big fans of bi-wiring and prefer to provide high-quality jumpers constructed from their speaker cable where necessary – a policy that's certainly gaining ground in the UK market.

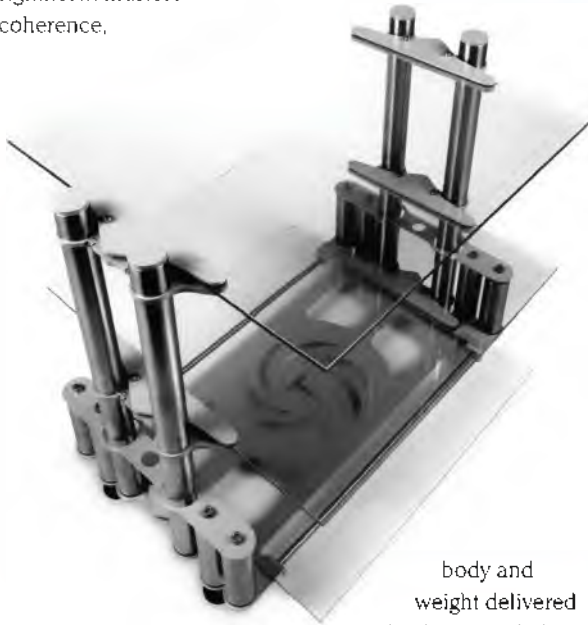
The benefits of the Connoisseur mains cable were far from subtle, adding body to instruments and voices, space around them and a welcome sense of pace and flow to the music. Not surprisingly, the next step was to add a Connoisseur interconnect (£450/1m

pr), followed by speaker cables (£750/3m pr) and finally a second mains lead for the CD player. With each step the system moved towards greater colour, weight and musical momentum, banishing the grain and tonal greyness that had inhibited the original set-up. But the icing on the cake was the increasingly relaxed, unforced and engaging quality that came with the Connoisseur cables. Music started to breathe, reveling in a newfound rhythmic freedom. But it was adding that final mains lead that pulled everything together, injecting a sense of purpose and intent to the playing. It's an impressive performance on two counts: these cables are produced in tiny quantities by a pair of committed individuals with no corporate structure or funding behind them, yet their sonic performance, the clarity with which they achieve their musical ends makes them seriously good value for money. Of course, only being available from CS obviates the need for a dealer margin as well as freeing them from the onerous burden of a promotional budget – but that can only be



► described as a win-win situation for the end user. They certainly lifted this system into the realms of something special.

But that was only the start. Next up were Stillpoints cones and risers under the electronics, delivering the expected increase in dynamic range and discrimination, clarity, focus and transparency. These weigh in at £245 for a set of three, the risers adding an extra \$80 a set. Building on the significant musical coherence,



body and weight delivered by the upgraded cable loom, the system was

starting to sound really excellent considering the relatively modest overall cost. Sure, it lacked some scale and authority, a little drive and purpose, but boy was it fun to listen to and it really drew you into the musical proceedings. It had now also reached a level of performance at which CS finally felt the basic elements were approaching their potential, a point where the listener was actually receiving the music they'd already paid for! More often than not this is exactly what CS find themselves doing with new customers, although the specifics will vary with system and musical tastes.

With the house-keeping fundamentals of support, mains and signal cabling dealt with, it was finally possible to turn to the possibility of equipment upgrades. Of course, the preceding experience and my reactions to its various

The System:

Pure Sound CDP A800 CD player	£895
Pure Sound A30 amplifier	£1100
Focal JMlabs 1007Be	£2295
Focal JMlabs loudspeaker stands	£550
Cable loom -	
1m Connoisseur interconnects	£450
3m Connoisseur speaker cables	£750
2x 2m Connoisseur mains leads	£450ea.
Isolation -	
Townshend VSSS Rack from	£900
Townshend VSSS Loudspeaker Cradles	£750pr.
6x Stillpoints Cones and Risers	£670
Upgrade 1:	
Belles Soloist 3 line-stage	£875
0.3m Connoisseur interconnect	£240
Upgrade 2:	
Focal JMlabs 1037Be loudspeakers	£6395
Upgrade 3:	
Esoteric X-03 CD player	£4895

steps had given CS a clear view of exactly where my musical priorities lie. So perhaps I shouldn't have been surprised when their next step consisted of adding a line-stage to the system... in this case the \$875 Belles Soloist 3, a small, solid-state unit with a profusion of inputs, a tape loop and full remote control. It also required an additional cable, the 0.3m of



Connoisseur necessary adding another \$240 to the bill, but it was immediately obvious that this was money well spent. The increase in apparent bandwidth, stability and authority was really worthwhile, reflected in far more natural vocal delivery, underpinned by the ►



▶ singer's chest and more articulate diction. The subtle cues that reveal phrasing and vocal technique were much more telling, adding significantly to the convincing quality of the performance, bringing you closer to the singer. With hindsight it's an obvious step (after all, a volume control and input switch on the front-end of a power amp circuit is no substitute for a real line-stage) but I wonder how many dealers would suggest it, or customers consider it.

As an aside, at this point CS also demonstrated an all solid-state alternative, teaming the Soloist 3 with the matching Soloist 5, 65 watt power amp. For me the fluidity, colour and presence of the Pure Sound A30 won over the control and separation of the Belles amp, but the purpose of the exercise was to show a valid option (and demonstrate that they are more than one

trick ponies). However, whilst I can see the appeal, in my case it really was no contest.

At this point we reach a fork in the road: there will be those who, limited by the size of their listening room, are happy with the astonishingly capable 1007Bes. For them, a CD player upgrade beckons, but CS wanted to take an alternative route with me, replacing the small stand-mounts with the much larger, floor-standing, three-way 1037Bes – and why not. After all, an £895 CD player used with a £6395 speaker system holds no horrors for one who willfully mixes

the CD 120 Linear with the Wilson Duettets. Once again, the unorthodox approach proved dramatically successful, the larger speakers' 93dB efficiency offering no challenge to the A30's headroom, the substantial output transformers delivering the necessary control at low frequencies.

With the 1037s in play, the benefits of serious bandwidth were well and truly driven home. A brand new model, it enters the range above the 1027Be,

using the same mid and treble units teamed with three 190mm bass units in place of the smaller floorstander's pair of 165mm drivers. The greater swept area and increased cabinet volume are significant, adding weight and more significantly, real scale to the sound. For the first time the performance steps free of the speakers, the added bass extension balancing the sweetness and clarity of the Beryllium tweeter to dramatic effect. The speed and material continuity of the new bass drivers blends seamlessly with

the mid-band (both use Focal's proprietary W sandwich cones, although each is optimized for its specific function) meaning that the extra bandwidth, dynamic range and weight are delivered without compromising the superb detail, transparency and focus of the 1007. Here we have a speaker that combines the appealing virtues of a standmount with the extra weight and genuine believability that only comes from larger speaker systems. Now the extra authority delivered by adding the line-stage to the



Coherent Systems: On a mission...

Coherent Systems is a two-man band consisting of Tony Sallis and partner Paul Whittington and it's been running for just over a year. Based in an unassuming family house tucked beneath the shadow of the brooding Malvern hills, their two modestly proportioned demo rooms are filled with a carefully selected range of products from the companies represented in this system as well as Audio Physic, Revolver, Bel Canto and others. They also act as UK distributor for Belles and RPG, as well as manufacturing their own cables, ranging from £195 to £750 for a metre pair of interconnects, each with mains and speaker cables to match. Then there are their own external clocks, mains conditioners, an acoustic assessment facility and European servicing responsibility for Belles, all underlining their technical savvy. But it's the range of support accessories, disc treatments and the almost obsessive seriousness with which they treat system set up and matching that sets them apart from so many dealers. In many respects it's an attitude which mirrors my own and it comes as no surprise to hear them extolling the virtues of sophisticated support systems and complete cable looms, the sonic importance of correct terminations and disc treatments. These things are the foundation on which system performance rests. The heartening thing is to see the way in which CS can tilt that foundation to match the sonic preferences of their individual listeners.

It's also interesting to note how many of their customers are prepared to travel. Indeed, only about 30% of their business is based locally. It underlines just how rare this type of knowledge is



these days, as well as how convincingly it can be applied. In many respects, CS represents a new kind of dealer and a future for the high-end, reestablishing the importance of demonstration and the ability of specialists dealers to add value to existing hi-fi systems as well as brand new ones. This was a compelling demonstration of just how much can be coaxed from what might appear at first glance to be relatively basic components, as well

as what can be built once you've established a solid foundation. A demo with these guys (by appointment only) can be something of an eye opener, as well as a lesson that both customers and other dealers would do well to take seriously. Worth the journey? And then some...

Coherent Systems
Tel. (44)(0)1684 310849
Mob. 07815 890303
Net. www.coherent-systems.co.uk

▶ system really paid off. Without the little Belles in circuit, I doubt the benefits of the 1037s would have been nearly as apparent – or nearly as satisfying. Make no mistake, this was a seriously viable and extremely engaging and entertaining set up.

Final step on this journey revisited the CD player, substituting Esoteric's \$5k X-03 for the Pure Sound. Detail, transparency, the separation of images as well as their solidity and stability all took a serious step forward, but more than anything else it was the range of textures available that really high-lighted the increase in musical sophistication. Again, the 1007s would have told you about this, but it was the dimensionality delivered by the 1037s that made the benefits so apparent and musically important, once again suggesting that CS have got their



priorities right – and leaving me with a hankering to get both the CD player and the speakers home for further audition.

By now we'd taken the Pure Sound A30 about as far as it was going to go. The next stage would involve major

surgery in the amplifier department, perhaps best left for another day. But it's hard not to be impressed by both what had been achieved in the

end, and by the logical coherence and musical success of the steps along the way. Increasingly one is forced to question the accepted wisdom on which so many of us base buying decisions. Coherent Systems pose those questions and then provide convincing answers. ➤

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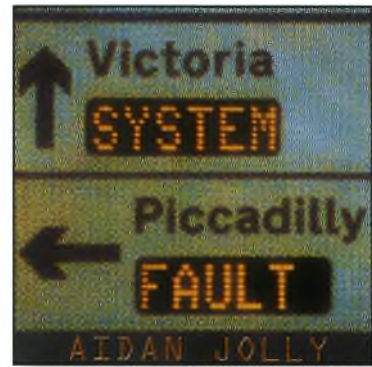
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Record Reviews

How To Read Them



Aidan Jolly

System Fault

Well Red Productions WR001 

Listening to Aidan Jolly brings to mind the intricate wordplay of Ian Dury and the man-on-the-street leanings of Billy Bragg. Pretty love songs are not the order of the day here; the focus is firmly on the impact this world has on ordinary people and the lives they lead. When Jolly's on a rant the words come tumbling out like a machine gun. Take 'Dennis The Menace', where he gives us characters like Dennis who's 'a menace in his old jackboots that he got from an army store, they were ex-East German 'cos he wanted to be learning how to kick down front doors' and Jay, 'the skinhead in the BNP who reads all the crap in their magazines and puts it between his ears.' Nothing's safe from Jolly's acerbic eye: the violence present in the guise of religion ('Landfall'), the moronic way we hang on to the coattails of the past ('History'), the sweat and toil of our ancestors in their quest for better pay and rights ('Sea To The Sky') - it's all there and quite brilliantly handled it is too. The last track, an untitled bluesy rap about one of this country's more curious institutions, 'Jeffrey Archer of Weston-Super-Mare, the world famous storytelling multi-millionaire', is a fine slab of satire and a fitting end to a unique piece of work.

