

hi-fi+

Issue 55
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REPRODUCING THE RECORDED ARTS

INTERVIEW Anne Sophie Mutter



ROCKY V

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And Run...



Cable Talk

Wiring Priorities Sorted

Show Time!

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Universal Players

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Whose Bass Is It Anyway?

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Since the arrival last year of PrimaLuna's first model, the ProLogue One, the audio community has been unable to contain its joy nor reign in its praise, because PrimaLuna has revolutionized the whole concept of 'affordable audio.' Commencing with a pair of integrated amplifiers with prices more typical of mundane, solid-state products, PrimaLuna has shown other manufacturers that compromises in fit and finish, styling and facilities are unnecessary.

And PrimaLuna has shown the music lover that 'high end' performance and pride of ownership can be made available to aficionados on a budget. But don't take our word for it. Audition your preferred ProLogue or the newly-launched Dialogue models at the PISTOL Music dealer of your choice. And prepare your wallet for a pleasant surprise!

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One of the nicest aspects of editing a magazine comes in the shape of reader correspondence. But two recent events have left me astonished by the level of Response they've elicited. Our writers competition, won by John Mason whose entry can be enjoyed on page 12 of this issue, attracted no fewer than 144 separate entries. At 1000 words a piece, put them all together and that's about a novel and a half of material we had to sort and sift before Mr Mason finally made it to the top of the stack. Considering the effort involved I find this number remarkable.

The other event that has generated a massive level of response – everything from thanks through to requests for further information and even specific recommendations – is the demonstration we conducted at the Rocky Mountain Audio Fest in Denver. I think listeners were frankly amazed at the differences they were hearing, often from aspects of vinyl replay they'd ignored, considered irrelevant or never even heard of. But the most poignant moment had to be the visitor who produced a mono RCA pressing in beautiful condition, one of collection left to him by his father. Disappointed with how they'd sounded at home, he'd brought one along to see if anybody at the Show could do a better job. Using the Titan mono, with the VTA adjusted and the equalization dialed in on the Zanden phono-stage, the musical transformation brought tears to his eyes – although that might have been connected with the cost of the equipment involved!

Hi-Fi+ has always enjoyed a healthy mailbag, but it's the letters that question or extend the views expressed in the magazine that always make the best reading. Current hot topics include the Marantz SA7 review, correspondents divided between those who feel I damned it with faint praise and those who feel that I soft-pedaled on a product that's a musical disaster area! Read these and other points of view in the next issue. In the meantime, as long as we're provoking a response I'll know we're engaging your attention.

Roy Gregory

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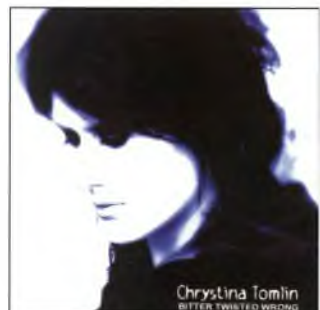
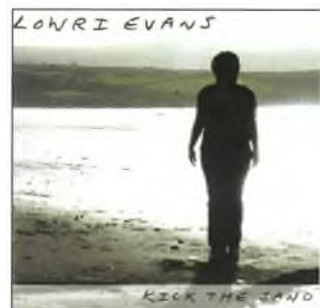
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SPEAKERS CORNER

by Paul Messenger

How loud do you want your system to go? This interesting question was recently brought to the hi-fi community's attention by Musical Fidelity, first by launching a high power mono-bloc amplifier called the Supercharger, intended to boost the power between a regular integrated amplifier and the speakers. By way of justification, and even more contentiously, MF then gave away in hi-fi magazines, thousands of little sliding card calculators, which imply that a hi-fi system needs to be able to achieve a level of at least 106dB at the listening seat in order to qualify as 'high quality'.

I don't propose to spend this column discussing the whys, wherefores, ins and outs of this controversial assertion, because I believe we all have our own individual ways of enjoying our hi-fi systems. While it's true that 106dB may be encountered in even an orchestral concert (never mind its rock equivalent), that doesn't mean we all necessarily want to replicate similar levels in our own homes. Doubtless some will want to enjoy their systems as a private, focused experience: turn off the doorbell and phone, wind up the wick, and pretend they're at a concert. With average sensitivity speakers this does indeed require massive reserves of amplifier power – according to the MF calculator, in excess of 300W.

The trouble with live concert levels, of course, is that they're essentially anti-social, effectively inhibiting conversation. And I have to say that much of my personal pleasure in enjoying music comes in talking about it with friends and family, at the sort of levels that might not be 'realistic' but which do allow conversation to take place. Sensibly loud speech rarely goes much above 80dB, and it's quite difficult to hold a conversation against a hi-fi delivering 90-95dB. And although those dB figures don't sound all that different from the 106dB mentioned above, they're actually logarithmic ratios. If 88dB sensitivity speakers require 300W to produce 106dB peaks, generating 96dB from the same speaker needs only 30W, and 86dB just 3W (which explains why I still reckon the first watt is the most important one).

While very high power amplification with 'average' speakers is one obvious means of achieving high sound levels, in theory at least the same could be achieved by combining more modest

amplification with very high sensitivity speakers. The interesting question is whether those two alternative propositions do actually supply the same net result, and an opportunity to test this, albeit imperfectly, recently came my way.

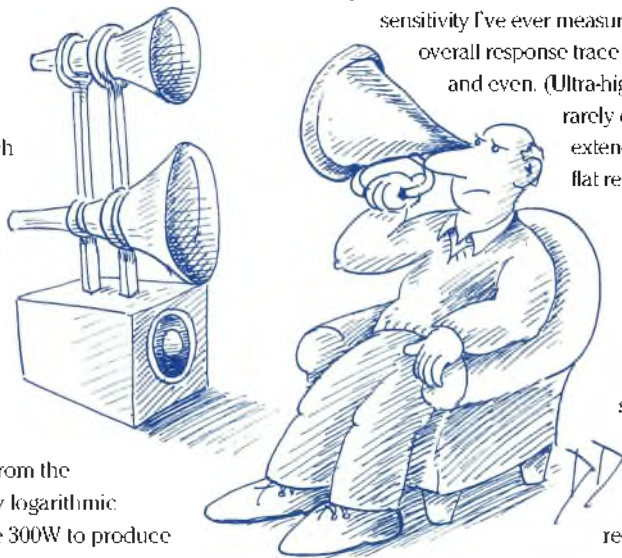
Back in March I went to a small specialist hi-fi-only show at Heathrow which had a surprising number of horn loudspeakers spread around the dem rooms, including the Gemme Audio Vivace I reviewed in Issue 53. Another dem was being operated by a Welsh operation called Horn Audio, and a few months later they brought some very similar equipment down to my listening room for the evening. It proved an intensely interesting and exciting experience. The adverb 'intensely' is not one I use lightly, but no other word better describes the experience of this extraordinary speaker system, even though it also has rather more than its fair share of idiosyncrasies.

I only had a few hours to play around with this speaker pair, so this isn't any sort of considered review. It's a hybrid two-way design, combining a large actively driven bass enclosure with port-loaded 15-inch bass driver, crossing over at around 300Hz to a large compression horn driver, with a mouth about 26 inches in diameter. I took my usual in-room far-field measurements, and was surprised to discover that the horn delivered the highest

sensitivity I've ever measured, at 108dB, yet the overall response trace was also quite smooth and even. (Ultra-high-sensitivity speakers rarely deliver a smooth, extended and reasonably flat response.)

Equally impressive was the extraordinary dynamic tension and grip this speaker delivered. More than any other speaker system I've hitherto encountered, it laid bare the mechanics of the recording process, and brought fresh insights to

albums I've played a hundred times before. One reason is undoubtedly that the whole of the audio range above 300Hz is handled by a single driver, so no intervening crossover spoils the overall coherence of human voices. But I also believe that the brilliant dynamic behaviour is





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▶ somehow related to the ultra-high sensitivity, and in this respect a 5W amplifier driving a pair of 108dB sensitivity speakers is simply not the same as using a 500W amplifier driving a pair of regular 88dB speakers. Incidentally, the 15-inchers, driven by inbuilt 40W solid-state amplifiers, also worked very well indeed through the bass region, and seemed to match the horn surprisingly well.

The disappointment for me was that the horn speaker also proved fundamentally incompatible with my regular Naim amplification, because the high sensitivity made the thermal hiss of the amplifier's output devices all too clearly audible. (Past experience has shown that sensitivities above 97dB

become increasingly unacceptable in this respect.) Horn Audio had brought down a pair of prototype mono-bloc valve amps, based on solitary single-ended 45 DRD valves capable of delivering a less-than-massive but entirely adequate, hiss-free 1.5W. These made a very good match for the speaker, though I did miss some of the characteristics of the Naim that I like.

The whole experience was a very sobering one, and I fully intend to take it further when time permits. Frustratingly, the problem lies more with finding suitable amplification than in the performance of this remarkable speaker system.

www.homspeakers.co.uk/main.htm



PLAYING THE SYSTEM

by Roy Gregory

In a brave move, and something of a blast from the past, Ray Kimber conducted a "live versus recorded" demonstration of his Isomike technique. Like all such exercises it ended in inevitable failure, serving best to illuminate how far we still have to go when it comes to reproducing the live event, but it was laudable nonetheless in that it exposed the show going public to real, live musicians making real, live music. And watching the animated performance of the Fay Street Quartet was definitely a pleasure – and an informative one too.

Watching: shouldn't that be listening? Well, one listened too, of course, but what really struck me about the playing was just how obvious the level of communication between the performers was. This was as far from four people each reading the same music from their own separate page as it was possible to be. The highly stylized structure and precisely interlaced elements that create the complex patterns of a string quartet are about as near to a musical conversation as you can get. Factor in the lack of a single, controlling conductor and the shifting relationships between the instruments within the quartet that create so much of the formation's fascinating texture and the need for such definite, non-verbal communication becomes clear. What's more, far from distracting from the music, this expressive underpinning actually illuminates and underlines the shifting relationships, the textures and patterns within it.

Nor is it a phenomenon limited to small-scale chamber music. Just watch the degree of eye contact used by a conductor to prompt or control his orchestra. Watch a great rhythm section at work – jazz or pop – and you'll see the players looking at each other in order to synchronize or stretch their

input, placing their beats and notes against each other. It is, just like the music that results, all a question of communication.

We often use that word – communication – when we discuss hi-fi systems. But like so much of the terminology that surrounds the subject, its meaning seems to have become plastic and circumscribed depending on the particular perspective of the user. "Communication" is unequivocally and always a good thing, but the nature of that communication, what is being communicated and how, seems to be a matter of selective preference rather than universal language. But aren't such semantics the barrier that music should overcome? Isn't that what invests songs and larger works with the power to move our emotions? Isn't that why a lyric sung is so much more effective than the same words written down?

When we talk about hi-fi and its ability to "communicate" we often go on to discuss that sense or purpose behind the music, its ability to influence our mood or response. We might even go so far as to discuss the sense of performance, the groove within the band. What we rarely discuss is the communication between members. We talk about the band "playing together" but we rarely go any further than that. Yet as we've seen, that process is fundamental to the creation of the music, the form in which it finally emerges. Watching music made is a far more involving and enveloping experience, simply because it engages more of your senses, provides you with more cues. In many cases, the greater the level of communication, the greater the performance that results. The question is, can a system mimic or reflect that aspect of the performance? ▶

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► The answer has to be yes – if only in that on the best systems we can hear all too readily the difference between a great performance and the one where the artist is simply fulfilling a contractual obligation. Indeed, that ability itself defines the quality of the system. If I go back through the reviews I've written, that very aspect of reproduction is a common theme when it comes to describing the best components I've enjoyed. But that doesn't explain how that goal is achieved.

Although it was the Fry Street Quartet that started me thinking, it was something else that kick-started the process. Conducting our show demonstration and listening again and again to that special quality that makes mono records swing, that gives them that temporal integrity and ineffable sense of musical purpose. I started to wonder if maybe these two examples of directness when it comes to musical communication might not be related. After all, a single mono mic captures and preserves all those complex relationships intact, heard from a single point – which is exactly how a good mono system sounds. People refer to the stacking of mono images, an uncanny sense of depth in the reproduction. Thinking about the Fry Street players, you can start to understand why...

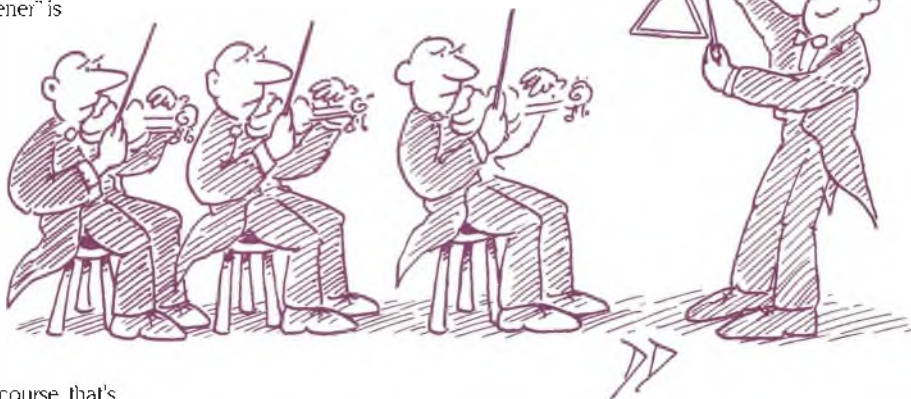
The reason that the performers in a quartet or rhythm section, an orchestra and a conductor look at each other is to time their phrases, to precisely place their notes. As a listener, each instrument or voice is a distinct source. So, just as the players synchronise their contributions, placing each note, those notes have their own relationship, their own individual arrival time at the listening position, dictated in turn by the relative positions of the performers to the listener. These arrival times will vary by micro-seconds, but they will vary.

Now, in a situation where the "listener" is a mono microphone, those arrival times and the distances from the microphone they incorporate are all preserved intact, along with the patterns of harmonic development and decay. But if we use more than one mic, say a crossed pair, we have two distinct points of observation, two sets of arrival times and harmonic structures as the outputs from different instruments overlap. Of course, that's why we can start to triangulate the location of each instrument and discern the distance between them. But to do so, we need a system that preserves the relationship between those two microphones, our left and right channels, perfectly. Any deviation in channel balance and we erode the spatial benefits as well as impacting on the inner structure of the music. Now, think about what happens when we add more than one microphone per channel. Suddenly we're juggling multiple stages of potential temporal and spatial distortion, balancing multiple feeds into

multiple channels. Frankly, it's a wonder that systems image at all, let alone that some of them do so, so convincingly.

But let's look at this from the other end, sitting facing a pair of speakers. If we have poor channel balance or a poor image then it is not just the spatial representation of the performers that will suffer, but the musical relationship between them too. Rather like a split image rangefinder, we will be presented with overlapping pictures. It's not until those images align that the subject falls into focus and we can identify its nature, as well as the distance to it and its location relative to us. Stereo systems are just the same. When they image, they tell us all those things, and much more besides. But if they don't, then they are already on the slippery slope to musical destructiveness.

In reality, all systems are indeed musically destructive – to a greater or lesser extent. That's why Kimber's "live versus recorded" demonstration delivered such a salutary (if unintended) lesson. But that's not my point. For years people have debated the importance or otherwise of stereo imaging, its opposers or detractors dismissing it as an exercise in mere cosmetics. To some extent they're right, because if you are going to run a stereo set-up you want to make damn sure it images – not because it's so wonderful in itself but because of what it means if it doesn't. For a system to image it first has to get a lot of other, more subtle but musically fundamental things right. So when we sit in front of a system that images in a truly convincing way, we also sit in front of one that preserves that inner communication and chemistry between players, that explores the greatness in a performance. It's not the imaging that allows that insight, it's the correctness of the inner



relationships that allow the imaging. It's not the imaging that's important (although it surely is attractive) it's what it tells us about the system – or in all too many cases, doesn't. So, whilst imaging varies with recording (and in turn reflects on the quality of those recordings – at least if they have any pretence to acoustic instrumentation) if your system can't image there's a whole level of musical expression that's escaping it. In fact, if you don't care or bother about imaging then why not listen to mono? It's a lot cheaper and a hell of a lot easier to get good results... ➤

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2007 Hi-Fi+ Writers Competition Winner

After wading through an astonishing number of entries (especially surprising given the effort involved) the field was narrowed to a top-twenty and then a top-six contenders. At this point the entries were passed to John Bamford at Meridian (representative of the sponsoring company and himself an ex-journo and editor at *Hi-Fi Answers* and *Hi-Fi Choice*). There then took place a round-table discussion on the merits of our various contenders, with JB given the casting vote. Below you'll see his chosen winner, but next issue if space allows I'll be printing a few honorable runners-up, so if you want to know just how close you got... Meanwhile, Mr Mason will doubtless be enjoying his Meridian F80. Ed.



YOU NEVER FORGET THE FIRST TIME...

by John Mason

Everyone's stolen at least one thing in their lives.

Whether that be sweets when you were young or the odd envelope from work when you should have known better. Me? I once stole a ticket. Not to access Willy Wonka's chocolate factory, but for something almost as magical - my first visit to a hi-fi show.

During the early nineties, I became interested in technology. Being a poor teenager with little money to spend on magazines about it, but I was lucky and my local libraries had a good selection. I could often be found in there reading them. On one visit I felt luckier still as I noticed a ticket attached to a magazine. It offered free admission to a hi-fi show. Intrigued but not really sure what a hi-fi show was, I decided I'd like to visit and find out. Believing the ticket would likely remain unused, I felt I should have it. With a sly tearing motion that could not have looked more suspicious if I had stood up on my chair and loudly announced "I'm taking this", I eventually ripped it out and slipped it in my pocket. I felt pleased but nervous as if the library police were about to bust me like an internationally sought after criminal.

Fast forward to a few weeks later and upon arriving at the hotel near Heathrow, I handed over my ticket and entered the show. Little did I realise that once inside I would become hooked and not want to leave.

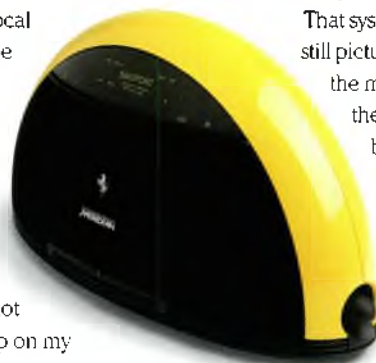
I went into the first demonstration room I came across and it was there that I experienced it. High-fidelity sound! I had never

heard music sounding so good before. It blew my mind. Sure I had owned various cheap stereos passed down to me over the years. But this was much higher quality. I stood transfixed by the tune coming from the speakers, like a deer caught in headlights. The three-dimensional realism was impressive but more notable was the sheer clarity of the cymbals being hit. For the first time I was not only hearing, but also feeling something that I had only read about before.

That system left a lasting impression on me and I can still picture those speakers today. But I didn't recognise the manufacturer. In fact I couldn't identify most of the brands at the show. I soon realised that the best hi-fi separates weren't necessarily made by mass market corporations. Instead, hi-fi seemed to be like a members only society featuring obscure companies (many of which were, surprisingly, British), a dictionary's worth of terminology and possibly secret handshakes too. But it was a club that I knew I wanted to join.

As I moved from room to room through the hotel, I felt like a naughty son who had just found his dad's Playboy collection. Each door I stepped through was like turning the page over to reveal another naked lady while trying to discover what turned me on. Blonde or brunette? Floor-standing or bookshelf? It was aural pornography... and I liked it.

As the day progressed I started to learn more things about audio. When growing up, I had skipped vinyl and instead chosen cassette (hey, it was acceptable in the eighties!),



▶ whilst all the time aspiring to own an elusive CD player. This was my first real introduction to the record and upon listening I felt it produced a smoother sound that was easier to listen to. It sounded even smother when played through a valve amplifier - another novel concept for me and my newfangled transistor ways. I began to understand and appreciate the value of upgrading cables and of placing equipment on sturdy supports. Throughout the day I started to actively listen out for the different sound characteristics so often mentioned in reviews.

Since then I've visited the show each September, including the short period when it moved to Hammersmith then finally returned to Heathrow. I've been there during the continuous name changes and have collected all the entry stickers to prove it. Some of the most memorable time I've enjoyed at the shows has including Bary Fox's fascinating lectures regarding the state of the industry plus the demonstration of a vastly expensive set up from PMC/Bryston which produced the best sound I've ever heard. Over the years I have been treated to an eclectic selection of music that I might have not thought of listening to or even heard of. I've appreciated many of the characters from the industry, such as the cheeky chap who worked for Arcam, the slightly crazy (but undeniably passionate) guy from Nordost and all the journalists and spokespeople that I have spotted. You could call me an audiophile groupie!

The shows have often provided me with my first look at new products and introductions



to fresh innovations such as multi-channel audio, high-end car stereos and the increased popularity of integrating video equipment with hi-fi. Sadly increased popularity it seems can't be associated with the show itself, as there isn't one this year, nor are there plans for it to continue. Thankfully the organisers of a rival show just across the road will continue to run their event, carrying on a tradition that has been gracing the area for decades (and shall hopefully continue to do so).

Some might say it was dishonest to take the ticket that got me into that show in the first place. But now hi-fi has captivated my interest and has stolen a piece of me. Until my lottery numbers roll around and I can take permanent refuge in my mansion with that PMC/Bryston system, then I shall continue to attend and enjoy hi-fi shows.

When the day of that first show drew to a close, I left with my new-found fascination, a little knowledge and a certainty that I would return again.

Which I did; The very next day; Complete with my favourite CDs.

Plus another free ticket.

Which I had stolen from a different library.




ECLIPSE ECLIPSED BY AWARD OVERSIGHT...

In an unfortunate error, the photograph which appeared on the Eclipse TD725SW sub-woofer's award showed a detail from a competitor's product. Lest any of you should be confused, the Eclipse is indeed strictly cuboid, resolutely black and employs a pair of horizontally disposed drivers. Just like the beast in the picture here in fact – and yes, it is the right one this time! Sincere apologies to all at Eclipse, manufacturers of a wonderfully musical sub that adds real bandwidth to two-channel systems – which is why they won the award in the first place.

The original review appeared in Issue 52, and those interested in further information can contact Eclipse TD (UK) Ltd on (44)(0)20 7328 4499 or at www.eclipse-td.co.uk





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HI-FI+ AT THE DENVER SHOW

DEMONSTRATING THE FINER POINTS OF RECORD REPLAY

by Roy Gregory

It's Fall in Colorado's Front Range, with crystal bright skies and the first sniff of snow in the air. It's also the third annual Rocky Mountain Audio Fest, and what is fast becoming the most important consumer orientated show in the US, held in Denver, a stones throw from the hi-fi Mecca of Boulder, home of Avalon, Ayre, Boulder amplifiers, PS Audio and others. But for us at least, this year is different, because for the first time we have agreed to put on one of our show demonstrations, sharing a room and a system with John Atkinson, editor of *Stereophile* and long-erstwhile editor of *Hi-Fi News*.

With JA presenting his own high-resolution recordings, demonstrating the differences between different sample and compression rates, our contrasting offering was based around record replay and the audible impact of a range of system and set-up parameters. Working in our standard forty-minute, closed-door format, we set out to show just how much potential lies (often undiscovered) in the narrow grooves of the humble vinyl record.

We concentrated on the audible impact of four aspects of performance:

1. Correct cartridge alignment
2. The benefits of a true mono cartridge in replaying mono discs
3. The musical importance of correct VTA
4. The application of correct replay equalisation

Now, given the subtleties involved in each and every one of these parameters, their reputation for being towards the more microscopic, even trivial end of the musical impact range, that might seem a tad ambitious – especially under show conditions. But show demonstrations offer us the opportunity to put our (metaphorical) money where our mouth is. We've written long and we've written loud

about this stuff so we should be able to demonstrate it, even with a show system and a hotel room thrown into the equation.

Now, although larger than a UK hotel room, once we had the system up and running there was only going to be space for nine or ten listeners, which with time for only twelve sessions meant tickets were at a premium, virtually taken by the time the show closed on Friday, leaving some very disappointed folks. I can only apologise and promise a larger room next time round. Organiser Al Steitel is aware of the

problem (somewhat astonished by the demand) and we'll wangle it one way or another.

We started the demonstration by showing the importance of correct cartridge alignment. To do this we used three 12.7 armwands, each carrying a Titan i. The first was set with its overhang about half a mm too long and arm tube dead level, exactly the result that might be expected from a novice or someone following one of the various guides available in book or DVD form. We used the protractor supplied with the VPI and sure enough, to the uninitiated everything looked fine. It didn't sound bad either: sweet, reasonably musical, definitely inoffensive. However, swapping to the second wand, this time set up using the VPI protractor with

considerably more care and the benefit of much hard won (for which read "expensive") experience, wrought a huge improvement. Bandwidth, dynamics, focus, energy, detail and timing all improved, but that's not the point. Throughout this demonstration we were at pains to underline the musical (rather than hi-fi) impact of the changes we were making. With the cartridge adjusted more precisely, the song simply came to life; more interesting, more emotive and far more purposeful, it was simply much more interesting and involving listening.

But we weren't done yet. Final throw of the alignment dice involved using the ultra precise Feickert protractor ►



The Show System

We were extremely fortunate that every manufacturer and supplier approached came up trumps with loan equipment and we got exactly the system we were aiming for. Given the nature of the demo, a VPI JMW tonearm with its interchangeable armwands was essential. The company supplied a 12.7 along with a TNT Hot Rod with new heavy platter to mount it on. Cartridges were Lyra Titan i's with two and a mono coming from staff and a third from US importer Immedia. Likewise, the Zanden Model 1200 Mk. II phono-stage was essential to proceedings and was duly made available. Electronics came from Conrad-Johnson, a CT5 pre-amp and the new ET250S hybrid power amp. I would of gone with the recently reviewed LP140M mono blocs, but it would have been greedy as well as ill-advised: all those 6550s and a small room was never going to be a good mix! I wanted to keep the speakers real-world too, as I wanted listeners to understand that the changes they were hearing would be just as audible on any system, more so on their set-up at home. I chose the Avalon NP2s and they didn't disappoint, astonishing people with their revealing but musical sound all weekend. Cables were Nordost Valhalla throughout, the whole system being fed from a Thor distribution unit, while racks were the latest and even more impressive Stillpoints, including a component stand under the turntable and cones under the Zanden. Last but by no means least, I must thank my assistants, the glamorous Richard S. Foster (who is probably still having nightmares about specific VTA and level settings for each track) and the wonderfully diplomatic Dennis D. Davis who managed to keep the ticket-less but disgruntled hordes at bay... Gentlemen, thank you both.

▶ and adjusting the VTA by ear rather than simply setting the arm level. This involved a whopping 110 positive steps on the VPI's VTA scale – although in practice that amounts to only a mm or so of arm height! The result? An even bigger difference than before, with the music stepping away from the speakers and system, a new intimacy and expressive level driving home the heart rending sadness of the song 'At Seventeen'. Now, the directness of the communication, the absence of the system, drew you right into the music – exactly as a good set-up should. And that's all for free. A little bit of time and care and you should be able to wring similar results from any record player – Rega to Rockport.

But no matter how much effort you put into aligning your cartridge, there's a whole category of records you'll probably rarely if ever play, simply because the results don't warrant the effort, and that's mono discs. Enter then, Buck Clayton's *How Hi The Fi*, a Columbia micro-groove mono record. Played with the Lyra Titan i, exactly as we'd used it for the Janis Ian track, the results were predictably disappointing: thin, no bandwidth, no body and terrible surface noise. Which begs the question, why would you even bother to play such a disc? Before I answer that, we need to look at the whole question of sound quality with mono records and the place to start is with a genuine mono cartridge. Which surprise, surprise was exactly what we had waiting in our fourth JMW 12.7 armwand – in this instance a Titan Mono. Replaying the Buck Clayton with this installed wrought an astonishing transformation: full,

weighty body, real bandwidth and superb tonal quality were joined by a sense of pace and swing that brought 'Blue Moon' to beautiful, beguiling life. Yet this was ostensibly the same system, even the same cartridge – just a mono version of it. Why the difference? It's all to do with the way that mono (and stereo) records are cut...

In order to extract two channels of information from a single groove, stereo cartridges read information in both the horizontal and vertical plane. The problem is that they do it all the time. So, although mono discs only carry information in the horizontal plane (the only plane the people making them worried about) play them with a stereo cartridge and any vertical modulation is read and added to the signal – hence the lousy results. But a cartridge that only reads horizontal information, but does so with the resolution and capability of a modern moving-coil – now that's another matter. It's also why a mono switch on your pre-amp (although desirable) won't do the same job. This is about the way the information is actually read at the input rather than the way the amplifier handles it afterwards.

Of course, achieving the result we demonstrated demands a second cartridge and either a second arm or the ability to swap head-shells or arm-tops in some way, but it's an expense well worth considering for two reasons: sonic performance and repertoire. Anybody who heard the Clayton disc transformed cannot be anything other than impressed by the musical results on show. And whilst this is a great ▶



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IN ADMIRATION OF MUSIC

▶ mono disc, the key benefits of improved timing, tonality and overall coherence are common to all but the least desirable mono records. Which brings us to the second point; whilst engineers wrestled with new technology to create the first stereo recordings, encountering phase and tonal issues as well as hardware that was often being developed on the job, the



parallel mono chain they were also using suffered no such problems. On the contrary, this was mature technology with several decades of experience underpinning its application. The results, not surprisingly, are both extremely good and very consistent – yet the records are generally available for a fraction of the price of the stereo equivalents, despite containing the same performance in a recording which whilst lacking the spatial aspect of stereo reproduction, is often superior in most other regards!

Nor is this just about getting Reiner and the CSO on the cheap. Many stellar performers either never made it as far as, or were already past their best by the advent of the stereo era. If you want to hear them at their best, then it's mono that delivers. Armstrong, Ellington, Billie Holiday, Callas, Milanov, the list is endless. And it's not just jazz and classical performers either. If you want to hear early Beatles, Stones or Beach Boys, then it's mono again. All of which means that a proper mono set-up doesn't just enhance the pleasure to be had from mono discs, it opens up a whole vista of new material – often at bargain prices.

Third item on our agenda was correct VTA; or more precisely, the importance of correct VTA for each and every disc. We started out by reverting to the set-up we'd finalized for the Janis Ian disc, with the stereo Titan I and preferred VTA. Then we played 'Last Chance Texaco' from Rick Lee Jones' first album. It's a slow, measured but powerful cut that should suck the listener in. But time and again the reaction of those present was the same; two bars in and they'd start to fidget, look around, look at the equipment, look at the room. The music clearly wasn't

holding their attention – and that's because it was flat and lifeless, devoid of pace or tension, devoid of interest. But dropping the rear of the arm by fifty notches on the VPI scale and starting again, suddenly the music had a pulse, it was deliberate rather than simply slow, clearly building towards something. The vocals became far more

expressive and intimate, the music underpinning their wistful longing. Now there was a new dynamic, energy and thrust to the performance, a tension in the air. This didn't just hold your interest, it was actually compelling, just as it should be. Yet if you'd only ever heard the record the way we started out, you'd probably have dismissed it and never played it again. These are not cosmetic differences I'm describing. The difference between the VTA

being right or wrong is the difference between wanting to hear this music or not!

The problem is that VTA is equally specific to every record, yet many arms make no allowance for adjusting it on a record-by-record basis, simply settling on an average figure that seems about right for most records. Some arms consider this so unimportant that they allow no adjustment at all. Yet the influence of correct VTA cuts straight to the heart of a record's musical integrity and the ability to access the performance it contains. If you are serious about record replay, you need to have an arm that allows on-the-fly VTA adjustment, because the lesson is clear; average VTA means average performance. It's as simple as that.

How precise does the adjustment need to be? With the Titan i, single steps on the VPI scale are readily audible.

Other cartridges are a little less demanding, but not much. That might sound daunting but actually it's a big help, as the effects are so apparent that pretty soon, setting correct VTA simply becomes another aspect of putting on your records. The increase in dynamic range and life makes the ideal setting sound louder, so just play part of the record, turn



the dial and adjust for maximum level. With a little practice you'll start to hit the spot with remarkable ease.

Our final demonstration centred on the almost unknown (or totally ignored) question of correct replay equalisation. The mechanical characteristics of the vinyl ▶

▶ vinyl used to press records mean that, in order to cut a full-range signal, that signal has to be bent out of shape and then bent back into shape when it is replayed. This is done in your phono-stage and the process is called equalisation. Historically, the major record companies each produced their own cutting heads and compensatory replay curves. That's why vintage pre-amps generally have multiple phono equalisation settings, each indicated by the name of a record label. Now, clearly, such compensation has to be closely matched to the cutter head or the accuracy of the results will suffer badly. With that (and the ease of manufacturing) in mind, the major labels agreed, around the early '60s that they'd standardise on the RIAA cutting and replay curve. The only problem is that just like Kyoto, they all signed on the dotted line and then carried on just as before. But the electronics manufacturers embraced standardisation wholeheartedly, because it made their lives a whole lot simpler. The end result is that whilst our replay electronics are standardised on RIAA, the records we are playing often aren't. How much deviation is there? Well, as far as I can discover, Deutsche Grammaphon, Philips and Telefunken never used RIAA, while EMI, Decca and Columbia were late to adopt it at all. What's more, different plants and even different departments within labels often had their own subtle variations. So, depending on where you source your records, which labels you favour, well over half your discs are likely to deviate from the RIAA standard.



The question is of course, how far they deviate and whether it actually matters. In practice the various replay curves, all having been dictated by the same mechanical constraints are apparently extremely similar, a fact which plays straight into the hands of those that claim that RIAA

The Records

I was determined to use "real" records for the demonstration and selected them as follows:



- Janis Ian – Between The Lines
- How Hi The Fi? – A Buck Clayton Jam Session
- Rickie Lee Jones (a Nimbus pressing of her first album)
- Dvorak – The New World Symphony (Karajan and the BPO on DGG)
- Bizet-Sarasate – Carmen Fantasie (Ricci with Gamba and the LSO on Decca)



These are very much standard fare, although the How Hi The Fi is certainly collectible. The Decca is a later, narrow-band pressing of SXL2197 while the Karajan New World was picked up for 99p (around \$2) at a local thrift shop, specifically with this demonstration in mind.

equalisation is all you need. However, this is simply not the case, as our demonstration made all too clear...

I have never been a big fan of DGG pressings or Herbert Von Karajan. In fact, I generally find them turgid, dull and lacking in any sense of creative tension or pace, resulting in a mechanical and often bombastic sound – with HVK one of the worst offenders. It was with this in mind that I brought a copy of his *New World* reading, performed with the Berliner Philharmonic, to the show. Playing it wasn't pretty! Slow, disjointed, soporific and yet weirdly brittle, it sounded like the orchestra was half asleep. In fact, it sounded exactly how I

expected it to. Nobody in their right mind would listen to this record for pleasure.

But the Zanden offers not just RIAA equalisation but a choice of two other, generic curves as well – labelled "Columbia" and "Decca" respectively. Switching to the Columbia setting and replaying the Karajan *New World* it was difficult to believe you were hearing the same record. Suddenly there was poise in the playing, a sense of deliberate tempo and controlled constraint. The phrases ▶

► fit together, the opening crescendo gained impact, weight, texture and drama, but above all, the music made sense, the performance made sense, the reading made sense. At last you could understand why HVK and the BPO enjoyed their stellar reputations. Again, we are talking transformation from musical desert to enthralling and masterful performance.

Right about now you should have mixed feelings. On the one hand, all those dud DGG pressings that came as fillers in boxes of old records suddenly become playable; on the other, what about all those records you left in the racks just because they were on DGG? But it's not just DGG. The next and last record on the table was a Decca, and a good one too. Played using RIAA equalisation Ricci's tone underlined his derisory nickname of Screechy Ricci, while the orchestra was nicely spread but lacking in body and substance. Switching to the decca setting on the Zanden, the LSO became itself, its performance of the *Carmen Fantasia* bold and dramatic, its dynamic contrasts beautifully paced and emphatic. But it was Ricci who really benefited, his sweeping bow work more fluid and more telling, his playing every inch the virtuoso as his swaggering confidence brought poise and tonal security to his performance. A good record became a fantastic one, a disc with the ability to transport, the very quality we seek from music and our systems.

Now, at around \$20000, the Zanden phono-stage, wonderful as it is, will be a little rich for most peoples' blood. But don't despair. Other phono-stages exist that offer similar switching options at a more affordable price, like the Graeme Slee Jazz Club we hand on hand to show visitors. At around £700 this is a

great phono-stage in its own right, even before you factor in the equalisation options. Anybody who has heard the effect of correct record equalisation will be in no doubt that this (conveniently) overlooked aspect of record replay is about to come out of the shadows. Pretty soon, it will be difficult to offer a serious phono-stage without the facility. It really is that important...

These demonstrations are always a fascinating experience, challenging and rewarding in equal measure. I don't think a single visitor failed to hear the differences made to the system; I don't think a single visitor was ready for their magnitude or musical importance. And if these changes are that obvious under show conditions, how much more apparent do you think they'll be at home?

But the real lessons of this experience are clear. If you want to hear what's on your records then accurate cartridge alignment, record-by-record VTA adjustment and the correct equalisation options are critical to achieving proper performance. If you want to enjoy the widest possible range of music then you need to start taking mono replay seriously. Ignore either aspect of musical reproduction and your system starts to act as a gate on the music you enjoy – and that is not good!

...AND HEAR THE SAME AGAIN IN MANCHESTER

Such was the interest generated by this demonstration that we'll be seeking to repeat it, in essence if not in detail, at the Manchester Show in January. After missing last year's event, Hi-Fi+ will be once again mounting another of our (in)famous demonstrations over the Weekend of January the 26th and 27th. Don't expect the exact same system or demo outlined above...

I'm sure we'll have added an extra refinement or two by then! What will remain the same as the sessions described above (and following our usual practice) is that the demonstrations will be a closed-door program, with tickets available from our stand. Sceptics should get there early to avoid disappointment!



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Opening The Proverbial Can of Worms...

Seeking a set of priorities for cable looms

by Roy Gregory

In Issue 54 we reviewed a system with no electronics. Or to put it another way, we reversed the normal state of affairs or priorities, relegating the boxes and bits that get power to the level of barely relevant ancillaries, instead concentrating on the stuff that holds them up, feeds them juice and connects them together. It's a project I've been planning for a while, but it's not as easy to achieve as you might think. Simply writing about the cables instead of the equipment isn't the point. What I wanted was to look at a coherent approach to these issues, one that enabled us to assess their importance in the great scheme of things. The problem is that few companies embrace all the required components – cabling and supports. The one I settled on was Vertex AQ and I wasn't disappointed. Their unique approach to handling mechanical and electrical interference generated from both outside and within the system produced what can only be described as astonishing results, confirming my long held suspicion that we were seriously underestimating the importance of these issues in the system performance equation.

