

hi-fi+

Issue 43
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"A little champ of price/quality ratio: available at an affordable price, especially for a tube amplifier of more-than-usual power."

AUDIO REVIEW Italy, July 2004, Claudio Checchi

"PrimaLuna ProLogue One is now my 'affordable reference amplifier'. With apologies to various British and Italian geniuses, this amplifier has to my ears no equals at its retail price."

HI-FI NEWS and record review, July 2004, Ken Kessler

"A refreshing change from the transistor competition with a captivating presentation. Excellent finish and build quality makes for a package strong on value."

HI-FI WORLD, August 2004, Dominic Todd



PrimaLuna

Music is a pleasure not to be denied. So, too, the beauty of music reproduced by valves should be accessible to all. To make available to a wider audience the seductive, silky sound of the vacuum tube, PrimaLuna has developed a range of all-valve amplifiers with the construction, power and sonic performance of high-end electronics, but with one unique, inimitable feature: prices that can only be described as 'entry level'!

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And there's more good news: PrimaLuna has also announced retro-fittable auto bias boards for the Prologue 1 and 2, and a moving-magnet phono stage for the Prologues 1, 2 and 3. Additionally, there is now a choice of optional gold or silver front panels in place of the standard finish.

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Editorial

As many of you now know, Hi Fi Plus was acquired by Absolute Multimedia Inc, or AMI, in December of 2005. In this short piece I would like to tell you why we did this and how excited we are about the future for Hi Fi Plus.

First a few words about AMI. The first thing you, as readers need to know is that we are not some huge, faceless, corporate publisher. On the contrary, we have a small portfolio of special interest, niche titles, including *The Absolute Sound*, *The Perfect Vision*, *AVGuide* and *The Winding Road*. We started out with *The Absolute Sound*, a title that had done pioneering work in the development of the whole concept of High End Audio, when that magazine found itself in trouble. We stepped in because, as audiophiles ourselves, we didn't want to see it disappear. As audiophiles we understood its appeal and we also understood the mindset of the readership. And we continue to believe in the role of magazines in keeping this wonderful hobby alive and healthy.

Taking on a new title is always exciting. Taking on an existing title, one that garners considerable affection and loyalty from both its staff and readers adds "daunting" to the mix. The issue is always how to strengthen the equation without diluting or weakening the qualities that built that loyalty and affection in the first place. The staff can get anxious about future plans and so too can the readers, worried that their magazine is going to change or morph into some unrecognisable form, worthless to them. They are understandable concerns, especially given the history of hi-fi publishing.

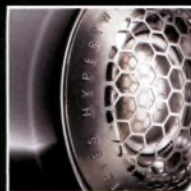
So let's look at this from the point of view of AMI. In acquiring Hi-Fi+ we appreciate its editorial values and approach. That's why we bought it and these are not qualities we want to tamper with. On the contrary we want to see them flourish and grow. David Ayers, the previous publisher, had sunk enormous effort into the magazine to build it to this point, a burden that's not always recognised or appreciated. But he'd also taken Hi-Fi+ as far as he could. It was recognising this fact that persuaded him to pass the reins to AMI, confident that we would honour and respect his original vision. We'd like to thank him for that confidence and reassure both him and you that we will continue what David started.



Atul Kanagat
Strategic Advisor, AMI
Director, AMI (UK)



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Incoming!

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

Dear Sir,

I am not a hi-fi expert by any stretch of the imagination but I am currently looking for a new stereo to buy. I want something small (micro-system size) that is stylish, plays CD and has excellent sound quality. However, after scouring the net I can't seem to make any progress on whats good and what isn't and wondered if you can give me any informed and expertise advice. The other thing is, I've noticed that a few new systems have USB allowing MP3 players to be connected. I have a Zen Micro and so would be interested if theirs any products through which I could play it. My budgets about £200 and i've been looking at the following models:

- * Sony CMTCPZ1 - older model but seems to generally be seen as good with good sound.
- * Pure DMX-50 - new with USB but I'm not that fussed about DAB (which seems to be its key feature.

Any other suggestions would be a huge help, as I'm getting nowhere.

Mat

Via e-mail

We don't normally answer specific equipment questions but this seems to be an increasingly common concern and one where there really is a single, obvious solution in the shape of the Arcam Solo. Yes, I know it's a full width unit, but it's extremely shallow and if sound quality is important then the trade off between vertical and horizontal space is well worthwhile. Ignoring its svelte good looks and comprehensive facilities (including an excellent tuner and all the "free" software that goes with it), we enthused about its sound quality when compared to the various separates options. The latest versions offer a software update and an optional iPod lead that allow you to listen to as well as charge the ubiquitous MP3 players. Whether this will work with your Zen is something you'd need to check. Yes, it's way over your budget but it's also where real hi-fi starts. Better to wait and do the job properly than opt for a sub-standard solution. A Solo will give you years of reliable service, repaying the investment many times over. Ed.

Hello Sir,

In Issue 41 I read that *X and Y* by Coldplay is available only on CD. Well, then the double LP I have at home must be the only copy in the world... I have a fortune home then!

Anyway I find it a shame to not mention it both for your review in a magazine that still cares about analogue and for Coldplay. In fact, they originally wanted to print only the vinyl version but EMI forbade it.

Greetings from an Italian in Sweden. And Merry Christmas!

Maurizio Grosso

Via e-mail.

We try... we really do. Ed.

Dear Sir,

This morning I received my copy of Hi-Fi News - Feb issue. Guess what I found on p145 - their claim to publish an "exclusive review" of conrad-johnson's CT5 pre-amp in their next issue!!! Strange claim, isn't it? Last week, I read your ALREADY PUBLISHED review of the self same pre-amp in your final issue of 2005. I wonder whether they could be taken to court for misleading advertising?

Carry on the good work,

Nigel Briggs

Via e-mail.

You might suggest that, but I couldn't possibly comment.

Actually, on a more serious note I think you'll find that this is down to over enthusiasm mixed with a little confusion. Certainly MC was under no illusion as I actually delivered the review unit to him. I'm unaware of what the other magazines are planning (and frankly, it wouldn't my decisions anyway). Those that bother with the dubious appeal of "Exclusivity" do run the risk of Russian Roulette as review schedules and production cycles overlap and unavoidable delays ensue. Fortunately it's only egg they end up with on their faces, not bullets in their brains! Ed.

► Dear Sir,

This isn't strictly speaking a formal letter to the editor, but rather a query. I know that you and some of your contributors hold in very high regard the Philips 963SA DVD player as a budget or bargain CD/SACD player and I wholeheartedly share that view. In fact, after reading your earlier reports on the machine I went out and bought one and am still very pleased with it.

I find it interesting to note that Philips Australia told me last year, when the 963SA went out of production, that there were no plans to replace it (at least in terms of a DVD machine with high specification audio facilities). As you would be no doubt aware the 963SA has been replaced by the DVP 9000S which appears in fact to be at least as highly specified in terms of CD and SACD playback as the 963SA.

Given the above, I was wondering whether you are planning to review the 9000S and perhaps compare it with the 963SA at some stage?

Keep up the great work.

Kind regards

Ken Jacobs

Australia

Via e-mail.

By now you'll have realized that PM reviewed the DVP 9000S in Issue 42, and enjoyed what he heard. We'll be using that machine as the primary source during our Manchester Show demonstration of multi-channel music, another indication of the high regard in which we hold it. As to comparing it with the 963SA, I'm not sure what purpose it would serve. Does it constitute an upgrade on the old machine? Not in audio terms, although I think the video portion has improved. Would it be worth changing from one to t'other? To do so would undermine the whole appeal of these machines and their bargain status. In my view we should simply be happy that fortune and happenstance (it certainly wasn't part of some corporate master plan) saw fit to offer us these players. Sit back and enjoy. Ed.

Dear Sir,

I had a look at your website, the preview of Issue 42, and noticed that you have reviewed Philips DVP 9000S. It'll be very interesting indeed to read about your experiences.

I had that model myself for some months. I got it as a replacement for a problematic DVD963SA I previously had. Unfortunately I've experience some problems with the DVP9000S as well (mechanical and setup-related)so I spent a little more and went with the

new MarantzDV-7600 instead. Couldn't be happier. The picture is about equal but sound quality is much improved, specially SACD multi-channel. I would very much like to read a review of the Marantz DV-7600. Is that already in the planning or is it possible for you to do one in the near future?

Thanks for a really nice magazine!

Best regards

Marcus Enbergh

Sweden

Via e-mail.

Which just goes to prove that you can't please all the people all the time! Looks like we should be getting hold of the Marantz then... Ed.

Dear Sir,

I didn't go to the September show for the first time in five years this year, for a number of reasons. The main one is that there is little new to see; by and large its the same people, often in the same place in the hotel. I enjoy chatting with some of them, particularly the chaps at Vivante (who are always friendly and helpful) and the elderly gentleman from Florida who brings over the Chesky catalogue. But by and large its noisy and not in a good way, expensive and crowded.

I envy you attending the rocky Mountain show, I would love to. Why? because in part, of the live music. Whenever you see a review of a US show, it includes a number of snaps of the live acts. Why, by and large, don't we get that in the UK now? We used to. I am sure it's all down to money and sponsorship. Looking back a few years, I remember Nordost sponsoring Eleanor McEvoy, whom everyone seemed to enjoy. The live demos, such as you carried out in Manchester last year, are a draw too; better than room after room of poor sound, due to poor surroundings. Give us some live music, more talks, demos of turntable set up for example, like the ones Michael Fremer does in New York, even if we have to pay a little more to get in. Let's have a bit of imagination and variety; then the punters will come back, I am sure. It all comes down to money, I know. Perhaps as you suggest, the Americans can put on what seems to be a more exciting format because the show-goers are bringing in more money, using the show as a surrogate for the high-end dealers they can't access. In any event I know which show I would like to attend, given the time and money.

Yours

David Wise

Via e-mail.



► Dear Sir,

I wrote to you before with regards to using batteries to hold up hi-fi gear, thereby saving some money that could have been used on Nordost Pulsar Points to buy the next issue, or two, or three, of Hi-Fi Plus.

This time around I am just wondering if you had ever tested Walker SST, or Walker Extreme SST. I got a jar of the SST and used it on my hi-fi system and two TV set ups. The difference this product made to the output of each of the systems was stunning to say the least. I am using a 3D Sonics Victory CD player and a Unison Research P30K power amp, so there were plenty of valve legs to be coated, at least 80. Coating these made a huge difference to the overall sound. Space, detail, nuance of playing, soundstaging, basically everything that should be there was vastly improved. So being a tweaker and having found a tweak that surpasses all of the rest by miles I thought I would pass it on. Check it out!

There is another product which claims to be similar, Quicksilver, but I have not tried it. Perhaps you could do a head to head test of these products.

Yours sincerely,

Paul Bell

Via e-mail.

We have the Walker product as well as a few alternative offerings in-house at present – we just haven't got to them yet. Recent events have left me a little short of time but we should be able to start on the backlog shortly. Ed.

Dear Sir,

I much enjoyed your presentation with Martin Colloms at the London Show. I thought there was a genuinely useful dialogue at the event.

I am writing, though, more in relation to Max Townshend's universal player, reviewed by Alan Sircom in Issue 41. I've bought this machine myself and agreed with AS that it is a really excellent player. I got the impression that you or Alan were likely to do a comparative review of the Townshend with the other universal machines soon, in which case, I have found three ways of really improving the sound which may be worth trying when comparing it with the other products:

1) Changing the power cord, of course. The Nordost Vishnu is too lean for this machine but Brahma and Valhalla are amazing. But even the Isotek Mainline or Kimber High Current help. Max lives close to his power station and the cables make much less difference chez MT, but elsewhere they are a must.

2) The Marigo stabilising disc mat – their most

expensive one – really improves note shape, timing, imaging, etc

3) Most important of all: by-pass the supplied feet on which the machine sits on the power supply and substitute with three (not four) RDC cones and cone cups. With these installed between the player and the power supply the sound really takes off in terms of dynamics, flow, bass definition and tunefulness, a more natural/vinyl-like quality to vocals etc.

If the other machines perform better than MT's player, try these tweaks and you might be surprised at the improvement they make.

Best wishes

Professor Ali Rattansi

PS. Forgot an important one: use the dimmer button on the player to switch off the display. Offers a noticeable improvement.

An investigation of the current state of hi-end, hi-res replay is indeed on the cards, with Ayre and Esoteric units lined up amongst others. Ed.

Dear Sir,

I think the above would be a decent contest - bring on the Metronomes, Burmesters, Daartzeel's etc. and put them up against the Accuphase's, Kondo's Air Tight's etc ...

You could even get an overdue, fully-justifiable foreign trip out of it ...

If ever there was an issue to bother normal, sane newsagents for, it will be this one.

If ever there was an issue to stay in and lock the wife out, it will be this one.

If ever there was an issue to be completely sold out, it will be this one.

No doubt at all.

Go for it - you may be knighted....

Kind regards

Jai

Via e-mail.

Too late, although the head to head isn't incorporated as yet. This issue's introduction to the more obsessive elements of the Japanese hi-end clearly demonstrates the particular fascinations of designers in that market, and how their emphasis differs from their more marketing led, Western counterparts. Of course, it's dangerous to generalize, but the results achieved in these reviews (albeit at considerable cost) are encouraging to say the least. You can certainly expect far more on this subject in coming issues. Ed.

▶ Dear Sir,
 Thank you for yet another superb HiFi+, up to the usual very high standard. However, a slight feeling of "Oh No, here we go" is creeping over me. Why so? well, in issue 23 May/June 2003 Editorial you assured the readership that "in case you're wondering - no this isn't the first step on an inevitable path to monthly publication – What we are not prepared to do is risk the quality of the content by increasing the publication rate any further."

Issue 42 Editorial does say that, among other things, "ultimately increasingly frequency in publication". Fine, I suppose, but I am not sure about the "Risk to the Quality" that you did seem to be not prepared to do. Perhaps "never say never again might be a watchword at HiFi+? On a minor note I see that in the side box alongside Editorial we are actually only going to get six publications a year, obviously a typo after all this time at eight per year?

Regards

Ken Betts

Via e-mail.

Dear Sir

I can't believe I'll be the only subscriber complaining about this, but here goes anyway...

Back in issue 23, your Editorial proudly announced that "Subscribers, often confused that their subscription runs for eight rather than six issues, need no longer concern themselves, because, from issue 25 Plus will be appearing eight times a year. That's approximately every six weeks...". This is confirmed in the column alongside your Editorial, from issue 26 right up to issue 41, which clearly states "Hi-Fi plus is published eight times a year".

Your Editorial, issue 42, proclaims "Hi-Fi Plus has changed hands", offering the reassurance that "Hi-Fi Plus will remain unchanged" and "...increasing frequency of publication". Yet in the adjacent column, your publication statement reverts to "Hi-Fi Plus is published six times a year" (although your subscription form, page 125, still shows "One year subscription / 8 issues").

I'd be inclined to think this may be one of your infamous (although thankfully now less frequent) "typographical errors", were it not for the fact that your web-site is currently showing a planned publication

schedule for some seven issues during 2006.

Despite your issue 42 assurances that "Hi-Fi Plus will remain unchanged", and your issue 23 statement that Hi-Fi plus will appear "approximately every six weeks", your web-site schedule is currently showing an issue to appear throughout 2006 every eight weeks with an extra issue squeezed in late December, rather than the regular issue every six weeks that you'd previously committed to.

What's going on?

Keith Burton

And you think you're confused? Right (taking a deep breath), here goes. We originally launched Hi-Fi+ at six issues a year, always intending to increase it to eight as the business and staff allowed. This we did with Issue 23, noting the caveat that we weren't prepared to allow quality to suffer. Unfortunately, two years into the eight a year programme, it was becoming increasingly obvious that quality was suffering; we simply didn't have the editorial bandwidth to meet the increased demands of more frequent publication, nor the business structures to justify editorial help. As a result, the magazine wasn't developing its content or presentation. We were effectively treading water... It was this realisation that led to the deal with AMI.

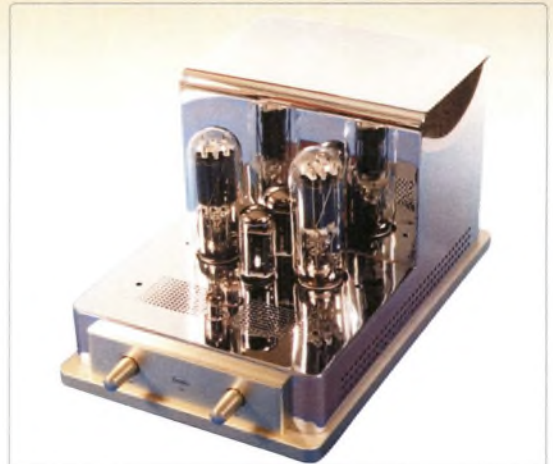
First step was to revert to six issues a year, along with an annual awards issue, just to get everything under control. That's the rate at which we are currently running. Discussion with and eventual acquisition by AMI will provide exactly the business foundation and investment required to allow us to take the title back to eight a year, along with the equally necessary editorial reinforcements (which will also help with the typos!). Could we go beyond eight in a year? Not with the present structure. The demands of photography and allowing reviewers sufficient time with products would mean running two separate writing teams – which effectively means two different magazines. It's not impossible, and actually offers some intriguing opportunities, but that is a long, long way off. Eight a year will do as a target for now and we'll leave the subscriptions at that, to avoid further confusion, while seven remains the realistic, currently attainable rate. We'll endeavor to have that reflected across all the magazine's communications. Ed.



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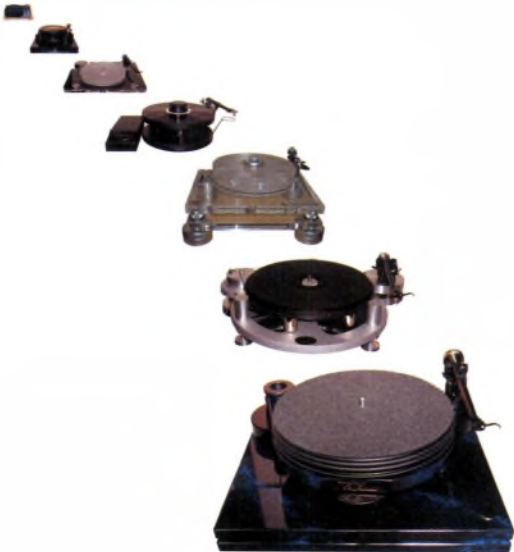
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Have we got turntables? Do bears... no, forget that. Of course we have!



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

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

However...

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



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

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



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

air tangent amazon amplifon apollo furniture argento audible illusions audio aero audio physic black rhodium breuer dynamic brinkmann cartridge man cawsey clearaudio consonance decca london duevel dynavector ear yoshino final lab goldring graham (tonearms) graham slee hadcock heart heed audio hyperion (loudspeakers) incognito isolda jadis kr electronics klimo koetsu lavardin lyra magneplanar mcintosh michell engineering morch musical fidelity nordost nottingham analogue opus 3 origin live ortofon pro-ject rega (turntables) revolver ringmat roksan shun mook shanling shelter sme something solid sonneteer spendor stax stirling broadcast sugden sumiko tannoy tci cables tom evans townshend audio transfiguration trichord trigon van den hul voodoo wireworld xlo

This is a most exciting
time for high end audio.

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are bringing a transparency
and naturalness to the high end
unlike anything we have
previously experienced.

Symmetry is proud to
be involved with many
of these designers.

Here are some of the
exciting new components
they have created
for you to experience
the music you love.

Esoteric X-01 CD/SACD
and G-0s Master Clock system

Lyra Skala
moving coil cartridge

Mark Levinson
No 51 Media Player

Brinkmann La Grange,
10.5 Tonearm and
EMT phonograph system

Ayre K-1xe and
V-1xe amplifiers

Thiel CS2.4 and SS1
speaker system

Stereovox SEI
and LCP cables

Ayre Acoustics
Brinkmann
Cello
Esoteric
Grand Prix Audio
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Lyra-Connoisseur
Mark Levinson
Stax
Stereovox
Sumiko
System Audio
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w: www.symmetry-systems.co.uk

Hi-Fi+ 2005 Awards

It's that time of year again...

...and once again we'll indulge ourselves by revisiting and drawing your attention to those products or performances that have crossed our paths this year, impressed and continued to impress us. No democracy or pseudo-scientific meritocracy here; no attempt to give proceedings mock gravitas. This is a simple straw poll, an arbitrary listing of those products that have got us and kept us excited.

They're easy to choose because they keep cropping up in conversation between reviewers, pushing their way to the front of our collective awareness. This is after all, a collective rather than a competitive exercise (although you'd struggle to realise that given the way a few of our compatriots carry on) and you advance understanding by pooling knowledge. Along the way, certain ideas and products don't just bubble to the surface, they float

there waving at you. Well, these are they and each in its own way has something special to offer.

Having said that, products appeal for different reasons, besides and beyond simple audio performance. There are the record labels and engineers behind the discs we listen too and enjoy. There are companies with a long and established record of producing not just one great product but consistent musical excellence across the years, supported by long-term servicing and back-up. It's a very real difference buying a product from a company like this (with guaranteed consistency, serviceability and second-hand value) rather than from the latest star, hurtling across the audio firmament. As magazines we are as guilty (perhaps more so) as anybody else of seeking out excitement in novelty. Of course, every company starts somewhere and today's establishment

were yesterday's revolutionaries, but identifying the companies that will survive and prosper from those that will flare and die is notoriously uncertain and has little or nothing to do with the sonic attributes of their products.

So, with this in mind I have further sub-divided the awards structure, with four different categories. These are explained opposite and it's important that you appreciate the nature of each award. None (save the Legacy award) is inherently superior to the others, but they are distinct from one another and that distinction is important: Read carefully and digest.

Then stop taking things so seriously and enjoy. Each of these products or companies should be able to show you something new or exciting. Seek them out and appreciate their efforts because, irrespective of price, they've all taught us a thing or two, and they can probably do the same for you. ▶+



Product Of The Year

As outlined on the previous page, these are the solid products that have that little bit extra, that certain something that elevates their performance above (in some cases way above) the norm. Each will be special in its own way but each must also be treated with respect if you are to understand and appreciate just why it excited us in the first place. Reading the original review will give you an idea of what you should be looking for, but also the context in which you are likely to find it. Just remember that it is a lot easier to make any product sound bad than to extract the last ounce of its potential.



Discovery

This designation rewards exceptional performance in products from emergent companies. Whilst the sonic rewards should never be in doubt, you need to be aware of the vulnerability of start-up enterprises. A little research into the background behind the designer/manufacturer as well as an appreciation of second party service-ability will reap dividends, especially where these products are exotic or expensive. So, approach with the appropriate caution, but do approach: advice that applies to just about any piece of hi-fi now that I think about it!



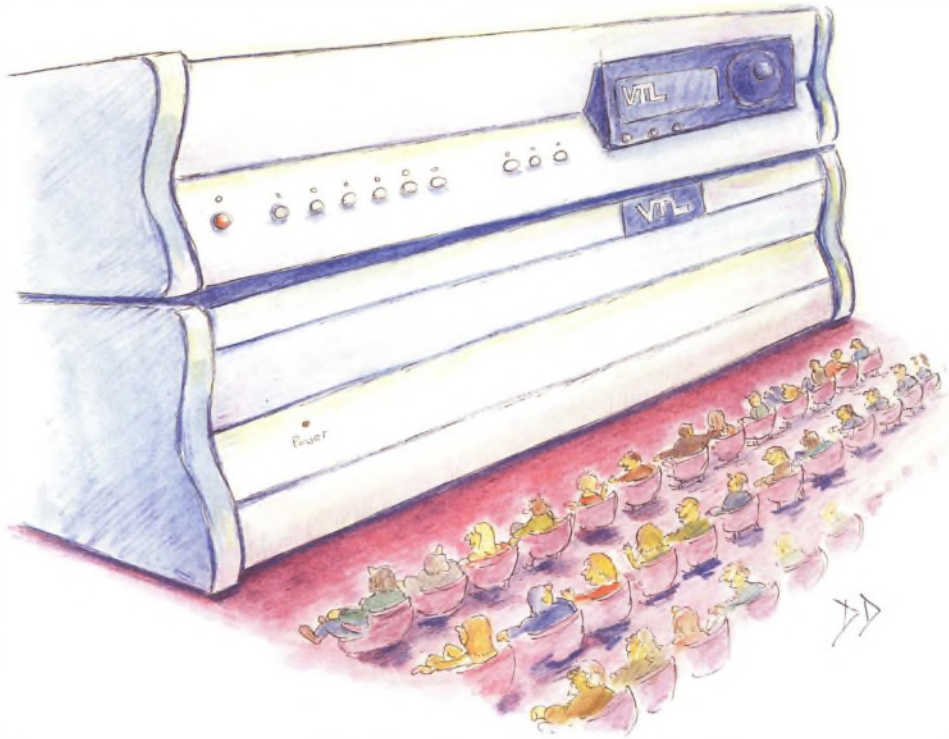
Recording

In the course of the year we come across many discs that excite our admiration or maybe just our musical juices. Sometimes it's simply the music; sometimes it's the process or people behind the recording, pressing or mastering that have released that music from the shackles of the storage medium. This is a catch-all category that rewards special achievements when it comes to software. It might be awarded to a single disc, an entire label or catalogue – or as is the case this year, a mastering house. Our software awards are few in number, which makes them all the more precious. The projects they reward will in turn reward your attention.



Legacy

The Legacy award recognises not just the excellence of an individual product, but also the consistent performance and longevity of the company behind it. In many ways this two-tier commendation is the nearest thing we can give to a blanket endorsement. Normal caveats regarding equipment and system matching apply, but these products come with the imprimatur of an excellent company reputation and proven record of support behind them. It's no trivial consideration, contributing directly to the likelihood of you realising the best, long-term performance from the unit as well as the best return should you decide to sell it. These are products you can consider with confidence.



VTL 7.5 Reference Pre-amp

reviewed by Roy Gregory in Issue 41

"Making tubes user friendly" is the strap line on the VTL literature and they're serious about it. So serious in fact that without taking the lid off you'd do well to know that this unit uses thermionic devices at all. Operationally, the two-box VTL matches the benchmark Levinson No.32 for versatility and actually exceeds it when it comes to the intuitive ease of the user interface. At last we have a high-end pre-amp which combines sonic strengths with a genuinely useful, easily configurable control logic, as well as system interface options to meet the needs of almost any conceivable set-up. Technologically it's a tour de force, while its ability to simply step aside from the musical signal,



allowing the scale and drama, delicacy and emotional shadings of the performance to pass unhindered makes it an unobtrusive joy to use. But the best news is that the lateral thinking and willingness to apply new approaches and technology to the issues of valve ownership present in the 7.5 Reference are being applied across the range. This is only the standard bearer, and the self-biasing, self-diagnostic circuitry that appears in the flagship Seigfried and S400 power-amps will soon see the light of day in far more affordable products; likewise the control circuitry that makes the 7.5 so easy to use. But it's the vision to apply this technology to tubes, and in doing so to enhance (rather than inadvertently

compromise) their traditional sonic strengths that sets the VTLs apart. With system demands becoming ever more complex and varied, the VTL 7.5 truly represents the shape of things to come.



Price: £9000

UK Distributor:
dCS Ltd
Tel. (44)(0)1799 531999
E-mail. dsteven@dcsLtd.co.uk

Manufacturer:
VTL Amplifiers Inc.
Net. www.vtl.com



Kuzma Stabi XL Turntable

reviewed by Roy Gregory in Issue 41

The Stabi XL is the latest and greatest (at least in terms of weight) table in the Kuzma line, a range that still offers every deck they've ever made. It also embraces rigid as well as suspended designs, and uni-pivot, gimbal and air-bearing tonearms. Clearly not rooted in a single approach to the problem of record replay, each product uses materials and technique appropriate to its price-point and aspirations. Which is where the XL comes in. A genuine, no holds barred, flagship, it takes the high-mass path to its (il)logical extreme, concentrating 80kg into its compact footprint. Not surpris-ingly, speed stability is

rock solid and so too is the beautifully proportioned soundstage. Colouration levels are below those of the matching tonearm, revealing the cartridge in all its glory (or otherwise). The ability to

characterful. The old maxim has it that all a turntable needs to do is be quiet and turn at the right speed: The Stabi XL is and it does. Simple to say, realising that goal represents the pinnacle of a long and winding road. ▶+



accept multiple tonearms through the use of additional, modular and VTA adjustable arm-towers further adds to the deck's appeal, making this by far the most approach-able and affordable option in top-end record replay – not to mention that it's also arguably the least



Price: £10500

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

Manufacturer:
Kuzma
Net. www.kuzma.com



The Zanden Audio CD Replay System

reviewed by Roy Gregory in Issue 38

It's not often that words like "fluid", "tactile", "involving", "natural textures" and "musical life" grace a CD player review. But then, not many CD players look like, cost as much as, or sound like the Zanden Model 2000 Premium CD Transport and Model 5000 Mk. IV Signature D/A converter. And if the name seems like a mouthful it's nothing compared to the chunk of humble pie all those analogue die-hards will be swallowing (and their brains will be trying to assimilate). Include me in the latter category; never have I heard a CD player that can rival the sonic performance of the best analogue sources – until now; never have I had a CD player that can recreate the power and emotional range of a musical performance as well as a good record player – until now; never have I lain awake at night wondering just how to scrape the money together to buy a CD

player – until now. And don't be fooled by the exquisite appearance and construction; this player is much, much more than just a pretty face. In sheer musical terms, the Zanden is so much more involving, so much more satisfying, than any other digital system I've used that it



has forever changed the hi-fi landscape. The horizon has tilted at a crazy angle and the facts of musical life have changed. Viciously expensive, this player will remain a pipedream for many, but its performance won't. It's in that promise that its real importance

lies: unless of course, you simply must have the best – now.



Price:

Model 2000 Premium Transport

£19000

Model 5000 Mk. IV D/A Converter

£12500

UK Distributor:

Audiofreaks Ltd

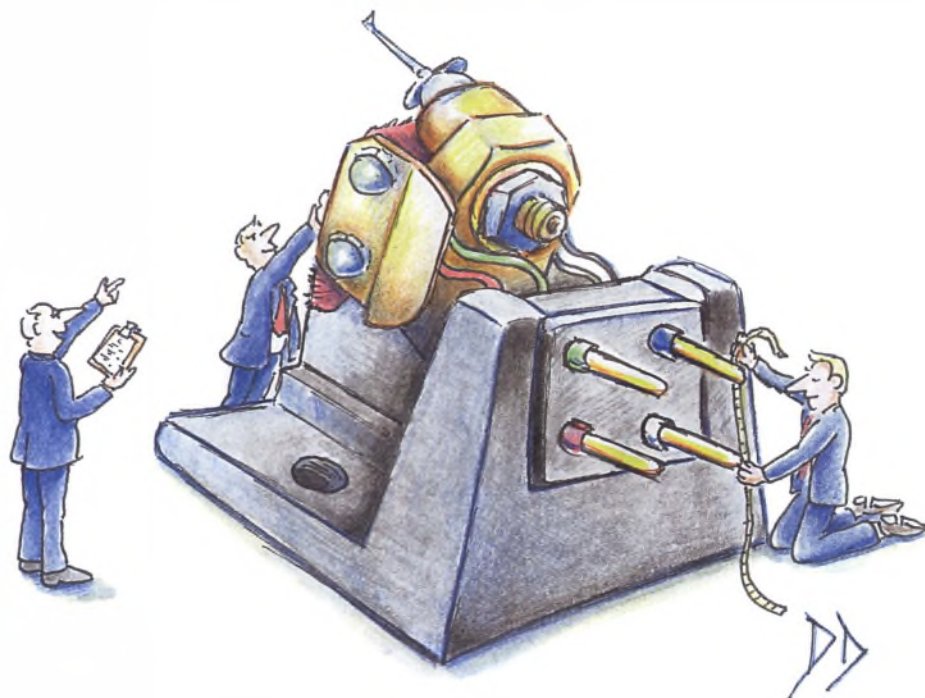
Tel. (44)(0)20 8948 4153

Net. www.audiofreaks.co.uk

Manufacturer:

Zanden Audio Systems Ltd.

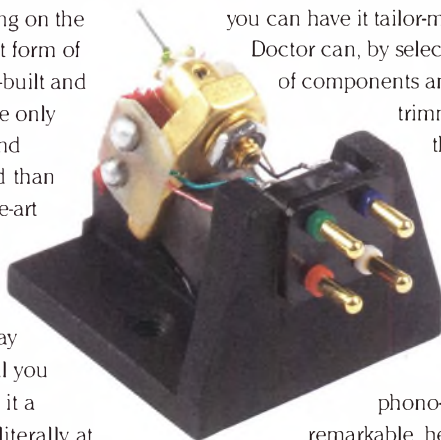
Net. www.zandenaudio.com



The van den Hul Condor MC Cartridge

reviewed by Jason Kennedy and Roy Gregory in Issue 37

In a realm in which traditional notions of material value need to be parked firmly at the door, seemingly barely a month goes by without some new, ever more exotic and ever more expensive moving-coil pick-up appearing on the market. Hi-fi's highest form of craftsmanship, hand-built and micro-engineered the only thing most people find harder to understand than building a state-of-the-art cartridge is the five figure price-tags audio-philes are only too willing to pay for them. That is until you hear one; not only is it a transducer, but it is literally at the sharp end of the system, giving it the greatest possible influence over the presentation and performance. But even in this rarefied company, the vdH Condor stands apart. Normally



when you choose a cartridge you are selecting one man's vision, his (or her!) choice of balance and attributes. You can do the same with the Condor, buying an off-the-shelf sample. Or, you can have it tailor-made! The good

Doctor can, by selecting from a range of components and materials, trimming and tuning the various elements, match the physical characteristics of the cartridge to your chosen tonearm and phono-stage. Even more remarkable, he can match the sonic character to your tastes too. The sample he built for me is amongst the most enjoyable and musically impressive cartridges I've ever used, which at between a half and a quarter of the

price of the other contenders makes it a bargain – even if it is the wrong side of £2K. It also makes it a bespoke product in a world of cookie-cutter conformity, which brings its own special satisfaction to ownership. ➤



Price: From £2400

UK Distributor:
Henley Designs
Tel. (44)(0)1235 511166
Net. www.henleydesigns.co.uk

Manufacturer:
van den Hul
Net. www.vandenhul.com

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'Discovery Of The Year 2005'



Jas-audio Orsa

"In some ways it always feels more rewarding to review a product that punches above its weight and this is a special little speaker that sets a price/performance yardstick that is hard to beat."

Chris Thomas
Hi-Fi+ Issue 42

"Impressive sophistication considering the £1,399 per pair asking price, but the build quality and finish are, well bananas."

David Vivian
Hi-Fi Choice March 2006

"The Orsa is such a good all round speaker that I often found myself comparing it with my Micro Utopias Be's which is both totally unfair given the large price disparity yet still a compliment."

Chris Thomas
Hi-Fi+ Issue 42

also from Jas-audio



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Hi-Fidelity Audio
6 Grosvenor Gardens
St. Neots PE19 1DL
Tel: 01480 216039

Musicology
12 Vernon Terrace
Brighton BN1 3JG
Tel: 01273 700759

Shadow Audio
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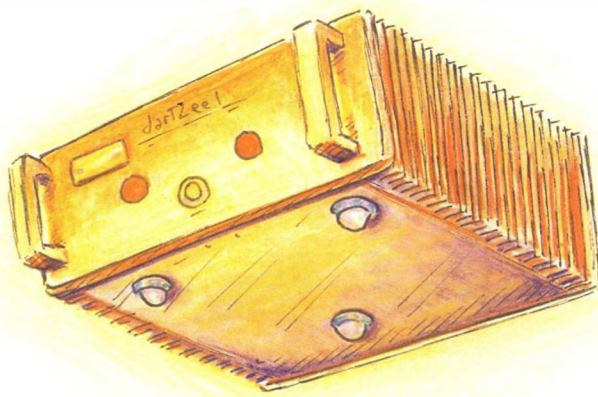
Sweden :
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Phone: 08-158443
info@avalonaudio.com

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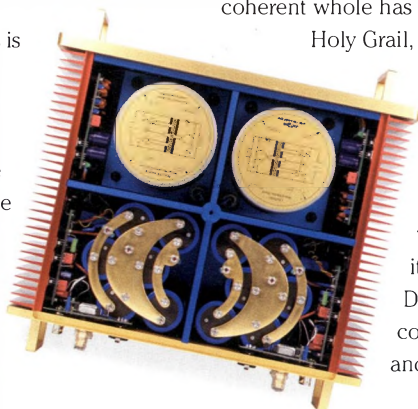
DarTZeel NHB-108 Power Amplifier

reviewed by Alan Sircom in Issue 41

There have been few first products as accomplished, as complete, as polished as DarTZeel's NHB-108 power amplifier: Few as sensible either.

The DarTZeel is a compact, stereo chassis offering 100 Watts and weighing an almost laughably manageable (in this day and age when might seems to be right) 30kg. So it's got enough power for most applications from dimensions that don't demand half your lebensraum and in a package that can actually be moved by a single person.

But that's not all. This is also one of the most beautifully built and presented pieces of audio equipment I've ever come across. The quality and precision of the assembly and finishing is fully in keeping with the unit's Swiss origins.



And if that wasn't enough it sounds as impressive and musically pristine as it looks. No shrinking violet or anonymous grey automaton, the NHB-108's colourful, even slightly quirky exterior promises character, a promise it makes good on sonic grounds. The sound is so natural, so effortless and so transparent to the nature of the recording that the amplifier cuts straight to its heart. If the amp that can combine the virtues of valves and solid-state into a single, coherent whole has long been a hi-fi

Holy Grail, then the Swiss

might just have found it. With AS struggling to match its performance with the superlatives it demands, the DarTZeel manages to combine the sublime and delicate with the

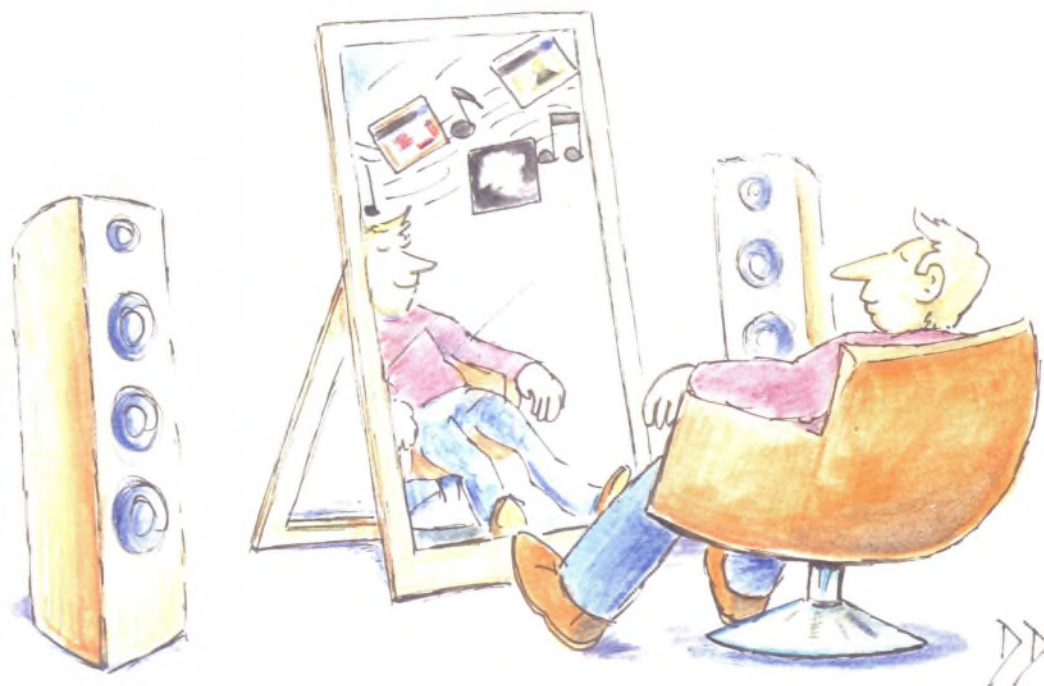
downright rude, Julie Andrews with Indiana Jones, and to do it all with unobtrusive ease that makes it and the listener seem right at home. If this debut is anything to go by, expect great things from DarTZeel in the future. ▶+



Price: £11490

UK Distributor:
Ricardo's Studio
Tel. (44)(0)20 8971 3909
Net. www.absolutesounds.com

Manufacturer:
DarTZeel
Net. www.dartzeel.com



Sound/Mirror Studios

Covered by Richard S. Foster in Issue 40

2004 saw Sony/BMG's first SACD re-issues from the rich and diverse RCA Living Stereo catalogue. The first ten releases were, in a word, stunning. Sound/Mirror, located in Boston, Massachusetts, had been given the re-mastering project, including both the DSD conversion of the original tapes and the creation of a new, down-converted CD layer for these hybrid discs. While the original ten releases were ear opening to say the least, the quality of the work as well as the efforts behind-the-scenes to bring the next 20 to market in 2005, have made these equally if not more exciting for the consumer. They have had vintage equipment renovated and rebuilt beyond original specifications for the project, and where equipment was unavailable, they've built it themselves. Whilst such care and attention to detail has been well documented over the last two decades of vinyl re-issues, it has been sadly lacking in the digital arena.