AH

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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, Anke K. Bronner, 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

-  CD
-  Gold CD
-  HD
-  XR
-  Double Disc
-  DVD
-  SACD
-  Hybrid SACD
-  Multi-Channel
-  120g LP
-  150g LP
-  180g LP
-  10" LP
-  Availability As S/H LP
-  Vinyl Double Album



Allison Moorer

Getting Somewhere

Sugarhill Records SU6CD4012 (CD)

Allison Moorer can never be accused of churning out the same old sounds. Debut album *Alabama Song* was straight ahead country, *The Hardest Part* (still my favourite) had a distinct Stonesy vibe, *Miss Fortune* found her in country soul territory, the double live *Show* was understandably a blend of everything and her last, *Duel* had more of an Americana/rock feel.

This latest one swims in similar waters to *Duel*, with production handled by new hubby Steve Earle. All the songs were written by Allison and fly by in an instant; 10 tracks/31 minutes - no room for fillers or hidden tracks here.

The close bond between big sister Shelby Lynne and Allison can be felt on 'Where You Are', a touching ballad with one of those stick-in-the-head choruses, and there's also one written for Mr. Earle called 'If It's Just For Today'. One gets the feeling that Moorer is constantly reminded of his track record (he's been married 6 times) but here she takes a philosophical stance on the subject:

"...but you got me for as long as I get to stay, even if it's just for today."

Earle plays guitar and moog on a few tracks, but this is definitely Moorer's album; at no time does she give the impression she needs to lean on anybody - not even the great man himself.

AH



Jessica Blake

Three Good Reasons

Pufffish Records PR02 (CD)

Jessica Blake was born in the UK but grew up on an Indian reservation in Florida. She came back to London in 2002 and opened a shop on the Portobello Road where she met producer Ben Wright. They got together personally and professionally and she released her debut album *Take Your Time* to pretty favourable reviews. I never heard that one but it has to be said that her latest is a pretty safe affair.

According to the press release Blake's two biggest influences are country and southern rock, but I can't hear much of the latter in these songs. Yes, there are a couple that border on it in the shape of 'Don't Try This At Home' and 'Dancing With The Dead' but to call it southern rock would require a pretty vivid imagination. She shows more promise when she handles the more sensitive material, such as 'Colorado, New Mexico'.

I think it fair to say that this album wanders about not really knowing what it wants to be. If Blake's aiming to crack the country market in the USA she needs to sharpen up her own songs or hand the job over to one of the Nashville hotshots, because quite frankly the ones on display here don't quite cut the mustard. The alternative's to hire a ballsy band and make a southern rock album.

Now there's a thought.

AH



Jim Byrnes

House Of Refuge

Black Hen Music BHMCD932 (CD)

The music business has a history of pandering to actors who think they have the talent to be rock or pop stars. Most get exposed fairly quickly and return to their chosen careers, but some have the talent to carve out a career in the recording world. Billy Bob Thornton did it a few years ago with a great country rock album called *Private Radio* and Jim Byrnes, an American actor living in Canada, has managed to pull it off with *House Of Refuge*. It's clear from the sleeve and the lyrical content where Byrnes' religious allegiance lies, but unlike some other artists he doesn't allow it to become cloying or tiresome, and it doesn't detract from the album as a whole. Byrnes has a warm and fulsome voice, one that switches from a bluesy wail to a soft, honey-coated croon. Hoagy Carmichael's 'Stardust' is an affectionately sung tribute to his mother and shows just how flexible that voice is. At the other end of the spectrum 'Didn't It Rain', is a full-on gospel workout with a thumping drum beat and authentic vocal harmonies from The Sojourners. As well as some well chosen Robert Johnson and Skip James numbers there's also a faithful rendition of Nick Lowe's 'The Beast In Me', beautifully sung and played and a fitting way to bring this fine album to a close.

AH





Mike Harrison

Late Starter

Halo Records HALOCD17

Whenever lists are drawn up as to who the best blues/rock singers are, the names first out of the hat are invariably the Paul Rodgers, the Robert Plants and the Mick Jagers. One name consistently overlooked is ex-Spooky Tooth front man Mike Harrison, a travesty which needs addressing and hopefully will be with the release of this cracking album. It's sad to learn, although hardly surprising given the reputation of the music business, that Harrison's never made a single penny from his early recordings. It's something he's understandably bitter about and he swore he'd never put his name to a contract again. Time's a healer though, and in 2001 he recorded *Touch* with The Hamburg Blues Band, an album aficionados of blues/rock should make every effort to track down. *Late Starter* finds him in the studio once more, this time to record a great batch of tunes made famous by the likes of Ray Charles, Etta James, Delbert McClinton and Otis Redding. Like Etta, Harrison is a master interpreter who glides effortlessly from blues to rock to soul - whatever the song requires he can supply it in spades. Late starter he may be, but hopefully he'll get to make up for lost time. So welcome back Mike, it's so good to hear you again. And to the record buying public...welcome to the first great album Of 2007.

AH



Nanci Griffith

Ruby's Torch

Rounder Records 1161-3265-2

Nanci Griffith's fans have been asking her to record an album of torch songs for some time, so not wishing to let them down that's precisely what she's done. *Ruby's Torch* is something of a first in a number of ways. It's the first time she's not played guitar or sung background vocals, and also the first time she's had to rely on a conductor to ushern her vocal parts. Now, the burning question is: does it work? Well, yes and no. There's no denying Nanci has a lovely voice (fortunately not one of those hollering, whoop-it-up vehicles favoured by the Nashville pop/country brigade) but, dare I say it, it's a little too authentic to be stepping outside of what it does best. All the songs featured are tried and tested classics and the performances of The Blue Moon Orchestra, conductor Kristin Wilkinson and producer Peter Collins can't be faulted, it's just that at times Griffiths sounds a little stretched. That said, when it does all come together the results are more than satisfying; 'When I Dream' and the beautiful 'Grapefruit Moon', one of three Tom Waits compositions, being cases in point. *Ruby's Torch* is not without its merits and sure to please her legion of fans, but I can't help thinking Shelby Lynne would have done it better.

AH



Ruf Records Anthology

Various Artists

Ruf Records RUF1121

Over the last 12 years Ruf Records have gone about the business of bringing some of the most prodigious talents in blues onto our stereos and into our living rooms. The label now has an enviable roster of artists catering for just about everybody's tastes; household names like Walter Trout, Canned Heat and Luther Allison sit alongside the stars of tomorrow, handsomely represented here by the likes of Aynsley Lister, Ana Popovic and the mercurial Ian Parker. This anthology is split into two. The first disc is a 12 track CD chosen by head honcho Thomas Ruf and is a fair representation of what the label is all about. The second is a 13 track live DVD of the bands in their natural habitat, and it contains some cracking moments. Anyone fortunate enough to have seen Blues Caravan on their recent tour will enjoy once again the guitar fest offered up by Aynsley Lister, Erja Lytinen and Ian Parker on 'All That Time', whilst red-blooded males can lust over the gorgeous form of Ana Popovic, while hopefully not forgetting to admire her amazing talents on guitar and vocals! However, top spot goes to Ian Parker for a spellbinding performance of 'Awake At Night'; he has great stage presence and is an excellent singer, guitarist and songwriter who will surely go on to much greater things. A brilliant set.


AH





Wilson Pickett

The Definitive

Atlantic Records 8122700262 


When Wilson Pickett died in 2006, soul music lost one of its most dynamic and respected performers. Like most of the black singers of his day Pickett grew up in a harsh and impoverished environment. One of 11 children, he would do two days at school and three days picking cotton in the fields until his fingers bled. He recognized a way out of hardship when he heard Sam Cooke and Aretha Franklin singing secular music; "if the devil got them" he realised, "then they may as well get me too." Pickett's tenure at Stax produced some of the funkiest, hardest-hitting soul sides ever. The combination of that scream and Steve Cropper's highly distinctive playing proved irresistible on monster cuts like '634-5789', 'Ninety Nine and a Half' and the legendary 'In The Midnight Hour', still guaranteed to fill a dance floor in seconds flat. Over the years the hits kept coming; 'Mustang Sally', 'Land Of A Thousand Dances', 'Funky Broadway'... classic slabs of the toughest soul driven by a voice unparalleled in its field. This compilation includes a dazzling reworking of the Beatles' 'Hey Jude', a song Pickett claimed he would never cut because it was "too weird"... that was until a young session guitarist called Duane Allman convinced him otherwise. This is a wonderful collection by a wonderful singer; set aside a couple of hours and immerse yourself fully.

AH



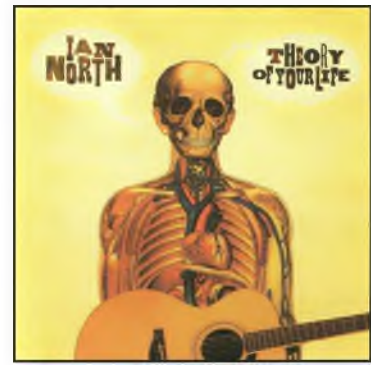
Maria Muldaur

Sings Love Songs of Bob Dylan

Telarc CD-B3643 

I've been a Maria Muldaur fan since her early days with her equally talented brother Geoff. Better yet, she's joined here by a fine band, although sadly Amos Garrett, he of the superb guitar solo in Maria's 'Midnight at the Oasis' appears on just one number. A long time Dylan fan, Maria was initially inspired to record this set by Dylan's 'Moonlight' from his Love & Theft album. Encouraged by the man himself she realised that whilst many people had recorded Dylan's more scathing material there was also a stockpile of tender and passionate love songs that might lend themselves to her voice. She was right. First off, the band is excellent; really soulful and tight with excellent lead guitar from Cranston Clements listen to the fluid electric solo on 'To Be Alone With You' or the equally adept acoustic solo on 'Heart of Mine', drums from Tony Braunagel and keyboards from David Torkanowsky. Maria's soulful, bluesy delivery makes these numbers her own. 'Moonlight' comes across like some forgotten '40s torch song. 'You're Going To Make me Lonesome When You Go' is a slinky, funky joy, and 'I'll Be Your Baby Tonight' with Amos Garrett guesting, could have been written for her. Of course these interpretations don't, and don't set out to, better Dylan's originals but they do realise a fresh, superbly performed and very enjoyable set.