Nor was this snake oil. These were clearly demonstrable and repeatable benefits, as seen from the fact that Vertex run extremely successful active demonstrations at shows. We are not talking subtle changes here. These are so big they're obvious, smack you in the face, jaw dropping, "how could I not have noticed that?" type



differences. The type of differences that demand a fundamental reassessment of what we do and how we do it. No less a light or more sceptical a luminary than PM said much the same thing when he first discussed the Vertex kit. Well, it's come a long way since then and the results are even more compelling now. The response has to be a complete revision of priorities within the system – frankly, something that's long overdue. The

old "Front-end first" approach was a product of its time and the specific equipment that produced it. But the advent of CD and multi-channel, re-emergence of valves and easier to drive loudspeakers, better cable systems and an appreciation of the importance of the mains have all seriously rearranged the hi-fi landscape and the disposition of and demands on budget as a result. If the equation of cost and quality was the great fallacy of the "Front-end first" philosophy, its complete relegation of cabling and support to inconvenient ancillaries has undermined and hog-tied the advance of both its advocates and its adherents.

What is required is a more realistic and all embracing approach to system set-up; a more coherent overall strategy. So, whilst the Vertex AQ components are mightily impressive, not everybody will want or be able to afford them. Instead of ignoring them, let's take the lessons learnt and see if they can be applied with other product ranges to develop our general understanding and approach.

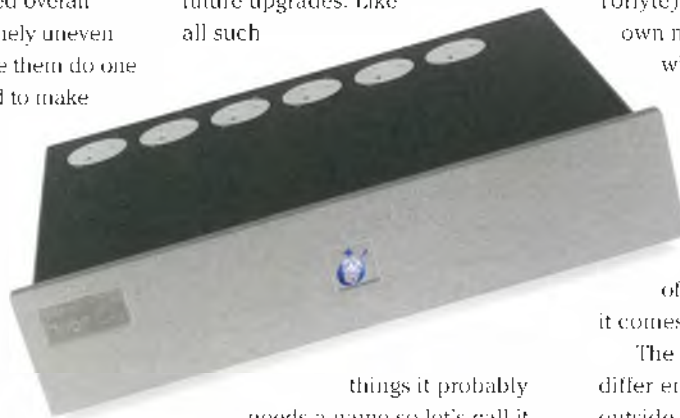
In thinking about this I developed a visual model or diagram that was used to illustrate the Vertex piece. In it I depicted a system as a ►

▶ pyramid, connected to the ground by its cables and supports. The width of the pyramid's base was defined by the expenditure on and quality of those components. The broader the base the more stable the system, the more musically coherent its performance. Now, apply that model to the "Front-end first" philosophy and you actually end up with the pyramid inverted, balanced on its point! Which goes quite a long way to explaining why such systems have limited overall performance and extremely uneven attributes. You can make them do one thing quite well; it's hard to make them do everything, almost impossible to have them do everything well.

Since then I've developed the model a little. Rather than a pyramid, think of a stack of wooden blocks, each representing an element within the system: the width of each block represents its quality, its height the cost. The taller the stack, the better the system: the broader the base the greater the musical coherence and stability. In fact, systems which offer a square (or even oblong) profile will function perfectly well, although I guess our object should be the widest, lowest block possible. Unfortunately, the vagaries of different technologies and the costs involved in different components mean that some things will always cost more than others for a given quality.* But the simple geometrical law is that stability will suffer as soon as the equipment

quality over-reaches the quality of the supporting elements: The narrower the footprint of your base block, the more precarious the stack that results. Likewise, move one element in the stack left or right of centre, have one element that is of much "narrower" quality than the others and stability again becomes critical.

It's a useful model, helping us visualise system structure and construction, initial make up and future upgrades. Like all such



things it probably needs a name so let's call it "foundations first" because, building a system is pretty much like building a house. What you can build and how high you can build it depends completely on the foundations you've set in place. What's more, adding to or revising those foundations at a later date tends to be disproportionately expensive, so it's worth getting it right the first time around, as well as building in a little spare capability!

Of course, the notion of such a foundation is suggestive of a single, unified entity. In practice, when it comes to hi-fi we need to assemble it out of different parts. The great divide in this case comes between signal and support, cables that pass

signals or power and the racks or platforms that isolate equipment. Fortunately, we are some way down this road, having already done some considerable work in the area of supports back in Issues 41 and 46 (in part the results of which motivated the "full Vertex" review). Now, as I've already said, companies that embrace both camps are few and far between: beyond Vertex I can only think of Russ Andrews (Kimber and Torlyte) and Music Works (with their own mains loom and association with Quadraspire). We'll return to these later, but in the meantime let's examine a range of offerings from different cable companies to see if it's possible to establish a generalised set of priorities or hierarchy when it comes to wiring a system.

The cable systems chosen differ enormously, at least from the outside, with contrasting conductor materials, dielectrics, terminations, geometries and physical characteristics. But conceptually at least, in the coherent way in which they approach the problem, they have a surprising amount in common. The most complete (in terms of coverage) comes from Nordost, combining their Tyr cabling, Brahma mains leads and Thor distribution block with its RF filtering and Quantum technology. In contrast comes the stark simplicity of the Crystal Ultra, similarly expansive in range but with a conceptually far simpler (but beautifully elegant) distribution block. The question is, given the range of materials and technologies on offer, how consistent will results be and how clear a hierarchy of application exists? More to the point, can lessons learnt here be applied to other cable systems? We'll find that out in the next issue, with offerings as varied as Chord, Magnan and a few in between... ▶✚

Take for example, a high efficiency horn design with expensive drivers and a large and complex cabinet. These are going to cost well into five figures for a pair, yet they could be driven by a power amp of just a few watts that can be built to a very high standard with a relatively small budget. So, system dynamics and architecture imposes its own logic - which is how we ended up in the "Front-end first, my way is the only way" mess in the first place.



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Top Tyr...

Taking a step back from Valhalla

by Steve Dickinson

Cables, eh? Can't live without 'em, can't show 'em off to friends at dinner parties...

Whatever your take on cables, from unreconstructed nihilist, ("once you've reached a basic electrical standard, all cables sound the same, ergo manufacturers of expensive high-end brands are charlatans and their customers fools") to unapologetic advocate, ("cables are as fundamental to the quality of a system as the active components and badly-chosen cables will ruin the potential of good components as surely as well-chosen cables enhance them") you're still going to need something to connect the boxes together and feed them with power. We've long since moved beyond "All properly-designed amplifiers must sound the same." Those who trust their ears also recognise that different cables sound not only different, but that those differences can be qualitatively, if perhaps not yet quantitatively, assessed. From that follows a need for a system-building strategy similar to the one for the boxes. Accepting the need to give some thought and funds to cabling, where to start?

In this case I took a middling decent system, connected it up with eminently respectable [Chord Chorus] interconnects and [Chord Epic Twin] loudspeaker cable, and the supplied mains leads. More complete and planned than what feeds most of the systems out there, but just the sort of thing you could pretty much walk into any decent high street dealer and take home. I then changed various parts of the cable loom, upgrading to Nordost Tyr, Brahma and Thor, in order to assess their contributions to the whole, but in

this case starting with the speaker cable and working backwards to the mains. The system sat on a Quadraspire acrylic reference table throughout.

That Nordost have evolved a distinctive house sound is indisputable. Fast, crisp and loaded with so much treble energy they can make other cables sound distinctly rolled-off, they are not for everybody. There is also a distinct hierarchy, from middling-dear to "Buy that and I'll divorce you" with consistent progression and improvement as you move up the price range. This consistency is one reason why I'm happy



to take Nordost's claims at face value. They are clearly onto something (as opposed to being simply on something).

The introduction of the Tyr range is a slightly mixed blessing. Intended to build on the strengths of the, rather fine, Valkyria I've been using for, gosh, over three years now, it aims to elevate performance at the Valkyria's price point, while simultaneously dropping one rung down Nordost's hierarchical ladder to third position. Pretend that doesn't matter to you, if you like. What considerably eases the pain is that that's only because the previously peerless Valhalla has

been usurped by Odin. Valhalla remains unchanged in the product range, its performance undiminished but now overshadowed by Odin, reviewed with some approval by RG in issue 51. The technology employed across the range has been discussed before, and the basic differences between the materials and topologies in the current line-up covered amply by RG in his review of the mid-table Frey in issue 42 so I'll recap only briefly. Tyr differs from Valkyria in using different numbers of heavier, 22AWG, monofilament cable and employing the twisted-pair dual-filament spacer technology from Valhalla, to further reduce contact between conductor and outer sheathing, dielectric duties therefore being mostly covered by the air gap. Completing the line-up is a set of Brahma mains leads (RG, issue 38), occupying the same sub-Valhalla position as Tyr (for some reason Nordost nomenclature treats the mains leads differently, except for Valhalla). These replace my existing "entry-level" Shiva mains leads, and are now to be fed from a Thor distribution block, (RG again, in Issue 35) rather than my old 6-way Russ Andrews Silencer block. So I now have not only a coherent cradle-to-grave Nordost loom, but also one comprising elements from the same hierarchical level in the system.

Listening to the standard, non-Nordost system, it was striking how many of the hi-fi attributes I took for granted were absent. In 'Amado Mio' from Pink Martini's *Sympathique* album (WRASS 143), voice was front and centre, but everything else was an afterthought. Percussion was vague, bass plodding, and the piano was mostly lost in the m \acute{e} l \acute{e} e. This from a

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▶ track normally so full of ebullience it can hardly fail to lift your spirits. The next track, 'No Hay Problema' was, frankly, blurred. This album, in case you don't know it, is a gem, but this system was rendering it as if it were the accompaniment to a cheesy 1970s caper movie, rather than the exuberant celebration I know it to be. Similarly, Jools Holland's 'Birdcage Walk', from the *A-Z Geographer's Guide to the Piano* (ALTOCD 1) lost all its sense of fun, the timing was off, bass vague, no dimensionality, sense of space or instrumental placement. Definitely time for a change, then.

Replacing the speaker cable with the Tyr brought about rather less in the way of improvements than I might have anticipated. Sure, it was better in most respects, but if I'd spent my hard-earned on this cable, I'd feel distinctly short-changed round about now. Piano was tighter, and had lost a lot of the blurring distortion you commonly get, leading edges of notes were better, cleaner and faster, percussion was more tactile, with more 'snap', bass more rounded-out and tuneful and there was more of a sense of musicians working together, but hell, this was just not the cable I knew it could be. It didn't even have that much of the Nordost signature treble. A couple more tracks to confirm these characteristics and it was obvious, more was required.

Working backwards again, I replaced the Chorus with a Tyr interconnect. This time, 'Amado Mio' was, if not an unqualified success, then certainly a much more rewarding experience. The opening harp glissando was significantly more tactile, consisting of clearly plucked notes rather than the blurred smear previously heard. Midrange had filled out, making a valiant attempt to bridge the gap 'twixt bass and treble, and the piano took its rightful, crucial, place in the mix. The exuberance was definitely beginning to show through.

Here's a test: Steve Reich, *Six Pianos* (DG 439 431-2). The music is typical Reich: depending on your viewpoint, either mesmerisingly subtle and compelling or

stupefyingly repetitive. Dense yet sparse, uneventful even, but on the right system it can draw you in with its hypnotic allure. Played on the system as described, it was boring. If you'd told me it was six pianists doubling up on three pianos, or even two or three (very busy) pianists, I'd have had no way to refute it. The payoff in this piece is in the way the music subtly changes every few bars. One piano changes a note, or an emphasis grows on a repeated figure while another recedes. The music shifts and changes, like wind-whipped sand on a beach. With the system as it stood, most of this was simply smoothed over and the result was a maddening, enervating mishmash, the playing of which would probably be banned under the Geneva Convention. Changing the mains leads from freebies to Brahmas brought about easily the biggest change of the day, so far. The six pianos snapped into focus, each nuance and shift becoming not only discernible, but musically relevant, whole layers of texture revealing themselves. The opening track, 'At Home', from Tord Gustavsen's latest album *Being There* (ECM 2017) revealed a significant reduction in hash, a better sense of note, it was simply more tuneful. Rhythm, particularly the brushed percussion, was more tactile, vivid and three-dimensional with a longer, deeper decay to cymbals. Bass was more low-key, not recessed just less dominant, more in its place. Gustavsen's music is thoughtful, he eschews drama in favour of a more considered, measured approach. A system lacking in subtle discrimination could leave you thinking this was cold, soulless and dull. On the right system, it calls to mind the bleak beauty of northern European flatlands in Winter, on a lesser system it's rather closer to a damp February in Lancashire. More upbeat music, back to Pink Martini and 'Tempo Perdido' from *Hey Eugene* (WRASS 193), is altogether tighter and much more dynamic.

Nordost's Thor completes the picture, and brings benefits in terms of a still, silent



space in which the music can work. There are definite gains in the sense of stability, an element of structure and palpability borne out of a solid, inky black background. Clearly if this is a foundation, it is a most secure one. *Six Pianos* is revelatory; to the gains from the Brahmas we can add a more certain sense of six musical instruments, located in space, each with its own acoustic volume and subtle timbral differences. There is a trade-off: leading edges to the notes sound less acute with a consequent loss of attack, diminishing the sense of speed and dynamics; 'Tempo Perdido' again, and we've lost some of the snap and immediacy, it sounds quieter. This is a repeatable phenomenon, many gains, some losses but Thor allows higher levels, restoring dynamics without apparent effort. Some may feel the loss outweighs the gain but I have no doubt that for much material, particularly classical, largescale stuff, the solidity and unshakeability of that acoustic space is necessary to allow the music to work. For tighter, faster, more intimate music, the sans-Thor attack and dynamics is undeniably attractive but, possibly not entirely truthful.

To complete the experiment, I re-introduced the cheaper interconnect and speaker cables in turn, and now the differences were much more pronounced and in keeping with what I know of the Nordost cables' strengths. Chorus interconnect loses low level detail, cymbals are more damped, atmosphere and space more constrained, Tyr restores the full, lush beauty and rich instrumental timbre. Epic Twin speaker cable is softer focus, with less tuneful, more plodding bass. Which is emphatically not a criticism of the Chord cable, remember it is scarcely a tenth the price of the Nordost, it is a reminder that, without the mains stuff in place, the more expensive cables simply couldn't ▶



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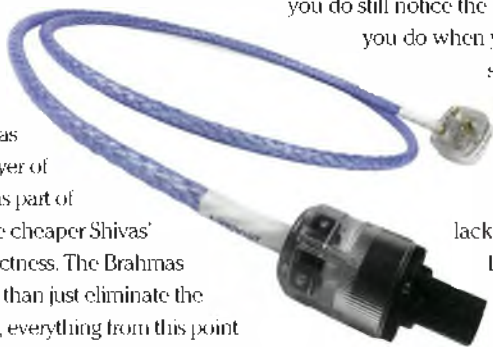
► deliver. In many ways this is good news. High-quality mains leads and conditioners are rather less expensive than top flight interconnects and speaker cables. We are back, in a curious sort of way, to the "Front-end first" philosophy, except that now, the front end is the mains socket at the wall, not the music source.

The benefits wrought by the Thor and the Brahmas are well-documented in RG's reviews, suffice to say in this system the Thor kept everything firmly anchored and the Brahmas eliminated a layer of grain which was part of the price for the cheaper Shivas' clarity and directness. The Brahmas do much more than just eliminate the grain, however, everything from this point forward just feels better nourished. I know that's a very anthropomorphic analogy, but I don't care. There is another, curious effect of the pairing in that the music opens out, temporally. It's obviously not slower, although it almost seems so, but there's a clear sense that the musicians are not hurried, they have more time to create the notes. It's not languid but it is relaxed, and they sound like better musicians in consequence. Don't make the mistake of assuming this robs the music of impact. There's a world of difference between stress and drama and even if the Thor does sound quieter, you can always turn up the volume and when you do, there is manifestly less strain.

There is one small irritation, the Brahma leads are quite fat, somewhat stiff and rather springy, which makes cable dressing a bit like arranging a box full of puppies. So if you're concerned about cables touching walls, or twisting themselves out of their sockets (they can, and do) then leave a decent space behind your supports and don't attempt this when you're short of time or patience.

The Tyr interconnect shows its superiority over Valkyrja, a quieter noise floor, less hash, and a better sense of

space are the primary, obvious benefits, but coupled with them, and crucially in the context, is much improved bass definition. People who don't know Nordost cables will claim they are bright; those who do counter-claim that they just don't lose as much treble energy as other cables. What is not disputed is that what you tend to notice first is the treble. Then, when you acclimatise, you realise that the effect is broad-spectrum after all. But you do still notice the treble, rather like



you do when you first hear a speaker with a top-notch tweeter, but now as something you previously lacked. Tyr is different, but possibly you'd only be aware of this coming from a lesser

Nordost cable. Bass gains a significant degree of weight, tuncfulness and control, while treble gains sweetness and loses grain. I found myself wondering if Valkyrja was voiced more towards the top end, but switching back, it is clear that Tyr concedes nothing in terms of treble energy. The overall effect is of a far better balance. The Tyr loudspeaker cable further underlines the beneficial effects which is why, I think, Nordost occupies such a special niche. Other high-end cable makers also have a hierarchical system but few exhibit such consistency of performance across mains, interconnects and speaker cables such that each complements the others and adds to the strengths, with such a coherent sonic signature.

The naysayers still maintain that cables (by which they mean interconnects and speaker cables) are, at best, expensive tone controls. And my experiences here would suggest that they have a point, up to a point. Certainly, exchanging the lesser cables for expensive Nordost ones wrought far less benefit initially than might be expected for the price. Until the mains was addressed, that is: that

done, everything started to make much more sense. The difference between the two sets of cables is not just obvious, it is fundamental to the ultimate performance of the system. All of a sudden, the expense of the high-end cable is justifiable. It seems we have another hierarchical approach to consider and it starts way in front of the source. On the evidence of my own ears, properly designed mains leads and distribution boxes are crucial to getting the best performance out of your chosen hardware. Further upgrades, whether to componentry, interconnect or speaker cables, are pointless, until you know how your existing equipment sounds with a properly sorted mains feed. Front end first? You betcha, but only if you go right to the very front. ➤

Nordost Tyr cable

Interconnect, WBT NextGen Phono plugs, 1m pair, \$1249.95; 1.5m pair, \$1434.95; (per 0.5m increment, add \$172.50)

Loudspeaker cable, single or bi-wire termination, 3m set, \$4,311.95; 5m set, \$5,747.95; (per 0.5m increment, add \$359.00)

Nordost Brahma

Mains leads, 2.0m with 10A IEC plug, \$899.95; (per 1.0m increment, add \$160.00; 16A Wattgate IEC add \$50.00)

Nordost Thor

6-way power distribution box, \$1649.95

UK distributor:
Activ Distribution
Tel. (44)(0)1635 291357
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Seeing Clearly...

The Crystal Cable Ultra Loom

by Roy Gregory

"Gregory using cables from someone other than Nordost!" I can see the shock in certain quarters already. But settle down at the back there. This isn't as big a roach as it might appear, because despite some very obvious physical differences, Crystal Cables and Nordost share a number of critical conceptual similarities. On the surface these are very different products, but the thinking behind them, the way they do their job, is extremely similar. Having said that, it's not the same job that they do...

However, more of that later: first, I think a little background is in order. Whilst Crystal might be a new name in the great scheme of cable things, launching their first product a little over four years ago, they sprang from well-established roots. The giveaway is in the metallurgy; Crystal use a silver/gold alloy for their conductors – the same alloy employed by Siltech. In fact, the two companies might not be joined at the hip, but they are, quite literally married to one another – at least the management is. Siltech is owned and run by Edwin van der Kleij; Crystal belongs to his wife, Gabi. The two companies share a common technological base and production facilities, but there the connection ends. With its own, independent company structure and a totally separate design team – not to mention a fiercely independent CEO – what Crystal does with that technology is very distinct from the Siltech solution.

The Ultra cables reviewed here represent Crystal's flagship product, top of a five-tier range, all of which share coaxial construction and silver/

gold alloy conductors. Incorporating small amounts of gold into the high-purity silver effectively fills the holes which would otherwise be left in the metal's crystal structure, enhancing conductivity as well as banishing space for contaminating impurities and creating a more consistent matrix. The result should be a more stable conductor, with much greater longevity. Now, whilst such metallurgical claims



are impressive, I'm not qualified to discuss their accuracy. Of more interest to me is what they say about the lengths Crystal are prepared to go to in order to achieve their ends. Given a product range that starts at just a little over £100 a pair, using such exotic and expensive technology (and it's certainly both of those things) suggests a heavy commitment to both quality and value – concerns that more than occasionally seem to have passed cable companies by. The flagship Ultras approach

Valhalla price levels, but that seems almost reasonable given the cost of some competing products.

But this is where the wider conceptual approach takes over, bringing cost savings of its own. The basic cable geometry is extremely simple throughout the range, a solid core silver/gold central conductor being wrapped with a Kapton film to space it from a pure silver, woven outer, which is in turn sheathed in a thin

layer of Teflon. It doesn't get much simpler, or thinner, than this. As you move up the range, the central conductor gains weight, but even the Reference leads are incredibly spindly compared to the competition. It's not until you get to the Ultra range that the conductors are twisted. But taking things a stage further, identical conductors are used throughout each range, paired up as required to produce everything from tonearm leads to power cords at each price level, meaning that a single base conductor is used to create an entire product tier.

Far from being a cheap shot, this is one of Crystal's greatest virtues, the utter consistency across all the cables in a system offering very real musical benefits. Yet the less-is-more simplicity extends further still, with lightweight terminations continuing the low-mass/low-bulk philosophy, and even the elegant packaging making the competition look heavy, bulky and over done.

By now, those conceptual similarities with the Nordost cables should be becoming clear, but just in case... ►

► There's the consistency of the materials used throughout. There's the minimalist construction and attention paid to low dielectric effect. There's the geometrical accuracy of each conductor and the low-mass terminations. There's the provision of a complete, coherent range of cables to meet every system need, from the wall socket onwards.

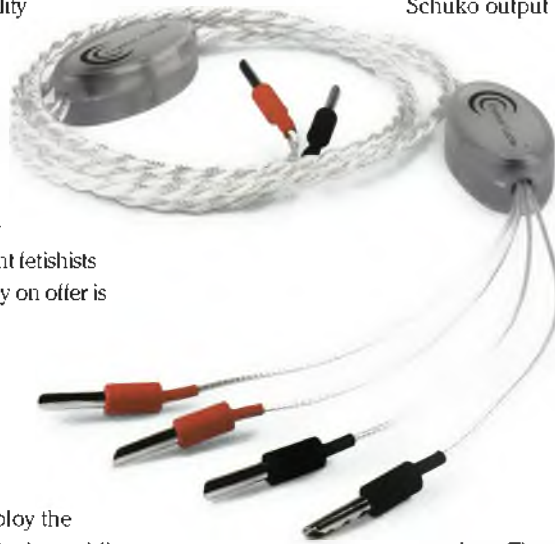
Not that these things are exclusive to Nordost. But they are things that every really successful cable brand (and there are fewer than you'd think) has in common. In the case of Crystal, the geometrical and materials consistency across the tiers in the product range means that the cables can also be mixed and matched more successfully across less critical applications, without any loss in overall musical coherence, while their slim dimensions, low mass and flexibility make installation itself extremely easy. Unusually, the speaker cables have exchangeable terminations, lodged in the case of the Ultras, inside the oval housings at each end of the run. Want to swap from spade to bi-wired 4mm plugs? No problem. Just order up the necessary terminations and swap them over, using the high-quality multi-pin connectors installed for the job. Purists, aghast at the introduction of any sort of break in their cables can order continuous runs, but for reviewers and equipment fetishists everywhere the flexibility on offer is a Godsend.

The Ultra cables themselves are of course, virtually identical, aside from their terminations. The single-ended leads employ the excellent Furutech RCA plugs while speaker cables can each be terminated with two or four, rhodium plated spades or 4mm Z-plugs. The balanced wires employ Neutrik XLRs and there's even a tonearm option with an IEF 5-pin

connector. Incidentally, Crystal also offer a rather natty iPod lead, which makes a great deal of sense if you want to connect your portable hard-drive to your main, Crystal-wired system.

As normal, I made sure that I had sufficient cabling to wire the entire system, regardless of configuration and including mains leads and distribution blocks. It's the latter where things start to get interesting. Even with three conductors twisted together, the Crystal Ultra power cords are thinner and far more flexible than most, a stark contrast to the springy awkwardness or sheer bulk of competing products. It's a compact neatness that carries over to the distribution block, a beautifully constructed oval composite of milled aluminium and Perspex, internal channels carrying the meticulously dressed and star-earthed conductors from the 15Amp input socket to the six

Schuko output



sockets. The use of European type socketry might seem obtuse, but not only do Schukos sound better than 13Amp UK sockets, they enter vertically, making cable dressing significantly easier, and allow

easy reversal of mains polarity, an oft overlooked but vitally important part of system set up. Taken together, a Crystal power loom thus consists of a 13Amp plug to 15Amp IEC lead which feeds the Powerstrip, together with as many as half a dozen Schuko to 13Amp power cords to feed the system. With all the plugs being genuine Furukawa and providing a good, positive fit, it's a neat, easy to handle and easy to dress set-up that allows you to keep your power leads well away from the audio signal. However, there is one glaring omission: where's the earth terminal on the distribution block? A simple addition, connected to a clean earth it would lift the performance yet another notch.

According to Crystal the leads need little or no burn-in. I put them on the Vidar anyway, but comparison with a virgin sample kept to one side indeed showed a smaller than expected difference. The same cannot be said of settling and dressing. In fact, I've never used a cable that responds so badly to being moved about or carelessly placed. Plug them in, sit back and you'll be greeted by a disappointingly compressed, grainy and congested sound, dull and grey, flat and lifeless. Leave them for a day undisturbed and you won't credit the improvement. Leave them for three days and you'll really start to hear what these cables are about. Likewise, simply trail them along the floor and you'll hear that too. Careful dressing of the cables, keeping them clear of walls, racks or other structures ►

► pays real dividends, as does supporting them clear of the floor on wood or Perspex risers. I used Quadraspire silencers with good results, and later the Ayre maple blocks proved even better.

Why should the Crystal Ultras prove so susceptible to settling and placement? I suspect it's down to the minimal amount of mechanical damping inherent in the structure. The dielectric material is kept to an absolute minimum, while the incredibly thin and hard Kapton will provide little or no damping at all. Add to that the twisted construction (which only applies to the Ultras) and each time you move them the separate conductors will be pulled into tension, a tension that will slowly relax over time, but a process that involves many, tiny mechanical shifts and jerks as the whole structure settles. And that's as close as I can get to any sort of explanation... the effect however, is hard to ignore.

Which I guess is good news and bad news. Attempt a quick AB comparison between Crystal Ultra and another lead and you'll conclude, wrongly, that the Ultras are expensive rubbish. Instead you need to take them home, plumb them in, listen after a couple of days. Then you need to take them out and replace your old cables. That's when you will hear exactly what these cables do – or rather don't.

If I had to describe what the Crystals do as they settle, I'd say that they step away from the music. When you first put them on they constitute a serious barrier to listening pleasure, but as time (and signal) passes they become less and less obstructive, allowing the system to become less obstructive too. So now that we've got the settling in period dealt with, let's just concentrate on what they deliver when they're singing, the musical access they offer...

You can hear it on anything, but on the whole the harder the music the more

obvious it will be. Blue Note's superb recent issue of the *Thelonius Monk Quartet at Carnegie Hall*, featuring John Coltrane



is a case in point. This is not easy music and it's not easy music to reproduce. Too many systems render it stark, angular, disjointed and discordant. It's a disc I've been playing a lot recently, on a lot of systems with different components and cables. But slip the Crystals into the equation and a common quality emerges. Take the performance of 'Epistrophe' as an example. It's a rhythmically complex track, with different tempi superimposed, a confusing and interruptive instrumental structure. Yet the Crystals impose a relaxed poise and calm on proceedings. Even the frenetic cymbal work locks into the pattern of the bass and piano parts. And pattern is the word. The sheer fluidity and shape of Coltrane's phrasing creates a logical progression in his shifts and developments, revealing the landing point even as he jumps. Monk's sporadic, often staccato interjections become subtle prompts and hints, the little nudges and bubbling up of excited anticipation they really were, so that when he steps forward, his long flowing line becomes a simple extension of the submerged thread that you now realise he's been teasing you with all along. The expression in his playing, the range of weight and placement with which he invests his notes lifts the melody away from the mechanics of the instrument, instead flowing it straight from his fingers.

The notes fit, the parts fit, the music makes perfect, glorious sense. It pulls you in and it's a pleasure to be pulled, simply because it's so effortless.

This isn't a great recording – a *Voice Of America* live broadcast from 1957 – but it is a great performance of what is undeniably great music. What the Crystals do is fasten your attention on the music, the playing of the band, the way they interlock to create a single coherent whole, against which issues like bandwidth (minimal), stereo (it's mono) and dynamic range (limited) recede in importance. It's a little like reading an ancient text. Often a fair copy is easier to follow than the illuminated and curlicued artistry of the finished page, the sense and passion in the writing submerged behind the formality and ornate intricacy of the finished page. Sometimes hi-fi systems get so wrapped up in the means of delivery that they forget the meaning of the message. Sometimes it might as well arrive in hieroglyphics!

The Crystal Ultras' musical integrity is built on balance. There's an innately natural, unforced and unexaggerated quality to their musical delivery. Tonally they're sweet and devoid of edge, while dynamically they are quick and crisp if not massively wide of range. Likewise transparency, staging, dimensionality and acoustic presence are all present without standing out. It's the very evenness of their achievement that elevates their ability to communicate. Imagine yourself looking across a perfectly flat plain; it's difficult to judge distance



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▶ without landmarks, it's harder to see a dip than a hill, a gentle depression than a stark mesa. Most cables (most components for that matter) draw attention to themselves because of standout qualities that disturb the sonic landscape, the stage on which the music appears. If the Ultra's have a standout attribute it's the musical independence they allow individual instruments, something that sums them up perfectly simply because it depends so completely on the correct balance of all the other contributing virtues.

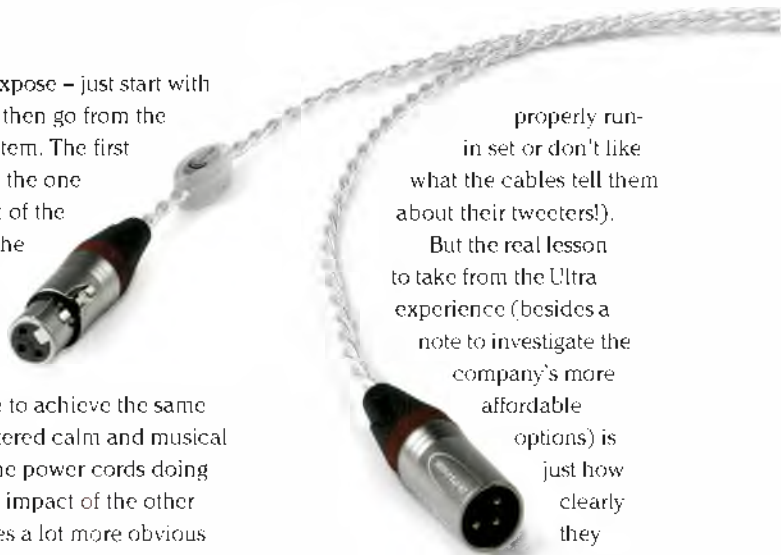
So, when you listen to Julia Fischer's Tchaikovsky on Pentatone, you are aware of the sharp tempo of Kreizberg's opening and the contrast it creates with Fischer's measured delicacy, the unhurried, confident maturity of her reading, the natural presence and scale of her instrument. Likewise you hear the balance between that instrument and the orchestra, rather than noticing the depth of the soundstage, the spread of the players, you hear the patterns and contrasts rather than the positions of the different instruments, the insistence of the winds asked to underpin the graduated crescendos rather than marvelling at the air around them. It's what you hear rather than what you notice that matters and the crystals lead you unerringly towards the performance, away from their (actually very impressive) hi-fi attributes. It's the whole that matters and it's a whole that the Crystals deliver.

As such it comes as no surprise that they are also heavily interdependent. Remove one element of the whole and you diminish the effect dramatically. However, given that few of us are in a position to purchase a complete loom of Crystal Ultra outright, the all too audible benefits of adding each element to the loom as a whole are an absolute boon. They're also big enough to establish just which order you should take them in. I'll save you the lengthy

and detailed expose – just start with the mains and then go from the front of the system. The first cable to buy is the one that comes out of the wall. Without the mains loom in place, the interconnects and speaker cables struggle to achieve the same level of unflustered calm and musical insight. With the power cords doing their thing, the impact of the other cables becomes a lot more obvious and a lot easier to both appreciate and forget – if you see what I mean.

Are Crystal's Ultras the perfect cables? No, but they are as conceptually elegant as anything out there, while top-notch materials and precision termination carries them an awful long way. For sheer musicality they are hard to beat, but that artistic integrity isn't won at the expense of smudged edges or limited resolution. They time beautifully and integrate copious amounts of detail. There are bolder, bigger and in hi-fi terms ultimately better cables out there. Of the ones I've heard none are cheaper and only the Valhallas match and the Odins exceed the sheer musical access offered by the Ultras – the latter at a fearful price!

It seems invidious to mention Nordost so repeatedly in a Crystal review, yet the conceptual similarities, the coherence of the approach and results are such that it is almost inevitable. What's more, the mono-filament cables have set the benchmark for so long that comparison is equally inevitable given the Crystal's performance. It's unobtrusive excellence makes it comfortable in such exalted company, while its distinctly different balance will appeal to those who describe the Nordost cables as "obvious" or "lean" (the ones who describe them as "bright" either haven't listened to a



properly run-in set or don't like what the cables tell them about their tweeters!).

But the real lesson to take from the Ultra experience (besides a note to investigate the company's more affordable options) is just how clearly they underline

the importance of a coherent approach to cabling your system, and where the priorities lie within that strategy. I have loved listening with these cables; their ability to lift the musical performance free of the system is exactly what hi-fi should be about. They offer no panacea for poorly assembled or matched components, they offer little or nothing of themselves save an imperturbable musical poise. They are both refreshingly simple and simply excellent. Allow them a little time and that excellence will unlock the musical performances you've already paid for. ➤

Crystal Ultra Prices:

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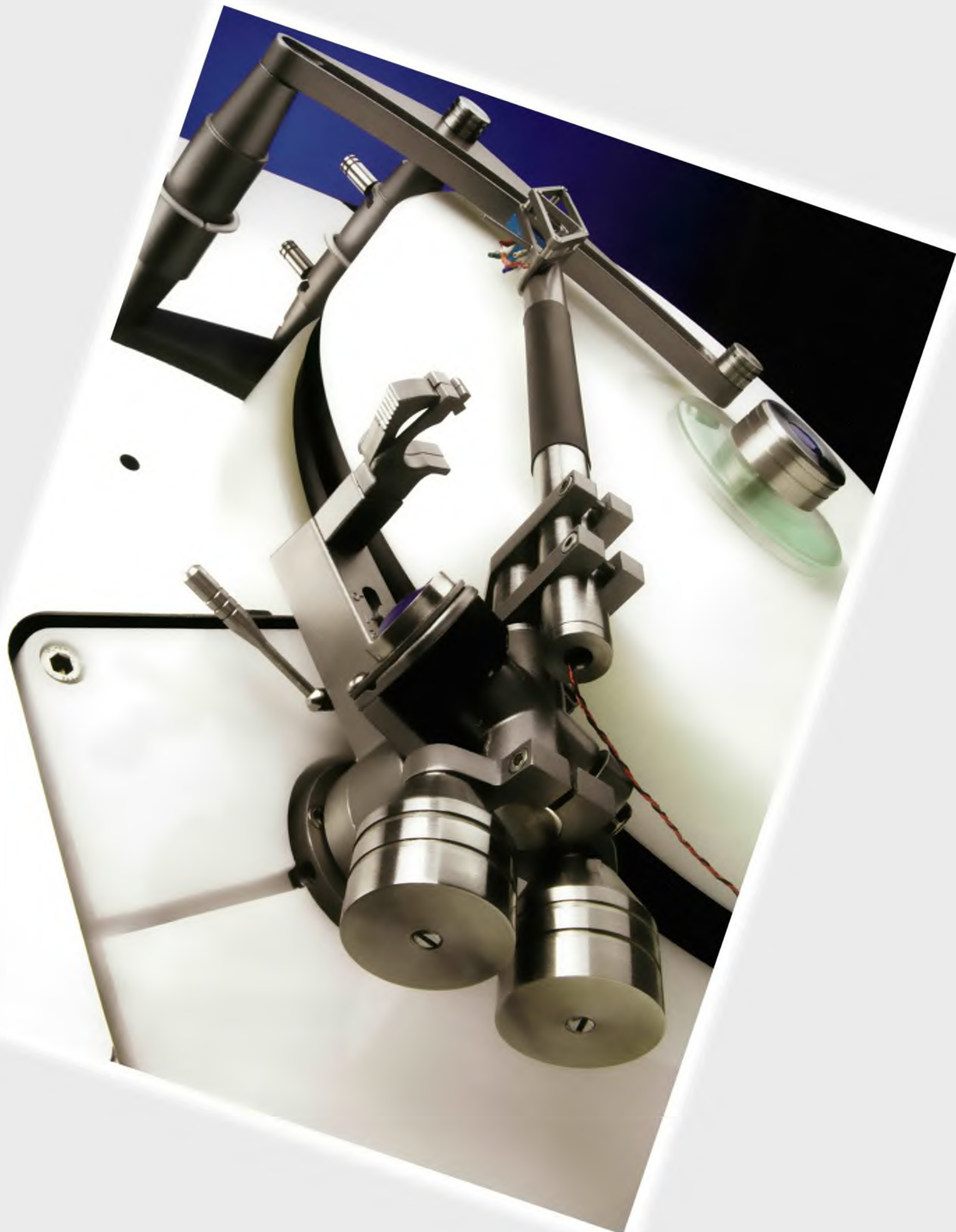
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The Townshend Rock V Record Player

by Roy Gregory

Considering the apparent simplicity of playing a record and the sheer scope it offers when it comes to innovation and Heath-Robinson engineering, it's remarkable how few new ideas have really stayed the course. Linear tracking tonearms remain, as do direct drive motors (recently enjoying a resurgence), but it's remarkable just how many new record players represent a refinement or amalgamation of older thinking. Even the once omnipotent suspended sub-chassis seems to have had its day. Perhaps it reflects the fact that the engineering was indeed all too Heath-Robinson, a fact readily revealed by a problem that demands a pure engineering solution. Or perhaps it is the result of a lack of global thinking, in the sense that too many products offered solutions to a single problem rather than reflecting the all embracing and conflicting nature of the challenges. However, there are two obvious exceptions to this rule, and both attract small but vociferous and dedicated followings. One is Bill Firebaugh's Well Tempered Arm and Table, in all its various iterations. The other is the Rock...

