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Issue 51

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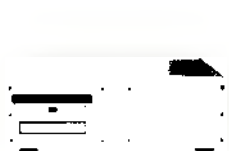
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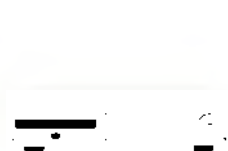
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Editor

Roy Gregory

Contributors

Tim Britt
Anke K. Bronner
Chris Binns
Mark Childs
Dave Davies
Dennis D. Davis
Steve Dickenson
Peter Downard
Richard S Foster
Jason Hector
Andrew Hobbs
Jimmy Hughes
Jason Kennedy
Curtis Leeds
Paul Messenger
Reuben Parry
Alan Sircom
Chris Thomas

Photography

Simon Marsh

Cartoonist

Dave Davis

The Editorial Office

can be contacted at,
Hi-Fi+ Editorial
25-27 Whittle Road
Ferndown Industrial Estate
Wimborne, Dorset
BH21 7RP
United Kingdom
Tel. (44)(0)1202-875315
Fax. (44)(0)1202-875314
Net. www.hifiplus.com

Advertising

Abi Flower
Tel/Fax. 01202 875107
Email. sales@hifiplus.com

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Design

Creative Byte
Poole, Dorset
Tel. 01202 690990
E-mail. info@creativebyte.co.uk

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Editorial

The Biter Bit...

For many years, exhibitors at the annual CES in America have exercised their option to meet their distributors and show new products at "off-site" locations, safe in the knowledge that the main event will have drawn the necessary crowds. For some it's a case of facilities, being unable to get the space amidst the competition at the main show: for others it's simple economics. After all, it's a lot cheaper to simply rent a hotel room or suite and set up on your own, rather than paying a show organizer for the pleasure. In fact, the practice became so prevalent that it actually spawned an entire alternative event - T.H.E. Show.

Now, I'm not going to debate the well-worn arguments for and against this behavior. Instead, I merely note the historical precedence for last year's events in London, where a parallel show was established across the road from the established *Hi-Fi News* event. Driven in part by frustration with the decline of the *News* show, the alternative was sufficiently successful to create something of an impasse, with the two events together being worth a visit, but the risk that neither was viable on its own. In response, *News* owners IPC have cancelled their September show for 2007, leaving you might well think, the organizers of the parallel event rubbing their hands in victorious glee..

Well, not if they actually stop to think for a moment. Not only is it far from guaranteed that exhibitors (or visitors) who previously attended the *News* show will automatically cross the road, now it seems that a number of Companies are taking a leaf out of the Vegas book and setting up independent exhibits in the Renaissance Hotel, so recently vacated by IPC. Whilst that effectively adds their presence to the main event, it does deny its organizers a substantial chunk of revenue. So, the plot thickens, but given the strong vein of cynical self-interest that has been nurtured in exhibitors over the years, will what was once a parallel event have the pulling power (or be able to guarantee the attendance) to counteract the financial savings on offer across the road.



Roy Gregory

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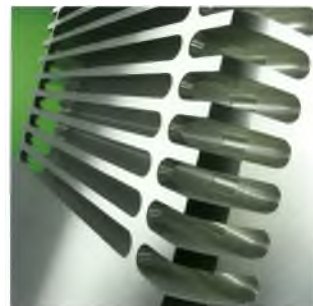
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or via the website at www.hifiplus.com

Dear Sir,

I just wanted to comment on how much I enjoyed your editorial this month about the whole reviewer/advertising/long-term loan situation.

I felt that it was very accurate and articulate as the reviews in *Hi-Fi+* always are!

It's always a pleasure to read *Hi-Fi+*, definitely my favorite one on the newsstand!

Best regards,

Jeff Dorgay

Publisher

TRIONE Audio

Dear Sir,

Having been thinking about buying a turntable for some time, your analogue special in issue 50 has essentially been "the straw that broke the camels back", and in particular the review of the Zanden phono-stage, especially as all of my records (100% classical) were bought between 1977 and 1986 so the equalisation facility would be particularly relevant. I last owned a turntable around 20 years ago, a Rega Planar 3, feeding a Rogers A75 amp and Heybrook HB2 speakers. Times change and my budget is now somewhat enhanced (ie. I will spend whatever it takes to reach the best level of performance I can hear). Any advice on good turntable, arm and cartridge options to feed a Musical Fidelity kW/P pre-amp, a pair of 1000wpc kW power amps and my Quad 2905 speakers would be gratefully received, prior to me spending time with a suitable Dealer and trying to get home demonstrations.

This is not however my main question. My LP's have been stored in a succession of houses and damp, cold garages over the last 20 years and are without doubt in need of some TLC. I recently browsed a well known hi-fi accessory web site, and the sheer array of products available to clean and preserve ones records, other turntable related accessories as well as contact cleaners and enhancers is stunning. Is it all snake oil, or is there merit in these products. If so can anyone offer advice on which types of products have a positive effect, and more specifically the best products and equipment for record cleaning? Have you thought of doing an article testing record cleaning products and machines?

One final comment if I may. Your editorial in Issue 50 on advertising was spot on. It did however seem like an attempt to defend yourselves against the recent launch of a new magazine promoting itself (and its very high cover price) on the back of not carrying adverts. In my view, and having read the first two issues of this other magazine, you have nothing to fear. In fact since I started reading *Hi-Fi+* last year I have been so impressed that I have just applied for a subscription. So please concentrate on what you do so well, and don't worry what the other buggers are up to!

Kind Regards

David Ingham

As regards that editorial, please don't make the mistake of assuming that it was either defensive or aggressive in nature. It was actually a necessary response to the issue of advertising and industry relations that had been raised by a number of different and distinct events. The way in which magazines function, the mechanisms by which they work, should be a matter of considerable interest to all those who are involved in this industry, as writers, manufacturers or readers. I'd like to think that other, reasoned responses will be forthcoming.

On the subject of record preservation/cleaning, we have covered a number of different machines and fluids (Issues 11, 14, 40 and 48 for example). However, the collective wisdom of all that scribbling could perhaps best be summed up as follows:

- i. *There's no substitute for a properly designed fluid based, vacuum drying record machine.*
- ii. *The easier it is to use the machine the more likely you are to do so and the better value it will represent. The converse is of course equally true. So don't be suckered by unnecessary facilities or functions – squirt it on, suck it off: that's all you need. My favourite machine is still the VPI HW16.5 but that's a purely personal view.*
- iii. *There are various fluids and they do make a difference, but see number 2 above: keep things simple and you'll reap the benefits.*
- iv. *There's no point in cleaning a record and putting it back in a dirty sleeve so make sure you have a supply of fresh inners.*

Oh, and I'll be reviewing the latest HW27 Typhoon in the next issue. Ed.



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Playing The System

by Roy Gregory



As far as the world of hi-fi goes, the product review has become an article of faith: manufacturers crave them, dealers rely on them, enthusiasts dissect them and magazines depend on them. They are, in many ways our staple diet, affirmation, marketing tool, source of information and the opportunity to vicariously indulge in our interest, all rolled into one. Yet how often do we stop to question their inherent value? Given our dependence on them (and let's not kid ourselves) just how useful are they?

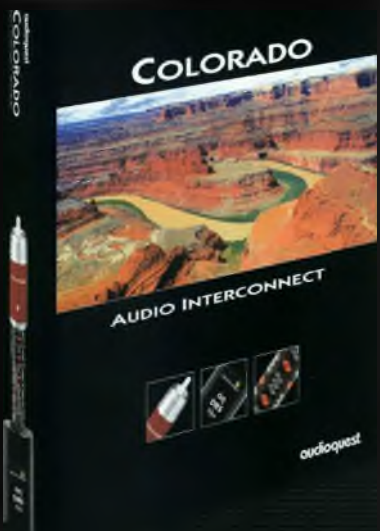
The answer, like so often, is that it depends... It depends on who conducted the review, their methodology, how rigorously they applied it and perhaps the most influential variable of all – context. Whilst the who and the how are questions we could debate until the cows come home, I'm more interested in this instance in that last category, not least because it is the easiest to understand. By context I'm referring to the system and circumstances in which the review takes place – and more importantly, how they vary from yours. Some degree of variation is inevitable, but we all accept it and assume that we are smart/experienced/gifted enough to read past it and reach the truth contained in the holy text. Indeed, prior knowledge of the writer, his system and approach all support this endeavor. But we tend to ignore other, less obvious factors that are just as critical. In a recent example, a valve power amp had an unusually high output impedance (unremarked in the manufacturer's specs) which meant that it sounded quite different depending on the speaker it was driving. Most reviews, including ours, failed to pick up on this point – mainly because the reviewers used it with only one, or at most two, different speakers. In practice, the variations will be relatively subtle unless your speaker has a very low or uneven impedance characteristic – but if you are in that unfortunate group, boy are you going to be disappointed. And that's the point. The value of a review differs depending on the individual circumstances of the reader. Okay, so I've just quoted an extreme example, but variations between the review system and your own, the reviewer's room and expectations and yours, can be just as critical.

Of course, reviews should seek to point out the broader compatibility issues, the suitability of a product for a given role, but few actually do. Most reviewers take their own (shifting) system landscape as a given and few if any ever question the impact of their room (and particularly its low

frequency characteristics) on the outcome. We can merrily list our system and the partnering equipment, describe our room and our listening prejudices, all of which is relevant, but doesn't really solve the essential problem – that of specificity. At the end of the day we take this particular product, use it in this particular way and then seek to draw general conclusions from the results. That's a hell of a leap...

The better the reviewer the more capable he or she is of ensuring that the performance extracted and reported is representative, but we all get blind-sided occasionally. What's more, much of what we do to ensure that we get that performance is assumed rather than explained in the text. Even taking all that into account, we still can't (or more often don't) cover the intangibles. So, few reviews can really investigate the longevity, reliability, serviceability or consistency of a product (or the company that makes it). Even fewer consider the secondhand value you might expect to recover should you sell it, or any other hidden costs of ownership. Yet all these factors are intimately connected to the purchase price and hence the value ascribed to a product. The reviewer might account for some of them (even subconsciously), but it's impossible to ensure that the product you receive is representative rather than tweaked – and you'd better believe that reviewers get service and back-up from suppliers that goes beyond the norm. All you can do if you discover that the products and support you are receiving is wildly out of step with the public's experience (and this is a very small world) is stop dealing with that company.

So, where does that leave the poor reader? I'm certainly not saying that reviews are worthless. What I am saying is that you need to be aware of what they can and cannot tell you; aware of their limitations. Reviews can tell us about products – they can't tell us what products to buy. Knowing all of the above and considering it when reading a review is a step in the right direction, but unfortunately, human nature acts against us. We want answers, and even more likely we want affirmation. As someone once said, "They don't want to know what you think, they want you to confirm what they think!" If you've set your heart on that single-ended amp with the fancy Russian transmitter tube then look hard enough and you'll probably find a review to confirm



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But what concerns me is the basic disconnect between the specific and the general. That's something I can deal with. If the problem lies in the particularity of the review context then what we need is to conduct more general reviews – or rather, shift the focus of those reviews. That's why you've started to see group reviews appearing in the pages of Hi-Fi+. They're not a case of a first past the post contest. Look closer and you'll see that they take good examples of contrasting approaches, reporting on both the products themselves and the differences between them

– sonically and in terms of application. In other words, we're moving into the realm of wider system contexts; take this technological approach and what are the costs, what are the benefits and how does it impact on the system around it? What conditions or allowances are required to allow it to flourish? These are more general conclusions, talking about a product category as well as the individual product itself. The intention is not to supplant individual reviews, or the specific depth of detail they provide, but to offer a supporting fabric against which to set them. As I said earlier, reviews can't tell you what to buy, but connected into a logically continuous whole, they can help you decide for yourself. ▶+

Music Matters



by Alan Sircom

There's a new game in town. It turns current thinking about hi-fi on its head. And it's capable of producing brilliant sounds – or, something akin to the audiophile equivalent of a nasty skin rash. It's the system where you put the bulk of your budget on the loudspeakers. The back-end first system. The audio mullet.

This isn't just out of whack to flat earthers of old; saying this is the act of an apostate. Because the very spirit of the flat earth movement that was so deeply successful 20 years or so ago was that the source component rules. Back in the days when you could just about scrape a Linn LP12, arm and cartridge for a grand, a not to uncommon £1,200 system was that LP12 with a NAD 3020 and a pair of Wharfedale Diamonds.

Part of this was wholly understandable – being a mechanical system, LP is quick to show up any shortcomings in the engineering of the turntable. Good engineering costs money, and you get what you pay for in clear and readily identifiable terms. But CD is less clear cut, because the engineering is arguably less important than the electronics. This has meant, since the early-1990s, most people in hi-fi have advocated a balanced approach to system building. The relative costs of the source, amp and speakers have been remarkably close to one another. A typical system today might feature a CD player, amp and speakers all

costing around \$1,000, with a further \$500 or so spent on cables and tables.

Once again, the logic underlying this idea is wholly understandable. It's a safe pair of hi-fi hands. You can be reasonably sure that if you put together a similarly priced trio of components, they will work well together. Maybe the synergistic fireworks will be a bit subdued compared to a very carefully matched system, but it's hard to put a foot really wrong when taking the balanced route.

Recently, this has been taken to extremes, by being so conservative that people no longer venture outside of a single brand. In the past, you could put together a fine system comprising, say, a Marantz CD player coupled to an Audio Analogue amp and on to a pair of Epos speakers. Not any more. Whether through design-orientation or fear of getting the synergy out of whack, today's systems are one brand affairs, except for the loudspeaker of course. So, today's system might be a Creek Evo CD and amp to go with those Epos speakers.

Of course, when we get to the high end, all bets are off. Well, almost. A surprising number of ARC amps have been sold on the back of the Reference CD7 and companies without a matching digital player and power amp are finding it harder to sell their pre-amp on its own these days. But, when scouting for the best of everything, ▶



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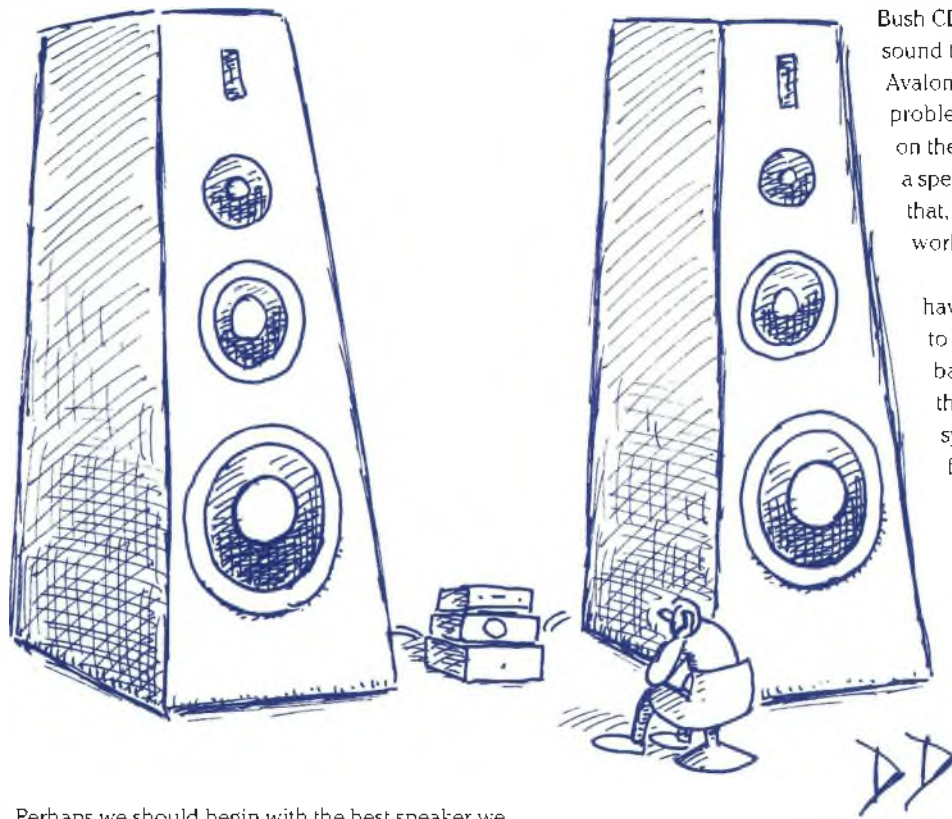
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▶ there's no necessary budget balance between components anymore: If the best CD player you've heard costs £6,000, the best amplifier £25,000 and the best speaker £12,000, so be it. When you think about it, though, this too is a safety shot. By buying the best of everything, you are still system matching, this time by performance, not price. You may not make the best sounding system in the process, but the stakes are raised and the expectation for good sound is higher.

Not all of us have an infinite budget. Even those with deep high-end pockets find there's a limit somewhere. So, if we cannot afford the best of everything, how do we allocate the funds? Perhaps we start at the wrong end.



Perhaps we should begin with the best speaker we can afford and build a system around it. Perhaps we should engage with the mullet.

There's one word that sums up why loudspeakers should dominate the budget when considering building a system – bandwidth. To build a speaker that can deliver a wide bandwidth sound – and deliver it well – is no easy or cheap task. Once we find one that works well with our tastes and our room dynamics, we should then choose the electronics to suit.

In a way, the specifications we all check on the back of speakers are looking in wholly the wrong direction. Or rather, we are missing a vital measurement on the spec

sheet. Impedance, frequency response, sensitivity, power handling are all important for matching amplifier to speaker, but where's the measurement about the room the speakers will work in? Where does it say 'suitable for rooms up to 30sq metres'? Without such a rubric, imagine how crazy your mullet might become.

Of course, this implies the mullet-making task would be in some way simple. In fact, picking out a system by the speakers is one of the hardest things to get right. You have already allocated the lion's share of the money to the speaker boxes, now you have to find equipment that drives the speakers properly and sounds good doing it. This is where a modicum of sensibility comes into play.

If you are trying to get your £50 Bush CD and amp to make a good sound through a pair of £50,000 Avalons, forget it. But I see no problems with spending say £1,500 on the electronics to drive a speaker costing many times that, as long as the system works in the listening tests.

We can go further. And have. Cast your mind back to a certain Wilson Duette-based system. In traditional thinking, a £13,000 speaker system should be fed signal from electronics costing upwards of £20,000 or more. We used it with a few grand's worth of CD and integrated valve amp – costing as much as someone might drop on cables in a £30,000 system. The system sang far better than it had any right to. I'm sure if you randomly put together half a

dozen sets of electronics costing anywhere between £1,500 and about £5,000, the Wilson would sound good through possibly two, tolerably okay through another three and truly dreadful through one. But - and here's the clincher - it wouldn't automatically be the most expensive set of electronics that sounded the best.

Because such a system is relatively easy to get horribly wrong, it needs careful investigation and close-scrutiny when auditioning, ideally over long term sessions. But, properly put together, who knows? Maybe the mullet will be back in fashion once again!



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The Second Great Hi-Fi+ Writing Competition

We ran our first writing contest back in Issue 23 with a mind to unearthing new contributors. Of course, we sweetened the lure with a fabulous prize as well as the promise of seeing your winning entry in print and the possibility of becoming a reviewer for the magazine. Well, two years down the line you can witness the results, the winner on that occasion, Steve Dickinson, now a regular reviewer on the *Plus* mast-head. Indeed, we were so pleased with the outcome that we've decided that the time is ripe to repeat the exercise.



The problem as always is to find a prize that will actually be useful to all our readers, whatever their hi-fi leanings. After all, there's nothing more galling than seeing the generously donated high-end component (that we managed to beg, borrow or steal at enormous risk and damage to our personal self-esteem) ending up on e-bay; not everybody wants a moving-magnet only, valve powered four-box phono-stage. But I don't know anybody who has seen or heard Meridian's new F80 'high-end table radio' and doesn't want one – badly! And that's exactly what's at stake. The winner of our *Second Great Hi-Fi+ Writing Competition* will get their grubby mitts on their very own F80 – built-in CD/DVD player, sophisticated, DSP-driven speaker system, DAB/FM/AM tuners and all. At last, an

audiophile wireless that actually receives *Test Match Special* – and you even get to pick the colour! Of course, you also get to see your winning missive in print and get the chance to become a bona fide audio reviewer for *Hi-Fi+*, but beside the Meridian F80 that seems like small potatoes.

All you have to do is compose 1000 words on one of the following subjects and forward them, along with your name, address, e-mail and telephone number, to:

e-mail: accounts@hifiplus.com - using "Writer's Competition" as the subject heading and attaching your entry as a word.doc.

Post: Writer's Competition
Hi-Fi+ Magazine
25-27 Whittle Rd
Ferndown Industrial Estate
Wimborne
Dorset
BH21 7RP
United Kingdom

The closing date for all entries is 31st August '07. The competition is open to all and sundry irrespective of age, sex or profession, unless you happen to work for AMI or Meridian Audio. Clearly state your chosen title from the list below, along with your name and contact details at the top of the first page. Oh, and good luck.

Roy Gregory
Editor, Hi-Fi+ Magazine



1. Are we now so obsessed with quality that we're forgetting to feel the width?
2. You never forget the first time...
3. A review is only a review but a purchase comes out of your bank account.
4. Great music can transcend a poor recording but there's no making a silk purse out of a musical sow's ear.



Power Trip...

The evolution of the high-powered amplifier

by Roy Gregory and Chris Binns

There came a point in the short and recent history of high-end audio, when the unfeasibly powerful solid-state mono-bloc became the absolute apogee of audiophile aspiration. Why these hulking, physically difficult and imposing brutes – as opposed to something more obvious (like a large loudspeaker) or exquisite (like a hand-built cartridge)? It's easy to speculate about the vicarious reinforcement of the fragile male ego and the corruptive attraction of absolute power, but I suspect that the truth is more prosaic. Even the largest mono-blocs are relatively unobtrusive and easy to accommodate.

Factor in a fashion for ever smaller speakers with increasingly improbable aspirations as regards bandwidth and a general acceptance of impossibly low impedance loads and it's not hard to see why a monster solid-state amp (or two) would have an attraction: "All that sound... out of those little speakers? Wow!" Of course, the reaction fails to incorporate the pair of huge amps lurking discretely out of sight, each a three-man lift – but hey, impressive is as impressive does...

But fashion is by nature a transitory beast and the SET backlash was only just around the corner. Still, the high-powered solid-state amp retained its devotees if not its primacy of place in the spotlight. But with alternative approaches came a greater understanding of the qualitative cost of all that power (the financial burdens were already indelibly etched on the

psyche of a generation). Listeners started to appreciate the problems that come with simply trying to deliver such huge potential and the price they exact in terms of speed and musical agility, subtlety, finesse and tonal range. Increasingly, the circuitry required to keep all that power in line became the deciding factor in its delivery.



superceding the demands of the signal, robbing the experience of emotion and intimacy.

But there's no denying the universal nature of solid-state amplification, its load tolerance and efficiency. As the incumbent champions of the technology succumbed to the distractions of a variety of domestic upheavals or a simple lack of inspiration so the once dominant marques of Krell, Mark Levinson and Rowland fell from their once lofty prominence to be challenged by a new generation of designers with leaner, hungrier ways of doing the same job, or new ideas all together. While the likes of Spectral and MBL (the latter driven by the specific demands

of their loudspeakers) have simply carried on regardless, their higher profile contemporaries have rather fallen from grace, suddenly finding themselves embroiled in (and in danger of losing) an unseemly brawl for market prominence. Well, here are the "barbarian hordes", rewriting the rules and parameters of high-powered amplification – and generally making it rather more affordable along the way. Hardly upstarts, there arguments are more persuasive than the establishment might have you believe.

The Ayre MXR mono-blocs

As a company and a product line, Ayre Acoustics represent the archetypal example of this new wave; and nothing more so than the MXR mono-bloc power amplifier. Long respected for the excellence of their more affordable electronics and disc players, Ayre's original statement designs have been unfairly and unwisely overlooked – as we discovered when the K-1xe pre-amp turned up alongside the MXR monos. Rather blocky in appearance and with an undeniably clunky volume control, this fully discrete, fully differential design totally rearranged our perceptions of what was possible at its £6K price-point, easily matching the likes of the LS26 and including an excellent phono-stage into the bargain. And that from a ten year old design...

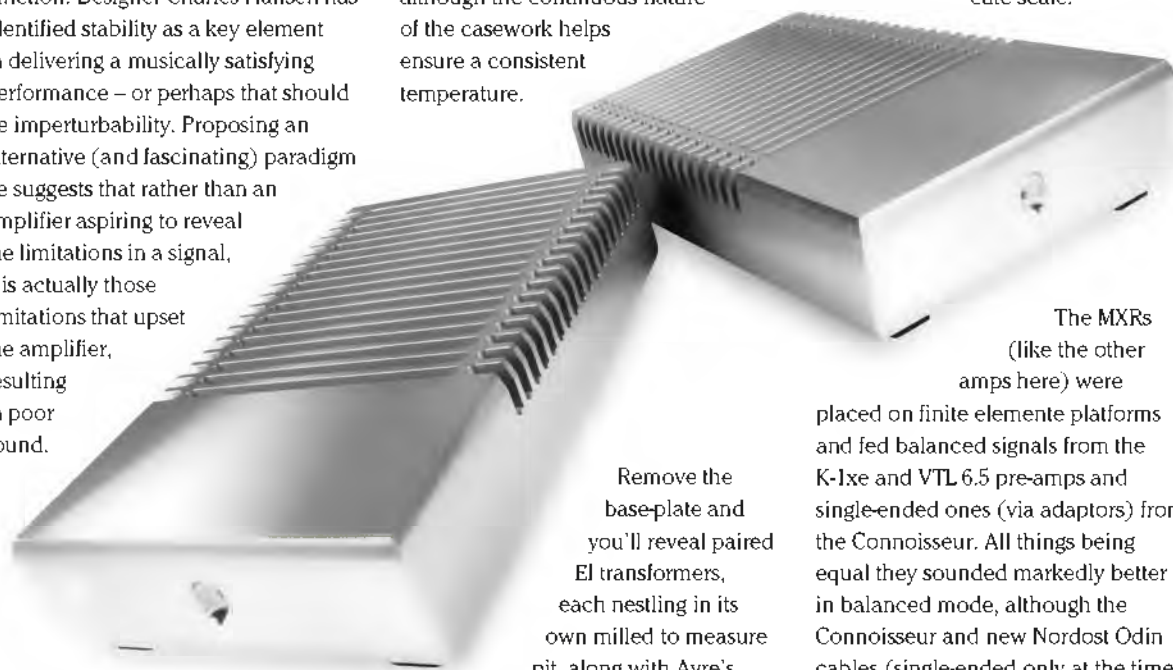
All of which makes Ayre's latest assault on the high-end an even more enticing prospect. The MXR mono-

► blocs are nothing if not distinctive. Each compact, shallow case is hewn from a single billet of aluminium, yet its discrete dimensions will deliver a full 300 Watts into eight Ohms and 600 into four. Nor is that casework mere extravagance designed to justify a high-zoot price-tag. The MXRs weigh in at £5500 each, an astonishingly affordable ask for the performance on offer while, as with all the best designs, form definitely follows function. Designer Charles Hansen has identified stability as a key element in delivering a musically satisfying performance – or perhaps that should be imperturbability. Proposing an alternative (and fascinating) paradigm he suggests that rather than an amplifier aspiring to reveal the limitations in a signal, it is actually those limitations that upset the amplifier, resulting in poor sound.

Render the amp impervious and poor recordings will be far more rewarding. It's a proposal I'll return to in a future discussion with the man himself, but if the results of its implementation here are anything to go by it's worthy of serious consideration. To this end the MXR pays considerable attention to both the electrical and thermal stability of its fully differential circuit, as well as its mechanical integrity. Ayre have coined the term Equilock to describe newly developed circuitry designed to effectively fix the operating voltages within the input transistors. Meanwhile, a new generation of output devices that incorporate their own thermal

sensing has enabled far more precise control of the output stage. Key circuit boards are selected not just for their low-loss electrical properties but for their mechanical rigidity too, helping to eliminate spurious mechanical vibration within the circuit and creating a single physical entity that can be effectively grounded. Even the heatsinks are positioned and braced for minimum mechanical signature rather than thermal efficiency, although the continuous nature of the casework helps ensure a consistent temperature.

press it to pass from standby to operate (blue – while other colours indicate low voltage, blown rail fuses, over heating etc.) These amps need to run and delivered notably better results when left in operate mode, taking a full 36 hours to really hit their stride. The cases also run warm enough to take the chill off a spring room – and attracted admiring comments from everyone who saw them. They may not be big but they score big on the cute scale.



Remove the base-plate and you'll reveal paired EI transformers, each nestling in its own milled to measure pit, along with Ayre's signature fully differential,

feedback free, discrete circuitry, as beautifully executed on the inside as the casework is on the outside. Internal wiring is carefully routed through individual, carved channels and even hardened hi-fi cynics went all soft and gooey when shown the cellular beauty inside of the Ayres.

The MXRs are minimalism personified, offering a 13 Amp IEC mains connection, an XLR input and a Cardas twin speaker terminal, which will accept spades or 4mm plugs. There are also two AyreLink sockets for integration with a full Ayre system or pre-amp. The recessed LED on the front-panel glows green on switch on;

The MXRs (like the other amps here) were

placed on finite element platforms and fed balanced signals from the K-Ixe and VTL 6.5 pre-amps and single-ended ones (via adaptors) from the Connoisseur. All things being equal they sounded markedly better in balanced mode, although the Connoisseur and new Nordost Odin cables (single-ended only at the time of the listening) had enough of an edge over the K-1/balanced Valhalla set up to make it the preferred combination. The effectiveness of Symposium Rollerblock couplers beneath the amps also spoke volumes for their mechanical integrity, underlining the completeness of their conception. Speakers varied between the new Eben CI, the Marten Coltrane Supremes and, for the comparative sessions the easy to handle and full-range demands of the standard Coltrane.

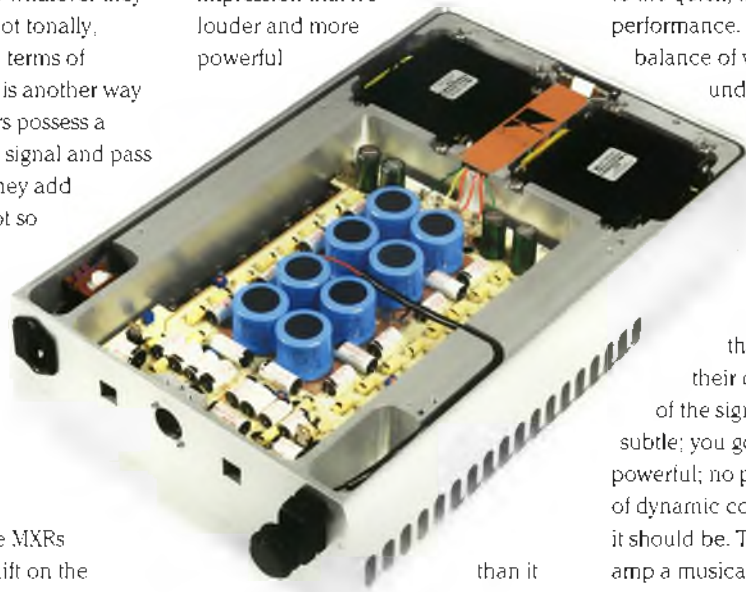
It's a shame that Roland have already used (sullied?) the Coherence moniker, because it could have been coined for these amps. They are almost valve-like in their continuity ►

► and sense of flow, the smoothness of their dynamic transitions – the very things that make valve amps so musically appealing, but wed here to the traditional solid-state virtues of transparency, load-tolerance, power and bandwidth. But the Ayres take those virtues a stage further. Put the MXRs in your system and they'll make any other amp I've tried sound disjointed and uneven. Musically, they'll make whatever they replace sound tilted. Not tonally, you understand, but in terms of understanding. Which is another way of saying that amplifiers possess a viewpoint. They take a signal and pass it on, but in so doing they add their own subtle (or not so subtle) push in some particular direction, their own specific spin on the musical event. In so doing they influence the way in which we understand and react to what we hear.

But, listening to the MXRs requires a paradigm shift on the part of the reviewer. It's not enough to simply seek that thumbprint, that character overlaid on the signal. "What do the Ayres sound like?" came the question. The answer: "Whatever they're connected to." It's not that they're sonically invisible, just that they manage to take the signal and pass it on without seemingly imposing on its sense in any way. Run a direct comparison with the other amps here and you can clearly hear what the MXRs can and (more obviously) cannot do. They can't for instance, float the stunningly defined acoustic space presented by the Karans, or decode and separate the denser bass textures on the Johanos/Dallas *Symphonic Dances* the same way the Brystons do. Nor do they have the bottomless pit of sheer energy that underpins the performance potential of the real

powerhouses here. That feeling that no matter what you do with the volume control the Amps will just keep coming. No, the MXRs' capabilities lie in quite a different direction.

Play a modern, compressed, rock recording on the Ayre amps and you'll find it surprisingly, astonishingly satisfying. All that presence and substance (which is after all the point of all that compression, to give the impression that it's louder and more powerful



than it really is) hits you right in the chest – with purpose. High-resolution sound? No. High-fidelity? Yeah, right! But highly satisfying? Definitely. Or to put it another way – musically, it works. In fact, it works so well that it speaks volumes about this amplifier's time and phase coherence. No matter how muddy or dense the signal things still happen exactly when and where they should, making them make a lot more sense. Piled chords and power guitar become exactly that – carefully piled rather than thrown together higgledy-piggledy. Which translates directly into that feeling of power and musical satisfaction.

Now, switch to Janis Ian and 'At Seventeen' and you'll hear a track that's all about the delicacy and subtlety of its phrasing, each expressive twist or turn

underpinned by a percussion or guitar accent, the haunting brass chorus that adds that plaintive air. This is musical intimacy and emotional directness at its most powerful. And if you want sheer, unbridled power, those *Symphonic Dances* have a muscular substance and drive that simply propels you into the performance.

All of which is another way of saying that these amps cut straight to the quick, the very nature of the performance. Such is their overall balance of virtues, the lack of any undue emphasis on their part, that the musical message emerges unimpeded and intact. There's a seamless continuity, an overarching holistic quality to their sound that manages to match their delivery to the demands of the signal. Small, delicate, subtle; you got it. Big, brooding, powerful; no problem. Dramatic, full of dynamic contrast; emphatic, just as it should be. That's what makes this amp a musical chameleon, the ability to shape-shift at will. You think its big and it surprises you with its delicacy. You want more power – and there it is. It's stable without ever holding too tight, it's quick and dramatic without ever being obvious. So, when I say it matches its delivery to the demands of the signal, what I'm really saying is that it's the signal that defines the terms of reproduction: Which means that in turn, the amps give you as much as the signal is capable of, rather than taking the signal and constantly comparing it to what they're capable of. That might seem like a subtle distinction but when it comes to musical enjoyment the effect is smack you in the face obvious. There's never any question as to whether this disc is good enough to grace your system: there's precious little sense of the system at all. Instead, the musical message becomes the ►

▶ dominant influence, demanding your attention and dismissing such trivialities. As authoritative as the amplifiers' grip on the speakers is, it's the signal that controls their intent.