DD



Ian North

Theory of Your Life

Ear rational Music ERM 001 

Songsmith and rhythm guitarist Ian North names fellow Canadians Neil Young and Joni Mitchell among influences as diverse as Miles Davis and J.S. Bach. Unsurprisingly, he specialises in poetic and confessional narratives, more observational than redemptive, and that these songs supplement their memorable images and personal recollections with catchy melodies and smartly handled lyrical trysts. The deliberate vocal style of their delivery is reminiscent of Young, but North is less mournful. On five of the eleven tracks found in *Theory of Your Life*, Ian is joined by Jennifer Claveau, and her silky soft harmonies further sweetens his light yet full bodied voice. All of the songs through their intimacy and mellow instrumental arrangements for mandolin, accordion and bass lean towards the folk side of the contemporary Americana scene. Beneath each story there's an insight or simple message offered. In the case of 'Leaving Buffalo' when you move beyond the gentle humour there is a serious side to a line like "So I went awol from Fort Bragg in 1972, just after all the hippies died and just before the war was through" as North speculates on the many false promises of freedom experienced in his life.

Supplier: frontieruk@btconnect.com

RP





Joni Mitchell

Blue

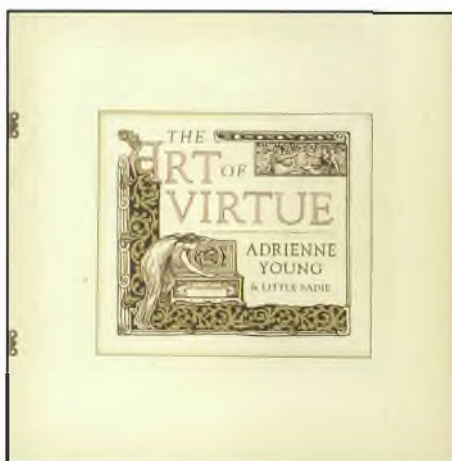
Warners/RhinoVinyl/Reprise 74842 **180g**

It would be 23 years and 13 albums before Joni Mitchell returned to Reprise Records. *Blue*, a watershed release for Mitchell was her fourth album in a career that has spanned almost 40 years! Her music has evolved from deeply personal folk stylings into pop, jazz, avant-garde and even world music. She's definitely not to everyone's taste, but I find it hard to resist her voice when it's been so well recorded. An awesome collaboration between the great Kevin Gray and Steve Hoffman – as well as some major hunting in the tape vaults to get to the original tapes – has given us, I think, a masterpiece of vocal repertoire in what is considered a high-point album for Mitchell. It was released approximately a year after she penned the anthem 'Woodstock', made famous by Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young, as well as previous numbers written for Fairport Convention, Judy Collins and earlier hits like 'Big Yellow Taxi' which had already assured Mitchell her place in the pop/folk pantheon. You can almost hear the confidence feeding the lyrical and musical freedom here. My favourite cut on this album is 'California' – but you'd better believe that it will reveal any shortcomings in your cartridge set-up. A great disc with great sound.

Supplier: www.warnerbrnsrecords.com

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Adrienne Young

The Art Of Virtue **CD**

The Art Of Virtue is an album inspired by the idealism of Benjamin Franklin. A booklet containing his *Thirteen Virtues* that includes ideals like resolution, sincerity, justice and humility has been enclosed as part of the CD package. It's a kind of aide memoir – a reminder of just what lies behind the music. Adrienne Young takes upon herself the custodianship of these values and, as with her earlier release *Flow To The End Of The Row*, they are sensitively and sensibly managed. Generally, she chooses to reflect upon them through her own personal and family experiences. It suits her country blues style and, in this way, instead of patronising the listener with overblown or overly grandiose principles, she humanises the themes. Applying a practical and recognisable approach draws dividends. Images of her grandmother for 'Pretty Ella Arkansas' and that of her grandfather for the dramatic arrest of a viscous killer in 'Rastus Russell' resonate. In her eyes these people can be relied upon as noteworthy witnesses and keepers of the faith. There are also some simple homespun philosophies buried here too. Notions of commitment and family rest behind a lively dance tune like 'Wedding Rings', while those childhood countryside reminiscences heard in the song 'Hills & Hollers' recalls simpler and less turbulent times. This mixture of Young's original song writing, the

traditional music like 'Farther Along/Billy In The Ground' and classic country tracks such as Uncle Dave Macon's 'Don't Get Weary Children', provides a stark contrast with today's social atrophy. However, while her criticism of the modern American lifestyle remains undiminished, there is always a constructive alternative at hand. For example, when she casts doubt upon the sustainability of current agricultural policy, a solution is readily put forward. In this instance it can be found through her support of the FoodRoutes Network and its 'Buy Fresh, Buy Local' campaign. It may not strike fear into the heart of global capitalism, but once again it does thoughtfully draw us back into those agrarian roots that are the epicentre of Young's world. After all, at a most basic level, we are what we eat, and Adrienne clearly figures that this was a starting point in her own life that could easily be applied elsewhere, leading perhaps to wider change at a grass roots level. I believe she'd like us to participate and share the burden in this stewardship, yet at the same time develop and apply our own set of ideals and principles. Away from the understated ideology, Adrienne's work at a musical level is thoroughly absorbing. Few works of art are thus intelligently crafted, entertaining, or so beautifully sung and played. Her credentials as a modern bluegrass diva cannot be faulted. Outwardly, optimism courses through *The Art Of Virtue* and she is as perky as a game buck in the delivery of its message.



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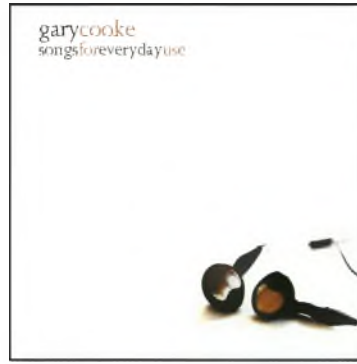
Erhu Chant
Yu Hong Mei, Erhu soloist; Wulin, Konghou (Chinese traditional harp); Liu Yin Xuan, Yang Qin (cymbalo); Chen Zhe, (piano).

Channel of China (Channel Classics) CCS SA 80206  Townsend Records TOWNCD4 


The erhu consists of a long vertical stick-like neck, at the top of which are two large tuning pegs and at the bottom is a small resonator body (sound box) which is covered with python skin on the front (playing) side. Two strings are attached from the pegs to the base and a small loop of string (qian jin) is placed around the neck and strings and acts as a nut which pulls the strings toward the skin holding a small wooden bridge in place. The instrument is played with the sound box resting on the floor, rather than being positioned under the chin like the 'Western' violin. The music is quite extraordinary and exceptionally involving. The tone is very beautiful and I just sat transfixed for repeated hearings, enjoying the tremendous skills of these musicians. One of the great treats for me was that having heard this 'sound' in various films over the years, I've always been fascinated by it. But I've never had the pleasure of hearing the erhu recorded as well as this release. A really interesting disc and highly recommended.

Supplier: www.channelclassics.com

RSF



Gary Cooke
Songs For Everyday Use

Townsend Records TOWNCD4 


Gary Cooke, with his raw and chiselled voice, deeply personal but ubiquitous themes and an attitude as robust as his subject matter, demonstrates a considerable if embryonic song writing talent. A melancholy and moody posture, sadness barely hidden beneath the surface and some underlying yet contrasting optimism seeps through this album, making *Songs For Everyday Use* an intriguing proposition. Cooke - toyed with for 'She Plays With A Word like Love'. Cooke - contemplating those unspoken feelings between a parent and child on 'Tables Must Turn'. Cooke - reflecting upon another one of those drink-laden nights out and the nature of friendship in 'Seven Day Weekend'. Cooke - collectively exploring all these eminently recognisable experiences through a series of telling vignettes. Dealing honestly and openly, working through life's issues and those personal demons until he arrives at an answer to the sort of problems that have at sometime or other plagued nearly every one of us. He rarely comes up empty. He sings passionately, yet without that navel gazing propensity for over analysis or self-indulgence. Clearly these sentiments have been carefully weighed, and then delivered with a conscious lack of sentimentality. It gives his contemporary songs much greater integrity than one could usually or reasonably expect from this material.

Supplier: www.garycooke.co.uk

RP



Brett Dennen
So Much More

Dualtone 80302-01240-2 

Occasionally, just occasionally, art and reality collide in a label so right, so apposite, that it perfectly captures a mood, a moment, a movement. In the case of Brett Dennen, young, unsung and out of California, that label is "folk nouveau", containing in a single phrase the peculiar combination of tradition and almost naïve purity that marks his music apart. There'll be the inevitable comparisons with Dylan, which will serve neither to any great degree. Yes, there's the distinctive voice, its not quite nasal whine, but it's an individuality that worms its way beneath your guard, enticing rather than irritating and definitely the sound of now. Deceptively simple lyrics carry hidden weight, juxtaposed and somehow reinforced by the fragile beauty of the melodies and sparse, uncluttered arrangements. This is about the songs and songs are about words and tunes and Brett Dennen never forgets and never lets you forget that that's the case. This is his second album, wrapped around the horribly addictive 'The One Who Loves You The Most', five minutes of the most perfectly poised and catchily understated pop you'll hear this year. That takes hold and the other tracks weigh right in. With lyrical and musical talent to burn, a message and the skill to insinuate rather than ram it home, Mr Dennen's going far. Get in on the ground floor and enjoy the ride.

RG



The Moody Blues Remastered

by Richard Clews

Days Of Future Passed

Universal 983 215-0 / Hybrid Multichannel SACD



In Search Of The Lost Chord

Universal 983 214-7 / Hybrid Multichannel SACD



On The Threshold Of A Dream

Universal 983 215-3 / Hybrid Multichannel SACD



To Our Children's Children's Children

Universal 983 215-6 / Hybrid Multichannel SACD



A Question Of Balance

Universal 983 770-6 / Hybrid Multichannel SACD



The Moody Blues may be the first band to progress from the pub circuit to outer space. This is entirely in keeping with their evolution from hard-hitting R'n'B to quasi-symphonic concept albums. Universal Music have chosen several of the latter for lavish re-issue treatment, resulting in the multi-channel SACDs under review. Surround versions of Sixties music: the very notion of this will make some fans of the bold Brummies cover behind their gatefold LPs! Yet the remix process has enhanced rather than diminished the power of this early prog rock.