Of course, the Rock isn't a single turntable, just as there are various Well Tempered designs. Indeed, the various Rocks differ in almost as many ways as they possibly can, from solid plinth to suspended designs, universal motor units to integrated record players. But the one thing they all have in common, the thing that divides opinion into the pro and

anti lobbies and in many respects, the thing that dominates the nature of their performance and musical presentation, is the front-end damping trough. That variation in design tells its own story: for every engineering challenge represented by a turntable or tonearm, there's more than one solution – save one. Critical damping of the tonearm/cartridge resonance can only be achieved by applying that damping as close as possible to the source of energy, and that means the stylus record interface.

That in turn dictates some form of front-end damping arrangement and nothing yet has superseded the fluid filled trough.

"But why the fuss?" I hear you ask. After all, there's plenty of well-regarded tonearms that use minimal damping applied at the pivot or no damping at all.

Interesting to note then, that that other great turntable innovator, Bill Firebaugh damped his entire tonearm

tube with sand and effectively immersed the main bearings in a silicon-oil damping well. For controlling resonance in the pick-up arm is one of the great, unsolved conundrums of record replay.

Look at it this way. Move the stylus and that movement is detected by the magnetic circuit contained in the cartridge body and thus produced as signal. But that signal depends on the movement of the coil relative to the stationary magnet (or vice versa in a moving magnet cartridge) so an accurate



transcription depends on holding that magnet stable. But as the stylus is moved sideways by the record groove modulations, it will tend to drag the cartridge and tonearm in the same direction, creating inaccuracy in the signal. This is why designers refer to the closed loop between platter, arm and cartridge and place such emphasis on the rigidity of their arm bearings. And yet, herein lies the biggest conundrum of all. ►



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► The arm must dissipate mechanical energy that would otherwise move it in sympathy with the stylus and it must do so without creating dominant resonant peaks that would themselves be read as signal. Yet at the same time, it must allow the cartridge and stylus assembly the freedom to read microscopic variations in a groove and trace those grooves across the surface of the record, making lateral or vertical friction absolute killers when it comes to accurate reproduction.

You can tackle these issues in a number of ways involving the structure of the arm and its physical arrangements, moving potentially harmful resonance outside the audible band, damping the structure of the arm itself. But the fact that the Rock sounds so different to other turntables tells its own story.

The Rock solution is to place a fluid-damping trough right next to the cartridge, allowing slow, gradual movement, but resisting faster or more sudden deflections. At the same time it effectively offers a far shorter route to close the mechanical loop between platter and cartridge. You just need to remember that damping one end of the arm will encourage the other end to flap about, so you can't afford to skimp on the bearings there, even if the front-end damping carries some of their load. Once you've engineered the practicalities of the design (allowing the trough to move for placing and replacing records, fixing the arm's arc of travel and thus effective length) the rest of the deck can rely on established engineering principles. As I've already suggested, these have varied over the years, dictated by price and technology as much as anything else. However, to really

understand the Rock V, we need to look at the stillborn Mark IV, or Rock Reference Master.

The Reference Master record player was vastly complex and so expensive to build that it was never to be a commercial reality, only one ever seeing the light of day. The Rock V takes much of the engineering and thinking involved in the IV project and recasts it in a more practical and realizable shape. So, gone is the three speed

you increase numbers. If you increase numbers a lot, then you'll slash those costs, so why not cannibalize key parts from the World's most successful and reliably engineered budget turntable, the Rega? And that's exactly what Townshend have done. Look at the arm and you'll notice that the bearings, base, arm-rest, arm-lift and bias arrangements are all taken directly from a Rega RB300, duly sandwiched between a new armtube and counterweight arrangement. Less obvious is that the motor pulley, sub-platter and main bearing as well as the



electronic power supply with fine pitch control; gone is the electronic adjustment of VTA and the motorized arm base that compensated automatically for tracking error – although these features, or facilities quite like them will feature as future options on the Rock V. However, core aspects and principles have been preserved through a novel and to some no doubt, shocking use of lateral thinking.

The logic goes like this: a turntable is a precision engineering product and what makes it expensive is the precision required and the small number of parts produced. But, whilst you can ill afford to reduce the precision or widen the tolerances, you can reduce costs if

glass disc that forms the basis of the main platter are also culled directly from Rega parts. By doing so, Townshend are able to rely on Rega's engineering consistency and selection processes, where thousands of parts are matched to meet precise tolerances, to deliver parts at a price and quality that they could never achieve independently. Those savings can in turn be invested in other aspects of the design, to wit, the plinth, suspension, damping trough and tonearm parts.

The deck itself is a three-point suspended design, using a powder coated plated steel sub-chassis filled with cast plaster-of-paris sitting on ►

▶ three coil-springs. Each spring is enclosed in a rubber bellows (or shock boot in cycling parlance) that is pierced by a small hole. Move the spring and you alter the internal pressure of the bellows, which thus resists movement until the air pressure equalizes, the rate of equalization defined by the size of the hole. It's a form of damping much used where weight is an issue, so you find it on high-performance motorcycles and mountain bikes. Indeed, anybody who rides such a vehicle will instantly recognise the slight wheezing that accompanies violent displacement of the Rock V's sub-chassis. The main plinth is also stainless-steel, chosen for its longevity, while three turned bosses provide parking points (left and right) for the record clamp and a drip tray for any escaping fluid from

the parked arm's damping wand, to prevent cosmetic marring of the shiny surface. Aluminium plates front and back dress and further damp the plinth, which sits on a 6mm thick steel base and four feet.

In the open area around the sub-platter, rotating steel wedges allow users to disable the suspension for transit, although levelling beyond the factory setting depends on tweaking the spring mounts from below. The platter simply sits on the plastic moulding of the sub-platter, and consists of a Rega glass platter sandwiching a 4mm thick disk of damping compound bonded to a thick slab of white vinyl. The record spindle is threaded to take the small clamp, while the central boss can be wound up and down to vary the clamping action or even act as a record centre for 45s.

The trough arrangement should be familiar, but has been reengineered. Height can be varied to accommodate different cartridges and it locks in place across the record using the front mounted cam lever. It feels reassuringly solid in use –which is just as well given the amount of silicon fluid it contains, poised just above your fragile record grooves.

The arm design grafts a double-barrelled front tube reminiscent of a Triplanar, onto the Rega bearing housing, secured via a pin and single bolt threading into what was the Rega arm-tube. The cradle arrangement that clamps the upper tube allows adjustment of overhang and azimuth. The headshell meets the tube on a shallow slant in established Excalibur style, and supports the magnesium spaceframe that carries the damping wand. ▶

Trough Line... The early development and family history of the Rock project

The collection of (in some cases revolutionary) ideas that were to combine in the creation of the original Cranfield Rock turntable emerged under the tutelage of Jack Dinsdale, already the creator of the first output transformerless solid-state amplifier and a well-received range of horn loaded loudspeaker designs. But it was in his role as head of the Department for the Design of Machine Systems at the Cranfield Institute of Technology that he guided the development of what was to become the Rock. As part of their Masters thesis, each student on his graduate teaching course had to complete a six-month project. Earlier work at CUPE (Cranfield Unit for Precision Engineering) had produced a novel, zero-contact fluid bearing (subsequently licensed but never used by Garrard) and a synthetic mineral material, Granitan S100, both of which lent themselves to the design of a high-quality record player. With Dinsdale's proven interest in audio reproduction, it was a natural step to encourage students to pursue this path.

In 1977-78, one student, John Hardwick extended the scope of the project by moving into the area of tonearm design and resonance. His work concentrated on creating a system to effectively damp the mechanical resonance

established through the playing of a vinyl record. Dissatisfied with the mechanical disadvantages of traditional damping systems set near the arm's pivot, the obvious route was to damp the tonearm's movement as near to the stylus/record interface as possible. Thus was born the (in)famous trough, defining aspect of each and

with a simple belt driven platter and a front-end damping trough. It was this model that attracted the attention of Max Townshend, who promptly offered to sponsor further development work.

This became the province of yet another student, John Bugge, and it was he who created the first Granitan plinth, and refined the drive system, trough and tonearm design, the latter concentrating all the forces acting on the arm along with its centre of gravity at a single point and in the plane of the record. It was this design that was widely demonstrated to the public and was to evolve into the first commercial product, the Elite Cranfield Rock, released in 1982. Sadly, with the incorporation of a complex fluid damped suspension along with the other developments (save the fluid bearing, which was never released by Garrard or used in a commercial record player design) the deck proved too costly and time consuming to produce and Bugge's manufacturing company was wound up in 1983, having only produced some 250 'tables.

Development now passed to Max's Elite Gramophone company, and the first commercially viable designs soon followed. The Rock Mk II, launched in 1984, was a massively simplified version based on a solid, plaster filled plinth and platter (a poor man's equivalent to Granitan), a simple ▶



every Rock turntable. But it wasn't until the following year that another student, Michael Clayforth-Carr undertook the construction of a prototype plinth, constructed from laminated layers of chipboard and aluminium, to combine the bearing design

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▶ The arm-tube itself is additionally damped by a plastic sleeve. This structure allows the horizontal bearings to be positioned ideally in the plane of the record, while a plug on the arm cable that exits the upper tube enables the forward section to be exchanged complete with cartridge, although this is not a particularly simple or quick exercise. The twin counterweights are hung from a machined yoke, their small dimensions keeping them close to the pivot point, optimally positioned relative to the arm-tubes and out of the way when cueing. The result is rather striking (in a bits and pieces, 50's science fiction sort of way) if not actually particularly elegant. It also incorporates Rega's dynamic balancing tracking force adjustment and bias arrangement, both of which are well engineered solutions

but whose scales are notoriously inaccurate – around 10% and 30% respectively on the review sample. Proper set-up using an accurate set of scales is essential. VTA is adjusted using a simple grub-screw through the side of the arm collar, reached via a groove in the white vinyl arm-board.

Actually playing a record adds swinging the trough into place to the whole procedure, but it's remarkable how natural this quickly becomes. It also allows you to listen with and without front-end damping: suffice to say, it's a salutary demonstration and one which once undertaken will have you using the trough every time you play a record, which helps explain why most of the Rock turntables ever sold are still in use today, and any that crop up on the secondhand market are snapped up, often for more than their originally

asking price.

Music played on the Rock V is characterized by its incredibly low noise floor and a sense of calm stability. The carefully sculpted phrases and heavily shaped notes of Chris Isaak's 'Wicked Game', their stretched and contorted length laid over the chuggy insistence of that infectious bass line thrive on the 'table's easy, unforced sense of space and timing. The measured pace of the track and the slow, elongated delivery of the vocals can easily lag if they're allowed to, but the lock-step quality of the Rock's low-frequencies keeps the rhythmic momentum and signature clear and precise, perfect foundation for the beautifully resolved reverb and effortlessly separated backing harmonies.

It's no one-pace wonder either. 'Heart Shaped World' runs it ▶



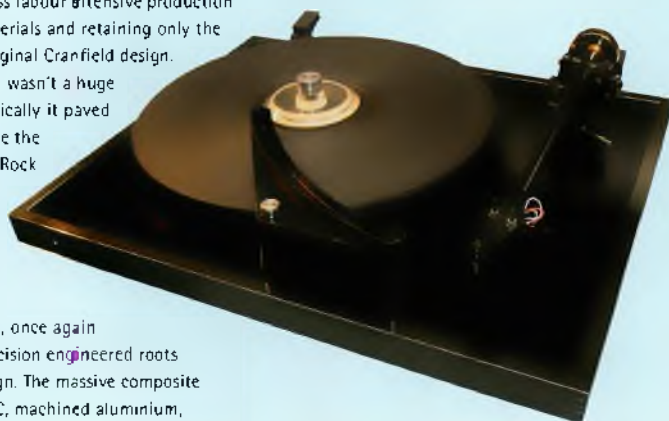
▶ belt drive and of course, the trademark trough. A precision inverted bearing was employed while "suspension" was handled by a quartet of Sorbothane blobs. Available with the Bugge designed Excalibur arm from the Cranfield Rock, it was also offered as a motor unit with a headshell-mounted outrigger to support the damping paddle. Later, a wooden picture frame outer plinth was created to soften the rather utilitarian looks and support a plastic lid. Despite the almost brutal simplicity of the design, it was the Mk II that firmly established the Rock and the concept of front-end damping in the hearts and minds of the record playing public. And whilst even its father struggles to describe it as beautiful, it was affordable and undeniably effective. Used with the just launched Rega RB300 arm the combination became a veritable giant killer, appealing to those who wanted nothing more than to drive a wedge into the first cracks then

appearing in the LP12 edifice; 3890 wedges to be exact.

But this was also the period when industrial design really gained its first toe-hold in the world of hi-fi, and soon products like the Arcam Alpha, Cyrus I and Musical Fidelity A1 were showing that affordability and superior aesthetics needn't be mutually exclusive. The Mk II's functional exterior and prosaic standards of finish were quickly becoming unacceptable, resulting in the emergence of a cheaper but prettier budget model, the Avalon, based on less labour intensive production techniques and materials and retaining only the trough from the original Cranfield design. Launched in 1988 it wasn't a huge success, but aesthetically it paved the way for arguable the most accomplished Rock design to date, the Reference launched in 1989.

This massive 'table, imposingly black in appearance, once again returned to the precision engineered roots of the original design. The massive composite platter involved PVC, machined aluminium,

lead, damping materials and plaster: it was belt driven from an electronically controlled motor, and once again suspended by a fluid damped suspension on a plaster damped sub-chassis. Bearing was a development of the Mk II inverted design, but using a Tungsten Carbide insert in the tip of the post. The logo and speed indicators were LDR controlled to self adjust to ambient light conditions, with the whole mounted in a handsome timber and Perspex plinth. The trough and Excalibur arm were carried over almost unchanged but the fit, finish and presentation were fully commensurate with the high asking price, which didn't seem to deter customers at all. Finally, the Rock's sonic ▶



► through the gears, its rhythmic hesitations and changes of pace, together with its fast-fingered, undulating bass line demonstrates the sure-footed solidity this deck instils in music's nether regions. Even the life and energy of the kick-step tempo of 'Heart Full Of Soul' is encompassed with ease. If you are worried that "damped" means "dead" – don't be. The uncluttered transparency of the Rock V's lower registers keeps things clear and perfectly placed, its low noise floor delivering the dynamic goods, both in terms of nuance and absolute dynamic range.

Okay, so we've dealt with that: There's nothing slow or lifeless about the Rock's reproduction. In fact, it's quite the opposite. There's a naturalness to recordings that is quite uncanny and which seems to push the system into the background,

allowing you to concentrate on the performers. It's a quality that's especially apparent on less than wonderful recordings, where the deck's poise and control seem to iron out some of the disc's worst excesses without stamping on the music. Playing a recent repressing of Neil Young's *After The Gold Rush*, a record marred by splashy upper-mids that infect the singer's nasal drawl, the Rock cleans up the hash and renders Young's voice both more pleasant and more accurate, a neat trick indeed if you can do it...

Much of the listening was conducted with the Wilson Duette/WATCH Dog combination reviewed elsewhere in this issue, both with and without the sub. It was an interesting match, as it underlined the extent to which the cleanliness of the turntable's lower register opened out the Duette's

mid-band, improving separation, placement, the shape and duration of notes as well as their harmonic structure in much the same way as the sub-woofer does. Likewise, the stability of the platform provided by the tonearm allowed the Lyra Skala to deliver greater resolution and detail to go along with its customary presence and dynamic contrast. This was never more apparent than in the flourishes and decaying arpeggios so often used by acoustic guitarists to close a song. The turntable's grasp of each note's tail, its shape and duration, the growing space between it and the leading edge of the next note, was held with such poise and delicately textured definition that it becomes a tiny, poignant microcosm in itself, with its own accent and emotional slant, the perfect parting shot; just as it should be.

This ability to separate and ►



► standards were paired with production quality to match and despite its elevated cost, the Reference seemed destined for significant commercial success, until the eclipsing of vinyl by CD forced it out of production after only 240 had been built.

Perhaps ironically, it leaves a lasting homage to its heritage in the shape of its main bearing, which can be retro-fitted to the original Cranfield model. That 'table used a variation on the original hydrodynamic design which was ultimately to prove problematic. The reference bearing used with a Gyrodec belt is the perfect substitute.

Next up was the Rock Mk III, launched in 1994 and riding on the wave of the vinyl revival.

Basically consisting of Mk II mechanicals and an acrylic platter built into a Seismic Sink isolation platform, it built on the classical simplicity of the donor unit, but added a more finished appearance and better isolation. It was a considerable success in the US, with close to 3000 being produced.

The Rock Reference Master (or Mk IV in numerical terms) was a massive, stainless steel clad development of the original Reference. Offering fine pitch control over 33, 45 and 78 speeds, its two major innovations centred on the arm, which now offered motorized and remote control operation of VTA, complete with numerical readout, but more importantly, a cam actuated drive system that moved the arm-base in an arc to compensate for tracking error across the record. Within the plinth the suspension system had moved forward too, the oil-damped brass bellows finally replaced with air-damped coil springs, a technology

familiar to anybody who rides a mountain bike. The problem with the fluid damping was that whilst it certainly damped motion it also acted to couple the suspended chassis to the plinth, just like the trough couples the arm. The air-damping provides far greater isolation.

In practice, the Reference Master was all but stillborn, only one ever being built. However, its importance lies in the bridge it provided to the Mk V, establishing new techniques and materials to further advance the design. The V might not be as lavishly complex as the Master, but it will ultimately offer many of the same facilities and solutions. Whether those options include a zero tracing error arm we'll have to wait and see, but motorized VTA is definitely on the way... ►+



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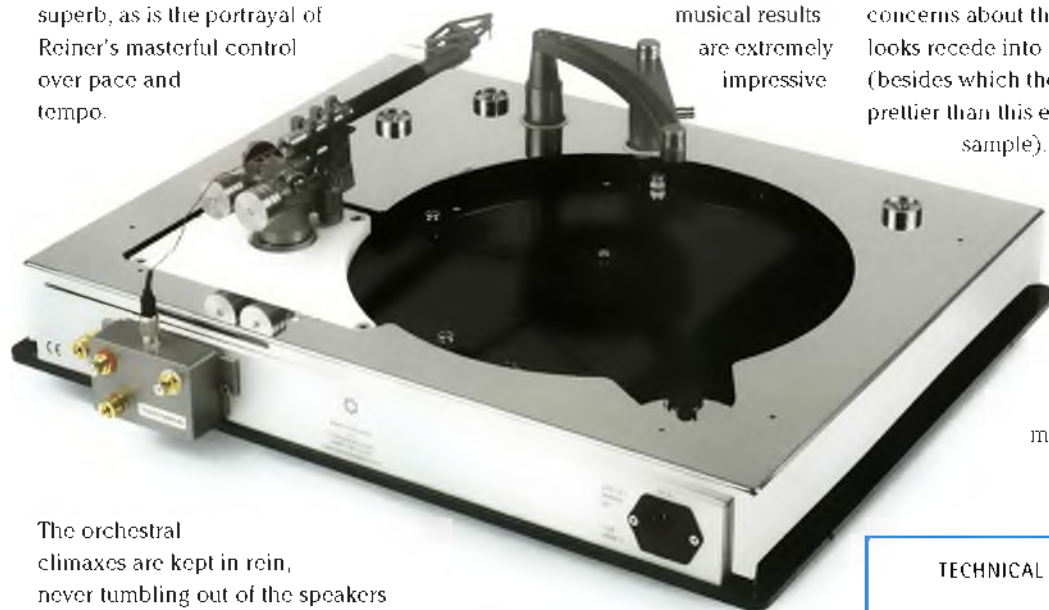
► preserve micro-dynamic information and the temporal terrain of the music translates just as effectively to large-scale works. The Reiner/Chicago *Lt Kije* is reproduced with a beautifully tangible acoustic and a stability to the placement of instruments that escapes all but the best (and often the heaviest) tables. Individual separation and tonality is again superb, as is the portrayal of Reiner's masterful control over pace and tempo.

bearing assembly and arm-base, having heard a similar loss of detail with Rega's own arms, but that is just supposition on my part. The loss is subtle enough to be pleasant rather than debilitating and again contributes to the Rock's forgiving way with less than perfect discs.

Considering that the Rock V is very much a work in progress, the musical results are extremely impressive

they arrive however, the Rock V is remarkable to me for the performance it achieves without these refinements. This early sample also lacks the levels of fit and finish that you get with more expensive and longer established designs, but then, they don't have a trough and once you've heard what a trough can do, you might just become addicted too. That's when concerns about the way a product looks recede into the background (besides which the latest units are far prettier than this early, well travelled sample). Because one

thing's for sure: the engineering basis that's under-pinned every single Rock design is alive and kicking in the V – and so is the music it plays. ➤



The orchestral climaxes are kept in rein, never tumbling out of the speakers or stepping forward in the stage, although here the more fulsome lower end of a deck like the TNT delivers a greater sense of physical presence and explosive power. That's a call you'll need to make for yourself, trading definition and separation against the sheer gusto that comes with the VPI. Likewise, although there's plenty of air around instruments the Rock has less obvious high frequency energy than other tables. In part that's a function of the cleanliness it brings to upper registers, rather like the apparently subdued performance of a diamond tweeter. But there's also a lack of extension and resolution of absolute detail, especially when it comes to the shimmer and rattle of beaded cymbals, the crisp snap of wood blocks or the upper harmonics of violin. I'd point a finger at the Rega

as well as artistically beguiling. There's no missing the natural, unforced quality or easy pace and separation, sweetened top and solid bass that this table delivers. It's a sound I could easily grow to love and a sense of poise and unexaggerated clarity that I'll miss when it goes. So why not install it on a permanent basis? The lack of real interchangeability in the arm (meaning no mono replay), the lack of interchangeability of arms full stop, and the lack of VTA adjustment on the fly are all issues for me. The lack of a lid – given the amount of silicon fluid around – is also a problem (albeit shortly to be solved) and I'd like to see a more sophisticated power supply. Most of these things are possible future options, especially the VTA adjustment and external power supply. Until

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Belt drive record player
Suspension:	Air damped, sprung sub-chassis
Speeds:	33 and 45
Platter:	Composite glass, vinyl and constrained layer damping
Clamp:	Screw down
Tonearm:	Front-end fluid damped
Effective Length:	220mm (stylus to pivot)
Effective Mass:	11gm
Dimensions (WxHxD):	525x165x415mm
Weight:	35kg
Number Of UK Dealers:	10
Guarantee:	5 Years
Prices –	
Rock V:	£4,500
Tonearm:	£2,500

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The DPS3 Turntable

by Jason Kennedy

Willi Bauer, maker of the dps turntable takes 'does what it says on the tin' product naming to new heights of clarity, or at least he does when you realise that dps stands for der plattenspieler or the record player. Willi is a Bavarian from Munich, home of Europe's finest high-end show and blokes who wear leather shorts. Willi as far as I know, does not wear lederhosen, but he does have a fascination for turntables, setting up his first one at the tender age of 15, culminating in 1999 when he started producing der plattenspieler.

The path that led to this result started with a Linn LP12 in 1978, replaced by a Pink Triangle Anniversary that arrived some fifteen or so years later. When PT went out of business he made a new bearing for the turntable but also invested in Bill Firebaugh's radical Well Tempered design, with its tonearm suspended on fishing line and a bearing that was propped in a box of oil. Looking at the dps you can see how Willi combined ideas from both of those designs. You have a similar approach to the WT plinth in the dps sandwich, along with a PT style acrylic platter.

But look a little closer and you will find there is plenty to distinguish the dps. The inverted bearing is composed of a tungsten shaft supporting an engineering plastic sleeve and uses a ruby ball to take the weight of the platter. The bearing shaft uses rubber O rings and a high viscosity oil/silicone mix to provide a specific and high level of resistance to the efforts of the motor. The idea here is to combat dynamic wow. This is the notion that variations in the signal create variations in drag

at the stylus/vinyl interface, supposedly because friction varies with signal. Others get around this by making the platter very heavy so that its inertia can overcome this issue, but there are those that dislike mass because of its ability to store energy. Acrylic platters are also extremely stiff and have a relatively high resonant frequency, something which the heavily

primarily intended to act as an energy sink for the motor that sits upon it, but it also supports three foamed elastomer pucks which sit in cups that can be adjusted for height. You don't use them



to level the plinth as this changes the angle of the platter relative to motor, but rather to bring the top plate up to the same height as the top of the motor body.

damped bearing on the dps attempts to control or at least ameliorate.

Acrylic platters of yore have often produced a highly dynamic and exciting sound but one can't help feel that this is due to resonance within the material being transmitted through the vinyl into the stylus. Listening to the dps 3 it seemed that the combination of bearing design, the threaded plastic record clamp and plinth design managed to retain the speed associated with acrylic without the associated resonance, it's still a more lively deck than my SME 20 reference but then again, most things are.

The plinth is made up of four layers although the first, a dense foam matt in a fetching shade of green, is so slim that it's not visible. It is important however as it forms a constrained layer sandwich between the supporting surface and the turntable base proper which is a granite slab. This slab is

Next up is the layer with the wooden surround, this contains a laminate of wooden and damping foils topped with a layer of cork which should have the effect of stopping high frequency resonances from getting into the black acrylic top plate. This top layer is where the tonearm and main bearing are supported and like the rest of the plinth is held in place by gravity and friction alone. In fact there are no real fixings as such on the turntable, the bearing housing slots into the plinth and the motor sits on the granite slab. If you decide you'd like to save on dusting time the optional lid also just sits on the top of the deck, with small transparent feet stopping it from sliding off.

The top plate and the next layer need to be made to accommodate your arm of choice. dps markets its own reworking of the Rega RB250 which has Incognito cable and a tungsten stub and counterweight



▶ as well as waxed-paper damping in the tube. This arm just slots into a hole in the black acrylic and is fixed by a grub screw from the side, thus allowing adjustment of VTA. The SME arms being somewhat bulkier require a larger hole in the wood layer to accommodate the cable outlet.

There are two dps turntables or, to be precise, there is one turntable with two alternative power supplies for the AC motor. The dps 2 has a single-phase supply with switching and adjustment for 33/45, while the dps 3 considered here has a synthesised three-phase supply which offers the same facilities but is twice the size. These power supplies are made by Willi's cohort Lawrence Martensen whose MPS phono stage I got quite excited about a few issues back. They share the same style casework with (beautiful) blue LED pinpricks to indicate status. The benefit of three-phase operation according



to Martensen and Bauer is that each phase is spaced from the next by 120 degrees, which forms a virtual rotating magnetic field within the motor's windings. This is said to result in much smoother rotational forces when correctly set up. Which is where the many slot head bolts in the front of the PSU and the sockets in the back

come in. They change the relative angle and amplitude of each phase and are factory set. So, in practice there are only two controls of relevance, neat little toggle switches that control speed and on/off. Given the threaded clamp, you need to make sure the switches are readily accessible.

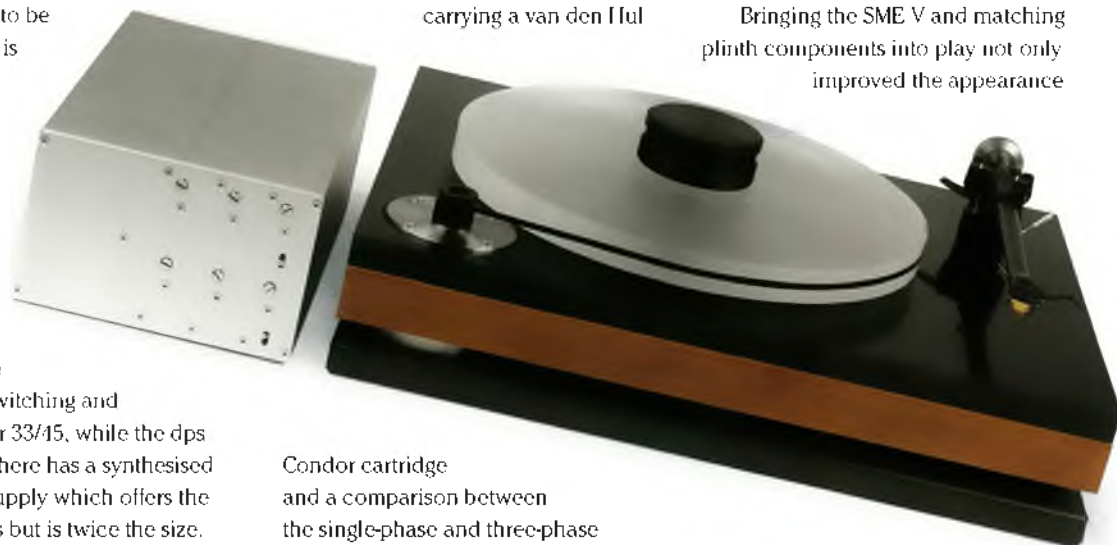
Listening started with the dps arm carrying a van den Hul

Condor cartridge and a comparison between the single-phase and three-phase supplies, the larger, more expensive box delivering greater resolution of acoustic space, more subtlety and higher levels of detail alongside a calmness that allowed higher volumes without discomfort. But as the listening progressed other qualities became

apparent, not least phenomenal dynamic range thanks to an incredibly low noise floor. The acoustic signature of the Pointer Sisters' backing vocals on Taj Mahal's *Sweet Home Chicago* is so utterly different to that on the lead vocal that one wonders whether the same studio was used on this 1972 recording (*Recycling The Blues & Other Related Stuff*). On Richard Thompson's more up to date but not entirely dissimilar *Old Kit Bag* the higher recording quality has a visceral solidity and presence

that is so real it could be in the room. But there is also a hint of hardness to the sound which I disc decided to counter with a plastic bodied van den Hul Colibri cartridge. This went a long way to providing a better balanced result, the sound being less incisive but more relaxed, tonally richer and even more enjoyable.

Bringing the SME V and matching plinth components into play not only improved the appearance



of the dps but also took the bass in particular into another league. Whether it was over £1,500 of extra league depends on the resolution of the accompanying system but in the context of a Trichord Delphini phono stage, Russ Andrews HP-1 pre-amplifier and ATC SCM150A active speakers it seemed a fair price for the increase in analysis offered. That said, the dps RB250 is remarkably good and if budget limits you to the choice between a dps2/SME V and a dps3/dps RB250, the latter would be my choice. Having said that I do love the way that the Series V produces such richness of detail and solidity of sound, especially in the all important nether regions, an underpinning which affects everything you play. Take *Newport Rebels* on Candid from the early sixties. There's no real, deep bass on this superb recording but there is a heck of a lot of life and energy coming from instruments that have grittily real timbre. ▶

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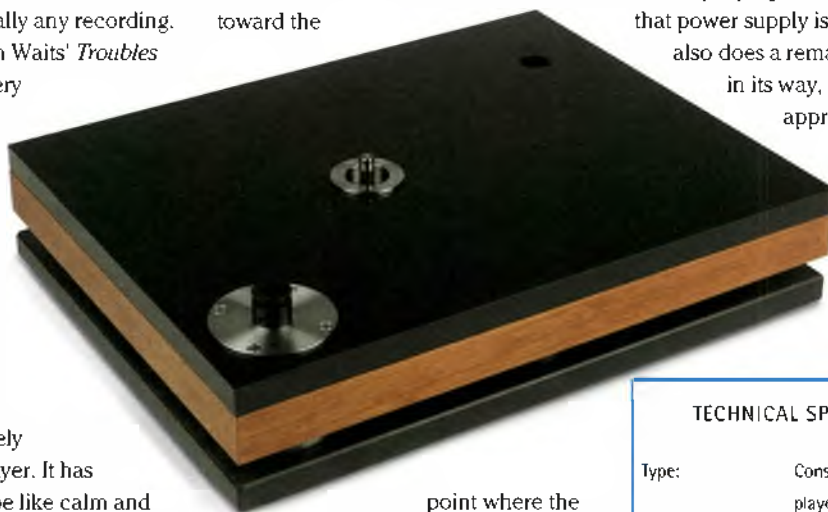
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► I also listened to the dps 3 in the more neutral environs of an Audio Zone Pre-T1, Gamut D200 power amp and B&W 802D speaker system. This set-up suggested that any hardness encountered previously was not coming from the turntable and perhaps that the RA pre-amp is not as well matched to the ATCs as I'd hoped. It also revealed more of the space that the dps 3 finds around acoustic instruments on virtually any recording. So much so that Tom Waits' *Troubles Braids* expanded every which way and delivered dynamics that were surprising in their vivacity, the double bass and percussion being unusually unfettered for a commercial recording.

This is a supremely analytical record player. It has an almost master tape like calm and precision that allows every nook and cranny of each recording to be heard. Some might find this approach a little short on thrills, speed or whatever you want to call it but they should really be looking to their record collection for these qualities. A lot of that excitement comes from colorations introduced by less sophisticated turntables, noise on the power supply, vibrations in the turntable etc. The dps 3 cuts out more of that hash than most designs I've heard and to be frank I'd be intrigued to hear what its power supply and motor could do for my SME Model 20. But I found plenty of thrills in my record collection thanks to the remarkable transient response of the plattenspieler.

As with all the turntables I've tried that have low compliance (stiff) suspension the dps 3 was improved by placement on one of Max Townshend's highly isolating equipment supports. Willi recommends solid stands or wall

brackets but he clearly doesn't have his turntable less than a metre from a 150 litre active loudspeaker! The move to the Townshend stand brought about an increase in bass weight and a drastic improvement in three-dimensionality. Even the background seemed to get quieter, allowing Gidon Kremer's violin on Arvo Pärt's *Fratres* to create unnerving tension as it builds in volume toward the



point where the piano joins in. The dps3 has an almost digital noise floor, I say almost though because it has all the beauty, depth and vibrancy of analogue, so in truth it probably sounds more like analogue tape but I've not heard enough of that (outside of cassette) to say for sure.

If you go to Willi's Bauer Audio shop in Munich you are more likely to find his turntable equipped with a Schröder, Graham or Tri-Planar pick-up arm and it would be fascinating to try any or all of those. I don't think however, that you would change the innately calm and resolute character of the turntable. You would just get a more or less neutral or revealing result depending on the quality of the arm used. The fact that such revealing results can be achieved with a revamped Rega is testament to the intrinsic quality of der plattenspieler. It's perhaps a little inconvenient that changing the arm

requires replacing the acrylic top plate (and sometimes the next layer down as well) but I don't imagine that a new plinth top will break the bank to the same extent as a Linn Keel!

The dps 3 is the most composed and purposeful acrylic-plattered turntable I've heard. In fact it's one of the best I've heard, full stop. Its levels of neutrality impose stiff demands on accompanying components and whilst that power supply is very expensive it also does a remarkable job. Which in its way, sums up the dps approach perfectly. ►+

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Constrained plinth record player with standalone motor
Bearing Type:	Inverted with ruby ball
Speeds:	33/45
Power Supply:	Single-phase or three-phase AC
Dimensions (HxWxD):	180x450x350mm
Weight:	23kg
Finishes:	Maple, cherry, walnut
Number Of UK Dealers:	1
Guarantee:	5yrs
Prices –	
dps 2:	£4,800
Lid:	£150
dps3 upgrade:	£2,050
dps RB250 tonearm:	£450
UK Distributor:	
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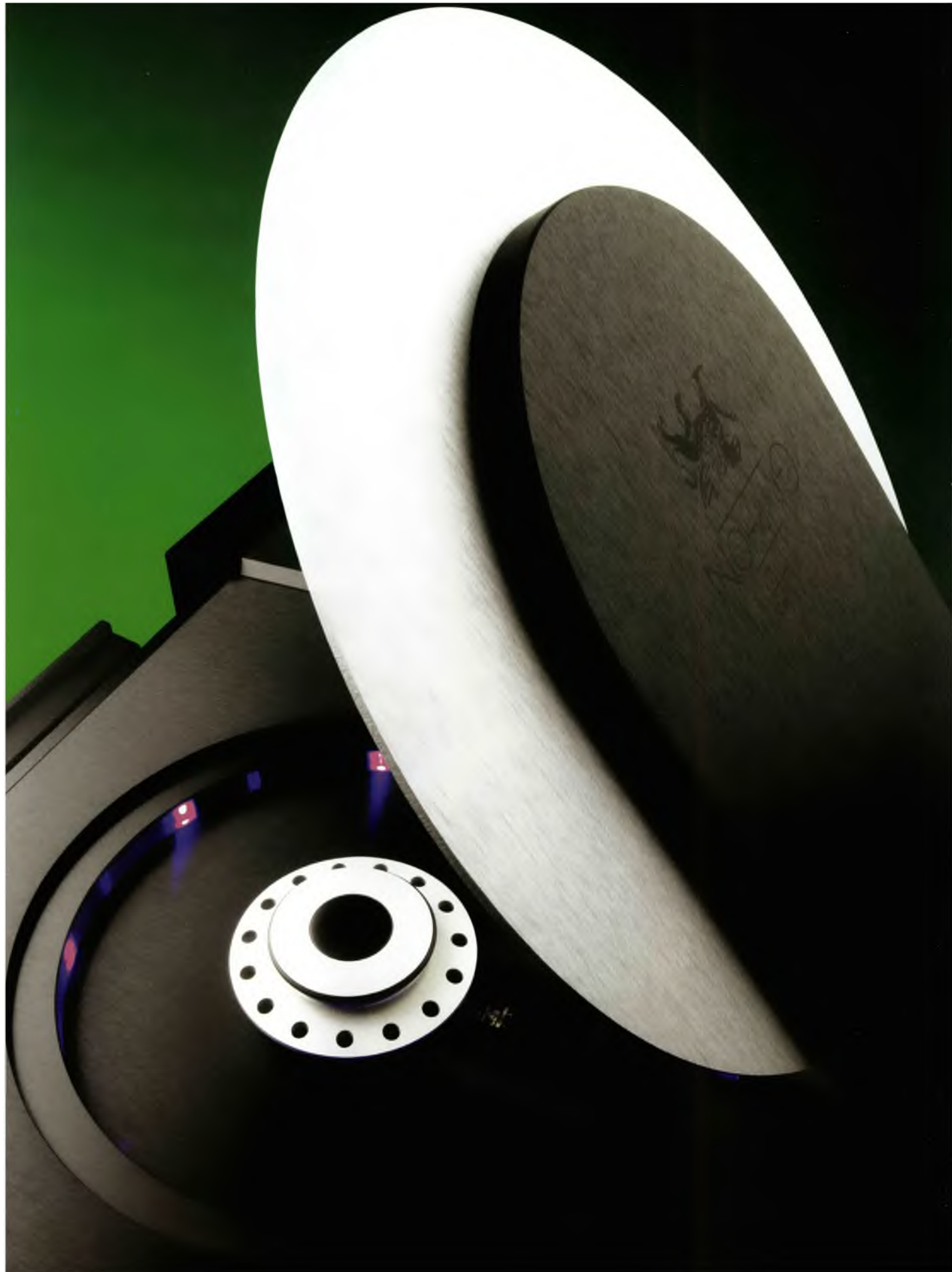


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Gryphon Mikado CD Player

by Chris Thomas

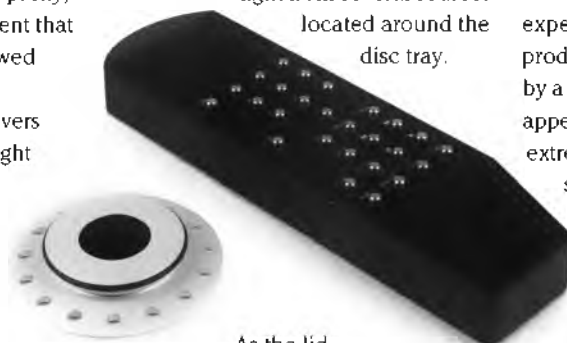
Anybody wanting proof of the burn-in phenomenon as applied to hi-fi equipment needs look no further than the gryphon Mikado. Listen to one with anything less than weeks on the clock (months would be better) and you will hear a bright, vibrant and undoubtedly dynamic performer but it will be so forward and in your face that, unless you just happen to like that sort of thing or are comatose, you will likely write it off as just another pretty, but expensive piece of equipment that swells the ranks of similarly flawed machines.