Now, lest you think I'm getting carried away, one thing these amps aren't is perfect. Whether you like the costs involved (sonic and monetary) there is no substitute for four-figure power ratings and their absolute authority, the musical and acoustic foundation they deliver. The Ayres present a deep and tall but slightly narrow sound-stage, and one that favours the images peopling it at the expense of the overall acoustic space and the definition of its boundaries. Scale and perspective are both, however, excellent – lifelike and naturally convincing – especially with the Coltrane Supremes (although whether the active bass towers influence this is an interesting question). Nor does the MXR flatter to deceive. If there's hardness or glare on the disc, push the Ayre mono-blocs and you'll hear it in all its glory. Nor, despite the impressive presence and substance of their sound, do they add spurious weight or harmonic colour. Some might find them slightly washed out in tonal terms, although I wonder whether that's more a case of what you are used to – like sugar in tea. Their spectral balance is uncannily similar to the RADIA, the latter amp sounding a little more agile and open, but without the top-to-bottom integrity and physical presence of the Ayres, or their power delivery. Where the Hovland is marginal with the Coltranes, the MXRs never even break a sweat.

In many respects the Ayre monos establish a new benchmark for all round excellence. An amp like the Bryston delivers more power, and arguably more sheer grunt. The Thorens too has its own appeal. But in terms of complete musical capability, the ability to deliver a musical performance into your room, most rooms, with a variety

of partnering speakers, the MXRs know no peer at the price. They are also elegant, compact and manageable, bombproof, intelligent and fail-safe. Despite their inherent musical virtues, they'll still reward careful matching. Those who are troubled by their high frequency honesty and energy might want to try a more forgiving cable than the Nordost. I'd anticipate AudioQuest or Cardas delivering positive and possibly kinder results. But whatever the chosen ancillaries one of these amplifiers' greatest strengths is to bring

the best out of partnering equipment just as surely as they do with the discs you play. No amplifier since the RADIA has spent as long undisturbed in my system. No amplifier this powerful and relatively affordable has proved anywhere near as musically satisfying. Such unquestioning acceptance is rare indeed – and all the more valuable for it. Unflappable and utterly unintrusive, for me, these amps rewrite the rulebook on power. You can do better – but you'd better be prepared to pay for the pleasure...

The Bryston 28B SST mono-blocs by Chris Binns

I have always had considerable respect for Bryston power amplification but the development of the ST and subsequent SST models (a revision that now applies to all the current Bryston range) has, not to put too fine a point on it,

served to redefined their performance. Upgraded components together with a revised layout to allow shorter signal paths has led to a major improvement in both technical and musical areas, notably a lower noise floor with increased resolution of detail and dynamics. Both the 14B stereo and 7B mono-blocs (both of which are bridged designs) have impressed me greatly during my time with them, and while there were subtle differences between the two, they both exhibited the sonic traits that I have come



to associate with the bigger Bryston power amplifiers. With the introduction of the 28B SST earlier this year, there was nothing to suggest that this was anything more than just a (heaven forbid) more powerful 7B, with a frightening 1Kilowatt per unit capability. For the record, that's the specified output on paper, in practice its just over 1.3 kW into eight Ohms with presumably even more available into four... even I started to wonder if this was slightly over the top. But forget about that, because it is totally not what these amplifiers are about.

Aesthetically, the 28 looks much like any other Bryston amplifier, but considerably bigger and of course heavier, and there are the usual options of black or silver, with or without 19" rack and handles which might well ▶

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REFERENCE

GP Acoustics (UK) Ltd., Eccleston Road, Tovil, Maidstone, Kent, ME15 6QP U.K. T: +44 (0) 1622 672261 F: +44 (0) 1622 750653

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▶ be a life saving choice if you ever have to move them around. Internal construction is about as neat as it gets, with virtually no wiring and dominated by a massive, high quality Plitron torroid to supply the +/- 90 Volt rails that feed the two power boards with 16 power transistors per side; like the 14 and the 7, the 28 effectively runs two amplifiers in a balanced configuration. The refinements that set it apart from the earlier models revolve around the input of the amplifier, where the single differential op-amp and inverter used to drive the power sections have been replaced with two differential amps in opposite phase, resulting in a symmetrical signal path which together with tighter regulation provides a cleaner, lower distortion source.

The 28Bs need a few hours to warm up and deliver their full potential, and under normal operating conditions the heat sinks will get warm to the touch and pretty much stay that way. Initial listening suggested a performance that was considerably ahead of my recollections of both the 7 and 14Bs, the 28B's delivering a performance that got right under my skin from the word go. The sublime Ayre K-1xc served the purpose of putting into context listening sessions at RG's house as well as enriching the experience in my own living room.

Given that the higher-end Brystons have always excelled in their performance at the bottom end, I guess it comes as no surprise to learn that the 28Bs are the best I have heard in this area to date. It was easy enough to ascertain the level of grip, authority, speed and sheer grunt that these amplifiers could provide. Your average stand mount seemed to gain an extra (finely tuned) bass unit from somewhere, while the 'difficult

to integrate' bass aspect of the Martin Logan Vistas had no choice but to obey the freakish control exerted by the 28s. Musically, anything with kick drum and bass guitar had an uncanny agility that meant all sorts of subtle rhythmic combinations seemed to make more sense than ever before, while orchestral music had a sheer presence and weight that allowed for a more palpable and involving performance from many recordings.



But I might be guilty of giving the wrong impression here. While I strongly believe that a system that gets the bass end 'right' stands a far better chance of conveying music in the manner in which it was intended, it was only a small part of what I was hearing with the 28Bs. If I start to talk about cleanliness and etched detail together with expressive dynamics coming from a near absolute silence it is still only half the story, as it is really the sum of these factors that lend the Bryston its particular brand of magic. The delivery of music is never forced or pushed forward to create an unnatural sense of excitement, but if it is coming at you fast and furious then you will know about it. The drumming and percussion that plays such a big part in the opening of Peter Gabriel's soundtrack *Passion* left my jaw on the ground, and I swear that this track

has always been about piling on the volume to create a sense of scale that will leave you open mouthed. With the 28s, it is the communication of the energy, and to a degree brutality of the playing that scares you regardless of how loud you listen, and that is one of the scary things about the Bryston; an amplifier of grid sucking power delivery that really does not need to prove itself. Even listening at barely audible levels there is still the impression that everything from dynamics through

to detail and resolution is intact, in other words there is no working level beneath which, and certainly not above - I did threaten the very life of a few bass units - that the 28 will work. The openness, delicacy and sheer subtlety that the Brystons were capable of

was sometimes breathtaking, with a fluidity that is often associated with good, make that really good valve amplification, much as I hate that comparison. There was a coherence and solidity both spatially and with timing that allowed the music to flow from the loudspeakers without constraint, with almost no regard to listening level, which meant that whatever type of music I chose to play and regardless of recording quality it was always, satisfying.

I would love to have had the 28B's for longer in order to try them with a wider range of loudspeakers. Apart from anything else, I am always a bit frustrated when I cannot entirely pin down exactly what a piece of equipment is contributing to a system (and I guess that's part of the job description as a reviewer) and I sometimes felt this was the case with the Brystons. But then a small part of me is relieved to know that a product can still hold back some magic that is a bit of a mystery for me, and is there to be enjoyed. That's how I felt about the Brystons; I can't wait to get them back. ▶

► The Thorens TEM 3200 mono-blocs

Some readers will doubtless be surprised to see the venerable name of Thorens gracing a high-end amplification survey. But whilst the Company is undeniably best known for its contributions to analogue replay, it's no stranger to the manufacture of electronics, having launched various ranges across the years. Besides which, the pressure/desire to diversify has never been stronger. Kudos then to Thorens for producing an amplifier (soon to be joined by a matching pre-amp and phono-stage) that's genuinely novel in design and topology. Like the other units here, the TEM 3200 is a fully differential circuit intended primarily for balanced connection. That's where the similarities stop. Here we have a hybrid circuit, driven by a fully complementary valve front-end, but which delivers 200 Watts from a single pair of n-channel output mosfets, one for each side of the balanced signal path. It even doubles its output into four Ohms. Just think about that for a second and you'll quickly realise that this amplifier's circuit topology is quite unlike anything else you've ever come across. So much so that designer Frank Blohbaum has patented it. So, even if the power ratings pale beside the likes of the Karans and Brystons, flirting with the lower reaches of genuinely high power, the topology alone ensures this amp's inclusion here.

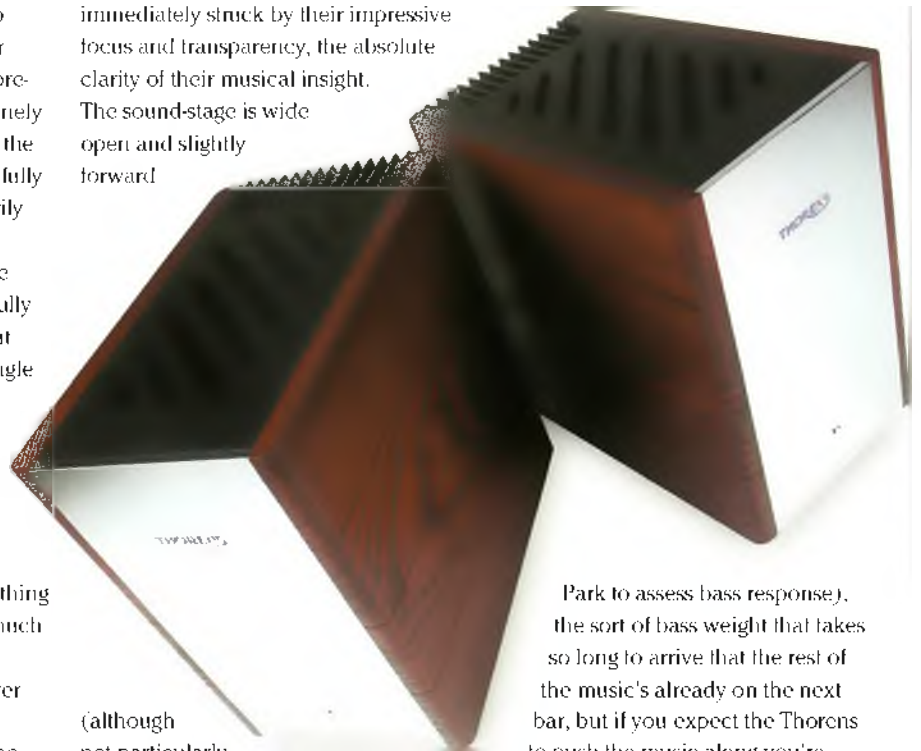
The boxy shape of the Thorens amps belies their solid construction, each one weighing in at a manageable but still thought provoking 25kg. The wooden side checks are available in a range of colours but there's still something undeniably Northern European about their four-square proportions. Once inside however, there's nothing conservative about the circuitry. Despite the rated output power and 14A continuous current capability the output Mosfets

are working well within their 120A continuous/300A peak output levels, ensuring excellent linearity and low distortion. The circuit as a whole is zero feedback, the transformer coupled input ensuring extremely low noise while the output devices deliver a very high damping factor. All of which sounds great on paper, but how does it sound in practice?

In a word (or two) clean and clear. Listening to the Thorens one is immediately struck by their impressive focus and transparency, the absolute clarity of their musical insight. The sound-stage is wide open and slightly forward

(although not particularly deep), dynamics explosively impressive. Indeed, the more you listen the more you realise that the sound of the TEM 3200 is characterized by the speed and dynamic coherence of its response. It sorts the dynamic density of congested modern recordings with ease, helped by a bass that's agile and deft, quick and lean. Indeed, in some respects the nature of the bass helps define the sound of the amp as a whole. There's no extra weight or wallop low down. Instead the music's impact comes from the sheer speed with which the amp reacts to shifts in dynamic range,

the fast hands you barely see rather than the roundhouse pulverizer you just can't avoid, if you get my drift. So, quick and agile, with a lightness of touch and speed of response, this amp's going to give music real zip and pace, right? Well no – quite the opposite in some ways. Okay, so it doesn't have the rumbling thunder that some people expect from a powerful amp (the same people who use the Tyrannosaurus footsteps from Jurassic



Park to assess bass response), the sort of bass weight that takes so long to arrive that the rest of the music's already on the next bar, but if you expect the Thorens to push the music along you're going to be sadly disappointed. This amp stops as quickly as it starts, giving it a relaxed, unforced grasp of musical progress. That's one of the key factors in its overall sense of clarity and musical separation. Notes never get jumbled or tumble over each other. But it also gives it a rather cool perspective – not tonally but musically. Playing Art Pepper's 'Smack Up', the rapid sprays of the up-tempo phrases never get blurred or confused, the insistent rhythm work never loses touch with Pepper's more reflective lines. But move on to 'Las Cuevas De Mario' and that easy clarity and control. ►

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▶ that unflustered poise rob the track of its lunky groove, conjuring cool restraint in its place, more early Miles than Art, more clean than dirty. It's a balance that you'll either love or hate, that will either work with your speakers and system or it won't. For those brought up on the rounded warmth and intimacy of a classic valve amp, the TEM 3200s will sound almost brutally stark and



unforgiving. But for those who crave structural insight, who want their music sorted out and decongested then the Thorens will come as a breath of fresh air. Likewise, Naim devotees will find them rhythmically restrained, even slightly detached while those who want additive free musical delivery will find them a breath of fresh air.

So much with the TEM 3200s depends on the overall balance of the matching speakers and the listener's own preferences that a home audition is essential. Listening to Janis Ian singing 'At Seventeen',

the detail and definition, the sheer clarity of the myriad percussion motifs and incidental musical accents is staggering, yet I can't help missing the overall coherence that I get from an amp like the MXR. The Thorens tell you what's there, for me, the Ayres tell you why it's there. That's the decision the listener needs to make. If you want the facts and nothing but the facts then there's no doubt that the TEM 3200s give you the unvarnished truth. In some respects their absolute honesty and refusal to add to the event or gild the hi-fi lily reminds me of the SQF Pharao,

another German design.

However, if you want the sense in the performance, the emotional weight, then there are other amps that will allow you easier access – although generally at a price in terms of sheer detail and definition. I suspect also that the sheer novelty and linearity of the circuit itself means that the full range of musical expression may well have to wait for the similarly innovative pre-amp if we are to avoid a technological clash.

Make no mistake; these Thorens amplifiers are extremely impressive performers. Just be sure you are actually after what they deliver. There's not a shred of fat on these bones, not a Watt of wasted energy or overshoot. Instead you get life and energy mixed with superb control, accuracy and neutrality tied to speed unfettered by excess baggage. It's an unusual blend of virtues that brings poise and manners to musical reproduction, the rapier thrust and restrained precision of fencing rather than the earthier appeal of boxing. The choice is yours and it's a nice choice to have.

The Karan Acoustics KA M1200 mono-blocs

If the Ayre MXR epitomises elegant innovation, the Karans represent painstaking evolution. Massive, significantly heavier and far more costly than the other amps here, these huge, fully differential designs take traditional low-noise wide-bandwidth circuitry to its logical extreme, coupling it to well over a kW of power. Factor in Milan Karan's proven attention to detail and you have a fascinating prospect – at a price. A pair of KA M1200s will empty your wallet of \$25000 for which you'll receive two inconveniently immobile behemoths, each equipped to accept single-ended or balanced inputs – and you'll be able to use them to drive pretty much any speaker known to man. Internally, each beautifully finished case is packed, not least by a massive toroidal transformer and a power supply to match, which demands a pair of mains leads for each chassis. But despite their imposing appearance the Karans are not about brute force; they're all about speed and delicacy across the first Watt – while backing it up with the other 1199 Watts queuing up behind. The Ayre's cite musical stability as a prime design goal and achieve it through innovative design – the Karan's get there by a more familiar route, simply taking their chosen methodology further than ever before.

Of course, the Karans have also been in long-term residence (partly I suspect due to the sheer impracticality of transporting them). In that time I've come to value and rely on their awesome power delivery and musical authority, itself part motivation for this test. Surely it must be possible to match their musical and muscular qualities without spending the price of a decent family saloon? Sadly, the conclusion is that it's not. If the Karans are present to set the bar, they set it at a level that no amp costing less than half their price is going to trouble. ▶

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▶ there are plenty of more expensive and higher profile alternatives that won't wake the judges either. The KA M1200s are, quite simply, a class apart. As they damn well should be at the price. For this kind of money I'd want an amp to do it all. The Karans get surprisingly close.

The thing that sets the KA M1200s apart from the other amps here, and most other amps besides, is their ability to recreate a truly credible sound stage. Not you'll note, overtly impressive with exaggerated dimensionality, and walk-in transparency, but genuinely natural, convincing and believable.

the normal sense, with the inference of stolid immobility and planted permanence. This is bass with life, texture and timbre, pace, subtlety and a vibrant energy that creates a single energised body of air. There's nothing carved from stone about it (surely the most inappropriate "positive" quality ever ascribed to music) nothing slab like, nothing inanimate at all – unless of course there's meant to be. But I'm talking real instruments and real space here – by far the hardest task facing an amp and the one that the Karans dismiss with apparent ease.



They have the rare ability to capture a real sense of actual presence. Of course, that has a lot to do with low-frequency extension and having the speakers to reproduce it. But used with the Isis or even the slightly more limited extension available from the Coltranes, the result is a remarkably convincing sense of a tangible, enclosed acoustic, the feeling of being within the space with the orchestra or band. There are lots of amps that go low, and lots that deliver weight aplenty, but the Karans can physically float the performers within that acoustic space, allowing you to hear beneath notes, feel the cushion of air around them. This isn't weight in

If you simply want grunt they'll do that too, as a quick outing with Nils Petter Molvaer ably demonstrates, but it's the subtlety and finesse of which they're capable that's really impressive. The combination of agility and real power allows the low-frequencies full expressive range without any slowing of musical progress. The complexity and multi-layered nature of orchestral tutti is astonishing. The Johanos reading of the *Symphonic Dances* is wrapped in a palpable space, one in which you hear both the dimensions of the hall but also the stage beneath the orchestra. Instruments are arranged in their ranks, precise in placement and depth, held

separate from one another irrespective of levels. The piano is remarkable for its combination of authority and harmonic delicacy, its weight never clogging or smudging its colour and texture.

Likewise, upright bass is rendered whole, a vibrating box of wood and strings. The repeated bass motif that underpins Pepper's 'Las Cuevas...' has pitch, shape and texture, real attack to the plucked notes that give the tune is easy, loping groove. But move upbeat to something like the unreconstructed blues of Lucinda Williams' 'Can't Let Go' and you realise that unlike so many amps that do the deep bass/big sound-stage thing, that definition and resolution does nothing to impede music's natural pace and drive. In fact, the pace, separation and attack that characterise the Karans' lowest frequencies extend right up the musical range, making the mid and top incredibly tactile. The tiny rattles and chimes that are used to accent percussion instruments

retain their independence and identity just as clearly as lead vocals or guitar. Ms Williams' 'Right In Time' is a case in point, the tambourine maintaining its insistent rattle right through the busyness of the chorus and bridge, its crisp beat through the verses. Of course, your speakers will need the high-frequency discrimination to handle the energy and detail, but that should be a given with amps of this price.

If the Karans have a weakness it's in their overall perspective. That palpable acoustic space they establish also imposes a subtle sense of distance – the band is definitely over there. It's not as extreme as a mid-hall balance but it's noticeable enough to worry those who prefer a more immediate and intimate presentation. Having said that, I might have numbered myself amongst them and I can't get enough of the Karans, so go figure. In the same way, there will be those who demand more or ▶

► more vivid colour. Again, the same applies. Such is the integrity of the picture presented by the Karans, the spatial and temporal continuity, that such considerations seem almost spurious, a function more of what you are used to than what actually is. The impression of the live event is remarkable. It's not that you believe you're there, just much easier to forget that you're not. The latest generation of speakers from the likes of Avalon and Marten, shorn of so many intrusive additive aspects we've come to accept from loudspeakers, build on that and the KA M1200s with the Isis in particular represents a haunting combination. Ultimately, the Ayre MXR might be even less visible, but the Karans' extra



strengths still outweigh the individuality of its viewpoint. There's nothing

I wouldn't play on them, no disc that I'd consider off-limits, which is perhaps the biggest compliment of all.

Conclusions

Here we have a fascinating cast of characters. The 28B SST is Bryston's most accomplished amplifier to date – by far, combining as it does the company's traditionally ample muscle with a refinement and fluidity that will shock many a listener who think they've the measure of the brand. Thorens' TEM 3200 demonstrates just how much mileage there still

remains in innovative circuitry and alternative approaches, combining a novel differential, DC coupled, tube voltage gain stage with a revolutionary n-channel single device output stage based on high-power switching technology. Astonishingly clean and musically honest I suspect its true value will emerge in tandem with its soon to be available matching line-stage. Even as it stands it establishes a stark marker for those who really want to know...

Ayre's MXR has emerged as something of a middleweight champion, not by being equally good in all fields but by adopting a new and more musically inclusive philosophy. The result is an amp that succeeds equally on

technical and artistic terms – and does so in a manageable and beautifully presented package.

Towering over them all, physically and performance wise, there's the Karan KA M1200s. These monster amplifiers demonstrate that as good as the contenders are, you can still do better if your pockets are deep enough – and you choose carefully enough. The more affordable models here are easily good enough to embarrass many an amplifier – some at many times their price. A truly exceptional amplifier like the Karan will still better their performance, assuming your finances stretch that far. For the rest of us, things have improved significantly, with performance on offer at the lower price point we could probably only previously have dreamed

about. Indeed, the likes of the Bryston, Thorens and especially the Ayre are so good that simply spending the money on something (much) more expensive is even less of a guarantee than it ever was. I can't afford the KA M1200s either – but the MXRs, now those are almost within reach. ►+

Contacts

Ayre MXR

Price: £5500 ea.

UK Distributor:

Symmetry Systems

Tel. (44)(0)1727 865488

Net. www.symmetry-systems.co.uk

Manufacturer:

Ayre Acoustics

Net. www.ayre.com

Thorens TEM 3200

Price: €17500 pr.

Manufacturer:

Thorens

Tel. (41)61 813 0336

Net. www.thorens.com

Bryston 28B SST

Price: £6000 ea.

UK Distributor:

PMC

Tel. (44)(0)870 4441044

Net. www.pmc-speakers.com

Manufacturer:

Bryston

Net. www.bryston.ca

Karan Acoustics KA M1200

Price: £25000 pr.

UK Distributor:

Audiofreaks

Tel. (44)(0)208 948 4153

Net. www.audiofreaks.co.uk

Manufacturer:

Karan Acoustics

Net. www.karan-acoustics.com



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Jitter Free...

The impeccable logic of Michel Reverchon

by Roy Gregory

Michel Reverchon, the charismatic and iconoclastic President of Goldmund is one of the founding fathers, a giant of high-end audio. His products have always challenged the status quo – as well as accepted notions of value and pricing. They've also offered stellar performance, perhaps inevitably attracting praise and condemnation in almost equal measure. Feared for years in the Far East, Goldmund's products are once again appearing in the West. I spoke with Reverchon, and Janet Mundy (Goldmund's Chief Operations Officer) in order to understand the history of the brand, as well as its supremo's current thinking.



RG. Perhaps we'd better start with your initial involvement with Goldmund...

MR. That was an accident. I was working with (the European Marketing Division of) IBM and felt it was time to do my own thing. Goldmund was initially started by two young French

architects who were doing modifications to the Rabco (linear tracking) tonearm at that time. Eventually they made their own arm which was the first Goldmund T3 and this attracted a lot of attention. They were not in a position to meet the demand so I decided to step in. I was still at IBM at the time and my "hobby" was installing every arm – when you see the tonearm it is precision mechanics and to the French this means nothing (laughs) so I moved production to Geneva and started to produce the arm in quantity, professionally made to an improved design. That was the start, in 1980.

Having decided to build a business I couldn't do that with only the tonearm so we had designed a turntable (the Studio, in 1979) which allowed us to sell sufficient products to actually start the business. That's when we launched the project and research for the Reference turntable and started the development of the complete system. In 1982 we added a speaker and we got the first electronics in 1984. The idea was always to create a complete line of products.

Now, back in 1980 we had only one table and one tonearm. Nobody was making a decent turntable at that time... just Linn, a few esoteric Japanese designs... nothing much else (he shrugs). Audiophiles all over the World, you bring them a new turntable, a new tonearm that is exciting and they buy it – so we had no problems. My friends from Levinson and Audio Research were happy because we were completing their systems. They had amplifiers, there were speakers but no good sources of comparable quality so everything was fine, they accepted us.

RG. Initially, you started out working with a product developed by two other people. Yet, within five years you'd developed turntables, speakers, electronics... How can a company achieve that?

MR. A company can do that – one man cannot. If a company decides that it needs to bring a speaker to the market, it looks for a man who knows how to build

► speakers. Very fast, in Europe, you have a list of 20 names of such people. You visit them and select one. The first who got involved was a Frenchman called Christian Yvon, a freelance designer – which often means somebody who is good at design, not so good at building a company. So we hired his expertise. In the same way we approach people who design electronics, we approach people doing other things, including cables. I learnt by catching new talents and hiring them as contractors. Some would just do one project for us, others would become more and more involved until they ended up working full-time for us. This is the way you build a company – not by trying to do everything yourself. I just organize.

We started with a plan to create all categories of product and that was the real start of Goldmund – not the turntable and tonearm; we just used them to enter the market. But this had another consequence. When we were just selling the turntable and tonearm we were friends with everybody. But as soon as we started to produce speakers and electronics my friends in the US started to scratch their heads – they started to see us as dangerous. So, we decided to continue selling the turntable products all over the World, but to concentrate on selling the electronics in markets where they would be welcome.

There's a business model that says it's better to swim in a blue ocean than a red one – to offer your products where there's little competition rather than a lot. So I looked at the market to see where our products – made in Switzerland, high-tech, superb finish, full line – I looked to see where this would be welcome. Most of our competition at this time was American and the people who loved the Europeans, loved what we did and hated the American brands were the Japanese.

Everybody thought I was crazy but I saw them accepting brands like Levinson because they had no alternative, so I went to Japan – that was in 1984. This was so successful that in 1987 our distributor created a separate company to sell Goldmund products, headed by the former president of Micro Seiki; because of his history with turntables he understood Goldmund very well. In Europe we had just

acquired the Stellavox brand which had a fantastic reputation in Japan, so this is what we called the new company – Stellavox Japan – which is still our biggest distributor.

So we actually moved out of the US and Europe – that's when we disappeared off the audiophile scene here – because we were so successful in Japan and the Far East. We had a choice: disturb people here, disturb people in the US or please people in the Far East. There can be no doubt which course you choose. But the effect was that we seemed to disappear, to be removed from Western perception and that has had a huge impact on the way the company is viewed over here.



RG. Why return to the Western markets at this point in time?

MR. (Pauses) Because we are strong enough now to fear no competition... period. Before we were faced by established companies that were powerful in the market; fight them and they'll win that fight. Now, coming back is not a problem. Now we can compete easily – present a proposition and people can decide whether or not they like it.

RG. In other words, fight the battles you can win...

MR. Exactly – much less blood that way!

RG. The key step in this history has to be the decision to evolve from the craft manufacture of modified Rabcos or the original T3 to a business model with a strategic plan. What were the fundamental aspects of that strategy?

MR. If I tell you the truth, you will hate me! As a businessman it was to make money to stay in business. I saw Goldmund as a real business. So when making decisions about this product or that, I always did so on the basis of their potential. The company has always been run like that. I still listen to and love music and love equipment, but as a business our products have to make the money to create the equipment I want to listen to. ►

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► **RG.** So how do you set about creating financially viable products?

MR. It is extraordinarily simple. We are just operating at the top of our field. It is an arena in which people are prepared to pay as long as it is for something genuine. That's a luxury market and it will support extremes if necessary. So what you must do is overcome technology barriers; create products that really do perform better. You must build your brand; which is making the quality of the product, the finish, the image, name, distribution chain, everything... the top. Then the recipe is filled, you must just ask the right price and people will say, "Yes". So, business-wise, the recipe is the same as Patek Philippe or Chanel. Make the best, with the best performance and finish and you can ask the full price – and people are glad to pay it. They will buy your equipment because that is a pleasure in itself. So it this touch of luxury added to high-tech, provides a powerful mix that brings in the money to invest in the next R&D.

RG. With so many options and approaches available, how do you select the ones you use?

MR. That's down to your business sense, watching the market. Being aware of future technological changes before the others. Be very close to the customer – on his knees as he is listening. Be sensitive to the changes in distribution, technology and the taste of people when it comes to front-ends – where they get their music from. You must have the organization to capture all this information and understand it. The choices become obvious then.

JM. Michel makes it sound very easy, but that's like an Olympic athlete makes their sport look easy. It's a special skill and there are not many people who can do this with such clarity, who have the ability to act as a catalyst with designers, technicians, distribution chain – the whole team. To combine the right people and skills to produce exactly the right direction so that they achieve far beyond what was originally perceived. That's the unique talent Michel has.

MR. It is true that we surround ourselves with many talents, but that was a business decision. We chose to make Goldmund a research rather than a manufacturing company. If you want to make the best amp or turntable or speaker, as a small company you cannot afford to employ the top guy. But if you hire him as a consultant for six-months, then you really can afford the best. As you develop the company and it grows, soon you can afford one guy, but with so many products and different technologies he can't be the best at everything – that's not possible. So rather than hiring the stars, when we started to attract our own engineers in 1998, we took young people who would develop into stars.

JM. But they're attracted by the opportunity to work with the specialists who still surround Goldmund, and to be

part of a true technology company – we have always had more engineers than all the rest of the staff put together. Also, the Swiss Atelier system, the collection of tiny precision engineering houses on which the watch industry is built suits our structure perfectly. Technological advances aren't just to do with chips and electronics, but also the degree of precision available and the engineering possibilities that creates. We've seen huge advances in this regard in recent years.

RG. Given the importance of branding and continuity to your overall strategy, does bringing an engineering element in house help provide that?

MR. There are few aspects in the design of a product. The visual designer, from the beginning, was myself – I drew everything. I still do some of this. But branding and finish is far more than just the surface or appearance of products. We also have an extraordinary level of mechanical and technological continuity, approaches that typify our products – mechanical grounding, wide bandwidth for instance. These things have been with us from the start and absolutely dictate how we actually build our products. To that extent our engineers represent a methodological foundation, a fundamental basis on which outside designers can overlay new thinking and which we know is secure.

Let's take mechanical grounding as an example that ►



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► has been with us from the beginning and is still in every product. I learned about this from one of our original contractors, the guy who designed the Goldmund Reference, Georges Bernard. He introduced the idea. When a concept is so attractive, when it makes so much sense, I fasten on it. I had him explain it, more and more and now, when people come to work for us, I have him teach them too. The new Reference turntable – you know it is the work of the same guy? That's continuity of thinking – and practice. When we hire a new engineer they embrace this concept – it becomes central to their thinking too. But to get the best technology, to bring that to us, our people must work with outside talents. I don't know any other way to do it.

You know though, we are now starting to also make discoveries ourselves. Our own people are doing some fundamental research, things they have discovered that they will soon teach at the University. Sometimes when you can't find what you need, you have to create it...

RG. Besides mechanical grounding, what are your other keystone technologies?

MR. I think that we have two families of technologies. Firstly, and mechanical grounding is part of it, we are concerned with suppressing mechanical resonances. So, for instance, we have designed transistors and have them specially built for us because most transistor manufacturers don't worry about resonance within components. This is one domain where we have really pushed the thinking. If you look at the design of the new Reference turntable you'll see that the theory and structure behind its construction is almost identical too – just a development of – the mechanical grounding principles used in the original version. Every detail is different, but the principle is exactly the same. Of course there are huge advances in materials and execution, but that basic approach, the removal of extraneous vibration from the mechanisms and circuitry in our products is universal. If you look in our speakers, our amplifiers, our CD players you'll find a properly executed ground path sinking energy

out of all the critical components. This isn't just a spike on the bottom of the box. This is a carefully constructed exit strategy, starting from the source of the vibration and, yes, terminating with a spike or cone that the unit stands on. But do not confuse it with the spikes on most other products.

Another thing that surprises many people who look at the new Reference turntable is that it provides a digital output. Sacrilege! But it is also an essential part of our second and most exciting technological advance related to the listening mechanism and accuracy of the brain. We all know how easy it is to make something sound nice that is also totally inaccurate: to fool the brain. So we must examine how the brain works with sound. In this respect we have made huge strides, not just in terms of psycho-acoustics, but also

in understanding which parameters in musical reproduction are really critical. What is important and not important, which things combined create that incredible impression of being real.

The human brain has been tuned to work on time – not on amplitude. So anything that is wrong in terms of time is immediately noticed by the brain. It doesn't exist in nature since

Mother Nature doesn't fool with time. You can fool with everything else, frequency response, phase response but nothing exists to distort time except hi-fi. This was always something we knew, but we have spent years and years analysing and developing a better understanding of this in order to be able to correct it.

RG. So what you are really talking about is time and phase integrity across the system?

MR. I think the principle is known, however, when you show people the way in which a simple two-way speaker crossover distorts time, you play them a cello and then the same instrument through the speaker, they can't believe they are listening to the same thing. The brain immediately hears the time distortion.

To preserve proper time relationships across a whole system – that's difficult, but it's vital to our ability to create a "real" sound. How do we do this? Let's start with our Telos ►



► amplifier circuitry. If you take a Telos amp and put it in any system it will improve the sound – any system! This is what our distributors and dealers confirm. It's because the power amp is generally the weakest link in that system. Telos is about speed – speed and safety: The safety because of the speed. An amp that is capable of delivering 70 Amps in 100ns is a killer. If you do that by accident to a driver you'd better be wearing a mask! So safety is important for the protection of people and speakers and reputation also. This is an amp that is, in theory and practice to date, unbreakable.

The reason we want speed is for bandwidth. If you want to reproduce a decent phase response you need 10 times more bandwidth than you'll actually need to hear: 20 – 20k needs 200k – everybody does that. But if you want correct arrival time, for that you need 0.2 – 2Mhz! That is to prevent a variation of propagation delay between 20 and 20k. So speed is vital to increasing the bandwidth and correcting the time. Bandwidth by itself has no advantage. By the time your signal is in the amp, there is no way to correct time – you can only protect it. So in Telos, bandwidth is from DC to 3Meg within the amplifier itself. We limit it at input and output, but that is the performance of the circuit doing the work. This gives us a decent time response, with a group delay within a few nano-seconds (the brain is sensitive to 100 pico-seconds). We have that performance irrespective of level: no bandwidth limitation with power or load.