Progressive music has always been a broad street, even if the Moodies trod it in moccasins rather than ELP's bovine boots. However these SACDs do justice to the care taken over the original recordings. *Days of Future Passed* was completed in five days but there is no evidence of the session being rushed. Any distortion – and you won't find too much – is down to the limitations of early recorders and mixers, not poor engineering.

For the re-masters, Justin Hayward and producer/

engineer Alberto Parodi searched the Decca and Moody Blues vaults. Paschal Byrne and Mark Powell of The Audio Archive Company transferred the analogue tapes using Studer and 3M machines to a SADiE DSD8 workstation, and authored the final SACDs. Without listening to the source tapes it's impossible to judge if anything was lost in the process, but the remasters are thankfully free of the aggressive limiting and over-zealous noise removal that has blighted many re-issues.

Technical aspects aside, has the music lost any appeal? The Moody Blues are still an acquired taste. There are plenty

of accessible, sing-a-long numbers on these albums, but the song titles and sleeve design scream 'prog'. However, put aside the emotional baggage of the prog rock era (and the punk counter-revolution) and it is much easier to give due credit.

Strangely, 1967's *Days Of Future Passed* fares the least well. Peter Knight's orchestral arrangements are of their time, not helped by the hollow, slightly resonant reverberation that typifies Sixties light orchestral music. What is remarkable is the degree of integration between

the London Festival Orchestra and the band. Perhaps this is because the album was originally planned as a Dvorak vs rock 'n' roll exercise for Decca's Deram offshoot, and as a demo for the nebulous 'Deramic Sound System'. Perhaps 'Deramic Recording Method' would have been a more helpful moniker, as the 'system' involved recording at an unusually high level and swamping echo returns on the console to create a wide soundstage. The final touch was to apply bucketfuls of reverb.

'Nights In White Satin' remains the album's standout ▶



▶ track, and its transition to multi-channel will face great scrutiny. No matter - it's still a knockout forty years later. If you genuinely detest surround, or even stereo, at least Universal have provided excellent compensation: the original mono single masters of 'Nights...' and five other songs, as part of an accompanying 19 track disc of rarities.


In Search Of The Lost Chord saw the band swap the orchestra for psychedelic seasoning. The results are occasionally amusing ('Departure'), predictable ('Legend Of A Mind', a tribute to their friend Timmy Leary), or sublimely melodic ('Om', 'Voices In The Sky'). Again, there is a bonus disc stuffed with alternate mixes (including a Mellotron mix of 'The Word' for Streetly Electronics disciples) and BBC session recordings.

On The Threshold Of A Dream and *To Our Children's Children's Children's Children's Children* (a typesetter's nightmare) were both released in 1969. Quite a feat, given the complex arrangements and overdubbing involved. *Threshold* contains perhaps the most painful track to make it to SACD thus far: 'In The Beginning'. The high-pitched whine of the



'great computer' invades one's ear canals like a marauding Albion fan. This is hardly ameliorated by couplets such as the pithy, 'There you go lad/ Keep as cool as you can/ Face piles of trials with smiles'....

Despite this, *Threshold* is one of the band's best-loved albums, and rightly so. 'Lovely To See You' and 'Never Comes The Day' successfully blended rock with pastoral folk and have become important parts of the band's heritage. 'Higher And Higher' and 'Gypsy' from *To Our Children's...* set the Moodies for the next decade, which they heralded with *A Question Of Balance*. This is a treat in surround: the swirling guitars of 'Question' are given air to breathe, while the multi-layered vocals in 'The Balance' taken on an even more Phil Spector-like majesty.

Overall, Universal's investment has paid off handsomely. This is exactly the kind of re-issue project that SACD was made for: a collection of classic music that deserves restoration and sympathetic remixing for surround. The copious bonus tracks, deluxe packaging and liner notes are a welcome addition. 

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E.S.T.

Esbjörn Svensson Trio

by Jason Kennedy

Tell the average youngster that you like jazz music and the chances are high that they will recoil in horror and make a hasty getaway, which is fair enough when you hear what passes for jazz on certain Saturday afternoon radio shows. But that's the deal with jazz: it's a broad field that includes everything from Acker Bilk to John Zorn, yet the chances of finding someone who appreciates both extremes are pretty low. The Swedish Esbjörn Svensson Trio, or e.s.t. as it is usually called, sits somewhere in the middle of the jazz pantheon, managing to appeal to both jazz connoisseurs and the mass market by playing music that is essentially defined by rhythm and devoid of tedious solo turns by its close knit members.

Drummer Magnus Öström, double bass player Dan Berglund and pianist Esbjörn Svensson have been laying down grooves together since 1993 when they recorded *When Everyone Has Gone* for Swedish label Dragon. This was followed by the rather sweetly titled *Mr & Mrs Handkerchief* (Prophone), a live album recorded in 1995. The latter was later re-released under the more sober if accurate title *e.s.t. Live '95* by the band's current label ACT. At the time it sounded

rather out of place because it followed e.s.t.'s two studio albums, *From Gagarin's Point of View* (1999) and *Good Morning Susie Soho* (2000) on which the band sound distinctly different after five years of musical development.

The trio came about because Svensson and Öström were childhood buddies. Svensson originally wanted to play drums but as the family only had a piano at home that's what he learned; there's a story that he attempted to build his own drum kit out of odds and ends and did his best to sound like Sweet's 'Ballroom Blitz' – ambitious stuff. As it turned out Öström was given a drum kit and according to Svensson:

"he brought it over to my house, and we started playing. We had no idea how to play, but it was a lot of fun. Since we didn't have a teacher, and no one was telling us how to play, we were able to gradually develop our music in a very unique, individualistic way."

This duo established themselves as sidemen on the Swedish and Danish jazz scene, going on to form their first trio in 1990. It wasn't until 1993 however that they connected with bass player Dan Berglund and started to make a sound that earned their first recording contract. Since that time e.s.t. has produced ten albums and a live DVD, with a sound that has evolved in a gradual fashion from Thelonius Monk

inspired pure jazz into a rhythmically dominated form that crosses the jazz blues boundary and shows influences as wide apart as JS Bach and Metallica.

The influence of Monk is not to be underestimated, yet their own music rarely approaches his sophistication, largely because e.s.t. have modern sensibilities that reflect the tastes of those outside the intellectual world of jazz. Their work is engaging yet rarely challenging and e.s.t. *plays Monk* is about as difficult as the band's sound gets. They are more about great interplay

than great solos. Tunes like the title track from *Strange Place For Snow* reveal the skill with which they can manipulate an essentially simple theme and take it to places that while not unexpected are certainly inspired. The interplay between all three crosses the border into the psychic or intuitive and there are times when drum and piano in particular gel so well as to seem like the same instrument.

Then there are the distortions and treatments which on albums like *Seven Days of Falling* give the impression of actual faults with the manufacturing process of the disc. ▶



▶ itself, the opening track being particularly onerous in this respect. Esbjörn explains how and why he does this in the interview that follows, but this doesn't make it any less jarring. In the live situation such effects are somehow less intrusive and you can hear what he's getting at but at home the tendency to reach for the next track button can be very strong.



When I met Esbjörn he had just got off the bus from Heathrow after a short break mid-tour. I asked him how long he had been on the road and he replied "sometimes I used to say we've been on tour for fourteen years". And he was only half joking. They have been to venues around the UK with at least the last five albums and they did the same in Europe. Now they are also touring in the US. It must be tough, and yet of the four times I've seen them only one disappointed while the one for *Tuesday Wonderland* at

the Barbican was the best. They clearly thrive on audience atmosphere and this brings out variations in the music that make the experience far more entertaining than many live events.

The key to their sound is Svensson's left hand, which works in such a steady powerful fashion that it has an almost automatic or programmed solidity whilst all around it varies.

In it you can hear his original desire to play the drums, the fundamental rhythm instrument. It's as solid as a kick drum but as there's more than one note there's an interplay with the rhythm section that makes up the rest of the group. I wouldn't want to give the impression that this is all there is to the band's sound; there is a lyricism to the piano playing that keeps the music interesting, a sense of exploration and seeking from the clearly thoughtful and self deprecating leader. He is a man who always refers to the trio rather than himself when speaking at live events, something he seems quite adept at for an apparent non-extrovert. Mind you he has plenty to say, as the following interview reveals.

JK: Why is the new album called *Tuesday Wonderland*?

ES: I see the name of the album and the tune as much more about being able to not take everything for granted, to be present, to see that life is happening now and even a Tuesday could be a wonderland. We're using Tuesday because it's a normal day, a day you don't talk about very much. Fridays and Saturdays are the great days.

JK: Where do you get your song titles?

ES: You should talk to Magnus [the drummer] because he is the man behind the titles. I compose the music. When it comes to names I'm much more like the old classical composers, I just put a key and a tempo on the pieces, I don't really care about names. I tried once or twice but it doesn't really work. Magnus has some ideas when he hears the music, he gets so many pictures or images in his mind and he sits there with a book of expressions trying to find titles, he is a bit of a poet I think. We record the album and then he comes up with lots of suggestions for titles ▶

► and we go through them all and try to find what he means about a particular name and so on. It's not a democratic process, but it's a process where everyone is involved and everybody has to agree.

JK: What do you use to prepare the piano?

ES: It's pieces of paper on the strings, but I'm also using a guitar slide [metal rather than glass] and I'm using my fingers to damp strings. I'm also using some electronics, a simulated amplifier for guitars called Pod which has effects like distortion, vibrato, tremolo, chorus, things like that: Different amplifiers, different types of sound. So instead of bringing all those amplifiers into the studio just put a mic into that thing, play the piano and you get some interesting sounds.

JK: On *Seven Days of Falling* the first track seems really distorted, why is that?

ES: That was the first time I used the Pod. Maybe from growing up with vinyl records and hearing the piano distorting so many times and also through recording myself with small cassette players you get a sort of very compressed sometimes even distorted sound and I've grown to like that sound. Therefore I've been searching for this distorted acoustic piano sound so many times. Now I've found a way of doing it in a live situation and sometimes in the studio. Even on our second album, it's called *e.s.t. Live 95*, we were experimenting with how to distort a piano and we took all the channels from the whole band into Marshall amplifiers and then back into the studio so suddenly you had acoustic piano and distorted piano and you could mix it a little bit – and we got so excited I remember. I played a lot of Fender Rhodes for many years and I always distort that, because I like it, it's part of how I want to sound. But it's also about the contrast, not to have it distorted all the time, also to really work with the clean sound. Now and then the contrast can refresh everything, suddenly the piano starts to sound even more acoustic after hearing this weird sound, or the opposite when you hear the acoustic sound for a while and then “what's happening now?” I just like the contrast.