Straight from the box it delivers an intimidating, stiff and forthright musical message that grabbed my attention all right, but very soon had me feeling weary of its tense and rather brittle character. Now, I quite like a bold and forward sound, but this was a step way too far. I couldn't get far enough away from the speakers. Yet, beneath this insistently obvious presentation I couldn't help but notice micro-focus and sharp resolution – and that intrigued me. So I left it on repeat in a separate room for several weeks. Now, all equipment needs running in and over the years I had been here many times before, as have all reviewers. There have been some startling caterpillar to butterfly transformations but none quite as stark as the player that was emerging when I re-installed the Mikado, and it has continued to blossom over the passing weeks into something very interesting indeed.

This all-black, gloss-fronted player

from Danish company Gryphon is a beautiful looking single-box design. Slim in profile it has a semi-detached, angled display that has its own power supply, completely isolated from those tasked with digital duties. An elegant circular, motorised door swings open with a rather unattractive wheezing noise to reveal the transport. It also offers a light-tight environment for the disc, which is instead bathed in blue

light from several sources located around the disc tray.



As the lid

opens these begin to flash, which also adds a bit of theatre to the whole operation. When you look at the design of the 40 gram clamp which secures the disc to the heavily modified floating Phillips CD PR0-2 transport and see those blue flashing lights, it is hard not to conclude that designer Flemming Rasmussen is a fan of 50's American Sci-Fi movies (I'm thinking Forbidden Planet here). Gryphon have been a devotee of dual mono electronic design for years and the Mikado continues this trend. It has full-time up-sampling to 24/96 via four AKM Delta-Sigma D/A converters, each with an individually regulated power supply, four toroidal transformers and both single-ended

and balanced outputs as well as a couple of digital outputs as well. I have often complained about the quality of remote control units supplied with expensive CD players and amplifiers but not here. The Mikado unit is a solid, felt-bottomed device that only adds to the pleasure of using the player. Don't skimp on your power-cord either, as care here reaps rich rewards.

Although I have had limited experience of previous Gryphon products, they do seem characterised by a couple of things. Their physical appearance is always super-stylish, extremely distinctive and they are superbly built with a musical approach that is very involving and right to the point. This player is no shrinking violet.

A well run-in Mikado puts you at the heart of the music and in the right system, will show you its innermost workings. It is extremely transparent with a broad, open soundstage and the ability to disengage the performers from the limitations of the speaker boundaries and almost float them in space before you.

But don't get the impression that the pictures it paints are anything other than rock-solid. It is true that the Mikado never sounds as firmly grounded as my Naim CD 555, but it is endlessly dynamic in both big and small ways, and full of micro resolution that is not only instrumentally revealing, but also spatially. The Mikado makes extraordinary and ruthless demands of the system it is sourcing, as do

▶ all great products, but give it the right opportunities and you will be impressed at the sheer variety of musical expression it is capable of. For me it soon becomes one of the player's main attractions and the one that has endured. This is no ice-cold digital analysis and reconstruction of information. Although I would still describe the tonal balance as slightly cool, there is undoubted warmth and intimacy in the way that it brings the music into the room. David Sylvian's Blemish remixes of *The Good Son vs. The Only Daughter* (Sound CD SIS 005) is both a very unusual recording and one of those discs that relies heavily on an open spacious soundstage for its dramatic effect. It is as if the music has been remixed in 3-dimensional space. I have never heard it sound starker than through the Mikado as the contrasts of scale and texture fill the room. It becomes so easy to hear the relative positioning and precise levels of everything in the mix and the mid-air materialisation of Sylvian's quivering moody vocal is just plain spooky. Anyone who says that high levels of transparency, front-to-back depth and image are unimportant where hi-fi is concerned should hear just how critical they become here. This is a recording dripping in both atmosphere and weirdness and so much of its drama comes from the soundscape and the sheer distances between instruments and effects, making it a mix in the truest sense of the word. The Mikado's superb transparency and perspectives lets the music live and the system

becomes a kind of musical image projector. This is indeed a strange collection of tracks and ideas in sound and that is just how the Gryphon portrays it.

More conventional perhaps is Herbie Hancock's *The New Standard*, now a ten year old disc that is one of those recordings that walks that fine line between sounding excellent on good systems




and abysmal on bad ones. Piano has always been one of the most difficult instruments to record and reproduce (particularly digitally) and great examples are rare. But the Mikado always treats music with a delicate and deft touch. It has speed and strength in good measure but couple that with these attributes and it brings a real feeling of progression and rhythmic momentum. I have seldom heard *The New Standard* sound better or more joyous. Where my Naim CD 555 offers a serious and darkly shaded, intense view, the Mikado's offers a somewhat lighter approach by the musicians. Where most systems fall down on this disc is that they cannot resolve the density of the instrumentation, lacking the tonality and fine shadings of colour

and character necessary. This is exactly why the Gryphon excels as its superb separation, tonality and speed, coupled with its beautifully light touch really bring the playing to a peak and let you concentrate on all those things that set fantastic musicians apart. The phrasing of Hancock and his unique left hand chord technique which is so often a mere suggestion of where the harmonic direction might lie, is brought to life and so easy to follow.

You begin to understand that nothing on this album is quite as straightforward as you thought as he leaves the occasional brick out of the rhythmic wall altogether. Add to the mix the truly astonishing drumming of Jack DeJohnette and the way he uses his cymbals to illuminate the melody and the path ahead, and on the right system this becomes an involving and eye-opening experience. It is not one of the great recordings that are so often used to demonstrate hi-fi systems but it's great music nevertheless, music that might have been made for the Mikado's strengths.

There are very few downsides. There is, even after several months of intense use, a slight sheen that lays like a gloss varnish over the music. It does not really bother me, but I am aware that it is there. In the same way, I know that the tonal balance is slightly bright and that the presentation is always going to be a little on the forward and brash side. In comparison with my Naim CD 555, which is more than double the price, it can also sound a little rushed, when dealing with highly complex musical passages. The Naim is more relaxed and has a blacker and ▶



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► more tranquil background to operate from. But these are minor caveats and the sort of remarks that can be made of all but the very best players around – and they cost a lot more than the Mikado.

But let's not forget that music through a fine system should often have an element of fun to it. The Mikado does not disappoint here either.



It possesses a really fruity bass that is tight and full of impact. It never fades away as the frequency drops but remains impressively taut and in focus. Add to this its undoubted speed and you begin to understand what sort of system the Mikado requires. Coupling it with the Gryphon Diablo, a powerhouse integrated amplifier, makes a system with dramatic transient abilities that is full of impact and plain old-fashioned grip.

Trio Of Doom is a very interesting disc from the late, but very great bass-player, Jaco Pastorius, drummer Tony Williams, who died in 1997 and John McLaughlin. This is a commemoration and a snapshot of a trio that existed once upon a time and just for the duration of this disc. It was recorded in 1979 at the Havana Jazz Festival and only recently released. There is plenty of tape hiss and the recording itself endures completely unpolished and this is a good thing. The opening salvos are fired by Williams on a track named Drum Improvisation. Normally a title like that would have me moving swiftly on to track two but with the

Mikado in place and the volume control advanced beyond what would normally be considered a sensible level, it has a quality that you very seldom hear from recorded drums these days. The sheer visceral nature of the stick striking the skin, the tautness

and resistance of the skin itself and the incredible presence and transient impact place enormous strain on any system. Add to this the tuning of the tom-toms and the murderous high frequency impact from the cymbals and I guarantee you that dealing with this sort of energy would have most systems running for the hills. They couldn't live with it and you couldn't listen to it. With the Mikado running through the Lyra Connoisseur 4.2L SE and a pair of the exquisite Ayre MXR mono amplifiers the sound is intimidating and exciting, but never unpleasant. I suppose you could call the whole album a system-killer as it is so raw and uncompressed but, given the Mikado's innate talent for dealing with the transient and the MXR's unflappable ability to supply clean power without fuss or strain, it soon became a benchmark for the system's abilities. Because that is what we are dealing with here and in every other review of any piece of audio equipment. It is how you assemble a system around the component in question that really determines the results and the Mikado

ticks most the boxes.

This Gryphon presents the music enthusiastically and with a pacey edge and flavour. It may not be the most uncoloured or most tonally accurate at the price, but it always delivers a compelling and attention-grabbing view of the music and that, to me, is just as important. Be careful with partnering equipment though and remember my opening words of advice and never audition one that hasn't rotated many, many discs or you may wonder what all the fuss is about. The Mikado may not be cheap, but it presents an attractive and stylish option. ➤

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Single-box CD player
Transport:	Modified, susoended Philips CD-Pro 2 with all metal chassis
DACs:	2prs up-sampling to 24bit/96kHz
Digital outputs:	1x 110 Ohm AES/EBU 1x Co-axial 75 Ohm S/PDIF
Analogue outputs:	1or Single ended (RCA) 1or Balanced (XLR)
Dimensions:	100x480x370mm (HxWxD)
Weight:	11 Kg
Guarantee:	5yrs
Number Of UK Dealers:	1
Price:	£7200

UK Outlet:
Audio Salon
Tel. 01845 4000 400
Net. www.audiosalon.co.uk

Manufacturer:
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Christopher Breunig, Hi-Fi News
May 2007 (Score: 20 / 20)

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Duette Plus One...

Mixing Wilson's two-way stand-mount with the passive WATCH Dog sub-woofer

by Roy Gregory

Having reviewed the Wilson Duette as recently as Issue 47, and revisited it in Issue 48, with no major (or even minor) revisions made, ordinarily there'd be no reason to cover it again so soon. But this project dovetails so neatly with our ongoing discussion of sub-woofers and adding bass extension that it's simply too good to miss. Besides, I don't need that much of an excuse to get reacquainted with what is fast becoming a firm favourite of mine.

Possessing astonishing scale, musical coherence and balance, surprising dynamics and a beguiling tonal beauty, the Duette is a fantastically musical performer. To get that degree of musical authority and integrity from a package that is at once as tractable (as in easy to place, easy to drive and easy to accommodate) and versatile as this is, frankly amazing. This is the little(ish) speaker that breaks all the rules. It's too big to be small, too expensive to be a bargain, too small to have real bandwidth and not expensive enough to be taken seriously. And it breaks those rules by performing a balancing act more impressive than the great Wallenda doing a one-handed stand, atop a chair, half way across the Niagara Falls. So sure footed is this little gem that what matters is there and what isn't you don't notice. The only area in which you can dent its poise is with serious low frequencies, where it simply can't match the weight, texture,

dynamics and transparency of bigger speakers – which is what leads us to the WATCH Dog.

We've looked at single subs and we've looked at pairs of subs. Time then to take the next step in examining the great Achilles heel of add-on bass – integration. After the issues of placement and parameter adjustment,



the greatest obstacle to the successful use of any sub-woofer is the sonic character of the device itself and how it's physically integrated into the main system. If we accept for a moment that the vast majority of sub-woofers consist of a cabinet containing one or more drivers and the electronics necessary to drive them as well as filter the signal they receive, a number of issues

immediately emerge. First and most obvious is the quality of the electronics themselves. If they are not at least as good as your pre-amp, placing them anywhere between your pre-amp and the main speakers will cause unacceptable degradation of the vital midrange. I'm afraid that, given the cost and difficulty of creating a high-quality pre-amp, few of the filter circuits

used in subs quality. Which is why most subs are rolled up under the full-range output of the main speakers, run from parallel pre-amp outputs, or from the speaker outputs of your amplifier, again connected in parallel.

The second obvious issue is placing delicate electronics inside the vibrating chassis of a sub-woofer – especially given what we know about the vulnerability of circuitry and individual components to mechanical interference. Finally there are questions concerning not just the quality but also the sonic character or nature of the amplification itself. The need to supply serious power to generate real low frequencies (even with active equalisation) has led designers to ever more powerful amplifiers, often employing Class D operation. Now, while that isn't true of every sub, I can pretty much guarantee that whatever amp is used will be optimised for low-frequency performance – hence the popularity of Class D designs. Of course, the

▶ other side of that coin is that they wouldn't work very well run full-range, or necessarily blend well with your main amps that are designed to do just that. Which is in turn why so many sub manufacturers want to run their products from the speaker outputs of your amplifier – overlaying (as they describe it) the sound of the main amp onto the sub's electronics.

Now, I can see how the sonic imprint of one amp, laid across the character of another might be less obviously damaging than running two dissimilar amps side by side to furnish a single audible range. At least you gain a degree of consistency. I can also appreciate the financial benefits of shoving everything into a single box – especially as buyers seem to assume that bass from sub-woofers should be cheaper than bass arrived at by more conventional means. However, there's no question in my experience that this approach costs you transparency and bass texture – and I don't even want to consider what the output stage of your amplifier thinks about all this. There has to be a better way – and there is.

Although the filter electronics for a sub really do need to be active, there's no requirement for them to be inside the sub-woofer cabinet itself. In fact, if we actually functionally separate the various elements that constitute a sub, we end up with three boxes – an active crossover, an amplifier and a speaker cabinet. Given that doing so is much more expensive (that's three sets of cabinet/chassis parts instead of one) less physically elegant and demands additional ancillaries such as cables, which are also far from cheap

– why would anybody bother? Because doing so enables you to overcome all those issues outlined above. The active crossover can be driven directly from your pre-amp outputs, the best place for it. The amplifier is no longer subject to the indignities heaped on it inside the woofer cabinet and what's more, if you design your speaker with care,

there's no reason why you can't use an identical amp to drive it to the ones you are using on the rest of the range.



So physically elegant it isn't, but conceptually speaking it's got a lot going for it – just as long as

quality considerations outweigh cost.

Wilson's passive WATCH Dog is exactly such a device, a derivation of an older, active version of the same cabinet, now offered sans electronics and thus with slightly reduced dimensions. Instead, there's a sophisticated active controller built into a standalone rack-mount chassis and the owner gets to choose (and pay for) his own amplifier to drive the beast. And a beast it is, a single 12.5" twin-spider driver employing a doped paper cone, massive voice-coil, a single-roll

surround of heroic proportions and a suspension so stiff it barely moves. The driver is built into a massive, bluff cabinet constructed entirely of Wilson's proprietary X material, a foot and a half wide and two foot tall and deep. The bottom edge of the cabinet opens into a full width slot port, and all 211 lbs of it sits on four substantial conical feet and spikes. The price is not insubstantial either, at close to \$6.5K, but at least you are aware of what you've paid for – every time you pick it up!

If the WATCH Dog cabinet is all about carefully applied brute force, the controller is all about sophistication. Specifically designed to be equally at home in a home theatre or two-channel system – or indeed both simultaneously – it will happily accept and switch between line and LFE inputs. It will also operate single-ended or balanced, while giving you adjustable low and high-pass filters (just in case you want to roll-off the bottom of your main speakers too). As well as adjustable slopes (6 or 12dB/octave high-pass, 12 or 18dB/octave low-pass) and a crossover frequency range of 30 to 150 Hz, you get a level control and a continuously variable phase control. Finally, there's also an optional EQ section that can be switched in to tackle specific room anomalies, allowing the user to select the frequency, Q (width) and degree of bass boost or cut. As the manual makes clear, its application is specific and using it to simply increase bass output will cause more problems than it provides "benefits". Fortunately, it wasn't required in my room. The Controller weighs in at \$2.3K and will drive either one or two WATCH Dogs, depending on your craving for bass and the depth of your pockets.

With all those options available, set-up could be a bit daunting – but then I had Pedro from importer

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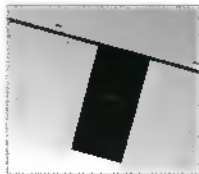
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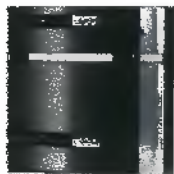
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► Absolute Sounds, and so would you. Or another, Wilson trained installer, which is the beauty of buying a Wilson product. They may be expensive but you know you are going to get the performance you've paid for because they make damn sure you do. In practice, it took longer to position the Duettes, running full-range and in free space naturally, than it did to adjust the sub-woofer. Wilson also supply a really well thought-out

a flat 8 Ohm impedance, the WATCH Dog is a far from frightening load. Nor is there any passive crossover to get between the amp and the cone it has to control, while the ported cabinet might trade off linearity but gains power and dynamic range where its both useful and controllable by a smallish amp. Or, in other words, if you are going to offer a passive sub, don't give it electrical characteristics that demand a kW to get it moving. I won't insult the Dog by calling it a pussycat, but it is the next best thing.

With the VAS amps hooked up and

fragility of the solo instrument. There's even a gentle rumble of fading bass, just to further bring home the sense of isolation, which passes all but unnoticed on the Duettes solo. With no low-frequency notes to speak of the tension and atmosphere evoked leave you in no doubt that this is an entirely different musical experience. Instrumental positioning is much more apparent, the sweeping nature of the orchestration, as is the slow, measured tempo of the building power beneath the music, the sense of menace and foreboding. With the Duettes alone, the first crescendo grows as a single entity from the centre of the stage:

with the Dog doing its thing, it rises and swells from the floor, not just full of extra weight and surging power, but full of complex textures too. But perhaps most important of all, with just the standmounts it reaches a strain and intensity that whilst musically impressive leaves nothing for the excesses to come.

The WATCH Dog keeps everything well within the system's compass, banishing strain and replacing it with natural drama whilst leaving one in no doubt that musically (and in hi-fi terms) there's plenty more on the way. It's all about building anticipation and it's a quality critical to the music, both in its own right and as an adjunct to the action on the screen. Those echoes of 'Mars' are no coincidence, their influence so much clearer with the sub-woofer in circuit. And it's not just to do with the drums either. Listen to track four with its theme so clearly stolen from *Lt Kije*. With the WATCH Dog underpinning the sound, instrumental textures and tonality across the entire range become clearer and more natural, colours and flavours more obvious, the musical contrasts and drama more vivid. ►



set-up disc and a set of clear and logical instructions, so the technique is well-established. Once you've seen it done you'll be confident enough to play a little and refine things if needs be. We started out by driving all three speakers from three separate but identical channels of an Audio Research D150M multi-channel amp. Despite being one of the better sounding digital devices around, it was clear that the speakers could deliver an awful lot more. The problem is, finding a suitable three-channel amp, or just three channels of identical amplification full stop. Fortunately I still have in-house the three VAS Citation Sound 2 mono-blocs reviewed in the last issue. Three channels certainly, but suitable? Only one way to find out...

Now, a 50 Watt valve amp might not seem like such a great choice for driving a sub-woofer, but actually, there's a few things running its way in this instance. At 89dB sensitivity and


the levels trimmed to accommodate their different balance to the ARC, listening could begin in earnest. Where better to start than the completely OTT demands of the *Gladiator* OST? I know, bass and dynamic range are only two of the things that subs do, but if they don't do those they don't do the other, arguably more interesting stuff either.

Listening with the Duettes alone, they produce a remarkably impressive sense of power and scale given their compact dimensions. But adding the WATCH Dog exacts a dramatic improvement. Take track 13, 'Barbarian Horde', as an example. With the sub in play, the lilting opening melody hangs in a huge acoustic space. The background is blacker, the air more transparent and free of grain. The effect is to heighten the contrast, enhance the delicate



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► More there is and more you get. It's not just that the music goes bigger and louder with the sub-woofer – it's the nature of the increase, the way it happens that makes it seem bigger even than it is, whilst ensuring that you hear the benefits even on solo instrument and voice, at *ppp* as well as *fff*. So, whilst the towering crescendos of *Gladiator's* battle scenes take on a properly imposing, almost monumental scale and complexity, the system holding the many instruments separate, identifiable by position, note and texture, that individual finesse and the spatial and musical coherence on which it depends gives the same presence and drama to the isolated three-note guitar phrase that opens Dolly Varden's latest album, *The Panic Bell* (cd035 at www.undertownmusic.com).

Those three notes, distinct, vibrant and immediately alive, encapsulate in a single musical moment the benefits and musical imperatives of coherent bandwidth. The sub doesn't just bring texture, tone and shape to each note, it spaces them, picks up the damping that kills the tail of the third, stretches out the space silence between it and the leading edge of the reprise. It brings intent and attack to the chords that build on the end of that first repetition, keeps each subsequent repetition present and intact as the track builds around it. Sub's might be big, visually (and all too often musically) brutal, but the bandwidth they delivers operates most importantly and obviously at the opposite end of the scale. The top-to-bottom linearity they promise underpins the harmonic development of notes, their point and place in time and space. It clarifies the scale, the structure, the relationships within music, within bands, within individual notes and chords. It's all about expression and emotion, the grit and finesse, the humanity in the performance, communicating the music as a whole and the message it

contains. Which is why a good sub-woofer is more obvious on small-scale work, where the clarity, texture and subtlety it delivers has the space and the system the power to reveal its true nature. Move down in frequency and up in level and the demands placed on the amplification, drivers and cabinets increase exponentially. Of course, with modern switching power supplies, a small, affordable and previously unfeasibly powerful amp is possible – which is why so many inexpensive subs claim amplification measured in hundreds of Watts, if not a thousand or so... The question is, at what point do you throw out the baby with the bath water?

So much of what makes the Duette Plus One system (as I've come to call it) so musically compelling and captivating happens exactly where the best hi-fi has always happened – in the mid-band. But you don't get it without the low-frequency extension delivered by the WATCH Dog, despite the fact that I'm running the Duettes full-range. Whether you play the rhythmic convolutions of Monk and Coltrane, the exquisite phrasing of Ella, the aching poignance of Billie or the fragile duets that characterize Dolly Varden, the result is always the same. The sub-woofer delivers a more natural, more believable and more listenable result. And that's with all of 50 Watts doing the driving, 50 valve Watts at that.

The potential musical coherence to be gained by using identical amplification and cabling for the lowest frequencies should be apparent after only a moment's pause for thought. Its actual importance however is hard to overstate. If we move on a continuum from "bass doesn't matter" to "bass matters but the quality of the amp and cables doesn't" and keep on going we eventually get to the "let's overlay the main amp's sound on the bass" school of thought. In performance

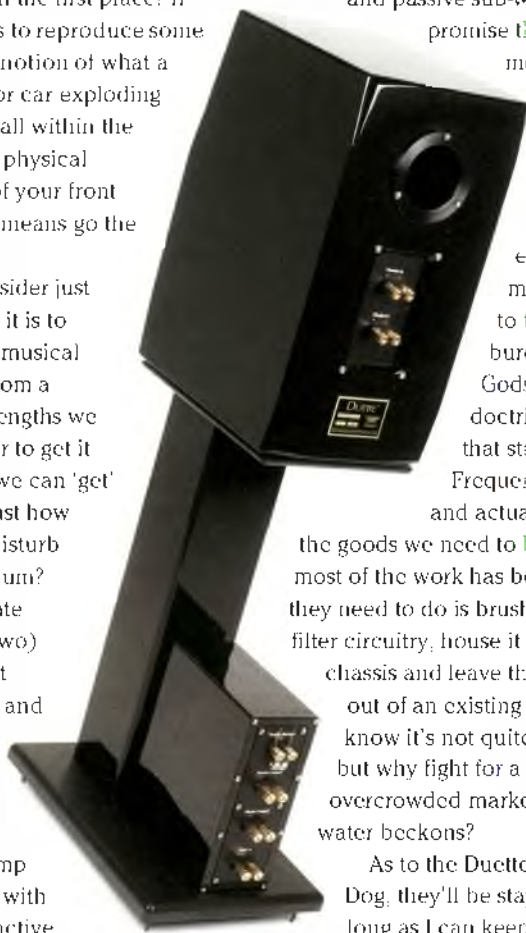
terms we'd be somewhere short of halfway towards what the WATCH Dog delivers. Of course, we'd also be quite a way short of the WATCH Dog's cost, but there are two issues in question here: the quality and value of the Wilson products (used alongside the Duettes or not) and the integrity of the conceptual reasoning behind them.

I've discussed at length the cost/value equation that applies to Wilson speakers in both the MAXX and the Duette reviews. I'm not going to tread the same tired ground here. Suffice to say, if you've bought into the Duette you've bought into the Wilson way. The WATCH Dog offers a fantastic upgrade for that speaker, delivering increased bandwidth, transparency, texture, tonal colour and scale to what is already a wonderfully musical speaker. But the real gain is best expressed in musical rather than hi-fi terms. The presence and sheer musical authority that arrives in the wake of the WATCH Dog elevates the Duette (and I'd suspect the Sophia too) to a whole new level. In doing so it spreads the cost and even the domestic impact of ownership without overloading the front-end spend or amplifier budget. This is an upgrade without any perceivable downside – save the cost. A WATCH Dog, active controller and a second amp will cost around £10K plus cables, doubling the price of the Duette solution. Do you get twice the signal? Clearly not. Twice the music? Twice the pleasure? Absolutely, no question. It's an upgrade that once heard you won't want to surrender. Duette owners – you've been warned.

But that only answers the first of those two questions. In some ways, as emphatic as the musical point the WATCH Dog makes might be, its conceptual impact could and should be even greater. Active sub-woofers offer all manner of (mainly marketing led) benefits. In practice, the ►

▶ passive cabinet with amplification to match the rest of the musical range delivers a less physically elegant solution, but far higher performance potential. It all comes down to the micro-macro debate. Why do you want a sub-woofer in the first place? If the answer is to reproduce some soundman's notion of what a train wreck or car exploding sounds like, all within the comfort and physical constraints of your front room, by all means go the active route.

Now consider just how difficult it is to achieve real musical coherence from a system, the lengths we go to in order to get it – all so that we can 'get' the music. Just how easy is it to disturb that equilibrium? Add a separate cabinet (or two) with different construction and materials, driver(s) from a different source, an amp or two, each with its own distinctive character and possibly a switching power supply to pollute the mains and some DSP to really screw things up. Throw in a cheap length of three-core cable to carry the signal. What chance have you really got? Okay, so I've painted the blackest possible picture of the active approach, and as we've seen, it's capable of delivering remarkably good results for the price, especially if it's carefully set up by a man who can. At the other end of the spectrum lies the WATCH Dog, \$10K of cost no object, performance dedicated engineering. The point is that



somewhere in between lies a happy median of price versus performance, more readily attained by mere mortals with all too mortal bank balances. For performance orientated, two-channel systems, bandwidth is an essential and passive sub-wooters

promise the best and most cost

effective way to get it. All we need now is for a few enlightened manufacturers to throw off the burden of the AV Gods and the LFE doctrine (I think that stands for Low Frequency Excess) and actually deliver

the goods we need to buy. After all, most of the work has been done; all they need to do is brush up on their filter circuitry, house it in a separate chassis and leave the electronics out of an existing cabinet. I know it's not quite that simple, but why fight for a place in an overcrowded market when blue water beckons?

As to the Duettes and WATCH Dog, they'll be staying for as long as I can keep a hold of them; if only because of the crippling weight of the sub! This is a \$20K system that delivers \$20K worth of performance: no ifs, no buts. It does it with grace and musical beauty, reflects the quality of the driving system without placing unreasonable demands on it. It's modular and upgradeable and the performance it promises is readily achievable. Would that more high-end product was as practical and dependable! As such it's a system I could and would happily live with, which might not seem much of a recommendation given the price, until you cast your eyes over the list

of other speakers that have preceded these through my listening room door. I've described the original Duette as "probably the second-best speaker Wilson make". The WATCH Dog extends its musical and expressive range, making it a whole lot better...

Which only leaves the possibility of adding a second sub to consider. I knew I could come up with a reason to keep them here!



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Duette: See Issue 47

WATCH Dog
Type: Passive sub-woofer
Driver: 12.5" dual spider doped paper cone
Nominal Impedance: 8 Ohms
Sensitivity: 89dB
Dimensions (WxHxD): 427 x 683 x 638mm
Weight: 95.7kg
Finishes: Various

WATCH Controller
Type: Active high-pass/low-pass filter
Connections: Balanced and single-ended
Inputs: Line-level or processor
Input Impedance: 56 kOhms s-e, 4 kOhms balanced
Phase: 0-180 degrees
Equaliser: 30-150Hz, ±10dB, Q 0.2-2.0
Dimensions (WxHxD): 482 x 144 x 292mm
Number Of UK Dealers: 6
Guarantee: 1yr

Prices –
Duette: £8900
Duette Stands: £1800
WATCH Dog: £5000
WATCH Controller: £3000

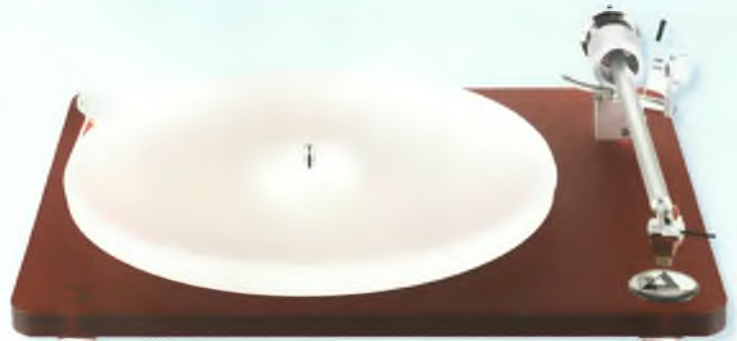
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The Zu Definition 2 Loudspeaker

by Roy Gregory

There's different for the sake of it, different for a reason and then there's different with attitude. At first take it's easy to place Zu Audio and their products firmly in the third category; after all, they do come from Utah. Not that there's anything wrong with Utah, it just also happens to be the home of Wilson Audio, a pretty daunting neighbour if you happen to manufacture loudspeakers. But experience and a little sober reflection will soon have you revising that opinion. The Zu Definitions are distinctly different, but there's plenty of cool, collected reasoning behind that difference.

Of course, even the paper spec tells you that this is no ordinary speaker. Zu's claim of 101dB efficiency should attract your notice (although in around 95dB seems to be about right, calculated in the conventional way). But it's the two large cones that decorate its upper half that stand out, theoretically and visually. These are the same Zu260FR-G2 units that grace the company's slim, monolithic looking Druid IV design reviewed by PM in Issue 45. Proprietary, high efficiency, wide bandwidth designs they are built onto a high-quality commercial basket and magnet assembly. But the paper cone(s), surround, voice-coil and central phase plug are all specified and assembled by Zu. Direct connected to the amplifier, without any form of crossover to get in the way, they form the heart of all Zu's designs, running flat(ish) from around 40Hz to about 12kHz before finally tailing off. Of course, the trick with any such "single driver" design is to get as much bandwidth as you can without crippling the potential benefits when it comes to temporal and dynamic coherence and immediacy. Which is exactly where most of the real purists come unstuck. Push things too far and you end up with horrific frequency response aberrations and colouration to match. It seems strange to use the term conservative when it comes to Zu, but that's exactly what these speakers are, in engineering terms at least. ▶



► Of course, 40Hz to 12k contains the vast majority of musical information, information that arrives via that single, directly driven driver. The result is a sense of tactile immediacy, an almost infectious impulse to conduct, sing and even dance along with the band. The undulating bass lines that underpin early Cure take on a living, breathing momentum, the slashing contrast of the sparse guitar riffs thrilling in their perfectly pitched and placed precision. They may seem slap dash and chaotic: the Definitions let you hear just how precisely the tracks are really crafted, but without robbing them of their essential pace and energy. This is what music is about; it's what good hi-fi is about and it's definitely what the Zu speakers are about. That they do it so successfully is down to the clever way in which the benefits of those broadband drivers are maximised and supported.

Nestled between those two large, paper cones there's a tweeter, again the same as the one used in the Druid IV. It uses a composite phenolic resin cone/dome diaphragm, which Zu horn load with their own, turned aluminium lens. It's rolled in using a single, high-quality Mundorf paper in oil cap in a first order arrangement, actually making the Zus conceptually closer to the Reference 3A speakers than anything else. In comparison they push the bandwidth of the main driver and the system efficiency, but the two brands share important sonic attributes as well as basic topology.

But the real surprise comes when you look round the back. The Druid's shallow cabinet has been replaced by a large, square section enclosure built from

19mm ply, that stands bluff on its small plinth. The reason for the extra volume is the four, actively driven 10" bass drivers that fill the rear baffle. The cabinet is split at half height by a horizontal brace, the upper volume further divided front and back to create a midrange enclosure and two bass enclosures, each with a pair of drivers, but differing volumes. All four bass drivers are powered by a single, off the shelf, 120 Watt class AB amplifier, with a level control on the rear panel. They run from 16 to 24Hz where they start to roll off at 12dB/octave until 40Hz where the slope steepens to 24dB/Octave. However, additional terminals on

the rear panel allow you to bypass the internal amp and filter, allowing you to use the same amp top and bottom, although you'll need a separate filter/equaliser to do it. It's an identical approach to Wilson's passive WATCH Dog, with all the same potential benefits. Indeed, the WATCH Controller would serve perfectly, although Zu are working on their own external unit.

The review pair arrived in a special, pale satin finish, but the standard colours are bright red, black or blue gloss lacquers. This is one speaker that really does carry off the spectacularly beautiful Ferrari red! Internal wiring is Zu's own (they made cables before they started on speakers and also give you a pair of their own mains leads), terminals are Cardas

copper and all connections are cold crimped rather than soldered. You also get a comprehensive range of accessories (decent spikes and domed feet, cabinet and terminal cleaning kits and comprehensive instructions) to go with the superb finish. Zu even go to the lengths of listing the source of each element of the system, everything save the crossover caps and the amp module coming from the US.

Yet this full-range, seriously engineered, beautifully constructed and finished, part-active, high-efficiency system will only cost you \$8000 in the UK. Which makes it an awful lot of music for your money.

How so? Zu supply their products direct to the end-user, and prefer their distributors to do likewise: hence the comprehensive set-up kit and instructions – and hence the low price.

Thankfully, set-up is surprisingly straightforward, with a tendency to spread a little wider than most speakers. Toe-in is critical to correct staging, but it's easily optimised and the biggest obstacle to achieving best performance is the two days or so the speakers take to settle down after being moved. That and just how clearly they revealed the temporary degradation induced by rearranging the Crystal cables!

I've already alluded to the presence, drive and immediacy you get from this speaker – all qualities you'd expect given the efficiency and direct connection of the main drivers. But what really sets the Zu apart is the degree to which it banishes the expected side effects. The deep bass delivers just the sort of foundation and solidity required, without slowing or smearing the pace and responsive agility of the broad



► mid-band. Despite the numbers this isn't the kind of foundation excavating bass that comes with real subs and monster cabinets. Instead this is real-life, real useable and real satisfying, delivering presence and a firm footing to bass lines, electric and acoustic. At the other end of the spectrum the transition to the tweeter is smooth and sweet, marked by a slightly recessed balance and



transients that just lack the vivid immediacy of the mid. It's a perfectly blended compromise, banishing the high-frequency nasties that attend pushing "full-range" drivers beyond their comfort zone whilst also avoiding the wilder excesses of horn loading. Cymbals and other high-frequency transients are crisp and more importantly, happen in the right time and place. In fact, the top to bottom range is impressively coherent and neutral for a design with this much sheer musical get up and go. Yes, there are some "cuppy" artefacts, hints of "hollowness" to offend the "ruler-flat" brigade, but the rest of us will be

way too busy enjoying one disc after another to notice (or care).

And I haven't touched on their strongest point... When these speakers sing, they really sing. Voices breathe so naturally, the pace and meter of a phrase or lyric falls with such unforced ease, that singers have a commanding power and compelling directness of communication. This is all about the message overcoming the medium. The clarity with which the Zus reveal and define harmonies conjures real magic from recordings, an intimacy that transcends the hi-fi limitations we so often accept.

It's a quality that extends to the convoluted instrumental conversations that characterise the likes of Monk, Coltrane and Art Pepper. It sorts out the interlocking elements within a string quartet just as surely as it unravels the stacked power chords of the latest indie guitar heroes. These speakers are all about access: access to the music, access to the performance, access to the motivation and spirit that drives it. The Zu Definitions put you firmly on the fast track to musical meaning, irrespective of musical type or genre. And that tells you that, despite assumptions to the contrary, these are accomplished and well-rounded performers. The carefully implemented bass reinforcement and structural refinements build on the communicative qualities of the Druids, broadening both the musical appeal and the performance envelope. By carefully nurturing the strengths of their chosen approach and working hard to ameliorate the weaknesses, Zu have created a genuinely capable all-rounder.

So don't assume this is a "have fun

and hang the consequences" design.