Yes, there are many companies that have brought us a wealth of previously unreleased historical repertoire – Naxos, Testament and Tahra as well as Music and Arts, to name but a few, but none, have shown themselves

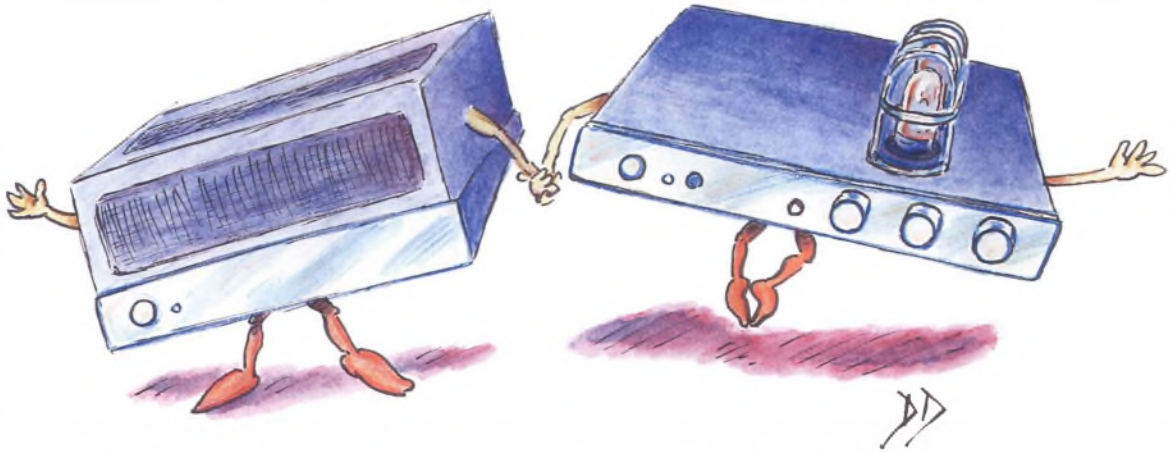


to be as dedicated, to be as absolutely faithful to the intentions of the original wishes of the artists, producers and engineers, that created these glorious master tapes almost half a century ago. Sound/Mirror breaks new ground in

bringing some of the finest sounding hybrid SACDs to the audio marketplace. Aside from these initial 30 releases – and the project continues with more titles scheduled for release in 2006 – Sound/Mirror does excellent recording work for labels like Chandos and perform archival recording duties for the Boston Symphony Orchestra. Because of companies like this, our musical wealth is vastly enriched, our heritage protected and preserved. ➤+



Sound Mirror
Tel. 001 617 522 1412
Email. soundmirror@soundmirror.com
Net. www.soundmirror.com



Rogue Audio Metis Pre-amplifier and Atlas Power Amplifier

reviewed by Roy Gregory in Issue 40

Faced with the onslaught of increasingly impressive products flooding out of the Chinese market most manufacturers have opted for one of three approaches that can be summed up as follows: the "they look good but they don't actually work" school, the "if you can't beat 'em, join 'em" school and the ones who've been rendered catatonic. Not so Rogue Audio. Having built the company on budget esoteric foundations, natural development has seen their products move inexorably up-market, creating the vacuum being exploited by the Chinese producers. But this is one company who aren't prepared to simply roll-over and surrender their traditional market-place. The Metis/Atlas combination is their response and they've combined every bit of experience and know-how into its design. Rogue have never been

a me-too company, simply rehashing old application notes and that's never been more obvious than with this pairing, designs that reconsider every aspect of performance and trade-off inherent in a given approach in order to wring an almost unbelievable level of performance and musical integrity from their svelte dimensions. Finish and presentation is excellent, the facilities comprehensive, operation faultless. No, they are not without sonic weaknesses, but so carefully do they tread the tight-rope of cost benefits that you barely even notice them; you're too busy wading thigh deep through your music collection. These are classic examples of the creative combination of genuine trickle-down engineering and the blunt stick of market forces. And that's AFTER they reach the UK; in the

US they represent an even better deal. More, gentlemen please. ▶+



Price:

Metis Pre-amplifier **£995**

Atlas Power Amp **£1195**

UK Distributor:

Audiocraft

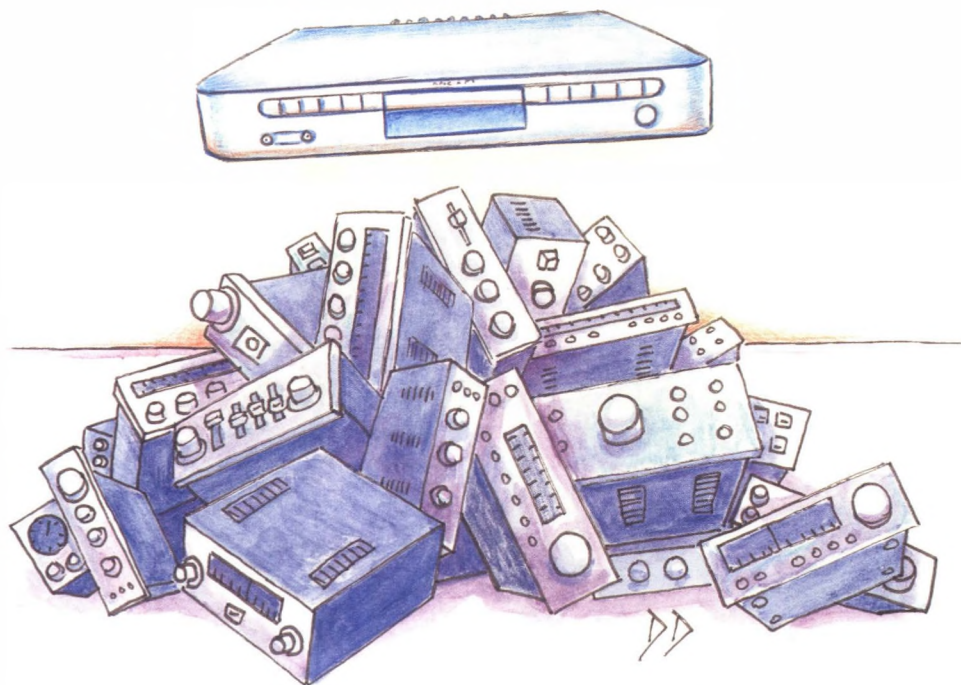
Tel. (44)(0)1895 253340

E-mail. kevinwalker@audiocraft.co.uk

Manufacturer:

Rogue Audio Inc.

Net. www.rogueaudio.com

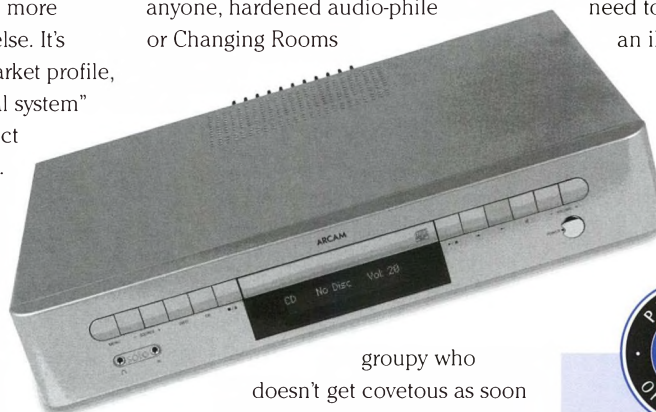


The Arcam Solo

reviewed by Alan Sircom in Issue 40

Arcam can justifiably claim to have been working the coalface of hi-fi performance for longer and more consistently than anybody else. It's not just the years, it's the market profile, with more people's "first real system" containing an Arcam product than any other single brand. In this most competitive and vitally important sector of the market (today's first time buyers are tomorrow's property magnets) they have stayed true to the ethos of "performance first", and if just occasionally that's left their products looking a little dowdy, the musical results have always been clear to hear – as well as long-lasting. The system-in-a-box Solo (CD player, DAB and analogue tuner plus amplification, all in one) need make no apologies for its presentation. Slim, sleek and elegant

it's one of the neatest and prettiest pieces of hi-fi out there. I don't know anyone, hardened audio-ophile or Changing Rooms



groupy who doesn't get covetous as soon as they set eyes on the little Arcam. The surprise comes when they listen to it. How can anything that looks this good sound so good as well? Defying the inverse law of hi-fi aesthetics, the Solo represents real hi-fi without domestic compromise. No "second system" or holiday home stand-in, this is the real deal, the first rung on the proper hi-fi

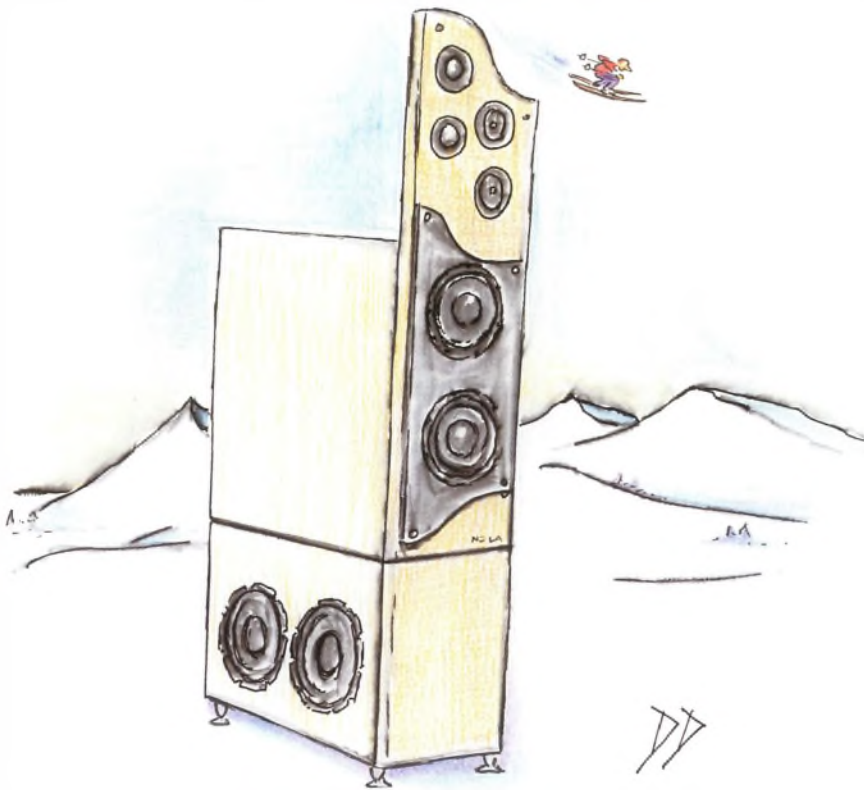
ladder, a window on the future of high-quality sound at home. Now all they need to do is paint it white and cut an iPod port in the top-plate...

Oops – Arcam have just announced an iPod interconnect lead and software update for the Solo – so all they need now is the white finish.



Price: £1000

Manufacturer:
Arcam Ltd
Tel. (44)(0)1223 203200
Net. www.arcam.com



Nola Pegasus Speakers

reviewed by Roy Gregory in Issue 42

Last year we saw a pair of loudspeaker designs, Avalon Acoustics' Eidolon Diamond and the Marten Coltrane, establish a significant new benchmark in the cost versus performance equation. Suddenly, you could get so much out of a (relatively) small and (relatively) affordable box that one was forced to question the benefits of larger, more extravagant and vastly more costly systems. All too often, the comparison proved less than flattering to the more expensive models, the harsh glare of the reality check leaving a very select few with their dignity intact. Now that movement has been reinforced by the arrival of the Nola Pegasus, which hits the cost criterion even if it's larger than the other two and rather less elegant. It adopts a very different approach too, relying on a multitude of drive units all equipped with distinctly

retro AlNiCo magnet assemblies. But don't be fooled by the obvious differences; in all sonically important respects the Nolas toe the party line, albeit with their own distinctive twist. Striking a near perfect balance of bottom-end extension, drivability and energy distribution, they major on tonal accuracy, scale and the organic thrust of the performance. They are also ruthlessly revealing of associated electronics and set-up, but working at their best they are astonishingly coherent. Turn out the lights and they flat-out disappear – which is a pretty neat trick for something this big. Add super-tweeters to match the extension of the diamond domes employed in both the Eidolon and Coltrane and you lift their performance another notch. Unfailingly musical and involving, they simply blow away audio sceptics, whose cries of “How

much?” shift from the incredulous to the enquiring. It doesn't make them any more affordable, but it's mighty gratifying...



Price: £39000

UK Distributor:
Nola (UK) Ltd
Tel. (44)(0)791 617 6399
E-mail. michael-akutter@hotmail.co.uk

Manufacturer:
Accent Loudspeakers Ltd.
Net. www.nolaspeakers.com



Castle Richmond 3i Loudspeaker

reviewed by Jason Hector in Issue 38

There are few things as certain as death, taxes and the fact that small, two-way, budget loudspeakers deliver more music for your money than any other audio component. Maybe it's their inherent simplicity, maybe it's the exacting discipline imposed by a limited design budget, maybe it's the natural stiffness of their ever shrinking cabinet dimensions, but feed them a decent signal and these little wonders will surprise and entertain you in equal measure with the sheer quantity and quality of the music they produce from their diminutive size (and matching price-tag). The Castle Richmond 3is are simply the latest in a long and distinguished line of such stop-gap giant-killers, all too often drafted in to shore up a crumbling budget only to survive a string of subsequent upgrades. The spiritual successor to the AR18, KEF Coda 2 and any number of little Missions, the

Castles lean on their own particular heritage to add beautiful cabinet finishes to the equation. No surprise really, given that Castle's cabinet plant has



consistently turned out some of the prettiest traditional enclosures and supplied them to a whole host of UK loudspeaker manufacturers. Unfortunately their own speakers have tended to be just as traditional and polished, which left them somewhat lacking when it came to musical excitement and drama.

Well, this little Richmond well and truly breaks that mould. Still just as polished and refined as the exterior suggests, it's also vivacious, engaging and surprisingly visceral when the music demands. Everything a small speaker should be (small, tuneful and real-wood too) how could they fail? ▶+



Price: From £320

Manufacturer:
Castle Acoustics
Tel. (44)(0)1756 759333
Net. www.castle.uk.com

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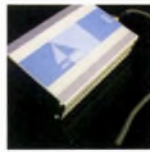
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MBL 101 Speakers, 9011 Power Amps, 6011 Pre Amp, 1621 CD Transport and 1611 DA Converter

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MBL CD Transport 1621

Hearing is believing

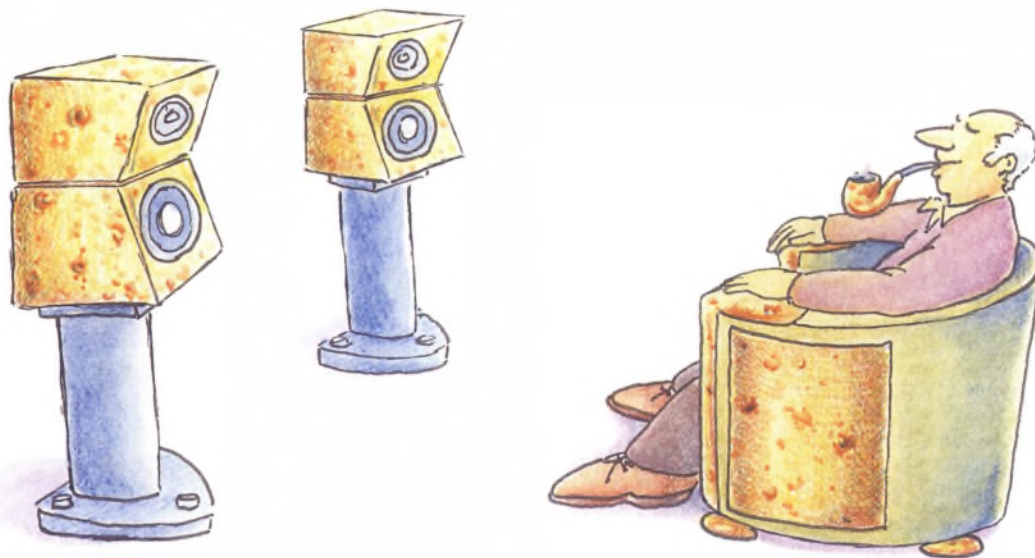
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The JAS Orsa Loudspeaker

reviewed by Chris Thomas in Issue 42

While most of us have marvelled at (and more than a few taken advantage of) the quality of finish that Chinese manufacturers can achieve on even budget products, few have perceived a genuine threat to the status quo. After all, it's one thing making a pretty product, it's quite another getting great performance out of it – at least so the argument goes. Well, all those established European and US manufacturers whose sonic standards have been slipping of late as they strive to meet the dual dragons of price points and domestic acceptability are about to discover the hard facts of economic life. Whether or not you like the way the Chinese do business, you can't deny their industry and willingness to learn. It was only a matter of time before they matched the sonic

performance of their indigenous designs to the astonishing material content and this year we've seen the first evidence. The JAS Orsa loudspeakers pitch straight into the maelstrom that represents the ultra competitive mini-monitor market,

individual presentation makes for a potent package: Now look at the price. You might not recognise it, but this is the shape of things to come. 



meeting products like B&W's 805, JMLab's Micro Utopia and any number of Sonus Fabers head on – matching them for quality of finish and sound. Astonishing transparency coupled to beautiful and



Price: 1399 per pair

UK Distributor:
Shadow Audio
Tel. (44)(0)1592 744779
Net. www.shadowaudio.co.uk

Manufacturer:
JAS Audio
Net. www.jas-audio.com



Eminent Technology LFT VIII Loudspeaker

reviewed by Roy Gregory in Issue 38

Eminent Technology designer and owner Bruce Thigpen is one of the diamonds in the audio industry's crown. An original thinker with a penchant for applying lateral solutions to existing problems he has a history of transforming difficult and expensive technologies into useable and surprisingly affordable products. The ET2 tonearm took the air-bearing and turned it into a tonearm that didn't just work but was easy to use, highly adjustable and affordable into the bargain. Then there's the novel fan-operated subwoofer as detailed by RSF in last issue's Denver show report, which stirred not just his soul but the contents of his stomach as well as giving his vital organs a workout. But the real masterpiece is the LFT VIII, a push-pull design that solves most of the frustrations inherent in the single-sided planar magnetic technology first popularised by

Magneplanar. A beautifully considered hybrid, the secret is just as much in the development and integration of the moving-coil woofer as it is in the impressively slim panel that covers the broad mid-band on up. With the scale and acoustic definition that comes from a well-controlled di-pole combined with the dynamics and authority that are delivered across the range this is a mighty impressive performer once you wire it up to enough power. "Expensive too?" I can almost hear you thinking. Well, that depends as always on your budget. But at \$1399 a pair this is an awful lot of speaker that delivers an awful lot of music for the money, and it does it with surprisingly modest electronics – it's quantity rather than quality that counts in this instance. For those who simply couldn't countenance a hybrid, there's a Quad ESL sized

"full-range" version, but it costs more and for me, the LFT VIII is just so much fun it seems churlish to refuse its favours. That they have no UK distributor is a crushing indictment of the imagination shown by UK importers and dealers. ▶+



Price: \$1399

(plus VAT, shipping and duty if imported to the UK)

Manufacturer:

Eminent Technology Inc.

Florida, USA

Tel. (001) 850 575 5655

Net. www.eminent-tech.com



Consonance Cyber 222 Pre-amp and 800 Mono-blocs

— reviewed by Jimmy Hughes in Issue 39 —

Anybody who doubts the ability of Chinese manufacturers to compete on the world audio stage, in sonic or material terms, need look no further than this Consonance pre/power combination for an object lesson in delivering the musical as well as the mechanical goods. For all those who cling to the forlorn hope that whilst Chinese built products look the part they'll never match the performance or consistency of their Western built counterparts, these are the stuff of nightmares. The finish and construction speak for themselves and are shockingly accomplished and impressive given the cost. Likewise, the paper performance and power output are well beyond expectations based purely on price. But what won JMH over was the musical performance, a combination of authority and delicacy,

unflappable control of orchestral climaxes hitched to wonderfully nuanced and subtle solo instruments. It's easy to become blasé when confronted by a constant procession of equipment whose stellar price-tags demand that they be discussed in hushed and reverential tones. To say that Mr Hughes was pleasantly



surprised by the actual price of the Consonance combo is an understatement. That he only discovered that information after committing his sonic impressions to

paper makes their achievement all the more impressive.



Price:

Cyber 222 Pre-amp

£1295

Cyber 800 Mono-blocs

£2995/pr.

UK Distributor:

Alium Audio

Tel. (44)(0)1273 325901

Net. www.aliumaudio.com

Manufacturer:

The Opera Audio Co. Ltd

Net. www.operaaudio.com

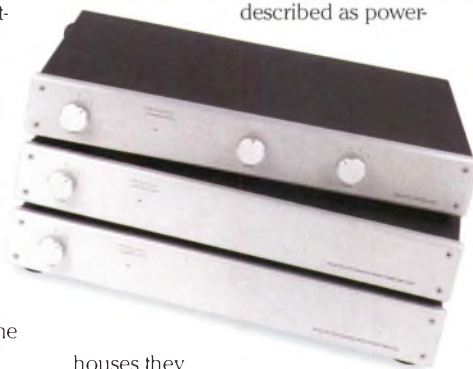


Renaissance Amplification RAP-02 Pre-amplifier and RA-02 Mono-blocs

Reviewed by Jason Hector in Issue 40

To say that the RAP/RA-02 combination was something of a surprise package is an understatement. Not only do these slim-line solid-state amplifiers come from a company best known for manufacturing pricey SET mono-blocs (and importing the even pricier LAMM and Metronome marques) but sonically they perform way beyond the level that their modest price and appearance suggests. The route from parallel single-ended 300B to bargain priced transistor amp might not be an obvious one, but manufacturer IES have applied the lessons of simplicity and short signal paths with a vengeance, leaving interiors looking sparse but the music direct, dynamic and transparent. Too many promising and affordable amplifiers are let down by their matching pre-amps, but the RAP-02 spends its budget wisely on a simple circuit and a really top-notch stepped attenuator. The end result

is a combination of bare-bones control unit and mosfet power amps that delivers astonishing clarity and authority at its price. Whilst the amps can't be described as power-



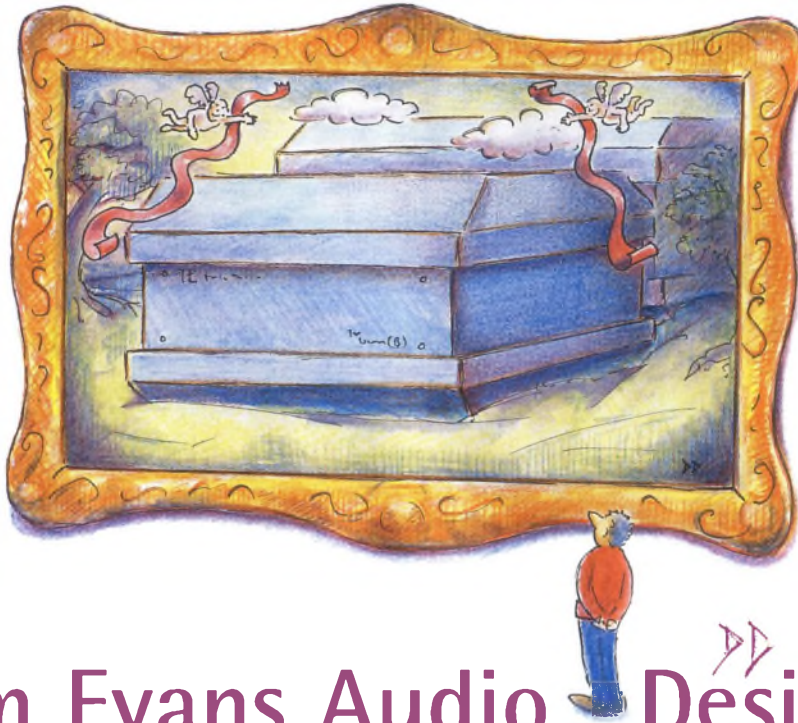
houses they don't suffer the crippling ills that go with jamming load tolerance out of a limited budget. Use them with sensibly chosen speakers and the musical rewards are astonishing. Discrete components and an overall circuit derived from the company's valve mono-blocs play their part, but it's the

skill with which the overall package has been balanced that really impresses. Classic examples of value engineering, these Renaissance amplifiers remind you just how much music there is on your discs – and that it doesn't have to cost the earth to get it off. ➤+



Price: £1999
as a combination

Manufacturer:
Integrated Engineering
Solutions Ltd.
Tel. (44)(0)2380 905020
Net. www.highendaudio.co.uk



Tom Evans Audio Design Linear B Power Amp

reviewed by Roy Gregory in Issue 41

Finally, in the wake of the Linear A stereo chassis, arrived the Linear B mono-blocs, the last piece in the TEAD jigsaw, a power-amp to match the resolution, immediacy and tactile communication of the Groove and Vibe. As good as the Soul and the Linear A are, the B delivers the authority and foundation that completes the musical picture and serves as a stable launching pad for the dynamic range, expression and discrimination that characterise the Evans sound. Employ the entire TEAD chain and there's a sense of rightness and direct communication to the music, unfettered access to the performance, which is what hi-fi should be all about. These electronics and especially these amps put you in

the same space as the performers. Outwardly identical to the A, the best thing that can be said about the looks is that they improve with multiplication, but that's

media; the Linear Bs breath life into your record collection, revitalise the most jaded listener, reveal the unvarnished truth. They've become indispensable chez-G, both as informers and entertainers. Just be careful what you ask them. ➤



not the point. Serious high-end performance at a price that remains at least semi-real-world was the target and the Bs deliver. Oh boy do they deliver. Presence, power and grip that belie their modest power rating, musical impact and purpose that conjures passion from plastic storage



Price: £3990 each

Manufacturer:
Tom Evans Audio Design
Tel. (44)(0)1443 833570
Net. www.audiodesign.co.uk



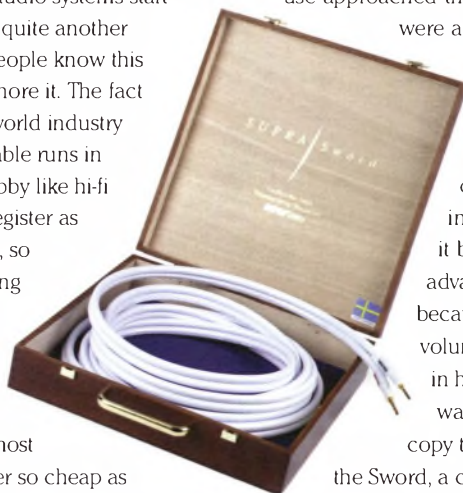
Supra Sword Loudspeaker Cable

reviewed by Roy Gregory in Issue 41

One of the best-kept open secrets in the hi-fi industry is that the vast majority of "specialist" audio cables are available, somewhere, off the reel. Indeed, most cables used for audio systems start life designed for quite another purpose. Most people know this but choose to ignore it. The fact is that in a real world industry that measures cable runs in kilometres, a hobby like hi-fi simply doesn't register as a serious market, so we end up feeding on the scraps of other users' research. Yes there are exceptions but most of them are either so cheap as to preclude serious performance, or so expensive as to exclude most customers. And then there's Supra. The Swedish manufacturer has chosen to specialise in

audio and video cables. Indeed, that's all they make; and they do MAKE them. So, when a telecoms engineer with a bright idea for a zero-inductance cable for hi-fi use approached the company they were able to see the potential and weren't frightened by the manufacturing complexity involved. Indeed, it became an advantage, simply because no high-volume manufacturer in his right mind was going to try and copy this. The result is the Sword, a cable that offers astonishing performance at a remarkably approachable price (just so long as you don't connect it to a Naim or Lavardin amplifier). How astonishing?

Within touching distance of the very best (and they require the addition of another zero to the price tag). Oh, that's right, I forgot to mention that Supra believe in no-nonsense/no b-s engineering and prices to match – which arguably makes them even rarer than a hi-fi cable manufacturer who winds his own wires!



Price: £725
3m Terminated Pair

UK Distributor:
Supra Cables
Tel. (44)(0)1223 441299
Net. www.supracables.co.uk

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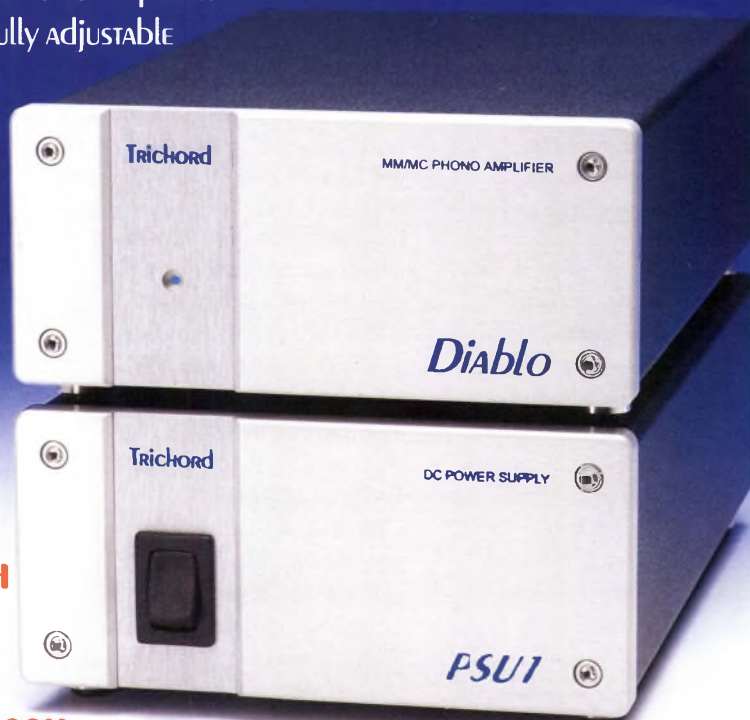
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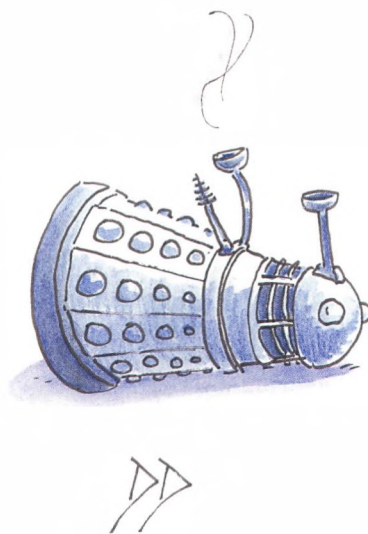
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B&W 802D Loudspeaker

reviewed by Jason Kennedy in Issue 42

Ever seen the right product hit the right place at the right time? B&W's original N802 design managed to combine a strong visual identity and superb construction with remarkable bandwidth and control from a surprisingly modest footprint and price tag. It also arrived just as floorstanders came back into fashion (some would say it brought the fashion with it). And beyond all that, just the fact that it didn't look like "every other loudspeaker" probably ensured its commercial success, even if the sheer magnitude of that success took everybody, the manufacturer included, by surprise. Well, brace yourself, because the 802 is back, this time brandishing this year's must-have component, a diamond tweeter. But the 802D is much more than just an N802 with a high-frequency make-over. B&W's Trinny and Suzanna have gone back to first principles and the result is

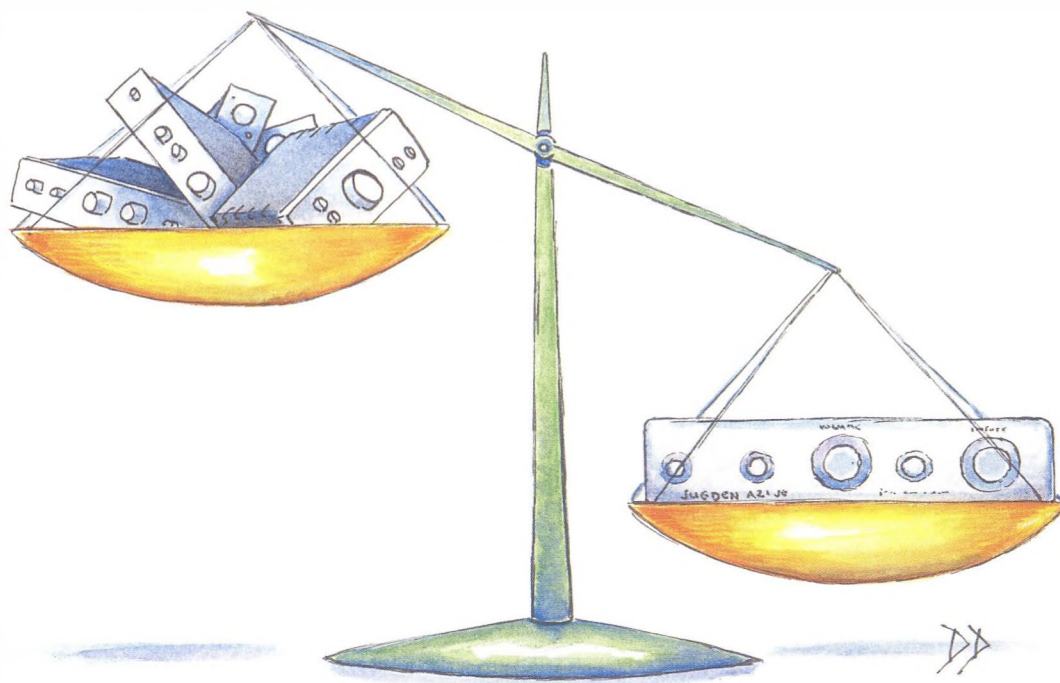
a speaker that may look like an N802 but actually represents an 80% redesign. And whilst even the most cynical observer (can metal domes cause jaundice?) is grudgingly having to admit the performance benefits of clean, top-end extension to way beyond audible limits, the most impressive thing about the new model is the way it has retained all the strengths of the original and systematically ameliorated its weaknesses. The 802D is far better integrated, (somewhat) easier to drive, but best of all, it now actually times. The price might have gone up (diamonds do cost) but the increase is negligible compared to the performance improvements. B&W have teased the 802D into balance, finally making the whole considerably greater than the sum of its individually impressive parts. The result is a product that's likely to give the opposition an

inferiority complex. Just when they thought they'd seen the back of the N802's market dominance, along comes the 802D – a bit like Bob Paisley following Bill Shankly. This one is going to run and run...



Price: £8000

Manufacturer:
B&W Group Ltd
Tel. (44)(0)1903 221800
Net. www.bwspeakers.com



Sugden A21SE Amplifier

reviewed by Jason Kennedy in Issue 39

Sugden's individuality and native Yorkshire cussedness is embodied nowhere more clearly than in the remarkable little A21a integrated amplifier. While everybody else was opting for high-power and load-tolerance from the new breed of "super-integrated" amplifiers, or cooing over the Musical Fidelity A1, Sugden were simply doing what they'd always done, and carried on manufacturing their deeply plain and deeply unfashionable little Class A integrated. But what goes around comes around and while the Audiolabs of this world have struck hard times, the A21 has trucked straight on, right back into fashion. So much so that the company has finally seen fit to respond to the market and deliver its own "super-integrated" (albeit twenty years on).



Enter then the A21SE, with a beautifully understated but fully audiophile "cred" casing containing around twice the power and upgraded components. The result doesn't just look more purposeful and

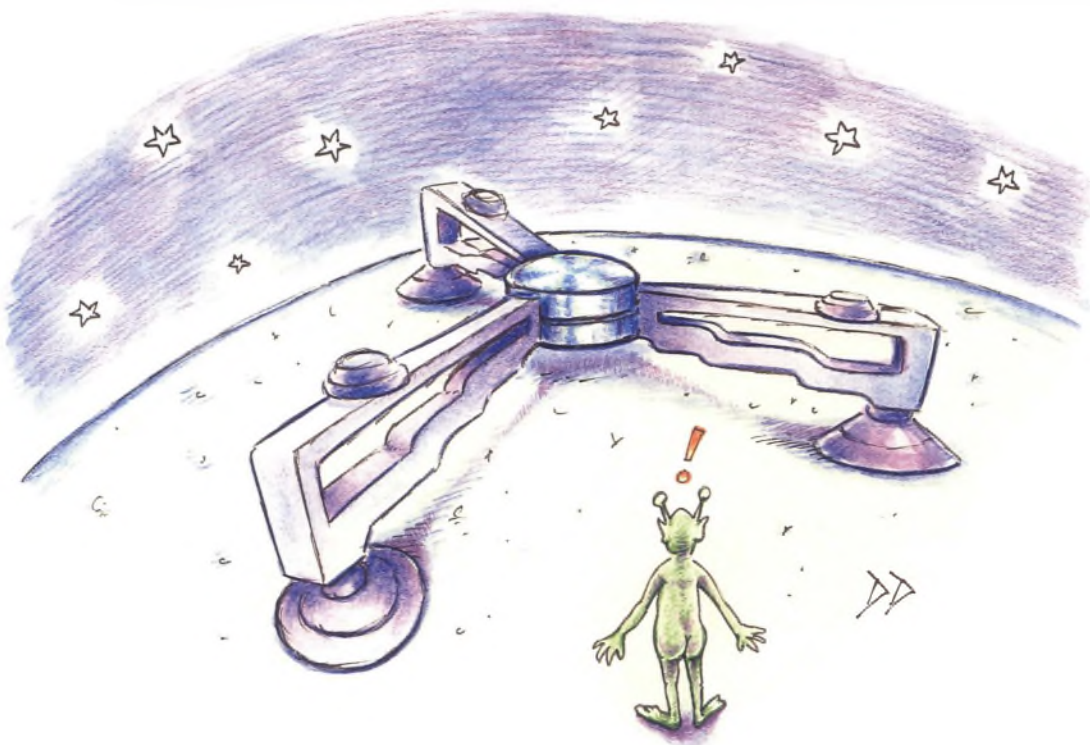
finished, it builds handily on the considerable strengths of the original, adding worthwhile headroom and authority to the enticing rhythmic flow. With that foundation arrives additional tonal subtlety and harmonic definition, and whilst the Sugden might at first seem softer than the competition you soon realise that it's actually just less

obvious, whilst its expressive qualities are second to none. Inner detail is captivating and music starts to live and breathe. It might have taken Sugden a couple of decades to follow the trend (and add a remote control too) but the results are worth the wait, living proof that what was right then remains right today, despite the changes and advances in the industry. ▶+



Price: £1995

Manufacturer:
J.E. Sugden & Co Ltd.
Tel. (44)(0)1924 404088
Net. www.sugdenaudio.com




The Stillpoints Isolation System

reviewed by Roy Gregory in Issue 42

If hi-fi goes in cycles then it's high time we revisited isolation. Lightweight tables and TipToes might have been the first generation, with air suspension representing the second, but the third wave is upon us, combining concerns over external, environmental impact with the realization that internal sources of vibration within equipment itself can be just as damaging. Approaches that seek to combine isolation with the sinking of internal energy are becoming increasingly common, but the most sophisticated and universally applicable comes from Stillpoints. These immensely clever little flexibly constrained, ceramic ball shock absorbers are built into conventional looking cones as well as the bases of the skeletal three and four-legged



Component Stands. Designed to cancel vibration traveling in both vertical directions, they are remarkably effective, often totally transforming the dynamic range and resolution of units supported on them. Add in adjustability in the shape of Risers and Inverse Risers and you have the ability to level components too. The whole system (and it is a genuine support system) is modular and can be built up over time. Like many listeners I had trouble crediting the impact of these supports in my system, but anybody who heard our demonstration of the component stand under a CD player at the London show will be in no doubt. The Stillpoints underline once again that supports and cabling are just as crucial to overall system performance as the electronics themselves. Underestimate them at your peril – or alternatively,

invest in some serious support technology and finally realise the potential in the equipment you already own. Stillpoints might seem expensive, but it's hard to fault their value once you hear what they can do. 



Price: From £245

UK Distributor:
Lyngdorf Audio
Tel. 0870 9100100
Net. www.lyngdorfaudio.co.uk

Manufacturer:
Stillpoints Inc.
Net. www.stillpoint.us

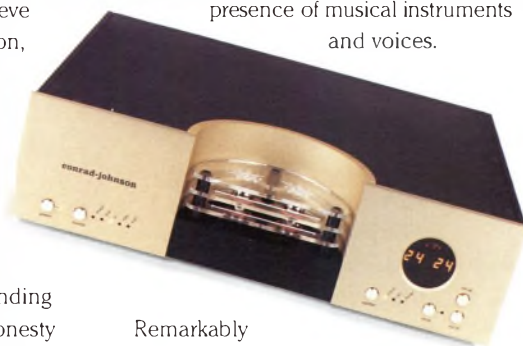


conrad-johnson CT5 Line-stage

reviewed by Roy Gregory in Issue 42

conrad-johnson may not have been part of the very first wave of high-end designers, but they were central to the first real expansion. Across the years they've also been unusually consistent, producing products they believe in rather than following fashion, so that although their range includes valve, hybrid and solid-state designs, these have evolved at their own pace and in their own order, rather than in a rush to board the latest passing bandwagon. The common binding themes have been musical honesty and listenability and the CT5 embodies those virtues perfectly. It would have been easy, in following the stellar accomplishment of the ACT2, to concentrate on the flagship's obvious sonic strengths, rather than its more cerebral, musical virtues. Instead the CT5 takes the latter course: it's not the

most detailed, transparent or hi-fi line-stage out there, and certainly not at this price. But what it is, is powerful, rich and solid, an emotive performer that deals in the raw energy and presence of musical instruments and voices.