JK: *Viaticum* came out on SACD – do you think *Tuesday Wonderland* will do the same?

ES: It's very tricky question because SACD is really hard as a format because nobody is really buying it. We have done a surround mix for *Tuesday Wonderland* but the thing is, are we going to release it and in which format because the market's just a mess at the moment: Dualdiscs or SACD or surround video or surround audio? I don't even have surround sound myself so I don't know, but I'm fascinated by the process and also being able to listen to music in this way. We have it ready but we have to find out if there is a format that we can use, it has to be worth it and at the

moment it's just turmoil, so I don't know."

JK: The live DVD is the only live material you've released for a long time, will there be more?

ES: With *Viaticum* we did a special platinum version for Germany that I think is more or less available across Europe that includes a double disc that contains four tracks from the album played live in Berlin, it's a very good live recording. But I'm looking forward to making a really good live album, something special.

JK: You grew up with vinyl. Hi-fi fans love vinyl. Do you think there's a chance of your music being released on the format?

ES: We talked about it back and forth. It's very expensive and really hard to earn anything back from it. From an artistic point of view I would love to see some vinyl but from my position as one of four guys on the board of our production company we already spend too much money on too much stupid stuff. Maybe we will make a best of album just on vinyl.

JK: Do you have decent hi-fi system yourself?

ES: No. I have okay equipment to work with, a computer and speakers and so forth, and when you listen to music there it sounds good. Apart from that the stereo we have in our house is just... you can't talk about hi-fi, it's not even average.

Magnus our drummer has an extremely nice system and also Åke our sound man has a good system too, but I don't listen to music that much at home. I have my iPod on tour ►

▶ but at home I'm practising a lot and composing. I wouldn't mind having a 5.1 system."

JK: What's with the hidden tracks that you put at the end of your albums?

ES: I think it's about using the CD format and trying to find other ways of making art of the CD itself. If you just put lots of music on the CD, it's like making lots of food but not presenting it well. You have to work with the CD in a similar way. At least it's interesting to try it and so we see it a little bit like what's written on the cover is on the CD like the

JK: There's also a surprise a short way into 'Fading Maid Preludium', the opening track of *Tuesday Wonderland*.

ES: On *Tuesday Wonderland* there's maybe more of what before used to be hidden tracks on the actual album. The same piece is continued at the end of the album; it's like the start and it fades down and then it fades up. We see it a little bit like a prelude and postlude with a story in between. Like in a classic work, overture and coda.

Talking about hidden tracks very few people have realised that on, I think it's *Good Morning Susie Soho* there is a hidden track at the end but there is actually one track



normal set; you know what you get, this is it. But then it's like we always keep a few minutes silence and then something is coming. People by now know that they're going to be surprised by something and most of the time something unlikely, something that sounds a bit weird compared to the other tracks. We have a positive problem in e.s.t. in that we have so many different musical sides and we record lots of different things, but when we make an album we try to make a story out of it, something that actually keeps together, a thread that goes through it. But then when the record is done you can put something completely different at the end. We've done it since *Good Morning Susie Soho* [which ends with a heavy metal track]. It's been different from album to album and it's become part of the e.s.t. concept, the buyers know that they can expect something unexpected.

before track 1, if you put the album on and then rewind it, it will go to minus and there is something there. That's something that people haven't discovered yet. That's also trying to make the CD into an artistic creation; you can't do that on vinyl.

We wasted 5,000 because the manufacturers couldn't understand what we wanted to do so they printed 5,000 incorrectly so we won't put a tune on minus again.

JK: Do you like any of the new Scandinavian bands such as Bugge Wesseltøft, In the Country or Jaga Jazzists?

ES: I'm not too familiar with them. Bugge I know: I met him a couple of times, we've played double bills together. In general I can't say I'm interested in jazz, it has been ▶

long time since I heard jazz, which really took me off. I find much more pleasure in listening to classical music. Even if it's old music it's new to me because it's the first time I hear it if I listen to Bach or Brahms or something like that, which for some reason is much more what I like at the moment. I'm not really up to date with that sort of music."

JK: You seem to be about as busy as AC/DC these days!

ES: It's also very good, it's something that I work for and fight for. There are certain levels, there's one level where you have to say yes to every gig that you possibly could get. I was playing with everybody, playing big bands, studio, dance classes, taking pupils, everything. Then I came to a point where I decided to try to concentrate on the trio, therefore I said no to everything else, which was a bit of a risk but it worked. But then you have say yes to everything with the trio. You don't know exactly when you're going to work. We've worked with lots of different singers for many years but now we have come to a point where we can decide a bit more when we want to play, in which period we're going to work. It's a positive luxury.

JK: Success breeds work?

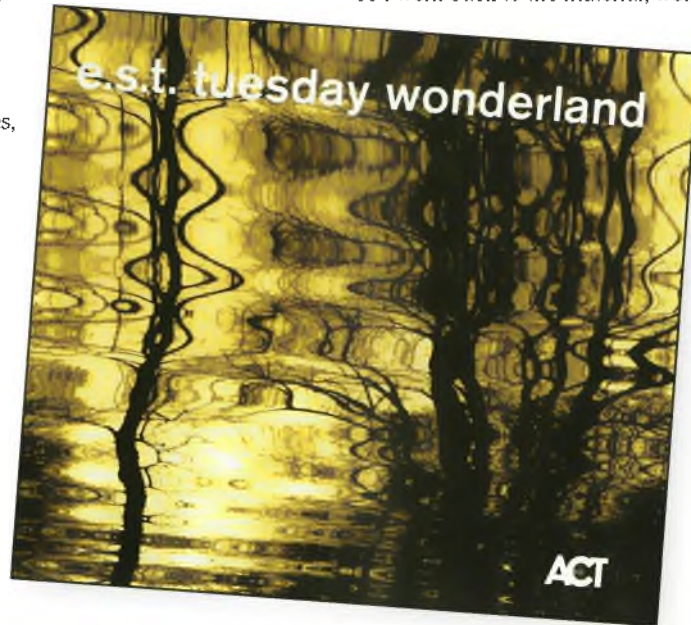
ES: It's a totally different way of working hard, if you do shows, you're playing with this, you're playing with that, but this is tough in a different way. We are artists, now there are lots of people and expectations. We're playing very, very big places with lots of people every night and you have to be focused. But I prefer this, this is fantastic, exactly what I've been wanting and asking for and trying to achieve with my musical life. Because I think it's important what we're doing, I think we have a music that is actually speaking to some people. Not to everyone of course but there are lots of people in this world who are actually in need of our music. Also the reason why we play is that we want to play, we are inspired to play this music, we love to play together. It's positive, it's fantastic, no complaints.

JK: We had *e.s.t. plays Monk*; are we going to have *e.s.t. plays Bach* one day or *e.s.t. plays Metallica*?

ES: Actually this recording, Tuesday Wonderland, when I started to compose music for it I had Bach very much in mind. I was trying to do something like the *Well Tempered Clavier*. I was trying to do a prelude and fugue in each key for the trio but not particularly in the style of Bach just the form. I composed lots of music and presented it for Dan and Magnus, recorded lots of stuff, lots of fugues but then we found that it was not really what we wanted to do so I went back to the material, went through it and

recomposed some stuff, composed some new stuff and found some of it we could use as it was, some so called preludes. For example 'Brewery of Beggars' and 'The Beggars Blanket, Brewery' was once a fugue and 'Blanket was the prelude to that fugue, but the fugue didn't work so we changed it. Not much actually – it's still more or less the theme from the fugue. Then the prelude, which is supposed to be first,

is now after as a conclusion or a postlude. As for playing Bach, I'm very much inspired by Bach and I think I can use that inspiration in the music that we're playing now, but if you suddenly go to play Bach then it might be too much, it might collide too much and it might not work. Monk was a different thing because I'm not really playing music like Monk did, therefore to play his music you could use his compositions played in your own way. We got lots of criticism for that in Sweden; "You don't play it like Monk" but that's the reason why we did it. I know Glenn Gould had the same problem with his very special ideas about playing Bach. People thought he was crazy not playing it like everybody else had done. He wanted to play it in his own way. As you can tell Esbjörn and his band are very much their own men; they have influences like nearly all artists, but what they do with them creates something new. If you want to find out how they do it, the latest album is as good a place as any to start.





The Brad Shepik Trio

Places You Go

Songlines SGL SA1562-2 (SACD)

The trio comprises Brad Shepik on guitar with Gary Versace on Hammond B3 organ, and Tom Rainey on drums. The album title refers to a children's book and also to the fact that many of the tunes were written in various places: Mandelieu, Santa Barbara, Dulles, on the subway in Brooklyn. This may have coloured the tunes to some extent but the influences reflected in this album range wider than that, from American to Celtic to Indonesian music.

The CD opens with a tricky, up-tempo number 'Temoin' which shifts between 6/8 and 7/8 and that the band nail with ease. Their prowess is amply demonstrated through the remainder of an album that spans a whole range of influences: 'Return' a slow-spiralling romance carries faint echoes of Bill Frisell, 'Five and Dime' carries the resonance of gospel and folk melody, 'As Was' sounds almost like a traditional folk tune and 'Batur' referring to a sacred volcano in Bali, successfully fuses an Indonesian scale with fuzz guitar and organ swells, whilst 'The South' and 'Frozen' are more straight ahead workouts. The closing number 'Tides' is rock influenced, reminding me a little of some of Zappa's work, at least until the B3 kicks in. Whatever, it's a fitting close to an inventive and entertaining album.

DD



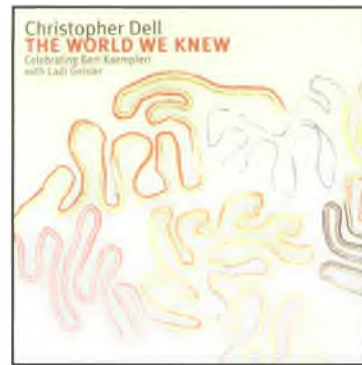
Coleman Hawkins

The Hawk Flies High

Mobile Fidelity UDSACD 2030 (SACD)

The Hawk Flies High, recorded in 1959, was a comeback album of sorts for Hawkins, who at the age of 58, had already lived out a legendary career. Listening to this Riverside title you would never suspect that Hawkins was practically a senior citizen. It's a ferocious album with outstanding contributions from youngsters J. J. Johnson on trombone and Idrees Suleiman on trumpet. The album collects ballads, bop and blues, and the front line really "flies". Suleiman wrote 'Juicy Fruit', and puts in a star turn as a soloist, beginning the piece with a bravura show of circular breathing. Johnson drives the pace on 'Blue Lights', and makes it sufficiently his to remind the listener of his fabulous sessions on Columbia. I compared the SACD layer side by side with the CD layer. The CD layer on its own sounded pretty good, but compared to the SACD layer (on a relatively inexpensive combination player) it sounded like a constricted mono recording, with the images stuck in the middle. SACD opened everything up, spreading the instruments across a wide stage, sounding fabulous. I haven't compared it to the vinyl issue, and suspect that the LP sounds even better. However, if you have a combination player, this is a great way to hear how good SACD can make these old jazz masterpieces sound.