It's a meticulously executed and beautifully crafted refinement of a seriously valid operating model. It even offers an upgrade path. Revealing of partnering components, it thrives on quick, coherent quality rather than quantity, extending the value equation even further. Add a classy integrated to the Zus, with or without a matching bass amp, and you won't look back. If you want hi-fi and fun, both the facts and the sense of a performance, the Definition 2 gets closer than most to letting you have your cake and eat it. One taste and you could be hooked... ➤

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Full-range floorstander with active bass
Driver Complement:	1x horn-loaded composite conc/dome tweeter 2x 260mm wide-range paper cones 4x 260mm paper cone bass drivers
Amplification:	Internal 120 Watt Class AB amp (bypassable)
Impedance:	6 Ohms
Sensitivity:	101 dB (95 dB apparent)
Bandwidth:	16Hz -20kHz
Dimensions (WxHxD):	320 x 1240 x 320mm
Weight:	50kg ea
Finishes:	High gloss lacquers in red, black and blue. Others to order
Guarantee:	5 years
Number Of UK Dealers:	1 (see text)
Price:	£8000/pr

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hi-fi+

“ Publisher Clement Perry, often speaks of a state of mind he calls “Audio Hell,” where reviewers reside when they become exposed to gear that lifts them to a state of euphoria and then destroys them when they are forced to come to grips with the fact that they can never possess the gear that they love. As I prepare to ship the SS010 back to Denmark, I know where it is that I will be residing for the next few months ... psychologically anyway. The Vitus Audio SS010 amplifier is not just highly recommended it embodies the spirit of this webzine’s highest honor, a “Most Wanted Component” award. ”

Dave Thomas, The Stereo Times, June 07

“ The fact that the input options allow you to invest in it by stages, running the 010 as a standalone unit to start with until you can add a pukka line-stage later, just pushes the value quotient from “excellent” into the realms of “truly remarkable”. The price might seem high for the power on offer, but it’s cheap for the quality delivered. The Vitus Audio 010 is a genuine high-end bargain. ”

“ The Vitus brings all those things together in such an accessible and focussed way that it somehow seems to enhance the pure beauty of music to a point where the equipment is merely a tool and the music itself is the message. ”

“ For a hand-made amplifier of this quality I assure you that the asking price is not excessive. I think it is a great product in many ways the most impressive I’ve heard since the Connoisseur, which is praise indeed. ”

Chris Thomas, HiFi+, Issue 49

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"My, you git a Purity mouth..."*

The MartinLogan Purity Hybrid Electrostatic Loudspeaker

by Alan Sircom



In many respects, the Purity is the most radical loudspeaker MartinLogan has every manufactured. Of course the behemoth designs with their full-range panels and intricate sub-woofer enclosures are the real innovators, but the Purity is the shock product in the MartinLogan range.

It's the shock product because it's active. Well, powered – but the crossover per se is limited to controlling the piston driver in the bass unit. Which means MartinLogan is setting its sights squarely on audiences that don't use power amps, and that includes plasma TV users and computer music listeners. Previous MartinLogan designs have had amplifiers driving the bass units, but this one is powered from stem to stern, using a 200-Watt amplifier built into the wooden obelisk just behind the stator panel.

You drive the Purity either by means of the speaker terminals (in which case the amplifier drives the bass unit alone) or through the single phono socket on the back of each unit. In fact, an electrostatic design is perhaps the best design for using as a powered speaker, because you have to have a power lead going in that direction anyway, to power the stator panels. Why not just make the process simpler and put an amp in there too?

Controls on the speaker are limited to a three position toggle switch that gives a three decibel boost or cut to the standard bass output, factoring in mild tailoring for the bass to keep it sweet in most domestic settings (in my room, for example, the -3dB position was best, but a larger room might demand a fuller bass response). We are used to big and especially wide electrostatics in the UK, thanks to Quad. So the size of the Purity might come as a bit of a shock to some. It's a slim, understated design, looking like the typical six-foot tall MartinLogan ►

*After Deliverance – sort of...

► scaled down to domestically chummy size. The stator panel itself is a 71cm tall sheet of gossamer thin Mylar, stretched over a frame with a gentle convex curve (to give a 30° horizontal dispersion) and kept from harm by a front and back pointillist grille. Or, in native MartinLoganese, the Purity features a Generation 2 Electrostatic Transducer, with CLS™ (Curvilinear Line Source) Wave Launch, ClearSpar™ Spacers, Ultra Rigid AirFrame™ and MicroPerf Stators. There also a set of MiniETC™ (Energy Transfer Coupler) Spikes, to fine tune the angle of the speakers and the crossover uses a Vojtko™ topology. If there was a way of trademarking AC mains, MartinLogan would find it.

The panel crosses over at 450Hz to a pair of long-throw 165mm aluminium coned mid-bass units in the asymmetrical obelisk chamber at the bottom of the speaker. A large, rear-firing port vents and tunes the bass output. MartinLogan cites the frequency range as having ± 3 dB points at 41Hz and 23kHz and the bottom figure at least seems to hold true in listening (20kHz - or beyond - and I parted company at a Hawkwind gig in the mid 1980s).

There's some deceptively simple yet clever tricks going on here, typified by the wedge-shaped base-plate; turn it one way and the speaker beams for walking round, turn it the other and it fires at a seated listening position. Best of all, turning it this way and that requires the removal of just the one knob: all the sign of a product that's been really well thought out.

This thoroughness of execution extends across the whole speaker concept, not just the cabinet itself. It's the little touches, like the grey cover that you can use to keep the speaker dust-free during the off times (not good with cats, who consider a large grey bag to be an instant playroom, but electrostatics and cats are not a

good combination at the best of times. There's something about the mix of a combination scratching post/kitty assault course and several hundred volts only a claw away that makes them pretty far from cat-friendly speakers). The manual too is perhaps one of the finest examples of the breed and a perfect demonstration of instruction book, er, clarity.

Nothing's left to chance: everything from installation and positioning and even running in is highlighted and explained. This is a good thing because the Purity is typical of the electrostatic breed in being very demanding of optimum placement; the manual helps big time.

Okay, the packaging does not quite conform to our recyclable sustainable save-the-rainforests Eurogreen rules, but shows how to perfectly package a difficult and fragile shape for transit without making it almost impossible to open. There's only one downside – each

box is large enough to hold both Purity speakers. Between them, they make up an armoire-sized chunk of cardboard.

MartinLogan discovered long ago that hybrid drive may work wonders in Toyotas, but can often suffer criticism in listening rooms. Specifically, the crossover between piston drive units and electrostatic panels is all too audible. Strangely, this is where the Purity has an edge over bigger MartinLogan speaker designs; the narrow front baffle limits the bass to multiple smaller, faster drivers instead of one big, slower design. MartinLogan also learned early on that the bass units needed to be extremely stiff and fast if they stand a ghost of a chance of keeping up with the stator panel, so aluminium cones help a lot.

End result is that the Purity has one of the least noticeable interchanges between treble and bass of any MartinLogan hybrid design. It's not completely inaudible – there's a small part of Leslie Feist's vocal range that just wavers on the ►



► cross-over point on the title track of *Let it Die* that robs her voice of some of its modern-day Rickie Lee Jones clarity. For the most part, though, the Purity does an excellent job of integrating the dynamic bass with the panel top, both temporally and across the frequency spectrum. What is particularly clever is the excellent lack of box coloration; you expect the mids and top to be free from boxiness and honk, but the bass does well to minimise the sound of the box, too. A lot of that is down to the non-parallel cabinet.

The Purity is all about easy compatibility. It has speaker terminals and a phono plug, so you aren't limited by the components elsewhere in the chain. It is also extremely forgiving of source (up to a point) and makes the best of even less than fabulous MP3 recordings.

electrostatic design, with all the uncanny disappearing qualities that bestows on the sound. Yes, the Purity is electrically unfussy enough to make it compatible with a \$250 one-box micro-fi system in theory,

but it isn't going to sound that good in that context.

However, as much for fun as for the sake of thoroughness,

I hooked my Apple laptop to the Purity speakers, using a naff mini-jack to two phono cable.

It was a lash-up of the worst degree, but in fairness, the Purity speakers more than rose to the challenge.

Although it's close to an abomination given the family history, Quad's 99 series combined CD and pre-amp would be the perfect partner for this speaker system, making it a very reasonable entry into distinctly audiophile territory. Just add a 909 power amp later when funds allow.

It's that beguiling openness to the midrange, the almost 'there' sound of instruments with a strong mid and high frequency component that keeps you coming back for more. They really sound as if they are in the room with you... and nowhere near those panels, too. Meanwhile, the sub-woofer section gives the MartinLogan design something most panels never attain... dynamic range. Of course, the bass, while full, isn't ultimately that cavernous, but the bass limits performance less than before and complements the performance of the panel.

There's an almost unconscious

received wisdom that if you want good electrostatic performance, you have to pay big bucks and end up living with a speaker the size of a cricket sight screen. The Purity is neither of those things; it's small and reasonably priced and yet it works extremely well, especially in British-sized listening rooms. With such easy performance and an easy upgrade path to boot, the Purity will likely be many people's first panel speaker, making many a convert to the panel speaker cause. High-end speakers start here. ➤



Of course, the better the recording, the better the Purity sound... which is where the 'up to a point' kicks in. This is, for the most part, an

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Hybrid electrostatic with active drive
Frequency Response:	41-23,000 Hz ± 3dB
Woofer:	2x 165mm aluminium cone drivers
Bass Loading:	Rear reflex
Crossover Frequency:	450 Hz
Sensitivity (Binding Posts):	93 dB
Sensitivity (Line Level):	95 dB
Impedance (Binding Posts):	4 Ohms
Impedance (Line Level):	14 kOhms
Internal Amplifier Power:	200 Watts
Dimensions (WxHxD):	245 x 1329 x 373mm
Weight:	23.2 kg ea.
Number Of UK Dealers:	15
Guarantee:	1yr
Price:	£2080/pr.

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Three-Way Stretch...

Multi-format disc players from Arcam, Denon and NAD

by Jimmy Hughes

With such a wide range of media on the market, the appeal of a player able to handle everything from CD and SACD to DVD is obvious. But the question for Audiophiles is - can a 'Jack of All Trades' really be as good as a top-quality dedicated CD player for playing CDs? There's no point compromising CD performance just to get versatility.

This test considers three multi-format disc players exclusively from a purist two-channel stereo audio standpoint. We're assuming that picture quality will be something of a secondary consideration and as such, will be to a sufficiently high standard in each case. But what about sound quality? Can any of these machines stand comparison with a good comparably-priced CD player?

If I myself were looking to buy a multi-format player, I'd want something that sounded great on CD, as well as being able to do justice to SACD. I recently tried Pioneer's PD-D6 CD/SACD player. While it sounded pretty good, I wasn't blown away by the difference between CD and SACD. Maybe this time - who knows!

For the two-channel hi-fi purist, the question is whether or not it's better to look at versatile players like the ones here, or sink your money into a top-class dedicated CD player. It's not an easy one to answer. And matters are clouded by the uncertain future of SACD, and the question of how many record companies will continue to support it.

Suppose the release of new SACDs dries up; what's the point of investing in a player if you can't buy much software? However, after a slow start, there seemed

to be a steady release of classical titles from the majors, including re-issues from the Mercury Living Presence and RCA Living Stereo back catalogues. Of course, SACD provides record companies with a perfect opportunity to sell us what we've already got! Hence the number of Audiophile orientated titles re-issued. But, new releases from Universal (who include key labels like Decca, Philips, and Deutsche Grammophon), seem to have slowed down. Meanwhile, smaller labels with a greater reliance on sound quality rather than artist profile seem to be issuing

uncertain start, CD gradually established itself. It's an urban myth that CD was a huge and immediate commercial success when launched. Actually, it was all a bit touch and go for the first couple of years. In the field of classical music, we reached a turning point when Polygram (Decca/Philips/DG - now owned by Universal) released the first wave of complete operas. Once that happened, collectors could see that the record companies were in it for the long haul and everything changed. It's about confidence and having the belief that the product will establish itself given enough time and the right promotion. But first you have to believe...

To evaluate these SACD players, I listened to CD and SACD material, taking ASTINtrew's At3500 as my CD reference point. On a financial note, all three SACD players retail for under £1000, whereas the At-3500 costs around £1150. So in value terms these multi-format players offer a lot for the money.



discs at an ever greater rate, with the likes of Pentatone, Harmonia Mundi and even Linn regularly releasing SACDs.

Back in June 2003, I went to an SACD launch hosted by Decca/Philips/DG, and all the technical and production staff in attendance that day were very excited by the possibilities of the new format. So, if there is a lack of enthusiasm for SACD, it's from the bean counters rather than the engineers and producers. And although the smaller more specialised labels have a stronger commitment to SACD, for the medium to really succeed it needs commitment from everyone. CD succeeded because record buyers could see that the record companies were taking it seriously. Despite a slow and

Arcam DV135

The £900 DV135 is billed as Arcam's entry-level machine. It's based on their more expensive and elaborate, state-of-the-art DV137, but dispenses with some features, including analogue surround sound and second display. The DV135 is aimed at those wanting SACD, but not in surround. For movie fans the DV135 offers interpolation to 1080i to enhance DVD image quality, but also attempts to meet the needs of serious audiophiles wanting a good source component for CD and SACD playback. ►

▶ started by listened to it with CDs, making comparisons as noted to the more expensive ASTINrew A13500 player.

Tonally, the Arcam sounded slightly leaner and maybe just a shade more transparent than the ASTINrew. Perhaps because of its tube output stage, the latter produces a warmer, slightly lush presentation, with greater richness and depth. In some ways the ASTINrew sounded nicer, but the Arcam had many good points too.

Playing Andras Schiff's Decca CD of Mozart's *Piano Concerto No 21* via the DV135, I was impressed with the bright bell-like tone of the piano and the way the woodwind solos projected from the orchestral texture. The Arcam seemed to image more precisely, with the instruments very solidly located in space. It was a very clear-cut lucid sound. Dynamics were excellent, and so too was the separation between instruments. Small details in the playing seemed to register with pin-point clarity.

Next I tried Valery Gergiev's Live Vienna Philharmonic recording of Tchaikovsky's *Fourth Symphony* on Philips. I have this recording both as a hybrid SACD/CD and a CD. The CD sounded fine – crisp, clear, and powerful – but the SACD was noticeably cleaner with better separation. Playing the pizzicato third movement, the SACD sounded even more lucid and precise – as though the notes were starting and stopping with greater precision. When the finale began, the SACD gave a much keener impression of the front-to-back spatial positioning of the orchestral instruments – an effect that was both impressive yet not wholly to my liking. The heavy brass sounded a shade gruff and dry, and (confusingly) seemed to sit slightly forward of the violins. The bass drum and cymbals had considerable impact and power, but didn't sound as though they were at

the back of the stage. The acoustic felt a shade cramped. Although the sound was very dynamic, the music didn't 'expand' as it got louder – and there was not much sense of the orchestra playing in a defined acoustic space.

Technically, the sound was good in terms of tone colours and dynamic contrasts, but the soundstage seemed a bit disjointed and lacking in cohesion. The CD gave a more integrated albeit rather more generalised sound. It reduced contrasts and made the balance between instruments appear more even. In a superficial way this was preferable, but there was no doubt that the SACD

sounded more truthful and realistic.



I felt the SACD version – even if it wasn't perfect – was getting much closer to the actual sound the microphones had picked up. It had a very truthful, believable quality.

What I'm saying here is that some of the 'faults' were to do with where the music had been recorded, and how the microphones had been placed. Recording live, it's harder to get a perfect studio type balance. I had the engineers been able to, they'd almost certainly have moved the brass and percussion further back from the microphones – but in a live environment that's not always possible or desirable, at least for the audience on the night!

The stage in Vienna's Musikverein hall (where the recording was made) is fairly wide but not very deep. It's quite a narrow stage, and with an audience

present the acoustic would have become slightly cramped and dry, without much ambience or air; hence the apparent 'closeness' of the heavy brass and percussion.

Playing other SACDs confirmed these general findings. The SACD always had greater individuality and better separation compared to CD. With SACD, dynamics, clarity, and separation are enhanced over CD. From a recording engineer's standpoint, there's far less need to close-mike voices or instruments for them to be heard.

Next, I sampled Nikolaus Harnoncourt's recent live SACD recording of Handel's *Messiah*, and again noted some inconsistencies in balance and tone. The sheer, unforced dynamic clarity of the sound was impressive, though

the acoustic in which the recording was made did not exactly bathe the music in a sweet rosy glow. On the positive side, the sound had marvellous variation and range. Tone colours and micro-dynamics seemed to vary considerably, depending on the forces being used. In comparison, CD tended to sound the same all the time – and as a result it rarely surprised you. Once the music started, you'd know exactly how it was going to sound throughout. SACD showed more variation. As different singers or instrumentalists emerge, so the sound picture changed. The *Messiah* recording had some problems, but listening I once again felt I was hearing pretty much exactly what the microphones had picked up – for better and (sometimes) for worse.

The next SACD recording I tried was Bartok's orchestral showpiece *Concerto for Orchestra* with Seiji Ozawa conducting the Saito Kinen orchestra on Philips. This is yet another live recording, but here the acoustic proved more ample. Balances remained close, but not claustrophobically so.

Playing the second movement, I was impressed by the immediacy and

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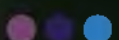
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sheer clarity of the sound. The instruments had real presence and superb tonal individuality. Bartok's scoring is very imaginative and the constant pairing of different instruments creates an ever-changing kaleidoscope of colours and textures.

Ozawa previously recorded this work for Philips back in the early '90s with the Boston SO - a Bitstream recording that's nicely balanced, smooth, and very natural. But good as it was, the new SACD version had much greater presence and fine detail. The way the instruments 'projected' made the CD seem 'flat' and un-involving.

SACD allowed you to hear exactly what was playing at any given moment. Its clarity meant that every strand was kept separate. It did not mush things up, nor did it make the music seem busier than it was. There was none of CD's tendency to smear across the edges of notes, smoothing the sound out at the same time diminishing subtle shifts in rhythm and phrasing. It gave a very honest truthful sound. While some recordings appeared to lack 'atmosphere', this was not the fault of SACD.

NAD T 585

NAD's £800 T 585 was the first player to arrive. I therefore tried it solo for a few days before getting to grips with the others. I liked it right from the start. It gave a clean, lucid, very detailed and articulate musical presentation. CD sounded leaner than the ASTIntrew, but not unpleasantly so. Imaging was very precise. The NAD offers analogue outputs for 5.1 surround sound as well as two-channel SACD. For some reason, there was a significant drop in volume level (about 6dB?) when playing SACD after CD. Once amplifier volume levels were increased, things sounded fine, and the NAD produced some impressive noises.

The CD/SACD comparison threw up results broadly similar to those

experienced with the Arcam player described above. However, the slightly leaner presentation of the NAD sometimes emphasised the lack of atmosphere alluded to earlier. The music sounded very clear-cut and detailed, but sometimes a little cool and stark. Playing Bernard Haitink's recent LSO Live Barbican Beethoven *Symphonies* cycle,



the sound was very precise but a bit dry and airless. I bought the set a few months back, and playing it on the ASTIntrew At3500 as a CD gave mixed results. I had hoped SACD might resolve some of the issues raised. Alas, it didn't. On the plus side, the sound was impressively clean and precise – SACD produced some wonderful low-level detail that had surprising presence. On the debit side, the sound still had a somewhat cramped 'airless' quality that lacked breadth.

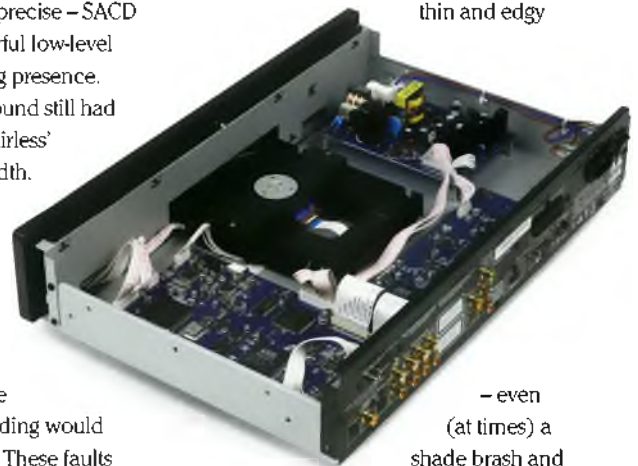
Climaxes would get loud, but the sound failed to expand. The lack of ambience was disconcerting. Again, the dryness of Barbican hall, and the vicissitudes of live recording would seem to be factors here. These faults are also apparent with the CD layer. But CD's comparative lack of precision, and its tendency to generalise subtle details, makes you less aware of them.

SACD definitely puts more on the table, but in doing so it also makes you more demanding as a listener. It doesn't flatter to deceive in the way that CD can and often does. If I were going to listen to Haitink's new Beethoven cycle for

pleasure, I'd still choose the SACD option. But like I say, there are inherent issues with the sound which SACD as a medium neither corrects nor conceals. Don't then expect it to be a panacea for poor or difficult recordings: increased fidelity means increased honesty too – for good or ill.

I liked the NAD as a CD player. It has a very clean top-end, and this helps create a sound that's focused and free from high-frequency edge. It produces impressive separation between instruments and voices – in some ways even better than the ASTIntrew, despite the latter's added richness and warmth.

The set of Schubert *Symphonies* on the Philips label with Frans Bruggen conducting the Period Instruments band Orchestra of the 18th Century illustrated this perfectly. Like other Philips recordings of these performers (and many recordings on period instruments) the CDs sound topky and forward - a bit thin and edgy



– even (at times) a shade brash and congested. Listening to the first symphony on the Arcam, I found the sound rather 'busy' and a touch congested. It's partly Schubert's scoring – lots of string instruments sawing-away for dear life, and the brass and winds blowing hard. Now this is the sort of recording I wished I had on SACD! I then switched over to the ASTIntrew At3500. It sounded slightly better –

► richer, smoother, and fuller. The dynamic contrasts were still projected strongly, but the presentation was cleaner and easier on the ear. Next, I tried the NAD...

Tonally, this rather bright-sounding recording is not perhaps ideally suited to the NAD – itself a touch bright and forward. But the results were very interesting. Unlike the At3500, the T 585 made no attempt to smooth-over the top or add a little richness and warmth. Indeed, the sound bristled with detail. It was immediate and forward, yet at the same time was surprisingly clean. On this sort of recording, the instruments can become something of a mish-mash. With everyone playing together the sound easily grows thick and congested - a big wedge of noise. But on this difficult disc the NAD showed its mettle, producing a sound that was crisp and forward, yet remarkably clean and very well-separated. While I still think the Arcam and ASTIntrew have a slightly richer, warmer (nicer) tonality, the NAD is cleaner on difficult congested material.

Incidentally, NAD point out that the two-channel analogue output from the T 585's SACD is pure DSD (Direct Stream Digital). Apparently, many universal players convert the DSD format into standard PCM (common to all CDs), which risks squandering many of the sonic benefits of DSD. The T 585 actually features two separate signal paths for DVD-Audio/CD and SACD, in order to maintain maximum sound quality for each format. Although the Arcam has the edge on it for SACD sound quality, the NAD proved impressive and very satisfying on its own terms. I certainly enjoyed listening to it very much.

Denon DVD-2930

The Denon DVD-2930 is physically the biggest player of the group, and also the most solidly built. It looks and feels very substantial, yet it's also the cheapest with a street price well under \$600. As a DVD player, it has garnered several rave reviews in the USA for picture quality, and its video options and versatility make

Two-channel DVD – the forgotten format...

Whilst I've skated over the issues of picture quality and DVD sound quality, neither being important for music listening, there's one, vast area of musical enjoyment that any of these players opens up. Take your two-channel system, add a flat-screen TV between the speakers (permanently, temporarily or via a projector and drop down screen) and the DVD replay capability of a universal machine offers you the ability to watch and listen to live concert DVDs – actually the natural bridge between the audio and video fields. They don't demand surround sound (quite a few don't even offer it), deliver potentially better sound quality than CD and are readily available. They also embrace a wide range of musical genres and performers. Whether you listen to



jazz or crave the frenetic energy of live indie rock, concert DVD can deliver greater excitement, atmosphere and mood to the proceedings. Orchestral concerts can be extremely enjoyable and frankly, what makes more sense for reproducing opera? Like any other format the results are variable with good discs and bad, but any of these players offers not just a route to the two-channel arena of SACD, but a bridge to integrated AV usage, all without compromising the quality and integrity of your two-channel set-up. And if you need an excuse to take the step there's always the kid's movies or the wife/girlfriend's RomComs! But don't be surprised if you find yourself with the screen on more and more – not watching instead of listening, but watching and listening. You know, it actually makes sense.

it extremely attractive in a mixed media context. But how would it compare in terms of sound quality alone?

Well, I was immediately encouraged by the bright lucid nature of the DVD-2930's sound. In isolation it sounded fine. The impression was of a sharp, lively presentation with plenty of presence and detail. But, subsequent comparisons to the (more expensive) Arcam and NAD players showed that the Denon sounded slightly shallower. The overall impression was of a marginally 'smaller' soundstage – as though one had moved slightly further away from the players. The presentation wasn't as subtle and fine-grained as it had been with the other two players. Clarity was good, but not absolutely outstanding – there wasn't the same separation and dimensionality.

By the way, I found the DVD-2930 less sure-footed than the others when playing CDs. The review sample sometimes 'muted' while playing CDs and would not continue. It also had greater difficulties

playing 'faulty' discs. With one particular example, it refused to play at all, whereas the Arcam and NAD at least made a sound - albeit with the odd click and dropout. This isn't a big deal and should have no impact with new discs at all. But collectors in the habit of playing older or secondhand discs might want to consider it.

Comparing CD and SACD via the Denon, there seemed less of a difference between the two. SACD did sound slightly better, but the extra cleanness and separation that had been so noticeable with the Arcam and NAD players was reduced. Everything seemed more contained and 'samey'. Nor was there quite the same sense of background 'quietness' - the impression of the music emanating from an inky-black 'silent' background. I'm not talking about noise in terms of hiss, but something more subliminal. It's an impression of the music coming from nothing.

This lack of 'noise' allows you to ►

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hear deeper into the soundstage. People talk about the wide dynamic range of better systems like SACD as though it were simply a question of expanding the contrast between peak loudness and background noise. But more important is the increase in working dynamic range.

This is the degree to which quiet voices or instruments can be still heard while louder ones are playing. Suppose an orchestra is playing very loudly. A wide working dynamic range would enable you to hear an instruments playing quietly. It also means that subtle low-level hall ambience is not be obliterated.

This should (should!) give the music a keener sense of place – as a listener, you should get a truer impression of the musicians occupying a specific acoustic space. SACD does a better job of this than CD, but obviously you must capture the hall acoustic when the recording is being made.

With regard to these kinds of things, the DVD-2930 produces results that are less clear-cut than the other players in this test. SACD was better than CD, but the difference seemed less tangible. In isolation I was happy with the DVD-29330, and could certainly live with the results produced by it.

But my judgement is that the DVD-2930 is a better bet for movie buffs than audiophiles. It's got the best build quality and the lowest price, and thus offers brilliant value for money. If you want to run as many movies as music-only discs it offers a brilliant balance of virtues: great on image, equally good when it comes to CD and SACD. At this point perhaps you should read the Sidebar, before deciding what kind of listener you are (or might become). But purist twin-channelers with a clear bias to listening rather than watching, would be better off paying the extra and buying the Arcam or NAD machines.

In it for the long haul?

So - either the Arcam or NAD machines would be my choice, but, whether you'd be better off buying a specialist CD player and avoiding multi-format altogether remains a key question. Disregarding the future of SACD, the answer must depend on whether you intend to use your player for movies as well as music - and also on the number of SACDs in your music collection. However, I can say that, in purely sonic terms,



the Arcam and NAD machines are very good CD players in their own right. They stand their ground against good specialist CD players, while giving you the option of SACD (and DVD movie) playback, should that be required.

One downside I haven't so far mentioned is operating speed – the time taken to read a disc's contents, respond to a command, move to a new track, fast search within a track – and so on. The bad news is, all three SACD players are clunky and slow – like some of the first (and worst) CD players made back in the early 1980s. Yes; that bad! Even the disc eject draws seem to operate in slow-motion. You have to learn patience and give each player time to think about what sort of disc it's being asked to play. If you put a disc in the open tray and press 'close', the time taken for each player to reach a state of readiness is as follows. The NAD was the slowest, taking around 30 seconds before being ready to play; the Arcam and Denon were a comparatively nippy 15 seconds. But none matched the ASTIntrew, which

only took just 4 or 5 seconds. Of course, this comes as no surprise to anybody familiar with DVD players, but again underlines the technology step-change, the differences in hardware as we move from CD only replay to more versatile digital formats.

There's also a wait of between 20 to 30 seconds when going between CD and SACD while the player sorts itself out. Fast search within a track is agonisingly slow. This 'fault' seems endemic to all Multi Format players – at least it has been on every machine I've experienced up till now.

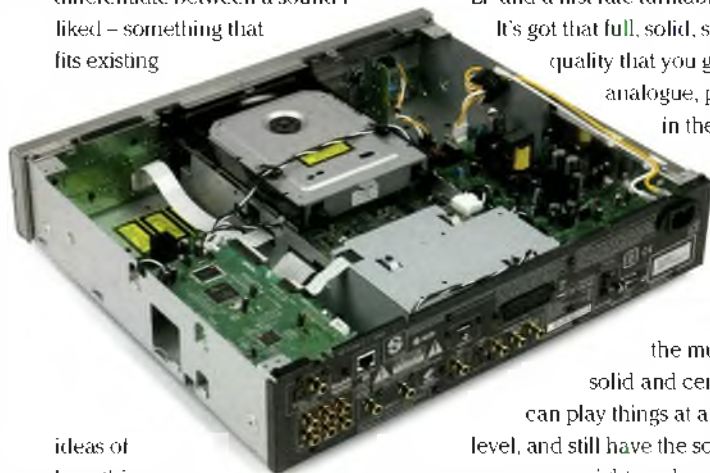
Finding a section in a long track is frustratingly slow. In the case of the NAD, this is made worse by the fact that it won't let you go to the next track and scan back. Unlike all CD players (and some multi-format disc players) that simply jump over to the next track when you reach the end, the NAD only searches within a track. So if a track lasted 20 minutes and you wanted to sample (say) the last couple of minutes, you'd need to trawl through the first 18 minutes (this takes about 2m 15s on the NAD) to get to the point you want – you couldn't go to the start of the next track, and wind back two-minutes to get to the section required.

I was also slightly annoyed that you couldn't load a disc onto the NAD's open tray, hit Play, and have the music (eventually) start. The Arcam and Denon let you do this (though you can't choose a track), and would start to play after about 12 seconds. The NAD has to decide what sort of disc it's being asked to play. Only then will it accept commands.

I also didn't like the way the NAD switched into Standby when left for a few minutes. All rather frustrating... Or is it? If you're the sort of listener who puts a disc on at the start and takes it off when it's finished, none of this is of much consequence. What I did find annoying with all three players is not ▶

▶ being able to put a disc in the drawer, hit a number on the remote, and have it go straight to the track in just a few seconds. Compared to the fast track access we take for granted with most CD players, Multi-format disc players are positively tortoise-like.

Speaking personally, I found the experience of listening to SACD very educational. For starters, it forced me to differentiate between a sound I liked – something that fits existing



ideas of how things should sound – and a true, accurate high-fidelity sound, with nothing added or taken away.

Despite some mixed feelings, there was no doubting SACD's positive qualities and virtues. Compared to CD, SACD offers much more of an open window on the music. It allows you to hear the individual qualities of the original recording far more clearly. Its higher quality raises your listening expectations. It didn't always deliver fully on those expectations. However, that's not necessarily a fault with SACD as such – all it's doing is faithfully passing on the original signal without adding or subtracting from it to any significant degree. So, if you're not happy with what you hear, don't shoot the messenger!

SACD also made me very aware of how one grows to accept (and ultimately overlook) certain limitations with CD. For example, the way that CD generalises the sound, and irons out its subtle individuality. While the best

discs and players reduce this to very low levels, it's not entirely eliminated – as SACD demonstrates.

In visual terms, SACD is like a picture with lots of subtly-differentiated colours and textures that retain more of their independence and separation. In this respect, SACD is closer to good analogue. It has something of the subtlety and finesse you get from a good LP and a first-rate turntable front end.

It's got that full, solid, substantial quality that you get with good analogue, particularly in the middle and low registers. There's a sense of body and firmness which makes the music sound solid and centred. You

can play things at a lower volume level, and still have the sound retain its presence, weight, and power.

What it hasn't got is some of the nice 'additives' that make vinyl so pleasant and addictive! SACD is a real, squeaky-clean, high fidelity medium. More so than any previous medium it gets us a step closer to that impossible ideal – nothing added, nothing taken away – which can't be bad.

Speaking as a punter with a massive investment in CD, I'm not sure I want CD to be blown away by SACD. If it was, I'd have several thousand CDs that would need replacing. Just the same, I can definitely hear where CD falls down compared to SACD, and the difference can often be quite a big one. Not so much a replacement for CD then, as an increasingly valid alternative. SACD easily justifies its presence alongside the other digital formats, while the performance of players such as these also makes a strong case for including it in your listening diet. I'm still at the novelty stage: because it only represents a small part of my listening time, SACD is a bit like an unexpected

treat – you enjoy it greatly at the time, but everyday reality resides elsewhere. Nevertheless, I reckon I could get very hooked on the format, especially if adding it to my system is made as easy as this... ➤

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Arcam DV135

Type: Universal disc player
 Formats: CD, SACD, DVD-V, DVD-A
 Outputs: 2prs stereo RCA/phono
 HDMI, component,
 SCART, S-Video
 1x co-axial, 1x optical digital
 Dimensions (WxD): 430 x 85 x 350mm
 Weight: 5.2kg
 Finishes: Silver
 Price: £900

Manufacturer:

Arcam
 Net. www.arcam.co.uk

NAD T 585

Type: Universal disc player
 Formats: CD, SACD, DVD-V, DVD-A
 Outputs: 6-channel analogue
 HDMI, component,
 SCART, S-Video
 1x co-axial, 1x optical digital
 Dimensions (WxD): 429 x 100 x 300mm
 Weight: 8.5kg
 Finishes: Grey/Black
 Price: £800

UK Distributor:

NAD Electronics
 Net. www.nadelectronics.com

Denon DVD-2930

Type: Universal disc player
 Formats: CD, SACD, DVD-V, DVD-A
 Outputs: 6-channel analogue
 HDMI, component,
 SCART, S-Video
 1x co-axial, 1x optical digital
 Dimensions (WxD): 434 x 102 x 386mm
 Weight: 7.6kg
 Finishes: Silver or Black
 Price: c.£600

UK Distributor:

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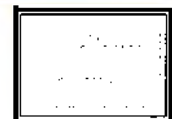
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The conrad-johnson ET250S Power Amp

by Roy Gregory



The ET in the product designation of this amplifier stands for Enhanced Triode, while the 250 is the rated output – Watts into 8 Ohms, naturally. But before the bearded triode brethren start getting all excited, the tubes in question are the 6922 twin-triodes used to provide the front-end of the hybrid circuit. That's right – it uses a solid-state output stage, which is where all that power comes from, while truth be told, you are hard pressed to put your finger on those vacuum tubes' contribution to the sonic picture as a whole.

The ET250S is a large, stereo amplifier built into c-j's new "niche" casework, where the tubes peek from between semi-circular Perspex slats sitting in the forward facing alcove. Unlike the trio of pure tube designs that featured in Issue 52, the top-plate is barely perforated while the chassis sides comprise full depth heat sinks. In use the amp runs reasonably warm but not excessively so, making it a much better bet for enclosed installations than its valve brethren. Combine that with the high power output and you might start reaching a few conclusions regarding the ET250S's target audience – but I couldn't possibly comment. Facilities are as Spartan as ever, with a single pair of RCA/phono inputs and one pair of five-way binding posts per channel. The mains input is via a standard IEC socket, but watch out for the small dip-switch on the top right of the rear panel, which activates the remote trigger sensor. Knock it up by accident and you'll be faced with a large and utterly unresponsive lump! In common with other c-j amps, the amplifier inverts absolute phase, meaning that you should reverse the polarity of your speaker leads in most cases, although not if using a c-j pre-amp. And therein lies a story, but I'll get to that.

There's no mistaking this amplifier's power, headroom and transparency. Having spent three days sharing a room with it at the Denver Show, ►

► I can also vouch for its easy, relaxed sound quality, devoid of edge or hardness. In these two conflicting descriptions we find the core of a curate's egg. In some respects the ET250S has all the classic qualities of a large solid-state amplifier. In others it's more akin to a tube design. Does that make it the best of both worlds? Well, not exactly, and how well it sits with you will depend on your system and what you want from your music.

Stage width, depth and especially height are exceptionally well defined with the ET250S, but like many solid-state amps, it majors on sound sources and their locations rather than establishing boundaries and a coherent acoustic. So listening to the studio chatter and intro to 'True Love Ways' from the *Buddy Holly Legend* album, instruments are fixed and stable in space, the various control room speakers located perfectly for height and position. The relative heights of Holly's vocal and the sax are also clearly defined, while the rhythm guitar and piano, which can easily blend together on this track were here quite distinct. Yet the rear wall of the studio, its side-walls and the floor were virtually absent, with some sense of the acoustic's extent immediately behind instruments but no coherent overall space.

Results on the synthetic soundscape that typifies Jim White's latest album (the

superb *Transnormal Skiperoo*) are in many ways more obviously impressive. The stark contrasts created as guitars and samples pop out of discrete parcels of space are extremely effective, especially given the crisp, clean

frequencies ever recorded, but here they lack texture and shape, taking on a softened, almost blurred quality. The weight of the notes is in the right place, which means that rhythm, pace and the tempo of the music don't suffer, but only if you work on your speaker placement. The c-j's bottom-end certainly doesn't lack depth or

weight, but get the speaker positioning slightly wrong (which means you can't simply rely on what worked with the amp that went before) and there's more than enough of it to get you into real trouble.

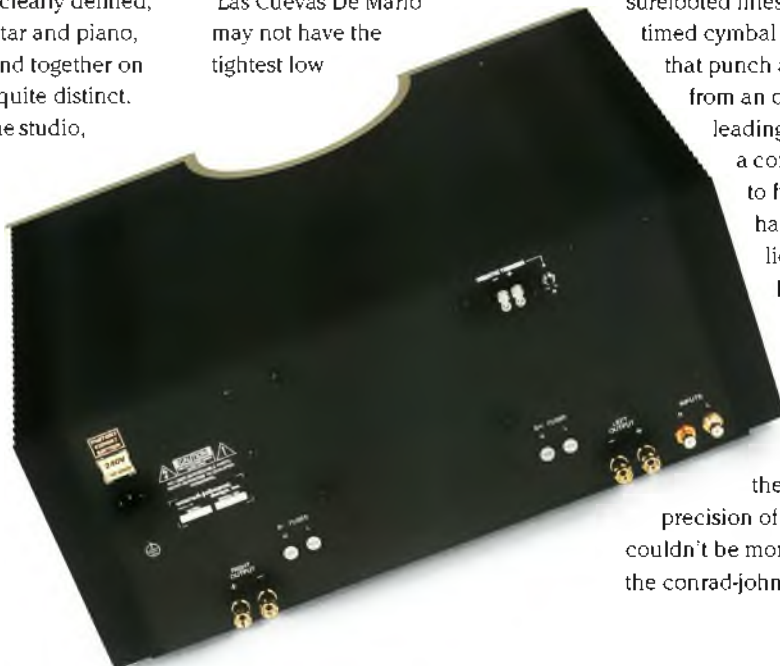
However, even with the bass working at its best, the lack of leading edge precision and definition leaves a disconcerting contrast with the clarity and incisive dynamics of the mids. In truth, the bass issues are no worse than with many other amplifiers, but the rest of the range acts to draw attention to them. So those rounded bass notes with their softened edges stand against the sharp pace and purpose of Pepper's fluid, surefooted lines and the beautifully timed cymbal work. But, much of that punch and clarity comes from an over-emphasis on the leading edge of notes – and a corresponding failure to fully develop their harmonic tail; wherein lies our curate's egg.