The other big advantage of Telos over any other amp is in its control of the driver. To really get hold of a speaker an amplifier must have an output impedance as near as possible to zero Ohms. This is reflected in the amp's damping factor (a term made famous by Phase Linear in the USA). Well, our damping factor is several orders of magnitude above others! And that's not for acceleration, it's for braking. The driver has a weight and that will cause overshoot if the amplifier doesn't control the driver.

So we have speed for time coherence, damping factor for control and protection for safety: no new things but all extended to the extreme and in a completely new way. Telos 5000 will arrive soon – 5kWs continuous! And a crazy damping factor. To achieve this we need new devices, three times the price of the Telos 2500s (so \$150,000US a piece), a special electrical installation, the amp will need to be tuned for your speakers and completely tested on installation for safety. These are the lengths we can go to.

But the Telos is only a better amp. Our Universal pre-amp

is where we can really transform a system. In a normal set up you have your CD player, a DAC, a pre-amp, power amp and speakers. What we decided to do was take the DAC and move it in the system – put it at the input of the power amp. So, if you look at any Telos amp you'll see that it has both digital and analogue inputs, and its own internal DAC. As soon as you do this, it is much easier to transport the signal. In its analogue form the signal is extremely fragile and difficult to transfer. Each step in the process risks major time and phase disturbance, the very things we wish to avoid. By keeping the signal in its digital form it is far more robust. Of course, you have to have a good digital signal, and our transports are extremely good.



So too are our A to D converters, so that even analogue sources will produce better results when they are handled in this way. The way I explain this is to say that although the music is always analogue, we prefer packaging it in digital, to protect it.

In the Universal pre-amp we have digital inputs and digital outputs. A conventional analogue pre-amp will require buffers on the input and output as well as a volume control – three more areas where you can only damage the signal. Properly executed (and many aren't) a digital volume control is infinitely superior – causing no damage at all. But, once we do things digitally, other things become possible.

Why not put the speaker crossover in the pre-amp? We can make a digital crossover where both the bandwidth interface and phase response and the time coherence are all perfect. This is impossible to do in analogue.

Why not add a surround-sound decoder? Dolby digital, DTS, etc... – that's an interesting facility: easy to do with a digital unit. Suddenly there's no difference between a pre-amp and a processor. And again, this facility involves no quality loss because we do it in the digital domain. ►

► **RG.** But most 5.1 chip-sets sound awful...

MR. Not if you apply the Dolby digital algorithm without cutting corners; the multi-channel digital output is then nearly perfect. It is just that most people don't do that. They buy cheap chips and use them as decoders – and that's not following the algorithm. That's cutting corners. We are the only company who has engineered a complete DSP decoder that is theoretically perfect. Cost? A house... or you can use a Goldmund pre-amp.

You could incorporate multi-room control, room compensation, filters – many, many things that might be incorporated into DSP. All without loss of quality. This is just mathematics – multiplying whole numbers. Now we have new things too: time alignment for separate cabinet speakers or sub-woofers.

critical. The quality of the cable is 99% down to the quality of the connector and the correctness of the electrical interface. Accuracy of the cable geometry is also important, but only once you have proper termination. 75 Ohm RCA is okay, BNC is best.

The next stage is what we call Project Leonardo – a blue sky project. In the analogue domain you cannot repair time alignment once it has been damaged. But in the digital domain you can. We now have DSP time-corrected analogue speakers. In other words, we analyse the damage done by the conventional passive crossover network of the speaker and apply the inverse “corrective” in the DSP and feed that into the power amp input. It sounds simple but the maths is horrendous and the subject of an AES paper. One of our engineers has been working on this for years and finally we have the results...



So, a Goldmund pre-amp is a box with little in it – just digital in, digital out, switching and a great deal of software processing. That's all. We call it Universal because the same box can perform all pre-amp or processor or system control functions. It never has to be replaced if the system grows or expands.

RG. Do you provide analogue inputs?

MR. Yes, along with the A to Ds. The number varies depending on model: three stereo in the small one, two six-channel and five two-channel in the big one. With analogue inputs and the decoding in the power amps now we have a revolution in system topology. But it only works because of the quality of the digital electronics and the DSP implementation. Here we have made huge advances and this system approach exploits those benefits.

RG. Does it eliminate the issue of cable quality?

MR. Yes and no. In digital the problem is not transmission but reflection. Termination at the cable ends becomes

And what results! Goldmund's Epilogue speaker is a highly rated and far from inexpensive audiophile system. Indeed, it has featured in some of the best sounding show systems I've ever heard. Yet, in an ABA comparison against the DSP moderated model, the standard version sounded broken – all as a result of a software implementation within the pre-amp. The hardware in the system remained identical throughout. Project Leonardo is way too big and complex a subject to discuss here, but the results are incredibly impressive, the implications profound. It sums up Goldmund's impressive grasp of their chosen technology and commitment to research – as well as Reverchon's innate understanding of music and correct reproduction.

Michel Reverchon undoubtedly expresses challenging views, some of which have been previously expressed and widely discredited in the past. But the proof of the pudding is in the listening and he can certainly demonstrate performance that suggests he has the technology and products to support his claims where others have failed. I'll be reviewing a complete Goldmund system in the next issue. To say I'm looking forward to the experience is an understatement!



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The Nordost Odin Cable System

by Roy Gregory

As an audio reviewer, your system inevitably presents an ever-changing face to the world. Even the static elements, your own system as opposed to kit that's in for review, changes with a greater frequency than most, exposed as it is to the need to stay current and the temptation presented by a constant passage of enticing alternatives. Looking back across the last five or so years there are few pieces that have been ever present in my listening room. There's the Wadia 861SE (although that's off being modified and in danger of replacement by ARC's CD7 or the new one-box Zanden) and the Hovland RADIA. Everything else has been and gone at least once, with one exception that predates even these two stalwarts: the Nordost Valhalla cable loom. In fact, it's hard to remember a time before Valhalla, so fundamental a part has it played in the development of both my system and my thinking.

Of course, it didn't all happen at once, and when it did it was in reverse – sort of. First came the interconnects and speaker cable, soon to be joined by digital leads. Then came the power cords and finally, at long last, the Thor distribution unit. Yet, if there's one thing that the Valhalla experience teaches you it is that we've grievously underestimated the importance of cables, both collectively and relative to each other. So, not only does the cable loom create the foundation on which system performance is built, but it starts not with the signal cables but at your wall sockets. The cable hierarchy runs in reverse to popular wisdom. First priority is the cable from your electricity supply to your distribution block: then the block itself, the rest of the power cords (star earthed through the block and with a clean earth too, of course) then the speaker cable and

finally the interconnects. Sounds dumb, huh? Try it and see. Listen to music rather than hi-fi and you'll soon see what I mean.

So, here I am with a cable system that I both like and understand to the extent that it has redefined what it's possible to do with a hi-fi system. But, just as I'm getting really comfortable in the halls of Valhalla, what should happen along but Odin. And he doesn't just arrive – he kicks the doors in, demanding attention with such commanding presence as to establish immediate authority; that's the thing with Gods – they know how to make you sit up and take notice.

Time I think, for a reader health warning. All of you who struggle with the concepts of cable performance outlined above, all those who still believe that all cables sound the same, all those who blanch at the price of Valhalla – for your own peace of mind, read no further. For, the first thing you learn when you've got over Odin's entrance, is that he doesn't travel cattle class! (It's the retinue, you know – they just won't tolerate the log-room!)

So, just how expensive is expensive? Well, there's two ways of looking at this: either Odin is around three times the price of Valhalla, or it's a third the price of Transparent's flagship cables. I guess it depends whether you're a half full or a half empty kind of guy, but either way that's a bit of a gulp. For that, you don't just want a cable to move the goal posts, you want them set up in another stadium – and one a lot further than the Emirates is from Highbury. Well, rest

assured that you'll not be disappointed. This is no Pyrrhic victory or dour "one-nil to the Arsenal". No, this is a *bona fide* revolution in cable performance, blending the key strengths that have made Valhalla's position so unassailable with the harmonic weight and complexity, the tonal subtlety and finesse that were its last remaining weaknesses. Disappointed? Listen to Odin and I can't see you being disappointed. Impoverished possibly... just thank the Gods that it's so darned expensive!



Or perhaps more to the point, what makes it so darned expensive? Well, at a quick glance, not a lot. There are the same basic materials and they're in much the same basic arrangement as before. Conductors are silver plated copper, wrapped in Teflon insulation, twisted and shielded in the interconnects, laid flat in the speaker cables. But look closer and you'll see that the Odin benefits from the logical application of two proprietary technologies. Indeed, Valhalla was itself the first step on an evolutionary path that extended the performance of Nordost's original extruded Teflon, ribbon construction. These cables combined solid-core conductors with a spiral wound, Teflon filament that spaced the insulating sleeve away from the metal's surface. The interconnects

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▶ also introduced conventional shielded construction to the range. Well with both those technologies now extending further down the product line in the shape of the “Norse” range (Heimdahl, Baldur, Frey, and Tyr) it’s clearly time to take the next step – and that’s Odin.

The new flagship cable again takes two technologies and adds them to the quiver. First up is dual-filament spacing of all conductors. By wrapping two filaments around each other before in turn wrapping them around the conductive core Nordost have achieved several benefits: reduced surface contact, greater air gap between the conductor and the insulating sleeve, better damping and greater geometrical consistency when bent. All these are good things. The difficulty and precision required to manufacture the conductors isn’t. First seen in the Valhalla power cords and later the Tyr interconnects, this is the first full signal family to enjoy this technology.

That’s one half of the problem. The other half is in the shielding of the interconnects. Look closely and you’ll see that the tubular Odin cables are constructed of individually shielded conductors, each shield in turn seemingly formed from linked, flat rings, rather like a worm’s skin or a stack of mints. This unusual appearance reflects the silver plated copper ribbon used and the complex and innovative construction, an approach that manages to combine flexibility with shielding capabilities only matched by (extremely rigid) copper pipe configurations. Dubbed TSC by Nordost (for Total Signal Control), you guessed it – difficult and costly to achieve. These are no off-the-shelf products dressed up to look special. They’re ultra high-tech, precision manufactured to incredibly

tight tolerances and that’s reflected in the price-tags.

Conductors are only part of the story. And you can easily ruin a good cable with poor termination (which is why you should never buy

shortened or “home terminated” cables second-hand). The Odin’s connectors don’t disappoint either, with silver plated copper versions of the established WBT NextGen and XLR plugs, with Rhodium plated Z plugs or spades on the speaker cable. Oh, and then there’s those wooden blocks – about which the less said the better. They serve to inhibit amateur retermination but otherwise, as far as I’m concerned do little to enhance the appearance of the cables. Be gone I say. You shouldn’t need bits of wood to separate these wires from the herd – one listen should be perfectly sufficient!

What should you expect to hear? Well, Odin is unmistakably a Nordost cable, but it’s also like no Nordost cable you’ve heard (with one exception which I’ll come back to). The lasting impact of Valhalla was the effortless temporal and spatial organisation it brought to musical signals. It’s quick, uncluttered and seamless in its delivery, making the heavyweight opposition sound lumpy, ill-defined and rhythmically bent out of shape, one part of the frequency spectrum pushed forward in time, another lagging behind. Ultimately it was the coherence of its temporal presentation and dynamic range that have kept Valhalla at the top of the

tree, a position that, save Odin, it still occupies. Wire it into the system and you know exactly what to expect: instant insight into the pacing and placement of each note, top to bottom of the music. It brought playing to life – and closer to life.

Now Odin takes those temporal and spatial capabilities and grafts on a whole new dimension of harmonic definition and texture – without even slightly diluting the speed and order that set Valhalla so far apart from the crowd in the first place. In fact, the effect is quite the opposite, the whole being considerably greater than the sum of the individual performance parts. Valhalla sounded as near to “No Cable” as I’d heard, because its sins were unintrusive on a structural level, purely subtractive when it came to the clothing. But it was that subtractive element that stopped it shortening the gap to reality, a gap that Odin apparently crosses with ease – at least until I can actually work out what it’s not doing.

Swap your Valhalla for Odin and prepare for a shock. The extra harmonic information translates into a far more real rendition of each note, not just the timing and placement of its leading edge, but of its shape and duration, its pace as an individual entity if you like: a pace that alters with instrument and frequency. So, rather than simply adding colour and weight to the proceedings, Odin ▶





► adds temporal texture as well. Combine the extra weight with undiminished dynamics and musical impact, a note's ability to jump, a band's explosive potential increases dramatically (in every sense of that word). All of which is impressive enough believe you me. But changes at the frequency extremes are just as significant. The bottom end, perhaps as a result of shifting to fewer, heavier gauge conductors, is significantly weightier and more powerful, yet more clearly defined too, with more air and space around and below notes. At the opposite extreme, notes carry more energy and information, but are accompanied by less glare and hash. It's an effect akin to the cleaner but much less obvious performance of the latest generation exotic-dome tweeters. It seems like less but it's actually more.

Musically, the end result is greater presence, drama, musical and dynamic contrast, colour, texture and shape (generally areas in which the Valhalla already excelled, which gives you some idea why I think this cable

represents a performance step-change). The impact is particularly noticeable on acoustic music.

Indeed, the more the natural the recording the more obvious the benefits. It's not that Odin is unimpressive with manufactured sounds, just that you have no benchmark against which to measure its achievement. The reality of its presentation is such that reality itself is the necessary moderator. The litmus test is natural musical expression. Just listen to Jacqueline du Pre's pizzicato interjections at the opening of the *Lento - Allegro Molto* on the Testament live release of her 1966 Elgar performance from Moscow. The placement and weighting of each note, the spaced pauses between them, is captivating, the restraint and colour of each note setting up the tension that and expectation that erupts into the dramatic sprays and rapid runs that characterise the movement. It just makes sense: sense of the music and sense of the performance. You can really hear the empathy she has, both with the score and Barbirolli. It's a fleeting, magical quality and part of what makes a performance live – and here it's **HERE**, boldly dramatic, quivering with suppressed emotion, searching for release. If music is about human expression that's what Odin delivers – and shockingly so, seemingly presenting it with the same absolute authority we identify with the live event.

This cable has rendered my system significantly more convincing, more alive, more compelling than any other single change I can recall – simply by allowing the rest of the equipment free-rein. Which is what a cable loom should be all about. I started this article by looking at priorities within the loom, suggesting we've been looking at things the wrong way round. Does Odin force me to reassess that proposition?

In fact it underlines it. The dual-filament technology in the mains leads doesn't distort the result, it just makes it more obvious. When I suggested that the Valhalla mains leads were Nordost's most impressive product to date, little did I realise...

But, as astonishingly good as the Odins' musical performance is, it comes at a wallet wrenchingly heavy cost that few will ever be able to contemplate. For those who can I suspect that a single brief listen will be enough to convince them of the cables' value. After all, if you already own speakers that cost \$120,000 then its false economy to feed them with less than the best. The crazy thing is, that even on a whole system costing less than a single pair of Odin interconnects the benefits are so stunningly obvious! And that's the way most of us will experience Odin – courtesy of the inimitable Lars at one show or another. It's a trip worth taking. Besides which, there are two upsides to the Odin saga: mono-filament technology has finally reached the real world in the shape of Heimdahl, and so too, eventually will dual-filament. Secondly, the sheer cost of Odin casts Valhalla in an entirely different light. Suddenly it looks like quite a bargain – and I never thought I'd be writing that. ➤

Prices:

- Interconnects - 1-m pr (RCA or XLR) £8500
- Speaker Wires - 3-m pr (shotgun or bi-wired) £17500

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Acoustic Energy AE1 Classic Loudspeaker

by Jason Kennedy

The AE1 is back and you can still have it in any colour you like as long as it's black. The original version made a considerable impression when it was launched in 1988 and marked a first in several respects. It was the first professional speaker with all metal drive units, it was also the first near field monitor with such a hardcore look to make a big impact on the hi-fi scene: even the LS3/5A (designed for the same job) had a grille cloth and veneered cabinet. The AE1 looks like a mini PA cab without the grab handles.

Acoustic Energy was started in 1987 by Neil McEwen, Steve Taylor, designer Phil Jones and this was their first creation. Jones is an interesting character: he plays double and electric bass and currently runs AAD in the US which makes pro and domestic speakers alongside portable bass cabs for Walter Becker of Steely Dan among others. In the period between AE and now Phil worked for Boston on the Lynnfield system and ran Platinum Audio where he built his first horn system, the stunning looking and undoubtedly high energy Airpulse 3.1 which weighed 1100lbs. Jones grew up with Westrex (Western Electric) horn systems rescued from the Capitol Theatre in Cardiff and also worked for UK horn specialist Vitavox, so it seems a little odd that his first commercial product was a compact design for the near-field studio market. The AE1 Classic is as close to that original model as the company can produce. The only real difference is in the tweeter. The original only survived for the first three

years before being replaced by the SEAS unit that we see here when the AE1Mk2 was introduced (circa '92).

Apart from being compact and workmanlike in its textured black finish the most unusual aspects of this speaker are



the metal cone main driver and the inside of the cabinet. Development of the AE1's main driver was done the hard way, one company making the cones and another doing the anodising. The hard anodising has the crucial effect of damping the cone's natural resonance, akin to a ceramic coating. Apparently this convoluted manufacturing process only achieved a 20% success rate! The drive unit was designed to give the high power handling required for studio usage and as a result has a tapering cone profile that is thicker in the centre than at the periphery. This provides

a heat sink for the motor assembly and reduces the unit's tendency to compress under duress. The cone is hand spun in aluminium by Acoustic Energy in Cirencester and the crossover is also made on these shores, which would not be significant if AE were not now a Malaysian owned company with manufacturing in that part of the world. While the Classic is housed in a fairly conventional albeit un-veneered MDF box, inside there is a significant difference. A compound material with a plaster like consistency is poured into the tilted box, one side at a time, to provide a slight slope on the otherwise parallel surfaces. This provides damping and reduces standing waves, again allowing it to play louder. It also explains why the speaker is far heavier than you expect.

One thing that sets the Classic apart is its more naturally tailored bottom-end. The majority of small speakers are equalised to get maximum bass extension at the expense of sensitivity; the current AE1 MkIII for instance goes down to 45Hz for the same volume as the Classic, which starts to roll off 10Hz earlier.

The question is whether the AE1 Classic cuts it in today's highly competitive market, although stand-mounts at this price are not as common as they once were thanks to the popularity of compact floorstanders.

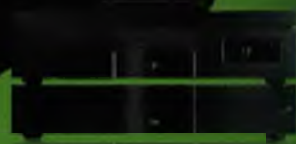
Well once I'd got over the single-wire terminals, it became apparent why this speaker has won so many converts. It is extremely quick off the mark which helps in many respects, timing being ►

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▶ the most obvious; when overhang is reduced to this extent there's little to get in the way of the transients. This is partly because it doesn't try to go way deep but is also a natural result of the high stiffness in driver and cabinet alike. Its tonal balance is on the light and bright side: not aggressively so but it is a little drier than average and metallic instruments are better served than their warmer sounding counterparts. Cymbals for instance are very real. It does do rather nice bass as well, which balances things out and there's a lot to be said for a nimble, tuneful bottom-end – an old lesson learnt. Pianos have good body and power thanks to the speaker's ability to cope with level. The *Keith Jarrett at Carnegie Hall* disc comes across with genuine energy. Put a detailed sounding amplifier in front of this speaker and

you get a detailed result. It does warts and all with little difficulty, which is another pointer to its pro origins.

On the other hand it could be more open. Images while precise lack the scale and air that some competitors offer, and while some consider the sense

of air to be a subtle distortion it's not a line I go along with. The other relative weakness is of dynamic range, with the best speakers at this price seem to find a greater range of level in a recording than the Classic, albeit without the speed on offer here.

Importantly, however, it is difficult not to enjoy a good tune on the Classic. It can dig out the groove in even quite dense material and if you play them loud enough there's energy aplenty. Although sensitivity is not particularly low on the spec sheet this speaker happily soaks up power and the more you can give it the more entertaining the results. Unlike some at this price it requires more power than most integrated amps can deliver. It also needs smooth, clean power, Marantz's 100 watt PM11 S1 seems to be a good match thanks, as does the nimble grunt of my Gamut D200 – at a price. It's not hard to hear why AE has brought this speaker back; it is thoroughly engaging and musical with looks that still set it apart from the crowd. ➤



The Supporting Cast

by Jason Kennedy

I jumped at the chance of providing a second view on the AE1 Classic. When they were launched I was just starting my own hi-fi journey and they embodied so much that seemed desirable at the time. They were regarded as all the speaker you needed, provided the amplifiers were physically bigger than the cabinets (and loads more expensive) and the stands had to be so uncompromisingly massive that they threatened the fabric of the building. Unfortunately

the purpose designed AE1 stands of yore are no longer available so you'll need an alternative. In the end I tried two stands, cost-effective Atacama SE6 and one from a new company, Anvil Sound Display. The Atacamas will be familiar to many, their single pillar design brought a new level of performance and appearance to mass-produced stands at this price (£90). Anvil on the other hand, custom-make each stand and offer a wide range of

material options to tailor performance. After consultation we chose aluminium uprights and steel plates top and bottom, a combination that retails for £259.

The AE1's followed the Duevel Planets into my system – a culture shock to say the least. It's hard to think of two speakers with more different presentations. Place the AE1's far apart and they provide a precise window into the recording with pinpoint imaging and an explicit treble response. ▶

► Conversely the Planets attempt to pull you into the performance itself with a diffuse, wrap-around sound. It is the classic omni/direct radiating comparison, yet both speakers have enough quality to musically disappear and both produce entertaining results.

The AE1 is a small monitor through and through, thriving on the sheer power, control and speed of a big amplifier. They let you know, in no uncertain terms when they are content. Drive them with a lesser amplifier and like an anti-Cheshire cat, your smile is the first thing to disappear. You simply lose so much of the drive, pace and interest in music that it's just like 1989 all over again. But can a correctly driven AE1 cut it in 2007? Oh yes, and the good news for the AE1 is that there are now more amplifiers out there with the power and control required at sensible money.

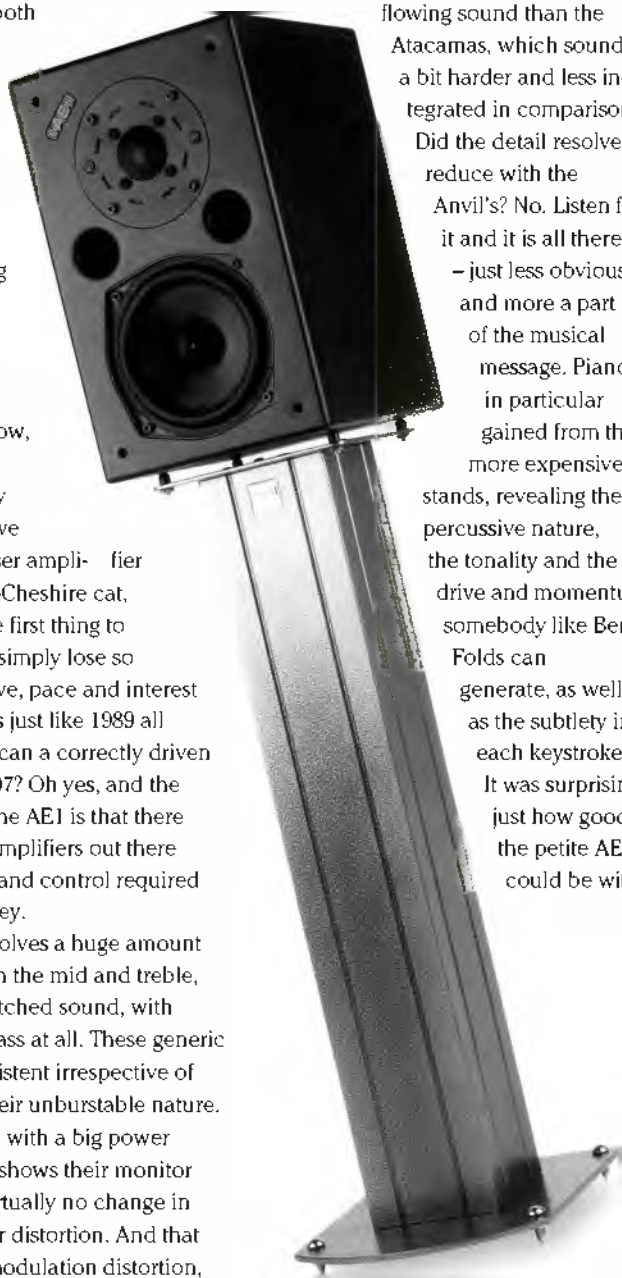
The AE1 resolves a huge amount of detail through the mid and treble, making for an etched sound, with very little real bass at all. These generic traits were consistent irrespective of stand, as was their unburstable nature. Walloping them with a big power amplifier really shows their monitor heritage with virtually no change in tonal balance or distortion. And that includes inter-modulation distortion, an impressive feat at the very loud levels I drove them to. They are a head-banger's delight in this respect but they also managed to impress the flat-earther in me. Playing Metallica, the White Stripes or Shostakovich,

they simply locked onto the rhythms through their speed of response and lack of transient compression. The Anvil stands proved particularly impressive, allowing the AE1 to produce a more mellow and free

flowing sound than the Atacamas, which sounded a bit harder and less integrated in comparison. Did the detail resolved reduce with the Anvil's? No. Listen for it and it is all there – just less obvious and more a part of the musical message. Piano in particular gained from the more expensive stands, revealing the percussive nature, the tonality and the drive and momentum somebody like Ben Folds can generate, as well as the subtlety in each keystroke. It was surprising just how good the petite AE1's could be with

(relatively) inexpensive boxes. Similarly impressive is the impression of bass you can achieve if you invest: simply put, the more powerful the amplifier and the more capable the stands the more convincing the bass response becomes. Good to see something from the early nineties still holding true.

The AE1 is back and it easily competes with modern speakers at a similar price delivering high-resolution access to your music. However, this performance can only be realised if you are willing to invest in the right amplifiers and ancillaries, most importantly those stands. If your budget stops at the Atacamas, should you still audition the AE1s? Definitely: the SE6s punch well above their price allowing a good solid sound. Just don't listen to anything like the Anvils 'til you have the money. The improved balance, integration and more natural sound of the AE1s with the Anvil stands comfortably justified the increased system cost. ▶+

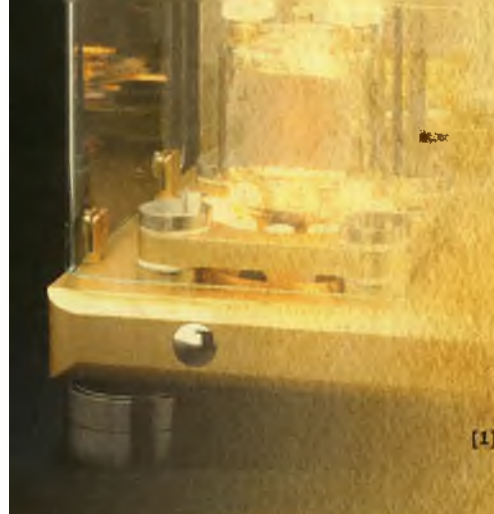


piano on either stand. While they can't stir too much air they get the inner complexity and energy of a concert grand just right. It's very impressive from such small and

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Compact, two-way reflex
Drive Units:	25mm magnesium dome tweeter, 90mm alloy cone bass/midrange
Bandwidth:	55Hz – 22kHz (±6dB)
Sensitivity:	88dB
Impedance:	8 Ohms
Power Handling:	200 Watts
Dimensions (WxHxD):	180x 295x255mm
Weight:	8kg
Finish:	Black
Price:	£845

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[1]



[2]



[3]

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The ART Emotion and Emotion Signature Loudspeakers

by Paul Messenger

Another day, another pair of speakers to review. It can sometimes seem that way, but in their infinite variety loudspeakers are always interesting and involving, and can sometimes prove educational too. And that was certainly true of the two pairs examined here.

The Dunlop family has a long history in British (or more precisely, Scottish) hi-fi. Father Peter was the man behind the respected Systemdek turntables, while his sons Derek and Randall have opted to go a different route, founding ART Loudspeakers (an acronym for Acoustic Reproduction Technology) in 1995.

Over the last twelve years they have accumulated a range of seven models, from the baby Stiletto Monitor up to the flagship three-box Impression. The Emotion models – three of them – come in below the Impression, but are still large and costly.

All three models share the same drive units and enclosures. They differ only in crossover components, terminals and wiring – and the price. The 'standard' Emotion costs £5,000/pair; the Signature version is £9,000/pair; and the Silver Signature (which I don't dare try!) is a whopping £20,000/pair. Given that cabinet and drivers are identical in each case, can such substantial price differentials be justified? With that question in mind (and given my natural reticence when it comes to things "audiophile") RG arranged for me to compare the standard Emotion to the Signature version.

Conceptually and stylistically the Emotion is a strangely unfashionable beast. Although it's technically a stand-mount, albeit with a fixed and fully integrated base, this big reflex-

ported two-way is based around an unusually large 10-inch (250mm) diameter bass/mid driver. It's a long way from today's slim-line stereotype. There's nothing discreet or self-effacing with this speaker: it's more than a foot wide, similar in depth, and stands three and a half feet tall. Internal volume is probably around 100 litres, which is bulky by anyone's standards.



Happily it's all – including plinth and stand verticals – rather attractively dressed in high quality veneer, with hardwood post-formed front panel and plinth edges. Our samples came in dark walnut and light maple, but light oak, cherry and rosenut are also on the options list. An optional grille covers just the drive units, and neatly attaches to the heads of the main driver mounting bolts. The plinth accommodates 8mm spikes, which come with nylon lock-nuts so the sockets aren't stressed, and the port fires downwards between the stand verticals.

The enclosure might have a large surface area, but it's built from birch ply throughout, and very solidly too, with a 38mm thick front panel, and two internal vertical braces. Both drivers are sourced from Norwegian specialist SEAS: the bass/mid unit has a 250mm cast frame, a 190mm diameter doped

paper cone, and a 50mm voice coil; the top-of-the-line Crescendo tweeter has a 29mm fabric dome behind a short horn flare, and a neodymium magnet motor structure. The large main driver likes to be crossed over at a lower frequency than usual, around 1.8kHz, while the network uses a third-order feed to the tweeter, and a second-order roll-off to the bass/mid driver.

The difference between the standard and Signature variants is limited to crossover components and wiring. Whereas the standard version has hand-wound copper air-cored inductors, Clarity cap SA series capacitors, and OFC copper wiring, the Signature uses Jensen copper-foil inductors, Jensen copper-foil paper-in-oil capacitors, Caddock non-inductive resistors and Kondo KSL SPC copper wiring. Signal is applied through a single pair of high quality WBT socket/binders. Upgrading from standard to Signature (or Silver Signature) is possible – at a price – though this is rather more than a simple DIY exercise.

My very basic measurement regime threw up some interesting results, especially since the listening experience hadn't prepared me for a quite dramatic response suckout in the crossover zone (1.5 – 2.5kHz. The reason is that the dispersion of a large diameter driver gradually narrows as it approaches the crossover region; this then changes abruptly to wide dispersion as the tweeter takes over. At 1m on-axis, the suckout is much less obvious, because less room-reflected (ie off-axis) sound is part

► of the mix, so toe-in is critical.

While the balance elsewhere is not particularly smooth, it is pretty well ordered, especially through the broad mid-band, and the treble looks nicely judged. Best used well clear of walls under my room conditions, the low bass is notably strong, helped by a low port tuning frequency of 261 Hz, while the mid-bass is a little lean. Sensitivity is a relatively modest 89dB, but reasonable enough in view of the fine bass extension and easy load. Interestingly, both models show a resonance at around 450Hz, while the Signature has a slightly lower impedance than the standard version, presumably because its superior crossover components have lower resistance.

The Signature immediately impressed. Even with unpromising sources, such as live sport from the TV, I soon came to the conclusion that this speaker was something quite special, the background noise from crowds seemed more convincing than usual, and the crowds themselves bigger.

The standard Emotions are very respectable performers, offering impressive authority, grip and drama, but I was surprised at how much subtlety, transparency, texture and delicacy was missing compared to the Signature. I could enjoy the standard Emotion right enough, but it has greater timesmear, more coloration and weaker low-level resolution, with the net result that it simply doesn't get my juices flowing like their more expensive brother.



\$4K is a substantial hike in price, but much to my astonishment (given what the money is going on) I have to declare it well worthwhile.

The Signature was the version that was really getting me excited; that I was becoming slightly awestruck by, and in danger of falling in love with. The market for \$9,000 speakers might be much smaller than that for \$5,000 speakers, but then I don't often find myself on the receiving end of a little bit of shock and awe. The more time I spent with the Signatures, the better I got to like them, across all sorts of sources and types of programme.

It's all very well to enjoy one's favourite music through a given pair of loudspeakers, but the acid test is actually how much you enjoy them when they're playing unfamiliar material, or music that you normally dislike – in my case, nearly everything operatic. The Emotion Signatures emerged triumphantly, helping even the most difficult unfamiliar and challenging material make sense and communicate. I found myself listening to Radio 3 much more than usual, and even enjoying the singing bits that normally leave me unmoved. Because of the extraordinarily subtle way these speakers handle very low-level detail and the precise decay of sounds, human voices sound uncannily real, solo or en masse: even modern atonal choral material proved highly effective, and it became surprisingly easy to hear what The Be



Good Tanya's Frazey Ford was actually singing about.

I review several dozen speaker models a year, and many turn out to be highly competent these days. But only a handful – perhaps one a year on average – ever get on the 'I want to keep these for reference' list. ART's Emotion Signature joins a very select band that includes (in strict alphabetic order) the B&W 800D, JBL K2 S9800, Quad ESL 2805 and Tannoy Kensington.

Each has its particular strengths, and while the JBL remains my personal all round favourite, the Emotion Signature combines much of the mid-band delicacy and transparency of the Tannoy and Quad, with a good measure of the weight and authority of the B&W and JBL. Assuming the exceptional bass extension and alignment suits the listening room, this superb loudspeaker will delight listeners with its subtle delicacy and superior communication. ➤

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Two-way reflex with integral stand
Drivers:	260mm treated paper bass mid 29mm soft dome tweeter
Bandwidth:	24Hz - 25 kHz ±2dB
Sensitivity:	89dB
Impedance:	8 Ohms nominal 6.5 ohms minimum
Cabinet:	Braaced birch plywood with hardwood trim, Book leaf matched veneers
Finishes:	Dark walnut, light maple, light oak, cherry and roscnut
Dimensions (WxHxD):	340x1060x340mm
Weight:	50 kg pr.
Prices:	From £5000/pair

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Reference 3a Veena Loudspeaker

by Chris Thomas

I sometimes wonder what motivates people to buy certain speakers. The UK market is currently awash with some really average stuff that offers poor music and indifferent value for money and yet it still seems to sell. I guess that ultimately a punter can only buy what the dealer has to offer and it's a fool who buys without a serious listen first. I know from experience that many dealers rubbish reviewers and their recommendations, even claiming that we are in the pay of manufacturers, but only when they don't have that particular brand in stock.