DDD



Christopher Dell

The World We Knew - Celebrating Bert Kaempfert

ACT 9449-2 (CD) (CD)

Don't let the title put you off. This is no MOR jazzfest but rather an intelligent exploration and re-interpretation (Dell talks of the original tunes as having "the morbid charm of a ruined building, the beauty of which becomes apparent if we take a second look"). Even old chestnuts like 'Swingin' Safari' and 'Spanish Eyes' are given new life and impetus. One of the strongest of the numbers here is based on perhaps the corniest original, 'Strangers in the Night'. With not a "doobey, doobey, doo" in earshot the number is given a much more meditative, spacey treatment that creates a curious tension in that it's near impossible to remove the crooning of the Hoboken Canary from your mind whilst you're listening to it - it's almost as though Sinatra is running through the number in an adjoining studio in the far corner of your mind whilst you listen to this radically different interpretation: Odd, very odd, but strangely enjoyable. Less familiar originals such as 'Afrikaan Beat 2' and 'Weidersehn' come up as fresh and funky tunes in their own right. This is a charming set superbly arranged and played (despite the occasional lapse into drum'n'bass treatments), that genuinely provides a fresh insight to familiar melodies and a stimulating musical journey. It benefits too from a solid, full-bodied and dynamic recording.


DD





Jimmy Scott

All The Way

Warner Jazz 8122-77655 2 

Originally released on Sire Records in 1992, a time when Jimmy Scott had virtually been forgotten, this is the album that helped to re-launch his career reminding previous fans of his genius and introducing him to a whole new audience. To those unfamiliar with Scott, his near soprano voice takes some getting used to but stick with him and after a few numbers you'll be hooked. He can invest a song with intense drama and real emotion like few others. Take his version here of the classic 'I'm Getting Sentimental Over You', from the opening line you sense just what he's feeling in his impassioned delivery, his near whispered first rendition of the title, his entreaty to "Make up your mind..." he delivers a novel's worth of emotion in a single song. Other standouts include the title song, 'Embraceable You', and the bonus track originally recorded for the film *Glengarry Glen Ross*, 'On the Street of Dreams'.

Backed by a great band comprising Kenny Barron (piano), Ron Carter (bass), John Pisano (guitar), David "Cathead" Newman (sax), and Grady Tate (drums) along with judiciously applied strings, the support for Scott is nicely judged; superb playing but properly sensitive to the man himself, providing the perfect platform for his soulful delivery. Produced by Tommy Lipuma and mastered by Doug Sax the recording matches the talent on show.


DD

RECORDING 
MUSIC 



Joachim Kuhn & Michael Gibbs

Europeana - Jazzophony No 1

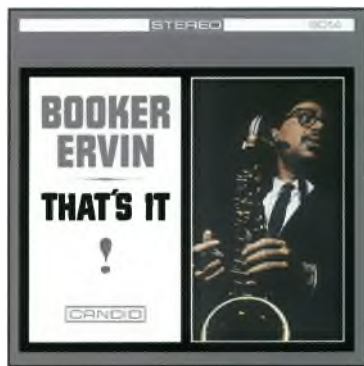
ACTSACD 9804-2 

Mike Gibbs' *Europeana* was originally released in recorded form to some acclaim in 1995, although it was not to receive a public performance until September 2006. ACT has now re-released the album, re-mastered for SACD in both two-channel and surround sound formats. The release is also by way of a tribute to two of the players on the original release who have since died, the German trombonist Albert Mangelsdorff and the French bass player Jean-Francois Jenny-Clark. Mike Gibbs composed the piece as a vehicle to bring together a range of European traditional folk melodies in an arrangement for symphony orchestra and jazz soloists. Containing elements that invoke traditional classical music, swing, free jazz, blues and flamenco, this could easily have been a very unwieldy beast indeed. So it's a significant tribute to both Gibbs' skill and the quality of the musicians involved here that the piece has an overall coherence and hangs together as well as it does. Some elements are inevitably more successful than others in this rich and heady mix, a great example being the superbly innovative

and technically accomplished trombone soloing from Albert Mangelsdorff in 'Three Angels' an adaptation of a 13th Century German folksong. The treatment of the lovely 'She Moved Through The Fair' also works particularly well with soprano sax floating above the layers of orchestral sound. An especially notable touch is Richard Galliano's accordion giving texture to 'The Shepherd of Breton'. The orchestra works really well here, providing a distant and evocative backdrop behind the more frenetic jazz musicians upfront. Even that old chestnut 'Londonderry Air' comes up pretty fresh, at least in the opening jazz section, although sadly as soon as the orchestra lead in with the main theme it's near impossible to dispel the elevator music connotations that have dragged this lovely tune way, way down. Still, what are skip buttons on CD players for? All in all this is well worth digging into. It's a bold, complex and ambitious work that involves some superb players for its realisation. Admittedly, there's a slight touch of the curate's egg about it, but it is well worth the sampling and seldom has a musical concept been more appropriate to the surround medium. An enjoyable kaleidoscope of contrasting emotions, wallow at will.

DD

RECORDING 
MUSIC 



Booker Ervin

That's It!

Pure Pleasure CJS 9014 **180g**

Booker Ervin is something of an acquired taste with his edgy, hard tenor sound – but one I acquired long ago. If you've heard much of Mingus, you've probably acquired the taste too, even if you didn't pay much heed to the identity of the sidemen.

Here, Ervin teams up with George Tucker on drums, Horace Parlan on piano and Al Harewood on drums to present a quintessential Candid recording: which means it's a little more out there than the normal fare, and perhaps a little more adventurous than the artist's product for other labels. Ervin puts in a fierce performance here, playing mostly his own compositions, while his ballads demonstrate that he was not all hard edges. He died at the early age of 40 after turning in a remarkable string of albums on Prestige, but this early outing stands up to the best of those. Whet your appetite on this a bum and then explore his playing on the two Mingus Candid albums, along with Eric Dolphy. That combination (also found on *Mingus*, *Mingus* and *Mal Waldron's Quest*) is like catnip to some jazz loving mice. Pure Pleasure has done a marvelous job mastering this 180-gram vinyl release, which compares favorably with the original. In both versions, the stereo effect is a little artificial with instruments stuck in the speakers and a lack of center fill, but still essential. Highly recommended.

DDD

RECORDING
MUSIC



Tubby Hayes

The Little Giant



Proper 117

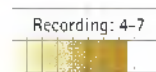
If the archetypal model of a jazz great involves undeniable musical brilliance snuffed out at a tragically early age, then Britain has its own candidate to vie for a place in the US dominated Jazz Hall Of Fame. This four CD set provides a welcome and comprehensive insight into the early days of one of the UK's very greatest jazz musicians, Tubby Hayes. (As a small measure, have you seen just how much his original releases cost?) Dying in 1973 at the horribly young age of 38, Hayes had already long cemented his international reputation as a fiercely talented tenor saxophonist, multi-instrumentalist and arranger. This set traces his progression from a remarkably trim and prodigiously gifted teenager with Vic Lewis' Band through to his establishment as a leading jazz name and as a band-leader in his own right. The first CD covers the Lewis Band in a set of 1954 recordings largely arranged by Gerry Mulligan with the young lion very much to the fore. These are followed by a lovely live version of 'Too Marvellous for Words' and 'The Creep' the former highlighting the astonishing capability and maturity of such a young player, before moving to a live set with the Lewis band and a further batch with the Jack Parnell Orchestra, before closing

with Hayes leading his own orchestra in a set of 1955 recordings. The second CD comprises 1955 recordings with Hayes leading his own orchestra and quartet along with recordings with the Jimmy Deuchar Ensemble and the Dizzy Reece Quartet. The Hayes Quartet recordings are for me the strongest of the CD, giving the greatest hint of things to come through confident workouts like 'Dance of the Aerophragytes' and tender ballads like 'There's No You'.

Disc 3 sees more 1955 recordings with Feldman along with a previously unreleased 1956 BBC recorded set of five tunes from the Hayes Orchestra. These fairly woolly recordings are easily outclassed by the following live Festival Hall set from the full Hayes Orchestra and the closing trio of tunes from his quintet. Disc 4, a 1956 recordings, covers three tunes from the Hayes Quartet, giving the band time to stretch out to great effect, notably here in 'Ha I Hears the Blues', a couple of live numbers from The Railway Arms featuring some great soloing on 'Laker's Day', two more from the Feldman 'ninetet', before closing with a final pair from the Feldman Big Band. This very enjoyable set delivers an affordable and fascinating overview of the early days of the man as he took his first strides towards jazz stardom. With all four discs costing the same as a single full-priced CD this an essential purchase – whichever side of the Atlantic you reside.

DD

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Julia Fischer

by Richard Foster

We are fortunate today to have so many excellent violinists playing on the concert and recording stages of the world. There is, at almost every international venue, the opportunity to hear one of these stars live and in person. While I have had the chance to hear several of the great young artists emerging today, including Midori, Sarah Chang, Hilary Hahn, Leila Josefowicz and Joshua Bell, I have yet to hear Ms. Fischer in concert. I can assure you that I will be looking to remedy this situation as soon as the opportunity arises.

For me, Fischer's recordings for Pentatone Classics have become a staple part of my listening diet. In issue 46 I commented most favorably on the first of these releases, *Russian Violin Recordings*, with Yakov Kreizberg and the Russian National Orchestra (Khachaturian, Prokofiev and Glazunov on PTC 5186 059). There are now two extremely satisfying discs available offering the complete violin concertos of Mozart – again with Kreizberg but this time with the Netherlands Chamber Orchestra (PTC 5186 064 and PTC 5186 094). In my opinion this collaboration, offers some of the most delightful and fulfilling performances I've heard in many years. These recordings are warm, lyrical and above all, Mozart without the filler.

In the chamber music category, Fischer gives a lovely performance of the two Mendelssohn *Piano Trios* with Daniel Müller-Schott (cello) and Jonathan Gilad (piano) (PTC5186-095). Played with great verve and panache, these are particularly exuberant and refreshing.