If purchasers assume that the 'ET' element in the c-j's circuit will deliver warmth and colour to counter or temper the often monochromatic precision of solid-state, they couldn't be more wrong. Likewise, the conrad-johnson name on the



presentation of the ET250S's broad mid-band.

But it's an album that also throws up a worrying discontinuity, the deep bass burbles that underpin proceedings seemingly soft, abstract and detached. It's an impression further underlined with acoustic bass. The familiar, repetitive opening bars of Art Pepper's 'Las Cuevas De Mario' may not have the tightest low



▶ front panel, for the ET250S sounds distinctly different to other, recent c-j designs. Indeed, as far as it's fair to generalise, you could readily suggest that harmonic development, the colour and texture of notes has always been a strength in the company's products, along with top-to-bottom coherence. Look no further than the all solid-state Premier 350 for evidence to support the contention.

Ironic then that in many ways the hybrid ET250S sounds far more typically solid-state. It offers speed, clarity and transparency, leaning for most of its range on the front half of the note in a way that has become familiar from many a brand over the years. And it does it to great effect. The issue here is simply that it doesn't sound like previous c-j designs, which is an observation not a criticism. And it means that you really do have to assess this amp on its own merits.

Right about now you might be wondering where the "tube-like" quality I mentioned earlier fits in... You'll find it in the easy flow and relaxed yet communicative way in which music is paced. So, the Pepper track might not enjoy the tightest bass notes, but its dirty, funky groove is undiminished. It's the naturalness and flexibility in the timing that replaces the regimented and mechanical quality that infects too many large solid-state designs that betrays the presence of those glowing bottles. It's a real strength and not to be underestimated. The question is, how to get the benefit?

Having run the c-j with four different pre-amps including the Ayre K-Ixe and the Vibe, in an attempt to aid the definition of and tighten up

the low-end, I actually got the best overall coherence from the all-tube and distinctly vintage VAS Citation One. Which in turn brings me back to our experiences in Denver. There, c-j's CT5 proved a perfect foil, for whilst we still experienced some looseness in the bass,



the vibrant colours and more holistic (or should that be "less etched"?) presentation of the acoustic space helped integrate the sound of the system as a whole, while the Avalon NP2s probably helped by not going low enough to get themselves (or us) into real trouble. Meanwhile the clarity and dynamic range delivered by the 250 made differences at the front-end all too apparent. The lesson to be drawn from this experience? System matching with the ET250 S will be critical to the sound you achieve.

So, if we accept that this amp represents a different sound or perspective to the classic c-j designs, the question becomes whether or not it represents a whole new direction for the company, or just recognition of a new market sector? The ET250S can undoubtedly deliver good results, but like any product that incorporates inherent discontinuities those results

will always be heavily dependent on system matching and compatibility issues. Not surprisingly, c-j themselves offer a perfect partner in the shape of the CT5, but step outside the family and you'll be entertaining the black art of system building. What I find myself asking is, "Why go there?" I know the ET250 offers more

power, more obvious clarity and runs cooler than previous designs. And yes, you can build it into a cupboard and switch it on remotely too, but whether those benefits outweigh the beautifully balanced musical coherence that typified the Premier 350, only time will tell. ➤

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Hybrid stereo power amp
Tube Complement:	2x 6922
Inputs:	1pr single-ended RCA/phonos
Input Impedance:	100 kOhms
Rated Output Power:	250 Watts into 8 Ohms
Dimensions (WxHxD):	19 x 7.188 x 16.125"
Weight:	65lb
Number Of UK Dealers:	5
Guarantee:	3yrs
Price:	£5900

UK Distributor:

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

Manufacturer:

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

The Coincident Triumph Signature Extreme Loudspeaker

by Chris Binns

I guess I should have learned by now that it is wise not to judge a book by its cover, and when it comes to loudspeakers, I find it all too easy to be pre-judgemental about a product like the Coincident. Damn it, it's far easier to get excited and write about a product that has some obviously innovative or radical aspect to its design, even though experience has told me on numerous occasions that the results can often be qualified to say the least, and in some cases very disappointing. Remember the Celestion SL600? I spent too much time some twenty-five years ago playing around with these loudspeakers trying to get a result that I was happy with. True, the Aerolam cabinet and refined drivers did deliver some of the lowest colouration sounds ever to come from a box, but the devilishly low sensitivity required an amp with lots of voltage swing together with some real spark and snap – something of a rare commodity in the mid eighties – to compensate for the rather un-dynamic tendencies of the speakers. I can't exactly recall what I ended up using out of the many, many amplifiers I tried (it might have been the sadly forgotten Robertson 4010) but I do remember that most of the time the system sounded about as musically interesting as a departure lounge at Stanstead Airport.

Which brings me to my point. The Coincident Triumph has nothing in the way of cutting edge technology in its drive units or exotic materials in its cabinet, and there is no suggestion that it is going to redefine the performance currently available from moving-coil loudspeakers. But the specification hints at the fact that it doesn't require amplification with arc welding capabilities to drive it. In fact, if

anything the requirements would seem (on paper at least) to be quite modest. With a sensitivity of 94 dB, which is fairly unusual for a speaker of this size, and with a quoted 'flat' 8 Ohm impedance, it offers plenty of possibilities when it comes to interesting partnering equipment.



Based in Ontario, Coincident Speaker Technology has been established for fifteen years, and the Triumph is the smallest in a range of three models dubbed the Ultra High Sensitivity series. As the title might suggest, part of the design concept has been to produce speakers that do not require vast amounts of power to work effectively, and there is an obvious nod in the direction of triode amplification, hardly surprising as these are also manufactured by Coincident.

Larger models have been reviewed enthusiastically by both JK and RG and while the Total Victory featured in Issue 44 is an elaborate multi-driven beast, the Triumph is by contrast a straightforward design that seemingly

doesn't stray too far from the rather tired theme of a conventional two-way box. With a cabinet substantially constructed from 1" MDF and internally braced, the front and top edges have been chamfered at 45 degrees to provide a degree of visual styling, and finish is to a high standard with a decent quality veneer on all surfaces. High frequencies are handled by a Revelator unit from Scanspeak, a 1" silk dome unit that has achieved considerable respect for being one of the best soft dome units around, being used in a number of high-end designs over the last three or four years. The bass-mid unit comes from Vifa and uses a doped paper cone coupled with a reasonably sized magnet assembly to achieve good sensitivity together with decent power handling. The crossover uses 1st and 2nd order slopes for the HF and bass respectively, and is made up of good quality components that are hard wired and mounted on an MDF block that sits on the back panel, fed from a single pair of five-way, gold-plated copper binding posts. The cabinet is loaded by a rear firing cylindrical port.

Auditioned with a wide range of amplification, at one end of the spectrum the Triumphs lived up to their claim of being amplifier friendly by making the most of a number of low powered valve amplifiers, but also responded with considerable dignity when asked to accommodate something a little more shall we say, substantial. Sitting atop a pair of foundation stands and well away from the walls, the Triumph's sounded lively and energetic, a little forward in character but not to the extent of being offensive or brash, as can sometimes happen in designs where sensitivity is ►

► a trade off against refinement. For once the timing of review equipment worked in my favour, as I had to hand the little Eastern Electric MiniMax integrated amplifier that produces all of eight Watts per channel, and while I cannot pretend that I was able to generate window rattling levels with seismic bass, there were substantial enough volume levels for the majority of listening. This is exactly where a loudspeaker such as the Coincident really scores, by allowing modest amplifiers to do their thing without the undue stress of always running at the limit of their power delivery. My usual amplifier of choice under these circumstances is the Leak Stereo Twenty, but it's quite possible that the MiniMax actually betters the Leak in the area for which that amp is renowned, the wonderfully fluid midrange. The result with the Triumphs had exactly the kind of mid-band quality that would make a tube head weep, coupled with a real sense of intimacy and flow that worked brilliantly with vocals and acoustic guitar. The Coincidents also have the ability to project a strong and defined soundstage with plenty of dimensionality to it, and although there was not the holographic imaging that some systems manage, by bringing the speakers a little closer to the listening position I achieved a lovely sense of being cocooned in the same space with the performers where good recordings allowed.

Even with a modest amplifier driving them, the quality of bass was rather interesting, as although there is not a great deal of it (always a trade off against efficiency) the roll off was gentle and quite even, so it never seemed to draw attention to itself. More importantly, it was

fast and tactile enough to make the best of what is always going to be the weak spot of any small valve amplifier, and it allowed even quite torturous bass lines to remain integrated and tuneful.



One of the major strengths of the Coincidents was their ability to produce a real sense

of coherence that allowed music to step away from the system and into the room, and I suspect that this is also one of the things that smaller amplifiers do well, its just that often you don't get the chance to hear it due to the heavy demands of the loudspeaker.

Going to the other extreme, feeding the Triumphs with the comparatively limitless power delivery of a Briston I4B SST suggested that they were not altogether against the idea of being bossed around with some authority. One of the Briston's fortés has always been exploring the depths of the bass range in a fashion quite unlike any other amplifier, and this set up was no different, revealing a different side to the Coincidents performance with a sure-footed, tactile quality that was tight yet articulate. Whilst I would probably not trade the intimate and organic delivery in the midrange that I had with the little Eastern Audio valve amp (and also a Radford STA25 that

worked rather well) there was no doubt that the Triumphs had the ability to do resolution and precision when required. Balanced against this was a tendency toward a slightly 'hard' character evident in the mid range, disguised somewhat by the gentler nature of the tube amps but on occasion with the Briston (and with certain recordings) it would prove a bit much.

But somehow I don't think that will be a problem. For all its lack of bells and whistles, the Coincident Triumph somehow bypasses the more technical issues of hi-fi and presents music in a fashion that is thoroughly enjoyable, while the lack of constraint when choosing the partnering amplifier is what makes it such a find. It is one of the few loudspeakers that could (just possibly) change my mind about single ended triodes, and that's saying something. ➤

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Two-way reflex loaded stand mount
Driver Complement:	1x 25mm silk dome 1x 165mm paper cone
Frequency Response:	45Hz - 35kHz ±3dB
Impedance:	Flat 8 ohms
Sensitivity:	94 db @ 1M-1Watt
Power Requirements:	3 Watts - 200 Watts
Dimensions (WxDxH):	228 x 406 x 292mm
Weight:	13kg ca.
Price:	£1895
Guarantee:	3 years
Number Of UK Dealers:	1

UK Distributor:

Musicology
Tel. [44][0]1273 770646
Net. www.musicology.co.uk

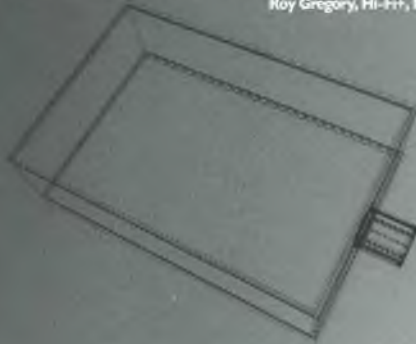
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Roy Gregory, Hi-Fi+, Issue 54



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ASTINtrew At3500 CD player

by Jimmy Hughes

For the best part of 2007 my regular CD player has been ASTINtrew's At3000. I like it very much – my only (slight) misgiving being the way it sounded when used in its 24bit/96kHz up-sampling mode. The new At3500 looks virtually identical to the At3000, and offers much the same mix in terms of features and facilities. However, internally it's a different story. The At3500 has a higher specification digital clock, with an accuracy of 5 parts per million (ppm) and its own dedicated low-noise isolating power supply. At normal operating temperatures the makers claim that distortion is held to less than 2ppm – an exceedingly low figure.

Another improvement is the inclusion of a second isolating power supply for the up-sampling clock. This is claimed to reduce digital distortion, while improving the isolation of digital components from the power supply. Other power supplies on the DAC board have been upgraded and improved. Higher quality capacitors have been used in critical parts of the circuit, including Auricaps for the output of the DAC and buffer amp. Finally, the At3500 has improved feet for better damping of vibration and isolation. These upgrades can be retro-fitted to an existing At3000 (which continues to be available at a price of \$647) at a cost of around \$650, while the new At3500 costs £1150.

ASTINtrew's Michael Osborne worked on these changes and upgrades

in conjunction with Graham Fowler of Trichord Research, but is keen to point out that the solutions chosen for the At3500 differ from those used in Trichord's own CD players and low-jitter Clocks. He also warns that, when brand new, the At3500 needs something like a fortnight of continuous burn-in time before the sound reaches its optimum. And while the At3500 sounded quite good straight from the box, it does ease-up and open-out after a week or two. He puts this long burn-in time down to the use of the

Auricaps.



The new At3500 retains the clarity and lucidity of the At3000, but sounds freer and more natural. Its musical presentation is very smooth and beautifully integrated. The sound has plenty of bite and attack, yet the upper treble remains sweet and very clean. There's a nice fullness and warmth about the sound. The bottom end sounds deeper and fuller too. Bass lines emerge with greater weight and presence, sounding lucid and

clean with considerable power. CDs that normally sound thin and bright are reproduced with greater warmth and richness. Yet there's no loss of brilliance or immediacy – actually, quite the reverse.

The 24bit/96kHz up-sampling option seems to work a lot better on the new player than it did on the At3000. Superficially, there's much the same increase in separation, fine detail and lucidity, but the At3500 sounds more cohesive and integrated. You get increased clarity, but with less sense of the music being pulled apart.

Set to 24bit/96kHz, the At3000 produced somewhat mixed results.

In hi-fi terms the sound was definitely clearer and better-separated, but the music seemed nicer and more together in the standard mode. On a quick A/B comparison, 24/96 seemed to win out every time. But in the longer term it wasn't as satisfying to listen to, losing that all important sense of musical coherence.

The new player performs more consistently. Switching to 24/96 brings increased separation between voices and instruments, and this definitely works with some CDs. If a more integrated and homogenous sound is required, going back to the standard mode produces a smoother more blended result. Being closer in overall accomplishment actually makes both options eminently usable. I still find the standard mode slightly easier for general listening. While it's not quite

▶ as detailed, and there's less separation between voices and instruments, the music falls a little more easily on the ear. But I can live with either option and, depending on the music playing at the time, the ability to switch can be very welcome indeed.

Something else I investigated with the At3500 is how well it performs on damaged or 'faulty' CDs. Some of my wife's dodgy Chinese pop CDs jumped, skipped, or produced rhythmic hissing noises on the new player, yet they had played perfectly on the At3000.

A couple of my UK pressed CDs were problematic too. However, on the vast majority of discs the At3500 performed impeccably. Choosing a particular CD with known problems, I compared the At3500 to the CD/SACD multi-players I was also reviewing at the time. I wondered if players able to reproduce SACD might handle problem discs better. Not so! The At3500 was easily the best so far as fault-free playback was concerned. On the chosen disc, all the CD/SACD multi-players produced clicks and dropouts. One actually failed to play the disc at all – the clock showed the laser skating back and forth trying to lock onto the signal.

Rather than relying on memory, I did actually go back to the At3000 for a quick listen. For some reason it proved even more sure-footed on problem discs than the At3500. Trying the disc that had troubled the CD/SACD multi-players (and the At3500 slightly) it produced a perfectly clean sound – no clicks, hisses, or dropouts. Alas, there was a downside; the At3000's sound wasn't as good! Having lived with (and got used to) the At3500 for a couple of months, the At3000 sounded noticeably thinner

and less substantial in terms of tonal body and weight. It was good, but the richness and tonal body I'd taken for granted suddenly wasn't there any more.

There seemed to be less 'power', and a reduced sense of presence.

On pop music, the sound produced seemed more 'processed' and electronic, without the fullness and integration produced by the At3500.



Vocal sibilants were a shade more pronounced, producing a slightly disembodied effect. The bass was less firm and clear. All-told the new player sounded cleaner and tidier. What I like about the At3500 is the way it manages to sound lucid and detailed on the one hand, yet smooth and rich on the other. It produces a very powerful dynamic sound, yet remains relaxed, and natural in terms of presentation.

After a few days' use I found myself 'forgetting' all about it – almost like it wasn't there. Yet don't infer from this that the At3500 produces a bland nondescript sound – far from it! It's actually very vivid and involving, albeit in a way that's less 'in your face' than many good CD players. Soundstaging is impressively three-dimensional, partly because the bottom-end is so solid and powerful. The depth of the low frequencies helps to enhance the impression of space and depth and if you've got speakers with extended bass

(or sub-woofers) you should really notice the substance and textural quality of the bass.

By now, it should be clear that I rate the At3500 very highly indeed. It's combination of warmth and solidity with incisive detail and transparency offers tremendous musical insight, allowing it to stand aside from the performance, so that you concentrate on the players not the player. The only question remaining is whether those of you with an At3000 should consider

having your player upgraded to At3500 spec for the £650 this costs. It'd say it's definitely worth doing, though (as always) try and get an A/B comparison before committing yourself. That way you'll be absolutely sure of just big the difference is. The At3000 is an excellent player, but the At3500 is at another level altogether. ➤

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	CD player
DACs:	Up-sampling to 24bit/96kHz
Digital Outputs:	1x co-axial SPDif 1x Toslink optical
Analogue Outputs:	1pr s/e RCA phono 1pr balanced XLR
Output Level:	2V
Dimensions (WxHxD):	430 x 128 x 390mm
Weight:	8Kg
Number Of UK Dealers:	15
Guarantee:	2yrs
Price:	£1150

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Forbidden Pleasures...

The Consonance Orfeo CD Player and Tristan Integrated Amp

by Alan Sircom

A surprising thing about Chinese-made products... few take advantage of their Chinese-ness, preferring instead to copy styles and designs from the Golden Age of UK and US hi-fi (the 1950s and 1960s). Of course, this is understandable because a) it was a Golden Age of hi-fi sales and b) the target audience is not strictly Chinese in many cases. But China's rich heritage often seems missing from the many products built there.

Not so the latest range from Consonance. The Beijing-based company looked around its home town for inspiration and the result is the Forbidden City series of products. Comprising two CD players, two integrated amplifiers, plus an all-in-one system and a turntable, they all share the same look; an homage to the gates of the Forbidden City itself. The Orfeo and Tristan are the two £995 entry points to the Forbidden City range, and as a consequence have the choice of either an all-black or all silver finish, while the more up-scale Turandot player and Calaf amp have the right grade of red with black dots as a front panel. Cor!

The design is elegant and shows off just how well parent company Opera (not to be confused with the Italian speaker manufacturer of the same name) builds its Consonance products. Excepting the big, touch sensitive display, these products could pass for Classé, both in looks and build. And yet, they cost just £995 a piece.

In fact, the only real downside to the Forbidden City duo here is they are a touch unfathomable at first jump. The products have a central red LED read-out with a power on switch beneath on the Tristan and a thin transport door on the Orfeo. Beneath these are a series of buttons – six on the Orfeo and four on the Tristan – which are slightly larger, slightly less black and slightly less square than the Forbidden City door pattern.



They also have instructions, written in near-black, dark, dark grey. In other words, unless you know where they are, you can be forgiven for thinking these two products have no controls whatsoever on the front panel. Fortunately the remotes are somewhat clearer, whilst still reflecting the same rock-solid approach to product build.

Despite the very different finish, the solid black remote shows that the Orfeo is 'simply' a refinement of an old friend – the Consonance CD-120 Linear as tested in issue 44. Like the CD-120, the Orfeo has just the one set of single-

ended phono sockets and a digital coaxial output, as well as a broadly similar internal architecture, with a centre toroidal transformer feeding the relevant digital and analogue stages spread evenly across the box. Both have the same 2.35V output, too. This puts them a notch above the Red Book standard 2V output, but keeps the players in line with modern techniques (a slightly more powerful output will sound more exciting in demonstration... it's a trick many CD manufacturers have been doing since the mid 1980s).

More importantly, the Orfeo and CD-120 share the same basic digital architecture and the same venerable and venerated Philips TDA1543 dual 16-bit chip, although this time four chips to the CD-120's two. This DAC dates back to 1991 (modern designers have to pay good money to get the TDA1543's application notes translated from the original Latin), and is used here in non-oversampling form. In a time where every other CD player oversamples and up-samples its PCM data stream to seemingly insane levels, it's perhaps refreshing to find a player that sticks resolutely to 16-bit processing and sampling at 44.1kHz, although you can push the sampling frequency to 88.2kHz from the remote.

Where things get really twisty is in the digital filtration stage. Or rather, where the digital filtration stage normally sits, because Opera has taken the bold step of doing

▶ without FIR (finite impulse response) filtration altogether. A FIR filter works by introducing a phase-linear delay to a signal to 'decimate' or 'interpolate' a datastream. If you think of this in purist audio terms, it means the filter essentially trades the time domain for the frequency domain... and that's a trade-off too far. Opera is not the first to think this through – Audio Note has been doing the same for some years and Opera itself cites Ryohei Kusunoki's article (published by Sakura Systems) as the catalyst for the lack of FIR filtration in the CD-120 and Orfeo.

There's a lot of 47 Laboratory style technology inside the Orfeo, even if the Sakura Systems team were not directly involved in the product development. The analogue filtering (as distinct from the digital stage) and I/V stages use discrete components (the I/V stage is passive) and the whole signal path is kept mercifully short. All of which is essentially the same as the CD-120, but the differences are there, if you scratch the surface. Well, in fact, the surface – or rather the case – forms a large chunk of the differences, because the extra rigidity of the thick Forbidden City case helps. It's this along with the dual-differential DAC layout, a beefier transformer, a slightly more discerning sift through the components that upgrades critical elements and replacing the LCD panel of the CD-120 with a less noisy LED read-out that delivers the performance improvements over the cheaper model. But given the architectural similarities, perhaps it's better to think of the Orfeo as a CD-120 in evening dress rather than a wholly new CD design per se. No bad thing, given that the CD-120 was a *Hi-Fi+ Product of the Year* in 2006.

The Tristan also shares its genome with other products in the Consonance line-up... but this time it's more distant

relative than bigger brother. The Tristan is a scaled down, solid-state only, half the power version of the 200 watt Calaf, but still with relay switched sources. It's also about half the size, half the weight, with no ugly hand-lacerating heatsinks down the sides and no balanced input. What the 100 Watt Tristan does have is just three line and one phono input, this last switchable from MM to MC at the touch of a toggle on the rear panel.

Opera can get a bit blurry about technology in this range, specifically whether a product is completely solid-state or not. More than one reviewer



has completely failed to notice a pair of input triodes buried inside the Calaf. Here though, both Orfeo and Tristan are distinctly solid-state in construction. The other blurry bit is the concept of Cool Class A, which is said to be derived from the Calaf. As best we can ascertain, this simply means the amp runs in Class A for the first few watts, before dropping into Class AB thereafter. Like the Orfeo, it is impeccably well built, not just for the money... just well built full stop.

Things have a habit of twisting and turning in hi-fi. One moment, the market is flooded with good new CD players at a price point and then it's the turn of amplifiers. Therein lies a problem for the Tristan; it's a very good amplifier in a sea of very good amplifiers. It's no simple placeholder, but one can't help feeling that on its own it lacks that special sparkle that will make it stand out from

the crowd. Which is a shame because this is that rarest of things, a great all-rounder, an amp where absence of character is a virtue rather than a vice. It is extremely musical in a dry, tight and controlled way, with a very good level of detail and lots of focused, deep between-the-speakers imaging. It also has extremely good bass, an open midrange and a gently extended treble. It is not the most rhythmically obvious amplifier around, but neither does it lack for rhythmic drive when required.

So, why does this seem so negative? That's largely down to the CD player, which is truly excellent – in its own way. In the light of the Orfeo, the Tristan seems merely good and that sets it up for damning with faint praise. But, that's not the whole story; the Orfeo is a love it or hate it product, where the Tristan is a far more balanced performer. As a result the buying decision for both is likely to rest upon the individual's like or dislike of the CD player.

So, what's to like or dislike? The sound of the Orfeo is one of the most singularly alive and dynamic you'll hear from CD. Virtually any CD. Ever. Other CD players that come close to being this dynamic and involving all take pretty much the same filterless approach (such as the 47 Labs, Audio Note, Zanden and other Opera/Consonance models). It's a topology that makes the CD player sound more unforced and musical than almost all the other players on the market today – especially at this price. The Orfeo adds detail, dynamic authority and transparency to the CD-120 mix, qualities that make it more revealing but also reveal its character more clearly. You trade finesse – especially in terms of air and detail at the top end – for that easy musical flow and directness of communication. The question is whether you see that ▶

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► trade as a no-brainer or a dangerous hint of anarchy...

There will always be those who question the sonic costs of this approach. Those who want their CD sound clean and analytical, with carved from solid bass and vice-like control will find the Orfeo wanting. Similarly those who think the key to CD greatness is a bright, zesty presentation won't even consider the Orfeo, simply because it integrates its musical information rather than volley firing it at you. It's also possible to catch this player out. With the wrong recording the Orfeo can sound (bizarrely) both stark and listless at the same time. In extending the envelope the Orfeo also shows its edges, meaning that just occasionally a disc will lift the player's skirt, revealing its underwear. In this respect the smoother sound of the CD-120 is better able to cover its tracks (and its dignity). But such recordings are rare and for the rest you are handed a sound that reminds you just why you got into hi-fi in the first place.

There's some small sense of what it can do from the very outset, in that it makes music very open and enticing. It just doesn't do it in the most forthright manner. But as you listen more and more, you find yourself drawn into the music's warp and woof, instead of just its surface nature. Even those who hate the sound of the Orfeo will admire its musicality – in rather the same way that those who cannot stomach the Rega CD players generally at least respect what they do. They just know they do it for other people.

For me though, the sheer musicality of the Orfeo drives a system in the right direction. And it will do this with any system. What the Tristan brings to the party is honesty and neutrality, the perfect foil for the potentially brilliant

but possibly frustrating Orfeo. Of course, that makes the Tristan sound like it's a sort of audio Switzerland, with visions of Orson Welles doing the cuckoo clock speech from *The Third Man*. Nothing could be further from the truth; the Tristan is a dynamic and capable amp, more than handy enough to keep up with the expressive freedom of the CD player without keeping it too much in check.




The amp also has enough power behind it to make music spring to life, something that happens often with the Orfeo.

Opera's ability to blur the lines between valve and solid-state might have been better used here. The Tristan cries out for a valve or two in the input stage to add that last degree of sparkle to an already dynamic and powerful presentation. It would then loft the Tristan from being a very good front-runner to being on the podium at every audition. There again, it would also turn it into a little Calaf, with a price to match.

Let's put this into some kind of perspective. In the Orfeo, Opera has produced one of the most exciting CD players available, and in the Tristan an extremely good amplifier to go with it. The CD player's sparky personality is tempered by the amp's calm neutrality, Katherin Hepburn to the Tristan's Keira Knightly, Pablo Casals playing the *Bach Cello Suites* as opposed to Yo Yo Ma. Together the contrast works, but apart there are those who might find the amp

a little too "pale and interesting"; the CD player a little too characterful for their taste. Of the two, the CD player is the star – it wears its heart well and truly on its sleeve, but assuming you want what it does, there's nothing near the price that does it better. The amp is more of a sleeper, and easier to overlook. Taken together and rather like the styling, these products make perfect sense as a pair.

The CD player will find its way into more systems as a stand alone unit than the amp, where its individual appearance will make as bold a statement as its musicality. The Chinese invented fireworks, the Orfeo continues the tradition... 

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Consonance Forbidden City Orfeo	
Type:	Integrated CD player
DAC:	Dual differential 16bit TDA1543X4
Outputs:	1pr. unbalanced RCA phonos 1x co-axial SPDif digital
Output Voltage:	2.35V
Remote Control:	Philips RC-5 compatible
Dimensions (WxHxD):	430 x 110 x 330mm
Weight:	18kg
Price:	£995

Consonance Forbidden City Tristan	
Type:	Integrated amplifier
Inputs:	3x line-level 1x phono (MM/MC)
Input Sensitivity:	300mV
Power Output:	100 Watts into 8 Ohms
Minimum Load:	4 Ohms
Remote Control:	Philips RC-5 compatible
Dimensions (WxHxD):	430 x 110 x 390mm
Weight:	22kg
Price:	£995
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A DIAMOND IS A GIRL'S BEST FRIEND

by Anke Kathrin Bronner

Gentle reader,

Extraordinary events demand extraordinary measures! So, contrary to normal practice, we ask you to lay your copy of Hi-Fi aside (just for one moment, of course)! Call your wife (or girlfriend) and show her a Diamond. No, not jewellery, but the first turntable for ladies! Yes, for ladies! The German manufacturer Scheu Analog (who make bearings and Perspex platters for many a German 'table) has finally responded to a long-standing requirement with a new type of record player.

But why a turntable for ladies? The thinking behind the Diamond goes like this: Women like listening to music at least as much as men do. But generally, the whole ritual involved in playing records, not to mention the risk to the cartridge and therefore life and limb, means they'd rather grab a CD or SACD instead of vinyl. That's a great loss for the analogue scene! So, why not provide a "plug and play" model and which proves in addition that hi-fi equipment doesn't have to be bland, clunky, bulky, unwieldy and butch? The Diamond is a lovely and stylish turntable, like a three-legged starfish or a triangle with "round edges". It comes in trendy colours and is easy to use. In fact, it looks more like a fancy objet d'art than a turntable. Your wife will love it! But, as you know: It is not only the appearance, but the practice and performance that matter. So, Scheu have combined their curvaceous motor unit with a modified RB250 and

a Benz Micro Silver MC cartridge. This combination works wonderfully well. So well that she will (finally) be convinced that the right equipment is able to influence the sound AND is worth the money, thus finishing all those tedious discussions about your hobby and the expenditure it entails. Finally, you don't have to share your system any longer, as she'll now have her own toy! But best of all, this is no toy, but a full-grown, high-class turntable! Not just a treat for the eyes... a treat for the ears!

Scheu started in the turntable business 20 years ago, gaining a worldwide reputation for his products along the way. The analogue community has long appreciated the terrific sound as well as the compact, substantial yet elegant constructions that typify the company's



designs. For the last three-years Ulla Scheu has been at the helm, and it is her that came up with the idea for the Diamond.

Actually, the Diamond is little sister to "Das Laufwerk No. 1", Scheu's top-of-the-range model. In contrast to "Das Laufwerk" with its 35kg weight, the Diamond is a lightweight at only 17kg. The 50mm platter is made of acrylic, and the multi-layer plinth, too. The

electronically regulated DC motor with line-speed adjustment for 33 and 45rpm and thread drive, is a deliberately low torque design, to minimize transmitted vibration. The accessories include a roll of thread, a strobe disc, special bearing oil and the original packaging for the Benz Micro, complete with bubble level, screwdriver and mounting screws.

Now, ladies...

Should you purchase a Diamond then it's the lady of the house who should install the deck. Open the box and nearly everything is already where it should be. The cartridge is pre-mounted and adjusted. Assuming no mishaps in transit it should be spot on. You just have to fill the bearing with oil (from the syringe) and put the platter on the bearing. Just be careful of your

fingernails and your long hair! You don't want to damage yourself or your new best friend. Then you just have to put the thread around the platter and pulley and space the

motor to provide tension. Check the speed with the strobe disc, remove the stylus guard, and that's it! It is really that simple. In fact, connect the output sockets to the main system's pre-amp and you can start listening

immediately – and it should sound great!

I would however recommend checking the settings, first of all the VTF (Vertical tracking force). My Benz Micro came with 1.75 grams, but the optimum tracking force according to Benz is 2.0 grams. In fact, by increasing the VTF, the sound became noticeably more

► detailed and the soundstage suddenly had more depth, while the music became cleaner and more fluid, so I would highly recommend this step! It really is quite simple to do, and just involves reading the instructions with a little care. (If all else fails, please ask your husband or boyfriend – it will make him feel so much better!)

Benz' intention with the Silver was to create a natural sound, not a cartridge "Diva". Its strengths are widely known – neutral to warm sound, especially the midrange, with pleasing heights and a tight bass. The RB250 also delivers a warm and substantial sound, with low surface noise while its rigidity makes it a good match for a low-compliance cartridge like the Benz. Scheu have replaced the original counterweight and plastic stub with a much heavier weight running on a metal post, keeping the mass closer to the bearings to improve the sound. I would suggest investing in the optional record weight too.

So, what can I tell you? It seems that this 'table is equally at home on classical music and pop as well; it even handled vast orchestral passages without any complaints! It sailed through my favourite Paganini concerto with Salvatore Accardo from the Italian audiophile label fonè. As a violinist I know the sound and range of the instrument and so does this record player – perfectly. Yet it was equally at home with Katie Melua's latest album *Piece By Piece*. Not surprising as Katie inspired me to test the turntable – she owns the very first Diamond and loves it. The Diamond is solid, stable and unflustered by even the busiest music. Its simplicity of set-up is echoed in the clarity of its sound and music.

Gentle reader, please consider: awareness is the key. Don't say afterwards that we didn't warn you! You might just be playing with fire. Once your wife has acquired a taste for vinyl, her own vinyl, she will after your stylus gauge, your test record and then your favourite LPs. In short: EVERYTHING!

And she might just drive you crazy with questions about VTA, azimuth, overhang... But bear in



mind: All this agony is for a good cause! You can finally show her just what a smart guy you are!

Of course, if a man wants to own this extraordinary turntable (and there have already been some requests...) it doesn't have to be pink. You can also order it in black, transparent or just about any other colour you like. And the Diamond offers enough possibilities when it comes to adjustment and upgrades. You could go to work on the Rega arm, but with a range of armboards available for other tonearms, maybe a more substantial upgrade makes more sense. Either way, the Diamond is well worth the effort.

The Diamond-Rega-Benz combination is a real dream-team. It eclipses even much higher priced combinations with its natural, neutral and detailed sound. Despite the entry-level price tag, you are purchasing a really solidly built and surprisingly weighty deck. It's a beautifully crafted, easy to handle turntable, full of style and finesse, a genuine little sister to "Das Laufwerk"! The design is ladylike, young, fresh and drop-dead gorgeous – and for me, there's nothing to touch its performance at the price. And I'm sure, once you've listened to it, you will agree: a Diamond is (not just) a girl's best friend! ➤+

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Thread-drive record player including phono-stage
Motor:	DC low-torque
Speeds:	33 and 45 RPM, manually adjusted
Tonearm:	Scheu modified Rega RB250
Cartridge Type:	Benz Micro Silver moving-coil
Output Level:	2.0mV
Dimensions (WxHxD):	480mm x 115mm x 430mm
Colours:	Pink, black, transparent, other colours on request
Price:	£ 1.990,00

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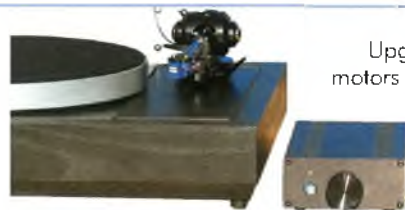
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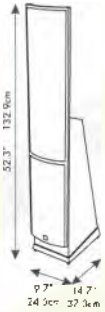
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IN A WORLD OF YOUR OWN...

NOISE CANCELING HEADPHONES FROM SENNHEISER AND AUDIO TECHNICA

by Roy Gregory

I've long been an enthusiastic advocate of Sennheiser's PXC300 noise canceling headphones, using them to great effect on the many long-haul flights that seem to have become a constant presence in my life. Incredibly compact, sensibly priced and surprisingly effective in not just improving the quality of in-flight entertainment but reducing the effects of travel fatigue and jet-lag, these days I never travel without them. However, good as they are and much as I've come to rely on them they are not perfect. The small ear-pads rest on your ears, which has two effects.

In order to block noise they need to fit tightly and the resulting physical pressure can actually hurt your ears (as opposed to your hearing) after continual wear for six or seven hours (especially if you fall asleep resting on them). Secondly, whilst they kill the high-frequency drone that is so wearing when flying, they do little to reduce the low-frequency rumble. Their diminutive size also means that the active electronics and the batteries they require are housed in a separate 'stick' that you need to clip to your clothing, a slightly awkward arrangement that can lead to a right tangle of wires when it comes to entering or exiting your seat.

All of which means that the arrival of two new noise canceling phones, one from Sennheiser and the other from Audio Technica is extremely interesting,

especially as both are circumaural designs. The fact that they completely enclose your ear makes them more effective against low-frequencies, while the larger pads make them more comfortable (if a little warmer) to wear for long periods. I took both with me, along with my PXC300s, on a recent trip to Denver, an 11 hour flight that gave them a serious 22-hour testing schedule.

Physically, both the new models (Audio Technica's Quiet Point ATH-ANC7 and Sennheiser's PXC450) are significantly larger than the PXC300.

The carry case



for either is about four times the size of the dinky 300 version, although clever folding keeps things flat and easily stored. But one advantage of the larger earpieces is that the batteries and electronics are all on board, doing away with the 300's fiddly extra stick.

Starting with the Audio Technicas, at around £150 a pair they cost about the same as the PXC300. Their headband and earpads are well padded and comfortable, offering excellent isolation from external

noise even without the noise canceling engaged. A simple sliding switch activates their circuitry while a small pouch inside their carry case holds the detachable cable, jack adaptors and spare AAA batteries. There's also room for an iPod and the phones are easily sensitive enough to use with my US version. The detachable cable is a particularly nice touch as it means that you can get rid of it if you simply want to sleep, read or walk about. Sonically the ANC7s deliver greater clarity at lower volumes than the PXC300, in no small part due to the much better low-frequency isolation. This is

important because the lower levels help to further reduce fatigue. Sound is punchy and dynamic with a mid-forward balance that works best with more explosive and dramatic material and music rather than speech and classical. However, one thing's for sure – whatever you play, the clarity means that you'll get plenty of detail and intelligibility, crucial in noisy environments.

Sennheiser's PXC 450 is around twice the price of the Audio Technica but is also far more sophisticated and capable*. Its large earpads are extremely soft and comfortable, but clever folding means that their storage pack is shallower but a little wider than AT's and if anything, easier to accommodate. However, you'll do ►

There is also a more affordable PXC350 circumaural design, priced at £230, which I have not heard. These dispense with some of the clever features that make the 450s so impressive, but might be an option if you want an enclosed design but can't stretch as far as £300.

► well to get much more than the adaptors, a spare AAA and something the size of a Nano inside it. My elderly 60GB iPod didn't want to



know, although the slimmer, newer models would be less of a challenge; a good thing as the internal impedance sensing circuitry employed by Sennheiser makes matching to in-flight systems or portable players completely problem free. They have their own volume control, allowing you to balance their sensitivity against the driving system for best audio performance, whilst their isolation and noise-canceling were both significantly better than the AT's. One other nice touch is the snug, right-angle entry for the removable cable, which is extremely secure and resists accidental disconnection at the crucial point in your film or music.