Speaking to a dealer friend recently after I had played him a world-class product I had on review I was amazed when he said that, as good as it was, it was far easier for him to sell a customer another product that he stocked because it had the reputation and margins already in place. In other words it was a lot less work and why rock the boat anyway? Thankfully there are still people out there who are open to new system concepts and who have enough confidence in their own judgement to make their purchases solely on what their ears are telling them and not on reputations. They are prepared to take responsibility for their own choices and not just run with the herd. It's just such free thinkers who could be interested in the Reference 3a range of speakers and although they'll have to look a little harder to find them they just might be glad that they did, especially if they also have the experience to understand and audition these interesting designs within the context of an appropriate system.

Reference 3a are a Canadian based company and we at Hi-Fi Plus are already admirers of both their little Dulcets and the larger, somewhat awkwardly proportioned MM Da

Capo which is a particular favourite of the editor. There is something about the way they make music, both free flowing and rhythmically liberated, that grabs the attention. Perhaps it is the fact that they don't use crossovers on their hand-built bass/mid drivers. They are not quirky, have no claimed magic ingredients but are instead solidly engineered and musically focussed. But their very simplicity makes them demanding when it comes to partnering equipment. It's not that they are difficult to drive: their impedance curve shows no nasties at all. It's just that most complex crossover networks hide or obscure a multitude of musical sins – a bit like musical polyfiller. The Reference 3as cry out for a quality system and I don't necessarily mean an expensive one either: as I found out with the floor-standing Veena.

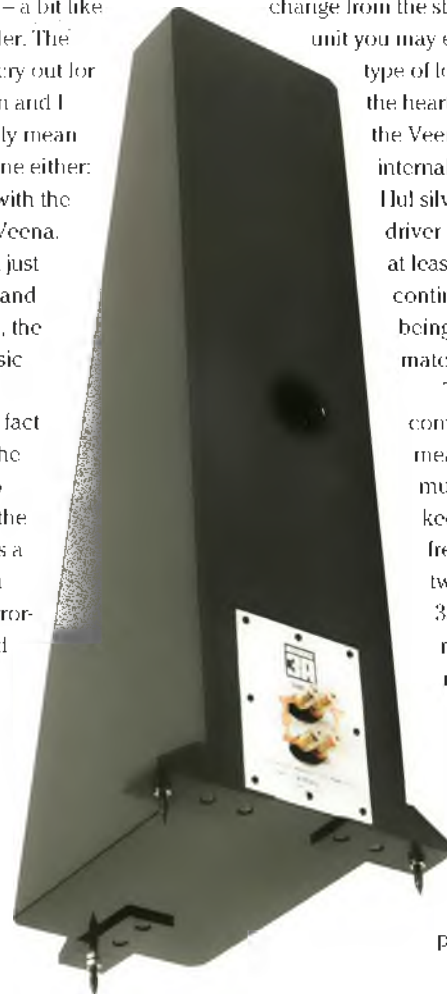
Standing at just 36 inches high and 13 inches deep, the Veena is a classic slim, elegant, floor-stander, a fact reinforced by the beautiful piano black finish of the review pair. It is a two-way design supplied in mirror-image pairs and incorporating a rear facing port. The front baffle is sloped backwards for time alignment and the drivers are grouped closely

together at the top of the baffle. This is a fairly substantial cabinet, heavily braced and damped internally with a thick felt-type material to avoid internal colourations finding their way to the outside world. The tweeter is a 1-inch soft domed model from SEAS but the directly connected 7-inch mid-range is the more interesting unit, a hand-built design manufactured in-house by Reference 3a. The cone is referred to as "hyper exponential" and is made from woven carbon-fibre. This is attached to the frame by what the company call an "edge hole" surround of rubber. In the centre is a phase plug. It's an interesting looking driver and certainly makes a change from the standard bass/mid

unit you may expect to see in this type of loudspeaker. It forms the heart of so much of what the Veena is all about. The internal wiring is Van den Hul silver alloy and each driver is broken in with at least 72 hours of continuous work before being electronically matched.

The lack of a conventional crossover means that there must be a way of keeping harmful bass frequencies from the tweeter and Reference 3a employ a custom manufactured multiple flat-plate paper-in-oil capacitor that serves as a high pass filter.

At the back you will find two pairs of WBT-type sockets/binding posts connected ▶



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2

▶ with some copper jumpers and some way above, a substantial 2.25-inch port. The drivers are covered by a pop-in grille but I would remove these when listening if I were you, as Reference 3a recommend.

Regular readers will know that I always seem to review small speakers. So much so in fact that my friends have, begun to call me Stan Mount. So the Veena, with its greater scale and bandwidth was always going to offer a different challenge, especially when it came to siting and footings. Three aluminium screw-on outrigger feet known as Pods give the speaker a wider, more stable footprint and the ability to micro-tilt them forward or back through a few degrees. Having a wooden floor I could choose between the supplied spikes with floor protectors (the excellent Naim Chips in this case) or equip them with a set of Titanium Nordost Pulsar points. After auditioning I decided on the latter, with the Pulsars getting the nod because of the slightly weightier mid-band and more lucid bass performance.

Initially, I started out with no toe-in at all (as recommended) but it soon became apparent that in my room I needed a small amount to bring the musical picture together. Rather more important though is the distance to the rear wall. With such impressive low-frequency extension and a large rear facing port, the Veena demands no less than 18 inches – and a couple of feet would be preferable. As for comers, forget it, as they will boom all over the place and you'll end up swimming in bass rather than listening to it. To drive them I used the impressive Vitus SS-010 amplifier in integrated guise

as they really do require something with this degree of control. With 89dB sensitivity you won't need masses of power but you will need grip. It's a similar story with the source and you'll need the very best you can afford. Cheap players just won't cut it, I promise you.

This speaker majors on scale, bandwidth and a feeling of musical ease. For a two-way it does some remarkable things. Unlike its smaller, wilder brethren there is a greater sense of order and discipline about the way it opens the music. It's a more formal speaker with a place for everything and everything in its place. Its ultimate performance is always



going to be decided by what you partner it with and how much space you afford it. As per usual with Reference 3a speakers there is superb driver integration and a real feeling of phase and rhythmic coherence from top to bottom, a uniform speed of response that is not purely a by-product of its tonal balance. The extra extension at low frequencies throws a completely different light on

the rest of the bandwidth and although it is never going to sound as crisp and sharp as the Dulcet, it is a much more authoritative and physically imposing speaker in every way. The sheer scale and weight of the sound it lays before you puts you in a front row seat, the whole soundstage extremely deep, solid and unwavering. It lacks the pinpoint sense of instrumental location that small, high-quality designs specialise in and often seems less obviously energetic, although its presentation of acoustic music is actually more natural as a result.

Where the Veena excels is in its ability to layer sound upon sound and unravel the complexities of the mix from front to back. George Duke's *After Hours* album (Warner Bros 47073-2) is really a series of slow to mid-tempo musical moods and ideas formed into short tracks. George plays well behind the beat through most of the album and relies on the tasteful use of piano and synth to guide the track melodically. Along with Herbie Hancock, Duke is one of the greatest exponents of the synth there has ever been because he avoids those gruelling wailing-catsounds and builds warmth, width and substance into his algorithms. As a synth-bass player he is, I believe, unsurpassed. But he cut his teeth as a jazz pianist so listen to the track 'Sweet Dreams' and you'll hear shades of Hancock and Bill Evans delicacy as he illuminates the piece with some great chord work and oh-so-tasteful, delicate note play. The Veena was just great here, not only in showing the easy, rolling feel and pace of the piece but also in the way the string bass provides such a solid and textural foundation. Upright acoustic bass is one of the hardest instruments to deal with, both in the studio and for a home system. The complexity of the leading edge so often gets swamped within the mass of that giant resonating body but the Veena gets it almost right and brings a real sense of the



► dominant power of the instrument. It manages to retain a commendable degree of focus as well, although it does loosen a bit at the lower end of its response, something that many floorstanders at this price are guilty of. It is full of ambient atmosphere too, with great image depth and that feeling of instrumental breadth and layering. The Veena's midrange performance is probably the star of the show so when George turns to the synthesiser you can really hear and appreciate the breathy quality and expressive tonal complexity and note-shaping that he is renowned for. I couldn't help thinking though that the speaker could do with a little more obvious high frequency extension, articulation and "air" as the top end can sound a bit over damped and dry. It is as if the extra bass presence requires balancing at the other frequency extreme because, as it stands, the speaker can sound a little tonally dull at times, when compared to some of the competition.

At its best, the Veena delivers a real sense of emotional warmth and occasion. I really liked its delivery on the 1956 recording of *Ella Fitzgerald and Louis Armstrong* (Verve 543 3042). On 'Moonlight In Vermont', Ella's precise intonation, superbly subtle, tasteful use of the most gorgeous vibrato and just pure sexiness are left shimmering in the centre soundstage. When this harmonic sweetness is juxtaposed with Louis' naked, shrill trumpet and gruff, smiling vocal it makes the music seem so delicate and precious that you understand how, through a great system, something really beautiful can traverse 50 years with such ease and without sounding remotely dated.

If it wasn't for the quality of the Vitus SS-010 and its superb grip things could go awry and with a lesser amp the Veena could easily get away from you in the bass. The extension available is very impressive for the

size, but this is a single driver working both midrange and bass frequencies in a fair sized cabinet with a large port, so occasionally the Veena sounds like it is taking on a few more Hertz than it is capable of completely controlling, particularly with the tremendous bottom end of the Vitus. But this is a common trait with such designs and one of the reasons to use a high quality stand-mount if you are prepared to forego pure extension in favour of better control. Ultra precise room positioning will mitigate



this somewhat, but getting it wrong can cause the musical tempo to drag and bass to linger longer than it should. If you listen to music with real rhythmic drive and super fast, big bass then you had better make sure you get the rest of the system right or the Veena's voicing will let you know all about it.

The Veena is a classic all-rounder that punches well above its weight – if it's allowed to. Its driver configuration and bandwidth make it as system and space critical as anything I've heard for a while, especially in smaller listening rooms. Add to this the importance of the source, amplification and cabling and it is obvious you are going to need to be careful with matching. But, get it right and you'll be rewarded with an intimate and involving musical portrait, the Veena delivering a really involving, communicative listening experience. I like it, the price is reasonable too, so it definitely deserves a recommendation – and the requisite care. ➤+

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	2-way, rear ported floorstander
Freq. Response:	42Hz-20kHz ±3dB
Sensitivity:	89dB
Impedance:	8 Ohms nominal
Power Handling:	120 watts RMS
Dimensions(HxWxD):	920 x 210 x 330mm
Finishes:	Natural or cherry red maple and gloss black.
Weight:	15.5kg ea.
Price:	£2795.00 or £3075 for piano black

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JMW MEMORIAL TONEARM

The Arm That Thinks It's A Foot... The rise and rise of the 12" tonearm

by Roy Gregory

Anybody reading my review of the SME 20/12 in the last issue will know that it left me deeply impressed. They might also know that the Model 20 has always left me rather underwhelmed, begging the question – to what extent is this volte face down to the new table, to having it in my own home or last but by no means least, its use of a 12" arm, the 312S? It's not as simple as either/or, but there's no denying the influence of the longer arm on the overall sound. Indeed, in Germany 12" tonearms have been pretty much de rigueur for at least a decade, while the more adventurous analogue designers are toying with 14" models. What then is the appeal of the 12" arm over the shorter 9" standard and is this just a fashion or a genuine opportunity for analogue improvement?

The theory is incontestable: the longer the arm the lower the tracing error caused by the arc as it crosses the record. It's a simple function of radius and geometry. 12" advocates simply point to the significant reduction in tracing error and grin smugly. Meanwhile, the cynics (and most owners of 9" arms) shrug and say, "So what! Can you actually hear it?" before launching into a tirade about all the bad things that effect 12" arms. Those of course include the increase in effective mass and overall inertia, tonearm mass and turntable compatibility as well as cost. Well, there's no getting away from the fact that 12" arms do seem disproportionately expensive when compared to their shorter cousins, and they do suffer higher effective mass and MOI (although one could argue that that actually makes them a better match to today's low compliance

cartridges) and they certainly demand more real estate when it comes to mounting. But make the sonic comparison between a deck carrying a 9" arm and one brandishing the full foot and there's no escaping the sense of ease, openness and stability that comes from the longer arm, generally accompanied by more natural perspectives and greater musical flow. Yes, you'll need the right deck (LP12 owners need not apply) and the right cartridge but that applies to any table. Take those necessary steps however and the benefits are clear.

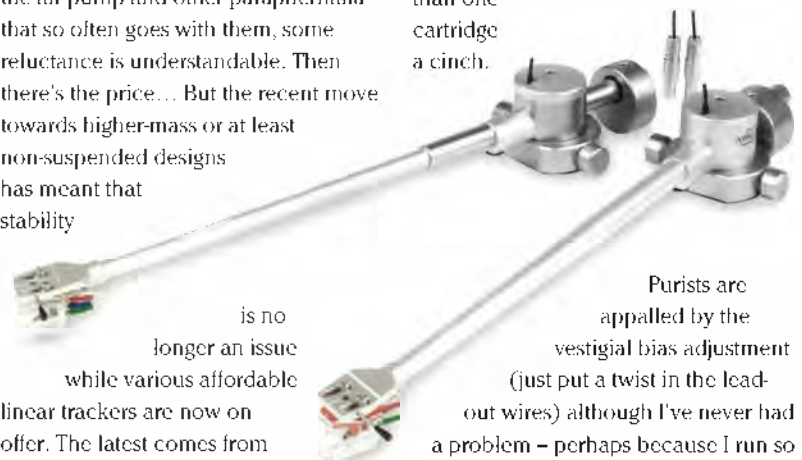
Which begs the question, "Why not go the whole hog and embrace linear tracing and zero distortion?" Why not indeed? Given the demands for absolute lateral stability imposed by passive linear trackers, not to mention the air pump and other paraphernalia that so often goes with them, some reluctance is understandable. Then there's the price... But the recent move towards higher-mass or at least non-suspended designs has meant that stability

is no longer an issue while various affordable linear trackers are now on offer. The latest comes from The Cartridge Man in the shape of The Conductor, essentially the Forsell arm reincarnate and at an altogether more affordable price so, why not indeed? Likewise, 12" arms are appearing at lower prices, so next issue we'll also be looking at the Project P9 Carbon arm in its 12" guise. Add in the latest 12" version of Brinkmann's

tonearm, evolving ever further from its Breur inspired roots and we've an enticing second instalment. But first the main course and three top-flight contenders...

The VPI JMW Memorial 12.7 tonearm

VPI's JMW 12.5 has been my pivoted weapon of choice for many a moon, surviving the introduction of the undamped and somewhat simplified 12.6. It's offset base (the uni-pivot bearing sits atop a boomerang arrangement coupled to the micrometer style VTA tower) means that it will fit on most arm-boards and tables – even if it looks a little awkward – whilst its interchangeable arm-tops and easily repeatable VTA adjustment make running more than one cartridge a cinch.



Purists are appalled by the vestigial bias adjustment (just put a twist in the lead-out wires) although I've never had a problem – perhaps because I run so many different cartridges for relatively short periods of time that uneven wear doesn't get a chance to show, perhaps because the reduced bias requirements for a 12" arm make it less critical anyway. Either way, an add-on falling weight arrangement is now available for those who want it, although personally I found it intrusively

▶ audible when used with the 9.0 Signature arm of the Super Scout Master (Issue 46).

Which brings us now to the 12.7, the latest incarnation of what is fast becoming a venerable design. The obvious changes are all in the arm-top, but don't be fooled. The base arrangement, along with the all-

important VTA tower, has



been significantly revised. Originally comprising a set of interlocking aluminium plates, bolted through to create the necessary platforms to support the bearing, cueing mechanism, terminal box and arm-rest, the design has been reworked into two basic elements, each machined from a single piece. They comprise the stepped base plate that mounts the arm, interfaces with the VTA tower and supports the arm-rest and terminal box, and the upper, mobile element that supports the bearing and cueing device as well as being integrated with the barrel of the VTA tower. The increase in overall rigidity is significant, as is the cost of manufacture, given the complexity of the machining required. But the VTA mechanism in particular is now noticeably more precise and secure in operation, the upper platform now a single part with the barrel that slides on the two vertical posts sunk in the base. The fine pitch thread that lifts and lowers the whole is still accessed by the clearly graduated knob atop the tower, the entire assembly locked by a knurled thumb screw on the inner

edge of the tower and another engaging a post in front of the arm-rest. If you want secure adjustment and rigidity, this is pretty much as good as it gets.

Much more apparent are the changes to the arm-top. The bearing housing (with or without damping) remains unchanged, along with the low-slung out-rigger weights used for accurate azimuth adjustment.

Likewise, the counterweight (five different sizes are available to accommodate different cartridge masses) still locks in place, with a large grub screw in the end of the stub being used to apply fine adjustments of tracking force. This was a running change on the 12.5 and 6 and



carries over into the 7. The big change is in the use of a one-piece, un-stepped arm-wand. Of course, the 12.6 used a single, profiled part derived from the 9.0, but the 12.7's tube employs a single, uninterrupted taper, similar to although not as massive as the one on an SME. The importance of this is that it has enabled designer Harry Weisfeld to move to a twin-wall construction,

a second, delrin tube sitting inside the outer to create a totally inert, self-damped structure. Internal foam is used to further damp the wiring.

Otherwise, the arm remains the same, using the same headshell, Nordost internal wiring and brilliantly simple set-up tools and technique. But the combination of increased rigidity and superior damping have wrought a major improvement in its sound. The 12.5 always sounded open, fluid and above all, lively, an arm that really allowed the music to breathe – perhaps at the expense of some focus and precision and a lighter, defter overall balance. On the whole it's a trade-off I've been happy to accommodate, especially as it dovetails so well with the darker, more velvety balance of the various TNTs.

But, over the years, the TNT has got leaner and meaner in its balance, the HRX achieving new levels of resolution and neutrality, traits inherited by the latest TNT 6 with its updated suspension and HRX composite drive. Well, now the arm has adjusted to suit. The greater rigidity in the base combined with the new arm-tube has elevated its performance in exactly the areas where it was previously weak. The 12.7 exhibits far greater focus, resolution and transparency, but also a more substantial and solid sound. Images are more clearly defined but also possess greater shape and presence. The overall balance has lost the slightly ethereal quality that you hear from the 12.5 in direct comparison, the fleshed out mid-band bringing real body along with it. The good news is that the arm still breathes, is just as quick, open and lucid – it's just that the whole musical performance is more grounded. Dynamics in particular are wider, but also delivered with a new found authority that lends musical contrasts and crescendos greater impact.

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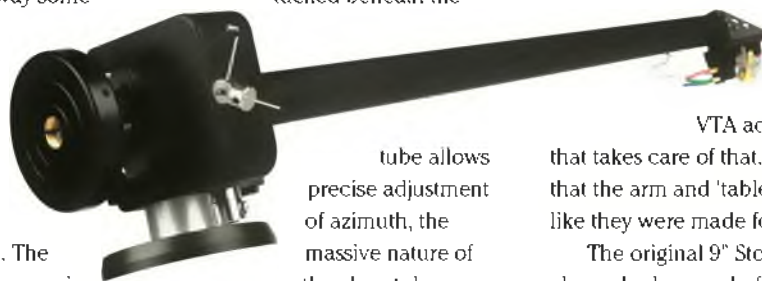
► uncanny physicality with the new arm, voices in particular taking on a more rounded, complete and convincingly engaging quality. Bass definition and textures have improved although absolute weight and power is one area in which the JMW can't match the likes of the Kuzma 313. Instead, its low-frequency touch is deft, quick and expressive, never ever sounding stolid or weighed down the way some (especially 9") arms can. Soundstages are huge: wide, deep and tall, but are more about space than boundaries. Ultimately, even though its levels of control, neutrality and resolution have all improved. The 12.7 is still an arm that puts the music firmly to the fore. Ergonomically and practically, especially in the case of its set-up tools and also the virtually instantaneous cartridge swaps, it's in a class of its own. It's an arm designed by a record lover to serve record lovers – and that's exactly what you get.

The Kuzma Stogi 313 tonearm

Kuzma's Stogi tonearm has an even longer history than the VPI, first appearing in its original form in 1984, the Reference with its massive, tapered tube following a few years later. That first design owed more than a little to the Zeta tonearm, but the passing years have seen it develop and evolve, both outlasting and outperforming its inspiration. Now comes the 313 (so dubbed because of its effective length) a 12" derivative that takes the basic design a further step forward.

One thing that has remained essentially unchanged is the massive gimbal bearing assembly with its huge, C-shaped housing. In many respects this sets the tone for the rest of the arm, a design built on solid (over)engineering rather than marketing gimmicks. The 313 mates that bearing assembly to the slimline, Linn-type collar first seen

on the AirLine and a longer version of the tapered and internally damped Reference arm-tube. Look carefully and you'll notice that, despite appearances, this is split some 40mm in front of the bearing, a substantial sleeve joining the two parts of the tube, damped with silicon grease and locked in place with Allen grub screws. Loosen those and a further, laterally disposed screw tucked beneath the



tube allows precise adjustment of azimuth, the massive nature of the close tolerance

joint ensuring no loss of rigidity.

At the business end of the arm you'll find a small, heavily triangulated head-shell, again developed from the one in the AirLine. Incredibly rigid, its diminutive dimensions actually help reduce the effective mass over the 9" version. The downside is that the new arrangement drops the stylus below the pivot axis, which theoretically compromises tracking of record warps. Again, in practice the use of a 12" arm actually diminishes the importance of this relative to



shorter designs, representing what designer Franc Kuzma considers an acceptable compromise. Elsewhere, the large diameter counterweight ensures that it stays as close to the bearing axis as possible, minimising MOI, while a simple falling weight arrangement provides easily optimised bias adjustment – its minimum setting just about accommodating the needs of the unusually lightly tracking vdH Condor.

The review arm arrived wired with a one-piece Cardas wiring loom.

Unlike most super-rigid arms the Stogi 313 does nothing to limit perfect cartridge alignment in all planes. I've already described the elegant azimuth arrangement and whilst the simple post and collar height adjustment is barely acceptable as a means of setting VTA, Kuzma's Stabi XL arm towers

incorporate the easiest to use and most repeatable

VTA adjustment ever, so that takes care of that. Good thing then that the arm and 'table really do sound like they were made for each other.

The original 9" Stogi Reference always had a wonderfully stable, calm and unflustered presentation, preferring perhaps to allow the musical performance to speak for itself rather than helping it on its way. Its self-effacing honesty was especially welcome with large-scale, complex works where its ability to retain control in dynamically frenzied situations was a boon. However, it was less suited to smaller, more intimate music, where it could on occasions sound heavy and a little shut in compared to

livelier arms.

Sixties recordings in particular, with their often ill-defined bass were delivered with equal, if unflattering, honesty – a presentation which helped neither them or the arm.

These tendencies could be eliminated with an appropriately low-compliance cartridge and really careful attention paid to tracking force, but it was certainly easier to get it wrong than right. ►

► Happily the 313 manages to retain everything positive from the 9" arm whilst being a much more forgiving and inherently engaging performer. If the potential had to be wrung from the 9" arm, the 12" version sounds great from the get-go, extra effort simply building on its performance. Its fundamental character hasn't changed: this is still a high-definition, high-resolution, high-stability device. But now it breathes far more easily, allowing greater expressive freedom without any compromise of its control and low-frequency authority. Playing the Chesky 180g re-issue of Boult, *Concert Favorites*, a disc whose lowish-level cut and congested, dullish balance highlighted the 9" arm's delivery, the 313 produces a commanding performance. Rock solid sound-staging and low-frequencies keep everything stable, while the more expressive midrange and explosive dynamics make the most of Sir Adrian's almost bombastic readings – not the most cerebral but definitely good fun! It's a quality that the Kuzma captures perfectly, along with the beautifully defined acoustic of Walthamstow Town Hall, making for an experience that is at once immensely enjoyable and rousing – exactly as it's supposed to be.

Smaller scale works, jazz quintet or the intimacy of Alison Krauss, revel in the stability and spatial definition of the 313. There are those who will demand more life, a little extra jump, but any shortcomings in this regard have been reduced to the level of an ideal rather than an imperative. Likewise, top-end air is significantly greater than on the shorter arm, again giving music space and the room to breathe.

Not that the 313 doesn't benefit from care when it comes to set-up. As good as it sounds straight up, time spent optimising azimuth and tracking

force will pay dividends in terms of greater instrumental texture and colour, musical life and separation. It's these low-level details that really bring performances to life and separate a really good system from one that's merely competent, a captivating musical experience from one that's simply impressive. If you really want to be carried along (and carried away) by Boult's mastery of the New Symphony in *The Hebrides*, you'll go that extra mile. It's certainly worth the effort. Do it and you move the 313 onto a performance plane that the Stogi reference has never threatened, grafting all round musical and expressive capabilities onto the original's familiar stability and control. It's a winning combination.

The Schroeder Reference 12" tonearm

As a bespoke product in which armwands are individually crafted, the Schroeder can of course be ordered with a 12" instead of the standard 9" effective length, requiring only a change in mounting geometry and head-shell off-set. The basic structure, single thread bearing with variable magnetic damping and wooden arm-wand remain. This example was specified by our own RSF who has been waiting patiently for his slothful editor to get it reviewed. The arm-wand itself is fashioned from ebony and intended for conventional low-compliance moving-coils, with



other woods used for lighter pick-ups. It was supplied along with a secondary armboard allowing the addition of an extra tonearm to the VPI TNT or HRX – of which more next issue.

Even for those used to dealing with uni-pivots the magnetically damped string bearing of the Schroeder comes as quite a culture shock – and that's only an intro to the set-up procedure as a whole. There are, quite literally, no fixed parameters with this arm. Overhang, off-set (and to a lesser extent) effective length are all out there, blowing in the wind. Arm-height needs to allow for bearing damping which needs to accommodate VTA which impacts arm-height! It's like trying to hit not one but two moving targets at once. All of which means that when it comes to setting up this arm you'll need either, 1. A great deal of patience, or 2. A professional who is well versed in the process. I strongly recommend the latter. If you are doing it yourself, I'd recommend starting with minimal clearance at the bearing, set the arm height, then attend to the cartridge alignment before worrying about damping and VTA adjustments. Bias uses the knurled knob above the bearing, while bearing spacing and thus damping are adjusted using a small grub screw located in the knob's centre.

With so much variation you could go round and round for ages, but fortunately the arm sounds pretty darn good even with an approximate set-up and adjustment simply makes things better. One nice touch is the grub screws horizontally disposed in the counterweight, allowing for really precise azimuth adjustment. Less impressive on this sample were the very short arm-lead and crocodile clip for earthing (both items – like arm length – that prospective owners can specify for themselves). ►

DEFINITIVE AUDIO



KSL Kondo Nero Line Integrated Valve Amplifier £24,000



L to R: 1. Kuzma Stabi XL £10,000 2. Art Audio Concerto Stereo Amplifier (GE) £4400 3. Living Voice IBX R2 (Burr Oak) £4400 4. SME 10 / SME V £4115
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 Gakuah 300B Mono Amplifiers £48,500 9. Resolution Audio Opus 21 CD Player £2950 10. KSL Kondo V-z (1m) Interconnect £750

► The absence of a positive arm-rest makes a stylus guard essential.

So what am I to make of the Schroeder? On the one hand it's a beautifully finished device. On the other it can best be described as quixotic. If you coo over the camera finish and precision feel of the SME 5 then the infinite variability of the Schroeder is perhaps best avoided. If however, you want music at any cost, financial or practical, this arm is a serious contender. It's wide-open sound and fiery dynamics are impressive enough, but what really sets it apart is the complete absence of grain. Similar in this respect to an air-bearing table, the sheer lack of mechanical intrusion delivers a beguiling fluidity and sense of ease to music, both in terms of momentum and dynamic shifts. Lacking the absolute low-frequency stability or definition of the Kuzma, the Schroeder nonetheless floats bass instruments in an attractive way, bringing life and immediacy to music, a real impression of air and energy. It has an almost uncanny sense of pace and time, which gives music a vividly natural sense of flow.

By now you'll have gathered that the Schroeder is something of a Curate's egg. On the one hand I love what it does with records, the life and vitality it breathes into performances. On the other I find it operationally and ergonomically frustrating. I can easily understand why some listeners swear by the arm, loath to surrender its undoubted musical appeal. But at

the same time their zeal occasionally has something of the fanatic about it, unwilling to countenance criticism or compromise. It's a familiar refrain from years past and products equally idiosyncratic, which have also attracted equal loyalty from their adherents. In cases like these the bottom line comes down to, "would I want to own one?" And if the Schroeder is on your agenda, that's exactly the question you'll need to ask yourself, meaning you need to hear it, but use it too. You'll make your own judgement, but for me, despite the fact that I love its musical virtues, the physical practicalities simply pose one question too many.

Conclusions

Collectively, these three products argue a powerful case for 12" tonearms.



There's no ignoring the ease and natural sense of musical progression they bring to records, or the way they help remove the system itself from that process. But at the same time, as musically unobtrusive as these arms are, they vary enough in character to suggest that reducing tracking distortion,

whilst a worthy aim, is hardly the be all and end all of record replay. The grain-free and naturally expressive nature of the Schroeder suggests just how critical bearing design can be, while the very real differences between the VPI 12.5 and 12.7 throw light on the importance of structural considerations. Like so much else in hi-fi, 12" arms are, all things being equal, a good thing – but they're no silver bullet or magic answer.

On this evidence I could happily live with the musical performance of any of these arms – the practicalities and personal preferences I'll leave to you. Just be content that a good 12" will always beat a good 9" – at least on this evidence. ➤

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

VPI JMW 12.7 Tonearm

Type: Uni-pivot with interchangeable armwands

Effective Length: 21mm

Effective Mass: 10.1g

Overhang: 15mm

Prices –

12.7 Complete £1795

12.7 Armwand £795

UK Distributor:

Audiocraft

Tel (44)(0)1895 253340

Net. www.audio-craft.co.uk

Manufacturer:

VPI Industries Inc

Net. www.vpiindustries.com

Kuzma Stogi 313

Type: Gimbal bearing, super rigid

Effective Length: 313mm

Effective Mass: 12g

Overhang: 13mm

Price: £1795

UK Distributor:

Audioreaks

Tel. (44)(0)20 8948 4153

Net. www.audioreaks.co.uk

Manufacturer:

Kuzma Ltd.

Net. www.kuzma.si

Schroeder 12"

Type: Thread bearing with magnetic damping

Effective Length: 315mm

Effective Mass: User specified

Overhang: 15mm

Price: From £3300

UK Distributor:

GT Audio

Tel. (44)(0)1895 833099

Net. www.gtaudio.com

Manufacturer:

Schroeder Tonearm

Net. www.schroeder-tonearm.de

TRACK

15

TOTAL

MIN

SEC

55:20

5	6	7	8
9	10	11	12
13	14	15	

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The conrad-johnson CT6 Pre-amp

by Steve Dickinson

There's something altogether comforting about a C-J preamp. It's like the hi-fi equivalent of a pair of favourite slippers. You know what you are going to get and it's a sublime, slightly rose-tinted view of sound. Something nice and sweet with a really buttery smooth phono stage.

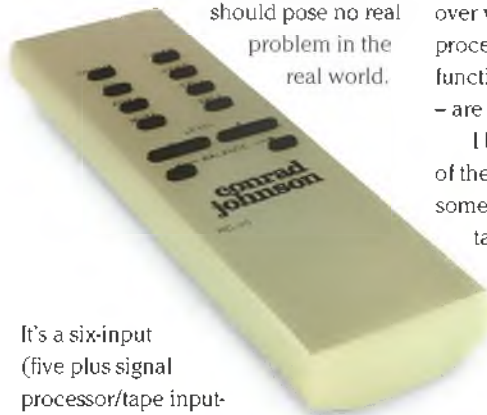
Wrong! It's time to get with the program.

The last ten years out of the 30 c-j has been making amplifiers has seen a profound shift in focus for the products, and yet this is almost completely forgotten by people who are seemingly emotionally attached to ancient history like the kit-built PV3 or the original PV10. c-js don't sound like that anymore. The two-box ART changed all that. The original Anniversary Reference Triode preamp of 1996 replaced the mighty Premier 7A pre-amp. The sound became more precise and arguably less warm in the process. And if we were to map the genome of the CT6, we'd find a lot of ART and not much Premier 7A inside.

In fact, there's an awful lot of ART running round inside the entire current crop of c-j pre-amps, but perhaps the family resemblance is strongest here and in the more expensive CT5. The signature paralleled 6922 tubes being the most obvious link back to the ART; that one used five of the double triodes per side to create effectively a whopping great single, feedback-free unbuffered gain stage. Things are scaled down on the CT6, with it using just two summed 6922 tubes per side, but the concept is remarkably similar. This is the 'Composite Triode' part of the CT5 and CT6 name, as well as the ACT and ACT 2 pre-amps, that have momentarily replaced the ART as top-dog. Of course, making the pre-amp out of one gain stage makes

for a very direct sound, but comes at a price. Like most c-j preamps, the CT6 inverts absolute phase at output, so you had better wire your speakers up accordingly at the power amp outputs. The other slight downside to this design is a mild increase in background noise, but unless you have a habit of sitting with your ear to the drive units, this

should pose no real problem in the real world.



It's a six-input (five plus signal processor/tape input-output that can double up as an extra input - and 'theater' processor loop that can't), line-only pre-amplifier with an elegant, if a bit Art Deco arrangement of functions on the front panel. There are six touch buttons, 14 yellow indicator LEDs and a volume display. This might seem like a big button count for a product that needs little more than a volume control and a source switch, but bear with us a while. The pre-amp never completely switches off, so it needs a standby button. That's right ecmentalists: even when slumbering the CT6 goes into standby mode, meaning all the Polar Bears in the Brazilian rainforest will die of landfill poisoning and exposure to conventional 60W light bulbs. Or something. Next to the power button is a mute button (get used to the sound of mute - it goes into auto-muting for the better part of a minute every time it moves from standby to full operation).

On the right hand side of the preamp (past the centre grilles that chimney out the heat from the four 6922s lined up with military precision in the middle of the amp) are the volume up and down buttons, source and 'ep11/thtr' buttons. This last racks through the processor/tape loop options and - if necessary - hand over volume duties to a home cinema processor or similar. In addition, these functions - and balance adjustment - are replicated on the remote control.

I blather on about the operation of the pre-amp at length because it's somewhat counterintuitive, and will take some getting used to. Although no buttons have a dual role, you will still find yourself switching into theatre mode and growling at yourself a few times before you nail things.

Which is impressive given it only has six buttons. The 100-step volume control raises or lowers the gain in baby steps of 0.7dB per click. And it really is a click, as the relays kick in and out to adjust the attenuator. The default switch on position (20) is rather low for most sources. Still, better that than switch-on thumps and blown drivers. Given the preamp delivers an impressive 15V rms output and 26dB of gain, it's wise to be cautious about these things.