Remarkably even and musically coherent, it excels in reproducing the colour and texture in a performance, the finesse in the playing as well as the sheer gusto. The results are engaging and gratifying, centring attention on the music rather than its means of reproduction. Cutting to the core of

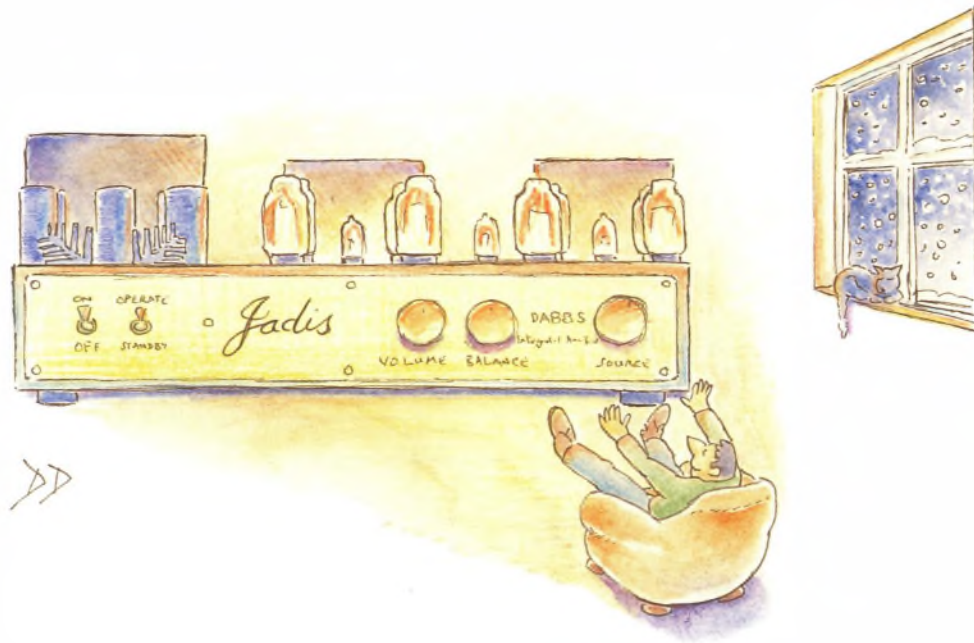
the music, the CT5 echoes generations of predecessors that eschewed the obvious in preference for longer-term satisfaction. It's the c-j way and the latest offspring remain true to the family values.



Price: \$7450

UK Distributor:
Audiofreaks Ltd
Tel. (44)(0)20 8948 4153
E-mail. info1@audiofreaks.co.uk

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



Jadis DA88S Integrated Amplifier

reviewed by Roy Gregory in Issue 39

Jadis have been doing things their own way for longer than I care to remember. Their products are instantly recognisable, the approach and execution utterly consistent.



The DA88S is no exception and it's impossible to mistake this for anything but a Jadis amp, even before you grunt with the effort of hoisting its remarkable mass off the floor. I don't know whether it's the fact that the transformers are wound in-house or the sheer amount of iron they contain, the immaculate point-to-point

wiring or the fearsome array of glass-wear deployed across the top-plate, but even a cursory listen leaves you in no doubt that this is another in a long line of truly great amplifiers. Despite a rated output of only 60 Watts, the DA88S is astonishingly capable when it comes to dominating loudspeakers. The rich musical warmth and vivid tonal colours that have long been the hallmarks of Jadis amplification here clothe a steel grip that injects presence and purpose, scale and authority into proceedings. But this isn't just crude muscle at work. The DA88S, like all Jadis amps, has a deft touch and balance when it comes to teasing out the subtleties in a performance. Yes it's rounded at the frequency extremes and a little over-warm in the mid-bass, but these things add to its cosy listenability and never obstruct its musical communication: Not so much fit and forget as fit and

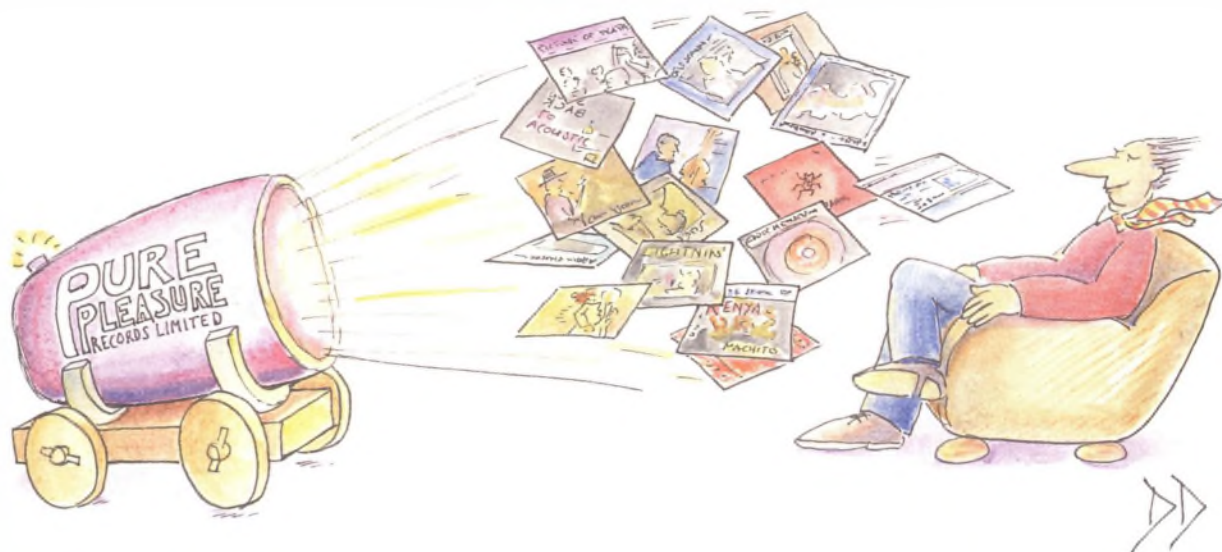
enjoy! Here's an amp that manages to be both inviting and telling at the same time – a rare and wonderful trick indeed. But no surprise either; it's been the Jadis party piece ever since day one so plus ça change! ➤



Price: £6000

UK Distributor:
Absolute Sounds
Tel. (44)(0)20 8971 3909
Net. www.absolutesounds.com

Manufacturer:
Jadis S.A.R.L
Net. www.jadis-electronics.com



Pure Pleasure Records

first reviewed by Reuben Parry in Issue 39

Like a bolt of lightning (that could actually be Hopkins) in the short space of less than two-years Tony Hickmott, owner of Pure Pleasure Records, has delivered almost two dozen re-issued treasures from the likes of Blue Horizon, Candid, Epic, French Isabel and now the Pacific Jazz catalogue. He has been one busy guy. With titles that are invariably hard or expensive to find on the collectors market, Hickmott has offered us 180 gram re-issues of extraordinary sonic quality. Just think of this: almost one release every month since he began the company! Can we talk about the quality and variety of the catalogues he is mining? They are nothing short of excellent. We've been able to enjoy Otis Spann, Fleetwood Mac (*Blues Jam at Chess*), Lightnin' Hopkins, Memphis Slim, Johnny Shines, Charles Mingus, Buddy Guy and Junior Wells, Jazz

Artists Guild – *The Newport Rebels* to name but a few. His release of Stevie Ray Vaughan's *Couldn't Stand the Weather*, unearthed previously unreleased material to add to an otherwise familiar mix.



The catalogue continues to grow and the quality, from the beautifully flat pressing by Pallas to the superbly reproduced original artwork has been first class. Next year promises some major treats as Hickmott

continues to mine the vaults of ever more record companies. His catalogue is going to get bigger, richer and more musically rewarding. We just can't wait. Based upon the diversity of music, quality of product and their extraordinary rate of progress, Pure Pleasure Records is our re-issue record company of the year.



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Michael Fremer, *Stereophile*, April, 2003

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Stereo Times June 2003

For prices and product availability, please contact:

Northwest – Acoustica (Chester) 01244 344 227

North Midland. – Acoustica (Stafford) 01785 258 216

Midlands – Griffin Audio (Birmingham) 0121 224 7300

Suffolk – Signals (Ipswich) 01473 655 171

Surrey – Infidelity (Kingston Upon Thames) 0208 943 3530

Southeast – Guildford Audio (Guildford) 01483 537 577

Central London – Robert Taussig 0207 487 3455

Bucks. – Hazlemere Audio (High Wycombe) 01494 865 829

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2006 marks B&W's 40th Anniversary in the hi-fi business, a long history that has included more than its fair share of technological innovations and highlights. From the seminal DM70, through the original Nautilus "Snail" to the N800D of today, the company has produced some of the most novel, creative and singular designs ever presented to the hi-fi buying public. And buy them they did. Unlike some technology demonstrator type projects, each of these has been a commercial success, each a serious product proposition that has pushed the barriers of the performance envelope, each a statement of intent that has spawned new fashions and new styles.

So perhaps it's not surprising that, in looking for a suitable way in which to mark and celebrate their 40th year in business, B&W should turn to Blue Note records. Blue Note represents one of the most successful, progressive, independent and above all stylistically innovative jazz labels out there. The strikingly original and instantly identifiable graphic style they established for their cover art has become iconic, an essential aspect in the public perception of jazz and jazz musicians. Whether you know and love jazz or not, you cannot be unaware of those duo-tone images of players and instruments, side-lit in reflective mood that seem to conjure up the smokey darkness of the live venues and performances so central to the genre. Those pictures in some cases outlived the albums they graced, taking on an importance and existence all their own.

And while you might not be aware of it, you'll also not be surprised to discover that Blue Note covers have formed the inspiration for Hi-Fi+'s cover art since Issue 41: Such strong graphics, inextricably woven into the musical fabric are an irresistible combination. So, when we learn't that B&W were planning to reward their



for runners-up. The competition is open to anybody who doesn't work for B&W or AMI, and closes on April 14th, so entries must reach us by then.

You must include your name, address and phone-number along with your three answers, and these can be submitted in the following ways:

By e-mail to

accounts@hifiplus.com, giving B&W Competition as the subject.

In writing to

B&W Competition
 Hi-Fi+ Magazine
 Unit 12, Albany Business Park, Cabot Lane, Poole Dorset, BH17 7BX, United Kingdom

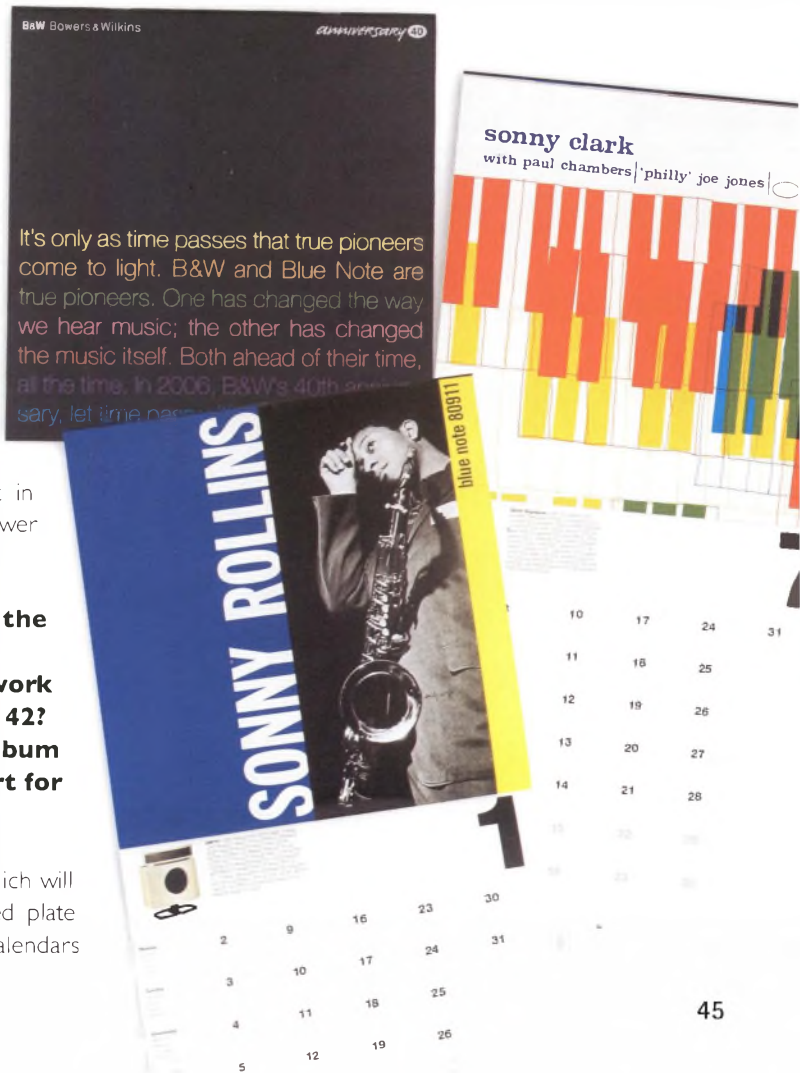
Correct entries will be placed in a draw and the editor's decision is final (which means no changes, no appeal and no whingeing). Good luck and good hunting.

international distributors' loyalty with a limited edition of 125 pairs of DM 600 S3 loudspeakers, decorated with Blue Note sleeve art, and personalised to each recipient, we just had to get our hands on a pair, along with the beautiful Calendar that goes alongside them.

But therein also lies the problem. Here is a prize beyond price; you can't buy these speakers and they'll never be made again, so I'd hate to see them turning up on ebay. You can't buy the calendars either. Which means that whoever wins them needs to appreciate just what they represent, so no giveaways. You'll actually have to work a bit in order to lay your hands on these prizes and answer the following questions:

1. In which year did B&W launch the legendary DM70 loudspeaker?
2. Which Blue Note artist's sleeve-work inspired the cover of Hi-Fi+ Issue 42?
3. What was the name of the album whose sleeve inspired the cover art for Joe Jackson's Jumpin' Jive?

We have one pair of speakers to give away, which will be personalised with the appropriate engraved plate carrying the name of the winner, and three calendars



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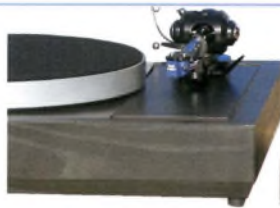
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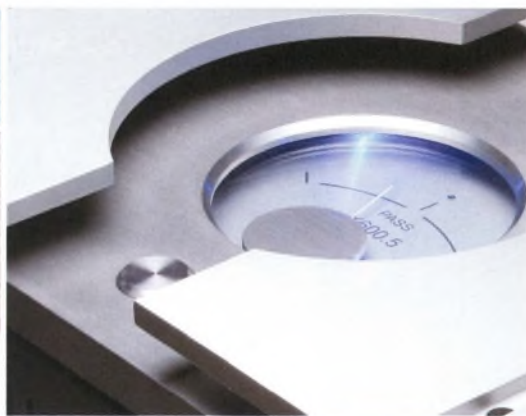
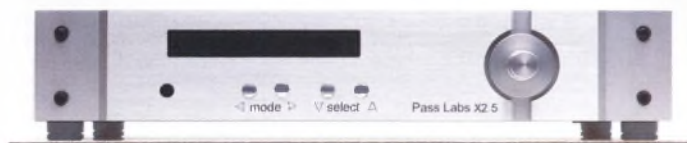
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Crouching Tiger ...

Investigating the highest-end with products from Japan

by Roy Gregory

Recent experiences, listening at home to products that have come for review, and in the US to the work being done by Harry Pearson of *the absolute sound*, suggests that we could (should) be about to undergo a paradigm shift in our understanding of high-fidelity reproduction. It can be no accident that the last few years have turned up the two most impressive

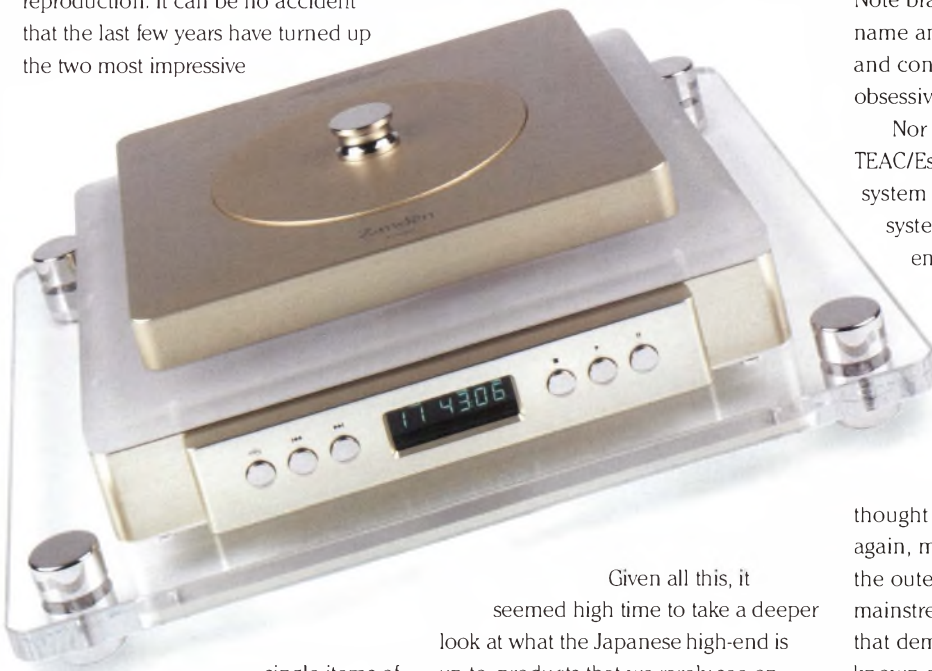
you can lay your hands on even temporarily. And what that proof tells me is that each of these individual epiphanies are cut from the same cloth; each moves understanding and appreciation of the current state of the art in exactly the same direction.

Certainly, there were certain common themes that seemed immediately obvious, concerning the unusual and particular mechanical construction employed, as well as the materials. Enter then the latest creations from Kondo-san, originator of the Audio Note brand, now flying under his own name and taking materials continuity and concerns to new levels of obsessive implementation.

Nor is corporate Japan excluded; TEAC/Esoteric's five-box disc replay system is just as excessive in its systematic application of over engineering, designing and building their own universal disc transport and then incorporating it into a multiple chassis that makes other such efforts look positively light-

weight. And just when you thought things were getting familiar again, meet two products from the outer reaches of the (almost mainstream) Lyra and Koetsu ranges, that demonstrate that even the best known and most established of exotic brands offer rarely seen and seldom heard products that occupy the fringes of audio understanding.

What would these extreme examples tell us about the way in which our more modest efforts should be directed? For make no mistake, these products occupy the rarest of atmospheres, where air (and funds) get extremely thin. For most of us they are but a dream, yet their lessons are universal if only we can unravel them. They may not allow us to reach the same dizzy heights, but they will at least point the way.



single items of hi-fi I've ever heard (the Connoisseur 4.0 line/phono stages and the Zanden CD player) or that both those items originated in Japan. Likewise, time spent with the reference system at Sea Cliff has underlined certain crucial aspects of system building (the critical importance of cable looms and coherent approaches to the mechanical support of equipment) that whilst we've been railing on about them, have never stood in such sharp focus as they do now. The proof is definitely in the pudding, or in this case, in the biggest, highest resolution system

Given all this, it seemed high time to take a deeper look at what the Japanese high-end is up to, products that we rarely see on this side of the globe, whose identity is only vaguely appreciated and whose performance even less so. Time to dig deeper into what Japanese high-end designers are doing and achieving; time to cast wider in the few areas that at least seem familiar.

New versions of the Connoisseur electronics beckoned, while a wider investigation of the Zanden system was an obvious step. Where these stellar products simple flukes or flashes in the hi-fi pan, or did they indicate a deeper understanding and appreciation of the problem, along with new answers.





LYRA
Connoisseur
POWER SUPPLY

The Lyra Connoisseur 4-2L SE Line-stage

by Chris Thomas

Can it really be more than three years ago that the Connoisseur Definitions 4.0 L passed through my life? Roy had sent it over with no fanfare and asked me to take a listen. What followed was two weeks of the most memorable listening sessions since I first bought a Linn/Naim system from Jimmy Hughes at Grahams Hi-Fi back in the seventies. But it left an indelible mark and an unquenched flame smouldering in the back of my mind. It came, everyone, especially me, loved it and then it went, leaving behind one frustrated reviewer for whom it had expanded the possibilities of music in the home so far that nothing would ever really be the same again. Having heard much, though not all, that home audio has to offer at this exalted level it was obvious that the Connoisseur 4.0L had achieved rather more than just slightly raising the bar.

Whatever our notion of “the best” is, it will be dictated by our experiences and the emotional impact each system has made on our souls, with the best marking the outer territory of what we feel is actually possible from a domestic hi-fi system. There are some very fine pieces of audio electronics out there but I have found little agreement as to where the boundaries lie. But everybody who heard that pre-amplifier including those from radically different audio creeds agreed, with a single voice, that the Connoisseur 4.0L was simply awesome. In fact of all the hi-fi that has passed through my hands over the years this was the only piece to achieve such total consensus. It was one of those

products that come along, perhaps once every decade or so, that push the boundaries back... a very long way. One of those that, however long you live with it, seems to have no discernable weaknesses, leaving you wondering just how it could be any better. Within the strange, tiny universe that is the Hi-Fi community, that very same pre-amplifier re-entered my orbit in Spring 2005, by which time my home system had evolved for the better with the passing of time. Once re-installed the Connoisseur Definitions 4.0L was straight back in the groove, working its magic and hauling the music onto such a level that I was spending hours and hours making a dent in the sofa, exploring my musical collection with fresh ears. But, once again, the flirtation was to be brief.

In the interim Connoisseur Definitions had changed their name to include their parent company and became Lyra Connoisseur, appointed a UK agent and released the final and ultimate version of both the 4 series line- and phono-stages. There had been a previous upgrade from 4 to 4-2 but this latest version would incorporate these and further important changes to be known as the 4-2L SE (Special Edition). The initial change from 4.0L to 4-2L was major enough and included a serious reworking of the boards with many new components being incorporated, as well as a completely

new system of earthing. This involves a pcb, which did not exist in the 4.0, being built into the base of the chassis and accessible through a small hatch set in the bottom. This is the central, master grounding board that is normally set to floating but, by using jumpers, can be set either via a cap and resistor network to



chassis ground or directly to chassis ground. There was also a new floor panel, a redesigned rear panel with improved airflow and a new acrylic top. Although the 4.0 came equipped with an aluminium top there was a transparent acrylic top available that came with the review example. This was much better sounding than the metal top and looked tremendous because it allowed you to see how beautifully made the innards were (and watch those Shallco stepped-attenuators ►

▶ at work). The latest acrylic top has a mirrored metallic finish that looks superb but I personally have a soft spot for the old clear version, purely from an aesthetic point of view at the moment, as I haven't compared their sonic attributes. So, if the jump from 4.0 to 4.2L was big, Lyra Connoisseur were not finished there. There is also a 5.0L which is sold almost exclusively in Japan. This is a more expensive no-compromise type line-stage that is both extremely limited in production and very rare. But, the man behind Lyra Connoisseur electronic design is Jonathan Carr and he decided to incorporate much of the thinking gained from research into the 5.0L into the latest version of the 4 series line-stages, the 4.2L SE. This upgrade it is said is at least as big as the first. Mouth-watering stuff.

Outwardly it looks the same. The control unit is smaller than it appears in the pictures but is beautiful and minimal with the wood lending it a warm organic glow. Like RG I hate the way wood is normally tacked onto audio electronics, but this is different. Take a closer look at the detail finishing, the way the wood is scalloped and the quality of the joinery at the edges. The cabinets are hand-made by Mr Jim Sweeney in Berkeley, California from South American Pau Ferro (Iron Wood) obtained from a renewable and sustainable source. The single satin shaft dual concentric volume/selector switch and the surrounding high-polished level and input indicator plate give it a look of real, understated, simple elegance. There is no balance control, illumination or relay switching, nor is there a remote control. Everything is centred on that lovely notched knob with the outer section providing the input switching and the inner part controlling the level. The rear plate is a lesson in logical layout though there are various permutations of connection available. The review version had four

sets of phono sockets and two XLRs coming in and both a set of phono sockets and a pair of XLRs for output. But these are not balanced connections, just a way of utilising cables with XLR plugs. Each pre-amplifier can be configured for individual preference. It's also worth noting that the phono sockets are custom made for Lyra Connoisseur and are hard-rhodium plated.

Power is drawn from the separate supply that mirrors the size and scalloped-sided design of the control unit.



This is a very solidly built, all-aluminium cased unit that carries the only illumination, in the shape of a small blue light. Internally it is as superbly built as you might imagine. There are two 190VA R-core power transformers (one per channel), each with dual secondary windings that each have their own rectification bridge. All rectifiers are 30-amp Schottky types, while there is 20,000uF of capacitance per channel. This connects to the control unit by a single umbilical cable, terminated with a Fischer connector

Lyra Connoisseur describe the 4.2L SE is an air-dielectric design. It trips off

the tongue easily enough, but what does this actually mean within the context of the design? I asked Jonathan Carr and I'll let him explain:

"I use air-dielectrics for nearly all the circuit nodes directly involved in signal amplification so it is not used for the power supplies or voltage regulators. Although there is a signal wiring loom and it is insulated with Teflon tubing this is oversized, relative to the conductor diameter so that the bulk of the insulation is air rather than Teflon but I don't regard this as being part of

the air-dielectric structure. When I say that an air-dielectric is used I mean that it is used to build internal nodes within the amplification circuit and because the circuits themselves are quite compact there is so little space that separate wiring would never fit. The air dielectric is actually constructed with the leads of the components, transistors, resistors and so on and these are laid out so these leads are very short. In many cases the components are physically touching one another and the connecting air dielectric leads are perhaps a millimetre or so long. For the 4 and 5 I developed a new type of structure which I've come to call "boundary-layer air dielectric". Now envision ▶

► how a modern sewing machine stitches. One thread enters the cloth from the top and another from the bottom and the two threads meet at the boundary layer, i.e. the cloth. The thinking with the 4.0 was very similar. All of its air dielectric components are mounted right side up on the circuit board with one layer on the top and one on the bottom. The components on the top can connect to each other in air dielectric fashion directly, without using wires or making contact with the circuit board, as can those at the bottom. This gives us two clear layers of air dielectric, but by significantly enlarging the holes in the circuit board relative to the size of the circuit lead that will be passing through it so the circuit does not come into contact but only touches air

I can overlap air dielectric components by utilizing the layers available on both sides and stitching the nodes together, again using air dielectric. In reality, each side of the circuit board has multiple air dielectric layers but, even if I limit myself to only one side I can still stack multiple layers. The outcome of all this is that much higher component densities and much more compact circuits become practical”.

Take a look inside the 4.2L SE and you can see for yourself how different that arrangement is. But beneath each of the boards, in a sandwich arrangement, are the pcbs carrying the voltage regulators. This board has been designed to hook up to the trailing legs of components on the amplifier board rather like a CPU does to the mother-board. This is designed for proximity regulation i.e. a big socket that the amplifier board plugs into, with the individual voltage regulators (12 per circuit board) located so that each regulator will be as close as possible

(directly below) the part of the amplifier that it needs to supply. When the two boards are placed and soldered together you get a circuit stack or sandwich. This increased density is obviously far more compact than if the respective types of circuit were laid out on a single circuit board and is the reason why the electronic innards look



so simple to the naked eye and is indeed why the whole package can fit in such a modest sized case. But perhaps the most obviously beautiful aspect of construction is the open cage arrangement that houses the Shallco volume and input selector switches. On the 4-2L SE this is a shorter and squatter design than that on the 4.0 but it sends a clear message as to what the pre-amplifier is all about. This construction probably doesn't have to be this visually attractive, look at the sheer ugliness of other high-end electronics, but where form follows function so closely I am glad that it is.

I always think about equipment, especially at this level, in terms of its musical potential so let me cut to the chase and say that, in a digital replay system, the 4-2L SE requires and deserves to be used with only the finest CD players. It is pointless using this line-stage with anything less. Never has the ancient phrase “Garbage in, garbage

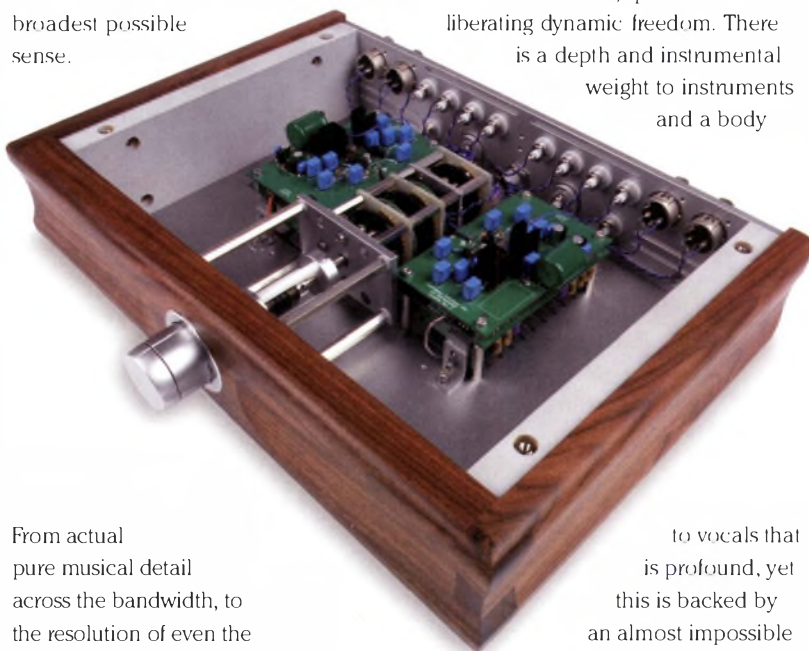
out” had such resonance. A player of the quality of the excellent Naim CDS 3 has to be considered the minimum required to provide the source. I used this and the Teac Esoteric X-01 SACD player. Anything less and although the system will still sound

very good, you will start attributing shortcomings here to the pre-amplifier and that would be a mistake. The hard fact is that this line-stage has way too much resolution for the vast majority of CD players. It also places considerable emphasis on the rest of the system. The partnering power amplifier, cabling and speakers must be able to deal with the sheer motorway of musical detail that the 4-2L SE can provide. But that doesn't necessarily mean monumental costs. I used the Lyra Connoisseur with the Hovland RADIA, Tom Evans Linear A hybrid, the mighty Moon W8, and though each had its own particular flavour they were all well able to show what this pre-amplifier is all about.

There are a number of things that the 4-2L SE brings to a system that are ever-present, whenever you listen to it. It sounds so much less electronic and processed than any solid-state pre-amp I have ever heard. In comparison it is as though several veils of noise and general mush has been stripped away. The Lyra Connoisseur does not strangle the flow by creating a bottleneck but rather just lets the music happen. There is no sense of the musical picture being pre-formed and reconstructed electronically to ►



▶ any predetermined shape or scale. Where many high-end systems, especially those from the US, impose a soundstage that is both enormously deep and stable, they tend to supply the same shaped picture of the music, whatever the recording, with only the instruments being interchangeable. The 4-2 SE has so much space yet it produces a sound-stage view into the musical picture that is determined by the recording rather than the system. It allows each instrument and voice so much individual freedom dynamically and tonally that it is easy to totally isolate any one instrument or vocal and follow its progress through a piece. At note level the control is absolute and by far the best I have heard. With no emphasis anywhere to falsely enhance its dynamic capabilities, the colour, duration and ultimate length of decay brings new meaning to the term resolution. Think of this in the broadest possible sense.



From actual pure musical detail across the bandwidth, to the resolution of even the most complex rhythmic elements, through its remarkable control and pure, natural speed. The 4-2L SE has a full octave more low frequency extension than the 4.0L and I never heard anybody complain about any lack of bass with that

pre-amplifier. This is pure extension we are talking about here but again with superb control right down to those last few hertz, where it has enormously impressive grip, frequency precision and where it is still operating in focus and

with a full range of tonal colour. With such a pristine and unprocessed view of the music this pre-amplifier lets you go straight to the heart of the piece by allowing the musicians room, space and liberating dynamic freedom. There is a depth and instrumental weight to instruments and a body

to vocals that is profound, yet this is backed by an almost impossible delicacy and subtlety of tonal shading. *Nefertiti* (Sony 9116) is one of my favourite Miles Davis' albums. Always overlooked in favour of *Kind Of Blue* it has an instrumental line-up that has Tony Williams on drums and no

one had quite the same fun or takes the same liberties with rhythm and time as him. The title track shows the whole band at their most languid. Williams makes the tempo feel almost arbitrary and seems to invite Miles and Wayne Shorter to drop off the beat.



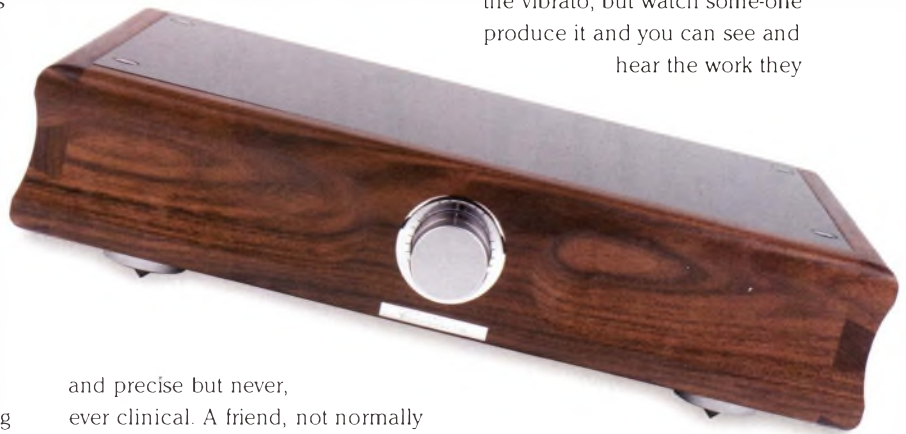
Even Ron Carter's upright bass threatens to wander off, almost to a stop as Williams plays with several timings before slipping in the groove and pulling the others back into shape. The 4-2L SE opened this tune up so much for me that it gave me a completely fresh view of the music. I soon realised that I had never really understood the bass line before, or the relationship between Williams cymbal work and Herbie Hancock's piano chord inversions. And the blend of trumpet and tenor saxophone, that I have heard sound so awkwardly astringent on many systems, is quite beautiful. When you can hear the character and the range of tones that both these incomparable musicians pull so effortlessly from their instruments you can appreciate the blend so much more.

Wes Bound (GRP 97052)), Lee Ritenour's tribute to the legendary guitarist Wes Montgomery is an album that I have enjoyed many times over the years, but hearing it through the Lyra Connoisseur once again left me with a completely new understanding and take on the music. The track titled '4 on 6' tells you what to

▶ expect from it timing wise, and the tempo is delicious. Based initially on a four note strolling bass line I was taken aback to realise just how sinuous that rhythm is; there was a whole new dynamic urgency and pace about it. The choppy guitar chords and octave playing, a Wes speciality, was so much cleaner without that gloopy attack that I normally associate with both this track and big-bodied jazz guitar recordings in general. But what really got me were the subtle variations the band uses when making those pushes that phrase the song so beautifully and keeps it rolling. Stabbing chords and lingering decays seem to hold the rhythmic structure in time with a delicate restraint. This band swings, with masterful musicianship and the 4-2L SE is so free, loose and very liquid in the way it allows this expression to flow.

Installing this pre-amplifier in a suitable system really does encourage you to begin a voyage of discovery through your music. It is completely at ease with anything from thrash metal to the most delicate pastel-shaded mood music. Its incredible responsiveness is limited only by the ultimate quality of the source and the abilities of the rest of the system. There are so many musical examples I could give to illustrate just how good this thing is but, in a sense, they would all be saying the same thing. This is the sort of task that has led me to run out of superlatives as it is simply the best I have heard and by a huge margin. I could tell you about the first time I heard some early sixties recordings of The Beach Boys through it and how every other high-end system I had heard this disc on made it sound every one of its 40 plus years and yet on the 4-2L SE it sounded so unprocessed, real and fresh. Every vocal totally individual, yet the sound of those harmonies like a recorded time capsule with even the dodgy drumming, up

and down in tempo like a yo-yo, completely in keeping with the simple charm of the atmosphere. Then there's the sheer, exhausting intensity of Shakti at full bore, with Johnny McLaughlin playing long, blistering yet structured passages like only he can, over some stupendously transient percussive backdrops. What sounds like a barrage of technique and brazen exhibitionism on other systems has form, structure and becomes a whole lot more approachable and understandable. The Lyra Connoisseur is stunningly articulate



and precise but never, ever clinical. A friend, not normally a listener of such complex music, sat with me through the whole ten minute piece and described it afterwards as the most intensely draining experience he had ever had listening to music at home. In doing so I think he hit on the greatest thing about the Lyra Connoisseur; its ability to get you emotionally involved with the music. How can you describe this aspect of its personality? Yet it is an affect that always comes up when the 4-2 SE is being discussed. For me it has made listening sessions an event. I can sit as an admirer and watch the music go by or I can step in and lose myself in it, opening my mind to its influences in the confidence that, as deep as I want to look, the Lyra Connoisseur can provide both the resolution and the answers.

As somebody who often sits opposite musicians of all abilities,

listening to them play guitar I must also say that, put simply, this pre-amplifier sounds more "real" than any I have heard before. In the flesh there is an energy signature surrounding each and every instrument, from guitar to trombone, that you are aware of as soon as the musician addresses it and starts to play. Where most high-end systems give you a decent enough representation of the note or the chord they often fall down when showing you the sheer physical connection between human and musical instrument. You may hear the vibrato, but watch some-one produce it and you can see and hear the work they

are putting into the instrument and onto the note. You can feel the extra, controlled physical pressures they are using and hear all the associated sounds and noises that this produces. For me it all comes under the general heading of technique. Give it a good enough source and the 4-2L SE will bring that sense of real people playing solid multi-dimensional instruments into your living room.

For the past three months I have been searching within the performance of this pre-amplifier with a microscope to try and find some limitations, but I can't. The truth of the matter is that it outperforms every other design I have heard in every area so comprehensively (or so it seems to me) that what we have here is something that is very special, something that should ▶

► find itself at the heart of some of the worlds best music systems – and I don't necessarily mean the most expensive. This is a totally hand-built performance-driven product that is solely devoted to making music and this it achieves with spectacular success. Lyra Connoisseur, and Jonathan Carr in particular, should be congratulated for producing such a stunningly beautiful sounding and looking piece of audio art. When I take an overall look and listen to the market at this price-level I have to say that, even at £12K, this represents a serious bargain. ➤+

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Solid-state line-stage	Price:	
Inputs:	6x single-ended RCA/phono (XLRs optional)	4-2LSE:	£12000
Input Impedance:	10kOhms	UK Distributor:	Symmetry
Outputs:	2x single-ended RCA/ phono (XLRs optional)	Tel. (44)(0) 1727 865488	
Output impedance:	50 ohms	E-mail. info@symmetry-systems.co.uk	
Gain:	33.6dB	Manufacturer:	
Dimensions (WxHxD) -		Lyra Co Ltd	
Line-stage:	400x 94x314mm	Tokyo, Japan	
Power Supply:	400x 94x270mm	Net: www.lyraconnoisseur.com	
Weight -			
Line-stage:	6.5kg		
Power supply:	11Kg		

Icing The Cake...

by Roy Gregory

The lovely thing about doing a second opinion (most of the time) is that someone else has done all the hard work – and you get to look all erudite by expanding on a few of the points they've made. Sort of like the benefit of critical hindsight if you like. Well, this is just such a case; CT has nailed the Connoisseur dead centre. I read his review and that's the product I'm listening to. However, that doesn't stop me adding my own two-ha'p'p'.

One reason that we double-teamed the 4-2L SE (apart from the obvious desire to lay my hands on it again) is that I wrote the original review. The other is that I use vinyl as a source and CT doesn't which, in light of his comments regarding the quality of source required, makes that a good decision. When it comes to sheer information there are few if any CD sources that can rival a top-flight record player, and as CT points out, the Connoisseur thrives on real, useable information: The key words in this instance being real and even more so, useable. The point about the musical

detail delivered by a decent record player is its intelligibility; it's recognisable and generally, reasonably well organised. It's exactly these qualities that the 4-2L SE maintains and amplifies.

Now, Lyra Connoisseur also make their own phono-stage to match the line-amp. It's also going through revision and wasn't ready in time for this review, but past experience with the previous models operating in tandem was what first got me thinking about synergy in its true sense. That whole is very much greater than the sum of its parts. I used the Groove Plus instead (not exactly slumming it you'll agree) but even with this "handicap" the musical experience delivered by the 4-2L SE exceeded that of the 4.0 line and phono together. The reason is all to do with that extra octave that CT refers to, so let's examine why...

Of course, the extra octave is a figurative description. Even the most basic integrated amplifier is essentially flat across the audible bandwidth. This is where that difference between "information" and "useable information"

comes in. Few if any hi-fi systems provide realistic energy levels much below 30Hz. It's one thing showing the bare bones of what's going on down their (many systems just about manage a fuzzy shadow of the bones) it's quite another to put real flesh and muscle on those bones. Yet that's exactly what the 4-2L SE does. The 4.0s knocked me sideways with their astonishing resolution of the energy envelope that creates each note: its shape and texture, duration and magnitude, harmonic structure and shading. It was a quality that extended from the mid-bass all the way on up, giving music a palpable physicality and presence that I'd never previously experienced from any hi-fi system. Now, the 4-2L SE extends that range further down, and whilst an extra octave might not sound like much, its musical impact is literally profound.