Sonically they delivered a far more even and natural balance, with much greater bass detail, texture and extension. The large pads seem to distance the drivers further from your ears, offering a less "in your head" listening experience, which combined with their superior tonal qualities and natural bandwidth make long-term listening much more relaxing. They also have a secret weapon, in the shape of their talk-through facility, a button on the right

earpiece that allows you to hear people speaking to you. It might not sound like much but believe me, it's a fantastically useful capability, given the chore of donning and removing a pair of tight-fitting 'phones. At first sight it might seem like a gimmick; once you've used it you'll be reluctant to consider any 'phone that doesn't offer it. One caveat; Louise found the ear pieces too large for her small head and ears, actually extending below her jaw-line (she is an extremely slim and petite 5'4") so you should check fit before you buy, especially if you are on the slight side. My only other complaint is that the fit is so good and all embracing that chewing produces a slightly disconcerting low-frequency grumble, but it's a small price to pay...

Where does that leave our three contenders? For once we have three excellent products, each offering their own virtues for a given price. The Audio Technicas are the budget choice for all-round ability, especially for flying where their circumaural design really comes into its own. But the lively, natural sound of the PXC300 maintains its viability for less



demanding situations like the train, especially if space and weight are at a premium or you don't want to look like an urban spaceman! However, once heard the PXC 450 easily justifies its elevated price on grounds of performance, sound-quality and practicality. For regular long-distance flyers, they are far nearer to necessity

than luxury. But the real lesson here is that, once experienced, a quality set of noise canceling 'phones makes such a difference to the experience and physical impact of travel or time spent in noisy environments that you'll not want to be without them, while the advent of the iPod and Bluetooth communications means that you don't even look odd wearing them. But their benefits in terms of reduced stress and fatigue are hard to credit until you have experienced them first-hand, making ownership something of a no-brainer. Whether you treat yourself or some kind soul buys them for you, you'll be forever grateful every time you put them on!



Prices and Contact Details:

Sennheiser

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PXC450 - \$300

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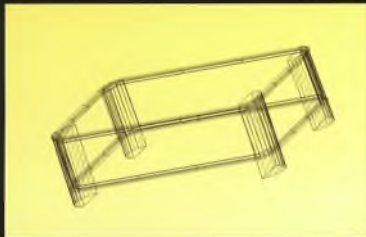


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Roy Gregory, Hi-Fi+, Issue 54

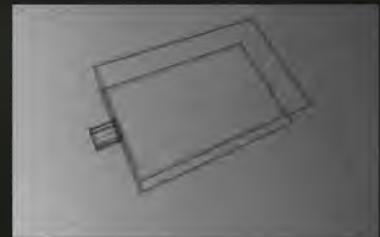
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SPIC AND SPAN...

THE KUZMA RECORD CLEANING MACHINE

by Roy Gregory

Anybody who plays records should have a record cleaning machine. Even new discs have nasty deposits on their surfaces from the pressing process and sound quieter and more musically natural after a proper clean: and a proper clean means one involving a wet cleaner and vacuum drying. The fluid used can vary, with a number of different options and home grown solutions available. But the vacuum drying is the one constant you just can't do without.

For years now, the de facto standard in this department has been the VPI HW16.5, the company's one-side-at-a-time basic model. It requires you to add fluid by hand to the slowly turning disc, before using the vacuum tube in its sprung-loaded turret to suck the surface dry. It's bulky, noisy, quick and simple and it's the last two of these qualities that have kept it in the box seat for nearly two decades. It's the right solution at the right price and to date, nothing cheaper has done the job better (and anything cheaper has lacked the VPI's solid construction).

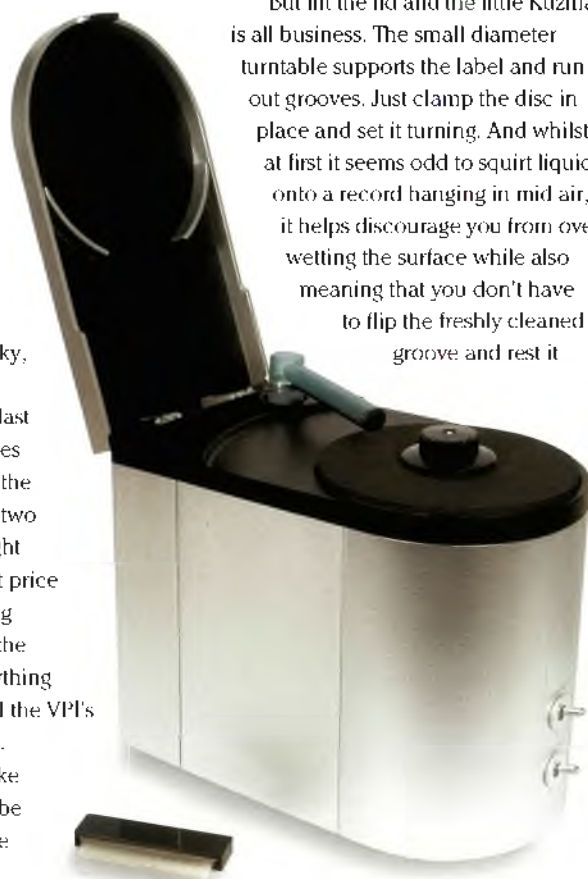
Well, it looks like there might finally be a serious alternative with at least one

major advantage. Kuzma's record cleaning machine is operationally almost identical to the VPI. But rather than a large, bluff box this looks more like a Moulinex coffee maker, its neat, discrete cabinet all curves and plastic mouldings. It's shallow, narrow footprint means it takes up about the same space as a shoe box, making it far easier to accommodate than the cuboid HW16.5, while its kichenesque exterior looks so un-hi-fi that the uninitiated won't even recognise what it is: "A drip filter machine for the office, darling? How nice."

But lift the lid and the little Kuzma is all business. The small diameter turntable supports the label and run out grooves. Just clamp the disc in place and set it turning. And whilst at first it seems odd to squirt liquid onto a record hanging in mid air, it helps discourage you from over-wetting the surface while also meaning that you don't have to flip the freshly cleaned groove and rest it

where the dirty side has just been – the VPI's one Achilles' heel. Once you've spread the fluid using the brush provided, swing the vacuum tube into place (its sprung loaded design unashamedly copied from the VPI on the "if it ain't broke don't fix it" principle of Chinese manufacturing). Hit the vacuum switch and within a turn the surface is dry, clean and shiny. The whole process is quick and simple enough to be done each and every time you play a record for the first time. There's even a little gutter at the back in which to store the brush, keeping everything neat and tidy. (The only question is whether alternative turrets exist for 7" and 10" discs, although this won't worry too many people.)

And the best bit of all? The price. At \$400 (direct from the importer) the petite and pretty Kuzma machine undercuts the VPI. It lacks the HW16.5's heavy MDF construction and years of developmental refinement, but counters with a far smaller footprint and more attractive price and appearance. Functionally the two machines are near identical so for many the size and cost factors will be decisive. In fact, this could just be the ultimate domestic harmony present for the audiophile who has (almost) everything... ➤+



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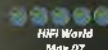
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FUTURE SHOCK...

OR WHY YOU SHOULD BE GETTING TO GRIPS WITH iTUNES AND THE IPOD

by Chris Binns

Like it or not, there can be no doubt that computer technology continues to infiltrate our lives in almost every possible way, and music is no exception. As soon as you step away from the scenario of experiencing an intimate, live performance of acoustic instruments you can pretty much guarantee that a microprocessor or several has been involved somewhere along the line. Pick any recent rock or pop release from the album charts (maybe one of the many that sound like early recycled U2 with a bit of the Doors thrown in) and the chances are that a computer was used as part of the production for the bass or drum sounds, and if not, a program such as Beat Detective will have been used to pull all the playing into time. It will have been recorded and mixed with Pro Tools or Logic Pro, mastered with Sonic Solutions or Sadie, and has thus spent the majority of the time buried on a computer hard drive somewhere. (Parts of it might well have been across the Atlantic a couple of times, squeezed down a telephone line, but that's another issue). Don't think that other genres of music are exempt either; a high

proportion of modern classical recordings are multitrack recorded in segments and edited, mixed and then mastered with computer software.

But of course, how we listen to music is also changing at a rapid pace. In the real world - away from hi-fi considerations for the moment - downloading music has seen a meteoric rise in popularity; and it's no longer confined to teenagers and the top-twenty. Significantly, in the last eighteen months record companies have reported a major rise in the amount of more serious music purchased via download, in particular classical material identified with a more mature market as older generations get to grips with computer technology. From a business perspective, the record industry has been slow off the mark with downloading, running scared

from experiences such as Napster where file sharing allowed music to be freely passed around and duplicated, thus robbing labels (and artists) of their profits. There was a considerable amount of burying of heads in the sand and hoping it would all go away. But the accountants know that selling music as a download could be highly profitable as there is no manufacturing, packaging, printing, or distribution costs and far less retail mark up to be covered. Getting carried away, many of the major record labels are now looking to a time where the compact disc is redundant, certainly as far as mainstream music is concerned, and it is not in the distant future.

From a technical viewpoint, storing music on a hard drive or 'flash' memory has a lot going for it, and there are a number of manufacturers who would be glad to see the back of the optical drive and all the problems that go with it. The quality and format that you choose to store your music in is your choice, and with drives getting bigger (and cheaper) all the time, space is far less of an issue. Meanwhile, the concept of the computer becoming the central hub of household entertainment, encompassing video, games and communication as well as audio is rapidly becoming reality. And as server based systems start to become the norm, increasingly

our discs (analogue and optical) will represent "safety copies" while music will more often than not enter our lives and our systems down a broadband connection. ►



► But, whilst servers themselves offer a number of potential sonic advantages and the latest dedicated hi-fi models are starting to sound extremely impressive, currently at least, downloading is more contentious. Commercial music is digitally compressed to hell and back to reduce file information down to a size where it can efficiently be sent down a telephone cable, and more worrying still is the general acceptance of MP3 as the de facto format for music. As an example, there is a new Radiohead album out which I would be quite interested to hear, but the band have taken the radical step of releasing it only as an MP3 download. You can buy it for whatever price you choose (seriously), but there is no provision for higher quality, which is a real shame. On the positive side, as broadband speeds increase larger files become less of a problem, and it is heartening to hear that EMI recently joined forces with Apple to offer all of their music in a higher quality format and so far, despite costing on average 30% more per download, the majority of people are prepared to pay for better quality.

Personally, the whole idea of letting a computer anywhere near a system that I use for listening to music has always been totally abhorrent, but listen - its taken me the best part of twenty years to get used to CD's, which must say something. But as I write, an Apple laptop is sat on the hi-fi rack displaying the cover artwork of various albums, selected tracks of which are playing in the background as I write - music suitable for a cold autumn evening, all streamed from a computer in my office. This is partly a result of my professional life, where

I have been dragged (kicking and screaming) into the 21st century by having to work systems such as Radar, Pro-Tools and Logic, and learning how to manipulate digital files while secretly lamenting the loss of two-inch analogue recording. With Macs being used almost exclusively by recording studios, it made sense that I should use one at home, (which, it has to be said is an altogether more pleasant and elegant experience than

the music was purchased from iTunes, given the artists name and title the program can access the database to come up with an album cover and track listings, as well as a host of other information such as composers and release dates. As a testament to just how much music is available on the site, with some fifteen hundred or so albums amassed in my library, there are only a few, rather obscure releases that it has failed to find.



iTunes is happy working with most formats including uncompressed types such as AIFF and WAV files, and after listening tests I opted to import the majority of files from CD using Apple's lossless system. This reduces the file size by about 40% and offers a reasonable compromise with quality. By

comparison, MP3 at its lowest compression rate manages to squeeze down by about 85 - 90%, possibly one of the reasons it doesn't sound too hot.

As hard drives get bigger this could be a decision I regret, particularly as when I have transferred material from vinyl I have done so as a full AIFF or WAV file, which is noticeably better, but then it is coming from an analogue source...
 The software used influences sound quality, and I have experimented with a couple of set ups for getting the signal in and out of the computer. The Apogee Rosetta is a professional interface that I use with Pro-Tools for recording, and via the Firewire port gives good results, particularly with the uncompressed files; its fascinating to hear the transcription from vinyl and compare it to the original. The process somehow 'tightens up' the analogue sound where clicks and pops become less noticeable, but there is less sense of life with a PC) and inevitably I started to investigate iTunes.
 I've little experience with other download managers, but that simply reflects the elegance and intuitive feel of iTunes - not to mention the sheer fun function of using it. Anyone with the slightest tendency towards anorak behaviour when it comes to their music collection will find it highly entertaining; ditto if you have ever been into making compilation tapes and the like for yourself or others. I guess where iTunes differs from a number of other systems is its direct link with the shop; this is where you can actually buy music, but at the moment only in MP3 format, unless (as I previously mentioned) it is an EMI release where the higher quality AAC file is available. I hopefully other record companies will follow suit. What makes it so interesting is the artwork. Regardless of whether

comparison, MP3 at its lowest compression rate manages to squeeze down by about 85 - 90%, possibly one of the reasons it doesn't sound too hot. As hard drives get bigger this could be a decision I regret, particularly as when I have transferred material from vinyl I have done so as a full AIFF or WAV file, which is noticeably better, but then it is coming from an analogue source...

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► 'flow' and natural delivery from the music. I have also been using the Cyrus DAC XP as an interface via the SPDif socket with great results, particularly with tracks that are encoded with the Apple lossless system, where for whatever reason the end result seems more musical than with the Apogee. But it is worth pointing out that even using the audio in/out on the Mac laptop the results aren't bad and that (and the convenience and access on offer) is really the point.

Does it work as a serious music source for hi-fi? Well... not really. Given the choice, if I really want to listen to music with my full attention I would always rather spend an evening with the original records and some CD's, but in all fairness it was never my intention (at this particular stage, anyway) that it should compete; had that been the case I would not have gone for a compressed file system. But for every other occasion, the hard disc system has given me a great deal of entertainment, almost along the lines of a high quality juke box – particularly when you see the covers displayed – and the random selection of music is a lot of fun.

AND THEN OF COURSE THERE IS THE IPOD...

Which hardly needs an introduction, having rapidly reached iconic status since its release six years ago. Responsible for one of the biggest changes in the way we listen to music since the transistor

radio, it has now sold in excess of 110 million units and is in its sixth generation. With Apple's customary elegant design, the iPod is certainly an object of desire unless, that is, you are completely immune to gadgets. Even then, you cannot deny that it is a beautifully functional device, conceptually developed to work with the iTunes software that is the basis of its operation. There is not the space here to go into a detailed history; suffice to say that the latest models have photo and video capability with a bright, clear display that also shows album artwork, but the prime function is still that of portable music player. To that end, the development has not always been straightforward, and while the sound quality was impressive to begin with, a design change around about the third generation saw it



decline quite considerably. The result was more pronounced with lower impedance headphones, where due to a component and circuit change in the output amplifier the power delivery and bass response suffered badly. This seems to have picked up again in the latest models, but there is still the issue of the inbuilt non-defeatable volume limiter on all units shipped into the EU; due I gather to some regulation in France. Non Apple software is available to 'de-bug' this on earlier

models, but has yet to catch up with the latest generations. The bottom line is that with less sensitive (decent quality) headphones, the EU iPods lack the grunt to generate reasonable listening levels whereas the US models don't; which can be wholly frustrating, and I guess is something you need to check out before you buy.

That minor gripe aside, the attraction of being able to carry several thousand tracks around with you is immense, and with higher capacities (now up to 160GB) that's a lot of music even in an uncompressed format. With a really good set of headphones, the results are not bad at all, while playing through a hi-fi system both a new Nano and the larger Classic sound only slightly inferior to the laptop via its internal line output. The days when I would take a selection of CD's into other rooms, the car or work have

gone, and the convenience of using iTunes to edit and compile a play list of exactly what you would like to hear and plugging an iPod into the dock is truly liberating.

One foray into the world of iTunes, followed by exposure to your cache of 'stolen' goodies on a portable player that can be as small as a

matchbook and you'll be hooked. An internet capable computer and an iPod is all you'll need. Spend a few minutes familiarising yourself with the (extremely simple) process – recruiting almost any available teenager as guide-come-mentor if necessary – and you'll be up and running. It's a bit like someone handing you the keys to the HMV shop on Oxford Street! Is it hi-fi? Not at the moment, at least not in this form. But it's definitely music!



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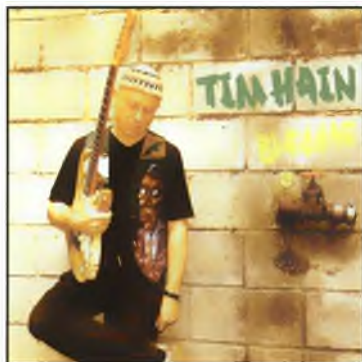
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The reviewers are identified by their initials.

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Tim Hain

Bleggae

Note Records NCD10152 


The great joy of music is that all boundaries are purely imaginary. If the mood takes you and you have the talent you can throw the rulebook out the window and just do your own thing. Tim Hain, an eccentric public school educated musician of distant Jamaican descent decided he'd fuse reggae with the blues, a style he's affectionately labeled *Bleggae*. As both forms are built around two or three chords and a prominent, rumbling bass line, the idea is not as far fetched as it sounds. In the hands of a lesser talent the results might have sounded forced and a little trite, but Hain is a wonderfully fluent guitarist with a highly authentic voice. Take 'Need Your Love So Bad' as an example; the guitar weeps and weaves its way over the reggae backdrop without losing any of the heartbreak, it's just as beautiful as the original, but different. The same sentiments apply to Hendrix' 'The Wind Cries Mary' and Tony Joe White's 'That's What The Blues Is All About' and let's face it, it's a fruitless exercise doing straightforward covers of such luminous pieces unless you can inject new life into them. All the other tracks are originals, expertly written and executed. The purists will have kittens but the rest of us can sit back and bask in a truly innovative and extremely entertaining listening experience.

AH



Chrystina Tomlin

Bitter Twisted Wrong

MCPSCDCD01 

Any young lady calling her album *Bitter Twisted Wrong* is not going to fill it up with lightweight ditties about uncomplicated love and bright, sunny days. Crystina Tomlin has obviously been around a lot of hardship and pain in her short life, and she's using her caustic pen to get it all out of her system. "Thanks to this album" she says, "I've had the chance to express all my emotional baggage. Hell yeah!" And express it she does, with all the ferocity of a young Sinead O'Connor. Trying to categorize Tomlin is impossible; the first three tracks alone take in stuttering funk, grungy Metallica-ish rock and Pretenders-infused balladry. The anger in her voice is pushed to the fore and she spits out some pretty vitriolic lyrics to boot, but just when you think you've sussed out where she's going she changes tack and starts singing in the most ethereal falsetto, showing a tender side of quite magisterial beauty.

'Lonely Tonight' is an obvious single choice and likely to connect with any lost soul, but for sheer brilliance try 'Losing You', reminiscent of Maxwell's fabulous interpretation of Kate Bush's 'This Woman's Work'. Tomlin's arrived on the scene in quite spectacular fashion. She's an incredibly talented young lady and it's going to be mighty interesting to see what direction she heads in next.

AH





Stanley Clarke

The Toys Of Men

Heads Up

Bassist Stanley Clarke has been writing film and TV scores for most of the last two decades so it's nice to hear him getting back to what impressed the likes of Art Blakey and Dexter Gordon back in the day. *The Toys of Men* would appear to have been inspired by the Iraq conflict but it does not state as much. Rather the release describes it as an examination of "the emotional sweep of war", a theme that has some resonance with his earlier work with Chick Corea in *Return to Forever*, or *Electric Warrior*.

Toys has many reminders of the glory days before being a great musician became unfashionable. Drummer Ronald Bruner jr. has much of the power and explosiveness of Billy Cobham in his heyday while violin player Mads Tolling could be Jean Luc Ponty. In other words Clarke has not tried to reinvent himself, but returns to a style of which he is an acknowledged master and plays it with a young and highly talented band. There is plenty of variety here: solo pieces on double bass, female vocals and a drum and bass duet keep things interesting. Then there's the recording which is taut and muscular thanks to Heads Up's Telarc connection.

JK



Steve Earle

Washington Square Serenade

New West Records NW6128

Steve Earle has had an extraordinary life: heroin addict, alcoholic, marital junkie, anti-death penalty campaigner, political activist...oh, and lest we forget, stellar musician and songwriter.

It was Earle's magnificent debut *Guitar Town* that paved the way for a new country uprising, and he followed that with a string of Springsteen inflected story songs and some of the toughest blue collar rock you'll ever hear. But Earle never stands still: the man's a chronic workaholic who now has a back catalogue to rival any of his peers. For the last year he's lived in New York and that's where this album took shape. It's more or less a one-man band; Earle set these songs to computer backbeats in his apartment ("I finally tested positive for Pro-Tools" he jokes) and then went in to Electric Lady Studios and added most of the instrumental work himself. The three-year hiatus from recording has sharpened his song writing and *Washington Square Serenade* contains some absolutely cracking tunes. 'Tennessee Blues' is a beauty, a sort of goodbye to his hometown, and 'Sparkle And Shine' is as romantic and touching as 'My Old Friend The Blues' was heartfelt. Earle's as relevant today as he was twenty years ago and that requires real talent, something he has in glorious abundance.

AH



Stoney Curtis Band

Raw And Real

Provogue Records PRD7232

Apparently, wherever this band plays there are always rows of Harleys parked outside the venue. That should give you some indication of what to expect when you put this CD in your player. The Stoney Curtis Band are a power trio in the vein of Cream, Robin Trower, Hendrix and Stevie Ray - in other words, a no holds barred fusion of heavy blues, psychedelia and all out rock. Curtis grew up listening to the above bands along with groups like UFO, Black Sabbath and Deep Purple, so it's hardly surprising to find his band immortalized by the biker fraternity. *Raw And Real* describes the music perfectly: it's no frills, in-your-face, foot to the floor blues rock from start to finish - a pretty breathless experience and not for the faint-hearted. Curtis is a potent guitarist with a guttural voice to match, and the rhythm section hold it all together without getting in his way. Solos tumble forth with a relentless fury, amped to the eyeballs and as aggressive as hell, but these boys have been in the game for a long time and always keep it fresh and exciting. The pace does slow for a couple of tunes but it's not long before they're up and at you again and kicking the proverbial ass. They might not break any new ground but I tell you, this band is HOT!!



AH





John Fogerty

Revival

Fantasy Records 088B02300019  

Creedence Clearwater Revival was one of those rare bands capable of writing anthemic songs that still sound as fresh and relevant today as they did thirty plus years ago. Even folk not into music remember the likes of 'Proud Mary', 'Bad Moon Rising', 'Fortunate Son' and 'Who'll Stop The Rain'. CCR were a truly integral part of American music and John Fogerty possessed a voice of real class. Actually, make that possesses, because unbelievably he sounds as good here as he ever has done, and as a songwriter he still has plenty of important things left to sing about.

Revival is a monstrous return to form; twelve songs with that classic Creedence vibe, and none would sound out of place on a CCR 'best of'...seriously, they're that good. The man's pretty pissed off too, most of his anger being directed at Bush and his cronies. "Your daddy wrote a check and there you are, another fortunate son" he sings on 'I Can't Take It No More', the guitars hissing and stinging and adding considerable weight to a really potent anthem. He's at Bush's throat again on 'Long Dark Night': "Georgie's in the jungle, knocking on the door, come to get your children, start another war." If ever a man deserves to be honoured by his country, it's Fogerty. Do something really useful and give him a medal, George.

AH



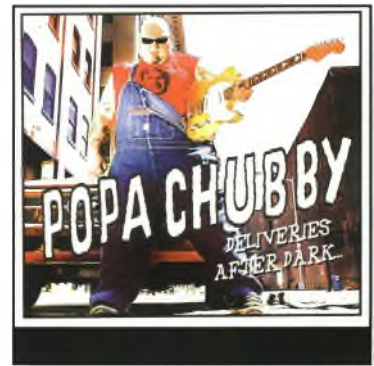
Manu Katché

Playground

ECM 


Manu Katché is a French drummer with Ivory Coast roots who worked with Sting, Joni Mitchell and Peter Gabriel in the eighties before being spotted by ECM's Manfred Eicher on a Robbie Robertson record. Eicher introduced him to Jan Garbarek with whom he has made several albums and toured. This is the second ECM album to come out with his name in the headline, its predecessor *Neighbourhood* garnering much critical acclaim in Europe. Here he is joined by Mathias Erck on trumpet, Trygve Seim on saxophones, Marcin Wasilewski on piano and Sławomir Kurkiewicz on double bass. The latter pair have their own Simply Acoustic Trio and acoustic is what this album is largely about; there is some almost ambient electric guitar from David Torn on two tracks but you don't get the lush, open and sexy sound of ECM without some natural acoustic to work with. Manu has said that he wanted to make more space for the drums on this album but it is still balanced in a fairly traditional style. He plays them with considerable subtlety and fair and maybe other combos would not have left the space for cymbal work that we have here. What Manu injects is his take on groove, never hammered out but rather dancing around the beat, at its best with the piano and bass pinning things down.

JK



Popa Chubby

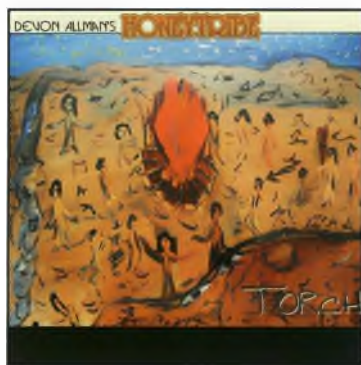
Deliveries After Dark

Dixie Frog Records DFCD8635 

Popa Chubby first came to my attention in 1995 when he released a truly splendid album called *Boozy and the Beast on SanyOkeh*. Produced by the legendary Tom Dowd, it introduced a major new talent to the world of the blues, someone with outstanding gifts as a songwriter, singer and guitarist. Since then, this brash New Yorker has carved a prolific career as an independent artist, and anyone who has seen him live will attest to his blistering performances on stage. *Deliveries After Dark* is the latest album to roll off the production line, and like the ones that have gone before is a showcase for his prodigious talents. Never one to be told what to do, Chubby continues to mix up the styles. There are typically robust, hard driving blues rockers like 'Let The Music Set You Free' and 'Salvage To Ride' which come at you like a relentless tornado. Then there's a detour into surf guitar territory ('Theme From The Godfather'), an 8-minute slow blues number called 'Grown Man Crying Blues' and even a stab at country with the charming 'You Can't Stop Love'. Throw in a helping of reggae ('Woman In My Bed Dub') and the acoustic 'Oh, Rock 'n' Roll You Heartless Bitch' and what you have is an album that sits close to the top of this larger than life character's repertoire.

AH





Devon Allman's Honeytribe

Torch

Provgue Records PRD77707

Having a famous surname can be a blessing and a curse. Sure, it can open doors, but at the same time the bar's automatically raised and expectations tend to go through the roof.

Devon Allman is the son of Gregg, founder member of one of America's most distinguished and respected southern rock bands, so he has a lot to live up to. However, he's no shrinking violet and has more than enough talent to stand on his own two feet. He's a gutsy singer in the mould of his father, and he sure can play the living shit out of a guitar. *Torch* is a great showcase for those talents. You want to hear it played lowdown and dirty? Take a trawl through 'Perfect World', a throbbing, sweaty heavy blues with scintillating guitar work and tough, hard-as-hell singing. Prefer your blues in Santana territory? Wrap your ears around the Latino soaked instrumental 'Mahalo', where Allman's consistently inventive playing mingles wildly with those alluring South American percussive beats. *Torch*'s ten originals stand brilliantly on their own but just for good measure Allman throws in an inspired version of Marley's 'No Woman, No Cry', so good it almost eclipses the original. Honeytribe have been on the road since 2005, honing their craft and building a passionate and loyal following. I have a feeling this band are in it for the long haul.

AH



Lowri Evans

Kick The Sand

Fflach Records CD797H

It has to be said that the female singer/songwriter market is bursting to the gills right now. Some are incredibly talented and stand out from the pack, some show immense potential but have work to do to unlock it and some should find a different career path. Lowri Evans is yet another, a young Welsh lass with a very pleasant, easy going voice who definitely has potential but who also needs to make some improvements before fame knocks on her door. Her first album was recorded in her native language and brought her to the attention of all the right people, which in turn led to invitations to festivals, radio station sessions and plenty of venue work. Realizing the restrictions placed upon her by singing in her own language, Lowri decided to record *Kick The Sand* predominantly in English. All but two of the songs are written by her alone, the exceptions being 'I'm Not In Love With You', a co-write with her partner Lee Mason, and a cover of U2's 'With Or Without You'. The latter appears in both English and Welsh but neither gets close to the original's hurt-soaked intensity and proves to be a fruitless exercise. The biggest problem with this album is the song writing; it stays mostly on one level and never seems to rise above just plain ordinary. That needs working on before real success can blossom.

AH



Luka Bloom

Tribe

Big Sky Records BSCD0004

I am a long time admirer of Luka Bloom and his gentle style of folkly roots music. He's cut some really moving albums, not least the ones he made for Warners in the 90's and 2002's brilliant *Between The Mountain And The Moon*, so there was great excitement when this newbie dropped through the letterbox. *Tribe* is a collaboration between Luka and multi-instrumentalist Simon O'Reilly. Apparently the two never shared a studio together; Simon sent Bloom a copy of his *Tidelines* album which Luka liked, and he sat down and composed lyrics and vocal melodies to suit O'Reilly's musical vision. On the evidence of what I hear I have to say it's not a collaboration made in heaven. Yes, the backing has a certain dreamlike quality but for some reason it seems to have taken away Luka's melodic sensibilities, an area he's always excelled in. *Tribe* is a one-paced, almost dreary affair, and it pains me to have to say that as it's not an accusation I could ever have leveled at him in the past. Too many times I found myself reaching for the skip button to see if I could find a song to stimulate my senses but alas, it wasn't to be. Luka can do so much better than this, as he's proved many times before. I guess it's time to go back to the musical drawing board.

AH



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ANNE SOPHIE MUTTER

A STUDY IN CHARISMATIC PERFORMANCE

Interviewed by Anke Kathrin Bronner

Few violinists in the post-Heifetz era have found a constant place in classical music. Few manage the transition from child prodigy to serious artist. Few are instantly recognized by their individual sound and personal style. And very few are as well known as Anne Sophie Mutter, revered for her beautiful tone, wonderful appearance and musical intelligence. The German artist has been called one of the most charismatic performers of our time – and deservedly so. Yet she still finds space for charity concerts and her two foundations that help young string players.

Her career has an almost fairy tale quality: discovered by Herbert von Karajan, the legendary conductor, who sponsored her enormous talent, she went out to discover the World. From Bach to Gubaidulina, from Mozart to Previn, from Beethoven to Penderecki, she is equally at home in each artistic milieu. Legendary recordings of the Beethoven sonatas, but also of violin concertos from the 21st century have brought her the music industry's most important awards. But one should never forget what is behind such great performances: the hard, disciplined work from childhood on. And, of course, all this would never have happened without a deep love – for the instrument, and for music!

© Harald Hoffmann / DG



ASM: A Stradivari from 1710.

AKB: With a famous previous owner? Do you know the history of the instrument?

ASM: Jelly D'Aranyi, to whom Ravel dedicated his *Tzigane*, played it. I think she was the most famous violinist to have owned it. Except for her it has been in private ownership in Ireland. That's why it is called Dunn Raven, after the Irish dynasty. But these owners were just enthusiasts who played it from time to time.

AKB: But it has been played regularly? And cared for? Otherwise you might have problems with an instrument, right?

ASM: Yes, that's true. Violins are animate beings, and they alter – due to cold or heat. But mainly, it is humidity that effects changes. I can't trace the history of my violin back to 1710. But, whatever happened in the past, I think the last 20 years have been very fruitful for this instrument – and of course for me, too. Because that is the time that we have shared!

AKB: So how's your relationship?

Do you practice every day? Some days do you have to make yourself play or is it a need, to play every day?

Anke Kathrin Bronner: Anne-Sophie, what does your violin mean to you? Have you given her a nickname?

Anne-Sophie Mutter: Obviously the violin is my musical voice. Just like a singer (only they don't have to put their voice in a case) the violin is my means of expression – no more, no less

AKB: Do you play a Stradivari or a Guarneri?

ASM: Being a single parent automatically means that no single day turns out as regulated as I would maybe wish. Which also means that I practice when I can. Sometimes at night, sometimes very early in the morning, when everybody's still asleep. I think as an artist, you learn very early to be extremely flexible and to utilise the



► creative opportunities in life: but also to do without playing, sometimes for weeks. That can also be positive, allowing you to deal with a composition on a mental level, without being afflicted by the problems of technique.

AKB: This is especially important for contemporary music, which can take some time to grasp mentally and inwardly.

ASM: Yes, yes. Contemporary music is incredibly time-consuming. Yet sometimes it only gets played once. So, I am always grateful when I am asked to premier a composition that is so meaningful and of course beautiful in its singular manner, in its own different way. I want to help it have a longer life expectancy than just that one evening; to become an integral part of the repertoire, like Wolfgang Rihm's *Time Chant*, or André Previn's *Violin Concerto Anne-Sophie*, or Gubaidulina's *Second Violin Concerto* that I'm working on at present. I will premier it with Sir Simon Rattle and the Berlin Philharmonic at the end of August 2007 in Lucerne.

AKB: And how long does it take you to study a work like this? How long have you had the sheet music?

ASM: The score has only just been finished, which leaves the conductor and me very little time before the world premier. Even the violin part has only recently been finished, the piano score since the beginning of July. Working really accurately is impossible for me until I have the score. So, even if I can use a piano score, though it is just the lean essence of the orchestral piece, but at least it establishes my position in the composition.

AKB: So, when you get a new score, a completely new composition... not something by Brahms or Beethoven which all of us have already heard...

ASM: ...and which no longer represent a foreign language...

AKB: Exactly! But, let's say the Gubaidulina, or maybe the Penderecki violin concerto: Once you get the sheet music, how do you approach it?

ASM: You know, the interesting thing is that, in either case, whether it is the so called standard repertoire or a new work, you try to find your own approach. Which is even more difficult with the standard repertoire, as unfortunately we can't live in a vacuum (laughs). What does this mean? In the course of your life, there comes a point where you can no longer differentiate between what you have acquired through habit or tradition, and what is effectively your decision as an interpreter. So, the process of playing a long established composition is, in a sense, just as hard and

problematic. The frustrations with a modern composition are different, maybe harder, especially if it is the first work you have played by that composer.

Personally, I take the violin part and just begin to play. If I am lucky, the orchestral part already exists. If not, I just have a part of the whole which adds another problem. After this, there is a working phase where I set fingering and bowing; then comes a second phase where I revise just these points. Then comes the phase of technically learning those passages, and after this very likely another one to review the fingering yet again, taking into account the emerging sonic demands of the composition. And then, finally, it is time for interpretation – but in most cases, by now time is running out! Which is why it is so nice to return to a new composition after a year or so, when all has settled, your view of it has matured – just like a good red wine!

AKB: Playing the violin is very demanding. Not just physically – playing is actually exhausting – but the music is mentally challenging too, isn't it?

ASM: Yes, although it's not necessarily contemporary works that present the greatest challenge... The working process is very intense, exhausting, because each day delivers a new problem, something exciting, like a hieroglyph you have to decode. But for me, Mozart is and will be the touchstone: returning to a Mozart sonata where everything is so transparent: or the violin concertos, so sparingly orchestrated, that every single note, the musical contribution of each single part in the score, has an enormous weight and a matching responsibility! If I take a look at a gigantic contemporary score, certainly it demands great seriousness, but often it is painted with a big brush. The miniature, the love for the detail has changed into a love for painting on a broad canvas. That's the current aesthetic, and I can identify with it very well. Nonetheless, for me Mozart will remain the radiologist par excellence (laughs).

AKB: What about older interpretations? I have compared different recordings of the Beethoven violin concerto. The recording you did at the age of sixteen, with Herbert von Karajan, was top ranking. What do you think about your previous recordings? Are they still valid? Or do you distance yourself from them?

ASM: Well, each recording still has its validity, for its own context and intentions. It captures a moment for the artist, one where you've reached a point in your life that you have sufficient to say that you can face a recording. This is the only motive for me to record, never an existing contract! In fact, the contract has to adapt to the musical landscape. So, every recording I ever made – and I can ►

► no longer remember how each one sounded – has its own authority, is simply a testimony. We will see if people still enjoy listening to it in twenty or thirty years, or if it will be *démodé*. Of course, the style of playing changes. If you listen to recordings by Jacques Thibaud or Jascha Heifetz, they encompass another aesthetic: for example, their use of portamento. Nowadays we live in an era where everything is so incredibly clinical that you almost feel embarrassed if you – even at the right place in the right piece – resort to portamento! Which is, by the way, high artistry! I love the old recordings. Fritz Kreisler for example, who provided a deep insight into the playing of his music.

AKB: To return to the Beethoven recordings: for a sixteen year old girl, you showed incredible maturity. Did you always have this inner quality?

ASM: I have no idea! Am I mature? I don't know. Am I mature nowadays? No idea (laughs)!

AKB: At least in your interpretations.

ASM: Well, because I worked with wonderful musicians from a very young age and have also always been a very serious musician myself, it allowed me to approach the Beethoven *Concerto* with the required inner calm. It's unbelievably important to act out the long suspense arcs in a contemplative way. But you should not draw conclusions from this ability as to my temper, as I am the exact opposite (laughs)!

AKB: Are there some violin concertos or sonatas which are more difficult for you or demand more time?

ASM: I find everything difficult at first; then, at some point, it seems to be easy, and then it becomes difficult again. There are moments when everything seems to work, and I think this is what pushes an artist! And then, there are parts of a score where you confront huge problems regarding musical structure. This can happen in every type of music!

AKB: You mentioned Mozart?

ASM: Yes, it happens in Viennese Classicism more than in Late Romantic, at least for me.

AKB: The great Classic-Romantic violin concertos are the Beethoven, the Brahms, the Tchaikovsky and the Mendelssohn. What would you say are the great concertos of 20th century?

ASM: Well, without any doubt the Berg violin concerto. It stands lonely on the top! Then Stravinsky and the Bartók *Second*. And then we get right up to date with the Penderecki (at least in my opinion). The Rosza is a wonderful concerto, the Korngold too. Another work I am desperate to acquire is the Barber. There are a couple of works that are very different in their language, which makes them all the more fascinating.

AKB: So, there is still enough to discover? Otherwise, you could always go back to rediscover...

ASM: Yes, that's true, you can discover new aspects again and again. I try to keep a balance between new works, the different sorts of chamber music and the standard repertoire. I'm also extending towards baroque music, what means I am actually going in both directions.

AKB: In your current cycle of the Bach concertos you are performing as both the soloist and the leader of the orchestra. Is this a direction you see yourself moving in the future?