As ever, the champagne gold front panel and black contrasting side and rear case marks this product out as a c-j design. Although a few recent models have looked a bit OTT in some respects, this one looks elegant and restrained. Inside is similarly elegant, with the big custom made C-J caps sitting neatly in rows on a large PCB. This in turn translates into a big footprint, and the CT6 is larger than you expect

► So, it uses a similar valve layout to the ART and has a broadly similar look to the ART, but does it sound like the ART? In short, yes... surprisingly so. The ART of a decade ago was easy to remember, because it was a revelatory product. That transparency and detail, coupled to an awesome ability to focus on the finer points of the music pretty much raised the bar for modern pre-amplification. The CT6 is never going to achieve the once-in-a-blue-moon revelation that the ART could muster, but it has the same openness and detail that caused the ART to re-draw the high-end map a decade ago, only this time for £10,000 less. And currently less still: generally slated at £4900, the CT6 is currently available (for a short period and in the UK only) at £3750 and that really is a bargain.



The most obvious aspect of the CT6's performance is the sound-staging. The word 'cor!' comes to mind, here, because you aren't just impressed by the sound-stage, you are reduced to teenager levels of communication. It has an entirely appropriate sense of scale (no *Attack of the 50' Singer* here), but the sort of sound-staging properties that few people ever get to hear properly.

Sound-stage width is particularly noteworthy because the pre-amp is like a building enhancement programme – suddenly your side and back walls seem further from your chair. Meanwhile you are transported to where the musical action is, be that a small,



claustrophobic jazz club (a potential worry for c-j owners who don't want to passive smoke 50 year old smoke) or a vast concert hall.

Once again, this is a lot cleaner sound than people expect from c-j. Cleaner and faster, too. It's a very tidy, ordered sound with the sense of tempo and architecture that is so often lost in the overall presentation. In other words, it doesn't impose its own timing structure on the music, even when the music ends up being something minimalist like *Nixon in China*.

Then there's the neutrality. It's not quite at ACT levels – which must be the Switzerland of amps when it comes to musical impartiality – but it gets remarkably close. Even that noise floor doesn't get in the way of making the sound seem open and faithful to

the original recording. And that has nothing whatsoever to do with warm and woolly sounds, at all.

In some respects, this is the best pre-amp c-j has built recently. There's neutrality without the word 'stark' to pre-fix it. There's one of the widest, deepest soundstages you'll ever hear and there's the sense of temporal

integrity that makes this sound good whatever you play through it.

All at a price that doesn't leave a Mercedes-sized hole in your bank balance, even at full list. Factor in the reduced ticket and those of us who lusted after an ART, but

couldn't reach the asking price can get back in the game at last. It's been a long decade.



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Tube Complement:	4 x 6922
Inputs:	5 x line-inputs, 1x tape input, 1 x theatre
Outputs:	2 x main out, 1x tape, 1 x theatre (unity gain)
Gain:	26 db
Maximum output:	15V rms
Phase:	inverts phase on all outputs
Output impedance:	850 ohms
Dimensions (WxHxD):	482 x 84 x 394mm
Weight:	8.6kg
Price:	£3750 (for a limited period) £4900 rrp

UK Distributor:

Audiofreaks
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Manufacturer:

www.conradjohnson.com

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audio 1050

V2
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V6
BIAS

V8
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BIAS

V8
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Audio Research VS110 Vacuum-Tube Power Amp

by Roy Gregory

The sparse soundscape of Nils Petter Molvaer's *Khmer* is haunting and threatening, pulsing with an underlying current of latent violence that threatens to, and just occasionally does, burst forth from the speakers. Of course, a threat carries no weight unless its actual delivery is suitably shocking. Well, roughly three minutes into track two, 'Access/Song Of Sand 1' the huge slabs of heavily flanged bass that crash out of the speakers are genuinely frightening the first time you hear them. A staccato cannonade that explodes across and ricochets around the soundstage it's as impressive for its speed and mobility as it is for its sheer weight and substance. At least it is when it's played on the Audio Research VS110.

Is it my imagination, or do some products really look the way they sound: c-j's Premier 350 – solid, three dimensional and warm; ARC's D115 – bluff, squat, weighty and powerful, just waiting to pounce; Martin Logan's Summit – airy, transparent and architectural with a firm foundation. Now comes the VS110, not as compact or closely coiled as the D115, but weighty nonetheless, with a clean, no-nonsense appearance that's all to do with self confidence and nothing at all to do with the foibles of fashion. This amplifier simply screams "classic" at you, with a strong "no-frills" echo from the back wall – which does indeed sum up the VS110 – sonically and topologically. The almost square, open chassis supports a dual-mono, push-pull circuit using two pairs of Svetlana 6550s a side, each with a 6N1P driver,

a fifth 6N1P playing phase splitter. Power supply is solid-state while reservoir capacitance relies on a single bank of 470 microF Nichicon caps, smaller and quicker than the much larger ones found in older ARC designs. The amp is a fixed bias design, inputs are single-ended only and there are output taps for both four and eight Ohm loads, delivering 100 Watts a side. All in all it's a model of common sense and practicality. There's even an optional valve cage.



But despite its rather prosaic exterior, the VS110 is not short on subtle twists and attention to detail. The nine-pin tubes all come with damping rings installed, while gain is higher than average for a valve amp, making direct connection to source components incorporating their own output level control (an increasingly common scenario with both digital and analogue front-ends) a far more viable proposition – although it can also lead to noise issues with high-gain line-stages. Biasing is straightforward and remained stable right through the review period. Even the soft feet on which the amp stands seem to do a better job than most of their brethren. Yes, I got an improvement

in focus, transparency and leading-edge definition by substituting a set of Symposium RollerBlock Jrs but it wasn't the make or break result you get with some amps.

The VS110 was provided as a suitable partner for the LS26 reviewed in Issue 50, but such was its performance that I quickly decided that it warranted a review of its own. ARC's D115, a design that dates back some 20 years, was always a firm favourite with me, while intervening Audio

Research amps have tended to leave me rather cold, especially the extended flirtation with hybrid designs. Could the VS110 possibly signify a similar renaissance to the Ref 3 and LS26, but in the power amp department? Even a brief

encounter suggested that the answer to that question would be a yes, while longer exposure simply reinforced that initial confidence. With a solid 100 watts on tap the 110 should be a capable all rounder, at home in most systems and un-phased by all but the most demanding speaker loads, but what really makes this amp special is not the power on tap but the way in which it delivers it.

The sound of the VS110 is built on the firm foundation of its solid and weighty bass. Rather than the ripped but ultimately soulless low frequencies that are extruded by all too many solid-state behemoths, the ARC is all about a calculated, loose, almost feline grace, more Merce Cunningham than Balanchine if you get my drift. This is muscle that breathes and lets the performance live, rather than pinning it to the artistic board of a musical ▶

▶ killing jar, frozen in time and space. It's what a good amp should do and in turn it's built on a quality that the D115 had in spades – the ability to let musical energy loose safe in the knowledge that it will never get away. The word coined to describe it is "authority" and it's a far more subtle and valuable attribute than mere "control". If it's the latter you want simply load up the output devices, wrap them in global feedback and revel in the low-distortion measurements that result. After all, you can simply ignore the fact that you've crushed the life out of the music along the way.

What the VS110 provides is that innate sense of balance that comes with genuine authority. The power to drive real world speakers without sounding muscle bound, enough feedback to allow the amp to grip the signal, not so much that it crushes it to death. The result is a sound that is vibrant and full of energy, big, bold and a little forward, making the amp sound more powerful than its paper performance would suggest. Of course, the increased gain is a factor here, but so is the amplifier's sheer enthusiasm. Building on that bass weight and power, the 110 instills voices and instruments with a real sense of presence and substance. The emphasis here is on dimensionality and separation, physicality if you will, as opposed to the last word in detail and resolution. The result is a well-developed soundstage, the space between its occupants taking precedence over the coherence and definition of the overarching acoustic. It's this combination of substance, dynamics and locational spread that makes *Khmer's* staccato bass eruptions so impressive, but voices too have a beguiling solidity to them. Just as the ARC captures the brooding menace of *Khmer*, so the subtly shifting emotional moods of Jim White's 'The Wound That Never Heals' flit across the song like

fast moving cloud shadows on a sunny hillside.

But, if the VS110 isn't without character, it's a shape that dovetails perfectly with the slightly laid-back, relaxed presentation of the LS26, making the combination much greater than the sum of its parts – and a mightily cost effective one too. The separation and detail of the line-stage, its sense of driven momentum,



takes hold of all that energy available from the 110 and gives it a real sense of purpose and direction, equally at home with the easy lope of 'Handcuffed To A Fence In Mississippi' or the joyous romp of 'God Was Drunk When He Made Me'*. The result is an impressively versatile musical landscape, one that captures the whole of the performance rather than dismantling it or concentrating on parts at the expense of overall impact. It's when you use the 110 in tandem with the 26 that you realize that its real power should be measured in the musical sense.

Concentrating on the wider view rather than the musical intricacies the VS110 thrives on better and better front-ends, equally at home with the Lyra Connoisseur 4-2s as it was with

Intrigued by the song titles? If you haven't heard it the album is called *No Such Place* and it's Mr White's finest work to date, being both more inventive and far less "produced" than the later *Drill A Hole...*

the LS26. The better the signal the more flesh and shape it puts on the bones – but it is the power amp that makes sure those bones are always there, the right shape and the right scale. Ultimately, there is a limit to its resolution, but you'll go a long way up the ladder to reach it, while its rounder, broad brush presentation captures the innate character of musical contours with deceptive ease. If you want to appreciate the beauty of a single flower, its interleaving petals, its delicacy and fragility, there are other amps that will get you closer than the 110 – but few of them will place that flower on the verge, beside the lane, at the foot of the hedge, sheltering beneath the swell of a wooded slope. This Audio Research trades in musical vistas, allowing you to glory in their scale, bathe in their sunlight or be drenched by their squalls. Real authority is general in nature; don't underestimate its rarity. ➤

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Push-pull vacuum-tube power amp
Tube Complement:	5x 6N1P 8x 6550
Inputs:	1pr single-ended RCA/ phono
Input Impedance:	100 kOhms
Input Sensitivity:	1.1V
Gain:	28dB into 8 Ohms
Rated Output:	100 Watts continuous into 8 Ohms
Dimensions (WxHxD):	445 x 201 x 483mm
Weight:	27.7kg
Price:	£4000

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The Rega Saturn CD Player

by Steve Dickinson

Dictionary definitions of “saturine” tend to use words like “gloomy, melancholy, taciturn, sluggish”. Holst described Saturn as “The bringer of old age”. Not, perhaps, the most obvious choice of name for a CD player? Then again, if the product you were replacing had been called the Jupiter (jollity, joviality, a source of happiness) and you wanted to make the point that this went even further, then you might be persuaded Saturn sounded good, and trust to luck that some nitwit with a paragraph to fill didn’t remind people of the dictionary definition. Oops, sorry guys. However, five seconds in the company of the Saturn is enough to dispel such negative associations.

By way of making amends, it’s worth reminding everybody that the \$1000 Jupiter, Rega’s previous range-topper was a stonking player full of musical insight and even-handedness. Rega are refreshingly slow to churn their model range, “design well, design once” seems to be their philosophy – but events, dear boy, dictated otherwise. Change was effectively forced on many manufacturers by Sony’s decision to cease OEM supply of CD transport mechanisms in 2003. Rather than merely re-engineer using an alternative transport, Rega found a UK company who were completing development of a new disc operating system and software. PM, reviewing Rega’s first player to use it in issue 42, declared the £500 Apollo superior to the Jupiter. The operating software and chipset, together with a more positive disc-clamping system, allows better data retrieval and 20Mb of memory means a much more transparent error-correction regime. That the fundamentals used in the Apollo had further potential was obvious: given

more development, a bigger budget and a higher price point they might be on to something rather special. Key differences between Apollo and Saturn include the use of two, parallel-connected, Wollson WM8740 dual differential DAC chipsets instead of one, a high-stability low-jitter master clock, better power supplies and a more liberal use of “audiophile” components such as Nichicon Fine Gold capacitors. So, can the £1300 Saturn run rings around the Jupiter?

The initial, rather overwhelming impression was of torrents of detail. After a couple of days the sound developed more homogeneity, and lost a slightly upfront assertiveness which, while far from unpleasant, tended to draw attention to the sound of the player rather than the music. The Jupiter had a very understated style that grew on you, rather than the more attention-grabbing approach favoured by less self-assured operators so it was encouraging to discover the Saturn following company precedent. Happily, though, the detail was still very much in evidence.

It’s not the impressive-but-pointless detail that tells you what brand of plectrum a guitarist is using, but it is simply more satisfyingly crammed with musical information. It’s the sort of detail that allows you to perceive the changes in pressure of bow on string rather than merely adjustments of volume, or follow a contrapuntal line because you can isolate the voices not just the change of harmony, even in a large choir. A few years ago, on a cycling holiday in Burgundy, my wife and I discovered a local curiosity, a wellspring which was both wide and deep. The remarkable thing was that such was the clarity of the water, the bottom appeared to be perhaps a

couple of arms’ lengths down, whereas in fact it was a good few metres deeper. I was reminded of this while comparing the Saturn to the Jupiter. While the Jupiter might suggest where the bottom lay, the Saturn shows you the texture of its surface. It’s not the levels of fractal detail you get from something like the dCS P8i for example, owners of true high-end equipment need not apply, but it is without doubt a significant step up at this price.

Of course detail, while useful, is not sufficient by itself and there is much more to the Saturn than just this aspect. This player is a great communicator. I remarked in a previous review that the Creek Evo CD player had a vitality



which the Jupiter, for all its sophistication and lushness, didn’t quite convey. I’m pleased to report that the Saturn lacks nothing in this department. Dynamics are truly vivid and to the Evo’s enthusiasm it adds a grainless, buttery smoothness and a lustrous luminosity – like Mediterranean, rather than Mancunian sunshine.

There is also a strong feeling of solidity. Not merely in the sense of a stable image, although that is certainly evident, but in the way the player creates a palpable musical event happening before you. It’s not just the fact that the soundstage goes deep, because conversely it’s not particularly wide, and the player doesn’t create the sort of laid-out-before-you, walk-round image of the dCS. But such is the tangibility, the consistency of

▶ tonal colour that instruments themselves become more 3-dimensional. You can sense the volume of the soundbox in stringed instruments, for example. Percussion has mass, as well as power.

It's also about control and subtlety: 'Nimrod' from the Elgar *Enigma Variations*, CBSO/Rattle (HMV 5 86725 2) had a breathy calm and sense of anticipation in the quiet passages, albeit a slight sense of compression to the image in the more full-blooded bits. But that would be to quibble. As a player for orchestral or large-scale music the Saturn does have the ability to conjure a sense of space, with good levels of separation and image depth. Ramirez' *Missa Criolla* (Naxos 8.557542) had excellent spatial rendering of orchestra and soloists, and a strong sense of the acoustics of the performance space. I also suspect that those hints of compression might be in the recording: I dug out an old favourite which I haven't heard for a couple of years,

The sense of mass also extends to smaller-scale music. kd lang's cover of 'Helpless', from *hymns of the 49th parallel* is accompanied by strummed guitar chords. There is clarity and crispness aplenty when strings are struck, but the ongoing chord has a smooth silkiness, like swimming in warm double cream. It is euphonious, but there's no suggestion that imperfections are being airbrushed away. I have a Joe Cocker compilation which probably came from a petrol station bargain bin, and it's a warts and all presentation (well, mostly warts, truth be told) but the last track, Randy Newman's 'Guilty' is Cocker at his undisputed, heartbreaking best. On lesser players,

you get a sense of

how good he can be, on the Saturn, it's an absolute show-stopper. I defy anybody to only play it once. Similarly, Brian Eno's "Deep blue day" from *Apollo* is overflowing with luscious gorgeousness, but any suggestion of over-romanticised schmaltz is skilfully compensated by subtle rhythm guitar and percussion. It is abundantly clear that Mr. E. knows a thing or two about music.

It is interesting to note that Rega attribute many of the improvements in the Apollo and Saturn players to the implementation of the new operating software and chipset. Not long ago, designers of digital players



concentrated on power supplies and choice of DAC chips, then came jitter control and messing around with digital filter algorithms. That the operating software can also affect the sound is much less intuitive. Yet the evidence is before me; the Saturn delivers a level of performance I've not heard from anything approaching its price. It improves on its predecessor in every important aspect of music-making which, when you consider that the Jupiter was considered a benchmark, is gratifying. That it does so to such a degree is surprising. That it is not double the price of the Jupiter is remarkable. The more astute reader might discern that I like this player. In truth, I think the Saturn and I could easily live happily ever after. ➤



Berlioz' *Te Deum* LSO/Davis (Philips 464 689-2), turned up the volume and put on the finale, *Judex Crederis*. I have one word in my notes: "Wow!" Some of it is texture, some of it is spatial, some is dynamics and speed but it's all about musicianship which, like comedy, relies on one crucial attribute. Err, timing. You can relax and forget that aspect more or less for granted. Notes start and end as they should, simple as that.

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Rega Saturn	
Type:	One-box CD player
DAC:	2x Wolfson WM8740 dual-differential
Outputs:	1pr RCA Phono analogue 75 Ohm co-axial digital Toslink digital
Output Level:	2.2V
Dimensions (WxHxD):	435 x 100 x 270mm
Weight:	5kg
Finishes:	Black; Silver
Price:	£1298.00

Manufacturer:
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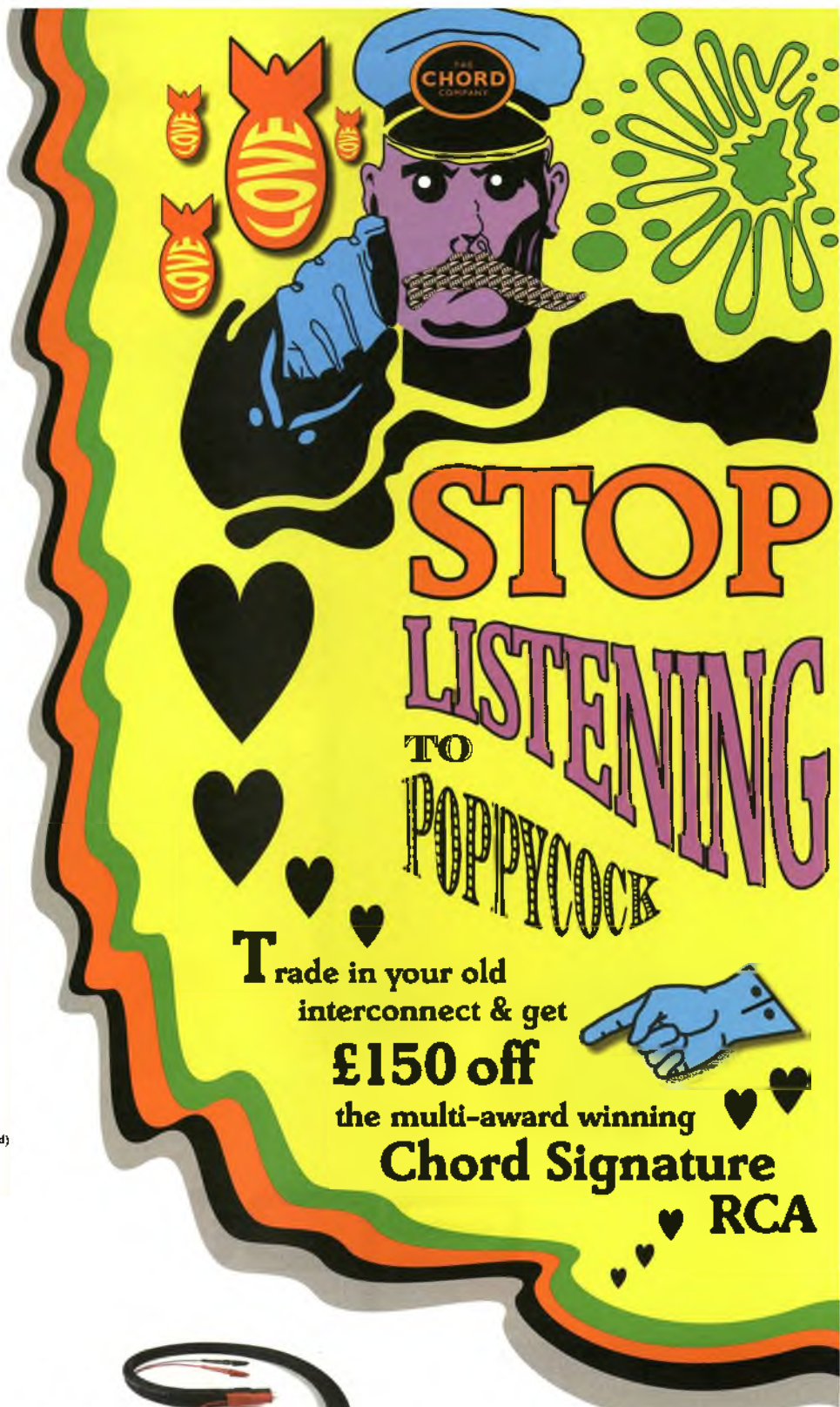
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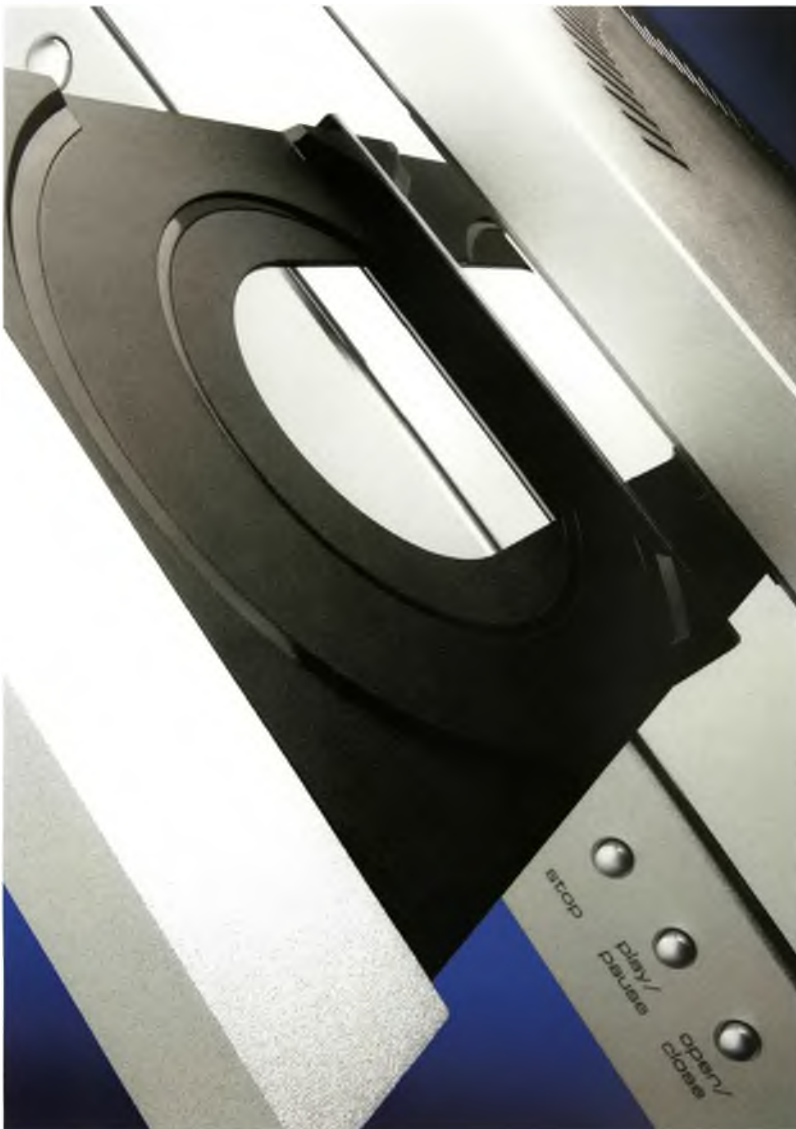
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ASTINtrew At-3000 CD Player

by Jimmy Hughes



I no longer recall the CD player that first employed a tube analogue output stage (CAL I think. Ed.) but it happened way back in the 1980s. Back then, it seemed the ultimate anachronism; the latest digital technology partnered with technology considered 'obsolete' by the end of the 1960s! Yet it made sense – as many CD players at that time sounded dry and harsh. So, a little added valve warmth, sweetness, and richness was no bad thing.

The ASTINtrew At-3000 has a tube output stage – though whether you'd guess this just by listening is a moot point. It certainly hasn't got the warm rosy glow so often (wrongly?) associated with tubes. On the contrary; the At-3000 sounds impressively sharp and focussed – it's crisp and open; smooth and clean. It's quite sweet, but does not produce the classic euphonic tube warmth. It's a very lucid and detailed CD player - focused and crisp - but not especially warm or rich in terms of tonal balance.

True, it does have a very nice clean top-end. And it always sounds well-balanced and integrated – even on bright recordings. The treble is sharp and tactile, yet smooth and clean, with good definition and impressive dynamics. It isn't an especially forgiving tonal balance - by which I mean it doesn't tone down bright, forwardly-balanced recordings. Yet neither is it excessively revealing of or inclined to exaggerate shortcomings. Essentially, it's a very honest, even-handed sonic presentation.

The player's bright airy treble and crisp lucid transient attack is matched by a clear strong bottom-end. The bass is very clean and firm – impressively powerful and deep when the music demands muscle and weight. It's the sort of bass that's not there until it's there – if that makes sense. The sound can be light airy and open, and then suddenly surprise you with deep, weighty low frequencies that seem to come from nowhere. The bass is

▶ very extended too – and on the right disc can produce powerful results.

In terms of casework, the At-3000 offers the same style and build as the ASTIntrew At-1000 and At-5000 Pre/Power combination reviewed in Issue 49. Build quality is excellent – heavy solid all-metal construction. The CD transport is reasonably fast in terms of track access times, and the usual facilities are provided. However, some things – like fast forward/reverse search – can only be accessed from the remote handset. There's a display dim/off function, plus an interesting 24bit/96kHz up-sampling option.

This offers you the opportunity to increase the sampling resolution of standard 16bit 44.kHz CDs to 24bit 96kHz. And yes it does seem to work.

over-separated things. It sometimes pulls the music apart, without quite putting it back together again. By and large, the At-3000 already sounds 'separated' enough not to need further enhancement. And while it's true to say you do get a greater sense of space and an increased impression of depth and width in 24/96, the music sounds smoother and more comfortable in standard mode. Which you ultimately choose boils down to personal taste. Despite certain reservations about the 24/96 option, I think it's a useful feature and worth having. It certainly helps bring life and clarity to muddy or congested recordings, giving you the choice of two sonic presentations, one of which (depending on the recording) will probably be very successful. To be honest, I found it hard to make up my mind which of the two

I preferred. Once I'd gone past the comparison stage, I tended to use the At-3000 in standard mode. The ear quickly adjusts to the difference, and the overall sound tends to be more consistent, as well as smoother and more natural.

I started out listening to the At-3000 partnered with ASTIntrew's At-1000/At-5000 pre/power combination, but a few weeks later I switched to Musical Fidelity's kW550 - a Monster 500W two-box amplifier with massive power and impressive dynamics. Via the MF amp, the At-3000 showed its positive qualities still further, sounding very detailed and dynamic, with sharp crisp transient attack and clean tight bass. Hearing the ASTIntrew CD player through this amp confirmed all my earlier positive impressions regarding its commanding clarity and presence. The sound had real energy and presence, creating a vivid and brilliant sonic picture that was engaging and stimulating.

This confirmed my earlier

impressions of the At-3000 as both a very civilised CD player, yet one also capable of biting sharpness and attack. Its tonal smoothness is not achieved by softening transients or rolling off the upper treble – it's a result of being naturally clean and free from nasties. Sonically, it combines excellent fine detail with



impressive dynamics and realistic tonal qualities, sounding smooth and natural, yet producing plenty of bite and attack when this is called for. The 24/96 option gives you the choice of two sonic presentations, one of which should produce near ideal results depending on the music and recording, making this a superb player for the price. ➤



The 24bit/96kHz setting gives the music added separation and enhanced clarity. The sound is sharper and more assertive, with greater independence between individual instruments and voices. In simple hi-fi terms, the sound is definitely improved. Whether it's better musically (or as enjoyable to listen to) is less easy to quantify.

While I definitely felt the 24bit/96kHz mode produced distinctly better results in hi-fi respects, sometimes the music sounded nicer in the standard mode. On direct comparison, 24/96 tended to win-out - more detailed and transparent, with increased separation between voices and instruments. You get a bigger more dimensional soundstage, with an increased impression of space and depth. But, occasionally, the 24/96 mode

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	CD player with tube analogue output stage.
Sampling Rate:	Switchable, 16/44 and 24/96
Outputs:	1 pr. Analogue RCA/phones 1x co-axial digital RCA/ phono
Output Level:	2V
Dimensions (WxHxD):	430 x 128 x 390mm
Weight:	8kg
Finish:	Silver
Price:	£647

Manufacturer:
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The Highland Audio Oran 4301 Loudspeaker

by Alan Sircom



Hi-Fi+ has a reputation – not entirely undeserved – as the champion of high-end hi-fi. But sometimes (depressingly often?) those high-end price tags are beyond reach. What happens then? Is hi-fi elitist? Or, is there audiophile life below £25,000?

Of course. Like most luxury goods, there has to be an economical starting point. A place where the sensibilities of the high-end apply, even if the price tags do not. Surprisingly, the nursery slopes to the high-end begin oh so mildly. They, perhaps, begin here with the Highland Audio Oran 4301 ('perhaps' simply because every day it seems that another two dozen budget loudspeakers are launched and perhaps tomorrow's super-budget starlet will change the face of the budget speaker market). As you might expect from the name, Highland Audio comes from, er, France (well, if Christopher Lambert can play a Scotsman in *Highlander*, I suppose there is a connection). It's a diminutive rear-ported two-way speaker, seemingly finished in a real wood veneer that approximates a dark cherry wood (there's a walnut and piano black option, too – as well as an even cheaper vinyl version). The front baffle is a moulded black affair, and the grilles (remove them at all costs when playing music) give the speakers a businesslike look. Then there are the WBT-like bi-wire connectors. That's right... big, chunky, Anglo-Saxon man-grade connectors at the back – these are rare on speakers costing \$1,500, let alone \$250.

The dimensions limit the bass, because they limit the size of the bass driver itself. The 100mm mid-bass cone features ceramic bonded to spun aluminium and is only 0.15mm thick. Not that it matters in today's flat screen world, but this bass unit is magnetically shielded. Very clever, but it still puts a lower limit of just 65Hz to the bottom end. The top end is delivered by a grille-protected

▶ 25mm titanium dome tweeter, which features a neodymium magnet. Like those big connectors, this bespeaks a far more expensive speaker than the price tag suggests.

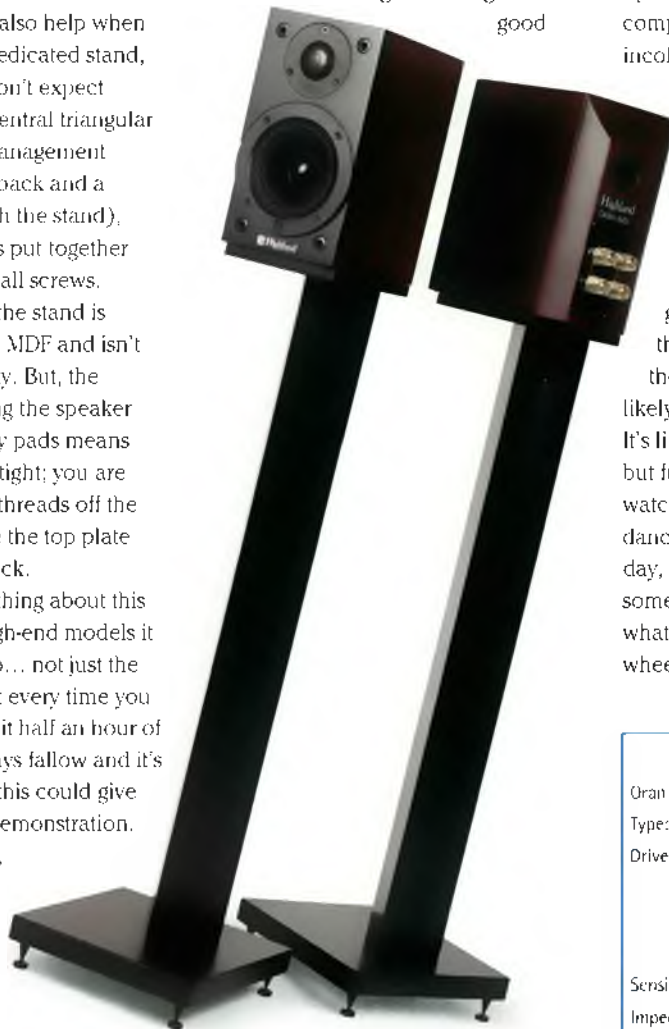
Highland thought to sink a quartet of M6 screw threads in the bottom of the speaker. These are useful if you want to spike the speaker and mount it to a bookshelf, and also help when connecting it to the dedicated stand, which is clever, but don't expect miracles. The single central triangular pillar hides a cable management system (a hole at the back and a cavity running through the stand), and the whole thing is put together using half a dozen small screws. The downside is that the stand is made of black-coated MDF and isn't the last word in rigidity. But, the combination of bolting the speaker to the stand and sticky pads means it is locked tight. Too tight; you are more likely to rip the threads off the speaker than separate the top plate from its base once stuck.

There's a strange thing about this speaker; like some high-end models it takes time to warm up... not just the breaking in hours, but every time you use it from cold. Give it half an hour of playing each time it lays fallow and it's fully warmed up, but this could give it a poor showing in demonstration.

Which is a shame, because this is a sweet little speaker from the outset, and it gets even sweeter after that half-hour has expired. It's mostly mid-band – bass is not really an issue when a drive unit is this small – and the high frequencies are not as rip-roaringly energetic as you might expect from a budget speaker, but this is a wholly good thing under the circumstances. Too many of its peers go for the sledge-hammer approach, boosting upper bass, to give an impression of deep bass at the expense

of speed and accuracy. The Oran is very different, and it sounds fast and clean as a result.

Best of all, that mid-band is really tidy. Voices are rendered extremely well, with a sense of naturalness that's normally the preserve of much more expensive loudspeakers. This also helps give the Highland good



soundstaging. Images move wide of the boxes, with some image depth, although they lack the solidity to appear rooted and there's some slight veiling of position in the soundstage.

Let's not get carried away, here. The Highland Audio design is not without its limitations. The combination of relatively low efficiency and power handling mean you don't go loud.