What the latest Lyra Connoisseur adds to the mix is absolute authority. By underpinning the music with a solid, defined foundation, not only is each voice or instrument locked in place ►

▶ relative to those around it, but the acoustic space is itself defined. Dynamics launch from a solid footing, making them seem more sudden and far wider in range (just think of a high jumper taking off from the solid running track as opposed to the sand-pit he'd normally land in). The resultant gains in crisp, natural clarity are impressive enough, but the real benefit is in even greater substance and presence to players, more believe scale and dimensionality, greater immediacy and – what this is all leading up to – more direct communication. I thought the 4.0s sounded more live than anything else I'd heard. They did – until now...



The impressive thing about the Lyra Connoisseur is its ability to make so much more sense of the same signal. I can feed the Kuzma turntable and Groove, or latterly (and tantalizingly) the Kondo phono chain, into other great pre-amps but none does what the 4-2L SE achieves. Indeed, comparison with the likes of the Zanden is fascinating. Harry Pearson, in his recently published (and seminal) review of the ATR integrated amplifier described its qualities perfectly: it's not, he said, that it makes the music more real, rather that it makes it less unreal. It's a subtle but vitally important distinction that encapsulates the Zanden line-stage perfectly. The Connoisseur is a different case;

it too fails to make things more real, but it does definitely make them more live. Each in its own way is a stunning achievement, but it's your musical proclivities that will dictate which is more appropriate to you. Reaching for a crude analogy I'd have to say that the Zanden leans more towards the strengths of the traditional, US-led high-end, the Lyra towards the UK Linn-Naim ethos, but don't read too much into this. Of much more interest are the similarities between the two.

The thing that separates the Lyra Connoisseur, and the Zanden and the Kondo, from

the vast expanse of opposition, is their ability to maintain the separate identities and musical integrity of individual instruments within the whole, whilst also achieving or maintaining other, stellar performance attributes; separation without constraint if you like. In the case of the 4-2L SE, it's the combination of holding instruments and voices separate from each other yet injecting their natural life and energy into the whole, recreating their creative tension and interrelationship. In many respects it cuts to the very heart and nature of what makes music so compelling, and in turn that makes the Connoisseur's performance itself compelling. Never has a system demanded attention in the way it does with the 4-2L SE in control. Never has it engaged so directly. You need to take care with what you

feed it – and what it feeds, but this quality of commanding authority and intensity will surface in any company. The Connoisseur is never wantonly destructive and always makes the most of what you give it – it just gets better with care.

How far can the 4-2L SE carry a system? Well, there's always the 5.0 to consider, even if it's rarely seen beyond the confines of its native shores. The notion that a \$12000 line-stage constitutes a compromise is faintly mind-boggling, but as outlined in the original review if the 4.0 back in Issue 16, that's exactly what it is. Using modular gain blocks, one pair in the line-stage, two in the phono-stage, allows some degree of efficiency in manufacturing. What it doesn't do is give you an ideal gain structure, so that the phono-stage comes in a little low while the line-stage actually offers too much. Used together they compensate, but mixing them with other units needs some care. Personally I think it's irrelevant as having heard the units together the benefits are so obvious that mixing and matching makes no sense. The combination of the 4-2L SE line-stage along with the upcoming, upgraded, phono-stage is a mouth-watering prospect indeed. I haven't played with the earthing arrangements, or compared the RCA/phono and XLR connections. I haven't sat the 4-2L SE next to the previous model. And obviously it awaits the arrival of its partner in (financial if not sonic) crime. But there are two things of which I am certain: there's an upgrade available to 4.0 owners that carries their unit right up to current spec and I'd get my name on that list straight away. And the other? That this one is going to run and run, if only so that I can keep the review sample in my grubby little mitts. There again, there's always the CT solution; he bit the bullet and bought one. I suspect I'll be opening negotiations shortly...





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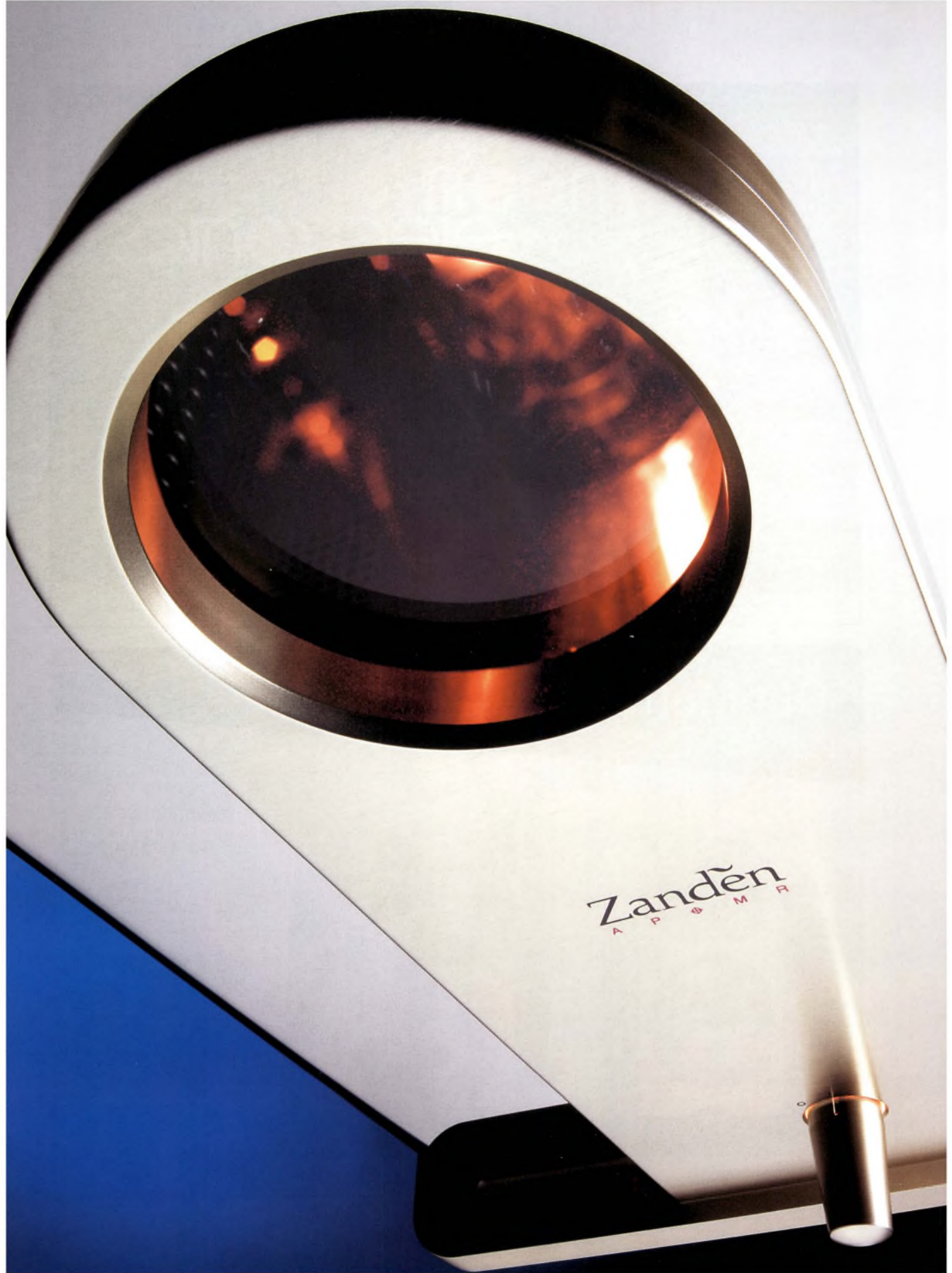


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The Zanden Audio Model 3000 Pre-amplifier and Model 9500 Mk.III Mono-blocs

by Roy Gregory

Zanden's Model 2000 Premium CD Transport and Model 5000 Mk. IV Signature D/A converter arrived in my audio universe like a bolt from the blue. Sure, I'd seen these beautifully crafted units at various shows, beautiful enough to instil nagging, covetous cravings; I'd even heard them sounding rather well at those shows, although which part of an unfamiliar system is delivering what is always a moot point. I'd marvelled at their exquisite construction and shrunk in the face of their frightening cost, but it wasn't until they arrived in the UK that I actually got to experience the full effect. That was when I got to take them home and experience them in familiar surroundings – and that was when they totally redefined my expectations of digital. For the first time the message was transcending the medium and for the first time digital replay was asking serious questions of my various record players.

Only one other product has ever had such a profound impact on my audio sensibilities and that was the Connoisseur 4.0, also hailing from Japan. The Zanden digital player immediately joined its compatriot on the top-rung of my existential ladder, as the single most impressive pieces of audio equipment I've ever had the pleasure of experiencing. But such epiphanies are not without their concerns. As a reviewer you worry about measuring the impact of

something that performs so far beyond the limits of your normal yard-stick. So it was reassuring (and not a little gratifying) to hear the complete Zanden system sounding so wonderfully impressive at the Heathrow show. It also added momentum to the urge to lay my grubby mitts on the company's amplifiers (not to mention the phono-stage, which designer Yamada-san considers his masterpiece).



At first glance it's tempting to label the Zanden designs as classic examples of "less is more", but they are actually far more conceptually sophisticated than that. What they actually represent is the ruthless application of informed simplification, a sophisticated cost/benefit analysis in which the currency is musical rather than financial. The circuits are novel in outline and extremely unusual in execution, not because of what they put in (and component quality is

naturally first-class) but more for what they leave out. Each element is forced to justify its presence in terms of its contribution to the musical whole, as well as being "costed" in terms of any negative impact. The result is products that have been honed and refined to an exquisite degree of elegance, in which conceptual simplicity is the guiding principle rather than the blueprint of execution.

Let's take the 9500 mono-blocs as an example. Their almost cubic dimensions are visually striking, the flawless finish just as impressive on a tactile level. There's a graceful but purposeful air to the Zanden amps that both instils confidence and sets them apart. The casework is constructed from a mixture of 16mm aluminium plate and mirror-polished stainless steel, designed to establish a rigid, protective envelope around the circuitry within. The details of construction are intricate and beautifully executed as well as contributing in no small part to the 42.5kg weight of each amplifier. There are no visible fixings, nothing ostentatious about their appearance, just a simple, immaculate exterior.

Inside, the circuitry quickly dispels any notion of "less is more" dogma. Whilst Zanden acknowledge the musical attraction of single-ended designs and valves in particular, they are also concerned by the limited power available from such an

► approach, a flaw which severely limits the ability of an amplifier to deal with the musical demands placed on it in real world systems. The challenge was to try and preserve that musicality and combine it with the benefits of higher output without suffering the sonic degradation that comes from multiple, push-pull output devices and the high levels of negative feedback so often necessary to keep them stable.

necessary to the results he seeks. He doesn't just want simple, he wants the simplest circuit that will actually do the job, and that's a very big difference indeed, demanding considerable experience and judgement to achieve. That's why the 845s are fixed-bias rather than the cheaper and simpler cathode bias. The added cost and complication of fixed bias delivers greater control at low frequencies as well as slightly more power. But given the huge voltages involved and the desire to make the amplifiers as easy to use as possible, Zanden have developed an incredibly stable bias circuit that can simply be factory set. Thus the owner gets the best of both worlds,

bottom of the front panel for power-up, surrounded by a ring that illuminates when the amp is switched on even though the 845s render any other form of status indicator unnecessary, with their soft, yellow glow. Switch-on is relay protected, which prevents unseemly rustling or thuds from your speakers. And while we're on the subject of noise it's worth mentioning that the Zandens are some of the quietest units I've ever used, valve or solid-state. Even with the fairly efficient OBX-R2s it was all but impossible to detect residual noise through the speakers.

The Model 3000 Pre-amplifier (it's actually a line-stage, Zanden also offering the previously mentioned Model 1200 MC or MM stand alone phono-stage) is virtually

identical to the DAC in appearance, sharing the same, modestly dimensioned chassis and shoe-box format polished steel power-supply casing. However, internally both units are totally different to their

digital counterparts, not least in their sheer simplicity. The 3000's valve rectified power supply relies on a single 6CA4 tube, while the audio circuit is based around one 5687 twin-triode. The all important volume control is a massive ALPS component while the power, source select and absolute phase control switches are mercury types for optimum sound quality and minimum sonic signature. The circuit is devoid of negative feedback, while Yamada-san has gone to enormous lengths to keep all signal paths as short as possible, again using a single main PCB to help in this regard. However, it's interesting to note that rather

the sound of fixed bias without the hassles. Likewise, the use of PCBs to carry the circuitry might well horrify purists but ensures greater accuracy and shorter signal paths, which add up to greater consistency between units. Besides, you just know that if Yamada-san could make a hardwired 9500 sound better then he would...

The amplifier offers both balanced XLR and single-ended phono inputs. WBT binding posts provide two, four and eight Ohm taps from the output transformer, while power reaches the unit via a standard IEC input. The socketry is grouped on the central rear panel which keeps everything tidy, although a little extra space between connectors would be no bad thing. There's a long, tapered switch at the

The result is unusual to say the least. The 9500 employs a single-pair of 845 triodes in a push-pull output stage. The patented topology employs no negative feedback and delivers 60 Watts within a 1dB limit from 25Hz to 20kHz. Hardly startling figures in themselves but a regular tour de force compared to the majority of the single-ended competition. But look through the perforated grille (the same grille that throws a patchwork lattice from the bright emitter 845s across the walls and ceiling of a darkened listening room) and you'll see no fewer than eight tubes scattered around the internal decking. That's because the Zanden uses a fully tube rectified power supply to feed every stage of the amplifier, from input and phase splitter to output. So much for simplicity! And that's the point. Yamada-san is not afraid of complex solutions if they are



▶ than simple wire links down to the board or PCB mounted socketry, relatively long runs of 8N cotton insulated copper solid-core carry the signals from the sockets and controls directly to their respective input points on the audio circuit, rather than relying on long PCB tracks. DC power arrives from the power-supply via a massive 10-pin umbilical cable which is sensibly long, allowing you to position the two units well apart.

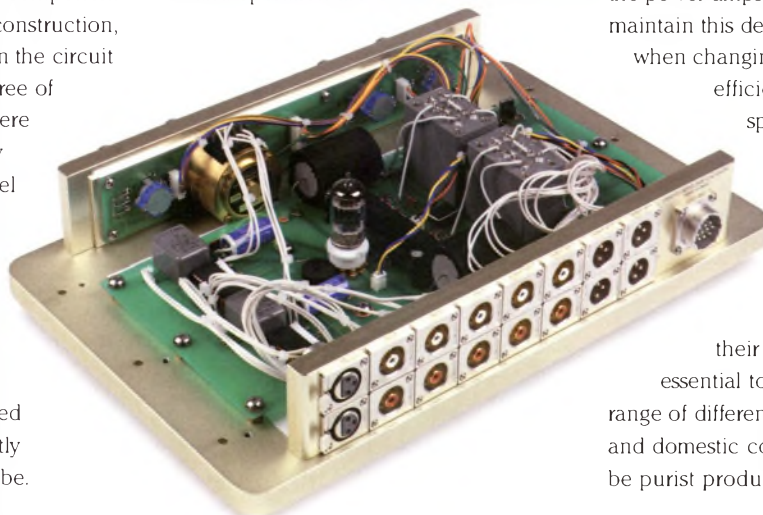
The main chassis is constructed from the same 16mm aluminium plate/polished stainless steel cover

combination as the power amps, which makes it surprisingly weighty and dense given its small overall size. The astonishing rigidity and solid construction underline Zanden's concern with environmental interference with their audio circuits, a concern that extends to the use of proprietary damping and noise absorption materials throughout their product range. In his introduction to the Model 3000's manual Yamada-san stresses the importance of the pre-amplifier being sonically invisible, a laudable aim that he has pursued to its logical extreme through a combination of careful component selection, considered construction, overall simplicity within the circuit and the maximum degree of external protection. There is something incredibly reassuring about the feel of the Zanden, its compact, almost inert quality when you pick up its 20lb mass. It seems at once purposeful and detached – which I guess is exactly how a pre-amp should be.

Despite appearances, the Zanden unit is almost as minimal as the Lyra Connoisseur, the separate knob for each function giving a false impression of functional complexity. Likewise, it offers no remote-control of function or volume (although the latter may well be on the way) and is bereft of even a manual mute switch. But, in stark contrast to the Lyra, the XLR sockets on



the back of the Model 3000 are genuine balanced connections, one pair for input and two pairs for output. Otherwise you get three single-ended line-inputs and two sets of single-ended outputs (no tape-out) and a pair of XLR shorting plugs that must be inserted into one of the balanced outputs if you are going to use the single-ended output option. This is to prevent ground noise leaking into the output circuitry. Otherwise, connection and operation are



as simple as they can possibly be. The only thing to look out for is the Standby/On switch that takes a minute to activate the audio circuit, allowing it to stabilize. Thus, the Standby mode is a transition from off to on that the Model 3000 enacts automatically, indicating status by passing from a red LED to a green one next to the control. Switch it back to Standby and you are actually switching the unit off!

In matching terms, the Model 3000 offers a sensibly low output impedance of 300 Ohms with input values of 10k and 100k Ohms for the balanced and single-ended inputs respectively. Overall

gain isn't stated but judging from the scope of the volume control and the 8V maximum output it is again in the sensible range – a nice change to the drive anything/worst case scenario mentality that seems to infect certain designers with the end result that in most cases you end up using about a tenth of the available volume control range. In marked contrast, the Zanden line-stage spent almost all of its time with the volume knob set between ten O'clock and three O'clock, allowing a superb degree of fine gain control. Of course, the input attenuators on the power amps meant that I could maintain this desirable situation even when changing from the 88dB

efficiency Nola Pegasus speakers to the 94dB

Living Voice OBX-R2s, a fact that underlines not just Zanden's aim of delivering absolute musical quality, but

their realization that it's essential to do so in a whole range of different equipment, musical and domestic contexts. These might be purist products, but they're ▶

► practical too, meaning that more owners will get more benefit more of the time.

One word of caution; Zanden explicitly advise against the use of Eichmann Bullet Plugs with all their equipment as they have experienced damage to some units when these have been employed. Whilst this is a function of the Bullets' tight fit and the clumsiness of the person inserting it, you have been warned. I used Neutrik terminated Valhalla cables throughout the review with no problems at all. Sources included the Kuzma Stabi XL/Airline record player, fitted with either the Lyra Titan or Kondo IO-J cartridges, the Tom Evans Groove Plus or Kondo step-ups. The Wadia 861SE was primary CD player, although I had a relatively brief opportunity to hear the Zanden amps in the context of their own front-end components, the Zanden CD player and phono-stage, driven by an SME 30/Triplanar/Benz LP 'table.

Confronted with a £40000 amplifier, it's tempting to ask what more it can do compared to something as competent and relatively affordable as Hovland's RADIA? After all, the 5000s offer around half the paper power and considerably less load tolerance yet cost five times as much. But listen to the two amplifiers and you quickly realize that as admirable as the RADIA undoubtedly is (and it embarrasses not a few far more expensive units) the Zanden mono-blocs are in a different league, even when both receive the benefits of the Zanden line-stage doing the driving. Just a few bars, or more precisely a few notes, is all it takes to appreciate the special abilities of the Zanden amplification. The line-stage and mono-blocs combine an astonishing ability to reproduce individual notes, phrases or musical

strands, keeping each utterly separate and distinct, with the preservation of the performance as a whole. So, as well as letting you hear the individual contribution of the players and instruments, they also make clear the part that contribution makes to the whole, unraveling the inner relationships in a band or arrangement.

The next thing that will hit you is the sheer weight and substance of the lower registers, a feature that spreads up the range to give the



music a real sense of presence and solidity. Bass is deep and incredibly stable, pitch definite enough to call low-frequency definition into question. Playing the 5000s through the Nolas with their genuine 20Hz capabilities, I was at first worried by a deep bass wobble, a looseness and lack of leading edge definition really deep down. At first I put it down to the amps, but after a while, and given the narrowness of the affected band I started to wonder about the speaker placement. Sure enough, moving the beasts forward a couple of centimeters made all the difference. It didn't eliminate the problem entirely, but it certainly improved the situation

significantly. The track in question was 'Lime Tree Arbour' from Nick Cave's album *The Boatman's Call* (Mute Stumm 142) with its VERY deep, dense combination of swelling, undulating left-hand piano chords, Hammond, bass and drums. Swapping back to the RADIA to see how the bottom end definition compared I was astonished just how congealed, two-dimensional and opaque the sound became. Far from telling me anything about the Zanden's performance, what it demonstrated was that the 5000s were in fact victims of their own clarity, insight and tonal separation.

It was their very ability to differentiate the bass guitar, Hammond and piano, giving each its own distinct harmonic structure that had shown up the "issue" in the first place.

Interestingly, along with the separation and independence afforded to each strand in the music, comes an east, relaxed and unforced quality. No amps I've ever used have allowed performers and music so much space to breathe. Yet at the same time, the pacing and tempo is never allowed to lag. So even on tracks as turgid and wallowing as the Nick Cave, the music settles into an easy lope, never getting stodgy or earthbound, the percussion work keeping things tight to the grid while Cave's piano chords and phrases dance little surges and emphasize the lyrical weighting on top. The result is a constantly shifting and evolving weave of threads, full of expressive nuance and harmonic texture creating a dramatic and moving whole that's at once dark, brooding and uplifting (as only a Nick Cave/P.J. Harvey "love album" could be*).

Of course, we all of us suffer from ►

* You want really dark, try the "split album" that followed, *No More Shall We Part*.

► the standard audiophile prejudices and mores, so having plumbed the depths of bass performance, there's always that preternatural impulse that demands to know how loud they'll go. Levels, even with the 88dB efficient Nolas can be described (in best Rolls Royce speak) as "sufficient".



I started out trying to upset things with Elgar's notoriously strident and difficult *Introduction And Allegro* (the Marriner/St Martins performance on a superb Argo pressing ZRG 573) only to have it transformed before my very ears to a thing of striking, stately beauty and measured solemnity. Thwarted in my avowed intent (and delayed by listening to the whole of the *Introduction...*) I reached straight for the Monteux/LSO *Enigma Variations* on the Classic repressing of RCA LSC-2418; this I was confident would burst the dam. Cueing that huge, ramped crescendo that occurs two-thirds of the way through Side 1 (I never have been able to work out which *Variation* it is) and advancing the volume well past the norm eventually forced the 5000's

into clipping, with glare and glassy treble destroying the orchestral facsimile, but by this stage the levels were so far beyond the necessary as to render the exercise pointless. Backing the volume off by a couple of notches restored order without diminishing the imposing scale and impact of the crescendo one iota. In fact, quite

the opposite as the system sailed through each stepped increase in power, level and intensity, maintaining the stability, substance and presence of the soundstage, the integrity of the orchestra under the inspired guidance of Monteux. Even driving the rather more awkward load presented by the Avalon Eidolon Diamonds the 5000s never flinched and unless you use them with some thoroughly inappropriate speaker with an impedance plot that looks like the profile for an alpine Tour stage, clipping is more an indication that you are playing too loud for the performance rather than that the amps can't handle the dynamic swings.

It's a remarkably impressive envelope given the amps' modest power rating, but it's built on the solid low-frequency foundation that delivers that musical substance rather than on sheer volume. The complex richness of the natural harmonic structures delivered by the line-stage and preserved by the mono-blocs put flesh on the musical bones, body and presence into the performance that has more to do with reality than it has to do with hi-fi. None of that pared away, ethereal beauty here. Play the AAM Vivaldi *Gloria* and it's delivered with power and passion, body behind the voices, character in their delivery. Each segment in the choir, each layer in the separate parts is overlaid yet

distinct, the identity of individual voices adding to the texture and intimacy of the performance.

But what's most impressive of all, an extension of the separation these amps achieve, is the extent to which each instrument or voice maintains its individual energy level and harmonic identity, irrespective of the intensity or level of the whole. Thus quiet instruments co-exist utterly naturally with louder ones, one instrument can increase in level while another descends. It's such an obvious requirement, so basic to full musical expression, yet nearly all amps fail this test. As levels rise into a crescendo, the entire orchestra or choir gets carried along – except that in reality they don't. Graduation of energy levels within the fabric of the music is where the Zandens really excel, and never more obviously than in the Elgar *Enigma...*



Having chosen that crescendo to stretch the dynamic envelope, a trial the amps negotiated with almost contemptuous ease, the real revelation came on the dynamic down-slope. All too often when listening to the Monteux performance, that big crescendo that doesn't quite peak simply dies away, leaving a ►

► musical void until the lively, almost jaunty opening of the next variation. But with the Zandens that peak is beautifully constrained, one definite notch short of fff before the energy flows through and dissipates, the echoes in the descending phrases forming a natural release and bridge into the next opening. Suddenly the full majesty of both the composition and the performance is revealed in a way I've only ever experienced before at live concerts.

It's the Zandens' mastery of separate dynamic strands that enables the system to follow the orchestra, rather than simply collapsing after the big effort. Again it's so basic – but again, it's so rare.

Does that make the Zanden amplification beyond criticism, devoid of flaws? Absolutely not. However the interesting thing is that the performance is so carefully considered and balanced that the weaknesses are in no way musically intrusive or obstructive. The line-stage, used in isolation can sound a little soft, almost gentle, certainly lacking the grip and absolute authority of the Lyra Connoisseur; like most 845 amps the 5000s trade muscular power and substance for air and extension. But in both cases the trade-offs are not as severe as you'd expect. There's tremendous subtlety that belies the presence of those four, enormous power-triodes, the sound is muscular not muscle bound. Likewise, if the leading edges delivered by the 3000 aren't as crisp or obvious as some, listen and you quickly realize that they're there. In each instance it's more a case of emphasis rather than content. Which brings me back to

the fleeting, tantalizingly brief period that I spent with the Zanden system as a whole.

It quickly becomes apparent that, despite the disparity in price and visual impact, the Model 5000 amps work better with the 3000 line-stage than almost anything else; the Vibe, the Hovland and the Herron all fell well short. Not surprisingly the Zanden products just gel,



the whole being noticeably greater than the sum of the parts. That separation, the almost invisible level of control and deft subtlety emanates from the line-stage, fleshed out and empowered by the mono-blocs. Lesser line-stages make the amps sound clumsy, lesser amps make the line-stage sound limp. But together the pairing is majestic. Which leads to the logical conclusion that the Zanden front-ends might well add another, cumulative layer to the process. If the line-stage and amplifiers square rather than simply sum their performance, will the CD player or phono-stage cube the results?

As soon as the Zanden CD player enters the equation you realize that that is indeed the case. It's almost as if the amplifiers and line-stage have simply been biding their time and waiting for a signal that's truly deserving of their attention. The languid, easy grace of the performance, underlaid by an unmistakable, sinuous power raises the system so far above the hi-fi norm as to demand a complete reappraisal of expectations. Whilst playing discs on the Wadia had occasionally left me looking for greater drive and purpose in a performance, there were no such qualms with the Zanden player out front. On the contrary, the pace and space within the performance became so convincingly right, so naturally engaging that such concerns never even occurred. Instead,

I was left to marvel at the layers and relationships within the music, the intimacy in the close harmonies of Steve Dawson and Diane Christiansen on 'Sweet Is The Anchor', the beautiful, simple power of 'Las Cuevas de Mario' on Art

Pepper's *Smack Up*. What you realize is that shortcomings in most systems act as obstacles or blocks to musical access and communication. The complete Zanden system communicates like no other I've heard, especially one running from a CD source.

The same basic observation is true of the phono-stage (a subject I'll return to in much greater depth another time) except that here not only does the Zanden have greater competition, but there's greater variability and personal choice in the selection of turntables, arms and especially cartridges. Playing the SME 30, Triplanar, Benz LP combination through the Zanden system actually exceeded the performance of the CD player, ►

▶ yet was less of a leap in quality over what I'd been accustomed to. Majoring again on the natural flow in the performance, the 1200 MC brought a wonderfully controlled and directed feel to the Elgar *Introduction*... without ever constraining the life and colours of the instruments. There was even greater ease in the climactic passage from *Enigma*... while solo instruments were stunningly dimensional and real.



Switches in loading, disc clamping or equalization (the 1200 MC offers a choice of three curves for Decca, Columbia and RIAA) were shockingly apparent and I'd love to have heard the Stabi XL, Airline and Titan through this system.

But such observations are almost churlish. The simple truth is that almost any record player would make music live through this system. And that is really the point; these elements – amplification and source components – are easily capable of standing alone but must be appreciated as a system if their achievements are to be fully

understood. Listen to an orchestra live and there's no effort involved in identifying the instruments and their contributions. Listen to a singer and the way they use their voice is an utterly natural extension of their musical expression. So it is with the Zanden system; music has the unfettered, engaging quality, the ease of access and emotional impact of the live event. Recordings move beyond the tacitly accepted constraints of mere hi-fi into a new and wonderful realm of message and meaning. It's not the real thing, but it's no longer what we mean or understand as "audio".

Which brings us to a conclusion of sorts. The Zanden products are unfailingly natural and universally impressive (in the true, musical sense of the term). Yet, it quickly becomes apparent that the sheer care that has gone into their individual construction extends to interfacing and compatibility, so that as well as they work in isolation, the combination of more than one element creates a whole that's significantly greater than the sum of their parts. The more of the system and performance parameters you can gather under the Zanden umbrella the greater this effect, until a complete chain is breathtaking in its musical capabilities. Unfortunately it's breathtaking in terms of cost too, and for many, such a system remains a very distant dream indeed. But it is a dream that you should endeavor to experience, if only to appreciate what is possible if a reproductive path is taken to its logical extreme. The Zanden components are not the only answer, but they do help us define oh so clearly the true nature of the question. ▶+

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Model 3000 Pre-amplifier

Type:	Valve line-stage with separate valve rectified psu
Valve Complement:	1x 5687 1x 6CA4
Inputs:	1x balanced XLR 3x single-ended RCA/phono
Input Impedance:	10kOhms (balanced) 100kOhms (single-ended)
Outputs:	2x balanced XLR 2x single-ended RCA/phono
Output Impedance:	300 Ohms
Maximum Output:	8V
Dimensions (WxHxD) –	
Audio Chassis:	398 x 103 x 254mm
Power Supply:	155 x 165 x 355mm
Weights:	
Audio Chassis:	9kg
Power Supply:	5.5kg
Price:	£12950

Model 5000 Mk III Power Amplifier

Type:	Push-pull triode mono-bloc amplifier
Valve Complement:	2x 845 2x 2687WB 2x 5U4GB 1x 5AR4 1x 6X4
Inputs:	1x balanced XLR 1x single-ended RCA/phono
Input Impedance:	10kOhms
Output:	60 Watts (2, 4 or 80hm taps)
Dimensions (WxHxD):	320 x 440 x 450mm ea.
Weight:	42.5kg ea.
Price:	£38000

UK Distributor:

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Tel. (44)(0) 20 8948 4153
E-mail. info1@audiofreaks.co.uk

Manufacturer:

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Vacuum-tube line stage
"Classé parmi les 2 ou 3 meilleurs au monde " in French Magazine "Revue du Son "
Weight : 24 Kg
Price : 2480 Euros



Melody H88 II
Integrated Vacuum Amplifier Push Pull KT88
Output Power : 50 W x 2
Weight : 30 Kg
Price : 1450 Euros

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Melody SP3 II
Integrated Vacuum Amplifier Push Pull 6L6
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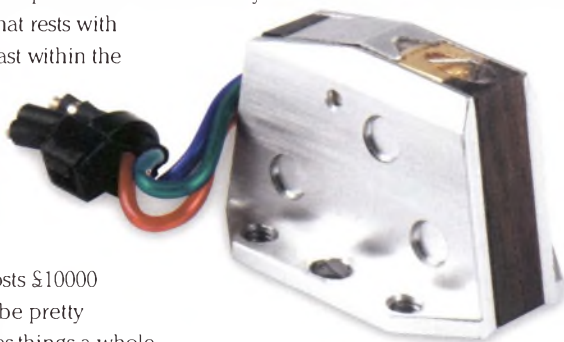
The KSL IO-J moving-coil cartridge, KSL SF-Z step-up transformer and KSL M7 phono-stage

by Roy Gregory

Over the course of listening to the various products featured in this issue, the notion of synergy has emerged as a major theme. It wasn't planned that way, although some sense of common ground was definitely on the agenda, but that's the way it's happened. Which brings us to the Kondo equipment and, if not the most complete expression of the concept (a mantle that rests with the Zanden system at least within the scope of our current listening, simply by dint of it being a system as a whole) then certainly the most extreme. Of course, any pick-up cartridge that costs £10000 can justifiably claim to be pretty extreme, but Kondo takes things a whole stage further. To really appreciate their £10K transducer you're going to need to spend a further £4400 on the matching SF-Z transformer and £12700 on the M7 phono-stage. Yes, you could run the IO-J into some other phono-stage, assuming it's got the gain, and it would sound pretty damned good – but you wouldn't be really hearing it, hearing it at its best. For that you need the matching step-up and phono-stage. That's what we mean by synergy, and to realise just why it's so important to the IO-J you need to look back a little in time.

Along with Sugano-san of Koetsu, Hiroyasu Kondo could reasonably be

considered amongst the most visible and certainly amongst the best known of the Japanese high-end designers – at least in the West. His Audio Note brand was in the forefront of the SET revival, his original Ongaku integrated amp shattering existing price barriers and not a few reviewers' sensibilities along the way.



Obituary Hiroyasu Kondo

It is with enormous sadness and regret that I must report the death of Kondo-San. He passed away peacefully in his sleep while attending the Las Vegas CES, the news being announced literally as this review was being completed. He is survived by his wife and two children.

A professor of electronic engineering and molecular metallurgy, he founded Audio Note in 1976, incorporating his trademark age annealed silver conductors into his designs. Suffering ill-health for some time, he passed the reins of Kondo KSL to his long-time associate Masaki Ashizawa some six-months ago, ensuring

But despite the undoubted commercial success achieved by the international distributor [Audionote (UK)Ltd] all was not exactly sweetness and light. Kondo-san was uncomfortable with both the pricing and the presentation of the products; the projection of SET designs over and above the company's push-pull amplifiers. In a classic example of history repeating itself the divorce was messy and resulted in Kondo losing control of his own brand-identity. But unlike Mark Levinson, he didn't lose the rights to his own name and it was to this that he turned in an attempt to distance himself from Audionote(UK)Ltd and the range of products they'd subsequently developed without his input. ▶

continuity for both the brand, his many devoted customers and his considerable audio legacy. Indeed, Ashizawa's work is already widely represented in the KSL products, ensuring that the soul and ethos will continue, not just the company. Nevertheless, clearly maintaining his fascination with the art and science of reproducing recorded music right to the end, Kondo-san's single-minded pursuit of sonic and musical excellence will be missed around the world. A quiet man full of grace, it is perhaps fitting that one of the audio industry's greatest iconoclasts should also be a consummate man of science. He will be remembered with great affection by all who knew him.

▶ Whilst time allows progress in the natural scheme of things, there's nothing like a little extra impetus, and nothing like a designer spurred to encourage a flurry of creative activity. Whether Audionote(UK)Ltd were intending to or not, they generated a revolution in the way Kondo viewed materials, constructed and designed his products. This "great leap forward" he refers to as KSL technology (for Kondo Sound Labs), and its techniques have been applied across the range, even though outwardly the older products might appear the same. Indeed, you only have to compare an original Ongaku with a current production example (don't even think about the A(UK)L amplifier of the same name in the context of this comparison) to appreciate just how significant the changes are. I was one of the few dissenting voices who were less than bowled over by the original, despite (not because of) the price-tag. I never concerned myself with the cost because I couldn't get past the rolled off highs, flabby detached bass and woolly, cloying midrange, devoid of attack or musical authority. As an amp, it just didn't communicate. It was pretty to listen to, sweet and big and cuddly and colourful, but it didn't speak to my soul. Not like the new version does. Kondo has literally cleaned up its act, harnessing all that harmonic colour and energy to a far more grounded and structured musical skeleton. The end result is an amp that has all the superficially attractive qualities of the original, but with greater extension and control at frequency extremes and a compelling sense of musical tension and authority; a transformation indeed.

It's these changes that hint at the depth and care that's gone into the KSL products. It's easy to point at the obvious, external features (you don't get much more obvious than the pair of 211s that decorate the Ongaku) like the extensive use of copper for chassis and silver for wiring, but such "magic

bullet" explanations are, as always over simplifications. In the case of Kondo-san they barely even scrape the surface.

The three products under consideration here offer a fascinating contrast and insight into the art of electronic design (as practiced by KSL). Starting with the IO-J, the cartridge coils are wound with silver wire. No surprise there then.



But what is interesting is that Kondo chooses to use a 50micron wire, rather than the more usual 20microns (or even thinner) used by other manufacturers. Thinner wires allow a lower moving mass for a given output (output being dependent on the number of windings) but KSL point out that by using thicker wire they can use material of greater purity. The cost comes in terms of a lower output level (unless you make the coils much heavier) and lower internal impedance. Of course, both these constraints are less important if you are prepared to build a matching transformer (you can see where this is going). The purity of the silver wiring effects the focus and transparency of the sound, and these are clearly apparent benefits in the final performance. KSL also points out that the internal wiring is 25 years old which adds its own benefits, although

I'm inclined to suspect that this happy accident probably reflects the amount of wire they had to order originally rather than any kind of clairvoyant forward planning. The heavy lead-out wires are also silver, and fitted with female connectors. These don't force you to use a Kondo arm wire but they do at least force you to think about it. Having said that, the silver-wired cartridge feeds a silver wired transformer, so what else are you going to use but Kondo's silver cable?

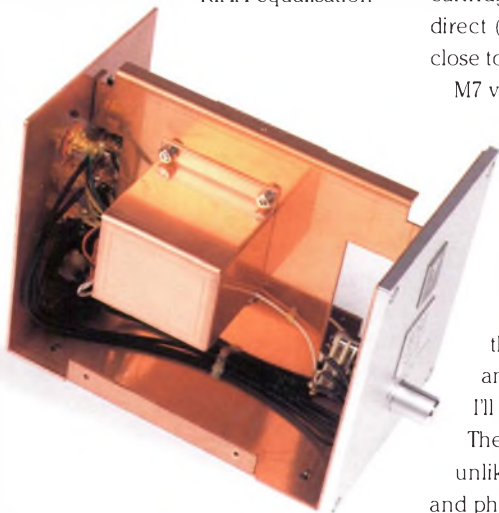
The stylus profile is a refined elliptical and it's mounted on a tapered tube, alum-inium cantilever, chosen and specially treated to reduce resonance. Likewise the body is a composite sandwich of wood core and aluminium side panels, again designed to minimise structural vibration. The long top flanges are each pierced by three holes, the front and rear of each being tapped for mounting hardware.

You could use the larger, central holes with nuts and bolts, but in the absence of any form of stylus guard, that's only for the brave. There is also an IO-II, which has thinner lead-out wires and an untreated cantilever, but is otherwise similar.

Kondo have chosen to employ a transformer rather than an active m-c stage because it better handles the low internal impedance of their cartridges and their extremely low output. Having no power-supply, transformers are notably free of internal noise or grain, both critical when dealing with a very high gain situation. The core is built from thin sheets of permalloy, while the windings are in the same 25 year old silver wire as the cartridge coils, but with KSL technology applied. The two transformers are sealed in a sheet copper chassis to avoid mechanical or electrical noise, while all inputs and outputs are direct connections to the coils, with no switches in line. ▶

► There are four inputs, one balanced and three impedance matched, unbalanced. The output is via a captive length of Kondo interconnect cable, along with a substantial earth wire, further reducing the number of contacts in the signal path.

Finally, we get to by far the largest of the three boxes, the KSL-M7 phono-stage. Again, the M7 has a previous, pre-KSL incarnation, but as I haven't had them side-by-side it's impossible to comment on the changes. However, the original M7 was by far the most impressive piece in that range, competing with the very best available at that time. The KSL version is again, visually identical, a shoe-box shaped chassis with a bluff, pale silver front-panel adorned with nothing more than an on/off switch. But lift the lid and the nature of the beast becomes rather more apparent. The massive copper chassis is to be expected, but the sheer number of tubes inside (the circuit uses a pair of 12AX7 twin triodes for RIAA equalisation



and 12AU7 cathode followers on the output) points to the relative complexity, and the large, valve rectified power supply. The crude looking components are also a pointer, but few would suspect their full import. If products like the Zanden or Connoisseur go to extreme lengths to select electrical components and

then assemble them in the best possible way, Kondo goes a huge step further. KSL actually build their own resistors and silver capacitors! And you just know that the lead-outs are all silver too. These are then painstakingly hand-built into a hardwired circuit, a process that itself takes an entire week. Yes, the M7 is expensive, but when you consider what's inside you can understand both why it costs what it does and why these three components have an almost preternatural affinity for one another. That affinity extends into the realms of system cabling and amplification, but that's beyond the immediate scope of this article. For the moment, just consider how far you can actually carry electro-mechanical synergy and continuity if you think it's important enough...

I ran the Kondo analogue replay chain into the Tom Evans, Connoisseur and the Zanden line-stages, as well as running cross comparisons with the cartridge feeding the Groove Plus direct (which being ultra quiet got close to having enough gain) or the M7 via a Koetsu transformer. I also

ran a Transfiguration Esprit high-output MC directly into the M7. Not surprisingly, the various elements acquitted themselves honourably in isolation, but it was in combination that the magic really happened and in it's in combination that I'll discuss their performance.