And then there is the Bach. Yes, the Bach. Her exquisite performance of Bach's *Sonatas and Partitas* is as



close to perfect as I've ever heard! While I am a big fan of Henryk Szeryng's first recordings on French Odeon as well as the legendary Johanna Martzy on UK Columbia, Fischer has in my view, expanded on both these performances. Which means to say that here is an artist who, at a mere 23 years of age, has completely encompassed this most demanding and revealing of works. And "encompassed" is the word; for half her life she has playing not just one or two of the sonatas or

partitas each day, but includes the complete work in her practice repertoire – every day! Fischer herself acknowledges in the liner notes of the Bach, how important a role it plays in her daily life. She comments, "This recording at hand represents a musical journey which has by no means been concluded. My interpretation of this music is bound to change later on; nevertheless, I wanted to be able to hold on to my

experience and understanding of these wonderful compositions to date."

This statement caused me to pause and think about Fischer's intelligence and insight. She clearly has a profound understanding of who she is, what her skills are, and where she is going. The woman's maturity is well beyond her 23 years. I was looking forward to hearing these performances and you should too. I can comfortably assure those readers who doubt my statements that they will be onside once they hear her play. Fischer has recorded a performance which marks the beginning of ►

► her musical recording journey, one that will obviously enrich us all of the years to come. I can't wait to hear her play and record these works again in a few years time – and again a few years after that.

There are several artists whose recordings of the *Sonatas and Partitas* have spanned many years in their performing careers. Does greater depth and wisdom always come with experience? It seems so. Milstein and Szeryng immediately come to mind. It's quite a revelation to hear the difference in interpretational maturity these artists offer over the years. Performances created later in their lives offer a much greater level of insight and understanding than those from their younger years. Yet, Julia Fischer already has something to say about the Bach – and we should all be listening.

Fischer comes from a family where music played an important, central part in everyday life. In a frustratingly brief DVD interview, whenever she mentions music and what it really means to her, there seems to be a glow, almost a blush with respect to the pleasure and enrichment that music has brought to her life. It's as if there is a separation of the artist and the music lover. Fischer as a person is a music lover; it is in her soul. As an artist, she is a virtuoso. Apparently she is a quite outstanding pianist and it seems that it was only a chance meeting with a conductor who heard her playing during a violin master class that finally settled her on the road to her concert career and chosen instrument. She freely admits to her fondness for the genius of Glenn Gould – someone she became enamored with very early in her life. Her statements about Gould's genius (made when Fischer was only 12!) offer significant insights – both into Gould and also Fischer's precocious appreciation of his talents.

She first began studying the violin with Helge Thelen before the age of four. Shortly thereafter, she also began studying the piano with her mother. Her formal training began at the Leopold Mozart Conservatory in Augsburg and at the age of nine she was admitted to the Munich Academy of Music where she still continues to work.

Julia Fischer has also received many international awards. She was the winner of the International Yehudi Menuhin Violin Competition under Lord Menuhin's



supervision where she won both the first prize and the special prize for the best Bach solo work performance in 1995! Her instrument is of Italian origin made by Giovanni Battista Guadagnini in 1750. She has a gorgeous tone.

Despite her tender years, Fischer has had recitals with many of the World's finest conductors including Lorin Maazel, Marek Janowski, Herbert Blomsted, David Zinman, Sir Neville Marriner, Yuri Temirkanov and Michael Tilson Thomas to name a few. She has also performed with a variety of orchestras from around the world, many of her concerts in every major European country, in the United States, Japan and Australia, having been broadcast. She made her Carnegie Hall debut in 2003 to critical acclaim and standing ovations. Her chamber music partners are as

impressive as the list of conductors with whom she's performed, and include Christoph Eschenbach and Jean-Yves Thibaudet. Fischer's active repertoire is expansive: from Bach to Penderecki: from Vivaldi to Shostakovich – containing over 40 works with orchestra and approximately 60 chamber works.

Once you've sampled the delights of her playing, you like me will be avidly anticipating her next release, especially given the excellence of Pentatone's hybrid SACD recordings. Next up is PTC 5186 095, an all Tchaikovsky disc consisting of the *Violin Concerto in D, Op. 35* with Kreizberg and the Russian National Orchestra as well as *Sérénade Mélodique* for violin and orchestra. In addition there is the *Valse -Scherzo, Op. 31* for violin and orchestra and the final composition is *Souvenir d'un lieu cher, Op. 42* for violin and piano with Yakov Kreizberg at the keyboard. It will be fascinating to see what this emerging genius can do with an old warhorse like the Tchaikovsky *Violin Concerto*.

Julia Fischer's talent is as undeniable as it attractive and engaging. I hope I've tickled your fancy sufficiently to have you investigate further. After all, how much greater the pleasure to follow her evolution and emergence in real time rather than looking back from the inevitable distance that comes with hindsight. In the meantime, you can always learn more and keep up to date at www.juliafischer.com.





**Frédéric Chopin: 26 Préludes
Robert Schumann: Papillons, Op. 2.**

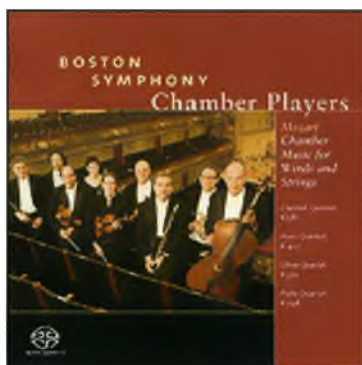
Claudio Arrau, piano.

Pentatone Classics PIC 5186 165

Pentatone Classics, along with the engineering know how of Polyhymnia International BV, continues their tradition of mixing musical masterpieces from the 1970's quadraphonic catalogue of Philips Classics. With over 60 discs in the Pentatone catalogue to date that should be explored by all music lovers, these 'classic' performances are given first-rate sound you'd never know wasn't from pure digital sources. The performances of Chopin and Schumann played by the great Chilean pianist Claudio Arrau, offer the music lover insightful, accurate readings of these important compositions. Arrau was one of the last century's legendary masters of the piano and his skills are clearly heard in these entrancing performances. His personal repertoire was vast, from Beethoven through Schoenberg. His Liszt is legendary. Born in 1903, he spanned the Century, only dying in 1991. Listening to these two 'old friends' is a reminder of how great he truly was. I hope to see more Arrau performances re-issued in the future; the sound is truly exceptional. I really enjoyed listening to the CD layer, but have to admit that the real beauty is realized in multi-channel. This is wonderful music, easily accessible and highly prized. Not to be missed.

Supplier: www.pentatonemusic.com

RSF



**Mozart
Chamber Music for Winds and
Strings**

Boston Symphony Chamber Players

BSO Classics 0801

I've always been a fan of the BSCP and was delighted to hear (and hear about) this all Mozart program which includes K581, the *Clarinet Quintet*, K407, the *Horn Quintet* as well as the *Oboe* and the *Flute Quartets*, K370 and K298 respectively. While the actual members of the ensemble have changed over the years - they were first formed in 1964 under the tenure of Erich Leinsdorf - the quality of the playing by these principal members of the Boston Symphony Orchestra has remained of the highest calibre. This is an immensely enjoyable outing that contains cohesive, yet spontaneous performances. The sound quality is outstanding and the disc timing is generous at 76+ minutes. There are not many comparable discs that offer performances of this standard and certainly nothing in the DSD market comes close. The CD layer is most likely a down-conversion, with a rich, not too reverberant acoustic. I have a particular fondness for the *Clarinet* and *Horn Quintets* and was extremely impressed with the playing of the principals involved. William R. Hudgins, clarinet and James Sommerville, horn. This is Mozart offered up with fashionable performances, exceptional sound and at a moderate price. Highly recommended and not to be missed.

Supplier: www.bso.org

RSF



**Biber, Bach, Vivaldi
Icons Of Music – Violin Sonatas**

Marco Fornaciari, Ernesto Merlini,
Leonardo Colonna

fonè Signorici ed 004

Italian violinist Marco Fornaciari performs violin sonatas by Biber, Bach and Vivaldi, and I am totally impressed. The sound of these original instruments - not as resonant as modern ones - fits perfectly with the church acoustic, not overloading it but sounding detailed and full of complex resolution.

The Austrian composer Biber is almost forgotten today, but he created wonderful sonatas for violin and basso continuo. Like Vivaldi, he was influenced by non-musical impressions - for his *Sonatas of the Holy Rosary*, it was scenes from the bible and the life of the Virgin Mary. The original instruments demand their own technique, yet the sonatas sound surprisingly modern. I am often dissatisfied by recordings with historic instruments - in my opinion, they have become more about attitude than authenticity. They tend to be too dogmatic, sometimes too forced, sometimes too artificial. But sometimes, you hear a record that sounds so convincing it forces you to change your mind. *Icons Of Music* is just such a recording!

AKB



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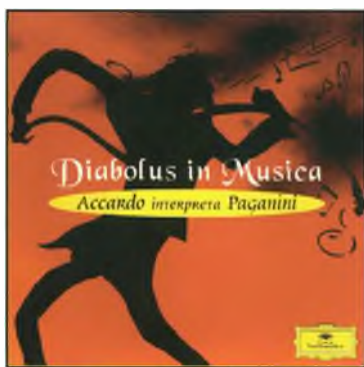
Plas Johnson

Positively

Pure Audiophile PA-005 **180g**

Plas Johnson is not exactly a household name, but anyone who has watched the Peter Sellers' movie *Pink Panther* will recall Johnson's bluesy sound from the famous theme song. This is a re-issue of one of Johnson's best Concord albums, made as an aside to backing any number of better known artists. He is accompanied here by the Concord house band, consisting of Ray Brown, Herb Ellis and Jake Hanna in this sextet outing. This is the kind of music you expect to hear on a Concord release – traditional, swinging and well recorded. If not the most challenging jazz, what it does, it does very, very well. The record swings, and reminds me of many great concerts I've enjoyed at the Concord Pavilion produced by Carl Jefferson, founder of the Concord label. Concord is well known for its excellent engineering, most often by Phil Edwards, and this is no exception, yet this deluxe vinyl set lifts the excellent sound a few notches. Stan Ricker's half-speed mastering is largely responsible for that, along with spreading the grooves out over two heavy discs, pressed on heavy vinyl at RTI. Pure Pleasure also scores with wonderful packaging. Except for the Japanese Venus Records releases, no record company today comes close to the quality of record sleeves provided by Pure Audiophile. Kudos to Dennis Cassidy and his team!