Also, compared to speakers that have better extension at both ends of the spectrum, it can sound sat on and almost muted. It's not a 'room-filler', the sound staying quite small in even medium-sized rooms. If pushed, it can fall into brightness and aggression (the tweeter lies in wait, but wick it up and it can get angry). But, as a complete package it rarely sounds incoherent and used within its range

it's a wonderfully engaging and direct performer.

This is an exciting speaker because it's a high-end springboard. What it does right, it does very right; what it does wrong is, well, forgivable given the size and the price. With that sort of groundwork in place, the Highland Oran buyer is more likely to upgrade along the right lines. It's like someone buying a cheap, but fundamentally decent, automatic watch, instead of an all-singing, all-dancing affair: you just know that one day, the next wristwatch is going to be something bigger and better. So, that's what we have here: essentially training wheels for a Sonus Faber. ➤

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Oran 4301	
Type:	Two-way bass-reflex
Drivers:	25mm Titanium dome tweeter 100mm metal/ceramic cone mid-bass driver
Sensitivity:	84 db
Impedance:	6 ohms
Bandwidth:	65 Hz - 20 kHz
Dimensions (WxHxD):	127 x 230 x 210 mm
Weight :	3 kg each
Finishes:	Wood veneer or piano black lacquer finish
Price:	£240

Manufacturer:

Highland Audio

Net. www.highland-audio.com

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Three Turntables... The Rega P2, Goldring GR2 and Project 1 Xpression Mk. 2

by Jimmy Hughes

Only the bravest of souls would have predicted that turntables arms and phono cartridges would still be in production almost twenty-five years after the launch of CD. And not simply as a token gesture, but as a small but vibrant market with models at all price points – especially at the top-end of the market. Yet it surprises me no end that younger listeners, some in their early 20s, are interested in vinyl.

It's one thing to grow-up with something and keep it, despite the fact that it's been superseded. But, to see younger listeners - those who have grown up with CD - embrace vinyl is remarkable. Interest in LP does perhaps reflect on the popularity of music from the '50s, '60' 70s, and '80s. It's sons discovering dad's old record collection – all those original pressings of Led Zeppelin, Pink Floyd, and Yes... And, even if your dad didn't have a collection to bequeath to you, there's always the second-hand market.

One of LP's advantages is low price and abundant availability. High-priced collectibles aside, vinyl is cheap and plentiful. If you know where to go, there's tons of it about – often at giveaway prices. So cheap in fact that you can afford to experiment. And, if the music or recording/pressing turns out to be duff – well, you've lost virtually nothing.

But how much should you spend on hardware to enter the world of vinyl? By the exalted standards of top-end vinyl, the three turntables reviewed here offer excellent value. Indeed, you're looking at the cost of a low to

mid-price CD player. Performance is surprisingly good too – good enough to challenge (and in certain respects outperform) even the best CD players. Now, to those who've never experienced good vinyl, that might seem a little far-fetched, but there's a certain relaxed ease and openness with LP that even the best CD struggles to match. Of course Vinyl can't match the cleanness, quietness and sheer consistency of CD, but it does have a more vivid three

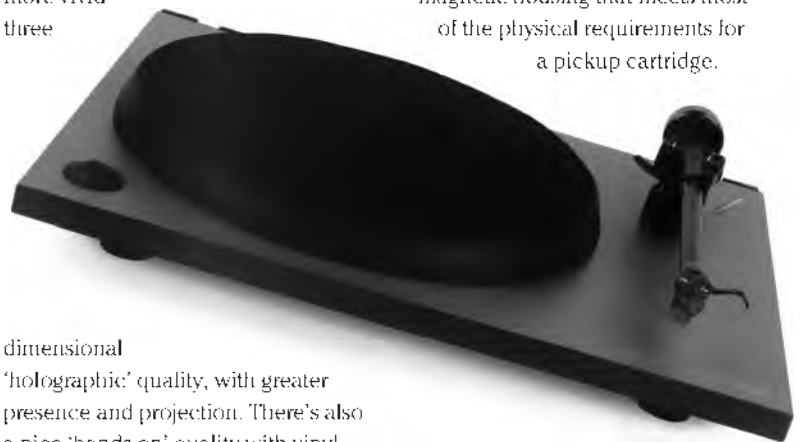
dimensional 'holographic' quality, with greater presence and projection. There's also a nice 'hands on' quality with vinyl – it's a very tactile medium compared to CD – and that's part of its appeal.

Goldring GR2

A nice simple straightforward turntable made by Rega to Goldring's design brief, the GR2 comes fitted with a good quality Goldring 1012GX magnetic cartridge. The tonearm is a variant of Rega's excellent RB-250 (see below), but one immediately noticeable difference is a change of arm cable to one with gold-plated phono plugs. The platter is made

from high-density particle-board with a metal insert close to the edge to increase peripheral weight and thereby maximise the flywheel effect in order to reduce speed fluctuations. The centre bearing is a good clean fit with no perceptible free-play.

The Goldring 1012GX is a moving-magnet cartridge housed in a body made from a glass-fibre reinforced nylon called Pocar. This creates a tough, rigid, low-resonance, non-magnetic housing that meets most of the physical requirements for a pickup cartridge.



The stylus is user detachable and is thus easily replaced.

First impressions were of a smooth clear and well-balanced sound with good detail and dynamics. The tonal balance was open and crisp, but not too bright, and LP surface noise was well controlled. Rotational speed was spot on. Fine speed stability was very good; not absolutely perfect, but good enough for most music most of the time. If you're used to CD (which has no pitch stability problems unless they're there in the original) ▶

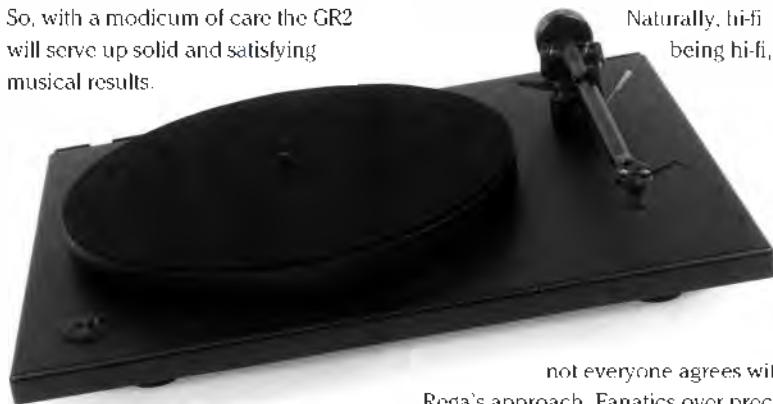


▶ recording), you have to accept that vinyl is unable to match the absolute security and solidity of the digital format. However, speed stability (while theoretically an absolute) is a rather subjective thing; some listeners are more sensitive to slight variations in pitch than others. Also, some kinds of music make pitch waver more apparent than others. So, any criticism of these three turntables in respect of speed stability should be understood in this context. Playing a difficult LP of violin and harpsichord music, there was sometimes a very slight suspicion of speed fluctuation. But it was very fleeting, and hardly noticeable for much of the time.

The GR2 uses a 12v low-vibration AC Synchronous motor, and the platter is driven by a thin round belt. The design takes advantage of this lack of vibration by coupling motor and plinth quite solidly. As there is very little motor/platter decoupling, the 'drive' is nice and solid, with only the stretchiness of the belt to consider. This improves dynamics and the overall solidity of the sound. So, given a clean belt and a clean motor pulley and inner platter, speed fluctuations will be very low. If you're still not satisfied, be warned; you'll need to spend quite a bit more money to get something significantly better!

Turntables tend to be susceptible to air-borne and transmitted noise/vibration. The GR2 sits on three rubber suspension feet, and these provide decent isolation. Choosing the right sort of support platform will help to minimise the effects of footfall and

other types of transmitted vibration. The Goldring (and also the Rega and Project) are actually pretty stable physically, so (unless you mount these turntables on a large and unstable support – like a big wooden cabinet on creaky floor boards) you won't find the arm bouncing all over the record when someone walks past. So, with a modicum of care the GR2 will serve up solid and satisfying musical results.



Rega P2

The very first Planar 2 dates back to the late 1970s. Since then it's undergone quite a few changes and updates. The result is an excellent turntable/arm package that provides class-leading performance at a very attractive price. It's a very simple yet effective design with emphasis placed on the things that count, like good engineering. Shorn of unnecessary facilities, the Planar 2 was arguably the original budget audiophile turntable. For while it's true that some earlier designs (like Edgar Vilchur's ground-breaking Acoustic Research player) offered a similar mix of features and simplicity, they all suffered problems – usually, crude, wobbly, high-friction tonearm bearings,

Rega's design philosophy is to minimise mechanical and electrical interfaces, introducing their one-piece moulded tonearm in the shape of the original RB300 back in the early '80s, avoiding all the separate interfaces between headshell and arm tube, and arm tube and fulcrum, to create a single structure of superior rigidity. Of course, arm height and cartridge azimuth adjustments go by the board, while the fixed arm lead reduces electrical interfaces but at the cost of further limiting options. Rega argue that having added mechanical and electrical interfaces has a detrimental effect on sound quality that outweighs the benefit of having the adjustment

in the first place. Naturally, hi-fi being hi-fi,

not everyone agrees with Rega's approach. Fanatics over precise alignment argue that exact adjustment is crucial for top-quality performance. While they're not wrong, it's also the case that unnecessary mechanical and electrical interfaces have equally serious adverse effects. Me? I tend to side with Rega on minimising interfaces, especially at this price level.

The P2 is fitted with an RB250 tonearm, a simplified version of the original 300, and can be supplied in two versions – without cartridge for you to mount your own, or fitted with a Rega Bias 2 at a slight saving. Although Rega always rather pool-pooled the notion of a fast start-up time for the platter as unnecessary and irrelevant, the P2's platter does reach operating speed very quickly. This is partly a result of a reasonably ▶



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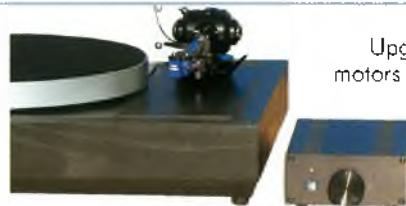


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Sound quality proved excellent – very smooth and open, with very good dynamic separation that retained the individual timbral qualities between voices and instruments. It was very good on pitch stability too – if anything, slightly better than the Goldring and Project turntables. Quite why is hard to explain, but that's how it sounded to me.



The P2 revealed subtle inner dynamics and a finer sense of light and shade than the other two turntables. This is one of vinyl's key strengths; it's ability to paint in subtle shades and fine gradations of tone colour and hue. In contrast CD is excellent at bold primary colours, and tends to impress with its brilliance and immediacy.

But good vinyl has an added finesse and subtlety which CD struggles to match. In this context, it's long been a prejudice of mine that turntables that employ a non-metallic platter are better able to maintain this subtle tonality and delicate openness – a result perhaps of reduced eddy-current effects beneath the pickup cartridge.

Whatever, the explanation, the P2 has an extra subtlety and finesse that isn't quite matched by the other two turntables. While it's not exactly lacking in dynamics or detail, the finer points tend to be implicit rather than explicit – if that makes sense. There's less of that bold up-front 'in your face' immediacy than is often the case with hi-fi today.

Project 1 Xpression Mk. 2

While there's a definite family resemblance between the Goldring and Rega turntables, the Project 1 Xpression Mk. 2 is a completely different animal. The first thing that caught my eye was the carbon fibre tonearm. In the past, carbon fibre was reserved for very expensive products – difficulties in fabrication and manufacture saw to that.

Mind you, it was much the same story with one-piece tonearm/headshell assemblies until Rega broke that mould (or should

I say – created the mould) with the RB-300. Clearly, the problems manufacturing carbon fibre have been overcome. Which is good news, as it's a special material that offers a number of benefits over conventional metals and plastics.

For starters, it's very light yet

amazingly rigid, and can be made inherently self-damping. Unlike metal, carbon fibre does not 'ring' when excited. Therefore its resonances should be much better-controlled when presented with the vibration emanating from the pickup cartridge. This results in a smoother more natural tonal quality. My own experience with

carbon fibre tonearms had mainly been with the expensive Wilson Benesch design. There was certainly something different about this arm compared to conventional metal-tubed arms – a freer, more open, more natural tonal quality, with less upper-middle presence lift.

Apparently the resonance points of a carbon fibre arm are quite a bit higher than metal-tubed arms, falling above 18kHz. When the tube does go into resonance, the peaks are well damped, and this gives the arm its very natural neutral tonality. Of course other things affect the final sound, but the having a carbon fibre tube gives you a head start. The Project arm is a gimbal bearing design, and it's fairly easy to set up and use. Although the bearings were devoid of perceptible free-play, I found there was a slight degree of 'sticktion' when setting the balance weight to produce equilibrium – hopefully just a one-off affecting the review sample.



The headshell/tube is one piece and therefore fixed, but it's still possible to alter cartridge azimuth by means of an adjustment near the fulcrum. For those who like to experiment, this permits very precise setting up. Indeed, for the would-be tweaker and upgrader, the Project offers much greater scope than either of the other decks. Having a detachable tonearm cable connecting via RCA phono plugs, it's extremely easy to experiment with different arm loads. The supplied

► cable is of very adequate quality, but if you had something better you could easily try it. The drawback, of course, is that having a detachable cable means extra electrical interfaces between plugs and sockets, and each has a slight but noticeable adverse effect on sound quality. This is especially true with weak signals such as the tiny



ones from

pickup cartridges.

However, any losses of quality can be minimised by keeping plug/socket connections clean.

Having an outboard power supply transformer means you could also experiment with something bigger – it would simply be a case of replacing the small 16v 500ma transformer supplied with the deck with something having the same voltage but greater current capability. Theoretically, there should be no difference, but – you never know!

The Project came fitted with an Ortofon OM-10 'Concorde' type magnetic cartridge. This offers good quality, though speaking personally (and I'm airing a long-held prejudice here) I never felt this range of cartridges sounded as good as Ortofon's more conventional models – though the rationale behind the design was sound enough.

The Project has a cast aluminium turntable platter weighing 2.2kg, and this is accurately manufactured with no vertical deviation when spinning – at least none that I could see. By critical standards there was sometimes a hint of pitch waver on the harpsichord and violin disc, but for the most part pitch stability was very good. The Project's isolation from external vibration was

slightly better than the Rega and Goldring, due to the use of Sorbothane damped feet with aluminium cones. Surface noise was very low, as was low frequency noise (rumble) and vinyl roar. The platter speed was very accurate – pretty much spot-on according to my electronic strobe.

The Project produced a bright, airy, spacious sound with excellent sharpness and presence.

It sounded slightly brighter and more forward than the Rega and Goldring turntables. Which sounds best is down to personal taste. Myself, I feel that not having too sharp a top-end is arguably better for this class of turntable. It means that any harshness due to (say) pickup mistracking will be less emphasised, and helps reduce the effects of surface noise. Actually, the Project was surprisingly good on surface noise despite its brightish tonal balance, and it sounded clean on most LPs. Nevertheless, it's brighter and more revealing than the Rega and Goldring turntables – sharper and more detailed.

Conclusions

If the choice were mine, I'd probably go for the Rega P2 as it offers the best balance of overall virtues. The Goldring is a very plausible alternative, but isn't quite as good in certain key areas, lacking the Rega's open, airy and unforced quality. That said, the differences are such that (without a direct A/B comparison to the Rega) you probably wouldn't be aware of the GR2's minor shortcomings.

The Project is the dark horse of the group – as a package it's not quite as good as the Rega P2, but it has far

greater upgrade potential. Fitting a superior pickup would result in better sound – I've read of users getting superb results with expensive Koetsu cartridges. On paper it's crazy – a pickup costing three or four times that of the deck – but, if it works, why not?

Also, as mentioned in the text, you've more scope to experiment with different arm cables and even perhaps a bigger power supply. But whichever model you went for, each will provide an excellent and inexpensive entry point to the world of vinyl. But, make no mistake; although reasonably priced, each of these turntables will produce beguiling musical results. And, even if the sound of LP fails to blow away the results you get from CD in every respect, there are still likely to be certain areas where vinyl sounds better. It's this, and the prospect of half a century of software at low prices, that makes the LP so attractive! ➤

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Goldring GR2
 Type: Belt drive record player
 Tonearm: Modified RB250
 Cartridge: Goldring 1012GX
 Price: £265 (inc. cartridge)
 Supplier: Armour Home Electronics
 Tel. (44)(0)1279 501111
 Net. www.armourie.co.uk

Rega P2
 Type: Belt drive record player
 Tonearm: Rega RB250
 Cartridge: Rega Bias (optional)
 Price: £300 (inc. Bias Cartridge)
 Supplier: Rega Research Ltd.
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 Net. www.rega.co.uk

Project 1 Xpression Mk. 2
 Type: Belt drive record player
 Tonearm: Project P9
 Cartridge: Ortofon OM10
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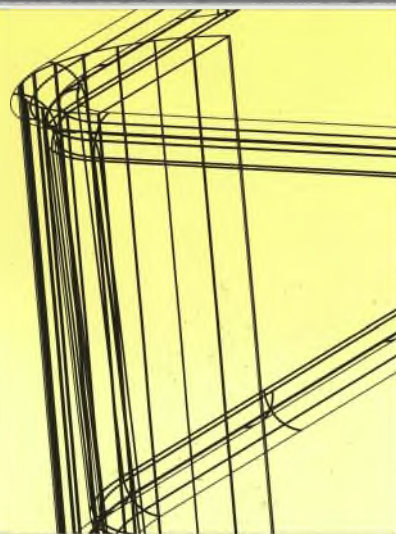
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MAX Power...

Midland Audio Exchange and the 47Labs Shigaraki system

by Alan Sircom

Midland Audio Exchange (or MAX, to its friends) is not your average hi-fi shop. It's like Santa's Grotto and Aladdin's Cave all built into one large former Wesleyan chapel. Its hardcore audiophile porn is there, stocked with some of the finest new and used kit, along with a select portfolio of its own imports. It's those I've come to experience.

MAX distributes the delightfully minimalist 47 Laboratory systems from Japan. The brainchild of Junji Kimura, this includes three CD transports, two DACs, two phono-stages and three amp modules, a couple of power supplies, cartridges, a weird crane-like arm, cables and a speaker or two. There's also a turntable waiting in the wings. MAX imports the lot.

The 47 Laboratory equipment is sub-divided into two distinct sections – the Reference Series (often called the Black series, because it's all so, er, black) and the Shigaraki series (so called because the products are either encased in - or resting on – elegant little slabs of Shigaraki ceramic, the stuff used by Japanese artists for the last 1,000 years or so to make sublime tea cups and vases for Cha-no-yu and Ikebana). The sub-division is also price-driven: the Shigaraki equipment is affordable, the reference kit is more of a reach. More of this later.

There are clues here. 'Delightfully minimalist'. 'Sublime' tea cups for Cha-no-yu tea ceremonies. There is something very Zen about the 47 Laboratory equipment. And not the watered down sitting quietly Western Zen: this is 60 years staring at a wall, meditating on nothingness, begging for noodles Hard Zen. So, the transport mechanism is out in the open, the products look functionally identical to one another and instructions are thin on the ground. Inside the things, the Hard Zen ethos continues, with improbably short signal paths and tiny component counts. The Gaincard (from

the black system) has just nine components per channel and a signal path that stretches to 32mm.

But it's the Shigaraki system we are focusing on right now. And the Hard Zen approach continues. Especially if you decide on not going down the phono route... two sources is arrogantly abundant, here. So, you have three boxes – the 4716 CD transport, the 4715 DAC and the 4717 integrated amp – each with their own dedicated power supply, connected by 47 Laboratory OTA interconnects and 3m of Kishemon speaker cables into Konus Essence loudspeakers. That's it. A whole system at £7,845 giving about 90% of what a 47 Laboratory Reference system can offer at almost twice as much.

What's the difference between the standard transport and the SC one? The standard model has a magnetic puck to clamp the disc, but the SC uses the acrylic sample out of the Flatfish transport, which screws down. It also means you get one less bit of magnetic interference in the system, which has to be a good thing. Otherwise they are identical, both using the 'full-hard' suspension system, where the drive mechanism, the lens-actuator assembly and the circuit board are firmly attached to the sub-chassis (resting on the Shigaraki ceramic helps here, apparently). If this isn't thinking outside the box, it's certainly playing outside the box – the transport is exposed to the elements. The SC transport costs £200 more than its magnetic brother.

The DAC is a non-oversampling affair, with no filtering in either digital or analogue stages, and just one phono S/PDIF input, two phono analogue outputs and a separate power supply. Encased in Shigaraki ceramic (which is claimed ▶



▶ to be so perfectly non-conductive it contributes to the performance) this is one minimal cube, taking much from the company's top Progression DAC.

Trickle-down tech is a big thing at 47 Laboratory. The Shigaraki CD transport is essentially a Flatfish with a bit of restraint, the DAC is a price-controlled Progression and the 4717 amp is virtually a Gaincard in a

simpler case. It has almost the same circuit, delivering 20 watts per channel and has three inputs, one line output and virtually no concession to control at all – just a couple of source selector toggles and a slider for the volume control. Even the source selectors show no concession to ease of use, because getting three sources out of two up/down toggle switches involves some binary thought. But, if you only have the one source, the switches remain static... simple is as simple does.

Then there's the OTA cable. It's in kit form, one pale blue 'stratos' coated 0.4mm copper conductor for send, one for return on a solder-free plug connector. You'll need a cable stripper and a pair of pliers. You can make analogue and digital interconnects and speaker wire out of the OTA kit, you get a lot of the stuff – 50m of the cable, eight banana plugs and 12 phono connectors – but we went for the dedicated 4719 Kishemon speaker wire instead, which uses 12mm wide, 0.1mm thick OFC for each conductor, in a thin tube to give even more frequency extension than the OTA cable.

The Konus Audio speaker is the odd man out, in that it's not Japanese and not made by 47 Laboratory. Instead it's built by Sead Lejlic, 47 Laboratory's European distributor. It's a slab-fronted crossover-free affair, with a single 100mm JA92S Jordan unit sitting in front of a flat, semi-transmission line, unusually entirely un-stuffed with wadding. Its finish is rich and, er, distinctive, veneered and given six coats of lacquer. Given the 20 watt output of the Shigaraki amplifier and the 86dB sensitivity of the Essence speaker, this is not a system designed to raise the roof, but is surprisingly loud and dynamic.

Curiously, in a room filled with exotic equipment supports and tables, the electronics sat on the floor between the speakers. Why? Because the equipment actually works best freed from the tyranny of equipment supports and stuff... it's best on something solid and wooden, without the glass and metal accoutrements that are the stuff of hi-fi supports (in a tight spot, the finite element stands will do if you must have equipment supports, but elegant things out of

furniture catalogues will do better in the long run).

With all that minimalism and solid-core wiring, it's hard not to draw parallels with DNM. In fact, both have similar goals and the sound the two favour is similar, too. It's a fast, cohesive and immediate, quite unlike anything normally produced by hi-fi systems. And, like the DNM concept, this directness of sound is a double-edged sword. Not everyone will like that immediacy and deviation from the accepted norms in hi-fi. But, if you get past that initial shock, what's left is something truly wonderful.

Overall, the sound 'breathes' wonderfully, the music has a sense of flow that is difficult to find elsewhere: difficult because it manages to combine the wonderfully unforced sound of good small speakers, the sort of dynamics that small single-ended systems do so well and also something of the drive that big-boy amplification delivers. Whether this is the solid-state amplifier sound for valve fans or the valve sound for solid-state fans is not

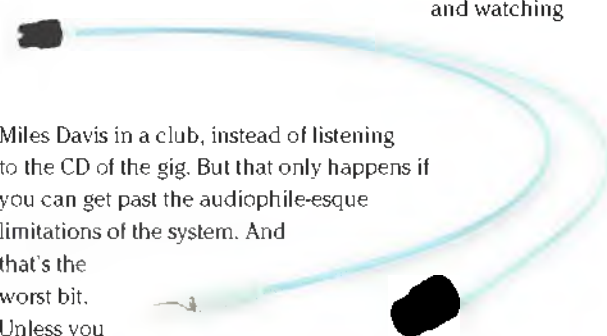
the issue. It's a sound that is quite at odds with much of audiophile thinking, and those who love it will think it serves up the best of both technologies (while those who hate it will think it serves up the worst of both, too).

The best? Breathtaking coherence, coupled with a sense of being in the presence of a musical event. It's like sitting and watching

Miles Davis in a club, instead of listening to the CD of the gig. But that only happens if you can get past the audiophile-esque limitations of the system. And that's the worst bit. Unless you managed

to skip out on years of recordings replayed on conventional hi-fi, you'll spot the one-note quality to the bass, the lack of extension to the treble and even pin-point some rough edges at the top and bottom ends of the mid-band. You'll notice that it doesn't go too loud or too soft, doesn't like the extremes. Yadda, yadda, yadda.

But, here's the thing. You perhaps need to get past those audiophile tasting notes. You do not sit in a concert hall and say "Well, the playing was sublime, but let down ▶



► by the bottom end on the piano." You enjoy the event qua event. And that's what you get with the Shigaraki system. You don't care that the clarinet sounds a bit too woody, you get carried away by the performance. Get past the hi-fi hurdles and you are left with an extraordinarily natural sound. Not an accurate sound, but a natural one.

Unforced is the watchword. Not artificially pitched up to sound fast, exciting or deep and ponderous. It's tight, controlled and musically true.

Imagery is a strong point. It's like a secret bulldozer silently knocked down your side and back walls. You even get stage height. But, where some systems throw out a nice big image at the expense of coherence, the Shigaraki system hangs together beautifully. More than enough to make sense of Tom Waits *Warm Beer and Cold Coffee*... if there's even the slightest lack of togetherness in this, it sounds flat and uninteresting. Here, it sounds like you are at the front table of the club. Any more real and you'd come away smelling of Jack Daniels and Marlboro.

Good vocal articulation too, extended into the top regions nicely. About eight out of ten words on the Eminem-understandability scale (which rates as a very good). Bass get's a bit one note, with a bit of upper bass thrum. It is also room dependent – sit back and it folds into sounding seamless.

This is distinctive in all the right ways. If you played the Shigaraki system to ten people, eight would wonder what all the fuss was about. The other two would be plonking down the credit card. No bland middle of the road sound here. All or nothing is the order of the day. You'll either find it live and classy or squeaky and wrong.

The fun didn't stop there. The Shigaraki system is not exactly the nursery slopes of 47 Laboratory equipment, but maybe it's up to number five out of the Ten Ox-Herding Pictures of Zen. Which means, you found and caught your ox and tamed it: now you have to ride it home and forget about it. It's time to bring on the Black bits. Pulling parts from the Reference system to beef up (I'll steer clear of more ox-related puns, honest) the Shigaraki sound, without breaking it in the process.

Given a significant proportion of 47 Laboratory's portfolio is power supply, it seems natural to add in one of the Reference class power feeds, and the best place was the DAC. Out went the little ceramic box and in came a big tubular £1,425 Power DUMPTY (and yes, the power supply for analogue bits is called HUMPTY). Bloody hell! An already separated, coherent sound gets more open, more

47 Laboratory Shigaraki system	
4716 CD Transport	£1700
4715 DAC	£925
4717 Integrated Amplifier	£1425
Konus Audio Essence speaker system	£2800
OTA Interconnects	£500
3m 4719 Kishemon Speaker Cables	£495
Flatfish Mk. II CD Transport	£3020
DUMPTY Power Supply	£1425

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Fax. 01562 730228

Net. www.midlandaudiox-change.co.uk

Manufacturer's Website: www.sakurasystems.com


coherent. It also pitches the soundstage further into the room. This is one of the biggest single upgrades you could hear to a system, and yet it comes down to the power supply. Impressive stuff.

And there's more... now we upgrade to the £3,020

Flatfish Mk II transport. This is a move toward the

more 'technical' sound of the 47 Lab 'black system' proper. It's altogether smoother, more relaxed, more detailed, with a softer top end taking the strain from an already strain-free system. There's also more stage width. But curiously, in the context of the Shigaraki system, it really does mean less is more. The sound is more rounded, but possibly pointing in a more

hi-fi related direction. Swapping out the Shigaraki amplifier for a Gaincard would restore the balance. But perhaps what's really fine about the whole 47 Laboratory Shigaraki to Reference system is that it's possible to make a series of distinct upgrades, in a similar manner to Naim Audio – buy system, upgrade power supply, then amp, then CD and so on.

MAX is an interesting place and the Shigaraki an even more interesting system. It worked perfectly well in the smaller of the two demo rooms at MAX (the bigger room is large enough to hide a stretch limo) as a Shigaraki system on its own. Moving up a power supply notch helped greatly, but the jump to the 'black system' components was like remixing the sound. It shows what the 'big' 47 Lab kit is capable of, but perhaps that should be left to true Zen Masters. 



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Head First ... Taking a step back ...

by Jason Hector

Back in issues 41 and 42 I had close look at some of the more costly amplifier and headphone options. The conclusions are easy to sum up: 1. You can achieve superb sound quality for £1k and 2. the range of equipment available, both in style and sound, is so broad that anyone should be able to find a set-up to match their requirements. But what if you aren't going to commit that much capital to headphone listening? What if you want to take a first tentative step into cans? With these questions in mind I have been looking further down the headphone pecking order at a quartet of products that sell within a price band from £70 to £100.

To drive the headphones I used the previously reviewed Sugden HeadMaster and a Creek OB1121SE. The Creek costs £250, is readily available and represents entry level for a decent standalone unit. For headphone reference I still had the Stax 4040 system while moving coil reference was the Grado SR325. I also included the AKG K601 'phones which sell for £180. I wanted exposure to these AKG's since they have a fearsome reputation with experienced can users and they failed to arrive for the previous review. The K601 proved far too interesting to stand in the background and so I'll say a lot more about them in this review than I intended.

In the flesh:

The Goldring DR150 is the top headphone in a three-model range. It is a head gripping design where the strength of the sprung headband has been well judged, the phones won't fall off but don't restrict blood flow. It is well finished (although not up to

The cable enters via the left earpiece through another plug and socket, which makes too many interfaces in the signal path for my liking, especially if you are using the adaptor.

AKG's K301Xtra are a large but light headphone with a wide leather headband that supports their weight effortlessly. The adjustability of the whole system means they should fit anyone. The earpieces are finished in a soft plastic that isn't the most comfortable but should be easy to keep clean. The rest of the materials have a good feel. A single cable leaves the left earpiece and connection is via a 3.5mm plug, again with an adaptor for 6.3mm.

The Grado SR60's are unimpressive to handle; the headband is incredibly basic (while the SR325 is simple, the SR60 tends towards crude!). The earpieces are secured to each end of the headband by the usual Grado pin through block system which gives massive adjustability but needs readjustment every time the headphone is put on. The earpieces themselves are similar in basic

design to those seen on the SR325 but executed in a basic plastic rather than metal, while the ear pads are simple foam. The SR60 is light and comfortable to wear but the loose fit results in a tendency to fall off. Connection is via a 3.5mm plug with adaptor and the



the standard of the Sennheiser HD555, a headphone the Goldring has more than a passing resemblance to) with a padded and adjustable headband, tilting earpieces and comfortable ear-pads. Connection is by 3.5mm plug with a 6.3mm adaptor supplied.

▶ Interconnect wire appears to be the same as on the SR325.

Being a simplification of the more expensive HD595, the Sennheiser HD555 phones are also the best finished of this group. Gone are the chrome bits and the leather covered headband (replaced with velour) but the basic elements and material quality is the same.



Goldring DR 150

The HD555 is a pretty tight fit to the head but stays reasonably comfortable over the long term with soft ear pads and plenty of headband padding. The lead also looks like it comes from the 595 and connection is via the same 6.3mm plug (an more sensible adaptor down to 3.5mm is included here).

Moving up in cost to the K601 brings a whole new level of design and quality from AKG. The K601 is obviously a high-end contender with big soft velvet covered ear pads and a high quality leather headband. The earpieces tilt on a hidden axle and are held by two large loops of plastic, while the headband describes a smaller diameter inside. Adjustment looks a little Heath-Robinson with the exposed mechanism but the quality of fit and finish is very high. Connection of the cable is to one earpiece. Add in some attractive metal detailing and this headphone physically impresses.

The listening ...

With so many headphone options in the house at once, long-term listening (rather than serial comparison) was the order of the day. While this requires a little more effort, especially with umpteen headphones to review, it's the only way to achieve long-term musical satisfaction and a more accurate opinion from yours truly.

The headphone that benefited most from longer-term appraisal was the Goldring DR150. Directly compared to the other options the Goldring's failed to impress in terms of resolution and neutrality with a warm and slightly rolled off sound. But listen longer and these phones are revealed to be only guilty of simplification by omission, while the things that they do they do very well.

They propel music into your ears with vigour and lock onto the groove, delivering a really entertaining if, strictly speaking, imprecise rendition. Dynamic attack is not the strongest with softening of cymbals, drums and the percussive aspect of a piano's sound leading to a general gentling, but this can be a blessing with less costly ancillaries. Bass is full if a little loose at times and sustained notes could reveal some resonance in the headphone.

The limited resolution means that acoustic instruments lose some of their harmonic richness making the DR150's better suited to electronic music, especially the busier varieties, where you are treated to an enjoyable wall of sound. Spatially the DR150's are a bit of a mixed bag. A really dense recording could sound claustrophobic but with big open recordings the DR150's

make a pretty good stab at revealing the acoustic and the relative size and position of instruments. The Goldrings are sensitive headphones and this fact, together with their easy going sound will suit many portable players, the only issue might be their lowish impedance. If £70 is all you have and your record collection tends to the rock and electronic then the DR150's are an entertaining option.

I could not generate the same enthusiasm for the AKG K310 XTRA headphones as I could for the other options reviewed here. They really are pretty much opposite to the Goldrings, since they major on resolution and tonality (at the price), which appears great till you consider their temporal capabilities. They just did not get hold of a rhythm and always either sounded slow (and boring) or confused (and boring) when things became busy. Unexpectedly the bass boomed on certain notes and became a little



AKG K301 Xtra

overpowering, while dynamics were obviously inhibited. The overall result was poor rendition of emotion and they just did not build suspense or keep you interested through a song, let alone an album. However, as I said above, they do resolve quite a lot of general detail and spatially they are better than the Goldrings. On denser recordings ▶

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▶ they could generate a big sound with space between performers, but large choirs were diminished in the upper registers while ballooning lower down, not an easy thing to listen to as it really emphasises the unreality of the experience. Clearly, these phones didn't do it for me.