The IO-J, SF-Z and M7 sound quite unlike almost all other cartridge and phono-stage combinations. Running direct comparisons between the individual elements and the set-up as a whole demonstrates just how astonishingly coherent and as one the three elements sound. With no shortage of alternative pick-ups and step-ups to choose from, no combination could approach the absolute coherence and natural

integrity of the complete KSL chain. What does that mean in sonic terms? That's the first, and in some ways the most fascinating conundrum that confronts the reviewer trying to encapsulate the performance of these products. Normally we dissect and categorize, talk about individual aspects of performance and relative excellence. Yet so holistic, so complete is the picture painted by the Kondo



designs that it becomes not impossible but almost pointless to dismantle the various elements that constitute the whole. It's not that you can't assess levels of detail or resolution, dynamic range or soundstage depth; it's just that to do so diminishes the whole rather than illuminating it. I've always tried to discuss equipment performance in terms of musical effects; with the Kondo units it is meaningless to do otherwise.

The first and most important realisation is the there-ness of what you are hearing. This is beyond mere presence or impact, dimensionality or substance. This is to do with just how convincing the instruments and performance placed in front of you are. All systems betray their presence in the sound. The object for any designer must be to shift that influence aside, harbour it in ►

► innocuous areas where it doesn't intrude and where the listener doesn't notice it. In other words, the best systems are measured by their absence, by what they don't do. The Kondo analogue replay chain is less intrusive in this regard than any other that I've used. It makes a fascinating contrast with the Connoisseur phono and line stages used in combination, and one which I'll return to later, but nothing steps aside as completely from the musical message as the Kondos do.

Which brings us to the thorny issue of the fact of the music as opposed to its soul, for it's the latter that I've been talking about. Playing small ensemble jazz, the structure of the piece is never in question, whether it's the pushy, energetic tension of an Art Pepper, or the more laconic left-hand promptings of Oscar Peterson. The creative chemistry between players and the way they translate that through their instruments becomes effortlessly apparent. The identity of each instrument and its voice are never in doubt. Listen to these records played back by the KSL chain and they make more sense, hold your attention, communicate more readily than anything else I've got in-house. And the same holds true for classical or pop recordings. Don't get the idea that this is equipment destined only for the systems of hair-shirt acoustic fascists. This stuff works on anything.

So the message is well and truly intact. How about the medium?

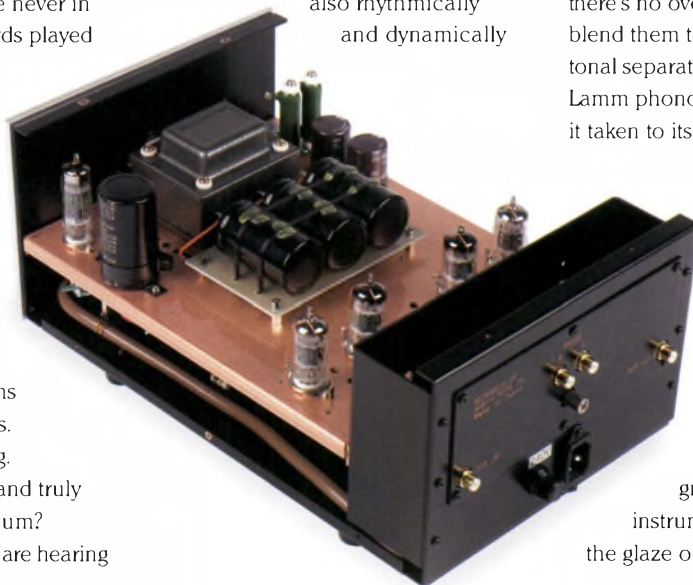
Examine the sound you are hearing

with the Kondo equipment and yes, you can ascribe it a character. It may surprise you just how neutral these three pieces are, especially if your prior experience is mainly with the amplifiers,



but whilst the overall sound might seem to lie on the warmer side of absolute neutrality, it's a subtle effect, and not one that intrudes. This is no classic valve sound or armchair ride. In fact, it's completely the opposite. Tonally sweet and natural, especially in the portrayal of overtones and harmonic structures,

the Kondo designs are also rhythmically and dynamically



precise. They don't cuddle or cloy the music, but seek to preserve its natural colour and energy. This is where the Connoisseurs prove so interesting in comparison, illuminating the way in which these two stellar systems tread

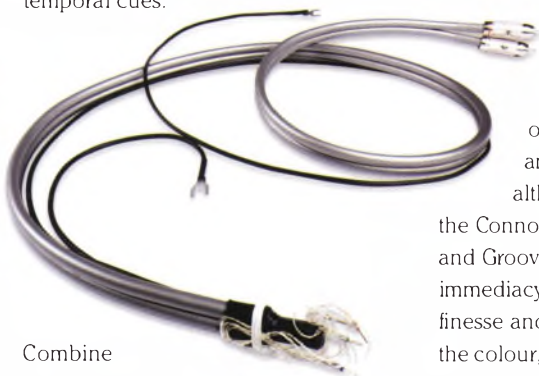
opposite sides of the same path, the Lyras leaning slightly to the side of raw energy, the Kondos towards the richness and complexity of tonal colour. But what they have in common, and what they share with the Zanden's is

the naturalness of their perspectives, the unforced sense of internal separation and organisation.

The thing that makes the Kondos so impressive is the seamless quality of their portrayal. There's no texture or character to the air within the recorded space, and whilst a unit like the Groove Plus is undoubtedly more transparent, has greater resolution of detail and better individual image focus, the sheer consistency that the Kondo chain brings to the sound more than makes up for the deficit. Each instrument or voice has its own identity, there's no overlaid texture or colour to blend them together. I first talked about tonal separation in the context of the Lamm phono-stage and here we hear it taken to its logical extreme.

Not that the Kondo is any slouch when it comes to spatial presentation either. The IO-J/SF-Z/M7 set-up seems to capture the air, the acoustic environment that enveloped the original recording. There's no grain within the intra-instrumental spaces, none of the glaze or glare that so often

► afflicts transformers. What there is, is a huge sense of space and of the performers precisely positioned within it. The sense of that space is more important than its precise dimensions (or transparency) because it preserves the physical relationship between players just as effectively as this equipment preserves their temporal cues.



Combine the tonal completeness of the Kondo analogue chain with the dynamic life and zip of the Lyra Connoisseur line-stage and you are in for a real treat.

But the lesson that the Kondo underlines most heavily is the interlocking nature of the various performance attributes that together constitute the musical whole. The harmonic complexity brings presence and scale.



The air brings volume; the substance couples with the dynamic shading to create impact. The organisation and separation of each strand brings understanding and rhythmic integrity; combine them with the tonal character of each instrument and you get

intimacy and a directness of communication that convinces, in part at least, because of the truth in the tonal shadings and nuances. It's the completeness of the picture, the lack of apparent distortion that makes it so believable. It and the parts that make it are all the right size, shape and colours, they're in the right places

and they do things at the right time, individually and together. The end result is less interference or distance between you and the original recording – although not in the sense that the Connoisseurs together or the Vibe and Groove achieve. This is less about immediacy, more about intimacy, finesse and the musician's caress. It's the colour, shape and tonal complexity of the instruments that draws you in.

Music replayed via the Kondo analogue chain is a thing of subtlety, presence and enormous emotive power. There is a palpable credibility to the efforts of the musicians involved, a substance and compelling vitality to their instruments, whether we're talking Art Pepper's sax or Narcisco Yepes' guitar. The latter is a near perfect blend of strings and body, impulse and decay, the instruments of the orchestra arrayed behind no less impressive. But it's Yepes' skill and fluidity that talks to you, the work he puts into shaping and sending his notes.

There's nothing flashy in the playing, just intensity of purpose and expression. That's exactly what the Kondo equipment conveys. It's all about the message in the art, the artistry itself. It's about what is being played as well as how. It's about music, and it's about as far removed from what we've come to understand as hi-fi as it's possible to be. There is much, much more to be considered (and written) on this subject. ►+

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Kondo KSL IO-J Cartridge

Type:	Low-output moving-coil
Stylus Profile:	Refined elliptical
Cantilever:	Tapered tube, treated aluminium
Output Level:	0.1 mV (50cm/sec)
Loading:	1 Ohm (SF-Z transformer)
Flying Leads:	Age annealed silver with sockets
Weight:	11 g
Price:	£10000

Kondo KSL SF-Z Step-up Transformer

Type:	Silver wound MC step-up
Inputs:	1x balanced (RCA/phonos) 1x 1 Ohm (RCA/phonos) 1x 3 Ohm (RCA/phonos) 1x 40 Ohm (RCA/phonos)
Gain:	1 ohm 36dB 3 ohm 30dB 40 ohm 20dB
Output:	Captive Kondo KSL interconnect
Dimensions (WxHxD):	114 x 150 x 174mm
Weight:	3.5 kg
Price:	£4400

Kondo KSL M7 Phono-stage

Type:	Vacuum tube MM RIAA stage
Valve Complement:	2x 12AX7 2x 12AU7 1x 6X4
Inputs:	1pr RCA/phonos
Gain:	46 dB
Outputs:	1pr RCA/phonos
Dimensions (WxHxD):	223 x 159 x 360mm
Weight:	6.5 kg
Price:	£12700

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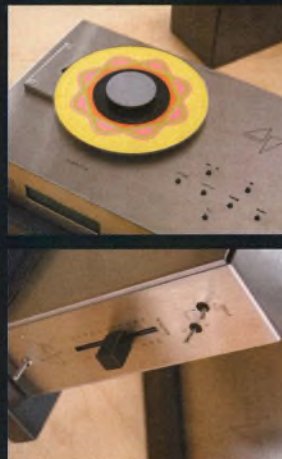
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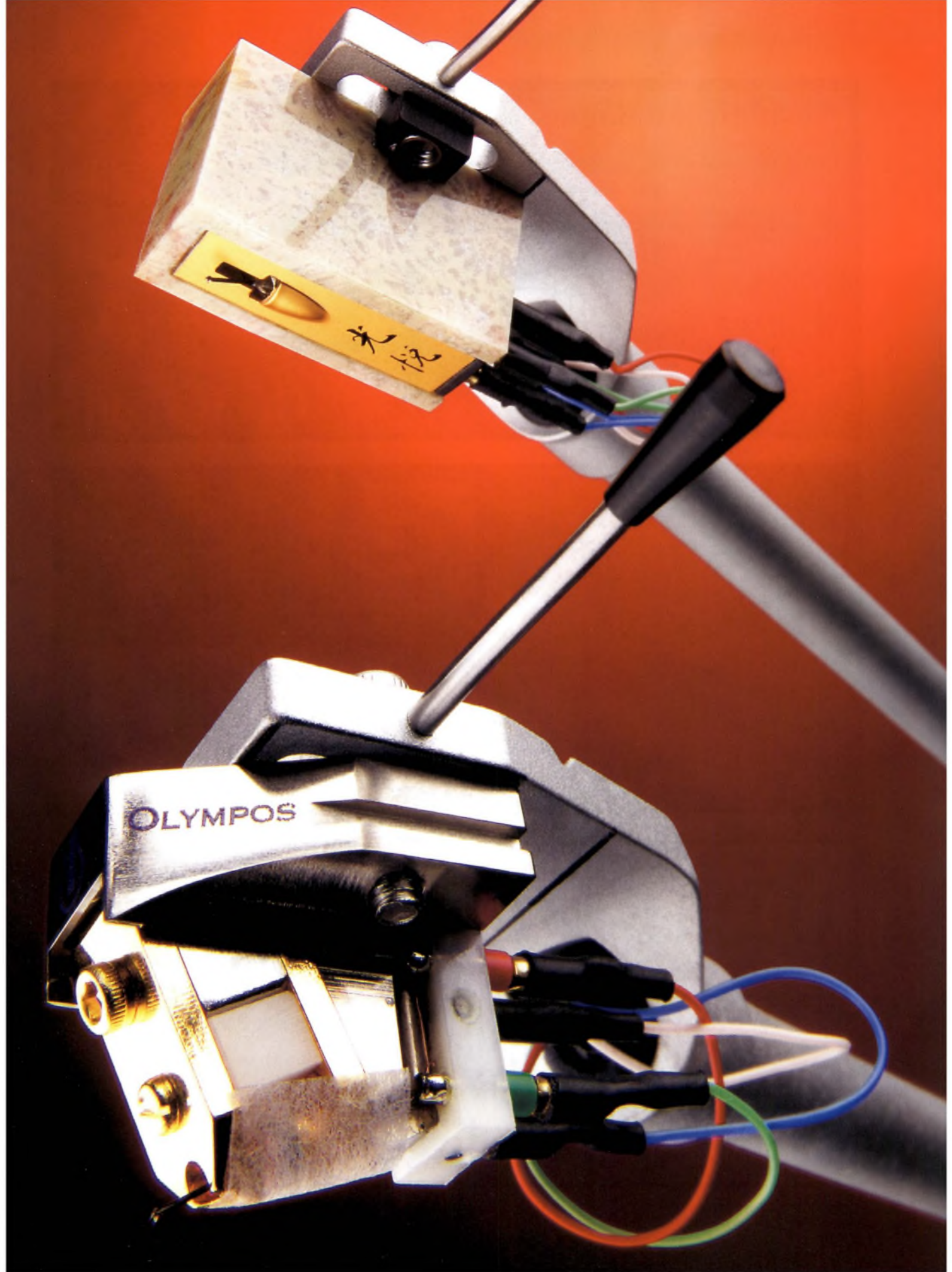
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Two Giants...

The Lyra Olympos SL and the Koetsu Coral Moving Coil Cartridges

by Richard S. Foster

None of you, so long as you have a pulse and a passing interest in analogue replay, will be unaware of, even unfamiliar with, those doyens of Japanese moving-coil manufacturing, Koetsu and Lyra. For those in the older generation, like yours truly, the name Koetsu is synonymous with the emergence and development of the hi-end, the first products we came across that redefined what was possible (and what it cost). Later, Lyra arrived in the vanguard of a new wave, the second generation of Japanese cartridge manufacturers who took lessons from Europe as well as their own heritage and promised even greater things – as well as better value. But as is so often the case, the output of the two schools has converged, until cartridge brands that once stood poles apart now have an astonishing degree in common. So it is with the Lyra Olympos and Koetsu Coral.

Both manufacturers offer extensive ranges of off-the-shelf designs, stretching from the almost affordable to the unconscionable when it comes to price. But even for products as exotic and rarified as these, there is another level – of exclusivity at least. Both these cartridges are available in extremely limited numbers, the Lyra only if you have a Parnassus to render up for parts as the magnets are no longer

available. Each is likely to require a considerable wait and an even more considerable cheque, but each is about as rare as hi-fi components get.

In fact, the similarities run deeper still, but it wasn't until RG landed me with this assignment that I'd even thought about comparing the two. It just seemed so uncouth, so unnecessary, because the thing these cartridges really have in common is the completeness of their musical vision. Yes, each has its own sound, but each is also the sound of music.

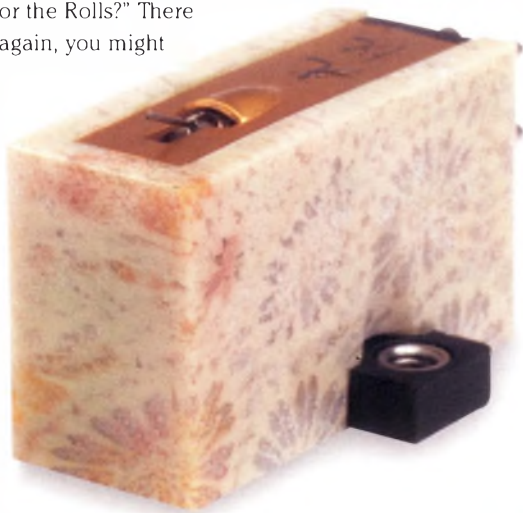
As far as Lyra are concerned, they view the Olympos and its lower output sibling, the SL, as a specialty model. Lyra simply states that their Titan "i" "...is the most technically exact phono cartridge transducer they can make." Allen Perkins, the U.S. importer for Lyra underlines that fact with the information that "The Olympos is priced at \$9800. It is available, but can only be made if we or the customer have an original Parnassus as a magnet donor. If you provide the original Parnassus, the price is \$7500. I don't think there is an extra charge for an SL version since they are all custom made anyway." You begin to get the picture. I was extremely fortunate in that Lyra not only sourced me a Parnassus, they turned my order around in a mere six-months (there have to be some compensations for the lousy pay and conditions that go with reviewing).

Those with a donor cartridge ready and waiting should think in terms of more like a year, so get in the queue early! The Olympos body is machined from solid titanium – just like the Titan, although the dimensions and specifics are slightly different. In many ways, the Olympos is rather like a Titan but with a more conventional magnet system (one magnet and two pole pieces). Having said that there's not much conventional about the super-exotic materials used; platinum for the magnet and chemically purified iron for the pole pieces. The Titan employs Lyra's avant-garde magnetic system; two magnets and no pole pieces.

Koetsu's Coral is another matter altogether. The company offers its generators in a range of different bodies across its various markets. Rather like the Olympos, the Coral is also not the Company's flagship offering (that's the even more expensive Blue Lace) but as soon as the brand's U.S. Importer, Ronnie Caplan, saw the understated beauty of the petrified coral bodies he knew he had to have them. So rare is the material that cartridges in this guise will only be available in the US, priced at \$15000 with production unlikely to exceed a couple of dozen. Yes, you can get the same internals built into a crystal body in the UK (called the Blue Onyx and costing £9098) but it won't be a Coral. Does that matter? ▶

► I have no idea, but bitter experience in a world where absolutely everything seems to matter suggests that it would be a minor miracle if it didn't. Certainly the Coral has fast become the cartridge of choice amongst the dedicated and insane that make up the band of US Koetsu aficionados.

So, what do you do if you're lucky enough to walk out to your dream driveway and the decision of the day is, "Do I take the Bentley or the Rolls?" There again, you might

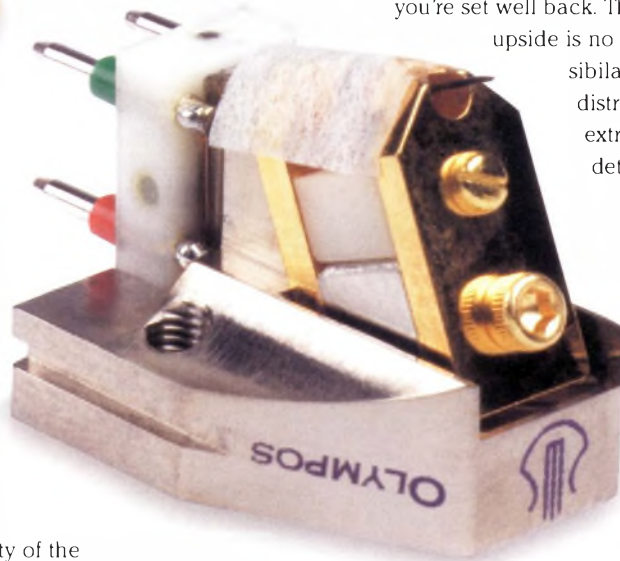


take your Porsche Carrera GT, or maybe the Ferrari Superamerica F1. You begin to see the problem. Just what makes a great car, and will it be the same today as it is tomorrow? And if this car is great does it mean the other one isn't? At the end of the day, they're all great cars; very different, and great for different reasons, but all definitely great. That's exactly how I feel about these cartridges. Today I might want to drive the Koetsu but tomorrow it could be the Olympos... perhaps I'd better try and explain why.

Let's start with the Coral. Hardly a surprise to hear that the Koetsu errs on the warm side of neutral, although those brought up on those original, long-body designs will be shocked at the diet this cartridge has been on. Yes it's warm, but no way is it stodgy

or syrupy. Now it's as much a case of perspective as it is of balance, more mid-hall than middle-aged spread. Which also explains why the Coral manages to sound a little soft and rounded without being slow – at least not obviously so. Actually listen to the attack and dynamic impact of individual instruments and you quickly realize that things are definitely happening in real time – it's just that they don't stand out as

separate or exaggerated compared to events around them. Which is to do with overall coherence, and that's to do with the mid-hall perspective.



The beauty of the Row M seating position is that you get to hear the band as a whole. Let's talk stereo; the Coral throws a wide, deep and very tall soundstage, with great corner fill and no narrowing. Image scale is accurate regardless of depth within the soundstage, while dimensionality, especially at the front of the stage is exceptional. Instruments are realistic in terms of size and shape, presence and body; body too behind voices. Ah yes –

voices... If you want to showcase the Koetsu (and blow away your audio buddies) just reach for well recorded vocals. Take one of my favorites, the Cisco re-issue of Joan Baez's Farewell Angelina. This is an album I return to again and again. Baez is at the height of her vocal powers on this recording and her power and range are truly magnificent. While she's not to everyone's liking, there's no denying the purity of her tone. The first three cuts on side one are classic Bob Dylan compositions: the title track, 'Daddy, You Been On My Mind' and 'It's All Over Now, Baby Blue'.

With the Coral there's a stunning naturalness and presence to her singing, a sense of substance and stability to the image. It's just over there – really. But you'll need long arms to touch her because, of course, you're set well back. The

upside is no spitty sibilance or distracting, extraneous detail;

just Joan and the space around her adding its own natural warmth and sense of presence. You look into the acoustic and there she is.

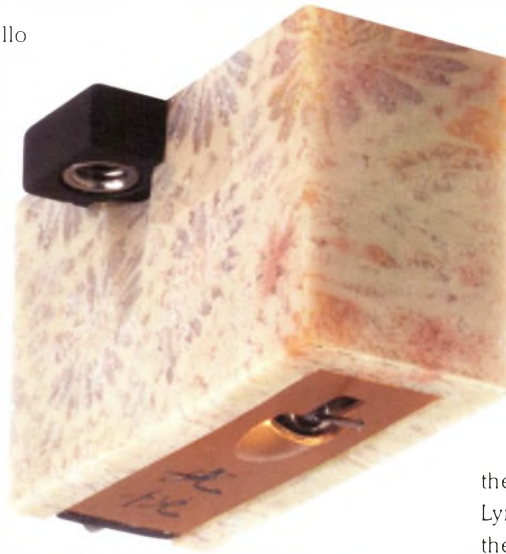
One of my current Desert Island records, and RG can attest to the quality of both this recording and performance, is on the Swiss Gallo label: VDE 3019. It consists of Rachmaninoff's Sonata, Op. 19 for piano and violoncello as well as ►

► Martinu's Sonata No. 1 for violoncello and piano. The performers are the great French violoncellist, Guy Fallot and his sister-in-law, Emmanuelle Lamasse on piano. (The record may be available through Juerg Schopper at Schopper, AG in Winterthur, Switzerland –

<http://www.schopper.ch>

but hurry 'cos they only pressed 500!) Getting back to the music, with the Koetsu doing the tracking Fallot's 'cello is big and vibrant, with incredible richness and body. There's a majestic sweep to his playing, real space between him and the piano, itself, rich and solid behind. The power and energy of the instruments is never in doubt, their relative positions, one to another and within the acoustic.

Big, orchestral pieces hold no fears for the Coral which handles wide dynamic shifts with the same easy grace that it brings to individual players or more intimate recordings. The same stability, presence and body serves equally well in either context. Playing the Dorati Firebird on Mercury underlines the Koetsu's strengths in this respect absolutely perfectly. It thrives on the huge dynamics, delivering the sweeping orchestration with real power and substance; breathtaking, simply breathtaking. About a third of the way into side two, there is a section entitled, 'Infernal Dance of All Kastchei's Subjects' (we played this at the Manchester Show last year) that is nothing short of astonishing; definitely one of the finest four-plus minutes ever committed to vinyl. It's got incredible layered strings and woodwinds (when the instruments were truly made of wood), which build and build, adding brass



and gaining intensity until the shattering climax explodes with drums and percussion. So you've got the whole tonal palette on show, building dynamics that need to be fleshed out and supported, a quickening rhythm that needs to be driven (but doesn't need to get away from the cartridge, not with this much energy flying around) and the ability to rise to that final, big crescendo. The Koetsu paints with vivid colours, spatial and dynamic contrasts and compelling presence and drive. The orchestra is held stable, as is the acoustic.



The whole event is as good as orchestral music gets – shut your eyes and enjoy that Row M, centre section seat you just paid for.

Which is as good a time as any to switch to the Olympos. Anybody who has had experience with other Lyra cartridges might expect the Coral and the Olympos to be like oil and water, but in reality they're far more similar than that. Not surprising given the material parallels. Remember, Lyra themselves cite the Titan "i" as their most accurate cartridge and it's immediately apparent that the Olympos brings a warmer, more golden glow to proceedings. This is definitely the romantic member of the Lyra family – which kind of explains why they run it alongside the rest of the range.

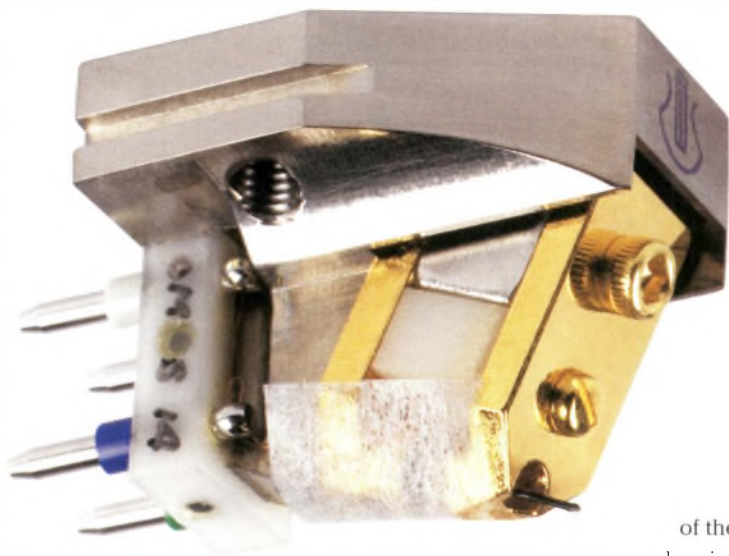
Having said that, and warm as it is, the Olympos still possesses more than a hint of the traditional Lyra speed, attack and resolution. To go with the weight and presence that comes with the warmth, there's immediacy and directness in its music making, an inclusive transparency that puts you in the same space as the players. This is much more of a Row D seat (the Titan "i" would be a B) not exactly reach out and touch closeness to the performers, but there's no doubting that they're right there. It's a viewpoint that favours separation over dimensionality, inner detail over the acoustic boundaries, leading edges over the expanding, blended harmonics of a more distant perspective. So, there's warmth – and then there's warmth. The Olympos offers tonal warmth as opposed to the acoustic variety, Living Presence as opposed to Living Stereo. Which, given the ►

▶ seating position, is just right.

Likewise, the placement and spacing of notes is wonderfully precise, especially with piano. The closeness of the instrument robs it of a little weight and rich complexity, but the compensation comes in the shaping of phrases and the precision of the player's technique. Take the piano recordings of Jeanne Bovet, yet another Swiss rarity (at least there are two CDs available from www.vdegallo.ch).

Steinway was captured by the recording. It's this ability to balance both the musical and the sonic virtues that sets the Olympos apart.

This of course begs the question as to how these two great cartridges compare. It's easy enough to describe, but much harder to really understand. I can use the Fallot 'cello disc as an example: the Koetsu is big and rich and vibrant, the two instruments perfectly defined in their acoustic space; the Olympos reveals more



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more of the

I will save extensive detail on Madame Bovet for another time, but she was a student of Cortot and a pianist of the highest order. She's now in her early 90's living in her native Switzerland. While she did tour extensively earlier in her life, she had really dedicated most of her career to teaching. However, in the 1970's she made several records in a series called, *Echos De Rompon*. The repertoire is rich and varied, from Bach and Scarlatti through Brahms, Schubert and so on. These were made for her friends and students and are extremely rare. More than any other cartridge, the Olympos conveys both her tremendous talent and flawless playing – but also how well her

energy and dynamism in the performance. One is all about the whole, the other leans more to the underlying structure. I say leans and that's what I mean. It's a subtle thing that gets exaggerated as soon as you write it down. Likewise the Firebird: the Koetsu has more substance and absolute weight, the Lyra more definite dynamic scaling and impact. One's about power, the other about excitement.

So far so good, you pay your money and take your choice. But there's a much subtler level to this. Let's go all the way back to the Joan Baez. No surprise that you get a shade more detail and intonation from the Olympos, or that she's ▶

Digits...

In numbers terms these two cartridges are surprisingly similar, despite the dramatic difference in their appearance. Both are low output: approximately 0.2mV (5.0cm/sec, zero to peak, 45 degrees) for the Olympos, with a slightly higher output for the Coral 0.2mV (3.54cm/sec, zero to peak, 45 degrees). Of course the Lyra is also available in a higher output, non-SL version, albeit at the cost of doubling up the windings. I loaded both cartridges at 47 kOhms – running them into the Herron VTPH1MC plus – as suggested by Lyra for the Olympos and Caplan for the Koetsu, however, your own preferences and system requirements will come into play here. I've adopted the US "norm"; in contrast RG will report in the next issue on his experiences with the cartridges loaded down to 200 Ohms (with his Groove Plus) or, in the case of the Kondo SF-Z transformer, between 1 and 40 Ohms. Internally, both designs rely on platinum magnets and both are distinctly on the heavy side, 13.8 grams for the Olympos, and 12.75 grams for the Coral. Both also use refined elliptical as opposed to micro-ridge stylus profiles (in common with the Kondo 10-J) with stylus life and overall musicality cited as reasons. Lyra refer to their profile as hyper-line contact while Koetsu have dubbed theirs Quadrahedron. Lyra employ a diamond coated, solid boron cantilever, the one on the Coral dispenses with the coating. But where they are different is with regard to vertical tracking force: The Olympos runs between 1.65 and 1.8 grams while Koetsu suggest 1.90 - 2.0 grams for the Coral. I track both at the lighter end of their respective scales. Running both cartridges in VPI JMW 12.6 armwands made swapping back and forth a breeze – which in this instance proved to be a double-edged sword... as you'll see from the review. These are products that need to be understood and appreciated on their own merits, with reference only to music, rather than to each other.

► placed that much closer. In direct comparison the Koetsu has a shade too much bloom but also more convincing body than the Lyra. Listen to either in isolation and you'd be happy, even ecstatic, with the results... Now listen to the guitar. The Olympos is undoubtedly crisper with greater attack, leading edge definition, more string and less body. But what type of strings is she using. With the Lyra you'd guess she's steel strung, with the Koetsu it



sounds more like she's using plastic. Which is it? I haven't a clue. But it reveals a fascinating (and just occasionally disturbing) difference between these two.

Much of the Koetsu's magic lies in its seductive power. There's a rightness, an immediately convincing quality to its presentation that draws you into the music. Admittedly, its qualities really shine with acoustic music, especially classical, and all things vocal. That might shift the emphasis sometimes, voice over guitar on rock, sax over trumpet on

jazz, but it's the colour and textural complexity that's ever present. You simply forget about the cartridge, the cables and everything else in the system – you just hear the music.


The Olympos offers greater clarity, arguably greater insight (especially into an artist's technique) but occasionally, just occasionally you hear it working, you become aware of the system. It's clearer than the Koetsu but ultimately not as consistent. As to why this might be, I'm going to leave that particular hot coal to RG, who has thoughts on the subject, but the thing you need to grasp here is that the Olympos is

much, much closer to the Koetsu in nature than it is to the Titan "i". It would be easy to conclude with some kind of continuum, Titan at one end,

Koetsu at the other, Olympos hovering somewhere in the middle. That's not the case at all. Indeed, it's the similarities

between the Olympos and the Coral that are far more

important than the differences. Perhaps I can enlighten you more by explaining that, when it comes to these two cartridges, it is hard to 'prefer' one over the other. It is easier to prefer one to the other. It does boil down to personal bias, preference and what particular balance of musical qualities is important to you. But in qualitative terms they share significant common ground, a way with music that some might even see as old-fashioned, especially in these days of high-resolution, ultra-definition audio. What these cartridges share is an uncanny ability to take detail and integrate it into a

coherent musical event. Or, to put it another way, the drama you experience in the musical performance (and these cartridges are nothing if not dramatic) comes from within the music itself, rather than from the performance of the cartridge. Where others high-light or exaggerate, these simply illuminate. You just need to decide which particular shade of lighting you prefer. 

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Lyra Olympos

£7500

\$9800

Prices assume customer supplies donor Parnassus body

Koetsu Coral

\$15000

Contacts:

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In pursuit of the dream...

by John Bamford

John Bamford – who has spent 30 years desiring a truly perfect replay system - marvels at Esoteric's obsessive engineering endeavours in pursuit of true fidelity to the source.

The first time I heard the term 'mechatronics' was in association with Professor Jack Dinsdale who in the late seventies/early eighties was lecturing at Cranfield University in Bedfordshire. Jack Dinsdale – responsible in no small part, it must be said, for the development of the transistor amplifier – was heading up the UK's only post graduate course in applied mechatronics. Jack Dinsdale was certainly the man for the job. Previously he had worked with NCR on the development of the ATM (to you and me, our banks' hole-in-the-wall cashpoint machines) which, if you think about, is a perfect example of mechatronics: where electronics engineering and mechanical engineering work inexorably together.

So it was that Max Townshend of Townshend Audio introduced me to the goodly professor of mechatronics. You see, Townshend had made some money in the late seventies selling Elite-branded cartridges and parabolic styli. So feeling flush, Max Townshend sponsored a research project on Dinsdale's mechatronics course. Graduates in electronics were combining research with graduates in mechanical engineering, so Max and Jack set out a design project for one of the semesters' modules. The

objective was to design without compromise the ideal transcription player (motor unit, platter and arm) for playing LPs. Let's not argue: it was the most worthy of causes. Learning of the historical background to TEAC Corporation's specialist Esoteric division recently I had to stifle a grin when Esoteric's Japanese president outlined the company's history of research and development in the field of mechatronics. Feeling smug that I at least knew what he was talking about, my memory whizzed back to when I was 20 years younger and first met the UK's only professor of mechatronics. Which is a sure sign that I'm getting on a bit, I suppose.

TEAC started life in 1953 as the Tokyo Television Audio Company, later changed to Tokyo Electro Acoustics Company and finally TEAC, making it one of the earliest specialist Japanese producers. TEAC's original mission was data recording (those with long memories may fondly remember some extremely serious TEAC open reel tape recorders), and over the years the range has expanded to embrace CD and DVD-ROM drives, measurement devices, communications and in-flight equipment, professional studio and multi-track recorders and mixing consoles.

While there are hundreds of brand names whose badges appear regularly

on the millions of CD, SACD and DVD players that we buy, what we often fail to appreciate is that there is only a small number responsible for the major key components – the mechanisms that spin the discs and laser pickups that read the data, for example. At the high end of the market there are fewer still, and of that select subgroup only the TEAC brand name is widely known to us in the west. TEAC's specialist design division comprises just a dozen-or-so of the company's top audiophile/videophile



engineers who between them develop products for the company's Esoteric sub-brand. They famously developed the VRDS CD mechanism 20 years ago (an exercise in mechatronics far sexier than an ATM to this audiophile's sensibility!) which appeared in both high-end Esoteric products and more affordable TEAC products over the years.

As the majority of us in the west can't speak Japanese nor read

▶ Japanese audio magazines, the fact that the Far East has a vibrant and enthusiastic specialist hi-fi industry largely passes us by. Oh yes, you need to believe it, in Japan there is a healthy high-end audio scene

where the designers are renowned for their attention to detail and the hobbyists and consumers more passionate about their hobby – our hobby - than you can possibly imagine. Occasionally in the west we get to learn about some of the ‘perfectionists’. The late Sugano-san, founder of Koetsu cartridges, put Japanese high-end audio into our consciousnesses 25 years ago as indeed did Kondo-san, legendary founder of Audio Note fame. Not all designers are entrepreneurial enough to set up and run their own companies, of course. Some of them work for the large Japanese electronics corporations many of which have their own high-end audio (and video) research and development facilities. Sony, Pioneer, Denon, TEAC and others regularly manufacture extremely high-end products to compete in the Japanese market alongside other (smaller) manufacturers such as Accuphase. But it’s the norm for such high-end

products to be considered too niche to manufacture in any large scale to supply overseas countries. Consequently the majority of Japanese high-end products are unknown beyond the Far East as European and American versions with appropriate power supplies are never marketed or sold.

Esoteric brand name comes in four separate boxes – and no less than ten separate boxes (count ‘em) in it’s ultimate SACD multi-channel form together with three optional Master Clock Generators – each flawlessly finished audio sculptures that scale the pinnacles of the art and science of disc replay.

Immediately I was struck by memories of the first Cranfield Rock turntable featuring cast Granitan ‘floating’ plinth and absurdly heavy platter (for its day), I checked myself back in to the present day. Esoteric’s extensive R&D into mechatronics applied to 12cm optical disc replay is equally as obsessive as any analogue enthusiast’s wildest fantasies. ‘Serious hi-fi’ – both in the world of ones and zeros and record player design – is designed mostly by small, specialist teams of engineers who are focused wholly on the pleasure of listening to music and consequently the musical performance of the products they design. Occasionally such products are marketed as a brand’s ‘flagship’ models: ‘designed without compromise’ according to such components’ predictably self-congratulatory accompanying marketing propaganda.

TEAC’s high-end Esoteric products are known for what can only be described as completely obsessive attention to detail.

Esoteric products have only quite recently been introduced to the British market through a limited number of selected retailers by current distributor, Symmetry. Just consider: the very top of the line CD/SACD player that bears the

Indeed, what else can the designer claim, other than ‘designed without compromise’? To claim that the flagship model in a brand’s

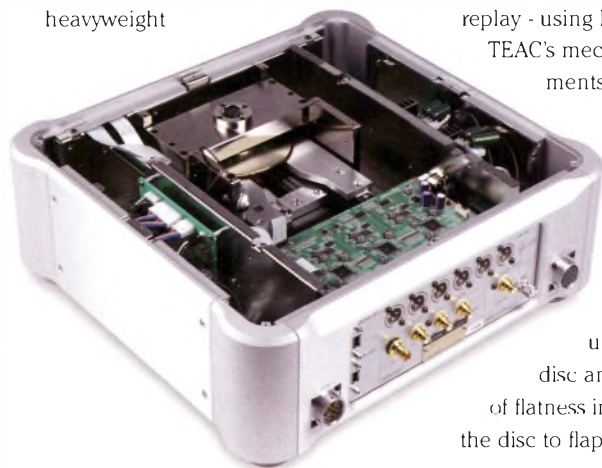


▶ product portfolio is compromised is to admit that it's really not worth the money – isn't it? But lest we get bogged down in such discussion allow me to get quickly to the point: when a manufacturer claims their top-of-the-range flagship is 'designed



without compromise', rarely is this true in fact. However, in the case of the Esoteric P-01/D-01, I'm forced to concede that the sentiment is genuine. Hewn from solid, it is without any doubt a formidable work of engineering excellence.

Designed to play – to the very best of humankind's ability, no less – Compact Discs and SACDs (in either 2-channel or 5.1 multi-channel, depending on how many of the mono standalone DACs one chooses to buy – two, or six), as a 'normal' stereo source CD/SACD player this P-01/D-01 player comprises four



components. The P-01 transport features TEAC's recently developed VRDS-NEO transport mechanism and a heavy duty power supply housed in a separate chassis. The transport has both IEEE1394 (FireWire/i.LINK) outputs and propriety ES-LINK digital outputs whereby Esoteric employ an XLR connector for each channel. The partnering D-01 DAC is mono,

so you'll require two of them at the very least. Furthermore this four-box behemoth of a CD player can be upgraded with the addition of a fifth box, a separate Master Clock Generator of which more in a minute...

The generic VRDS mechanism design, which first saw the light of day with the P-1 in 1987, was Esoteric's expression of the finest cost no object engineering applied to CD replay - using lessons learned from TEAC's mecha-tronics developments previously employed

for their older recording products. Key problems that VRDS was designed to address included tracking errors causing jitter to increase as the unrestrained edge of the disc and microscopic lack of flatness in the disc itself allowed the disc to flap about, reducing clarity

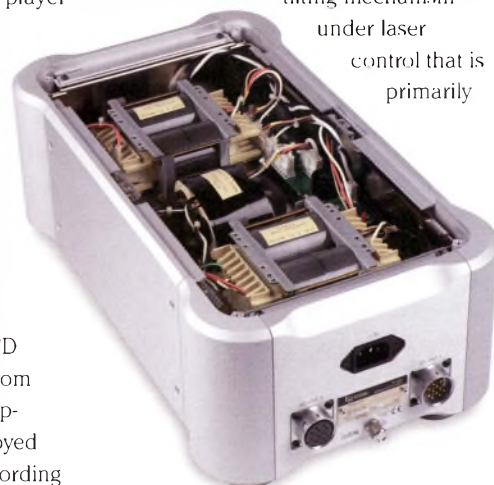
in the reproduction, and changes in servo current from the player's read servo causing rapid fluctuations in electrical noise. The problem is aptly likened by TEAC to trying to make sense of a newspaper while riding a rodeo machine.

VRDS was designed to provide a more Lexus-like ride for the disc.

VRDS itself stands for Vibration-free Rigid Disc clamping System, though the reduction in vibration is only one of a number of elements that distinguish VRDS mechanisms from the rest.

Simply by holding the disc in a stable, unvarying geometric relationship with the tracking laser sled, jitter and servo noise are decreased. Other elements in the package include the laser pickup.