DDD



**Diabolus in Musica
Accardo interprets Paganini**

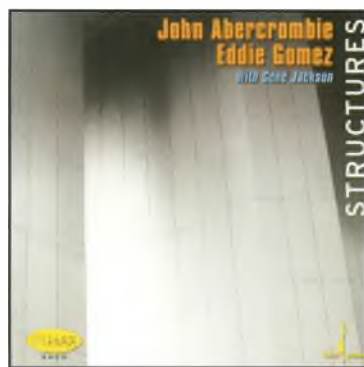
**Charles Dutoit cond. LPO.
Salvatore Accardo, violin.**

Clearaudio/Deutsche Grammophon 477 6492 **180g**

This one had me puzzled, but only for a little while. Although I see references to CD compilations in the liner notes, what is released here was originally recorded by DGG at various venues in the late 1970's. I wasn't familiar with Accardo's work for the label during this period, but I can tell you that what I hear on this Clearaudio release gives me great food for musical thought. Paganini, the fire and brimstone composer (as well as, according to reports of the day, one of the greatest violinists who's ever lived), is captured eloquently on this re-issue. While I did find the acoustic occasionally too reverberant for my taste, Accardo's playing is thrilling and exceptionally vivid. He's recorded perfectly by the engineers who not only deliver great dynamics, but also offer us the delicacy of a wonderful pianissimo in the form of a delicate triangle positioned properly in the orchestral venue. Each selection is a treat and I truly hope Clearaudio gets more of this on vinyl. Very impressive and I think 'a must own' set. Not to be missed.

Supplier: www.clearaudio.de

RSF



**John Abercrombie & Eddie Gomez
with Gene Jackson**

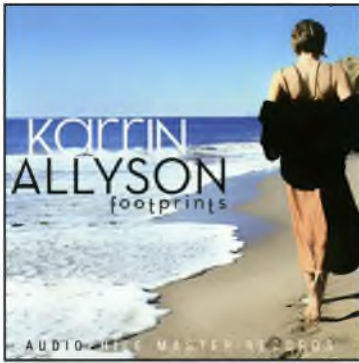
Structures

Chesky SACD317 **(SACD)**

The second release in Chesky's New York Sessions series, this set brings together ECM stalwart John Abercrombie with Bill Evan's long-time bass player Eddie Gomez and drummer Gene Jackson. Recorded, simply-miked in the Chesky fashion, in the spacious acoustic of St. Peter's, New York, the trio run through a mix of original compositions and standards to great effect. This set isn't about pyrotechnics, the musicians are too assured of their abilities for that, but is a gentle, reflective example of fine interplay between three masters of the art. "We kept things very loose, yet structured," says Abercrombie. "We figured out ways to set up the tune and then figured out a way to end each tune. And then in between it was every man for himself." Standouts include the lightly swinging opener 'Jazz Folk', a particularly lovely reading of Ray Noble's standard 'The Touch of Your Lips', Gomez' minor key ballad 'Walter Pigeon', 'Embraceable You' which opens with an extended bass intro that says everything about Gomez' virtuosity, and a gentle take of Bill Evan's 'Turn Out the Stars'. The recording does the music and venue full justice requiring, on my system at least, a slightly higher volume than usual to make it all come alive. This is a laid-back, well-recorded and highly enjoyable set.

DD





Karrin Allyson

Footprints

Pure Audiophile Records PA-014 (2) **180g**

I approach new releases by jazz vocalists with caution, but this one took me by surprise. I've enjoyed Allyson's prior releases for Concord, but she's finally put it all together in a package of songs that had me riveted from start to finish. The concept here was to take jazz instrumental compositions, add lyrics by songwriter Chris Caswell, and round off the mix with tasteful accompaniment by Frank Wess on tenor saxophone, Bruce Barth on keyboards, Peter Washington on bass, Nick Phillips on trumpet and Todd Strait on drums. Jon Hendricks adds vocals on three songs, and Karrin leaves little doubt that she could have stepped in for Annie Ross without disappointing Lambert, Hendricks & Ross fans. Karrin also gives us a tribute to the great Oscar Brown, Jr., performing his 'A Tree And Me' and 'But I Was Cool'. Allyson handles this material without going over the hipster jive top (those familiar with Oscar Brown's great album 'Sin and Soul' will know what I mean). The original CD recording was mastered by George Horn at Fantasy Studios and sounded excellent. This new two LP re-issue has taken things up several notches. Stan Ricker did his half-speed mastering magic, adding two bonus tracks, with the 15 songs spread across two 180g LPs. The sound is spectacular.

DDD



Clark Terry

Color Changes

Candof/ Pure Pleasure CJS 9009 **180g**

Despite a career stretching over 60 years, this 1960 release is widely recognised as Clark Terry's best. It's not difficult to see why, since he's joined here by a stellar group including Yusef Lateef (tenor, flute, English horn, oboe, etc. etc.), Jimmy Knepper (trombone), Tommy Flanagan (piano), Joe Benjamin (bass), Seldon Powell (tenor, flute), Julius Watkins (French horn), and Ed Shaughnessy (drums). The opening 'Blue Waltz' immediately sets the pace with great solos from all, underpinned by deft and inventive percussion from Shaughnessy. Lateef's 'Brother Terry' opens with a deep growl from Terry's horn that immediately sets the tone for this evocative piece, further developed by sinuous lines from Lateef's oboe. 'Flutin' and Flugin' does just what it says on the packet; light as air with the flutes of Powell and Lateef interacting superbly with Terry's flugelhorn. 'La Rive Gauche' opens side 2 and is Terry's tribute to "my favourite section of my favourite city". My favourite number here 'Nahstye (sic) Blues' is the funkier of the set and features a superb tenor solo from Lateef, some storming work from Terry and particularly inventive and powerful percussion from Shaughnessy. Well recorded, boasting an excellent pressing from Pallas and with not an ounce of fat in any of its seven numbers, this is a very welcome re-issue.

DD



The Tony Bennett Bill Evans Album

Analogue Productions 45 RPM limited edition **45**

Bill Evans teamed up with Tony Bennett in June 1975 to record this magic collaboration. Bennett, pushing 50 at the time, sang beautifully, but with was hardly at the peak of his powers. Compared to earlier recordings his voice had thickened and lost some elasticity. Evans, whose trio recordings ensured his place among the great jazz pianists, was slumming it playing what was a cabaret gig. Nonetheless, the pairing worked remarkably well, with Evans reading Bennett's every mood as though he worked as an accompanist for a living. Original pressings of this Fantasy title rarely show up, and it's hard to believe this record sold so few copies. Still, every copy of the original issue I have ever found had defective or disappointing sound. The record seemed to catch the fancy of record collectors when Mobile Fidelity Sound Labs released it heavy vinyl version. That sold out and itself went on to become a sought after collector's item. That MoFi release was one of their best mastering jobs, and compares well with this re-issue. This one squeezes a bit more "you are there" out of the piano sound, but in a few places I hear what might be tape overload or damage in the vocals. This minor quibble aside, it's an excellent job. Buy it now or wait until it sells out and pay double on eBay a year from now.

DDD





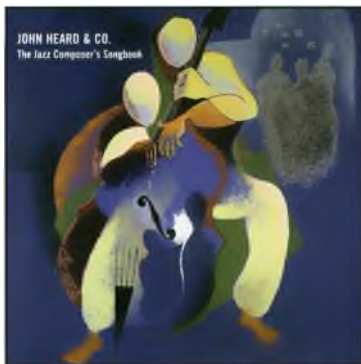
Lee Konitz

Motion

Speakers Corner/Verve **180g**

Alto saxophone extraordinaire Lee Konitz teamed up with Elvin Jones and Sonny Dallas for *Motion*, one of his finest albums. Konitz's cool sound is played off against Jones' usual frenetic pace to deliver an album that is riveting, adventurous and yet accessible. The Penguin Guide awarded this album one of its "crowns" designating a subjective favorite of the authors. Konitz recorded prolifically throughout the last half of the twentieth century, and has continued to record and perform at a very high level. This 1961 record is certainly one of his best and a good place to start an exploration of this great altoist, who did more than simply follow in the footsteps of Charlie Parker, developing his own vocabulary. Now if we could only get a re-issue of *Lee Konitz with Warme Marsh* on Atlantic, and then the rest of the Konitz Verves... Original copies of *Motion* are fairly scarce despite their relative youth, and Verve wasn't always producing top quality pressing in the 1960s. The new Speakers Corner mastering sounds splendid and handily beats the original Verve stereo pressings, with the harmonic correctness immediately obvious. The stereo spread is not ideal, but my mono original falls short of the re-issue in every other respect. This is one of the biggest sonic re-issue success stories I've heard – Speakers Corner turned an indifferently mastered original into a sonic gem.

DDD



John Heard & Co.

The Jazz Composer's Songbook

Straightahead-103 **200g** SA CD **180g**

Welcome to the Fifties, where the finest Jazz music and Jazz recordings took place! Straightahead Records wants to recreate the era: just imagine a great live session at Bernie's in Hollywood, pure analogue, recorded direct to two track, with titles from Horace Silver, Mank and Co. Those are the ingredients of *The Jazz Composer's Songbook*. Heard, who used to play with Oscar Peterson and Count Basie, is just one part of a fantastic band. Danny Grissett, piano, Lorca Hart, drums, Herman Riley, tenor sax, and Nolan Shadeed, trumpet, prove that today you can still play in the spirit of Horace Silver, but with some modern "lair too. 'Soulville' with an amazing unisono intro by sax and trumpet or 'Doodlin'" where Heard manages to apply Silver's lively piano technique on his bass, 'Valse Hot' with its tricky rhythm brushed the wrong way: How many examples do you need to be convinced? My favourite song is 'Dat Dere' from Bobby Timmons: The beat goes straight into your feet, the five are swinging, it is just "straight ahead" jazz! Without a doubt Straightahead Records, established by mastering legend Bernie Grundman and producer Stewart Levine, is set to become one of the finest jazz labels worldwide!

AKB



Sarah Vaughan In Hi-Fi

Pure Pleasure **180g**

One can walk into almost any used record store and find a selection of Sarah Vaughan recordings on Mercury, Roulette and Pablo. Two of my favorites pair Sassy with great trumpet players – Sarah Vaughan on EmArcy (with Clifford Brown) and this new release with Miles Davis. This fabulous record was recorded during several sessions between late 1949 and early 1952. The original album (Columbia CL 745) included eight numbers recorded in May 1950 with top-flight musicians, including Miles on trumpet and either Mundell Lowe or Freddie Green on guitar. Vaughan's throaty, sexy voice is always the star of the show, whether backed by a nameless orchestra or jazz immortals. Everything on this album is top drawer, but some of the songs and pairings stay with you long after the music has subsided. Especially haunting are 'Come Rain Or Come Shine' with Mundell Lowe's guitar accompaniment in the background, 'Mean To Me' with Budd Johnson on tenor sax and a very muted Miles in the background, and 'It Might As Well Be Spring' with Miles doubling Vaughan's voice a half beat behind. Pure Pleasure has released this album with nine tracks not on the original LP spread out over two discs. Where the original LP had quite good sound on most tracks, merely serviceable sound on a few, Pure Pleasure has done an excellent job on the original mono tapes.

DDD





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