I was very impressed with the Grado SR325 so I expected great, if similarly idiosyncratic, things from the SR60. In the end I was pleasantly surprised but also a little underwhelmed. The pleasant surprise was the neutrality and open sound of the SR60; the slight disappointment stemmed from a lack of star quality at the price point, especially when build is factored in. The unique selling point of the Grados is a better than average capability when it comes to portraying more than the main rhythmic thrust of a piece. The SR60 is an undeniably nimble headphone and recovers from transients quickly. Its general linearity with frequency and sound pressure

the changes of sound pressure that lend drama and excitement to many pieces of music: you reach the dynamic limits of these 'phones too early. Dissecting by frequency we do find weakness in the bass when asked to produce sustained notes and there is evidence of a couple of resonances and distortion on certain (narrow) bands. These are not so obvious with most acoustic music but can grate with electronically generated programme. The rest of the frequency range is better controlled. The SR60, like the SR325, displays a lighter and more forward sound compared to the non-Grado headphones. This tonal balance, combined with their rhythmic capabilities, meant they always sounded very exciting with the Creek amplifier but benefited greatly from the control and solidity of the Sugden. Overall they are well worth an audition, especially if you are after a lighter sounding headphone and have a good amplifier available.

The Sennheiser HD555 arrived in my system a little later than the rest of the 'phones in this test but it quickly became obvious that these are a great sounding product: more than that they are the ones to beat if you have a £100 budget. The HD555 reach a considerable

distance towards more expensive headphones. Put simply, they get more music into your ears than the other sub-£100 options. What really sets the HD555 apart is its open, spatial presentation coupled to excellent dynamic capability and a way with pitch and timing changes that brought music to life just the way I like. Add

in the lowest distortion and least congested sound together with best in bunch linearity and you start to build a picture of their all-round competence and class. Of all these cost-effective headphones it is the HD555 that

manages to do the best



Grado SR60

job of reproducing piano. It didn't seem to matter whether it was Ben Folds, Tori Amos or Alfred Brendel on the stool, the HD555 could be relied on to deliver a captivating performance with more of the drama and emotion of the piece intact. The only thing you might not like and the only obvious departure from neutrality is a fullness and slightly rich balance to the sound. Compared to the SR60 the bass and lower midrange gains emphasis and the treble is recessed. This makes them a little too rotund when driven with the Sugden HeadMaster and these headphones match best to the more exciting sound of the Creek. Like the DR150 and SR60, they exploited the dynamic, punchy and musical OBH21SE while putting a little meat on the Creeks faintly lean bones. This combination sets the capability benchmark for where I believe serious headphone listening starts to make sense. Any less and there are simply too many negatives, but from this level upwards the sheer resolution and transparency starts to balance out that unavoidably in your head feeling. ▶



Sennheiser HD555

is also pretty good and goes some way to explaining their realistic acoustic. The SR60 managed to produce a spacious sound where the performers had solidity and separation and well-recorded instruments and vocals had decent relative scale. So far so good but all is not honey and light in the SR60 performance. Big, dynamic recordings exposed some softening (irrespective of amplifier) to

► Inclusion of the AKG K601 headphones is purely opportunistic. At £180 they deliver considerably higher performance than the 'phones at £100 and below and compete well with the other more costly options I had to hand. Immediately on plugging these headphones in, two things are clear: 1. They are tremendously insensitive, requiring lots of gain, and 2. They can do the expensive headphone trick of sounding a hell of a lot less like cans than you might expect. To place the K601 in the context of the issue 42 reviews, they outperform the HD595 in side-by-side comparison, and also the Beyer. Their tonality is essentially neutral with great dynamics from an excellent deep, powerful and textured bass response, which underpins everything else. Their treble is extended, grain free and well matched to the bass and mid-range. The K601's reveal plenty of information, creating a large and detailed sound field. Instruments within the acoustic space sound well proportioned, solid and stay in the desired location irrespective of frequency. Unsurprisingly the AKG's thrive on big, bold and dynamic content and are capable of delivering realistically scaled dynamic impacts like the thwack of a large drum or the blat of massed brass, while congestion stays low irrespective of volume. Distortion of all types is low and intermodulation of soft sounds by transients is admirably absent. But best of all, these AKG's manage to let you know when a band is letting rip and playing, not just together but TOGETHER and while the K601 can not match the SR325's infectious drive with rhythm rich content, its overall rendition of timing is almost as satisfying. The K601's one weakness, particularly compared to the electrostatic Stax and the very best

of the moving-coil phones, is the handling of subtle shifts in loudness and tone which are not resolved, diminishing the realism of the reproduction. Partnering these headphones is easy tonally, but you need a low-noise amplifier with plenty of gain to overcome the insensitivity. In my case the Creek OBH2ISE matched the K601's particularly well, playing to their strengths and providing plenty of drive and propulsion for them to make the most of.



AKG K601

Summary

This comparison has been instructive. The lowest price headphone was the Goldring and while it revealed its price with a somewhat coarse performance, I can see many people enjoying its exciting sound and build for just £70. The Grado SR60 represented the brand admirably with a well-rounded execution for just £90, and while they lack a bit of bass weight and slam, they have a snappy sound that manages to be revealing while keeping the musical message intact. In contrast I really did not get on with the £90 AKG K301 Xtra. While they have good resolution and are light and comfortable, they failed to provide enough excitement and displayed some distracting resonances when pushed. My preferred headphone up to the £100 mark is clearly the Sennheiser HD555, which manages

to hint substantially at the performance of more expensive headphones. Add in a headphone amplifier like the Creek OBH2ISE and a decent source and you have a system capable of delivering completely satisfying musical results for what is, frankly, peanuts. That said further exposure to the more expensive headphones previously reviewed, and the £180 AKG K601, and it is very clear that investing the additional cost of a decent meal for two over and above our £100 budget really does reap big rewards. While the HD555 is excellent value it is the K601 that has really impressed over the last couple of months, with its solid powerful sound and build quality to match. ➤

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

AKG K301 XTRA:

Price: £90
 Efficiency: 102 dB/V
 Frequency Range: 18 Hz to 26 kHz
 Rated Impedance: 55 ohms

AKG K601:

Price: £180
 Efficiency: 101 dB/V
 Frequency Range: 12 Hz to 39.5 kHz
 Rated impedance: 120 ohms
 Net. www.AKG-acoustics.com

Goldring DR150:

Price: £70
 Impedance: 32 Ohm
 Frequency Range: 18Hz - 20kHz
 Net. www.goldring.co.uk

Grado SR60:

Price: £90
 Impedance: 32ohms
 Net. www.armorhe.co.uk

Sennheiser HD555:

Price: £100
 Impedance: 50 Ohm
 Frequency Range: 15Hz - 26kHz
 Net. www.sennheiser.co.uk

Stands That Deliver...

by Jason Hector

Reviewing the AE1s in this issue, I also got to try a new pair of stands from Anvil sound display, and very interesting they proved too. ASD stands are far from typical. While they offer pre-specified stands they prefer to add value by helping the customer tailor their stands to extract as much as possible from their particular loudspeaker. The company has taken a rigorous engineering approach to development and reproduce several sets of measurements on their website, illustrating the specific distortions introduced through the speaker and stand system. These in turn have helped them learn how to reduce these effects through careful choice of a stand's material construction and component dimensions to create a more even response. Experience and experimentation with a range of speakers and stand designs allow ASD to tune the design to match the speaker in question; in my case the stands were specified for the AE1. This meant steel top plates and bases and square section aluminium uprights four inches (10cm) on a side and one quarter of an inch (6mm) wall thickness (three inch uprights are also available). The choice of steel and aluminium alloy in combination and the specific grade of each provide mass and specific damping properties that benefit the AE1. The bases were supplied with chunky M8 spikes for good mechanical grounding while the tops had upward facing nitrile capped screws. Other

material options include wooden bases (in two styles), various uprights and a range of colours and finishes. In fact these apparently simple stands can be supplied in more than 150 standard permutations while special one offs can always be discussed. The stands can also be further tuned with mass loading of the central column.

Placing the little AE1 atop the ASD stands was a real revelation. Several negative characteristics of the speaker, that I thought were fundamental to the design, were either reduced or removed altogether. For example I believed that the AE1 had to be clouted with plenty of power to really flow with fast moving beats and tunes but with the ASD stands they were a lot more interesting and exciting at lower volumes. What had sounded slow and dynamically lacking was livelier and far more propulsive. It was a similar story in the bass with the speaker sounding both faster and deeper, which made the whole system sound more believable. Tinkering with the ASD stands set up proved unrewarding, with the Nitrile capped screws making a better interface than blu-tacking, while mass loading seemed to damp the response too much, losing some of the excitement and flow, which suggests that ASD really do know their stuff.

I also tried a pair of Proac Tablette

Reference Eight Signature speakers, another model whose performance belies their size (and almost matches the length of their name). Atop the ASD stands the Proac's were clearly allowed to do their thing, with a new level of harmonic richness, vocals gaining more realistic body and revealing extra expression and emotion. This sort of improvement is particularly obvious with something like Leonard Cohen, where female backing provides a counterpoint to his depth and all the power of the composition is in the vocal performances. The Proacs on the ASD stands were able to present the voices as distinct entities with their own space and scale but most importantly the interaction of the performers was preserved creating the tension or intimacy and emotional power of the song.

While large scale music fared pretty well, even the ASD stands could not help provide enough power to convince with a full orchestra and the bass response was sadly not improved in the same way as it was with the AE1. I wonder whether this would hold true if the stands were tuned specifically for the Tablettes?

Anvil have developed a great stand that worked wonders with the demanding AE1 and managed to justify their price with the more relaxed Proac Tablettes producing extra clarity and a more natural tonal presentation. I can't see many customers making use of the fourteen-day money back deal. ➤



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Andreas Vollenweider: harpist, spiritualist and storyteller

Interviewed by Anke Kathrin Bronner

AKB: Andreas, the harp is not exactly typical for pop music. How did you come together with your instrument?

AV: Well, actually it was very late. In the beginning, the harp was just one of a variety of instruments that I played. I always knew that one day I would find an instrument that would be special to me, that will be mine, that will be the one! First, I had a small Celtic harp, but it was too limited in its expressive power. Later on, I bought a bigger one and made some adaptations, modified it and even installed a mute. I wanted to play in a more percussive way. But the determining moment was when I discovered the groove on the instrument, what it means to be able to play it rhythmically, funky, even syncopated. I wanted the Afro-American and Latin energy to be part of it!

It was a crucial experience: I was playing and suddenly this groove appeared. It was really intense, I started to sweat, it affected me physically.

AKB: Did you ever take lessons?

AV: No, I am autodidactic in playing all my instruments. Every attempt has failed (laughs). But, by the way, music wasn't my gateway drug! My gateway drug was my birth. I was born into a family of musicians, and making music was absolutely a matter of course. My father, an organist, was an expert on Bach and has recorded more than 40 records for HMV and others. He was a composer, too. His music was very innovative in the context of his time. His great passion was improvisation: organists are the only ones to cultivate this tradition in classical music. Thus, I learned very early to play with him, as a kind of communication. And I also learned

that music is not only for amusement, but goes much further: a sort of a dialogue. My father was a difficult person, he was so focussed on music that communication wasn't his forte in everyday life. Music was the perfect way to get in contact with him. And it showed me, as a live example, how far you can go in communication through music.



AKB: But didn't you sometimes feel lonely?

AV: Of course! It wasn't that easy. Fortunately, he was a humorous man, which helped. But I often wished he'd had more time or attention for me, for my soapboxes, for a bicycle ride with me. Just something normal! Things that I, myself, have done with my three children, because this exchange between worlds is very important indeed!

AKB: And your mother?

AV: My mother was the philosopher in our family. She strongly influenced me ethical but also spiritual and mental values. She was inspired by anthroposophy and thus arranged a highly differentiated education for me. She instructed me in having the will to see behind things and not to be afraid of the profound. She gave me an essential – how can I say – message or means to take with me by telling me to always encompass things. Because possibly, behind what I see, there is something much bigger and much more important than what's directly in front of me, seemingly so important and powerful!

AKB: You mean that other dimensions loom?

AV: That dimensions must become reality that only then looms.



► **AKB:** This is what one can hear in your music – it is not superficial, but there are different layers. Music actually reaches levels inside us that we didn't even know existed?

AV: Absolute! Perfectly expressed! That's the point! In my family, for generations there has been a second tradition besides music, and that is storytelling. This was the great passion of everybody. And I regard myself as following this tradition, even more than the musical tradition. It is just that I use music for narrating.

AKB: But actually, you are not singing. One might suppose you should sing!

AV: No! It is actually non-verbal storytelling. You can find the model in music history: the whole epoch around Ravel, Debussy and all the composers of symphonic poems. The illustrative, the associative, the pictographic, the metaphorical language in music, the 3D-structure of the sound: All this has been long developed. If you think about *La Mer* (The Sea) by Debussy, about how he revealed the movement of the waves through the orchestration: You can hear them literally move! The man thought in a three-dimensional way.

AKB: In my mind, storytelling is associated with pagan roots, with fairy tales and mediaeval times. How would you describe your education? Did you grow up in a Christian environment?

AV: It was an inter-religious environment, but basically in the Christian tradition. However, if you compared it with the scope of "normal" Christianity, the latter would have been too limited by far! We learned both from Buddha and from the *Koran* very early, and thus I learned respect for the search of humans for spiritual profoundness, even as a young boy. I regard it as one of my challenges to remind people of the links between these currents in present times. In the end they are all about the same concerns. They have taken different turns in history, but the intention is the same. The realisation had been very problematic in the Christian world, too! The Christian tradition is guilty of the most incredible, blasphemous misuse of power. And now, some hundred years postponed, it is Islam that has got out of control – for the same reasons, namely blindness and lack of education. During the crusades, the bulk of people had no education and, thus, were easily manipulated and exploited by the rulers. Nowadays, it is the same with people from Islam! The only way we can oppose this development is education. Better-educated people don't accept things so easily. They know about the connections, they know about the secrets of reality. I think education has

Biography Andreas Vollenweider

- 1953: Switzerland's most successful musician is born in Zurich
- 1975: Andreas discovers the harp and remodels it into an e-harp
- 1979: His first album, *Eine Art Suite in XIII Teilen* (A Sort Of Suite in XIII Parts) is released in Switzerland – the legendary Vollenweider sound is born!
- 1981: First gig by Andreas Vollenweider And Friends at the renowned Montreux Jazz Festival
- 1983: Edison award for innovative sound in Amsterdam
- 1984: Fourth Album, *White Winds* enters the US billboard charts – in three categories (!!!); first tour of the USA
- 1985: Sold out concerts at Carnegie Hall and other American concert halls; Andreas is the first Swiss ever to win a grammy for *Dawn To The Moon*
- 1992: Andreas gives a concert in Red Square in Moscow for young victims of the Chernobyl catastrophe; World Music Award in Monaco
- 1993/94: *Eolian Minstrel* with Carly Simon and Eliza Gilkyson integrates vocal parts for the first time
- 1994–96: Performances with Pavarotti & Friends, with Zucchero and Brian Adams confirm his worldwide success
- 1999: On *Cosmopolis*, Andreas gathers stars around him from all parts of the world: Carly Simon, Bobby McFerrin, Abdullah Ibrahim, Ray Anderson et al.
- 2001: The symphonic novel *Song Of Convergence* is world premiered at Warsaw Film Music Festival; in course of the International Socrates Year, *Socrates – Dawn Of Civilization* with Rod Steiger as Socrates, has its world premiere
- 2002/03: Cooperation with "legend of the soundtrack" Hans Zimmer for the US movie *Tears Of The Sun* with Bruce Willis and Monica Bellucci
- 2005: The politically committed musician is a keynote speaker at Second WSF (World Spirit Forum), the counterpoint to WEF (World Economic Forum); concert in Zurich to mark the visit of the Dalai Lama
- 2006: After the DVD *The Magic Journeys Of Andreas Vollenweider*, including material from 25 years of concerts, the latest album *Midnight Clear* with Carly Simon, is released
- 2007: Grammy nomination for *Midnight Clear*

been neglected as a political factor, and we are now reaping the fruits of this neglect.

AKB: You had great success during the late '70s and early '80s. Do you think that if you had been born 20 or 30 years later, your career would have developed in the same way, or that you are moulded by your time?

AV: I am certainly moulded by my time, just as my music is. The history of my music and in particular the success we have had, this is a story shaped by zeitgeist! We hit the zeitgeist straight on! I was at the right place at the right

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► time. And me, myself? I've no pride on a personal level, not at all! It was just a stroke of luck!

AKB: You mean, since that generation was seeking for truth? It was the first generation to express doubts, wasn't it?

AV: Yes, that's the point, the doubts! This was the first generation who asked: Is this really everything? Is that really the end of the road, or is there something else? And, if you pose this question, you are rewarded very quickly; it doesn't take a lot, and the answer is: Yes, we are only living on the tip of the iceberg, and the rest remains unknown to us. There is not just more, there is much more! And suddenly, these questions become collective, and suddenly they meet a response. I well remember my beginning in America, when I took part in a lot of interviews, hundreds of them, and people actually heard the things I was saying for the very first



time. I told them about the waldsterben, the acid rain, all these subjects that were newsworthy at that time: the cruise missiles based in Europe, or simply the presence of war in times of peace. And they listened, fascinated, because the message was just right for that time, the right message at the right moment. I tried to do this again ten years later, but then I just reaped unseeing eyes and had to realise that I couldn't attain the same effect with the same subjects. Of course, cycles are a very important aspect, those of the individual and those of the collective.

AKB: So, the political statement is always important for you?

AV: It is of major significance, yes!

AKB: Do you think you could also have been a politician, or do people listen more to a famous musician?

AV: Well, a politician has the thankless task of concrete realisation, and that (at least in most cases) becomes a miserable failure. So, musicians can have ambitious ideas and philosophical constructs, as shaky as they might be! But we are never challenged in that way. We have no opposition.

AKB: But doesn't an opposition also exist in music?

AV: Yes, of course! Luckily, it exists!

AKB: What would you call your musical opposition? Shallow pop music?

AV: No, not really, that doesn't touch me. For me, it is explicitly the message that is important! How do we want people to feel after listening? And for me, it is clear: I want them to have an enormous, overwhelming happiness that blows them away. That they are fulfilled in such a way that they want it again, the very next day. And not just through music, but in their lives, knowing that they want this feeling again. Also whilst sitting in the office or doing business, they want to have more. And then my mission is done! But if I asked Marilyn Manson – and he

is representing a whole spectrum: "How do you want your audience to feel after the concert?" then I would get another answer for sure! And what is interesting about my music: Those guys with a strong dark streak are very attracted by my style. For example Hansruedi Giger, the Swiss painter, approached me several times. Actually, I think he is a very interesting person, but his vision also frightens me. It is mere horror. Gothic is almost bright in contrast!

AKB: But don't we see a deep shadow in strong light?

AV: Yes, of course. But it frightened me very much for some time. Roman Polanski was interested in my music and visited my concerts. After a gig, he wanted to meet, but I tried ►

Discography Andreas Vollenweider:

- 1979: Eine Art Suite in XIII Teilen (Colomba CD 880-01)
- 1981: Behind the Gardens/ Behind the Wall/ under the Tree (LP: CBS 85545)
- 1982: Caverna Magica (LP: CBS 25265)
- 1984: White Winds (LP: CBS 26195)
- 1986: Down to the Moon (LP: CBS 57001)
- 1988: Dancing with the Lion (LP: CBS 463331 1)
- 1990: Traumgarten (Colomba CD 890-01)
- 1991: Book of Roses (Colomba CD 891-01)
- 1993: Eolian Minstrel (Colomba CD 893-01)
- 1994: Andreas Vollenweider Et Friends - live 1982-1994 (Colomba CD 890-01)
- 1997: Kryptos (Edel / Content 4029758667422)
- 1999: Cosmopoly (Sony 089096-2)
- 2001: The Essential (LP: Columbia COL 501155 1; CD: Edel / Content 4029758667521)
- 2004: V O X (EmArchy / Universal 0028947626442)
- 2005: The Storyteller (Edel / Content 4029758675724)
- 2006: Midnight Clear (Edel / Content 4029758766026)
- 2006: The Magical Journeys of Andreas Vollenweider (DVD, Edel / Content 4029758743485)



history is a story of success, moving from complete anarchy towards a more or less active and effective democracy. I don't want to trivialise the problems, but I think this is really important: Through religion and our history, we have learned what unbelievably, profoundly, bad creatures we are. It's been made clear: You are sinners right from the beginning!

AKB: But what wider role can music play? Do you really believe that music can help improve the world?

AV: Absolutely, yes! Music on its own can't change things, but it can be a catalyst, it might be a cause, it might be the oil in a massage – which otherwise would hurt! Or, it might be the background for ideas. It might

be such a lot. But music on its own, being detached, can't effect anything, just as a drug that remains in its packing can't effect anything. It has to be transferred, to be activated by the audience, the listener. There's a good parallel in a book. A book is dead, until it isn't flipped open and read and re-animated by a reader. It is the same with music. Even if it is played, even if it is heard: Nevertheless, it is dead unless somebody gets into it and becomes an active part. The perfect scenario for a concert is if the audience is losing itself in the music – and the musicians, too. That is what I'm aiming for in a concert! You mustn't let the music become routine. Every 20 or 24 bars, something new and unexpected has to happen. Thus, everybody has to come up with a new idea and has to surprise the other band members with it: the creative spirit is involved, but you have to let go, too. It works best if the music is playing itself! That is the bottom line for me. Every evening, I try to manage to let it just play, to forget where I am, and to watch myself whilst playing!

AKB: Is it a special gift?

AV: No, I don't consider it to be a gift. I have just been lucky that my life developed as it did, and that somebody drew my attention to it. You know, somebody had to tell me that I could do it... It doesn't go without saying. Therefore, once more, it is education that is important, education of the intellect, of the heart and of the soul, too. It is about "gestaltism". When we are born, we are supposed to be complete, but we have to form ourselves to get connected with our future, we have to take creative action.

AKB: So how important is the intercommunication with other musicians? ▶

▶ not to see him. I was scared of him, of his biography! In my early days, my music was still vulnerable and I wasn't yet confident how it would work. Thus, I was quite defensive about it – perhaps too much, in retrospect. But a few years ago, something happened that carried it to the extreme: I got a tape from Notorious B.I.G. just a few weeks before he was shot. He wanted to use a song for an album. My label got really excited and they thought: Wow, great! But I said, "Are you totally crazy?" He's my antithesis: There was nothing more opposed to me than Notorious B.I.G. mainly because of his unconsciousness of the effect of what he was doing. I think, if you appear in public you bear a heavy responsibility – no matter what you do, whether you're a hair dresser or a musician! In my opinion, a person who incites others in the way he did is not just failing in his responsibility, but acting negligently and in fact criminally.

AKB: After all you have told me: Don't you despair of the world?

AV: Yes, about this! But I am also confident! Development occurs in circles. Even if it is painful, it is also a matter of course: We take ten steps, and we are happy and enthusiastic. But those who know realise that we are already on our way nine steps back. They are already wrapping up warm for the cold days of those nine steps. But we won't let anybody take away the one step forward! Put simply, human

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► **AV:** It is, of course, enormously important. For me it is crucial how things can be communicated and stories told. I even use storyboards and drawings in rehearsals. If the other musicians understand what I have in my mind, if they understand the matter of it, they play at least ten times better! We all tell the story together.

AKB: Does Carly Simon tell your story, too? What role does she play in your life? She is singing once more on your recent album *Midnight Clear*.

AV: She plays a key role in my life and my work: she was decisive in spreading my music. In the USA, she is an icon. By allowing me to lean on her status 25 years ago, she opened the floodgates – with amazing effect. She is an absolutely committed supporter of this kind of music!

AKB: On *Midnight Clear*, you have been influenced by Celtic melodies...

AV: Yes, it is the first time I've opened the door to such

things. Normally, my creative process, especially in terms of melodies (where so much power lies) is a more mysterious, internal process for me. Because they come through a

process of improvisation it is almost semi-conscious or even unconscious. With *Midnight Clear* it was a totally different process: We used something given with its own inherent strength. But nevertheless, I have still searched out some improvisation. Every song develops from the melody to its own, totally new place. But, as an album it differs completely from my usual approach.

AKB: What story are you telling with *Midnight Clear*?

AV: It's about the values I represent twelve months and 365 days a year, for my whole life:

The dignity of men, the quality and the depth of human beings, the splendour, the human problems. But first and foremost, it is about love, it is about hope, it is about sympathy, and about the power of putting yourself into another person. All these qualities; that is what my music is all about!



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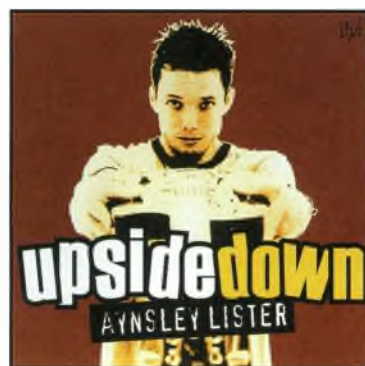
Bert Jansch

The Black Swan

Drag City  

There's no flash at all here, from the exceptionally accomplished guitarist and songwriter Bert Jansch. He has a voice of limited range and dynamics. His traditional acoustic guitar style avoids ornamentation like the plague. But these instruments are all he needs. Time and again on *The Black Swan*, Jansch quietly cuts to the heart of the song and reveals the music there. Jansch's original songs demonstrate strength as quiet and deep as his instrumental technique. The traditional pieces ring true and sound fresh. The limited complementary instrumentation is nicely judged and always acoustic – banjo and bottleneck guitar here and there, and a very effective cello on the title track. The best addition of all is the appearance of Beth Orton as a vocalist on three tracks. Orton's pure tone and cool manner fits like a glove. The songs here are all that might be hoped for on a compact disc featuring acoustic musicians of this calibre – with one quibble. Judging from the depiction of his guitar in the soundstage, for these sessions Jansch traded the lovely, thin-bodied Martin depicted in the booklet for an instrument that certainly sounds nice but also appears to be about six feet wide. That takes a little getting used to. But you will. Don't miss this superb album.

PD



Aynsley Lister

Upside Down

Ruf Records RUF1124 

After a brief sojourn with Ian Parker and Erja Lyytinen under the moniker of Pilgrimage, Aynsley Lister is back with his latest solo offering *Upside Down*, 12 cuts of (mostly) fret burning, head turning blues rock. Lister's been honing his chops on the live circuit for a fair few years, and anyone fortunate to catch him in his natural habitat will attest to the raw power and presence of this immensely talented performer. He's no slouch in the studio either, and this time around decided to put himself in the producer's chair as well as play guitar, sing and write the songs. *Upside Down* marks the return of original drummer Alex Thomas, a real powerhouse who along with bassist Jo Nichols provides the platform for Aynsley to launch his incendiary lead and rhythm work from. What Lister's all about is summed up in the six and a half minute 'With Me Tonight'; it kicks in on a throbbing bass line and proceeds to ebb and flow with some scintillating power chords and three or four remarkably inventive solos, and it's sure to become a live favourite. As will the driving 'In The Morning', a pacey number with plenty of menacing slide. *Upside Down* is a cracker and can only help to fuel Lister's burgeoning reputation as one of the UK's finest guitarists.

AH





The Cinematic Orchestra

Ma Fleur

Ninja Tune  

It has been a long wait for the Cinematic Orchestra's third studio album, five years in fact, so I was intrigued to hear the direction that Jason Swinscoe had taken his band over that period. The opening track 'To Build A Home' throws something of a curve ball, the fragile voice of Patrick Watson singing about life and death gives the impression that TCO has changed course altogether. Clearly Swinscoe's move from Paris to New York over the last few years has opened his ears to new approaches and deeper emotional waters. But after Watson's intro the appearance of TCO favourite Fonte la Bass brings a note of familiarity to proceedings. With a voice reminiscent of Nina Simone she delivers a depth of feeling that is rare in contemporary music. Lou Rhodes joins Watson on 'Music Box', which has a beautiful acoustic guitar backing, the pair producing a softness and warmth to the sound that is enchanting. Swinscoe uses a broad range of often acoustic instruments including strings, bass clarinets and cohort Phil France's double bass to superb effect. The recording ain't audiophile but it's strong on timbre, contrast and energy. The music on the other hand is strong on emotional communication and great grooves. While not as upbeat as earlier TCO albums *Ma Fleur* is powerful and evocative stuff.

JK



Eric Gales

The Psychedelic Underground

Provogue Records PRD7223.2 

Eric Gales is presumably sick of the comparisons to Jimi Hendrix but there's no doubting the great man's spirit oozes large over his music, and it doesn't help that Gale's himself is a left-hander who plays the guitar upside down! One of four brothers, two of whom also earned to play the same way, Gales has fashioned a niche for himself in psychedelic blues rock. The world stood up and took notice when he unleashed his first record at the tender age of 16, which earned him a 'best new talent' award in *Guitar World's* reader's poll. *The Psychedelic Underground* follows hard on the heels of last year's critically acclaimed *Crystal Vision*, and it's a continuation of that album's combination of dazzling fretwork and tough, rock-drenched blues songs. If your take on the blues is relaxed country picking played on a back porch with the crickets singing, keep well away from this. Gales plays with the ferocity of a man possessed, peeling off solos with frightening intensity while he takes the three-piece configuration right to its outer edges. It's bone crunching stuff and a guitar fan's wet dream, and definitely not for the faint-hearted. The legions of Joe Satriani, Steve Vai and Jimi Hendrix fans will ap it up but it has enough about it to appeal to the Stevie Ray/Joe Bonamassa brigade too.

AH



Yes

Fragile

Atlantic/Mobile Fidelity 

Media pundits of a certain ilk, those that get onto BBC radio and TV for instance, seem unduly keen to put down progressive rock and virtuoso musicianship in general. Punk pretty well blew such styles out of the popular consciousness a long time ago. But they should nonetheless be concerned because sooner or later enough people will get to hear albums like *Fragile* and realise what a travesty it was that such high standards of playing and composing were forced underground. *Fragile* is perhaps the definitive prog album. It was made by highly talented musicians at the peak of their powers and while it doesn't really fall into the concept album genre it comes from the band that virtually invented it. It also includes solo tracks from each of the band members, of which the least said the better, except Steve Howe's 'Mood For A Day' which is a fine bit of picking. The MOFI Utradisc II pressing is hint hard edged but extremely well defined. It puts out all the elements of each piece so that they can be easily followed but keeps the overall musical flow intact. I still prefer the Rhino DVD-A which like the vinyl is a bit more relaxed and open but for a CD this is damn revealing. Oh, and Analogue Productions offer it on 180g vinyl too, if that's your thing.

JK





Otis Taylor

Definition Of A Circle

Telarc Records : CD83659

Otis Taylor has to be one of the most prolific bluesmen working today. He's released eight albums including this one since 1995, and every one is worthy of your collection. Even if you aren't into the blues you'll find something to cherish in all of his recordings. We're not dealing with a typical bluesman anyway; Taylor has an inventive way of presenting his take on it, something he calls 'trance blues'. It involves the weaving of repetitive, hypnotic riffs - often banjo led - over some of the hardest hitting lyrics you'll find anywhere. For this album Taylor's enlisted the help of some very influential friends, including world renowned trumpeter Ron Mills, harpist Charlie Musselwhite and legendary Irish guitarist Gary Moore. Moore's contribution is revelatory; his punchy fills on opener 'Little Betty' are some of the tastiest to fly off his fretboard for many years. Moore also services 'Looking Over Your Fence' with a downright menacing walking guitar as Taylor spits out the lyrics to a song about a threatening neighbour. It fades out with the words "maybe we'll go to war..." and one can't help thinking he didn't make it up! Taylor's filling the hole left by the sorely-missed John Lee Hooker and will one day be talked of in the same reverential circles.

AH



In The Country

Losing Stones, Collecting Bones

Rune Grammofon

The second album from Norwegian trio In The Country follows a similar pattern to their first, with piano, double bass and drums/percussion starting things off slow and simple and building them up into a squall or, occasionally, a storm of engulfing sound before taking the vibe back down again. The main driving force behind ITC is Morten Qvenlid who is something of a one man musical maelstrom, working with Susanna Et The Magical Orchestra and numerous other Norwegian bands when not playing keyboards of many varieties with his own band. Morten seems to enjoy producing music of varying tempo and intensity, this album explores the full dynamic and tonal range albeit with not a great deal of high frequency activity. Unlike ITC's first outing *Losing Stones* brings in vocals from Stefan Sundström and guitar from alt rocker and Tom Waits collaborator Marc Ribot, this allows for a greater range of expression and some scorching fretboard work from Ribot on the track 'Torch Fishing' in particular. *Losing Stones* is a rounder, more fleshed out album than its predecessor. There's still some Scandinavian cool but interspersed with hot coals of musical delight.

JK



Eddi Reader

Peacetime

Rough Trade RTRADC233

My first brush with Eddi Reader came a long time ago when I saw her fronting Fairground Attraction in Southampton. 'Perfect' was all over the airwaves, a happy, jaunty little pop song that record buyers everywhere took to their hearts. It made the young Eddi an overnight chart sensation. When Fairground Attraction split up Reader pursued a solo career and released some very fine albums, none better than *Miriamma* and *Angels And Electricity*. She has always had a close working relationship with ex-Bible frontman Boo Hewerdine and that association continues to flourish here. He contributes two songs and a co-write and plays acoustic and electric guitar throughout. His 'Muddy Water' is a beautifully constructed piece which in her hands becomes a miniscule work of art. Eddi's last album was a tribute to Robert Burns and she's decided to include three more of his compositions here. The purity in her voice and the trace of a Scots accent add weight and authenticity to these ancient works, but the real ace-in-the-hole on *Peacetime* is a Trashcan Sinatras song called 'Pnsons'. Reader calls it a 'forgiveness prayer, and heaven knows we could use plenty more of those. Eddi Reader's her own woman and *Peacetime's* a reflection of an artist in touch with her roots, and that in turn has produced a charming album.

AH





The Damnells

Air Stereo

Zoe Records 01143-1104-2 (CD)

Any band worth their salt need a good frontman and in Alex Dezen, The Damnells have the best one to come along in quite some time. Pitched somewhere between Cheap Trick, The Replacements, Tom Petty and Soul Asylum, The Damnells hammer out their own particular brand of fireball power pop with a verve and a freshness that should catapult them into the hearts and minds of music lovers everywhere. *Air Stereo* follows on from their critically acclaimed debut *Bastards Of The Beat* and literally drips from beginning to end with wickedly catchy melodies and harmony-laden hooks. Dezen's lyrics are razor sharp but the rest of the band aren't just there to make up the numbers; they dress his clever songs in a wash of colourful sounds. The strangely titled 'Kung Fu Grip Kiss' offers up some of Dezen's most affecting lyrics: "forgive me baby, I am so full of hearts / swelled up with sadness and broken in parts" he sings, before confessing later in the song that: "I will always be your prisoner from his burning cell / I'm with you baby, rain or shine, heaven or hell." It really is stirring stuff, and there's plenty more where that came from. This band have massive potential and I'd really love to see them live, but until then I'll just immerse myself in their fabulous record.