In a conventional mechanism, the laser pickup is fitted to a base which tilts under servo control to follow the data track, before the mechanical inertia of the system can be overcome to place the laser where it belongs, inevitably after a short delay. It is the



tilting mechanism under laser control that is primarily

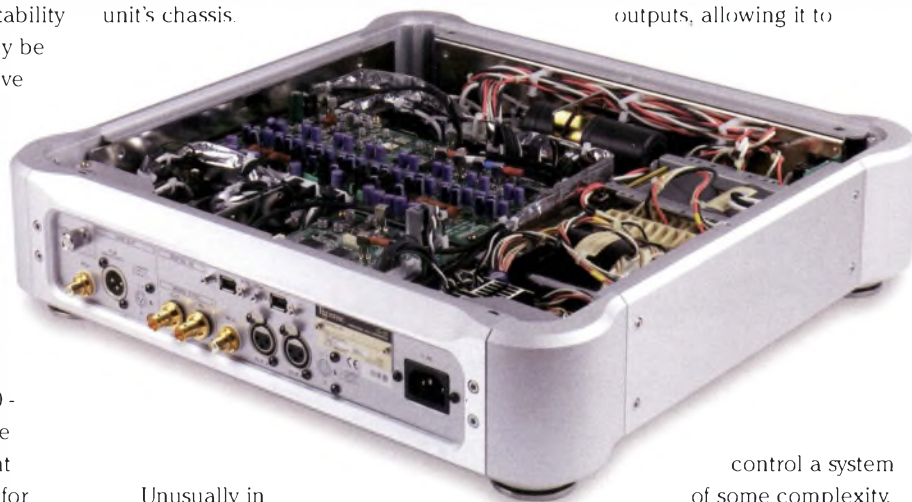
responsible for following the data, but this can only happen by allowing the optical axis and the 'eye pattern' from the laser to tilt and spread, and this of course increases jitter.

By contrast the VRDS pickup is mounted in a sled which radically restricts the freedom of movement of the laser to the radial plane. ▶

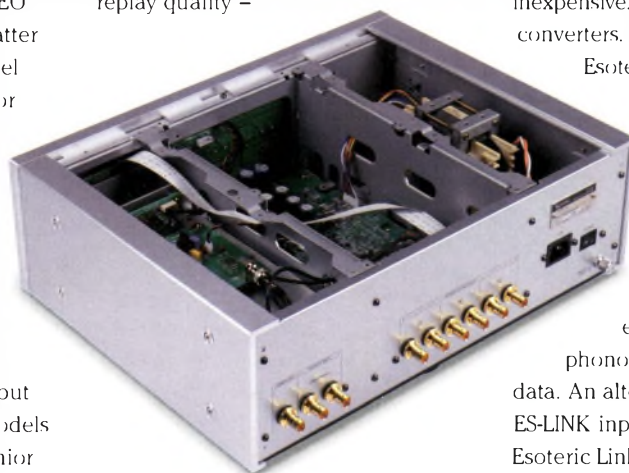
► It is the stability and accuracy in the VRDS mechanism, and the rigidity of the disc under clamping that makes this possible. The disc is slightly dished under pressure at the centre into the shape determined by the VRDS clamp itself. But this is only the beginning, as mechanical stability is also ensured by what can only be described as the almost obsessive engineering of the mechanism itself. The ultimate current expression of the VRDS mechanism is the VRDS-NEO which can now play DVD and SACD media in addition to CDs. With DVD and SACD replay the problems are multiplied by the much faster disc rotational speed: 570 - 1600 rpm, where CD spins in the 200 - 500rpm range. The current VRDS-NEO mechanism is rated for spin speed of up to 5000rpm, which by any standard represents considerable overkill.

TEAC does not distinguish the version of the mechanism used in this or its other models by name. All current Esoteric models are described as having VRDS-NEO mechanisms, but there are two versions. The one used in Esoteric's '01' models are of a higher standard than those used in models with '03' nomenclature. In the slightly-less-heavyweight version used in the X-03 (CD/SACD) and UX-3 (universal) models, the VRDS-NEO uses a black dyed duralumin platter and a 10mm thick machined steel base-plate. By contrast, the senior mechanism uses a higher quality magnesium platter and a heavier and more stable 20mm thick steel base. Both 'NEO transport mechanisms specify aluminium pickup assemblies in which the laser tracks radially, much like a parallel tracking turntable arm, but where the version in the X-03 models uses an alloy die-casting, the senior

model in the P-01 is machined from solid and is of different detail design, giving the laser better physical support and superior mechanical isolation. Last but not least, the mechanism in P-01 is mounted more rigidly into the unit's chassis.



Unusually in the world of disc replay, Esoteric also provides an upgrade path for the P-01, and indeed for all the brand's transports and players, in the form of a word clock input. This is designed to be used with the G-0s outboard master clock generator which uses a rubidium oscillator with a claimed accuracy of 0.05ppb (parts per billion!). However it is not the accuracy of the clock per se that appears to be fundamental and (crucially) improve replay quality -



and thus improve sound quality. This is a sophisticated unit that with Esoteric's video players can also correct the 4% speed error introduced to PAL DVDs, so videophiles may be interested in the G-0s for this quite different reason. The G-0s has three outputs, allowing it to

control a system of some complexity, though in a go-for-broke system you would need three for a fully configured P-01 multi-channel Esoteric package. A less expensive crystal master clock and up-sampler will be introduced in the near future, an interesting development as external clock inputs become more common on the likes of dCS and Metronome Technologie machines.

The requirements needed to make the P-01 work in a real life system are not exactly trivial - or inexpensive. They start with the D/A converters. In a stereo system using Esoteric hardware there will be two of the D-01 monaural converters, which can be connected to the P-01 transport using one of several methods. The simplest is the single ended input, using a phono lead to handle the digital data. An alternative is the XLR ES-LINK input. ES-LINK stands for Esoteric Link, and is a high speed

► interface proprietary to Esoteric, claimed to deliver better audio quality than the alternative balanced mode XLR (which is fitted as an alternative). DSD data from SACD can also be handled by the iLink input, and again this is available in two flavours, one generic, the other TEAC's own version, both of course compliant with the encrypted data that is streamed off disc.

Esoteric describe the D-01 as the world's first monaural D/A converter, and by any standards it is an elaborate design. Mono of course means zero crosstalk and a perfectly symmetrical circuit layout between channels. It is a 24 bit design using eight Burr-Brown PCM1704 converters. D-01 DACs also feature a (bypassable) analogue volume control attenuator for direct connection to a power amplifier. There are three filters to choose from: FIR, RDOT, FIR+RDOT, which can be chosen according to taste, or bypassed altogether. PCM data is converted up to 768kHz before being processed by the multi-bit D/A converter chips. SACDs' DSD signal is



similarly converted to 88.2kHz or 176.4kHz. A BNC is available for an external word sync input from the G-0s master clock generator. So, as I pointed out before, a fully configured stereo playback

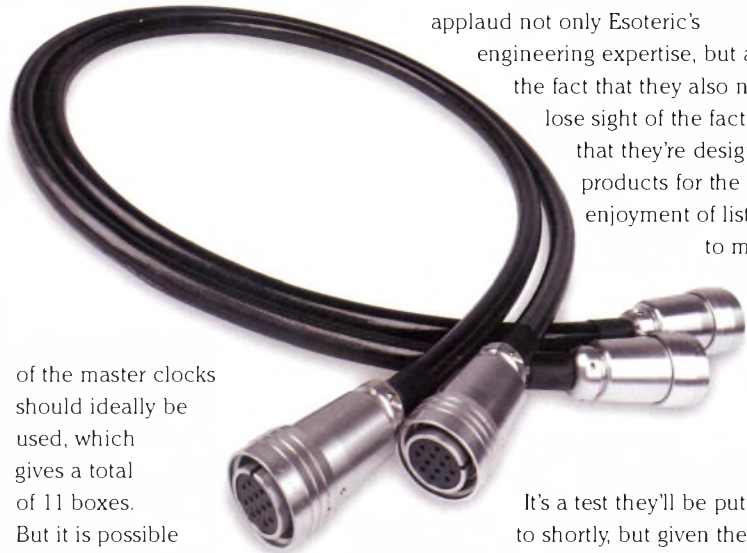
player would involve no less than five boxes, given that the P-01 mechanism comes with an external power supply in a half-width chassis. With six D/A converters and the transport, three


of the master clocks should ideally be used, which gives a total of 11 boxes. But it is possible to configure a multi-channel system with a single G-0s – in case you're trying to build up an Esoteric front end on the cheap(!).

Without any shadow of doubt the design of Esoteric's products reflect obsession of the highest order, which is to be applauded! Nevertheless even Esoteric's designers concur that there's more to sound quality than straightforward 'overkill' engineering. Any product, no matter how well engineered, becomes pointless if it is not enjoyable to listen to in a high-class monitoring system.

Seeing as how the P-01/D-01 is billed as the finest product on this planet for the most accurate replay of SACDs, the designer had to be asked the question: "So why do you commit heresy and convert the DSD data to PCM?"

Esoteric's answer to this question is straightforward: "In listening tests our favourite DACs are the multi-bit Burr-Browns. We especially prefer the bass 'slam' and 'punch' in high resolution PCM." So, one has to applaud not only Esoteric's engineering expertise, but also the fact that they also never lose sight of the fact that they're designing products for the enjoyment of listening to music.



It's a test they'll be put to shortly, but given the complexity of the system, you can see why a separate introduction was deemed necessary. 

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Prices:	
P-01 Transport:	£17495
D-01 DAC:	£8495 each
G-0s Clock:	£8995

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

Manufacturer:
TEAC/Esoteric
Net. www.teac.com/esoteric

...Hidden Dragon

by Roy Gregory

As part of this series of reviews I've listened to each and every product under consideration. I thought that divining one, or even some common threads would be a difficult, convoluted task, but in the end it has proved dramatically simple and obvious – not so much a case of lessons learnt but lessons forgotten.

We talk, in passing about issues such as synergy or mechanical integrity, without ever really scratching their surface, understanding their implications. One is seen as happy accident, the other as a function of weight and little else. Yet all these products take these concepts to their logical conclusion. Each, in its own way demonstrates categorically that what you use is important, but how you use it is much more so.

Zanden select components with care but it's the nature and construction of the circuits and their housings that elevate the performance to such astonishingly fluid and convincing levels.

Kondo take material continuity to new levels, extending it into the realm of components, actually within those components themselves. The company may not offer a turntable or digital transport, but their equipment and cabling will carry the signal (once it is in an analogue form) in as near a single unbroken medium as it's possible to achieve, all the way to your voice-coils. Dig around in Japan and you could probably include those too.

The Lyra Connoisseur shows how physical construction can take notions of power supply regulation and short, fast circuits to new levels through exquisite implementation and chassis design.

The Teac/Esoteric disc replay system demonstrates just what conventional over-engineering really means. Take a

complex solution and actually extend each and every aspect of its construction to the logical extreme (a specious claim made by many high-end manufacturers) and this is what you get: five boxes that are so full of circuitry and components and so robustly constructed that you can barely pick them up one at a time!

Both the Lyra Olympos and Koetsu Coral demonstrate the subtle balance between black art and technical innovation. Both essentially simple yet are compromised by existing standards yet each offers a particular magic when it comes to musical reproduction that suggests that deeper understanding is at work here.

What these products tell us is that we must dig much, much deeper into our existing understanding. The mechanical aspects of electrical system performance are far more critical than we appreciate, while the importance of continuity and synergy are grievously underestimated. Indeed, synergy emerged as the guiding principle of these listening sessions.

Let's just take a moment to consider the concept in mathematical terms: normally, combining products might be expected to generate the sum of their performance. So, like in all good universes, $1+1=2$. But in a synergistic relationship the product is greater than the sum of the parts. In fact, if things are perfect, two units might generate the square of their products – or $1+1=4$. Impressive enough if you can do it. But take it a step further and add a third, perfectly chosen or designed element and $1+1+1=9!$ Now we're really getting somewhere.

Fanciful. Listen to the Zanden or Kondo equipment used in concert with its partnering pieces and the whole is very obviously greater than the sum of the individual parts. Pay attention to

interconnection, the mains and how the units are supported and you take another series of major strides forward to the point where, in the case of the IO-J, tiny, tiny adjustments in downforce and vta start to have wholly disproportionate musical impact – because the rest of the chain has become so critically sensitive and responsive to input. Likewise, as impressive as the Zanden amplification is on its own, add the phono-stage or CD player to the equation and the results leap forward in quality and musical conviction. Suddenly that mathematical equation doesn't look so unrealistic after all. Just don't think in terms of magnitude – think in terms of distance. How close does your system place you to the original performance? The better your system the shorter the gap, the more it divides that distance. That's the significance of those numbers. You can divide that journey by three ($1+1+1$) or by nine; take your pick.

These systems are doing important (even vital) things on a musical level that elude all but the rarest of their Western counterparts. That they do it consistently, and that they all do it, suggests that the methodology and approach applied is something we should pay far more attention too. Their ability to bring separate life to individual elements within the performance whilst maintaining the musical whole is fundamental to advancing the reproduction and understanding of recorded music. It's what I heard at Sea Cliff and it's what I heard from these components. If I'm right it's what we'll hear from Lyra's new Helikon replacement, the Skala, and the knowledge and experience will spread that much wider. Exotic and beyond affordability these products might be, but we can all benefit from their influence and ethos.



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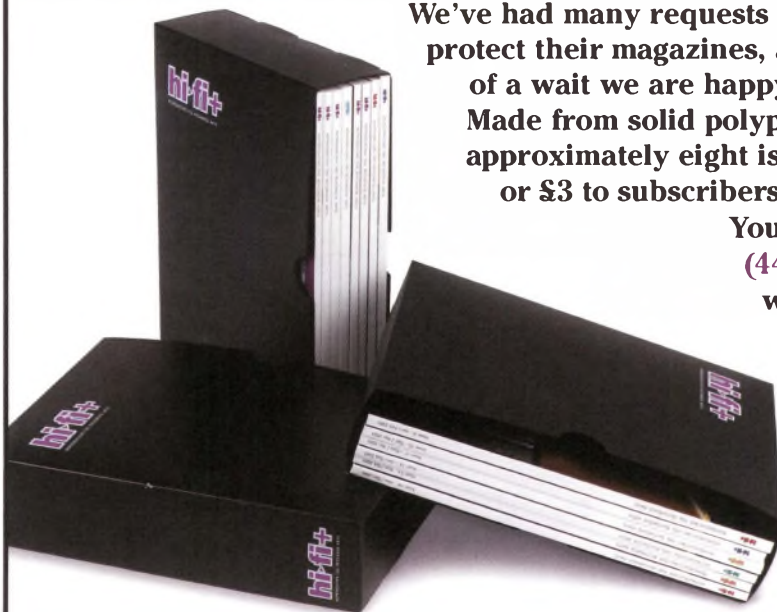
This Amp is so far beyond the usual that I call it "revolutionary," and this in a field where design breakthroughs are, at best, evolutionary. It's taken me six months to get its measure and in the process I've had to upgrade the reference system to meet the ASR's mettle.

Harry Pearson - The Absolute Sound - Nov 05

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Chris Binns

Anyone sad enough to be comparing reviewer profiles between last year and this will no doubt note that there is little, if any change in the line up of my system, and with the exception of a short flurry of activity in the late summer I have not provided much in the way of contribution to the magazine. 2005 has seen me totally immersed back in the world of recording; assisting a top mixing engineer, designing and building a recording studio and getting my hands dirty with audio equipment at the 'front end' of the process. As a result, I have had little time (and, if I'm honest inclination) to listen to music for pleasure. While this is (or should be) one hundred percent relevant to a hi-fi magazine, I should point out that the majority of music I have been involved with is commercial pop, a world devoid of all things audiophile and where perhaps one of the most important criteria facing (say) a mastering engineer is how to make your track sound louder than everyone else's when it is played on the radio. This is a world where one of the best selling albums of 2005 was processed through the cheapest (i.e. under £100) compressor after the final mix. Why? Because the character of that particular low-fi unit ultimately suited the sound and feel of the music, and I doubt that there will be many people who would listen to this album on expensive hi-fi systems. It is also indicative of a changing fashion in listening that the first single release to be taken from it got to number ten in the charts two weeks before it was actually released on CD – such is the popularity of iTunes.

So, highlights of the year? The small amount of reviewing that I did do included some new gear from Cyrus,

notably the Phono X and Dac X - both of which are interesting products in their own right. They highlighted the two extremes of my recent listening habits and contributed to both. Having had your head bashed all day (and quite possibly night) by medium to high-level monitoring –



of maybe just one three minute track – frankly the last thing I ever want to do when I finally get home is listen to music. That's why it always used to amuse me when hi-fi companies would get an endorsement from a commercial recording engineer; trust me, they rarely listen to music for pleasure. But when there has been time out, such as a long weekend, playing vinyl has been a real joy, and the all round performance of the Phono X has been much in evidence. As I think I said in the review, there are 'higher definition' products available at a comparable price, but the balance that the Cyrus achieves between resolution and addictive engagement is truly worthwhile.

The DAC X meanwhile, has encouraged me to explore far more in the way of digital listening than I

normally contemplate, particularly in the form of iPods and iTunes, and I admit to a new and unhealthy fascination with the random juke box of several hundred albums (helped by the wonderful organisational capabilities of iTunes) played into the unit using Apple Lossless encoding. Its certainly good enough to do the housework to and even better for entertaining, while the DAC X is a pretty fine pre-amp in its own right as well. I have also just about got used to playing mixes directly from hard disc out of Pro tools or Logic, and the flexibility of having digital inputs on my hi-fi system has been very

Hi - fi experience:

Where to start? There's not a lot that the Binns hasn't done, including: session guitarist; recording engineer; hi-fi retail and manufacturing (the original English Cadence valve amplifiers) as well as studio monitoring systems; teacher of music and sound recording and of course, hi-fi and record reviewing. Currently spends most of his time working in studios (again) as a mixing (sometime assistant) and mastering engineer, where everything is now done with computers – which he struggles to switch on, let alone command. Grumbles continually about this, and argues that if you had to drive a car using a mouse we'd all be in trouble.

Desert island discs

Talking Heads – *Once in a lifetime* – boxed set
 Shostakovich – *String Quartets* - Eder Quartet Naxos CD set
 Peter Gabriel – *Passion* – The last temptation of Christ Real World RWLP1
 The Cure – *Faith Fiction* record fix 6
 Cesar Franck – *Choral no. 3 in A minor*
 Chalfont SDGX 307
 Gerald Finzi – *Loves labours lost/clarinets concerto* Nimbus NI 5101

► useful over the last few months.

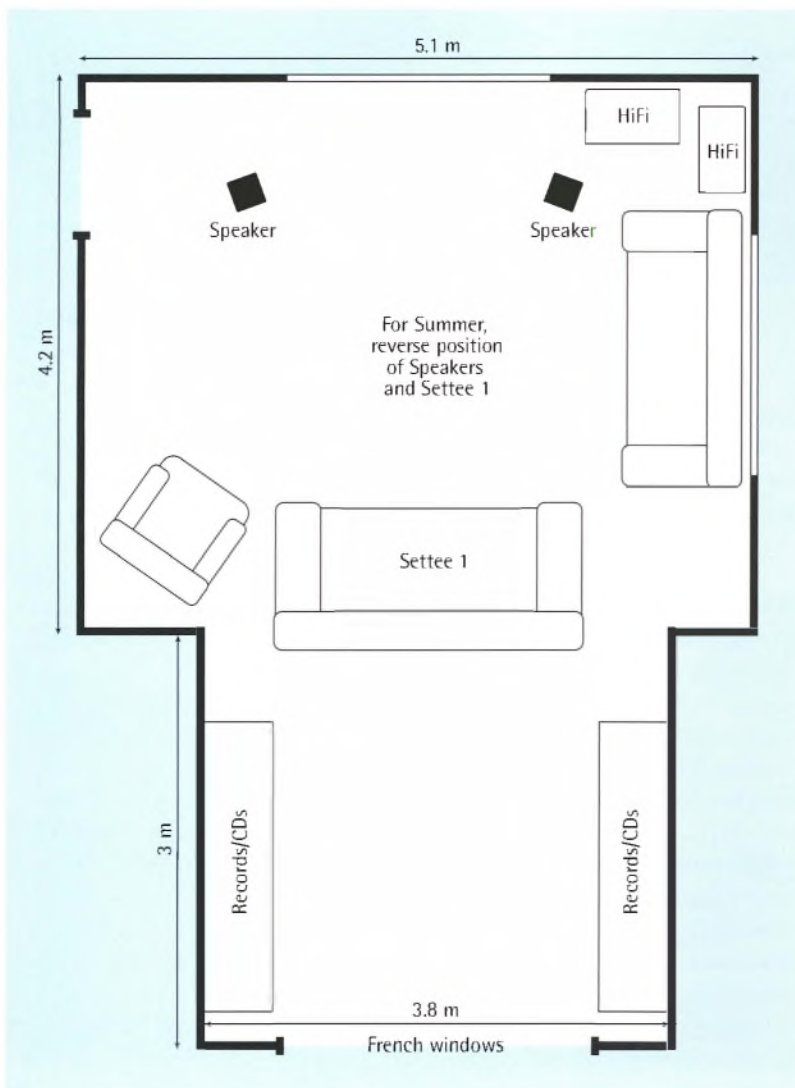
Meanwhile, back in the studio there are a couple of things more familiar for readers of this magazine. Naim Audio have quietly released a version of the NAP 250 power amplifier aptly called the 250 PRO, instigated by, I believe, an interest from the BBC. The unit is equipped with balanced inputs and (annoyingly) Neutrik Speakon connectors, plus a little bit of extra protection to survive the indignancies present in a studio environment. Their first professional amplifier since the short lived NAB 300, the results I have been getting under working conditions have been impressive. A lot of people

have commented on how surprisingly heavy and solid it is, but more importantly on how good it sounds, which is still an unusual occurrence in the studio. And get this – it actually makes Yamaha NS10s sound good. There is a God after all....

Another hi-fi company who have been dipping their toe into the pro market is Focal/Jmlabs, with a couple of highly sophisticated and expensive near/mid field monitors equipped with considerable DSP power designed to enable flexibility with location and room problems. For me, the biggest bonus is the inclusion of their superb Beryllium tweeter, which from previous experience

represents the best top end I have heard from a dynamic driver, and couldn't be further removed from some of the painful high frequency units that populate the monitor market.

If I have had less than the normal volume of domestic hi-fi passing through my hands, there has been a lot of pro gear that I have had a chance to use and evaluate, and while the majority of this will be of little interest to Plus readers, there is one product that has been haunting me for a while – the Cranesong Avocet. This is essentially a line-stage pre-amplifier with a precision volume control and switchable outputs.



System

Linn LP12 with Armageddon PSU, Linn Ekos and Lyra Helikon SL
 Cheap, wobbly Ikea rack (which incidentally revitalised the Linn)
 Resolution Audio Opus 21 or Densen 400XS CD players
 Cyrus phono-stage with PSX
 Cyrus DAC X and Primary valve line stage
 Naim NAP300 power amplifier
 Primary monitors or Quad ESL 57's
 Nordost Valkyra/Valhalla cabling

It finds particular application with computer based recording rigs where they are used without a mixing desk, i.e. you need a hands on control for your monitoring. With three digital and three analogue inputs, the device consists of a plain 19" rack mounted unit with an umbilical connected to a 'desk' control unit. So what? Three factors impressed me about this product; how incredibly sensible the layout was, how good it sounded and the fact that it sells in the states for \$2800 – with a build quality, facilities and performance that would shame the majority of high end hi-fi products. Why isn't someone producing hi-fi like this?

As for 2006, who knows?



Dennis Davis

Another year has passed and I'm taking stock of what came through the door. It's a wealth exchange kind of operation, because I have spent considerable time and effort weeding out records to make way for new arrivals. But with the relentless march of new 45s from AcousTech, and 33 rpm releases from Speakers Corner, Pure Pleasure and others, I've been inadequate to the job of bailing required just to keep my house from sinking below its foundations, so my collection – inevitably – swells.

Much of my listening follows a pattern of reading new music biographies while listening to the musician's output of recordings. 2005 was a disappointing year for jazz biography, and nothing significant caught my eye. Indeed, I cannot recall any remarkable music biographies between the publication in mid 2004 of *Moanin' At Midnight (The Life and Times of Howlin' Wolf)* and a couple of great books late this year. However, the fumes of the Wolf biography inspired much of my listening and collecting during 2005. I began a revamping of my blues collection with the help of eBay and my good friend RSE Plenty of listening time was devoted to recordings from Chess, Prestige Bluesville, Vanguard, Vee Jay, Arhoolie, Duke, Candid and Excello. But the big news in blues, to my mind, was the emergence of Pure Pleasure and especially its issues from the Candid catalog.

Midway through the year saw the release of Peter Guralnick's *Dream Boogie*, an outstanding biography of

Sam Cooke, which brought on a torrent of rhythm and blues listening. While I didn't go so far as to splurge for pricey copies of Cooke's *Keen* originals, I did update my copy of RCA's re-issue of *Keen* master tapes as *The Best of Sam Cooke* (LPM-2625) to a 1S stamper version, acquired a copy of *Live At The Harlem Square Club* (AFL1-5181) and listened over and again to *At The Copa* (LSP-2970) and *Night Beat*, probably

Cooke's finest record, released in 1963 by RCA. My Abkco heavy vinyl re-issue from 1995

sounds fabulous. Hot on the heels of finishing the Cooke biography Bob Spitz's *The Beatles* duly appeared. I was a teenager during Beatlemania, and remember when everyone had their

"favorite Beatle" (mine was John, teddy boy that I was), but this fabulous book retells the story in such a fresh way, that not only have I read every word (without skipping any of the "boring parts") but have stopped at every juncture to pull out the relevant music and re-listen to the entire Beatles catalog in chronological order. I long ago converted all my US pressings to British originals, so have not needed to break the bank again.

When it comes time to check how my system is sounding against some reference point, I'll inevitably go back to several favorite LPs, jazz on Columbia and classical on Mercury. The jazz LPs have been especially fresh on my mind this year, having spent some considerable time writing about them for this magazine. My Mercury listening has become rather more methodical over the past year, having been inspired



Hi-Fi Experience:

Aldous Huxley's descriptions of rapture listening to the late Beethoven string quartets on a 78-RPM player under the starlight ignited a lifelong affair with music, which set me on a course of building HeathKits and Dynacos in the 1960s. I started amassing a record collection to meet the listening requirements of my college music appreciation class in 1968, and have never needed an excuse since then.

Desert Island Discs: (all vinyl LPs)

Ornette Coleman *Change of the Century* Atlantic 1327
 Louis Armstrong *Plays W. C. Handy* Columbia CL 591
 Charlie Parker *Vol. 2-4 Savoy* 9001, 9010 Et 9011 [3 10" LPs for the price of 1]
 Miles Davis *Cookin' Prestige* 7094 [I'll leave my original at home and take the AcousTech 45 rpm]
 Coltrane *Crescent Impulse* A-66
 Bach *Overtures 1-4 Telefunken* SAWT 9509/10-A
 Howlin' Wolf *Rocking Chair* album Chess 1469
 Otis Spann *Is The Blues* Candid 9001 (Pure Pleasure).

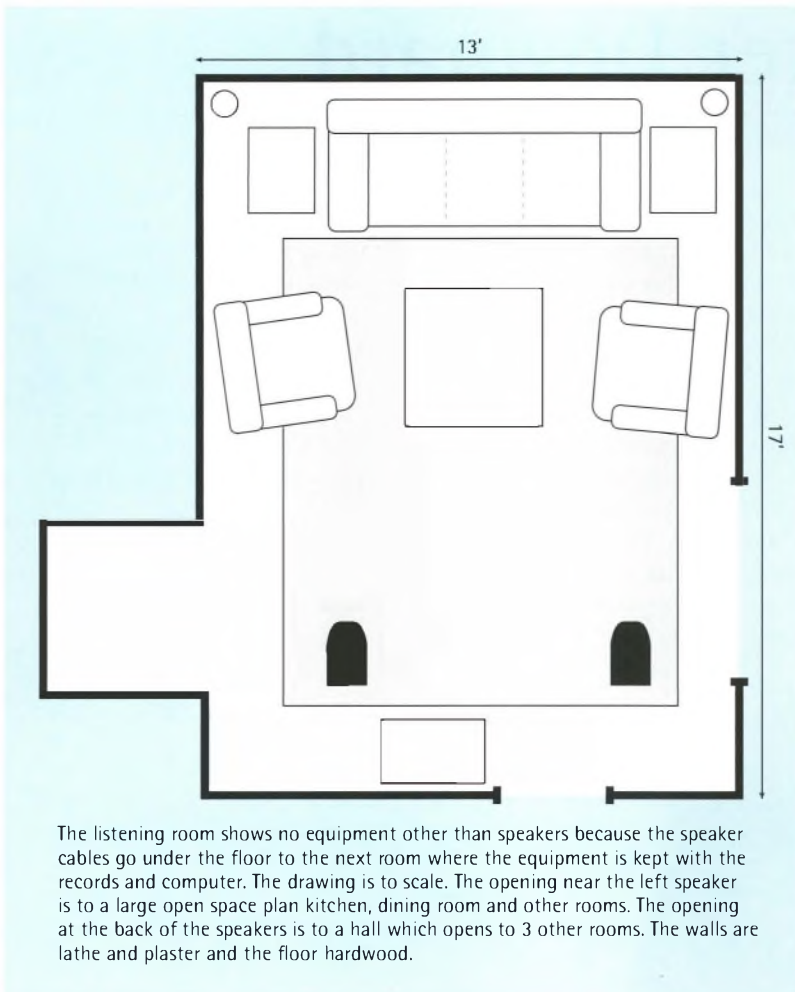
Book: This year's best book was *The Beatles* by Bob Spitz

Film: *The Big Lebowski* (DVD re-issue).

Luxury: Living in Marin County California.

Indulgence: Woodhouse Chocolates.

by the fine re-issues from Speakers Corner. As a result, I have begun re-listening to the Mercury LPs in my collection, looking for copies that need replacement because of condition or to weed out those few "vendor" copies that have slipped in. I'm about half way through the process and have replaced a few copies with promos that have come my way, and filled in a few



holes that emerged.

It was my dissatisfaction with the sound of my Mercurys that set me looking for a front-end upgrade a couple of years ago, and I continue to use them as a guidepost to evaluate each new change. This year I've continued that process with a few additional upgrades to the system, replacing the Graham 2.2 arm with a VPI 12.6, allowing two wands for stereo and mono respectively. I've added Nordost Valhalla interconnects, and switched the junction box of my VPI TNT 6 for the Valhalla wired version. I installed a four-inch maple shelf on top of my equipment stand, which minimizes the need to re-level the turntable. Finally, I've installed an IQAir filtration system in the room that houses my equipment and records to keep mold

spores from settling in amongst the records and to keep any kind of crud from settling into the electronics and turntable.

Being a reviewer of records rather than equipment, I must confess to being less than methodical about listening to each change of equipment carefully before and after. I am in awe of our editor's ability to move so much equipment through his system and still make such detailed observations. My own inclination, when something improves significantly in my system is to act like a child in a candy shop – off on a bender listening to record after record. The idea of switching out gear after something starts sounding good seems too much like punishment to my undisciplined mind. The most dramatic

change this year resulted from the tonearm change, which was also the first system upgrade, while the addition of the Nordost Valhalla was the icing on the cake. The combined effect was to tighten up images that I never appreciated were loose, and in so doing bring into focus details that were obscured. One of the best things about my listening arrangement is that I keep all the equipment in a room adjacent to the listening area, thus removing any interaction between the speakers and the turntable/electronics. The down side is that, after snaking speaker cable under the house from one room to the next, the cable length is ungodly long, making an upgrade unthinkable. Notwithstanding this handicap, those Mercurys are really sounding rather nice. I wonder what a new pre-amplifier would do for the mix . . . ?



System:

Analogue Front-end

VPI TNT Mk. 6 turntable
VPI 12.6 tonearm with two armtubes, mounting Lyra Helikon mono and SL stereo cartridges

Amplification

Aesthetix Iø phono-stage
Audio Research LS5MkIII line-stage
Audio Research VT130 Amplifier

Loudspeakers

Kharma Reference 3.2 speakers with wiring upgrade

Digital Front-end

Wadia 8 and 15i (upgraded) and Alesis Masterlink digital front end

Ancillaries

Nordost Valhalla interconnect cables
Wireworld Eclipse Silver speaker cable
XLO Ultra X-10 power cables
Two dedicated power circuits
Black Diamond Racing cones
Billy Bags stand with 4" Maple platform
Grado RS-1 headphones and Melos headphone amplifier
VPI record cleaning machine.

Peter Downard

I will remember this year as one of extraordinary jazz releases, almost all of them only new in terms of the date of their commercial release.

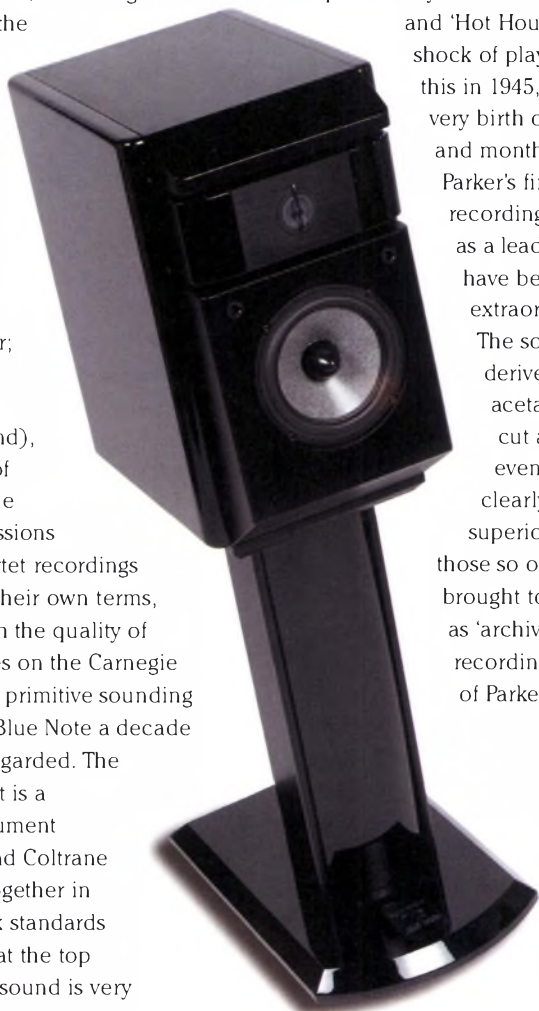
Thelonious Monk & John Coltrane At Carnegie Hall (Blue Note/Thelonious CD) vindicates everything that has been said over the last 50 years about the quartet that these two anchored for several months at New York's Five Spot Club in 1957. To date the recorded legacy has been composed of a transcendent 'Monk's Mood' on *Thelonious Himself* (Riverside), otherwise a solo piano album; some large group tracks on the wonderful *Monk's Music* (Riverside), on which Coltrane's performance in a larger group is workaday in comparison to that of the leader; and *Thelonious Monk with John Coltrane* (Jazzland), a hodge-podge of out-takes from the *Monk's Music* sessions and several quartet recordings that are fine on their own terms, but do not match the quality of the performances on the Carnegie Hall disc. A very primitive sounding CD released by Blue Note a decade ago can be disregarded. The Carnegie Hall set is a compelling document of what Monk and Coltrane could achieve together in two sets of Monk standards with the pianist at the top of his form. The sound is very

good, and for my money this album clearly tops any of the issues previously available.

In any other year, *Charlie Parker & Dizzy Gillespie's Town Hall. New York City, June 22, 1945* (Uptown CD) would steal the limelight. The concert does not begin on a promising note - Parker is late arriving and appears halfway through the first number with a relatively pedestrian solo spot. But by the second tune, 'A Night in Tunisia', he has found his feet and is electrifying. Not surprisingly, he keeps it up throughout the disc, particularly on 'Salt Peanuts'

and 'Hot House'. The shock of playing like this in 1945, at the very birth of bebop and months before Parker's first recording session as a leader, must have been extraordinary! The sonics, derived from acetate discs cut at the event, are clearly superior to those so often brought to market as 'archival' recordings of Parker.

Of similar importance this year was *One Down, Up Up: Live at the Half Note* (Impulse! 2 CDs), a wonderful document of the



Hi-Fi Experience:

I have been in love with reproduced music ever since I got The Beatles' *Magical Mystery Tour* album for Christmas in 1968, when I was 10. Two or three spins (especially of side two, with 'Hello Goodbye', 'Strawberry Fields Forever' and 'Penny Lane'), and that was it for me.

Desert Island Discs:

The Beatles, *The Beatles*, UK Apple 'top loader' stereo, PCS 7067-68

Traffic, *Traffic*, UK "pink" Island ILPS 9081 T
Stravinsky, *The Firebird* (Ansermet), UK Decca SXL 2017

Miles Davis and John Coltrane, *The Complete Columbia Recordings of Miles Davis and John Coltrane* (Mosaic MQ9-191, 9 LPs)

Duke Ellington, *...And His Mother Called Him Bill* (RCA LSP-3906/Speakers Corner re-issue)
Wilco, *Yankee Hotel Foxtrot* (Nonesuch/Sundazed 5161, 2 LPs)

Richard Strauss, *Ariadne auf Naxos* (Schwarzkopf, Streich et al.) (UK Columbia 33CX 1292-94, 3LPs)

The Clash, *London Calling* (UK CBS CLASH 1, 2 LPs)

Wilhelm Furtwangler, *Furtwangler in Memoriam* (DGG KL 27-31, 5 LPs)

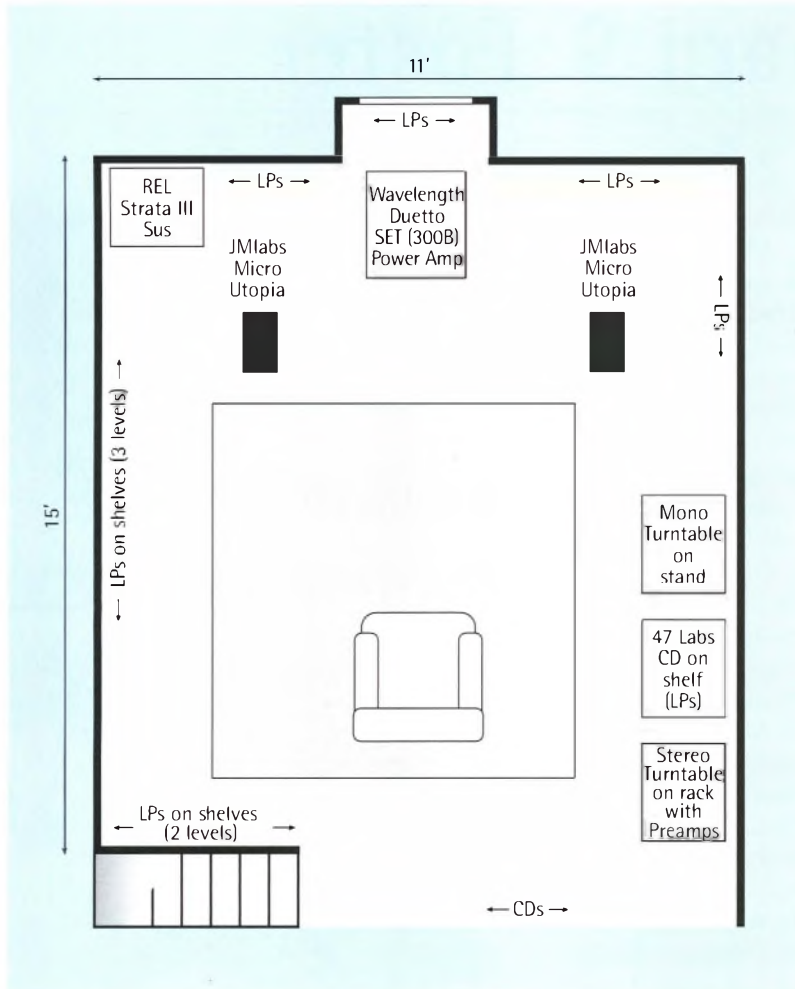
Bob Dylan Et The Hawks, *Live 1966* (Columbia/Classic CK2-65759-1, 2 LPs)

Book: On music: *Revolution in the Head* by Ian Macdonald. **Otherwise:** *Remains of the Day* by Kazuo Ishiguro

Film: This year: *Capote* **All time:** Fritz Lang's *M*

Luxury: Family including 13 year old, 7 year old, and Bernese Mountain Dog

Indulgence: See above



When I have been able to enjoy it I have been delighted by the music made by my 47 Laboratory CD 'front-end'. When I first auditioned it, over a long weekend spent working on a case in my music room, the absence of fatigue and sheer musicality it made available from CD was a shock. I have also had the chance to audition the Lyra Dorian mono cartridge, the coherence and tonality of which has been a revelation. All those who maintain an ideological bias in favour of stereo recordings, kindly send your mono LPs to me care of this magazine!

System:

Analogue Front-ends

Linn LP12 with Lingo power supply
Linn Ekos tonearm
Lyra Helikon stereo cartridge
Rega Planar 3 turntable
Rega RB300 tonearm,
Lyra Dorian mono cartridge

Digital Front-end

47 Laboratory Shigaraki CD system
(Model 4716 transport, OTA
digital cable, Model 4715 DAC)

Amplification

Sonic Frontiers Phono One Special Edition
phono-stage
Sonic Frontiers Line 2 line-stage
Wavelength Audio Duetto single-ended
triode power amplifier

Loudspeakers

JM Labs Micro Utopia speakers
REL Strata III subwoofer

Ancillaries

Dyna ancient homemade tube FM tuner
Dog's breakfast of cables (van den Hul,
Kimber, Cardas, Nirvana)
Various snake oil I can't bring myself to
toss out

'classic' John Coltrane Quartet with McCoy Tyner and Elvin Jones. It captures this magnificent group as the top of their arc in 1965, on the cusp of Coltrane's transition from the more accessible orientation of the Quartet to the more intense and difficult explorations of his last years. While speaking of intense and difficult, I should also mention that the best new jazz recording I heard this year was Marc Ribot's *Spiritual Unity* (Pi Recordings CD), a live quartet performance of Albert Ayler themes by a group including one of Ayler's own bass players, Henry Grimes, who is as intelligent and involving as ever.