ASM: I believe that any cooperation between musicians always involves shared leadership. When I am

playing the Brahms concerto with a conductor, we share the role of leader. In some sense, we alternate with leading. So, this sort of conducting without a conductor is almost an organic development of the years I've spent playing the Viennese repertoire, the Mozart concertos, with wonderful conductors. This music is actually conceived without a conductor! Thus, it has fitted perfectly into my life, into a life situation where I had – as I think – gained enough experience to realise my own Mozart. And, to answer your second question: No, I don't think that it will have any impact on other work – except possibly Baroque music: Bach, Vivaldi, Tartini, Locatelli.

AKB: So, unlike Heinz Holliger or many other instrumentalists, you'll not be taking to the conductor's podium? ►



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► **ASM:** Umm, of course, that would require completely new, additional studies. I would not rule out retiring for some years and then reappearing as a conductor. But...

AKB: That would be fantastic!

ASM: Well, it is not planned. But – life happens while you are making plans! So, let's see... (laughs)

AKB: Have you ever found yourself in conflict with a conductor? When you thought, "Oh my God, this can't work!"

ASM: There was the famous story with Mr Celibidache from twenty years ago; when I didn't want to take responsibility for the outcome of the concert. That is why I cancelled. Perhaps you should remember the famous Bernstein-Gould story. I think they were rehearsing Brahms together. And that evening, Bernstein went on stage and announced, "Well, you will now listen to a special interpretation. We couldn't find a compromise. Mr Gould will play his version, I will conduct mine."

AKB: And how was your cooperation with Herbert von Karajan? How were you discovered?

ASM: In 1976, I gave a recital in the Young Artists series at the Lucerne Festival. These still exist today; nowadays, it is also scholarship holders from my foundation who are playing there. I was just thirteen, but obviously this recital made an impact. Mr von Karajan often allowed one young artist to audition at each of his rehearsals – creating opportunities to play for him. So he invited me for an audition. And do you know what I did?? I went on holiday, because I wanted to push this dangerous situation as far away from me as possible. Of course, in the end I travelled to Berlin in December and played for him: Bach *Chaconne* and a Mozart concerto. That is how our cooperation began, and it lasted for thirteen years, until his death!

AKB: Do you think you would have developed in the same way without Karajan? Or do you owe him your international career?

ASM: I owe Mr von Karajan a huge amount, without any doubt. There is no day where I don't remember his work ethic. He strongly influenced me, musically and by the way he led his life, too. A life that he mainly dedicated to study, despite all the flashy elements we always put in the foreground: the aviation, his yachts, his beautiful woman, the fantastic houses... But deep inside, Karajan was a very modest, incredibly humble musician who took music enormously seriously. To see that a man who amounted

to so much as a musician and who was so incredibly competent, also had to start from scratch in each rehearsal, touched me deeply. And his complete concept of sound, the way he would have the musicians playing for him... in the most immediate way possible. Which is the greatest quality in a conductor – maybe even more important than the baton technique! To be so inspirational that these 120 players are bound together, just as a single person, just as one soul, to a composition. That way you reach a level you could not achieve otherwise – under normal circumstances!

AKB: Are you actually a good team player?

ASM: If I were not a good team player, I would be a bad musician! Of course, I try to convince people of my musical ideas, because I am convinced of them, and because I have good reasons in the majority of cases. And if not, I make up good reasons! But chamber music can only work if you listen closely to what the others are playing. Thus, it is a two-way-street, no doubt about it! And the most thrilling experience is combining strong personalities with different approaches. Personalities who enrich each other on a level where you discuss almost beyond endurance, but also always find a consensus. And you also experiment: What works? What is really organic within the composition, and what transports the musical idea best? That is what counts!

AKB: And what about chamber music? Is it important for you to develop long working relationships? Because nowadays, musicians very often meet at a festival, have one day only for rehearsal and perform in the evening.

ASM: This can be quite thrilling, yes. But it is not often my thing. I prefer to be thrilled by the depth of a musical partnership, where you have known each other for so long that you can debate really intensely the ifs and buts of a composition. Thus, you can actually become particularly creative at night, simply because you have examined everything together during the day. In my opinion, to run through a composition in a few hours and then to perform that evening with a random ensemble rests on the music's surface. Of course, it generates a lot of excitement – from all the fear. (laughs)

AKB: Adrenalin!

ASM: Yes, because you don't know each other well and don't know what to rely on. Very often the end result is just a botch job. So, it's not for me, this approach. But there are players, great players, who are really inspired by the experience. ►

► **AKB:** Especially in jazz.

ASM: Absolutely.

AKB: Did you ever consider improvisation?

ASM: I have no talent for jazz, even though I love it...

AKB: And though Ella Fitzgerald is one of your favourite musicians, right?

ASM: Amongst others, yeah. I've also recently got to love Madeleine Peyroux. It is a musical form that I really love and admire, and that inspires me endlessly, but for which I show no talent at all! What's more, when you are (or were) married to a jazz musician, improvisation prohibits itself in some way; even more if it is one of the top jazz musicians in the world. Then you don't want to look like a dilettante, like a photographer's wife taking snaps with a Polaroid camera! Not good for the self-esteem! (laughs)

From 2002 to 2006.

Anne-Sophie Mutter was married to André Previn. Ed

AKB: But you certainly have a great talent for teaching! You were already giving lessons at the age of twenty-two... which is very young!

ASM: God, I started everything at a very young age. Giving concerts at thirteen, and then, at twenty-two I held lessons. Was I a good teacher – I don't know. But, I did it with great passion and dedication and the absolute will to make a difference. In a certain way, at London Royal Academy time had just stood still then – which was twenty years ago... There were teachers, older people, who hadn't been in a concert for decades. Well, an experienced teacher is a huge asset, most of the time. But if you have no orientation towards presence, this is of course a problem, particularly for the students, because the technical demands are much higher now than forty years ago.

AKB: And what is the most important thing you would provide to your students?

ASM: I think being humble before a composer's work! There have been a few situations when I showed someone the door, and it has always been somebody who arrived haughty and ill-prepared. They were straight out on the street! Whereas students who maybe had less talent, but were really dedicating themselves to a subject, with them I could work for hours. Even if I knew they'd never make the top grade – whenever I see real love, I have enormous patience. For arrogance, I make no allowance, but it is always worth dealing with a person that has a genuine passion! Whether it is knitting, baking or playing violin doesn't make any difference for me. And for each talent, there is a niche. There is also a repertoire for each talent. There is so much music that hasn't been discovered yet, there are so many composers beside the popular ones

who are worth exploring, like Clara Schumann. So, there are niches galore! But I think it is also important that the teacher, and of course the parents too, don't try to turn a kid playing tennis – which my son does with great passion – into the next Wimbledon champion. And a person who plays violin doesn't have to become the second Jascha Heifetz! It is a matter of taking as much pleasure as possible in what you are doing. That's how to extend a talent to the right point. Parents can really drive things in the wrong way, and some teachers too, are reluctant to be honest with their students.

AKB: Would YOU be?

ASM: Always! I always have been!

AKB: And what does it mean personally, for you, a day – or let's say a week – without a violin?

ASM: Holidays! I can easily live without a violin for some weeks – or even some months – a year.

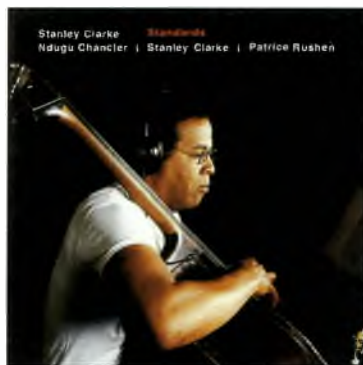
AKB: And without music?

ASM: Well, a week without music is actually impossible. Even if I don't have my iPod with me, I just have so much music in my head. You as a musician know that! But I definitely agree with Nietzsche: Life without music would be a mistake!



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Stanley Clarke

Standards

Kind of Blue K0B10010 +

Stanley Clarke, despite a grounding in acoustic bass working alongside the likes of Dexter Gordon, Pharoah Sanders and Stan Getz, really came to prominence on electric bass. His playing was influenced by rock, although he always maintained a real feel for melody, moving to a more funk-oriented style as his career progressed from the late '70's into the early '80's, when his collaborations with George Duke were hugely successful. Clarke has constantly evolved and changed direction during his career, but more recently has gravitated back to contemporary jazz and his straight ahead acoustic role on this recording marks his first album of standards. Originally recorded in 2001 for the short-lived Vertical label, it has now been re-mastered by Kind of Blue with two bonus tracks added. You also get a DVD of the recording sessions. Clarke is joined by Leon 'Ngudu' Chancler (drums), and Patrice Rushen (piano) and it's clear that they are having a ball, the fluid lines of Rushen's piano complemented by crisp and driving percussion from Chancler and great bass from Clarke – a listen to his 'sing along' solo from this track is a treat in itself. Other treats in this high octane set include a lovely relaxed reading of 'Take Five', but everything here is of such a consistently high standard that it'd be churlish to single tracks out.

Supplier: kindofbluerecords.com
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Dexter Gordon

One Flight Up

Blue Note/Cisco

Dexter Gordon had lived a lifetime before recording his seven Blue Note releases in the 1960s, taking Charlie Parker's innovations and applying them to the tenor saxophone, and so becoming a stepping stone for the next generation of jazz artists—most notably John Coltrane. While some may prefer his *A Swingin' Affair* and *Go Blue* Blue Note releases, this album recorded in Paris with Donald Byrd, Kenny Drew, Niels-Henning Orsted Pedersen and Art Taylor, like all Dexter's Blue Notes, is not to be missed. Only three songs are included and band members wrote two of them. Byrd's 'Tanya' takes up all of side one. Perhaps the standout performance of the session is the standard 'Darn That Dream'. This is a stereo release, and like all Blue Note stereos, exhibits the left-right separation of horns that may accurately reflect the master tape, but tends to sound a little artificial in placement. Rudy Van Gelder never seemed to mike the piano right and this record is no exception. Compared to my mono original of this LP, the re-issue seems to have a slightly more recessed piano. The instruments on the original have a bit more dynamic kick. The re-issue sounds cleaner, however, while still getting the harmonics of the instruments right on. Kevin Gray's mastering job does no damage to the instrumental timbre, and cleans up the inner detail. Another brilliant job from Cisco!

DDD



David Wilczewski

Room In The Clouds

Opus 3 CD22051

This set really comes alive on track two, 'Wayne's World' (thankfully dedicated to Wayne Shorter and not Mike Myers), a slow building circular theme showcasing the virtuoso guitar of Max Schultz alongside Wilczewski's tenor, slowly gaining in intensity to really powerful effect. The rich, breathy quality of his sax is nicely captured by Opus 3 to bring the best from this standout number. The title track sees Wilczewski move to alto and Magnus Persson adding vibes to the mix to enhance the spacey atmosphere and help extend the ethereal theme. 'Elvin Jones' naturally has a solid, driving beat with the tune initially taken by Wilczewski on flute before moving to tenor. Another really strong number is 'Fun For Kofi', dedicated to Wilczewski's previous bass player Kofi Bentsi-Enchill. It's full of texture, opening with the bass doubling Wilczewski's electronically treated tenor to great effect. Peter Nylander delivers a perfectly judged guitar solo in this number too. The standard of playing, the variety of texture and the just slightly cool tone throughout the album make for an intriguing listen that I'm sure will reveal more on each playing. Complemented by an appropriately full bodied and spacious production from Opus 3 this is well worth seeking out.


Supplier: vivante.co.uk
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Lars Danielsson with Bugge Wesseltoft & Nils Petter Molvaer

Melange Bleu

ACT 9604-2 

What a line up! I've hugely enjoyed Wesseltoft's *New Conception of Jazz* (Jazzland 538278-2), and Molvaer's *Khmer* and *Solid Ether* (both ECM), while Danielsson was a key player on one of my favourite recordings this year *Sulazu Music on the Water* (ACT 9445-2). The aim here was to create music based around melodic, improvised patterns played on his cello through a loop machine, or via keyboards. The other musicians respond to this with piano (Wesseltoft), trumpet (Molvaer), or synthesiser, guitar, steel guitar, percussion, voices and sampling. As if that's not enough, the Copenhagen Concert Orchestra are drafted in on four of the ten numbers here. The album demands listening to as a whole, organic piece. Opening with the title track, a simple repeated phrase on piano, set within a swirling soundscape and offset by splashy cymbals with occasional and seemingly very distant low bass thuds, you are quickly drawn into a very different aural landscape. Molvaer's trumpet drifts in and out of the funkier 'Makro', floating high above the earthier bass-heavy rhythms. Track three involves some lovely simple woodwind lines to help anchor the track beneath Wesseltoft's piano, whilst the string section slowly builds a theme and you get more sense of the full orchestra. And so it flows. Gently hypnotic, containing many surprising and lyrical sounds and phrases, an engrossing and magical set.

Supplier: actmusic.com

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Woody Herman

Woody Herman - 1963

Speakers Corner/Philips PHS 600-065 

Audiophile lovers of big band jazz have long known that the Woody Herman Philips releases were outstanding performances with truly top-notch sound. Together with the album under review, *Swing Low, Sweet Clarinet* (PHS 600-004) and *Encore - The Best Band of the Year* (PHS 600-092) offer some of the best big band recordings of the 1960s. Along with the Duke and the Count, Woody Herman kept big band swing alive into the 1960s, and this album is a great testament to that achievement. The other two Philips releases appear to be out of print on CD, but 1963 is available both as a CD and now on vinyl. Woody's band here is composed of mostly young, able sidemen but lacks the super-star quality of his 1950's groups. This band catches Herman in the early 1960's before he drifted into more rock-oriented tunes, so you get straight ahead swing with lots of punchy brass accentuated by high-note trumpet player Bill Chase. If you enjoy big band music you already know about this album and if you are just learning about it this is a great place to begin exploring this time period. Speakers Corner has done a fine job of remastering this tape, which could have sounded overly shrill because of the prominence of those high brass notes. The original album was pressed in large quantities and used copies are easily found, but none with the great surfaces of this perfect Pallas pressing.

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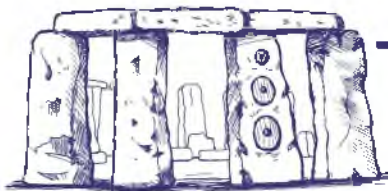
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The History Man...

by Richard S. Foster

Paavo Berglund's EMI Legacy.

Paavo Berglund is a Finnish conductor born in Helsinki in 1929. He began studying violin at the age of 11 and in 1949 he graduated from school and began his career as a member of the Finnish Radio Symphony Orchestra. Over the next 20 years he became first an assistant and then a conductor with several orchestras in Finland. He developed a passion for and reputation as an excellent interpreter of Sibelius. In November of 1970 the first performances outside Finland of Sibelius' *Kullervo Symphony* were given. *Kullervo* is an impressive live-movement piece on a Mahlerian scale. It predates *En Saga* and contains some vividly imaginative choral writing. Berglund recorded this work for EMI (SLS 807) and the recording was nominated for and won a grammy. He became Principal Conductor of the Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra in 1972 and over the next eight-years created a small body of work – less than two-dozen records – that still stands the test of time. Berglund championed the works not only of Sibelius, but also became an outstanding interpreter of Shostakovich. These records are highly prized by collectors today, but the best part is that they won't break the bank when you find them. They were extremely popular and so they were pressed in large numbers. They are still fairly plentiful and can often be found in thrift stores as well as collector's outlets. If you are starting out on your exploration of Sibelius, I really don't think you can do better than Berglund's box set, EMI SLS 5129, that contains all seven symphonies, *Kullervo* and some incidental music. Berglund has since gone on to record three other complete Sibelius cycles including another for EMI

(available on compact disc only). While you may not settle on Berglund's records for EMI as the last word in Sibelius, they will certainly provide you with excellent interpretive readings and a solid grounding from which to stretch out and embrace other performances. You will definitely walk away the richer for having heard them.

The other great Sibelius work to consider is his *Violin Concerto*, rated by many as the most difficult example of the genre. My favorite performances include Ginette Neveu on mono EMI and Jascha Heifetz on RCA Living Stereo, but also Ida Haendel performing with Berglund and the BSO on EMI (ASD 3199). Haendel turns out to be quite the magician as an interpreter and skilled soloist, and if the sound quality isn't exceptional, the playing from both the lead instrument and orchestra certainly is.

While Berglund's Sibelius represents a solid and consistent

base to build from, I think his Shostakovich is revelatory. The EMI catalogue contains multiple performances of Shostakovich's 'smaller' symphonies (those taking no more than one LP to complete). Amongst them, Berglund has produced almost half of Shostakovich's symphonic output and there isn't a slacker in the bunch. He's recorded the *Fifth, Sixth, Seventh*



► (*Leningrad*), *Tenth* and *Eleventh*. His 1976 recording of the *Fifth* – coupled with the *Tenth* (SLS 5044) is a tour-de-force that will bring new meaning to the term “lease buster”. It may be a little too exciting for some but I think it is splendidly played with dramatic and emotional eloquence to spare.

But perhaps my favorite Berglund/Shostakovich recording is the two record set, SLS 5177. This contains the *Sixth* and the *Eleventh*. While reviewers of the day were fond of the 6th, they too agree that the *Eleventh* takes on a life of its own. It is a powerful symphony named *The Year 1905* and contains, in the second movement, the conclusion of the ‘Ninth of January’. This is an explosive piece of music and I would warn those listening for the first time, to temper their enthusiasm as you may do damage to your woofers.



EMI engineer Stuart Eltham created a sonic masterpiece

and Berglund and the

Bournemouth really deliver the goods. This contains some of the finest orchestral music I know and it’s an audiophile delight as well.

Shostakovich wrote two violoncello concertos and Berglund, along with the great French violoncellist Paul Tortelier, has left us an excellent performance of the *First* (coupled with the Walton on ASD 2924). Tortelier’s reading has been categorized as tough and passionate and perhaps not as eloquent as Rostropovich and Ormandy, but I disagree. The colourful accompaniment by Berglund and the Bournemouth allow Tortelier to outshine the Russian master. This is a fine reading which provides the listener with a great musical experience.

ASD 3081 is one of my favourite EMI records. It contains Shostakovich’s *Concerto for Piano, Trumpet and*

Strings (No. 1, Op. 35); Piano Concerto No. 2, Op. 102 and Three Fantastic Dances.

Berglund and his Bournemouth lead the orchestral fanfare, coupled with sublime playing by the

Brazilian pianist, Christina Ortiz. Another Eltham engineered marvel, this record is almost perfectly recorded. The balance between the piano and the rest of the orchestra, the entire soundstage, is one of the best from EMI. While the critics of the day had their opinion of the Ortiz performance – and again I disagree with them – they readily admit to the quality of the sound in this well-engineered recording.

There are other recordings by Berglund and the Bournemouth Symphony (remarkable performers given their status as a small town orchestra), including works by Grieg, Nielsen, Smetana and Rimsky-Korsakov and all have merit. But I think his Sibelius and Shostakovich recordings are ‘must-haves’ for your collectors closet. They represent some of the finest performances in the EMI catalogue and you are treated to generally excellently sound as well – all at bargain prices. ➤

On The Record...

Here is the complete Berglund discography for his Shostakovich and Sibelius recordings. Included are the individual issues of the seven Sibelius symphonies although the box set, SLS 5129 is probably easier to find. If you like the performances in the box, then you know the individual discs will sound better.

SLS 897	Shostakovich	Leningrad Symphony
ASD 3081	Shostakovich	Piano Concertos 1 & 2
SLS 5044	Shostakovich	Symphonies 5 & 10
SLS 5177	Shostakovich	Symphonies 6 & 11
ASD 2924	Shostakovich	Cello Concerto No. 1
SLS 807	Sibelius	Kullervo Symphony
ASD 3216	Sibelius	Symphony 1
ASD 3497	Sibelius	Symphony 2
ASD 3629	Sibelius	Symphony 3
ASD 3340	Sibelius	Symphony 4
ASD 3038	Sibelius	Symphony 5
ASD 3155	Sibelius	Symphony 6
ASD 2874	Sibelius	Symphony 7
TWO 380	Sibelius	The Popular Sibelius
ESD 7160	Sibelius	Tone Poems
ASD 3199	Sibelius	Violin Concerto



W.A. Mozart
Concertone k.190; Sinfonia
Concertante k.364; Rondo k. 373.
 Netherlands Ch.Orch. cond.
 Kreizberg. Julia Fischer, violin;
 Gordan Nikoli, violin/viola

PentaTone Classics PTC 5186 098 (SACD)

This is the third and final disc for Julia Fischer completing her cycle of Mozart's works for violin and orchestra. This is extremely accessible music and I believe these three discs should be included as a cornerstone for anyone's classical music collection. Mozart wrote almost all his "string music for two" within a 10-year period in Salzburg, beginning in 1772 at the age of 16, yet also had time to write his violin concertos as well. He was, to say the least, a busy, busy young man. Fischer and Nikoli are right at home with this lively fare and play beautifully together in the two three-movement works included on this disc. The *Rondo*, with a cadenza by Julia Fischer is a quick (less than six-minute) one movement *Allegretto* which is sure to please everyone. Kreizberg is a master conductor and the Netherlands Chamber Orchestra offer perfectly balanced accompaniment for the artists. Once again we are treated to excellent sound on the CD layer which is only bettered by the DSD version. Top recommendation.

Supplier: www.pentatonemusic.com

RSF



Steely Dan

Aja

Cisco CIS 1006 (180g)

Kevin Gray's re-master and AcousTech's precise cut is a fitting and quite sublime sonic solution for this much admired and meticulously crafted album. The *Aja* "thirtieth anniversary" 180g Limited Edition LP release is a pertinent and timely reminder of the Donald Fagen (keyboards/vocals) and Walter Becker (bass/vocals) creative partnership. Steely Dan, so named after the steam powered dildo in William Burroughs's *Naked Lunch*, delivered a series of epoch-defining records between 1974 and 1980 including *Pretzel Logic*, through *Katy Lied*, to *Aja* and *Gaucho*. Here, on *Aja* they are joined by a fine array of musicians, amongst them Tom Scott (sax), Lee Ritenour (guitar), Jim Keltner (drums), Joe Sample (clavinet) and Larry Carlton (guitar) delivering rock music with a sweeping jazz funk/disco undercurrent. Songs like 'Black Cow', 'Peg', 'Deacon Blues' and 'Aja' possess an ethereal and contemplative harmonic and melodic quality that carries you back to 1977 more effectively than any time capsule, with their honeyed backing vocals and magnificent arrangements. Cisco's impressive technical standards completely outshine the original LP and eases past the highly regarded half-soleed mastered Mobile Fidelity re-issue.

Supplier: www.redsparkmusic.com

RP



Diego Ortiz
Ad Vespers

Cantar Lontano directed by Marco
 Mencoboni. Vittorio Zanon, org.

Alpha Productions 108 (SACD)

The Spanish composer Diego Ortiz was born in Toledo around 1525. He studied music there until 1553 before leaving for Naples where in 1558 he succeeded to the position of maestro de capilla for Fernando Alvarez de Toledo, 3rd Duke of Alba. This is a fabulous disk containing wonderful singing of interesting and captivating music. Baroque most definitely, if your tastes run to Monteverdi, these compositions will be just your cup of tea. The intricate themes, woven with organ and soloists are extremely soul satisfying and offer peace in a hurried world. The vespers consist of 25 compositions and are expertly delivered by Cantar Lontano. While not my normal taste, this disc was recommended to me by Greg Pastic of SRI Canada, Alpha's Canadian distributor. I'm definitely glad he did. The sound is first rate and while there is great pleasure to be had from the CD layer, the sound becomes richer and even more lush when playing the SACD layer. I'd like to explore more of this music and if you are willing to try something a little different, there is no doubt about the enjoyment here. If you like Bach choral music or again, the works of Claudio Monteverdi, this is a disk for you. Strongly recommended.

Supplier: www.alpha-prod.com

RSF





Neil Larsen
Orbit

Straight Ahead Records SAR 104LP

Florida born session man, solo artist and composer Neil Larsen has recorded and worked with a diverse and stellar group of musicians such as the Allman Brothers, Roy Buchanan, George Harrison, Janis Ian, B.B. King and Miles Davis during a varied career spanning four decades. His keyboard credits include Rickie Lee Jones' hit single, 'Chuckie's in Love' and the Rolling Stones album, *Emotional Rescue*. While all of his four previous solo releases were produced by Tommy Lipuma, this latest recording, *Orbit*, which features the famed electric blues guitarist Robben Ford, reunites Larsen with long term associate, Stewart Levine, who along with technical guru, Benne Grundman, happens to be a co-founder of the Straight Ahead Records audiophile label. Sonically, Grundman captures that elusive and undiluted essence of a live jazz infused performance. As a recording, its cleanliness and clearly articulated instrumentation takes Gary Meek's sax, Lee Thronburg's trumpet and the Jimmy Haslip bass reproduction significantly beyond that of their jazz fusion peers. Musically, tracks like 'C Note' and 'Aztec Legend' stand out because of Ford's biting electric licks. Elsewhere, Larsen's strength and versatility as a pianist comes to the fore in straightforward arrangements for 'Jungle Fever' and 'From A Dream'. The success of this album rests upon these twin pillars.

Supplier: www.redsparkmusic.com

RP



W.A. Mozart
**Piano Concertos – C major, k.415;
C minor, k.491.**

**Netherlands Ch. Orch. Cond.
Nikoli.Martin Helmchen, piano.**

PentaTone Classics. PTC 5186 305

No, I'd never heard of Martin Helmchen either until I was introduced to his playing via an online youtube experience. Winner of the Clara Haskil competition in Switzerland and a recent winner of the Borletti Buitoni Trust. Last year, this 25-year old German pianist won the Credit Suisse Young Artist Award and premiered with the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra, this time, conducted by Valery Gergiev. He is a fine young talent with years of favorable press ahead of him. I'm very picky about my Mozart yet was thoroughly won over with these performances. Helmchen's technique is light yet authoritative and he brings a level of maturity and panache you'd expect to hear from a much more experienced player. Nikolij and the Netherlands Chamber Orchestra provide honest, straightforward accompaniment and do nothing to distract the listener from the music. The engineers provide a rich soundscape which shines in the SACD mix. Included with this package is a DVD that provides additional insight into not only the recording session, but also the post production work as well as an interview with the soloist. This is an exceptionally fine outing which is sure to please. It is most heartily recommended.

Supplier: www.pentatonemusic.com

RSF



Giuseppe Verdi
La Traviata

**Netrebko, Villazon, Hampson
Rizzi/Wiener Philharmoniker**

DG 00289 477 5936 (2005)

The most recent 'all star' recording of Verdi's most popular opera took place at the Salzburg Summer Festival 2005. Some see *La Traviata* as no more than a collection of simple, but not particularly deep or complex arias. I beg to differ - the more 'simple' we think a piece of music may be (and, of course, it often is not), the more difficult it is to perform in a complete and proper manner. Which is why, after sampling so many existing recordings of *La Traviata*, I chose the new perfect couple for the parts of Violetta Valery and Alfredo Germont - Anna Netrebko and Rolando Villazon, for my artistic and musical reference! Both still very young, they sing with total and utter interaction, their absolute vocal perfection becoming a glorious irrelevance, simply serving the emotional senses. Thomas Hampson (Giorgio Germont) blends in equally well in the difficult role of Alfredo's father, providing Netrebko and Villazon with delicate harmony. Sonically, live recordings are rarely cooked to the same degree of (studio) perfection and this *La Traviata* is no exception. But it still sounds better than most, and realistically conveys the atmosphere and all the qualities of that unique evening in Salzburg. You will never regret having this CD. Actually, you should get the DVD as well!

DS






Alexander Scriabin

'assorted works'

Yevgeny Sudbin, pianist

Bis 1568 

My earliest exposure to the piano music of Alexander Scriabin via DGG recordings with Roberto Szidon was less than fruitful. Now comes a disc with Yevgeny Sudbin (whose Rachmaninov on Bis I adore) and the music turns out to be not only accessible, but rich, sonorous and wonderfully rewarding. Included in this disc are various etudes, sonatas, mazurkas, a nuance from four pieces, *op.56*, a poem and a valse, lasting nearly an hour. The music is very lyrical and one is captivated by the opening notes of *Étude, Op. 8, No. 12* before being catapulted into the 2nd *Sonata, Op. 79*, an electrifying fantasy. From here on in you are completely under the spell of the pianist. Do read the extensive liner notes written by Sudbin himself, which clearly indicate to the reader just how well the author knows this composer. This is a disc for those who love piano music. It's also a disc for those who aren't sure they like piano music. Contradiction? I don't think so. Sudbin's playing is really heartfelt and while you may not be sure you are ready for Scriabin, I'm here to tell you that you are. This is an excellent recording on CD that sparkles as a demonstration quality disc in the SACD format. This is what a piano-in-your-room sounds like. Enjoy.

Supplier: www.bis.se

RSF


RECORDING
MUSIC



Haydn

String Quartets: Opus 20, No.3,
74, No.1, 76, No.1

Amsterdam String Quartet

Channel Classics CCS SA 25007 

Haydn wrote 68 original string quartets having effectively invented the string quartet genre between 1/58 and 1/61. The three works presented on this disc are all from different developmental periods and offer tremendous insight into the craftsmanship of this master composer. Haydn is vastly imaginative and these quartets tell us much about his range of style. This is my first exposure to The Amsterdam String Quartet and I can tell you I walked away from this disc looking for more. There is a plan for this group to embark on an extensive Haydn project which will include performing ALL the string quartets. Considering he wrote the first of his quartets when he was 26, scholars consider his mature works to be from 1772 when the composer was 40. These are well performed and Jared Sacks once again delivers outstanding sound in both the CD and SACD formats. The liner notes tell us that Mozart was a big admirer of Haydn's *Op. 20* and later dedicated six quartets to Haydn. Haydn reciprocated and felt that Mozart was "...the greatest composer known to me either in person or by name..." My favorite of these three is *Op. 76* but you cannot go wrong with anything here. Great music well played in excellent sound quality. Not to be missed.

Supplier: www.channelclassics.com

RSF

RECORDING
MUSIC




Debussy: La Mer;

Britten: Four Sea Interludes

Mercure: Kaléidoscope

Orch. Métropolitain du Grand
Montréal: cond. Nézet-Séguin

Atma Classique SACD2 2549 

Nézet Séguin and his orchestra performed the wonderful Saint Saëns 3rd *Symphony* they've written about in the past and I was anxious to hear what they could do with Debussy's *La Mer*. I wasn't disappointed. In fact, these are compelling performances and if you do not have a favourite disc already, you might want to put investigating this one high on the list. Nézet Séguin leads his orchestra with a firm control and his reading of *La Mer* inspires and delights. Some conductors are too slow, others are in a hurry but he seemingly delights in allowing his orchestra to convey the passion and fire that breathes within Debussy's work. The *Four Sea Interludes* are beautifully played and a perfect foil for the other gems on this disc. I was not familiar with the Mercure composition, *Kaléidoscope*. It turns out to be a very interesting work which the liner notes nail. "Mercure evokes the dynamic world of the kaleidoscope in his score by mixing Debussian orchestral colours with rhythms reminiscent of Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*..." Sounds exciting? Indeed, and highly entertaining. The final track is a highly evocative reading of *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune* which will surely impress. Great sound quality on both the CD and SACD layer.

Supplier: www.atmaclassique.com

RSF

RECORDING
MUSIC





EVERY HOME SHOULD HAVE ONE

IN PRAISE OF THE UNDER-RATED, UNDER-APPRECIATED OR JUST PLAIN DISCARDED MUSICAL MASTERPIECE

by Reuben Parry



Busker, poet, minstrel, song-smith, social historian and guitarist extraordinaire – Martin Stephenson – a flawed genius from the North East of England, whose humanity and wry story telling (often delivered with a warm and self-deprecating smile) is the hero of this piece. His records sat in stark contrast to the political and musical landscapes of the day, be it the industrial wasteland of Thatcher's Britain or the creative impotency of his New Romantic peers. Two of those albums from that time stand out in particular. The brilliant, yet inconsistent debut, *Boat To Bolivia* (1986) that openly reveals so much of his persona as it searches hard for a distinctive voice, and Martin's polished follow up release, *Gladsome, Humour & Blue* (1988) that tones down the experimentalism, settling for a darker and more self-analytical mood instead. Both share differing hallmarks of greatness, but if I could take only one to the grave then it would have to be *Boat To Bolivia*. Its frailty, simple beauty and openness seem more in keeping with the man who was to turn his back on the excesses of the Music Industry in favour an independent and more contemplative musician's life in the wilds of Scotland.

Bolivia's eleven eclectic songs that were written between 1981 and 1985 (the title track did not appear on the original LP, but is present on later pressings) cut across the genres. Folk, blues, country, pop and rockabilly have their indelible imprints in songs thematically entwined with deeply personal family experiences...and what surprisingly serious experiences they are to be recounted by a boyish twenty-five year old who possesses the voice of a grizzled old blues man! Death, alcoholism, love (heterosexual and homosexual), a miscarriage, domestic violence and many other of life's dramatic and often tragic twists resonate through these varied yet appropriately crafted musical textures. The Daintees – Stephenson's backing band - Anthony Dunn (bass and acoustic guitar), John Steel (piano, organ and electric guitar) and Paul Smith (drums) revel in their work as they enthusiastically engage with these themes.

Why, I ask myself, is *Bolivia* so effective and so memorable? Stephenson's concerns are definitely timeless, remaining as pertinent and relevant today as they were to our lives over twenty years ago. His intelligent and poignant song writing, sometimes in spite of the subject matter, has a joyous quality permeating through it, and yet at one level those songs are

certainly tuneful entertainment as well. Take a track like Caroline as an example. His cousin's miscarriage is a distressing incident, but Martin's sympathetic approach finds an optimistic grain of truth rather than morbidly or perhaps self-indulgently dwelling on an underlying sadness. His knack

of taking the obvious and invigorating it with a sharp edged and even humorous twist is undeniable. Elsewhere, it's a family funeral, with the relatives and their phoney condolences with those crocodile tears nourishing their hypocrisy when they're really only interested in the contents of the will (Crocodile Cryer). All summed up in the chorus: "Well it's so good of me for calling/God will be pleased with me for mourning/I'm a hypocrite, a crocodile cryer, and it feels so good!"

Then, of course, there are those beautifully poetic lyrics: "Between lightening and thunder three seconds the gap. A warm candle glow keeps this wood room from black... As the rain pous down in the yard... Rain – a most haunting sound... Rain – makes beautiful music and rain brings peace upon all whom it falls" (Rain). For this spiritual piquant moment alone, I can forgive the fragmented nature of this album where songs swap from genre to genre. *Bolivia* is an album about strong individual competing voices and styles. It is more, so much more than the sum of its parts. ➤

Martin Stephenson And The Daintees

Rain
Added to later pressings:
Boat To Bolivia

Boat To Bolivia
Originally released in 1986 on
Kitchenware Records

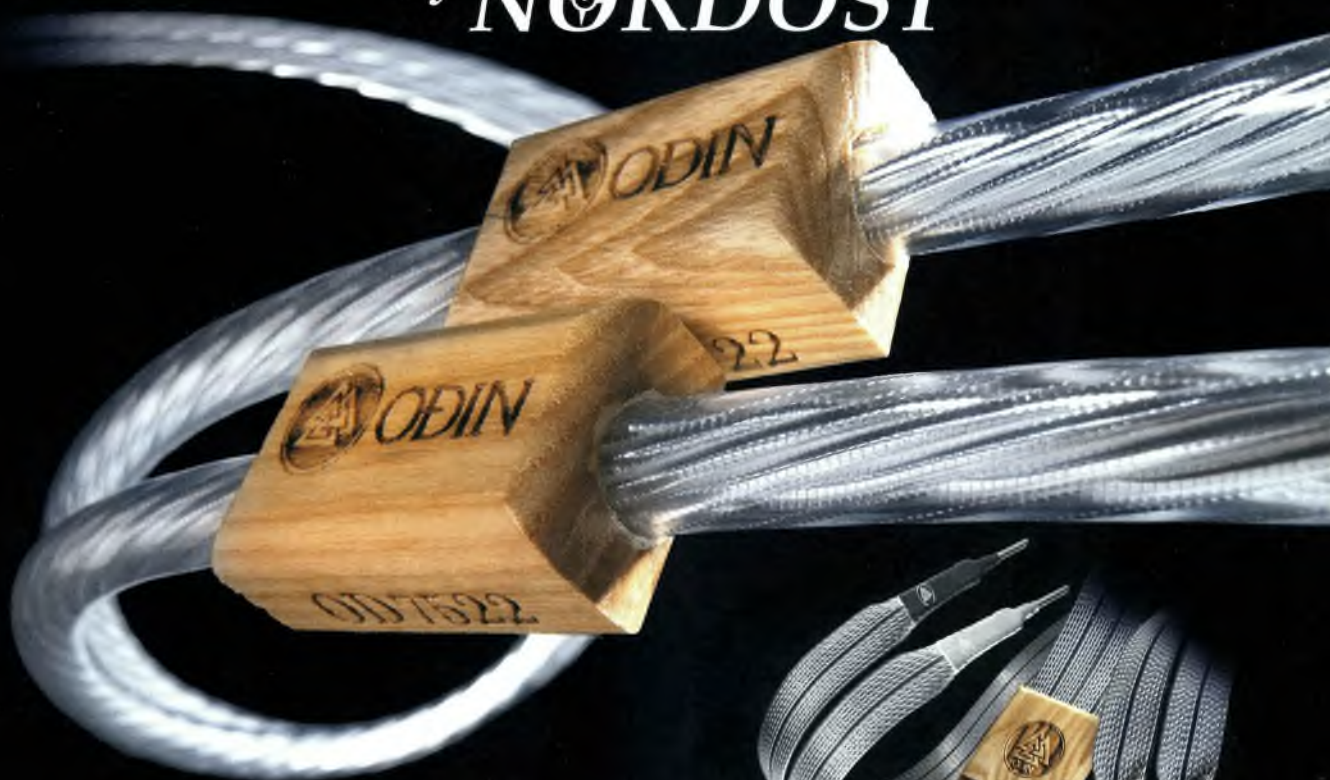
Words Et Music: Martin Stephenson

Track Listing
Crocodile Cryer
Coleen
Little Red Bottle
Tribute To The Late Reverend Gary
Davis
Running Water
Candle In The Middle
Piece Of The Cake
Look Down Look Down
Slow Lovin'
Caroline

Personnel:
Martin Stephenson – vocals and
acoustic guitar
Anthony Dunn – bass and acoustic
guitar
John Steel – piano, organ and
electric guitar
Paul Smith – drums
Clare Dunn – backing vocals on
'Coleen'

Produced and Engineered by Gil
Norton at Amazon Studios

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Roy Gregory - *hi-fi+* issue 51




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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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