AH



Lucinda Williams

West

Lost Highway B0006938-02 (CD) (180g)

This album has an iconic cover photograph by the great photographer Annie Leibovitz. *West's* producer, Hal Willner, has an extraordinary reputation for working on records of the highest artistic and sonic quality. The studio band is also beyond reproach – guitarist Doug Pettibone, bassist Tony Garnier (of Bob Dylan's band), the great Jim Keltner on drums and as a second (!) guitarist, Bill Frisell. So is the result all it should be? Yes it is. Lucinda Williams has written these songs from the bottom of her heart. They are rendered with a lyrical craft and musical resonance appropriate to an artist who has for 30 (or more) years been ascending slowly and steadily to the pinnacle of her art. This record is about devastating break-ups, parents dying, and the emergence of hope. There isn't a bad track here. It has been reported that Williams used demo vocal recordings on the final recording because of their emotional authenticity, regardless of flaws. Whether that is correct or not, the soul is here in spades. The CD of *West* is very good, but the vinyl issue is exemplary. My copy, bought from a retail rack, is superbly pressed. The tracks have a little bit of leakage between the various artists, but it sounds like real musicians playing in a real room. Magnificent.

PD



Julian Sas

Resurrection

Provogue Records PR07214.2 (CD)

As a youngster Julian Sas listened to Iron Maiden, AC/DC, Motorhead and Judas Priest but his world was turned on its head when he acquired a copy of Hendrix' *Are You Experienced*. That led him to Muddy Waters, a pivotal moment for this self-confessed 'lost soul' who knew then that he was to dedicate his life to blues-rock. Sas taught himself guitar, immersed his ears and heart in the works of the greats and formed a succession of bands, becoming the premier exponent of Dutch blues rock. With his talent on guitar and knowledge of the blues Sas could make a handsome living churning out covers, but he chooses to write his own material. The 12 originals on *Resurrection* are beefy, hard-hitting songs about loneliness, oppression and his obvious delight in being on the road. Wearing his influences proudly on his sleeve, Sas pays serious homage to the likes of Rory Gallagher, Alvin Lee, Peter Green and Jeff Beck, and whilst technically not a great singer his voice, a curious blend of Jimi, Rory and Lou Reed, does harmonize perfectly with the rich, fat tones he coaxes from his instrument. Sas also had his world rocked by a Rory Gallagher gig. Wherever the great man is now, I'm sure he'd approve of *Resurrection*.

AH



More Besides Joy Rides.... Depeche Mode re-mastered

by Richard Clews

Speak & Spell

Mute CDXSTUMM5

CD + CD 180g



A Broken Frame

Mute DMCD2

SACD 180g



Some Great Reward

Mute DMCD4

SACD 180g



Black Celebration

Mute DMCD5

SACD 180g



Music For The Masses

Mute CDXSTUMM17

CD + CD 180g



Violator

Mute CDXSTUMM64

CD + CD 180g



I'm reviewing three each of the CDs and SACDs here (ten albums have been re-issued in all, stretching from 1981 to 2001). Then there are the DVDs alongside the stereo discs, containing extra material and bonus tracks. The packaging of each disc is really impressive and well up to Mute's usual high standard. Since the label's inception, founder Daniel Miller has kept a close eye on the design of every release from his company. Lay all the Depeche Mode albums side by side, and you can see how this attention has paid off; the execution of each one is flawless.

Such care would be meaningless if the music did not warrant it. Fortunately, the Depeche Mode back catalogue holds up surprisingly well. *Speak & Spell* features the metronomic stylings of Vince Clarke, who went on to establish pretty much

Sometimes, it's tempting to yearn for those simple days when the only format choice was vinyl or compact cassette. In the case of Mute Records' monumental re-issue programme for Depeche Mode, a clear head and spacious wallet are the bare necessities to navigate and procure the right discs. If you live in the UK, you can choose between SACD+DVD editions, vinyl or vanilla CD. For American listeners, Rhino have stepped up to the plate with CD+DVD packs. In Europe, deluxe vinyl is the dish of the day (literally – get 'em quick before the collector's editions sell out). Online shoppers can order as they please, but the discs you find instore will very much depend on your location and the availability of imports.

every British synth duo of note in the 1980s. Preceded by the singles 'Dreaming Of Me', 'New Life' and 'Just Can't Get Enough', casual buyers erroneously assumed that the album contained family friendly electro-pop. Listening to it now reveals how strange the world of Depeche Mode was – even from birth. The simple arrangements, realised largely on monophonic synths and underlaid by distorted drum machine beats, are more alienating than welcoming. 'Tora! Tora! Tora!' invoking the image of kamikaze pilots, the menacing 'Photographic' and strident instrumental 'Big Muff' – these are hardly teenybop fare. Yet for the first year or two of the band's existence, their regular appearances on children's television and clean-shaven, smart suited style somehow managed to hide the darkness edging into their three and a half minute tales of young love dashed on the rocks.



▶ Vince Clarke's departure, while a shock at the time, allowed Martin Gore to step forward as the band's chief songwriter. *A Broken Frame* exceeded expectations, artistically and commercially; 'See You' remains one of the band's highpoints, a bittersweet concoction of boy-girl story and alternately warm (analogue) and cold (digital) synth textures. Alan Wilder, initially recruited to replace Vince Clarke for live duties, brought solid keyboard playing skills to the band and contributed greatly to arrangement and production on succeeding albums. *Some Great Reward* found 'the Mode' well advanced on the path to sampling

nirvana, with engineer/producer Gareth Jones'

had finally broken through to mainstream acceptance, *Violator* was the perfect album to set Depeche Mode for the 1990s and beyond.

Listening to these albums in re-mastered sound is a pure indulgence.

Compared to previous editions, the new CDs have a far more coherent stereo picture and less metallic sound (except, of course, when metal objects feature as instruments). Stereo SACD takes things to a higher level: DSD allows the music to breath and opens up the huge reverberant spaces around Dave Gahan's vocals. Re-mastering engineer Simon Heyworth preserves the dynamics of the original recordings and brings master-tape quality reproduction to the Depeche Mode

back catalogue for the first time. For the multi-channel SACDs, Mute's chief in-house engineer Kevin Paul has taken a fresh look at the original tracks, utilising modern plug-ins and other techniques that had yet to be dreamed of when the albums were first recorded.

For those without access to SACD, the accompanying DVDs in the 'deluxe' editions provide DTS and Dolby Digital mixes. These come in addition to bonus tracks and an excellent series of

documentaries in which band members discuss the writing and production of each album. It may seem vaguely inappropriate to say so in the pages of *Hi-Fi+*, but for many diehard fans the documentaries alone will make the double disc editions an essential purchase. For the keen listeners amongst them however, the re-masters will add a new level to their appreciation of a mighty force in electronic music.



enthusiasm for found sounds and the newly arrived NED Synclavier helping to create the thunderous metal bashing of 'People Are People'.

Black Celebration and *Music For The Masses* increased the band's following in America, where the alternative radio scene enabled Depeche Mode to subvert the role given them by the British music press (the absence of prejudice against Basildon in the States must have helped!). Despite – or perhaps because of – increasingly controversial lyrics and an overriding melancholy, they became the poster boys for alienated teenagers worldwide. Through their championing of electronic music Depeche Mode also became an inspiration to early techno DJs. From the ranks of these pioneers, legendary re-mixer François Kevorkian was chosen to collaborate on probably the most outstanding Depeche album, *Violator*. With co-producer Flood manning the desk, the band forged harder-edged rhythmic elements and a more compressed, punchier sound. Arriving when techno



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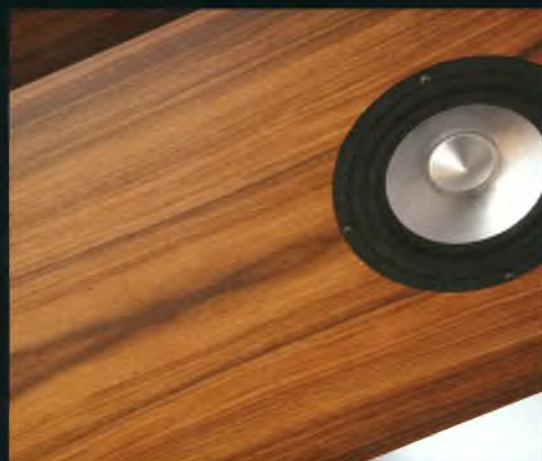


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Rosemary Clooney

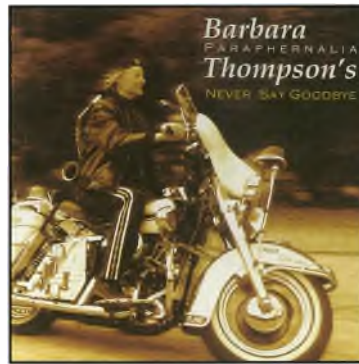
The Reprise Years

Rhino/Warner Jazz (CD) 8122748762 (CD)

Best known for her novelty hits of the 1950's such as 'Come On-A My House', Rosemary Clooney's background was nevertheless rooted in jazz and the songs of the great American songbook. In 1961 she recorded an album *Rosie Solves the Swingin' Riddle* for RCA which was subsequently shelved only to be released in 1963 and re-titled *Love* when her friend Frank Sinatra had signed her to Reprise and bought the master. Nelson Riddle with whom Clooney was passionately in love at the time, wrote some of his very best arrangements for this album, which is combined here with its 1964 follow up *Thanks for Nothing* with arrangements by Bob Thompson. Despite the quality of the music neither album set the charts on fire and Clooney subsequently left Reprise. She is at her best when more poignant and telling. Given her doomed relationship with Riddle, songs such as 'The Man That Got Away' and 'Thanks for Nothing' have really heartfelt emotion spilling out to telling effect. The first album has gorgeous arrangements from Riddle, but the second album's songs of doomed relationships bring the best performances from Clooney. All in all the album is a bit of a revelation and all the sadder in that Clooney never really got the chance to follow these fine performances with more of the classic songs she clearly loved.

DD

RECORDING



Barbara Thompson's Paraphernalia

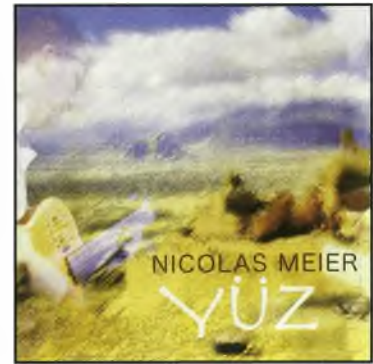
Never Say Goodbye

Intuition IN134052 (CD)

This album is the first Paraphernalia album recorded since 2001 when Barbara Thompson retired from touring having been diagnosed with Parkinson's Disease. Thankfully due to new medication Barbara has been able to bring that early retirement to an end. Thus the album's title. The CD opens with 'Living in the Fast Lane' a 'concerto in 3 movements' the first of which throws me every time since it recalls (unintentionally I'm sure), parts of the *Starsky & Hutch* theme tune. Fortunately these thoughts are effectively banished by 'Still Waters' the second number. This features some great electric bass work and piano and provides a lyrical sandwich filling for the two more frenetic numbers that encase it. The title number (subtitled 'The Tango That Got Away'), is one of my favourites of the set. With an insistent bass line from Dave Ball, and suitably exotic improvised vocals from Ana Gracey coupled with precise work from the horns, it's cinematic and great fun. Coltrane's classic 'Giant Steps' gets a sprightly if lightweight reading with fluid sax from Thompson and Jon Hiseman's drums powering things along. 'Finger Dancing' gives Thompson a chance to stretch out with typically ornamental and lyrical sax inter-twining delightfully with Billy Thompson's violin in perhaps the strongest number here.

DD

RECORDING



Nicolas Meier

Yuz

naim cd 103 (CD) (CD)

This release sees the band pared back to the core members of Meier (guitars, Turkish saz), Gilad Atzmon (clarinets, soprano sax), Tom Mason (bass), and Asaf Sirkis (drums), yet the range of sound and expression that these four conjure from their instruments belies the small size of the band. Having caught the band live during their tour I can confirm that this release, whilst not as powerful as the live experience, gives a pretty good impression of their skills. Sirkis is a phenomenally gifted and highly inventive percussionist, Atzmon a hugely creative and powerful player, Mason a solid force amidst the pyrotechnics, and Meier a master of his chosen instruments able to pull out sinuous and melodic lines that hold the multi-textured sounds together. Like their earlier release there's a real continuity from number to number and a quality of music making throughout that makes it difficult to single out any one track for particular praise. Like its predecessor this is a recording that will reward repeated playing, new subtleties will come to light with each hearing. Coupled with a very decent recording from naim, this'll keep me very happy 'til I get the next chance to catch this fine band in concert.

DD

RECORDING



Buck Clayton

How Hi the Fi - A Buck Clayton Jam Session

Pure Pleasure/ Columbia PPLAN CL567 180g

The famous Buck Clayton jam sessions comprise two sets recorded in Columbia's great '30th Street Studios' in 1953 and 1954 and were first released later that year. These are truly spontaneous and joyful sessions with Clayton leading terrific ensembles (there are some changes of band members between the two recording dates), including the likes of Urbie Green and Trummy Young (trombone), Al Cohn (tenor), Jimmy Jones (piano), Jo Jones (drums), and in the 1954 recordings, Woody Herman (clarinet). I'm sure you'll already have spotted a few Basic alumni in the mix. The double album set opens with the two tunes recorded in 1954, for me the most successful of the sessions. The title number is a real stunner with the band racing through 22 (count 'em) choruses in under 14 minutes, to terrific toe tapping effect. So much so that an original copy supplied by RSF was demonstrated at the Manchester Show a few years back as an example of mono's continuing musical relevance! Side two sees an extended take on the standard 'Blue Moon' and notably features some fine tenor soloing from Cohn followed by a rasping treat of a solo from Young. The number closes with

some terrific ensemble work with Clayton and Young to the fore.

The second album covers the 1953 sessions and here Freddie Green (guitar) joins Walter Page (bass) and Jo Jones (drums) to re-create the original Basie Band rhythm section, piano duties here being handled by 'Sir' Charles Thompson who clearly does a convincing job since even Basic's wife on first hearing the test pressing thought it was a Basic album. Opening with an appropriately relaxed pace 'Sentimental Journey' is jammed with great solos and swings for every second of its 14 3/4 minutes. The album closes with 'Moten Swing' originally developed for the Bennie Moten Band and loosely based on the chords of 'You're Driving me Crazy'. The rock-solid rhythm section really tells here, driving the number ahead and providing a great platform for more superb soloing particularly in this number from Clayton.

If you're a Basic aficionado you're going to love this record, not simply because of its ex-Basie Band members but because like the best of the Count's music, it's superbly played and swings like hell. It's a real bonus that this great, very well recorded music has been so well served by Pure Pleasure, with exemplary Pallas pressings and great packaging. This is one record (or should that be two) that everyone should own.

DD

RECORDING MUSIC



Herbie Hancock

Takin' Off

Cisco Music/Blue Note BST 84109 180g CD

Takin' Off was the first of seven titles Hancock released on Blue Note, and while a couple of other titles may be a notch superior in terms of invention, this is a fully formed classic album, featuring a Freddie Hubbard, Dexter Gordon, Butch Warren and Billy Higgins. The band plays all Hancock originals, including his "Watermelon Man." Sideman Gordon had emerged with a couple of Blue Note LPs, and his classics *Go and A Swingin' Affair* were right around the corner. Similarly, Hubbard was in the middle of his hot streak of Blue Note releases at the time, so it is no exaggeration to call this a meeting of giants. Up until now, the only audiophile record companies releasing the coveted Blue Note titles have been Classic Records and Mosaic, so word of competition for this honor is big news indeed. How have Cisco done? When I first heard the LP, I was shocked at how much better the stereo sound was reproduced than on most Blue Note releases. According to Cisco's web site, they cut the record with a "wider stereo image than the original release" rather than folding in the stereo image to avoid "technical problems" which now no longer exist because of advances in technology. Whatever the explanation, this release sounds harmonically right and presents a far better stereo sound-stage than one expects from Blue Note. More Please!

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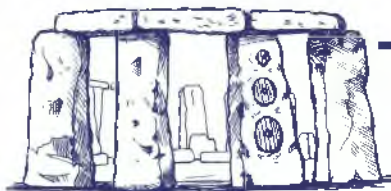
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The History Man...

by Richard S. Foster

EMI, HMV, Nipper and what do they have to do with recorded music anyway?

Electric and Musical Industries Limited was created in March 1931 out of a merger of the Gramophone Company and the UK Columbia Graphophone Company. From its beginning, the company was involved in both the manufacture of recording and playback equipment and the provision of music to play on its machines. Not only were the companies deeply involved in gramophone manufacture, (Emil Berliner's patented name - the graphophone was patented by Charles Sumner Tainter and later improved by Chichester and Alexander Graham Bell) their production of high quality acoustic recordings for these machines ultimately became the flagship operation of the business. EMI was involved in many scientific enterprises during the first half of the 20th century. For example, shortly after the merger, one of the great scientific minds and a man who'd previously working for the Columbia Graphophon Company, Alan Blumlein, invented the process known as Sterco! EMI were also heavily involved in radar and other scientific endeavors during World War II. Let's go back in time and bring a little history to light.

The origin of the Trademark Image-Nipper

"The famous trademark image comes from a painting by English artist Francis Barraud, and titled *His Master's Voice*. It was acquired from the artist in 1899 by the newly-formed Gramophone Company. According to contemporary Gramophone Company publicity material, the dog, a fox terrier called Nipper, had originally belonged to Barraud's brother Mark. When Mark Barraud died, Francis inherited Nipper, along with a cylinder phonograph and a number of recordings of Mark's voice. Francis noted the peculiar interest that the dog took in the recorded voice of his late master emanating from the trumpet, and conceived the idea of committing the scene to canvas.

In early 1899, Francis Barraud applied for copyright of the original painting using the descriptive working title *Dog looking at and listening to a Phonograph*. He was unable to sell the work to any cylinder phonograph company, but The Gramophone Company purchased it later that year, under the condition that Barraud modify it to show one of their

disc machines. The image was first used on the company's publicity material in 1900, and additional copies were subsequently commissioned from the artist for various corporate purposes.

Later, at the request of the gramophone's inventor Emil Berliner, the American rights to the picture became owned by the Victor Talking Machine Company. Victor used the image more aggressively than its UK partner, and from 1902 on, all Victor records had a simplified drawing of the dog and gramophone from Barraud's painting on their label. Magazine advertisements urged record buyers to "Look for the dog".

It is interesting to note that the painting is of Nipper listening to Mark Barraud's voice,

something which was possible with the Ediphone of the original, which could record as well as play. In the later version of the painting, with a Gramophone in place of the Ediphone, Nipper could not have been listening to his master's voice since his owner was not a recording artist with released gramophone discs."

{A side note if you will, the Ediphone recorded as well as played back wax cylinders. The graphophone only played wax cylinders. Ultimately, an improved Graphophone-Ediphone evolved and was known as the Dictaphone! The gramophone however, only played flat wax discs.}

In the UK, the first appearances of Nipper and His Master's Voice logos started in 1909. The next major step for HMV was in the retail area: In 1921 the Gramophone Company opened the first HMV shop in London. Sixty odd years later, shortly after the advent of the CD, and with all the copyrights imposed on EMI over Nipper, the company decided to change their brand name for music releases to EMI Classics. While English EMI still hold copyrights to Nipper, the convoluted history of who owns what, who has rights of usage of the image and in which part of the world, is too lengthy and complicated to even begin to think about starting here.

Returning to early history, it is extremely important to begin recording history with the great impresario and recording engineer, Frederick William Gaisberg(1873-



▶ 1951). "Gaisberg's association with the recording industry began in 1889, when he played piano accompaniment for cylinder records for The Columbia Phonograph Company (in the US). In 1894 he met Emil Berliner and became 'spell-bound by the beautiful tone of the flat gramophone disc'. Gaisberg joined Berliner who trained him in the art of disc record-making. In 1898 Gaisberg moved to London where he established a recording studio to make the first European disc records."

While Gaisberg may have worn the impresario's hat, his greatest legacy would be upon retirement in 1939.

Even though he consulted to EMI for the balance of his life, his two greatest pupils turned out to be the critical players in the growth and development of the artist and repertoire departments for EMI: Legendary producer Walter Legge (who was to marry the famous soprano, Elisabeth Schwarzkopf) and David Bicknell (who ultimately married the violinist, Gioconda de Vito). Both continued on the same path started by Gaisberg. Legge's journey was more difficult at the beginning because of post war regulations. Ultimately, he boosted his reconstruction,

unencumbered by these regulations, because of his formation, in 1945, of the new London based orchestra, The Philharmonia. Bicknell was in 'mainstream' EMI and was reunited with Legge-by this time manager of the Columbia division – as Bicknell became head of the competitive division of 'HMV' (HMV was used as an internal designation for what we know as the EMI label). What I find fascinating here, is the unbroken chain of history from the late 1890's through to Bicknell's retirement in 1971. Eighty-one years of unbroken links for the growth of the product from the acoustic age to the golden age of analogue recording. These three men set the company on an unparalleled course of excellence in music, artists and recorded repertoire that, to this day, has probably not been surpassed by any one company.

The mono world of Columbia and EMI – a brief look

Based upon the extensive foundations laid by Bicknell and Legge in the mid to late 1940's, by the early 1950's EMI's classical business had been transformed and with the advent of 'tape-technology' and the LP, artists were freed from the control of the four-minute duration of a 78-rpm side. It was an explosion of the best possible sorts as far as artist development was concerned, offering a musical

cornucopia of recorded product. The names are legendary, from Furtwängler and Von Karajan through Toscanini and Cantelli; from Callas and de los Angeles through Gobbi and Corelli. Include artists like Brain, Oistrakh, Rostropovich, Menuhin, Kogan and the repertoire offered was broad, deep and spectacular.

EMI's Columbia label, now completely dominated by Walter Legge's artists and Philharmonia orchestra for most of the 1950's, offered some spectacular performances of opera, orchestral music, concertos and soloists. Not to be out done, EMI's ALP label, headed by Bicknell offered up an equally enticing array of superb performances by the

likes of Rosalyn Tureck, Ginette Neveu, the Vienna Philharmonic, Bayreuth Festival Orchestra and Chorus and the great conductor, Sir Thomas Beecham with his Royal Philharmonic Orchestra. This was truly a glorious time for those artists and these two labels, and EMI prospered wonderfully. Both organizations, EMI (ALP) and EMI (Columbia), in a period of no more than 10 years, produced a combined total of approximately 2000 individual titles! (This does not include re-issues of mostly 78rpm repertoire either!) This is a massive body of work that would only be

surpassed in the stereo era.

This output can be broken down as follows:

Full-priced 12 inch "CX" (Columbia) label as well as the full-priced 12" "ALP" (EMI) label. The full-price EMI issues had a prefix of BLP while the Columbia issues simply enjoyed "33C" as a prefix.

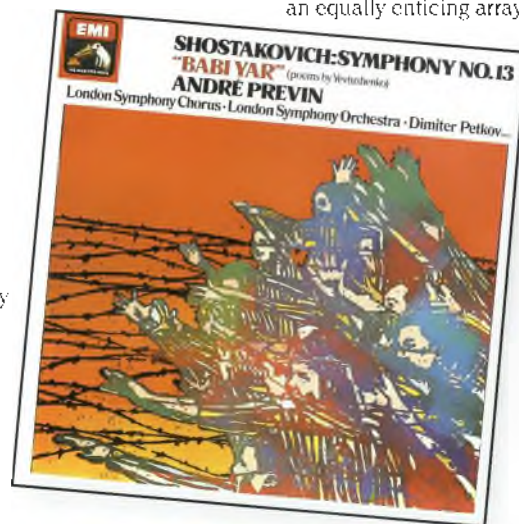
EMI also issued 12" mid-price discs, with a CLP designation. The 10" mid-price line was designated DLP. In contrast, Columbia did not have mid-price or bargain-priced labels – either 10" or 12".

As mentioned above they did offer 65-10" records with a "33C" prefix. These contained shorter programs with their full priced artists.


















By 1957, EMI formed EMI Records which managed the company's British manufacturing, recording and marketing activities. Of the two original operating companies, The Columbia Graphophone Company ceased to trade in Britain although records bearing the label existed for at least another decade.

Stereosonic and the "Golden Age" of EMI Records

The Decca Record Company actually beat EMI in the UK rush to Stereo in the late 1950's. While Decca's first



Basic Labelography

	1950's	1960's	1970's	1980's
EMI Full Price		 	  	
EMI Mid Price				
EMI Budget			 	
Columbia Full Price		 		

Please keep in mind that this chart is an approximation. Box sets such as SLS or SMS were always full priced items. In the 1960's both divisions for a few years, offered operas and some multi-record sets also as individual discs so the consumer could afford to purchase full-priced items more easily. For example: Columbia SMS 1008, Ponchielli's *Lo Giocondo*, a three record set, was initially released in October of 1960. Within a month of its release, the three single records, SAX 2359/60/61 (mono was CX1706/8) were also released. This was a way of allowing the public to purchase the full price set over a brief period of time instead of the large upfront costs of the complete box set. There are many examples of this throughout the 1960's.

It should also be understood that not everything went from full price to mid price to budget. There were many releases that didn't get reissued (especially box sets). The major labels tended to reissue items that were "good" sellers. Some "great" selling items, Strauss' *Four Last Songs* with Schwarzkopf and Szell, stayed in the catalogue at full-price from the time of issue through to its appearance on compact disc. Initially released as SAX 5258 in August of 1966, it later appeared as EMI ASD 2888 (again full price) after the Columbia label ceased to exist.

Always check dates on the back of jackets. This is a clue as to original release dates.

► publicly announced English recordings were done at Kingsway Hall in May of 1954 and with EMI recording two-track stereo at Abbey Road in February, 1954, EMI may have thought they'd won the race. However, Decca had very quietly recorded Ernest Ansermet's Suisse Romande Orchestra at Victoria Hall toward the end of 1953, creating the company's first stereophonic recordings. (For those who are curious, there is a Decca Eclipse, ECS 543 which includes Rimsky-Korsakov's *Antar Symphony* with Ansermet. While the label says re-channeled for stereo, sources at Decca have told me this is genuine stereo and from those historic 1953 sessions! The sound is quite primitive but it really is genuine stereo.) For patent reasons EMI held off their announcement of Stereosonic tapes until April of 1955. The first EMI stereophonic LPs appeared on the market in mid 1959, the title being EMI ASD 251, Sir Thomas Beecham conducting his Royal Philharmonic in Rimsky-Korsakov's *Scheherazade*. On the Columbia side, the first release was SAX 2252, Leopold Ludwig conducting the Philharmonia Orchestra with Emil Gilels in Beethoven's *Emperor Concerto*. The first box sets from each division were SMS1001 for Columbia, Verdi's *Falstaff*. EMI released SLS 751, Mozart's *Marriage of Figaro*. Incidentally, SMS stands for Stereo Masterworks Series while SLS stands for Stereo Library Series.

The business once again began to skyrocket and various labels were born and restarted under the EMI group. SAN, 'The Recording Angel' label was resurrected (it had been a very successful operatic label during the 78 era) and began, once again, to offer wonderful operatic and choral works (at full price). Semi-popular material, work by less important artists and light classical fare was offered on the CSD label at less than full price. Re-issued material from the LP era began to appear in the early 1960's under the 'Concert Classics' series, EMI's response to the emergence of the popular Record Clubs. These discs were identified with an XLP (mono) prefix and SXLP (stereo) prefix. This was a budget label and priced accordingly. In the 1960's mid-priced/budget priced labels such as Music for Pleasure and Classics for Pleasure also began to appear. (see sidebar) Much of this material was recycled from the full-priced line. In addition, there were other 'bargain' priced labels such as HQM, ENC (Encore), ESD also appeared. This is where so much of the profits are. First you offer records at full price. Then you mine your back catalogues offering some new, but mostly recycled material at mid-price. (Of course the vinyl is also less than first rate – another cost-saving exercise). After the mid-price cycle has run its course, you then re-issue the material again, perhaps with new couplings at a budget-price, including budget packaging as well as budget vinyl. (Read: thinner as well as noisier).

What I've offered here is an opening primer into the background of EMI as well as a tiny bit of information about the beginnings of the stereo era. I'll be back to discuss some of the great offerings from this company next time round. ►+

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Bartók
Dance Suite; Deux Portraits, Etc.

Dorati cond. Phil. Hungarica Orch.

Speakers Corner/Mercury SR 90183 **180g**

This is one of my favorite Bartók records, making this re-issue especially welcome. The original Mercury offers excellent sound and this SCR issue does not disappoint. From the opening notes on the oboes, and then their charming interplay with the cello and violin sections, you immediately realize Bartók is in very good hands. This Hungarian conductor and his ensemble grew up with this music and the Mercury team really delivers the sonic goods. These compositions span a period of some 14 years and while the earlier *Dance Suite* is devoid of the Folk themes incorporated in so much of Bartók's work, they are clearly abundant in the *Deux Portraits*. The two sections from *Mikrokosmos* are wonderful additions to an already great coupling – especially 'From the Diary of a Fly'. The Philharmonia and Dorati deliver performances that are extremely hard to better in any medium. These are dramatic orchestra works that are sure to please both the music lover and the audiophile. Bartók may not be considered easy or accessible, but this disc suggests otherwise and is not to be missed.

Supplier: www.speakerscornerrecords.de
RSF



Ella Fitzgerald

Sings The Jerome Kern Song Book

Speakers Corner/Verve V6-4060 **180g**

Ella Fitzgerald recorded a vast amount of material from the "American Song Books" including songs by Cole Porter, Duke Ellington, Irving Berlin, Ira Gershwin, Rogers and Hart, Jerome Kern and Johnny Mercer, between 1956 and 1964. By the time she recorded this entry in 1963 she was running out of songwriters, but was by no means running out of steam. Unlike most of the earlier titles, the *Jerome Kern Songbook* fits on a single long playing disc. From a musical point of view, this songbook may not be my absolute favorite (that would be Cole Porter) but then how do you select your favorite child? What sets this entry in the songbook group in a class of its own for me is its great sound. Verve recorded Ella's songbooks in almost uniformly excellent sound, but by 1963 they seemed to find a "sweet spot" of stereo recording and many Verve recordings from this era are rightfully viewed as among the best jazz stereo recordings ever made. I had forgotten how good this record sounds, but within seconds of hearing the first song on side one, I realized that this LP belongs among the elite of Verve's stereo recordings. Speakers Corner has done a fabulous job of re-mastering this classic.

DDD



Shostakovich: Symphony No. 5,
Op. 47

Bernstein cond. NYP

Cisco/Columbia MS 6115 **180g**

While the photograph on the cover shows the composer and conductor shaking hands in the Great Hall at the Moscow Conservatory, this recording was produced at Avery Fisher Hall, the NYP's home in New York. This wasn't the first time this symphony was recorded, but this was the one I grew up with and as such created an imprint against which I inevitably compare all other performances. However, there was always a problem with this, as with many other U.S. Columbia recordings: They are bright sounding and lack a decent bass foundation. This recording is no exception in its original 6-Eye release. The record sounded harsh with high C strings that would have you running from the room (or would have done if my system then went as high as this one). Now, at last, this has all changed. AcousTech and Cisco have done a fabulous job in bringing one of the most insightful performances of this great work to a new generation of music lovers. You can take your 6-eye original and put it in with your Frisbees. There are other performances that may be to your liking, however not many will match the drama and emotion Bernstein is able to convey. Wonderful performance, now with outstanding sound quality.

Supplier: www.ciscocomusic.com
RSF





Stevie Ray Vaughan and Double Trouble

Texas Flood

Pure Pleasure/Epic Records 38734 **180g!**

While sides one and two are from the original Epic release, the second LP in this set is made up of bonus tracks previously only available on CD. This, the outstanding first album from SRV and DT is truly a knock-out, must own record. If you have any interest in stunning guitar work and heartfelt blues vocals, you are in for a real treat. My original was borrowed a long time ago, so it was a great pleasure to receive this release from Pure Pleasure – and one that maintains their tradition of providing additional material on vinyl for the first time. The two records making up this set are Stevie Ray at his best. Vaughan's style was taken from many of the 'Greats' that he so admired: Muddy Waters, Albert King and Otis Rush, to name a few. If you think you've heard the best in slide guitar action by other artists, just turn this LP to side two and get into a 'Rude Mood'. Not only does this cut accentuate just how good Double Trouble really were, it also embodies the greatness of Stevie's guitar skills. This was a watershed album for the Bluesy rock style this now deceased master established. Highest recommendation.

Supplier: www.purepleasurerecords.com
RSF



Eric Dolphy

Outward Bound

Analogue Productions/New Jazz 8236 **45**

This is a release from the fourth, and final, installment of Analogue Productions' Fantasy 45 Series—45-RPM re-masterings of jazz classics by Steve Hoffman and Kevin Gray. Of this set of 25 albums being doled out over the next year, this is my favorite title of the bunch. This classic set features, in addition to Dolphy on alto, bass-clarinets and flute, Freddie Hubbard, Jackie Byard, George Tucker and Roy Haynes. This 1960 recording was Dolphy's first record release as a leader. It is far more accessible, or I might add, a far cry less out there than Dolphy's later titles. This is the place to start for music lovers who would like to explore something a little more avant-garde, but are not feeling comfortable enough to leap straight in at the deep end of the pool. The LP was originally issued on the Prestige family label New Jazz, and the master tapes seem to have survived intact though many of years storage after they were acquired by Fantasy Records. Hoffman and Gray have spun gold with these tapes. Prestige and New Jazz releases by and large were recorded very well, and *Outward Bound* was no exception. Like most of the titles in the Fantasy 45 Series, this new version takes the sound quality up a couple of notches from the original. Top recommendation.

DDD



Little Richard

Here's Little Richard/Little Richard Specialty

Mobile Fidelity **SA**

Little Richard was the original King of rock'n'roll. He made Elvis sound insipid by comparison and was the inspiration behind much of the music of the fifties. If that sounds OTT just listen to the first track on MoFi's latest compilation – two albums on one SACD. The power and energy that he could put onto record has rarely been equaled and in their original mono form this music is shocking in its intensity. These two albums contain a lot of Richard Penniman's greatest hits; 'Tutti Frutti', 'Reddy Teddy', 'Keep A Knockin' and 'Long Tall Sally'. The familiarity of these and many of the other 23 titles is testament to their staying power in a world full of one hit wonders. Richard is credited by James Brown among others as being the man who put funk into rock'n'roll but it's the boogie woogie element that is closest to contemporary ears – I guess I've heard a lot more funk over the years. MoFi has done a superb job with the sound here; I guess the energy had to be on the tape but by choosing SACD and mono they have done a first class job of preserving it.

JK





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MAKING THE CONNECTION



Art or science? As the designer, I'm very pleased with the overall sculpture of this speaker. It amalgamates function and form perfectly. The oval cabinet is no mere style indulgence; it's an exceptionally rigid shape that reduces sound-distorting vibration. It's also been a delight to use classic materials in ways you simply couldn't have five or ten years ago. The diamond tweeter and marble housing are lovely aesthetic elements, but their absolute solidity also means the unit sings like nothing you've ever heard. Art or science? Why make the distinction? **Kenneth Grange**, *Product Designer and Fellow of the Society of Sound, on the Signature Diamond.*

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