On the 'rock' side (my usual focus), the best thing I heard this year was Paul McCartney's *Chaos and*

Creation in the Backyard (Parlophone CD). The opening sound collage, an apparent imitation of Revolver's opening seconds, both promises and misleads. This album is not the flowering of genius that Revolver was, but like that record it is finely crafted and intelligent. Its rewards, both lyrically and musically, are richer with every listening. Similarly, Neil Young's *Prairie Wind* (Reprise CD) is a record that will keep me going for months. As to newer artists, there were two fine albums from Spoon (*Gimme Fiction*, Merge LP) and the other-worldly Antony (*I Am A Bird Now*, Secretly Canadian LP).

A ridiculously busy professional schedule this year has kept my time with my home system at a minimum.

Richard S. Foster

2005 has continued the flow of great music and great products across my path; I almost don't know where to begin. Chad Kassem's Analogue Productions, with the ever able assistance of Kevin Gray (of AcousTech Mastering), Steve Hoffman (mastering engineer extraordinaire) and Don MacInnis' RTI are in the middle of releasing the third set in the Fantasy 45RPM series of Jazz and Blues titles – four will be coming in 2006. There are still a few titles available from the first two series and it's not too late to sign up for series three. If the likes of John Coltrane, Bill Evans, Sonny Rollins and even Lightnin' Hopkins are key to your musical pleasure, these are probably the finest sounding examples of their recorded legacies ever produced. My musical hat is off to Kassem/Gray!

Desert Island Discs:

Since I've left last years selections on the Desert Island and I know they will be there when I return, I now have room in my luggage for a new set:

Marcelle Meyer's Ravel and Chabrier records on Discophiles Français Aline van Barentzen's Beethoven on French Pathé

Magda Tagliaferro's *Spanish Concerts* on Erato and Ducretet Thomson.

Speakers Corner re-issue of *The Best of Little Walter* and the Mercury SR90235 Liszt/Enesco.

Pure Pleasure's re-issue of *Going Back to Acoustic* with Buddy Guy and Junior Wells as well as their Stevie Ray Vaughan, *Couldn't Stand the Weather*.

Sam Cooke's *Night Beat* on RCA Living Stereo Rachmaninoff *Sonata, op.19* for piano and violoncello with Guy Fallot and Emmanuelle Lamasse on Swiss Gallo.

Billie Holiday, *The Complete Decca Recordings*, two CDs presented by GRP.

A FULL compliment of ALL the RCA Living Stereo SACD releases.

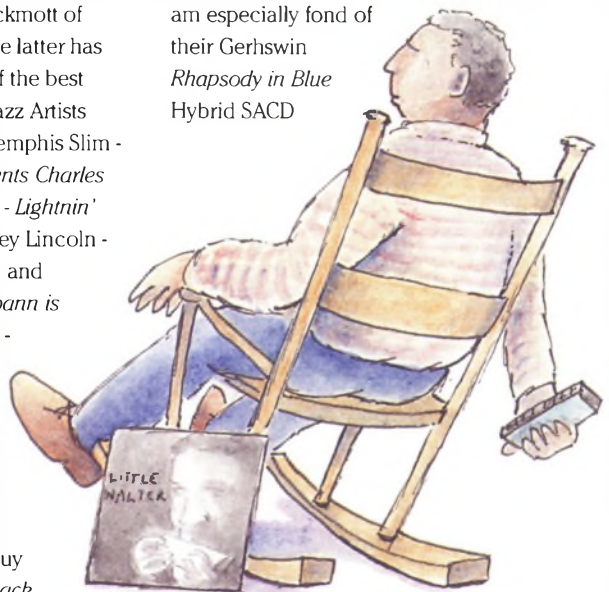
Hoffman/MacInnis for continuing to breathe new life into these treasures.

Other great vinyl has arrived from Dennis Cassidy of Pure Audiophile with the release of a couple of great records (Ray Charles, *Genius Loves Company* and Art Blakey and the Jazz Messengers - *Keystone 3*) and Tony Hickmott of Pure Pleasure Records. The latter has inundated us with some of the best re-issues I've ever heard: Jazz Artists Guild - *Newport Rebels*, Memphis Slim - *USA*, Charles Mingus Presents Charles Mingus, Lightnin' Hopkins - *Lightnin' Hopkins in New York*, Abbey Lincoln - *Straight Ahead*, Otis Spann and Robert Lockwood - *Otis Spann is The Blues*, Fleetwood Mac - *Blues Jam at Chess*. Stevie Ray Vaughan - *Couldn't Stand the Weather*. Johnny Shines - *Last Night's Dream*, Otis Spann - *The Biggest Thing Since Colossus...*, Buddy Guy and Junior Wells - *Going Back to Acoustic*, Chet Baker and Art Pepper - *Picture of Heath*. And I'm sure I've forgotten a few! Great vinyl, great performances and wonderfully outrageous titles! Meanwhile, Lost Highway continues their tradition with *Lucinda Williams: Live at the Fillmore*, an indispensable three-record set.

Speakers Corner Records continues to roll out spectacular releases including some of my favorites. Mercury releases this year included the Liszt/Enesco masterpiece with Dorati, The Brahms *Horn Trio* with Szegedi, Janos Starker's performance of the Dvorak *Cello Concerto* and the Widor *Symphony No. 5* with Marcel Dupre. But they've also continued to release Jazz and Blues titles. While I'm sure Dennis Davis has commented on their Jazz releases, I think Sonny Boy Williamson's *Real*

Folk Blues and Little Walter Jacobs' *The Best of Little Walter* are stunning musical and sonic choices.

While it's been a great year for vinyl, SACD has made genuine strides too. I'm particularly pleased with what is going on at Mobile Fidelity and am especially fond of their Gerhswin *Rhapsody in Blue* Hybrid SACD



as well as the new Ravel *Daphnis et Chloe*. British label Hyperion has given us several stunning recordings by one of my favorite Bach interpreters, Angela Hewitt. There are two releases on Hybrid SACD consisting of the seven Keyboard *Concertos* as well as the Brandenburg *Concerto No. 5 in D* and the *Triple Concerto in A minor*. I'd also suggest you look into Hewitt's *English Suites*. It doesn't get any better than this for NEW recordings.

And I haven't even mentioned Sony/BMG's stunning releases from the massive RCA Living Stereocatalogue? You can't go wrong with almost anything here that suits your musical fancy. These Hybrids sound amazing from either the DSD or CD layer and they are offered at giveaway prices. ►

System:**Analogue Front-end**

VPI TNT6, JMW 12.6 tonearm with additional arm wands, wired with Nordost Valhalla. Lyra Titan mono*, Titan "i" stereo, Olympos SL and Koetsu Coral moving-coil cartridges

The TNT sits on an Immedia NoiseBlock, active air isolation platform. Record cleaning is handled by a combination of the VPI 17-F cleaning machine with Disc Doctor Brushes and cleaning fluids.

Digital Front-end

dCS Verdi Encore CD/SACD Transport with DSD up-sampling

dCS Verona Master Clock

dCS Elgar+ DAC

Yamaha CDR-1000R recorder

Amplification

Herron VTPH1 phono-section

Herron VTSP2 remote control all tube

line-stage

Manley Neo Classic 300B SE/PP power-amps

Loudspeakers

Focal-JMlabs Micro Utopia Be loudspeakers sitting on a pair of generic heavy metal stands.

Audio Physic Luna 2 sub woofer.*

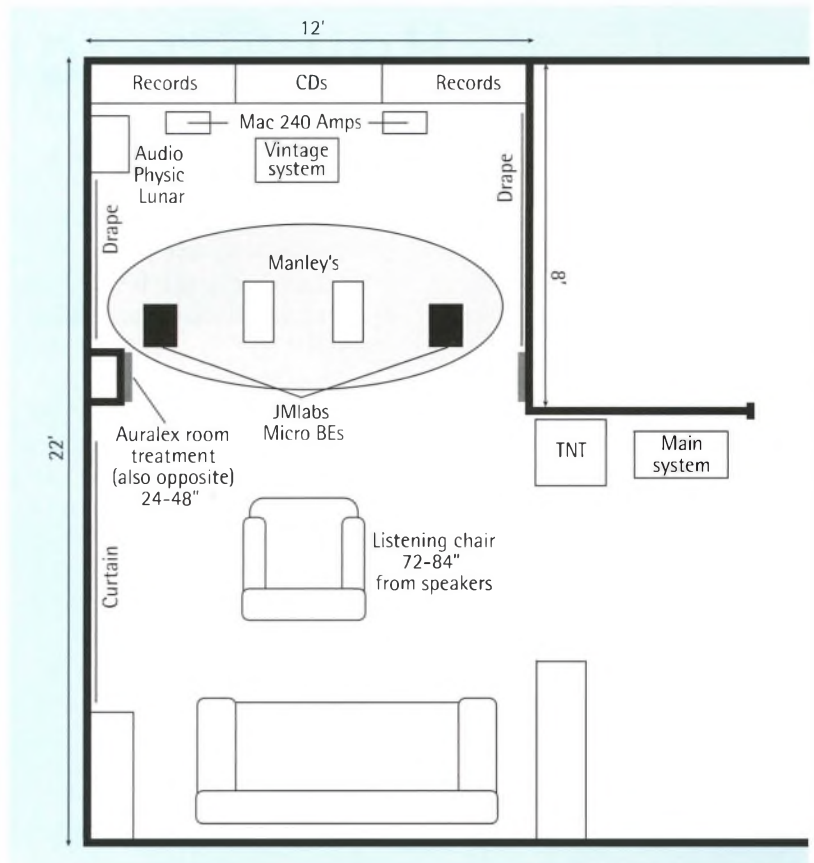
Ancillaries

Nordost Thor Power Distribution System by IsoTek.*

Burmester 948 line conditioner

Nordost Valhalla Power chords, speaker cables and interconnect

Full complement of support products from Stillpoints*



benefits of such continuity.

I thought last year would be it from the good folks at Stillpoints, but not so fast matey. They've come up with even more goodies! While I really liked my original ESS equipment stand, there is a newer and badder kid on the block, which you'll be reading about soon. Meanwhile, you've already read about their 'must have' Component Stands, essential to getting the best out of your system.

The icing on the cake for me was finally, really hearing what digital was able to deliver as an additional source, changing my feelings about this medium. With the help of the good folks at dCS, I bit the bullet and purchased a full-blown Verdi Encore Transport/Up-sampler, Verona Master Clock and Elgar+ DAC set-up. These three boxes have totally changed my mind regarding the possibilities from digital, especially SACD playback. I've had many hours

There is also a full retro system installed consisting of:

Thorens 124 turntable totally rebuilt with NOS parts, Ikeda 407t tonearm and Pierre Clement NOS moving magnet cartridge. Two McIntosh 240 amplifiers running in mono configuration
McIntosh C22 pre-amplifier
McIntosh MR71 tuner
Speakers are the JMlabs Micro Bes.

of real enjoyment from this medium and it's all thanks to dCS.

My records of the year? As far as vinyl is concerned, the hands down winners for me are Pure Pleasure's release of Stevie Ray Vaughan's, *Couldn't Stand The Weather* and Speakers Corner's *The Best of Little Walter*. And sorry... regarding digital, I'll have to list the entire RCA SACD Living Stereo catalogue. It's been another fabulous year.

► There are currently thirty releases and more coming for 2006.

2005 has also been a brilliant year on the equipment front. Not only have I gone over the top with my cartridge purchases (the Lyra Olympos SL and the Koetsu Coral) but VPI, teaming up with Nordost, now offers Valhalla tonearm wire! That allows me to run the same wire from cartridge tags to speaker terminals. If you don't think this synergy can be heard, think again. Even those who do not have the luxury of a full Valhalla system will 'clearly' hear the



Roy Gregory

Regular readers will know that I moved house this year, a trauma documented at some length in Issues 40 and 41. I'll not bore you with repetition, other than to note that the room gets better and better with experience.

The system has also changed, although in most cases its been evolution rather than revolution. Thus the Kuzma Stabi Reference and Triplanar combination became an XL/Airline set up: the Linear A power amp was supplemented with Linear B mono-blocs. However, there's one (very large) exception to that rule, in the angular shape of the Nola Pegasus. They're a long story, and one that starts near the beginning of the year.

Back in February, Harry Pearson of TAS invited (commanded) me to visit him at his Sea Cliff home to experience a new level of performance he'd achieved from his legendary reference system. When you break new ground, defining what's happening and refining that experience is the most challenging task facing the audio reviewer. Believe me when I say that all help is gratefully received. As soon as I heard HP's system I understood both his excitement and the problem he faced in communicating the revelatory nature of the experience. Undermined by years of intemperate exaggeration, the language of audio criticism was severely challenged by the task of describing and communicating the importance of the performance breakthrough he'd achieved. Well, Harry Pearson isn't HP (his audio alter ego) for nothing and he has proved equal to that task, the results readable in Issue 156 of *the absolute sound*, his review of the ASR Emitter II amplifier.

It's a model piece and well worth seeking out, but it doesn't cover the conundrum facing yours truly.

The problem is that HP has access to an unbelievable range and variety of equipment. Well, so do I. But what I don't/can't have is the massive, four-tower Nola Grand Reference speaker system that he uses, an astonishing macro lens onto the performance of the driving system. The performance breakthrough was there, but it was the speakers that let you hear it. The problem of course is, that once heard it's awfully hard to do without the benefits. How could I translate this new level of musical insight into my home environment?

Fortunately, the answer (at least an answer) was lurking in one of HP's other rooms. There stood, apparently abandoned and unloved, another Nola speaker which I was soon to discover was called the Pegasus. Fortunately, Nola designer Carl Marchiosoto realised that not everybody would or could, afford or accommodate the Grand Reference speaker system. Following his exposure to the system at Sea Cliff, he too set out to encapsulate the essence of the reference design in something rather more manageable (that means something less than a four-man lift per element). The result was the Pegasus, a speaker system that stacked its towers and weighed in at around a third the price of the Grand Reference. No, it doesn't match the performance of the monster rig, and placed side by side it does sound like the little brother. But, in isolation it's another matter all together.

I've been living with the Pegasus for around six months now and the results are exceptional. Not only has Carl Marchiosoto successfully embodied the performance attributes of the Grand Reference into a scaled down

realisation, in tonal and harmonic terms he may well even have exceeded them. The all AlNiCo driver line-up is astonishingly even and full of natural instrumental colour. The independence and separation of individual

System:

Analogue Front-ends

Kuzma Stabi XL with Airline tonearm
 VPI TNT6 with JMW 12 tonearm, all wands
 wired with Nordost Valhalla internal cabling
 Clearaudio Master Reference and Master TQI
 tonearm
 VPI Scout and JMW 9 tonearm
 Koetsu Jade Platinum
 Lyra Titan
 Lyra Helikon Mono (Everybody should have
 at least one mono cartridge and a tonearm
 to take it!)

ClearAudio Insider Reference
 Cartridge Man Music Maker
 TEAD Groove Plus phono-stage

Digital Front-end

Wadia 861SE CD player
 TEAD Vibe line-stage
 Howland HP100 pre-amp

Amplification

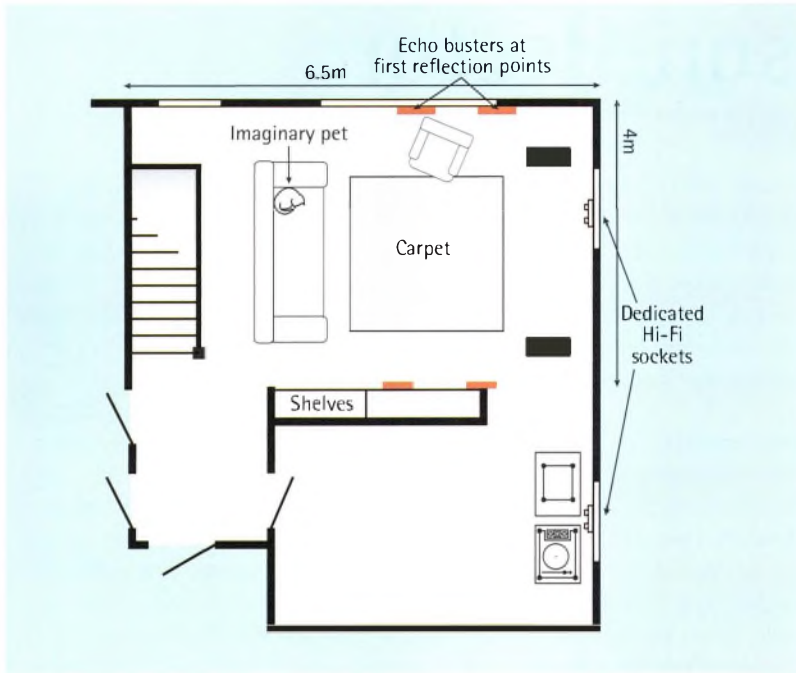
Herron Audio VTSP-2 tube and HL-1
 solid-state line-stages
 TEAD Linear A and B power amps
 Howland RADIA power amp

Loudspeakers

Nola Pegasus loudspeakers
 Living Voice OBX-R2 loudspeakers

Ancillaries

Nordost Valhalla mains leads
 Nordost Thor distribution boxes
 Exact Power EPA-15 conditioner
 Nordost Valhalla interconnect and
 speaker cables
 finite element HD Master Reference racks
 finite element CeraBase and Cerapuc feet
 Stillpoints Component Stands and cones
 Ringmat feet, domes and CD Statmat
 Echobuster panels



separation and dynamic snap. Which leaves me with a question. Do I stick to the original (which I'm dying to try with the AlNiCo magnet Dynavector XV-1s at the other end of the system) or do I get out the jigsaw and hack the cabinets to accommodate the larger drivers? Problems, problems...

► instruments within the coherent whole that makes the Sea Cliff system so dramatic and impressive is further enhanced by the trueness of shading, dynamic and harmonic, that defines the character of each performer or instrument. Voices have an uncanny, almost ghostly realism.

Flaws? Well, the Pegasus doesn't match the dynamic snap and sheer transparency of the Grand Reference (not to mention its enormous dynamic range, but hey, you can't have everything). Experiments with super-tweeters improved things pretty dramatically in these regards, albeit at the expense of some tonal discontinuity. Still, with colour and harmonics to burn it was a better than good trade-off.

So what should confront me at CES but a pair of Pegasus equipped with the mid-bass drivers from the Grand Reference. Stung by the criticism, Carl had responded by dealing with the bottom, rather than the top end. Yet the results were almost identical – just better: Same cost in terms of overall continuity, same gains in transparency, clarity,



On a happier (at least easier) note it's been a bumper year for music, new and used. With Dr Evil (otherwise known as RSF) emptying my wallet on a regular basis, my stock of fabulous pre-loved vinyl has soared to new heights, but contemporary releases have been just as gratifying.

Check out the latest from Steve Dawson, Eliza Gilkyson and the DeLuxe Edition Cure re-issues. Good stuff. More Please. ➤+

Jason Hector

System Changes:

My system only changed in one way in 2005; I upgraded my cartridge within the Dynavector range from a TeKaitora (TK) to the XV-1s. I'd assumed that the TeKaitora Rua would be the obvious replacement for my much loved and subsequently well worn TK, but I made the mistake of asking to hear it first. Instead, the distributor took the opportunity to run me through the whole range. Each step in the range made plenty of sense, obvious increments in performance being mirrored by increases in price,



and it was equally clear that the Rua represented a big step forward from the original TK. So, it was all going to plan - right up to the point that the XV-1s entered the system. I new I was sunk from the intro to the first track. The XV-1s is definitely not a cheap cartridge but the sound it produces is nothing short of remarkable. Admittedly I do not have experience with too many of the really big cartridges but I am convinced that the XV-1s is a contender (the editor, who does have more experience than most with cartridges at this end of the spectrum seems to agree) and is a fair bit less money than many of its competitors. So convincing is it that it made me reconsider my usual source first beliefs. An XV-1s in a Well

Tempered (WT) Classic was doing things the TeKaitora in the WT reference couldn't. I still think you need a pretty good deck and arm to justify the XV-1s, especially given its sheer bulk and considerable weight, but some of its magic will always get through. Ah, the magic...

New Products:

Whilst they are hardly a new product in terms of the market, the STAX headphones I reviewed for the last issue were new for me, and have managed to redefine what I thought headphones could do. Yes, headphones generally manage to resolve more detail; yes they are free of room artefacts and they do tend to have a wider frequency response; but they generally don't manage to get out of your head and sound spacious, and they rarely manage to make music sound like it is being produced by a real instrument in a real space as opposed to some drive unit strapped to the side of your head. If you have read a decent number of Hi-Fi+ issues (if not why not?) you will be aware of my preference for omni-directional speakers (pseudo-omnis if I am honest) and bizarrely the Stax headphones get closest to reproducing what the better pseudo-omnis manage. There's an inherent rightness to their sense of dynamics, space and scale. It's a neat trick which I think they achieve by having a beautifully balanced and incredibly even frequency response allied to fast and linear response with sound pressure level. To these attributes the Stax add incredibly low distortion and transparency. Think a really good pair of electrostatics that don't demand acres of space, have bass and where you are always in the sweet spot. The Stax

headphones get out of the way of the music so much more convincingly than their moving coil competitors, and as such I found myself listening to them by choice rather than necessity. They would have got an award but for the fact that the best are still to come in the headphone survey. <http://www.stax.co.jp/> UK Distribution: <http://www.symmetry-systems.co.uk/>

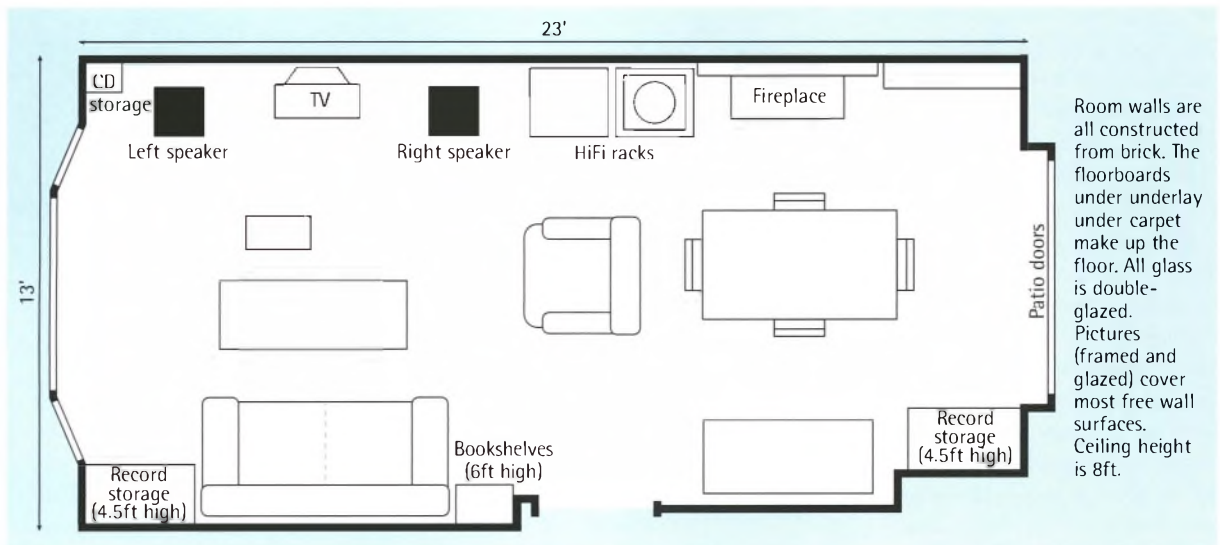
The other components that have really impressed me in 2005 are the new Neat Motive 2 speakers, the middle model in Neat's new three model, entry-level range for 2006. With prices of £650, £850 and £1200 the range consists of a stand-mounter and two floorstanders. There is also a centre channel speaker for those interested in such things. The Motive 2s are small (just 82cm tall and 13cm wide) and pretty floorstanders with fit and finish to a very high standard. Excellent cabinetry (construction and veneer) makes them appear particularly well priced. I have been listening to the Motive 2s on the end of my main system and I am very impressed; they do just about everything right and their sins are of omission rather than addition making them a very well balanced speaker capable of working with all music in a wide range of systems. They are an obvious beneficiary of the knowledge Neat have gained developing the Ultimatum series, illustrated best by the use of a derivative of the inverted dome tweeter developed by Focal. The other driver is a small bass-mid unit (two are used in the Motive 1). Like most Neat speakers the emphasis of the sound is on the all important rhythm, timing and integration of the music and they have a real knack of presenting the message in a piece. Like the bigger Neats, the balance of the speaker favours the high-frequencies and they get away with this through ►

▶ having an incredibly good treble, good enough to show up some much more expensive speakers. The bass response is pretty extended considering the tiny driver and the small enclosure. The speaker is reflex loaded with a port that vents from the bottom of the cabinet via a shaped slot in the rather neat plinth that bolts to the underside. Whether it is the port position or something else, the Motive 2 is incredibly easy to site. They simply do not seem to care greatly about distance from walls and work pretty

can then be decorated with pretty much any image you desire. A bespoke piece of fine art, a photograph or best of all replicas of album covers can be supplied. I had the chance to hear and see these in action and the results are impressive, both acoustically where a bright concrete box of a room was turned into a very neutral and forgiving space, and visually. They look just like expensive paintings and lent the room a gallery feel. I will be pursuing a diffusing panel of my own in 2006 to remove a slight zinginess in the treble response of

System:

Well Tempered Reference Turntable
 Well Tempered Reference Arm
 Dynavector XV-1s cartridge
 Micromega Duo Pro Transport and DAC (on a slate slab)
 Dynavector L300 pre-amplifier
 Dynavector P300 phono-stage (in L300)
 Dynavector HX1.2 power amplifier
 Shahinian Obelisk speakers
 Hutter Racktime tables
 Kimber speaker cables and homebrew digital and analogue interconnects



much anywhere, even in my difficult room. <http://www.neat.co.uk>

Most people who buy an expensive HiFi will pay some attention to the room in which it has to operate, usually by fiddling with the furniture. But to get the best from a system, especially one in a "bad" room, requires more serious treatment. Historically, most products available to create a better acoustic have been domestically unacceptable and the few attempts to improve matters have been pretty cursory (a bit of coloured cloth wrapped around the product). Finally somebody has realised that not only do we want to hear the affect of room treatments but we also have to look at them. Decorative Art Services now offer RPG Acoustics room treatments within linen canvases which

my room; my problem will be choosing the artwork to go on it! <http://www.decorative-art-services.co.uk/> <http://www.rpg-europe.co.uk/>

Unfortunately I am running out of space but I can't finish without mentioning some music from 2005; music that I have particularly enjoyed and that I think anybody will get something from **Seth Lakeman – Kitty Jay**: This is an album of modern folk music that was recorded in his sister's kitchen – and was nominated for the Mercury prize. An album of stories and strangely haunting instrumentation which sounds wonderful largely through the lack of production. **Ben Folds – Songs For Silverman**: Ben Folds piano work is as deft and expressive as ever on this album while his lyrical

abilities place him at the top of the tree. As emotionally charged as ever but with a gentler touch to several songs on this album. **Sufjan Stevens – three albums: Illinois, Michigan, Seven Swans**: When I first heard Stevens I found it very difficult to slot his style into any convenient box; a bit like Elliot Smith was the closest I managed. There is a mixture of so many styles but what is clear is that each and every aspect of each and every lyric or melody or piece of instrumentation has been carefully contrived for maximum effect. Sufjan Stevens can make music that is complex but he is not afraid of simplicity. Similarly the range of topics is vast, from the mundane to the bizarre. Intriguing and surprising, I really recommend a listen as soon as possible. ➤

Paul Messenger

Anyone who compares the above list of components with the equivalent published a year or so back in Issue 36 will notice that there haven't been many changes in my system over the last year. The regular core remains virtually unchanged, which is quite deliberate – it makes good sense to change things as little as possible when one's main task is reviewing loudspeakers.

That said, the ancillaries have undergone some refinement, with the addition of Vertex AQ's latest refinements – the Silver Plus Jaya parallel mains absorber and a couple of Super Kinabalu platforms – plus the Music Line Powerigel mains distribution unit, and a Harmonic Technology DIN-to-DIN lead between pre-amp and CD player.

I've added other components that provide some alternative points of reference: Anatek Audio's CMI remote control passive pre-amp, a recently restored Leak Stereo 20 valve power amp, and Rega's new Apollo CD player all provide welcome variety. And I've also included a pair of speakers for the first time. I really enjoy listening to B&W's excellent 800Ds, especially with the Vertex AQ bi-wire links, and also find them very useful when assessing other components – regrettably they don't get used continuously for any length of time because of all the other speakers queuing up for review attention.

The 800Ds were just one amongst a number of fine loudspeaker designs I came across last year. Indeed, if any one trend can be identified, it's that speakers as a whole have been getting markedly better as the years pass. While there are still vitally important differences from one to another, the overwhelming majority of today's models do at least seem able to deliver

a respectably neutral overall tonal balance.

From more than seventy different models tried this past year, I've picked out thirteen as particular favourites than encompass plenty of variety. B&W's 800Ds might have taken up residence, their massive-yet-tight bass and sweet diamond treble a constant source of delight, but the much smaller and altogether less pretentious 805S stand-mount two-way is a whole lot cheaper,



a whole lot of fun, and proved a real favourite in this household. If there were two particularly noteworthy B&Ws, the same could be said for Bosendorfers (VC-1, VC-7) and Regas (R3 and R7). Recent Dali experiences have been even more impressive, with the wildly contrasting Ikon 7, Helicon 400 and Megaline all setting impressive standards in their market sectors.

Both the Ikon 7 and Helicon 400 are fairly conventional designs subtly executed, but the active-drive Megaline was the largest, most costly and elaborate speaker I reviewed last year – yet also the most troublesome, as it required the doubling up of power amps and speaker cables, rendering direct comparisons impossible. That said, the

uniquely distinctive radiation pattern of a full height ribbon made it a memorably interesting and enjoyable experience.

The two Rega floorstanders are both notably good value for money, with real wood finish, a fashionably slim front, and a clever crossoverless side-mounted

bass driver.

Much more radically, the two Bosendorfers deliberately use their enclosure panels and 'acoustic sound boards' as an integral part of their sound sources, delivering rare dynamic realism in consequence, notwithstanding some colorations.

The four other speakers I'm going to mention ably illustrate the enormous variations that become available as one moves upmarket. The weirdest looking speaker I tried last year was certainly the Reson 3rd Rethm. A horn-loaded design conceived by a plumber rather than a carpenter – and none the worse for that – its solitary alnico magnet driver delivers magnificent realism, expressiveness, coherence and sensitivity across the mid-band, but not much output below 80Hz or above 5kHz.

The all-matt-black two-box Private Edition from Clearlight Audio is unlikely to win universal approval for

► presentation. But I became quite attached to its ultra-discreet hair-shirt appearance, as well as a sound that's notably free from time-smear and boxiness, and has extremely superior neutrality and dynamic consistency.

A somewhat similar dry-and-neutral sonic character could be ascribed to Mordaunt-Short's Performance 6, though here we find an exceptionally stylish loudspeaker in a beautifully finished moulded structural foam, stuffed with innovations, and selling at a very realistic price.

The final speaker is primarily aimed at the AV surround sector, but Naim's n-SATS/n-SUB 3-box combo worked very well indeed as a stereo system, and should do even better if two n-SUB sub-woofers are employed to provide more even in-room bass drive. Such a package

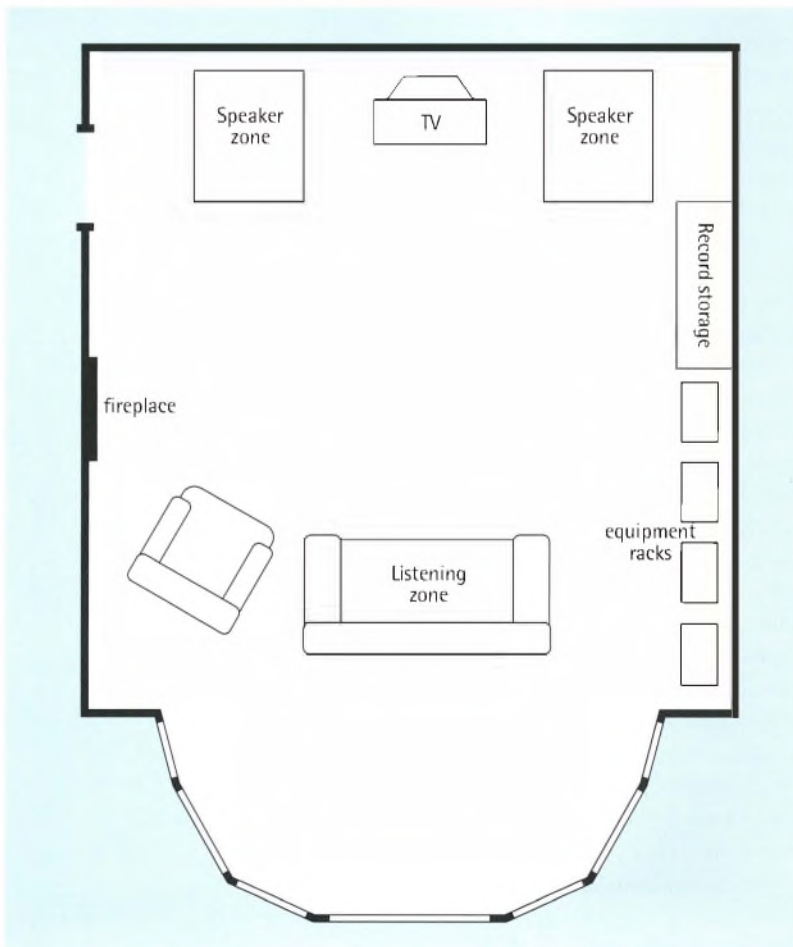
gets very close to providing the benefits of small satellites with the bass power and depth provided by two excellent active subs, with the bonus that each element can be discreetly located close to a wall.

If 2005 was a good year for loudspeakers, it also proved a great year for finding music. Last year I first encountered a fine band called Alabama 3, best known for 'Woke up This Morning' the title music to TV series *The Sopranos*. The band describes itself – quite appropriately – as playing Acid House Country Music, a bizarre blend that cunningly combines both wit and funk. Having steadily acquired most of the back catalogue, 1997's *Exile on Coldharbour Lane* (5 023469 004025) is the place to start.

I choose my software on musical

rather than sonic grounds, but it's a welcome bonus when the two come together, as they certainly do on New York performance artist Laurie Anderson's 2001 *Life on a String* (7559-79539-2). The same artist's *Strange Angels* has been a longstanding favourite of mine since the late 1980s, but *String* matches it musically and is even better sonically.

The third and final plug goes to Canadian combo The Arcade Fire for its 2005 recording *Funeral* (50501598-21921), which brings a very original approach to both song-writing and instrumental arrangements. The band could maybe do with stronger vocals, but its use of a wide range of acoustic instruments brings a subtle layered texture to the music that is genuinely unique and very refreshing. ▶+



System:

Sources:

Naim CDS 3, Burmester 001, Rega Apollo CD players
Modified Linn Sondek LP12 turntable with Rega RB1000 tonearm and Linn Akiva cartridge
Magnum Dynalab MD 102 tuner

Amplification:

Naim NAC552 pre-amp and NAP500 power amp
Anatek Audio CM1 pre-amp and Leak Stereo 20 power amp

Speakers:

B&W 800D

Cables:

Vertex AQ, NextGen phono terminated; Chord Company, Harmonic Technology and Naim DIN terminated interconnects
Vertex AQ, Chord Company, and Naim speaker cables
Music Line Powerigel mains distribution, Vertex AQ Silver Plus Jaya parallel mains absorber

Supports:

Mana, Townshend, and Naim Frain stands; Vertex AQ Super Kinabalu and Kinabalu platforms

Reuben Parry

Bricks And Mortar

We moved house last summer - exchanging familiar footpaths and bridleways in the Peak District National Park for that rugged beauty of Yorkshire's West Riding and those uninterrupted views across Bronte country. A three-month musical hiatus followed. This was always anticipated because the rooms within our new home, as well as requiring decoration, are of irregular and modest cottage proportions - none meeting the criteria for a dedicated music room.

However, from the outset, a remedy had been planned. The detached, double-skinned and slate roofed garage offered itself up for conversion. Power and lighting were already available and the bonus was an existing damp course found to be in excellent condition. Work eventually began towards the end of September. The main garage door was removed, being replaced by a double glazed window on top of a dwarf wall built from matching local stone. Internally, an insulated plasterboard ceiling was added, plasterboard walls were skimmed and an Indian stone floor cemented into place. A new consumer unit, feeding three un-switched power points, was also installed and these sockets were separately earthed to their own rod driven into the wet Yorkshire sod outside and to the rear of the garage. It was the first step towards cleaning up the mains supply, which is taken from the house. The finished room dimensions makes for a useful 17x14 foot rectangular studio but leaves me somewhat the poorer.

Unsurprisingly, as an empty space, it initially gave an extremely bright response. Hand-claps flashing

sharply around the room, though liveliness would eventually prove to be quite an asset here because, while listening to music was to be the priority, this room would also be the final resting place for thousands of LPs as well. The presence of so much vinyl does inevitably have a dampening effect upon the overall acoustic characteristics, partly taming and controlling the aural ferocity. The majority of my records were finally racked up within floor to ceiling storage behind the central listening position, without any obvious detriment and several positive benefits to the sound.

Well, at last I'm now sat down in a dedicated music room and can once again enjoy listening to and reviewing LPs and CDs. It is not all sweetness and light, as there is still a definite need to realise the room's full potential by building upon and maximising the sonic properties. Discernable crispness, speed and lucidity are decent starting points, but imaging, warmth and bass definition still require some attention. The Room Tunes acoustic treatments, including bass traps, will help. Attaining the correct positioning of the Eminent Technology LFT VIII panel loudspeakers is a task in itself, but to achieve perfect imaging means that a good deal of time and trouble must be spent with them. Also experimentation with equipment rack locations is on the agenda, but at the moment my old Audioplan speaker and interconnect cable looms are dictating where the kit has been sited. However, the plan for the near future is to re-cable the entire system using Chord Company products. This may also, in turn, lead to some repositioning of the

low record storage that currently runs along one of the side walls, so watch this space.

Playback

Like many, my system has undergone a number of changes over the years. Some have happened as increasing funds became

System:

Analogue Front End

Turntable: VPI TNT HRX

Arm: JMW Memorial 12.5 Tone arm

Cartridge: Lyra Titan

Phono Stage: Tom Evans Micro Groove

Digital Front End

CD Player: Tube Technology TriMode 64-Bit

Fusion CD Player

SACD Player: McCormack UDP-1 Universal

Disc Player

Amplification

Pre: Michell Argo/Hera Power Supply

Power: Trichord Alecto Mono-blocks (4no)

modified to 250w each

Loudspeakers

Speakers: Eminent Technology LFT VIII

Hybrid Linear Field Transducer

Loudspeaker with Sound Anchor Stands

Ancillaries

Cabling: Interconnect and Speaker cables by Audioplan

Mains: Cabling, Power Star S distribution blocks, Power Plants and Fine

Filters by Audioplan

Supports: RDC and Quadraspire Equipment Tables

Acoustic: Room Tune acoustic treatments including bass traps

Maintenance

Records: VPI HW16.5 Record Cleaning Machine

CDs: Disc Doctor Cleaning Fluid

Storage

Records: Ikea Bonde

CDs: Ikea Beno

Hi-Fi Experience:

Record Collector for the last 20+ years, a reviewer for Hi Fi+ since issue 1, and before that a hack on the short-lived AQ magazine. I am also, a regular contributor to music newsletters and occasional writer of CD/LP liner notes. The upsurge in re-issue label releases now means I've become far less precious about parting with rare and desirable records. Selling these LPs is and continues to be a liberating and financially rewarding experience. The love of music and an unbridled record collecting habit are closely linked. From the moment I heard my first proper turntable, a Rega 3, it became obvious that the further I went along the equipment upgrade path then the greater my understanding and enjoyment of music could be.

Desert Island Discs:

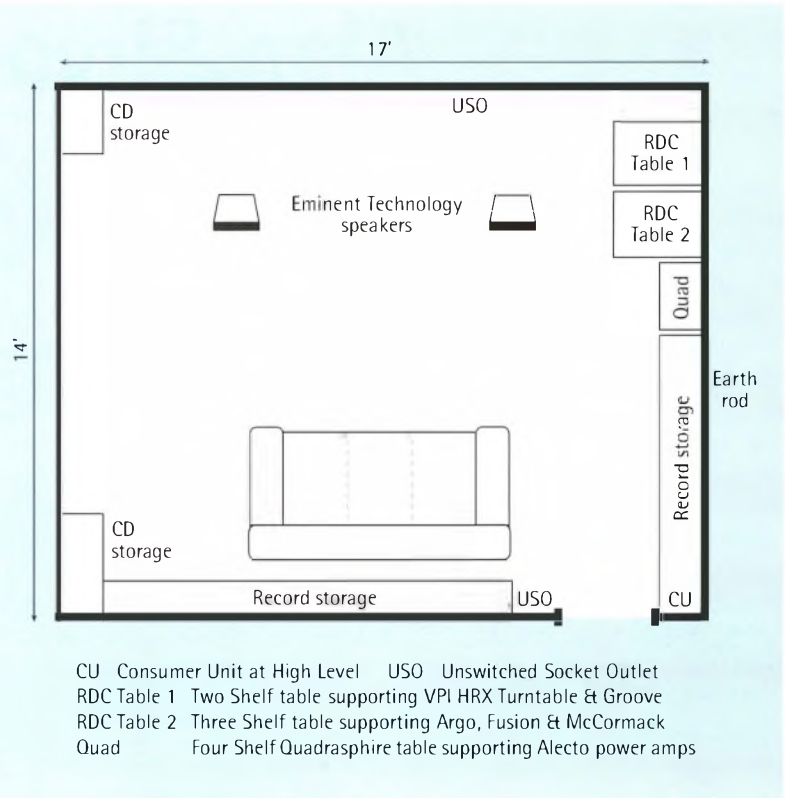
Eleanor McEvoy: *Yola*. Market Square Records MSMSACD113. SACD.
 Ella Fitzgerald: *George Et Ira Gershwin Songbooks*. Verve/Speakers Corner VS-6077-81. 180g LPs.
 Thelonious Monk: *The Riverside Tenor Sessions*. Analogue Productions APJ 037. 180g LPs.
 Lloyd Cole and the Commotions: *Rattlesnakes*. Polydor LCLP1 823683-1. LP.
 Dvorak: *Cello Concerto*. Janos Starker, Cello with Antal Dorati conducting the London Symphony Orchestra. Mercury Living Presence SR 90303. LP.
 Heifetz: *Brahms, Beethoven, Tchaikovsky, Prokofiev, Sibelius, Mendelssohn, Bruch, Glazounov Et Rozsa Violin Concertos*. LSC-1903, 1992, 2129, 2314, 2435, 2603, 2652, 2734 Et 2767. Classic Records 200g Vinyl Box Set.
 A greedy choice!
 Jimmie Lee Robinson: *Remember Me*. Analogue Productions APO 2006. 180g LP.

Book: James Lee Burke. *White Doves At Morning*.

Film: No change here as it's *Bringing Up Baby*, the Cary Grant/Katherine Hepburn screwball comedy.

Luxury: Sky Sports for Rugby and Cricket.

Indulgence: No real change here either. A Santa Cruz Blur mountain bike and I'll take my old mate, Alan to go biking with.



available. Others have been dictated by my own crass stupidity. Blowing up a much-loved pair of Audioplan Kontrast II loudspeakers was not the brightest thing I've ever done, but even here there was a silver lining - my exposure to the excellent Eminent Technology speakers that now reside at home. Elsewhere, an exceptionally classy and award winning analogue front end in the shape of a VPI HRX turntable needs little introduction, while a Lyra Titan cartridge has recently been added here as a replacement for an aging van den hul EMT. Real grunt down in the engine room is provided by four Alecto monoblocks. Graham Fowler of Trichord carried out the mods required to up-rate them to a solid 250w each, juice needed because of those power hungry speakers - a pair of LFT VIII hybrid panels, which really punch way beyond their weight to produce a well-integrated, subtle and satisfyingly

natural sound when you feed the beasts with sufficient current. In the digital realm playback is achieved via Tube Technology Fusion CD 64 and McCormack UDP-1 players. Both give enviably warm, accurate and natural performances - the UDP-1 being reserved for SACDs, while the Fusion is preferred for the standard digital format. Although the Micro-Groove phono stage and Argo pre-amp are a bit long-in-the-tooth, they remain immensely effective products. Yes, I would love to change them for the latest generation of Tom Evans equivalents but for now finances dictate that they remain in situ. Overall, I think it makes for a remarkably interesting and healthy blend of equipment, both old and new. This is the kind of hardware that does not overly or intrusively draw attention to itself at the expense of recorded analogue or digital musical sources - musicality and neutrality remaining its greatest strengths. ➤+

Alan Sircom

A couple of years ago, I spent a great deal of time experimenting with budget equipment to see how low I could go. I wanted to see how cheap you can go before the whole audiophile thing is replaced with little more than bland sound. It's at once an exciting and depressing experiment that I will hesitate to try again in this decade, but one thing's clear; after years of audiophile listening, your palette might need a good cleansing routine periodically, but be aware that it is forever altered. You cannot go back to entry-level hi-fi anymore.

After this breaking down scheme in 2004, last year was spent rebuilding and in contemplation. Money, time and space were at a particular premium this year (more so than usual), so the more heroic attempts at audio Nirvana were kept at bay. Nevertheless, big changes occurred to the system and it developed in a manner entirely unexpected.

Two products were pivotal this year; the Townshend TA 565 CD player and the Sugden A-21SE integrated amplifier. The first is hardly unexpected; despite having a loose grip on its little silver buttons (they fall off with alarming regularity), this extreme variation on the Pioneer DV-565 universal disc player theme is one of the best-sounding CD players money can buy. Its £3,000 price tag is entirely justified by the performance and anyone who has heard the product in anger is an instant convert. And there's the problem...

Trouble is, there are precious few products capable of performing with the same easy naturalness of delivery, unless you consider units that make a £3,000 player look like entry-level electronics. I tried

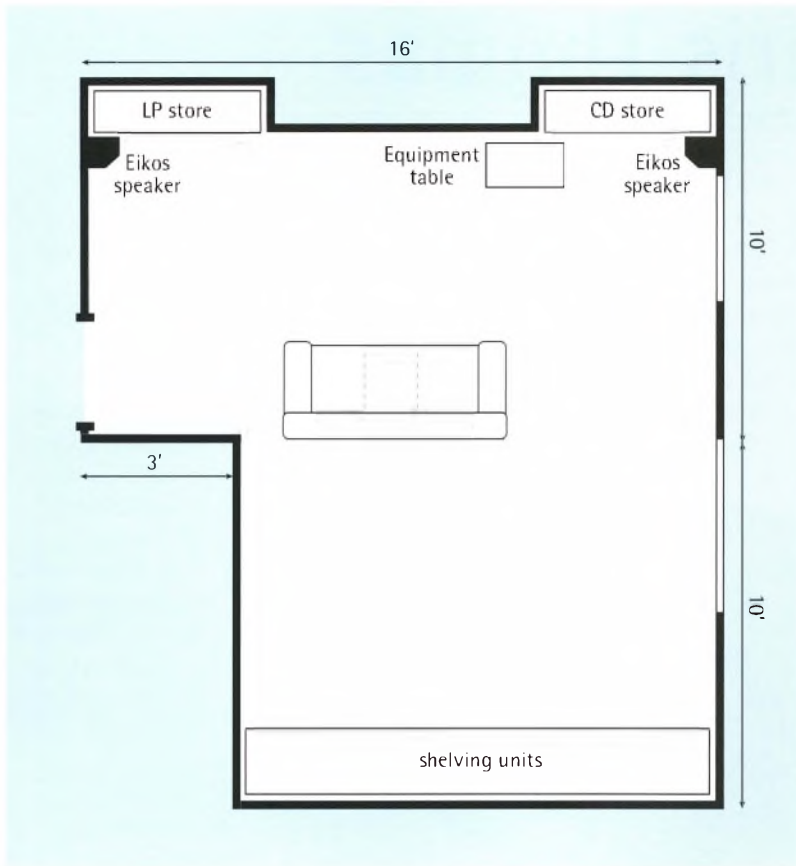
experimenting with equipment old and new (an antiquated EC Audio preamp I'd kept in a box for the best part of a decade being the most promising) but settled on the Sugden A-21SE for several practical reasons. Whatever it does, it does it sounding nice. It doesn't cost a fortune. It's winter and this doubles up as a heater. It's low-powered enough not to challenge my speakers at all. But, most important of all there is the sound; entertaining, rich, warm, comfortable and so very musical. It kind of dovetails perfectly with the Townshend player, which is also very musical but in a slightly stark manner.

I'm highly wary of all mains conditioners and treatments. But, an increasing number of digital devices, chargers and home cinema components have attached themselves to plug sockets around the home. These may well have a subtle eroding effect on the sound quality of the system as a whole, and such a 'may well' will have a very strong eroding effect on how I perceive my system. A separate spur and mains suppressors next to every offending item would help my psychological troubles, but time, money and 'can I be bothered' interceded. I could also go around the house, unplugging all the stray stuff. But once I'd removed all the battery pack chargers and power supplies, after I'd unplugged my printer, my broadband router and my Airport connection, then pulled the plug on the home cinema system and everything not connected to the hi-fi, I'd have lost interest in playing music and be ready to plug them all back again.

Enter the IsoTek GII MiniSub.

This effectively scrubbed clean my mains, helping to eliminate all those lazy features I'd forgotten to unplug. I'm supremely lazy here; I should give the Townshend a separate mains connection (it already has its own power scrubber), but I plug this, the Sugden and any tested products into the same IsoTek. In an ideal world, I'd like to experiment further, but Life Mode precluded any further investigation on IsoTek kit. For now. So, whether this actually improves matters or is merely a very expensive distribution block remains a question that only long nights of blind listening can solve.

All of this used to sit in the wibbly wobbly reference table from Quadraspire, but recently the Townshend bug bit harder, with the inclusion of the excellent new Versatile Seismic Sink Stand. Having replaced the air cushions with a series of load-bearing polymer cells, the whole stand looks and performs better than ever, and gives bass notes a sense of order they often lack with other furniture. The end of the Townshend addiction comes with the Isolda DCT cables for both interconnect and speaker level wire. These are still 'under advisement'; in short, I like the detail and the scale of the cable sound and the signal and speaker cables match one another greatly, but I'm not convinced they are the panacea Townshend believes them to be. Then again, I'm not convinced that any cable really makes that big a difference, ultimately; the reviewer in me says 'yes they do', the bit that always wanted to be a scientist says 'you must be joking'. Time – and possibly a few more tests – will tell. ►



System:

- Townshend TA565 SA
- Sugden A21SE Amplifier
- Eikos FR1 Loudspeakers
- Townshend Seismic Rack
- Townshend Isolda DCT Cables
- Istotek G11 MiniSub Mains Conditioner

► Here comes the strange bit. I was so stunned and impressed by a recent NXT Balanced Mode Radiator demonstration, that I recently put aside the ProAc Tablette Signatures I was using, to try and find something that can replicate the profound imagery the technology produced. I've got close, by using a wonderful speaker of old; the Eikos FR-1. This little-known but much loved crossoverless speaker has one Jordan unit as a full-range driver and needs to be placed into the corners of the

room for bass reinforcement, it can only work in small rooms and works best in a room where it can fire down the width, not length of the room. All of which makes it perfect for my current room (due to change in 2006... hopefully). Yes, I have lost about an octave of bass and the top end of the frequency band, but what I've lost in bandwidth, I've gained in speed and stereo. Essentially, these speakers have turned the sound of my room into headphones... and I like them for that. Of course, if a speaker breaks (the tacky blue flock covering is already looking distinctly saggy), I'm royally screwed and have to start from scratch, but that's a risk I'll take.

Musically, 2005 was an interesting return to form for the rock idiom, with excellent first albums from the likes of Bloc Party, The Magic Numbers and especially The Kaiser

Chiefs, plus superb follow-ups from Franz Ferdinand and the Gorillaz. This may have been the year I got weaned off drippy singer song-writers, too. K T Tunstall's debut was alluring at first but ultimately lacked the substance to sustain repeated listening and James 'Bloody' Blunt should have never relinquished his captaincy in my opinion. I've been to several weddings recently and Blunt's 'You're Beautiful' is first dance du jour at the moment, following in the footsteps of such luminaries as Sea-Lion Dion, Bryan Adams and Jeff Beck's 'Hi-Ho Silver Lining'. They may sound great on a hi-fi system – Damien Rice's 'O' being a particular fave of mine – but there's more to life than winsome. Of last year's musical output, the best is a toss-up between Gorillaz' *Demon Days* and Mylo's *Destroy Rock 'n' Roll*. Both play loud enough to finish off my Eikos speakers and can really kick.

So, where does that leave 2006? Even more experimentation is required. The amplifier possibly dances to a different beat to the rest of the system as it stands today. Bass needs to happen, whether from a sub-woofer or from a proper full-range loudspeaker. On the other hand, I might suddenly get fed up with the whole sound produced here and start back down the traditional US high-end hi-fi route. Perhaps the turntable will make a much-needed comeback. Or maybe I'll get a good Naim system and go back to Rockin' the Free World. Or perhaps I'll chuck it all in for an iPod! One thing's likely, though; I've outgrown the room and it's time to move on... and that may mean those changes to the system get put on hold until I get used to a new listening room. I've been cursed to live in interesting hi-fi times, may as well make them really interesting.



Chris Thomas

Achieving a good sound in a domestic living room is really all about coming to a compromise with the reflective and damped areas and that's what I have tried to do at home. The diagram shows a typical solidly built 1930's through-lounge arrangement which has a solid wooden floor and is sparsely furnished. I only use the front part due to large glass doors leading to the garden and inconveniently located radiators in the rear but I have found that I can turn the system through two positions, though there are issues with both.

Initially I used to fire the system long ways down the room as seen in position B. This had several advantages and some downsides. As the bay that they backed onto is so large it gave plenty of air behind the speakers and as I sat halfway down the room it gave about 13 feet behind them so I could get a really detached sound as there were no really close surfaces to cause any early reflections. The downside was that there were a couple of sound traps either side of my head where the remains of the old dividing walls were left to support the RSJ. This was the biggest problem, as I had to sit with my head in front of these to avoid the irritating smearing effects of caused by the sound bouncing around. But for pure openness this was the way to go, especially during the night when I could pull the curtains in the bay to kill the reflections from the window glass.

But I ultimately decided to move to what I have marked as position A. The potential downside here was that I would be sitting, or rather slouched, with a solid wall behind my head so I was concerned that I would be getting some compressive effects which would lead to bass bloom – and I hate that.



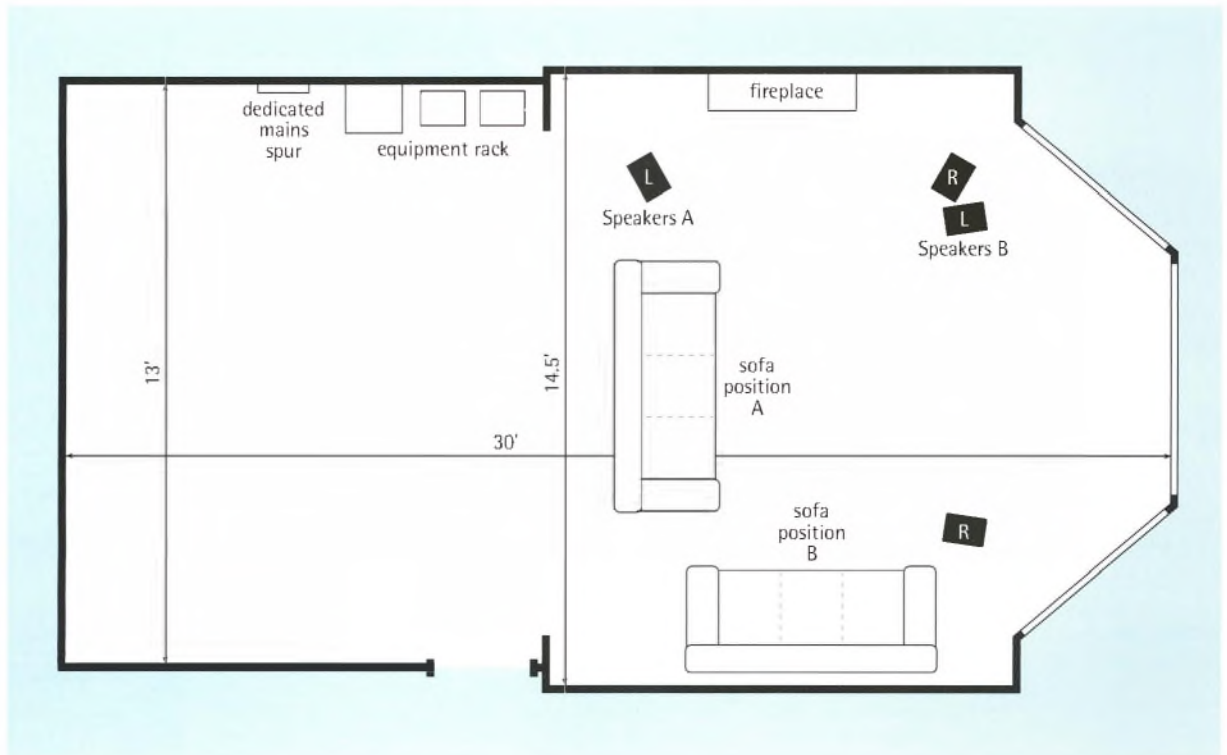
So I asked Richard Galbraith of Sandy Brown Associates, one of the worlds leading acoustic consultants and a long-term friend, to bring a spectrum-analyzer over so I could look at the behaviour of the room in both positions and in real time. This was a fascinating experiment as we could see at which position the room was particularly peaky and at what frequencies. The problem with such a scientific approach is always to know what to do with the information and how to actually minimize the problems within what is after all, a living room.

There are no cheap fixes although I do want to try some of the acoustic treatments commercially available later this year.

When I had an all-Naim system I used active SBLs and then DBLs hard back against the wall in position A and had a dedicated spur installed for that set-up where marked. I was really expecting some bass issues with the mighty DBLs, but there were none. However, being matt black they absorbed so much light that the room seemed perpetually in semi-darkness.

Due to the unreasonable length of speaker cable required I could not then utilise this spur with the system firing lengthwise. It's all swings and roundabouts but, as I like to listen late at night, I settled on position A. This is the more intimate way of listening and I am still surprised that I don't get more rear wall related problems especially at high levels, though I did buy a sofa with a very thick back to keep my head out of the compressive zone.

As I said, there is a wooden floor but I use a lightweight rug between the speakers. It's easily moved and gives me a bit of adjustable damping. There is also a solid marble sheet in the fireplace which is highly reflective but well behind the axis of the speakers. I tried damping it once but it killed the instrumental life in the soundstage so I have just left it. With the equipment stands (three Naim Fraims) situated in the



System:

Naim CDS3 CD Player
 Lyra Connoisseur 4-2L SE
 Tom Evans Audio Design
 Linear A Power Amp
 Focal-Jmlabs Micro Utopia Be
 Nordost Valhalla Interconnect,
 Loudspeaker and Mains Cables
 Naim Frain Racks
 Focal Loudspeaker Stands

▶ other room, at least with regard to the joists under the flooring, I think I'm lucky not to have to compromise this part of the installation.

I like the system to be as simple as possible so, sitting on the Frain supports are a Naim CDS3, which has one empty shelf between it and the power supply. The next unit, houses the Lyra Connoisseur 4-2L SE, again with an empty shelf between control unit and power supply while the last Frain and the one closest to the speakers is supporting a Tom Evans Linear A power amplifier. The Naim is powered through its

own power lead while the Connoisseur and Tom's amp use Nordost Valhalla power cords. I have tried these with the CDS3 but I do prefer the standard Naim lead (honest! – and if I didn't Naim might send the boys round). Interconnects are all Valhalla as are the speaker cables (2 x 6metres).

At the end of all this sit a pair of Focal-Jmlabs Micro-Utopia Be speakers on their own stands. I've done a fair amount of experimentation with spikes and things and have found that, under the stands I like the Nordost Titanium Pulsar Points as not only do they sound better than anything else, they also give me the ability to move and re-level the position of the speakers quickly and given the amount of gear that passes through, that is absolutely invaluable. For every single component change I make to the system I expect to make a change in the speakers positioning, even if it is only a few degrees twist or an inch or so of movement. It is one of the great overlooked tweaks

and a real problem for those with speakers permanently sited on screws in the floor. But in my opinion this can make or break a system. I have known situations where it has changed my mind over a piece of equipment.

Though I am not by nature a tweaker I must confess that, on Jonathan Carr of Lyra's advice, I polished the pins of my mains plugs to a ludicrously high quality finish. It took absolutely ages, largely due to flushing off the cleaning agent which I did with Caig DeoxIT. During this furious polishing session my wife walked in and saw me sitting cross-legged on the floor amid a pile of grubby old T-shirts and tissues and smelling of Brasso. "What are you doing?" she said. "I'm polishing the pins of all these mains plugs to a mirrored finish" I replied. "Mmmm," she said as she left the room. Then as she went up the stairs I'm sure I heard her say to herself, "He's really gone this time". And do you know what? I think she might be right. ▶+

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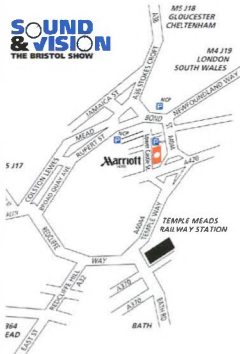
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and more...



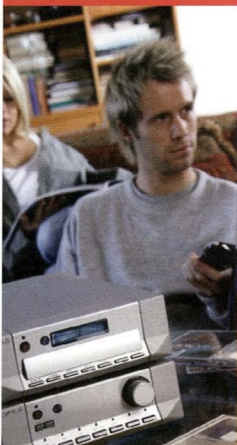
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Record Reviews
















How To Read Them

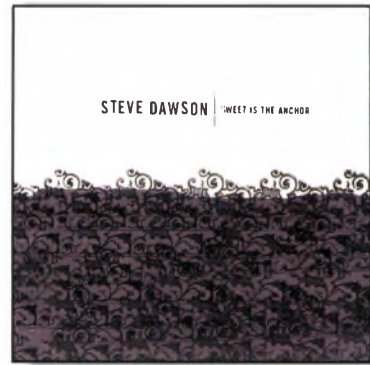
The information contained in the record reviews is presented in the following way. Albums are identified by label and serial number. Beneath this you will find one or more icons which denote the available formats for the recording. The first icon refers to the format reviewed.

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

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


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-  Vinyl Double Album



Steve Dawson

Sweet is The Anchor

Undertow CD-UMC-028 

Dolly Varden frontman Dawson fills in time with this winsomely charming solo project. 11 tracks span the lost desperation of 'Temporary' to the melting beauty of the title track, a duet with wife and fellow DV-er Diane Christiansen, via such unlikely stops as the deeply funky soul groove of 'Love Is A Blessing' and the stock singer-songwriter fare of 'Friend Like A Wheel'. But the binding cement that holds the whole together and sets the tone is Dawson's perception and intelligence, his ability to fasten on an unusual viewpoint on the familiar, his insistence on persuasion in place of bludgeoning dictation.

The subtle twists and deft emotional sleight of hand ask more questions than they answer, the open-ended arrangements have an unfinished, almost aimless lack of conclusion that underlines their lack of certainty. In a world where it's becoming increasingly obvious that we know a lot less than we think we do, there's a disarming honesty to this work, yet, impressive as it is I can't help being reminded by the two duets that the Dawson-Christiansen-DV axis is so much greater than the sum of its parts. More than worthwhile on its own, perhaps *Sweet Is The Anchor* is the ultimate aperitif for the new DV album that's due this year.

RG

RECORDING 
MUSIC



The Cure

Seventeen Seconds Deluxe Edition

Fiction 982 183-1 (CD)

Faith Deluxe Edition

Fiction 982 183-4 (CD)

Pornography Deluxe Edition

Fiction 982 183-7 (CD)

For those unfamiliar with Universal's Deluxe Editions, what you're buying is a re-mastered version of the original album paired in a swanky gatefold package with a second disc of previously unreleased but contemporary material drawn from sessions, demo tapes, live gigs and alternative versions. It's something of a high-risk strategy, based entirely on the success (or otherwise) of the re-mastering and the availability of worthwhile additional material. Like all such schemes, sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn't. The Lloyd Cole and the Commotions *Rattlesnakes* was a conspicuous success: John Martyn's *One World* an equally gruesome embarrassment. Like any process that involves original tapes, various mixes and retrospective judgement, it's not always easy to divine the reasons behind the catastrophes, but you have been warned.

Fortunately, in the case of these three Cure re-issues the results are superb. Poorly served by their original release on the beer-mat format, they are long overdue, and the results, overseen

by the man Smith himself, are worth the wait. Taken in chronological order, *Seventeen Seconds* represents possibly the most accessible of the band's early output. Upbeat, even boppy tunes are full of hooks and driving rhythms that reward frequent playing as well as advanced application of the volume control. The Deluxe package offers up the original album on one disc with 15 rarities on the other. As well as the obligatory live versions of the album tracks there are a couple of demos (including the previously unreleased 'Another Journey By Train') and studio as well as live versions of spin-off band Cult Hero's two singles (actually the same two tracks just reversed for A and B sides on different editions). The end result is more than enough to satisfy both newcomers and hardened fans alike and a model of how these things should be. Sound quality of course varies, but the original album has polished up brilliantly and sounds pretty damn good.

However, even better is *Faith*. Originally released in 1981, this sombre, brooding, undulating album is a natural progression from the repetitive beats and layered rhythms that underpin *Seventeen Seconds*. Pared away in form and then fleshed out with keyboards, the result is a moody, affecting soundscape of thoughtful emotional textures, the apogee of early Cure. The Deluxe release excels itself, both sonically on the original album tracks material, but also in the choice and range of additional material. First, you get the soundtrack 'Carnage Visors' (previously only released on cassette!) tacked onto the end of the original album, an instrumental coda

that fits like a glove (no pun intended).

On the second disc there's a superb collection of out-takes, demos (especially the title track) and a couple of tracks that didn't make the album. Six live tracks are capped off with the rare and absolutely wonderful 'Charlotte Sometimes' previously only available as a single or on the singles collection *Standing On A Beach*. The 12" version would have been even better, but hey, that's getting picky, picky, picky...

Pornography is a far more difficult proposition. Transitional in nature it also represents something of a musical blind-alley, a dark chasm that the band pulled back from to reach the sunnier climes of *Japanese Whispers* and the popular success of the single 'The Lovecats'. Ultimately Smith was to exorcise his musical demons in company with Steve Severin of The Banshees, but *Pornography* shows where it might have all gone wrong. The dense, slabs of sound and clashing chords, minor keys and wailing vocals are intense and initially impenetrable, requiring perseverance to mine the gem-like strands entwined within. It's an effort few but the most committed were prepared to make and whilst I love the album and applaud the re-mastered sonics, it's not a disc for everyone. Even the additional tracks are likely to appeal more to the die-hard fan, for whom this will be an essential purchase. For less dedicated listeners, the other two offerings are both easier and more rewarding. Treat yourself, you'll not be disappointed.

RG



The Chalets

Check In

Setanta SETCD 150 


The Chalets debut album has rarely left my hi-fi since I acquired it, on its release, back in October. At first *Check In* may seem an unlikely candidate for a must-have album. After all their music should properly be classified as pop, but like Blur and Pulp before them, they combine easily accessible music with clever observational lyrics. Musically the band cast their ambitions back nearly 50 years, with sugar sweet female harmonies and simple guitar codas they bring to mind American diners with a squeaky clean high school cast. But this is no trip down memory lane; 80's synths and drum machines fill the songs out and give the record a more modern sheen and bite. The production here is superb, keeping the different musical elements well separated and crystal clear, the heavily fuzzed guitars retain their chainsaw punch without becoming muddy in the mix. The songs depend crucially on the tightness of their performance, with each element perfectly timed and restrained, clipped and precise. The Chalets best trick however is to inject a dose of humour into every song without stooping to making a novelty record. *Check In* is slick, stylish and hugely entertaining. If you like a record that can make you smile, but doesn't grow to irritate over time, then this could be for you. This debut album is far better than might expect, and amongst my favourite albums of last year.

MC



Patty Loveless

Dreamin' My Dreams

Epic EPC 5205102 

There are, in my opinion, three great interpreters of other people's songs in country music; Trisha Yearwood, Emmylou Harris (hardly a country singer these days) and of course, Patty Loveless. Patty's last two albums have veered more towards bluegrass (particularly *Mountain Soul*), and as that's one area of country I find difficult to stomach, I approached *Dreamin' My Dreams* with a certain amount of trepidation. I needn't have worried as this new album is more in keeping with *When Fallen Angels Fly*, one of my favourites and definitely the kind of country she does best. Typically, the album's songs come from the pens of some of Nashville's most successful writers, but in Patty's hands they avoid falling into the sickly or the overly sentimental; in other words, she keeps the emotions real and the feelings at their most heartfelt. Turn the amps up and she motors, give her a ballad and she'll break your heart in two. When she's rocking she does so effortlessly ('Same Kind Of Crazy') but a ballad in this girl's hands is akin to giving a blind man sight, such is the joy she brings to them.


Dreamin' My Dreams is not Patty's best album but it still stands head and shoulders above the competition and shows any would be country singer how it should be done.

AH



Eric Bibb

A Ship Called Love

Telarc Records CD83629 

A new Eric Bibb record is always cause for celebration; his particular brand of gospel/folk/blues rarely disappoints his many fans and this latest offering's not about to upset the applecart. With one of the smoothest and most soothing voices in his field Bibb's been delighting audiences around the globe, garnering praise from the press and fellow musicians along the way. *A Ship Called Love* is another fine collection of Bibb originals, beautifully played and sung, which also features a guest appearance by rising young star Ruthie Foster on three of the tracks. She contributes a great scat vocal to 'Like Aretha Loves To Sing', adds some really husky soul to the duet 'Troubadour' and offers sensual humming in all the right places on the gentle 'More O' That'. Bibb's a huge fan of Curtis Mayfield and it shows on the title track, effectively a rewrite of the classic 'People Get Ready', and it comes complete with obligatory gospel backing, courtesy of The Dixie Hummingbirds. A distinctly Caribbean flavour appears on 'I'll Never Lose You' and there's more of a fleshed out band sound to the punchy 'The Way You Are', Bibb trading his trusty acoustic for an electric and proving he's equally adept with either instrument. As always with Telarc the recording is top drawer, as is the content contained within the grooves. A fabulous record.

AH





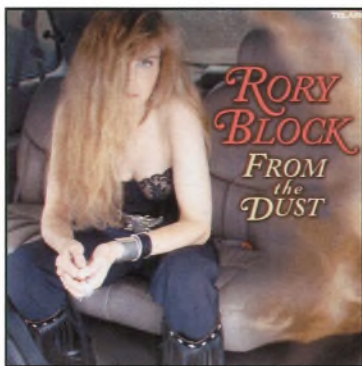
Eliza Gilkyson

Paradise Hotel

Red House Records RHR CD 187

The righteous outrage and tempered genius of *Land Of Milk And Honey* was always going to be a hard act to follow, so perhaps it's a sign of Gilkyson's artistic maturity that she's confident enough to move both back to her roots and forward in time. Yes, a track like 'Man Of God' leaves you in no doubt as to just what at least half of America thinks of George W. and his foreign policy, but the reflective words of 'Jedidiah 1777' conjure a historical context against which to contrast the actions of the present and the lessons, learnt and unlearnt, of the past. Less angry it's no less effective, while her decision to step forward in the mix and carry more musical weight on the shoulders of her voice and guitar make this a more traditional sounding album. And of course, it's that deep, husky voice that makes her work so singular and so attractive. Not one to hide the hurt between lovers any more than the hurt between peoples, Gilkyson is at the top of her game. A gentler, more beautiful album than *Land Of Milk And Honey*, *Paradise Hotel* is just as rewarding. The other side of Eliza Gilkyson? No, just one of the many.

RG



Rory Block

From The Dust

Telarc Records CD83614

Anyone not yet familiar with Rory Block who has a yearning to hear authentic Delta Blues played with passion, devastating mastery of the acoustic guitar and total respect for the tradition, should start by purchasing this magnificent album. Ms. Block has been a recording artist since the 1960's, but took a decade off to raise a family. She returned to recording in the '70's with a couple of albums of more mainstream material, but became disillusioned by others trying to mould her into something she wasn't, so she went back to her first love, the blues. A clutch of excellent albums followed on the Rounder label until she found her way to Telarc, recording *Last Fair Deal* in 2003 and *Sisters and Brothers*, a collaboration with Maria Muldaur and Eric Bibb, in 2004. With a mixture of fine originals and tried and tested classics, this latest offering bristles with a confidence and a freshness that so many others try to achieve but few come close to matching. The flurry of notes Rory coaxes from her Martin guitar weld seamlessly to her authentic voice, and the whole thing's held together with excellent production. Usually acoustic albums become wearing but not this one; it's just like a vintage wine, full bodied and overflowing with the finest of flavours. However, you don't have to be an expert to enjoy its contents.

AH



Maximo Park

A Certain Trigger

Warp WARPCD130

Last year a number of new bands made an assault on the charts with some success, people like the Futureheads and Bloc Party. Some of their albums were instantly great, but I've been sitting on a few others to see which of them would stand the test of time.

A Certain Trigger is certainly a good album and three solid singles as well as a whole load of good album tracks make it pretty instantly accessible. More importantly this record has a punch that a lot of their contemporaries lack, with each song just that little bit more urgent and immediate. Maximo Park build on the sound of bands like the Kaiser Chiefs but add an art school intelligence and experimentalism. Perhaps a track like 'Graffiti' embodies this best, with a good hard bass riff, powerful drum lines and howling vocals married to a distinctly art house lyric: "I'll do graffiti if you sing to me in French". *A Certain Trigger* is set apart by its willingness to experiment, and as the album progresses the band take the chance to explore their ability.

In line with current fashion, the recording is in the school of "worst tech". The first half of the record sounds as if it could have been recorded on a mobile phone. The songs could be said to benefit from the grit, just don't expect it to fill your room with a huge sonic landscape.

MC





Black

Between Two Churches

Nero Schwarz Records Nerocd10

Between Two Churches marks a return to recording for Colin Vearncombe, the driving force behind Black and the man responsible for placing the sublime song 'Wonderful Life' into millions of thankful subconscious's. That one song, like Steve Harley's 'Come Up And See Me (Make Me Smile)', has a special connection with record buyers everywhere, and no doubt ensures Vearncombe doesn't have to worry too much about a state pension. In the '80's and early '90's Vearncombe released three fine albums for A&M, but after his contract expired he turned to internet only sales for subsequent releases, dropping the Black monicker and recording under his own name.

Between Two Churches isn't quite as dark as previous work (no pun intended), instead it relies upon tasty production from in-demand engineer Calum Macoll and some of Vearncombe's sharpest songwriting to propel it into the listener's imagination, and whilst there's nothing quite as instantaneous as 'Wonderful Life' there are still plenty of memorable moments. The jaunty 'Cold Chicken Skin' locks into an acoustic groove and is liberally spiced with some choppy, bluesy guitar and the lovely ballad 'Charlemagne' is a real peach, even if the chorus is nicked from a Fleetwood Mac song! It won't dent the charts this time but *Between Two Churches* is a welcome return for this talented singer/songwriter.

AH



Sonny Terry

Sonny is King

Analogue Productions/Bluesville BV 1059

The two sides of this record carry two very distinct and different sessions. Side A teams harmonica player Terry with the great Lightnin' Hopkins on guitar, Leonard Gaskin on Bass and Belton Evans on drums, and is recorded by Rudy Van Gelder. Side B teams Terry with his usual guitarist Brownie McGhee, and was recorded by Fred Miles, a recording engineer who released a small number of titles on the Fred Miles Presents label. On side A, Terry mixes his usual folk-tinged blues with a number of songs charged with typically less than subtle sexual metaphors ('Tater Pie' and 'Diggin' My Potatoes'). While he never gets as down and dirty as some other bluesman (my favorite being Tampa Red's 'It's Tight Like That' and 'Let Me Play With Your Poodle'), Terry was a remarkable mouth harp player, and these performances are first rate. Whilst I prefer the songs and performances with the larger group, the duet side has a spontaneity bred from the long relationship with Brownie McGhee. What makes this a truly stand out record is the fine sound, which just jumps out of the speakers. Although this is a stereo recording with rather hard left and right separation (especially on the McGhee songs), that anomaly distracts little from the performance. Both the Van Gelder and the Miles sessions are impressive, and the remastering is a significant improvement over the original.

DDD



Jackson Browne

Solo Acoustic Vol. 1

Inside Recordings CDANGED 1

A couple of years ago it was my great pleasure to attend two concerts by legendary West Coast singer/songwriter Jackson Browne. I'd been a fan for a very long time but never seen him live - he didn't disappoint. Almost as entertaining as his songs was his between songs chat, and for mine and your pleasure there are eight examples included on this disc. Don't worry if you want to go straight to the songs because they have a track number and can be skipped. Personally I like to listen to the whole thing as Browne is a funny guy and because the spoken passages add charm and intimacy to the whole affair.

As the title suggests, this is just one man and his guitar and keyboard, singing 12 of his finest compositions in front of an enthusiastic and willing crowd. Tracing a song back to its origins and presenting it to an audience in its naked form would be a daunting prospect for the most hardened pro, but Browne's the consummate musician and revels in the feedback and the closeness of the occasion.

There might not be a band to flesh out the songs but it doesn't matter because they translate to acoustic form like a duck takes to water, and that is the mark of great songwriters, of which Jackson Browne is definitely one.

AH



Sequoia...

Blast from the past, trip to the future

by Andrew Hobbs

Remember the halcyon days of pop music; days when bands used to write songs with lingering melodies and memorable choruses, the days when a pop song was so much more than a five minute memory? If you thought the

writing skills of the likes of Crowded House, Squeeze and The Kinks would never make a comeback and were lost to the world forever, then you might just want to invest in *Ebb and Flow*, the debut album by a group of young men from Farnham, Surrey who have crafted one of 2005's most endearing and consistently brilliant records. *Ebb and Flow* bulges with potential hit singles; a fair portion of the songs on display here would grace the airwaves with a panache that's been missing for far too long. Take 'Laura Valentine' as an example; it's more addictive than cigarettes and one of those sing-a-long tunes that once heard is never forgotten, and it contains the killer ingredient capable of grabbing the attention of teenagers and grannies alike - the memorable chorus. If this song ever got the radio exposure it deserved you would find it turning up on every party compilation

going, where it wouldn't sound out of place alongside tried and tested classics like 'Get It On', 'You Really Got Me', 'Weather With You', or any other legendary pop number. Andy Stedman, lead vocalist and principal songwriter of Sequoia, focuses a large part of his writing talents on something just about all of us can confess to knowing a little about - relationships. He has a vintage head on young shoulders, with a knack of expressing the pain, loss and emotional turmoil we all feel when love breaks down. He does however, always try to find a positive in amongst the negatives, and ends most songs on the premise of hope.

On 'September Sun', a song about a summer fling

that meant more to the author than it did to the recipient of his affections, Andy sings: "All the records I played you, meant nothing to you / the part of me I gave you, meant nothing to you".



those lines been delivered at the end of the song they'd have left a bad taste, but in comes that desire to turn it around, to look to the future with fresh hope, so he finishes with the words: "So please excuse me, if I'm sad for those days / please excuse me, if I feel I've been fooled / please excuse me, if I build up a wall around my soul / but I just can't let you (do that to me), I've just got to forget you (be true to me)."

It's one of Andy's favourite songs and mine too, but if accolades were to be handed out for the best one they would be given to the song that gave the album its name. 'Ebb and Flow', a slow moving piece about the cycles of life, has modern classic written

all over it. The opening line "I became a man the day I saw my mother fall " draws you in immediately and urges you to carry on listening, even when it feels like an intrusion to do so, such is the poignancy of the lyric. But again Andy turns a sense of loss into visions of brighter things to come, ending the song with the beautiful lines " I embrace that life will... ebb and flow, and break our hearts some days, though we'll still forge our own true ways / and when the journey finally ends, we'll be surrounded by all our friends..."

Of course, great songwriters need great musicians to bring the songs to life, and it must not be forgotten

that, first and foremost, Sequoia are a band. Chris Earland delivers fine rhythm and lead guitar and always approaches his playing from the less-is-more school, and the engine room is well stoked by Mic Harrison on drums and the effervescent Ben Maxon on bass. Most recent member, keyboardist Andy 'Longhair' Scott, brings a little extra to the mix with his inventive playing and well placed harmonies, a perfect foil for Andy's highly distinctive but very contagious lead vocal. Sequoia have crafted an album of lasting appeal; for my money they are exactly what a generation brought up on computer generated blips and synthesised noises need to be listening to right now. If there's a DJ brave enough to go against the grain and one who's prepared to play any of their songs in heavy rotation (are you reading this Johnnie Walker?), then we might very well see a return to the glory days, when a pop song was a pop song for all the right

reasons. *Hi-Fi Plus* recently caught up with Andy Stedman in a plush wine bar in Farnham and, over a diet coke or two, asked him to expand on the creation of *Ebb and Flow*, along with a few other things in between....

HFP: The album certainly ebbs and flows. Was that a conscious decision?

AS: Yes definitely. It's supposed to mirror life's ebbs and flows, and the order took a bit of head scratching to decide upon. For example 'Laura Valentine' is not necessarily the best song but it sets the scene for the rest of the album, which is primarily about searching for what you want in your life. I'd love to find my own 'LV' but the worry is that

we're fed these romantic notions that are unrealistic, though I hope they're not! Do we settle for less, does she really exist? Same with all our life choices, how much are we willing to dilute what we've always hoped for?

HFP: Is there a real life Laura Valentine?

AS: I like the name Laura and wrote it around Valentine's Day. A month later I met my girlfriend who happened to be called Laura, so I took it as a fate thing. We've split now. I want a girl who is soulful, someone with depth and an edge, and that's what the song is about - searching for my Laura Valentine. Funnily enough, I've had three real

last legs looking at a child in a pram and it struck me as a very poignant moment. There's something man enough about being able to show emotion and that's what part of the song is about - moving from adolescence into manhood. The second verse is about rebirth; from sad moments you get good realizations. When I write a song I don't like to finish on a negative note, I always look for a positive way to round it off. The last verse is about looking in the mirror and being honest with yourself and that to me is the most important thing. I guess the purpose of life is to find your way in the world.



life Laura Valentines contact me on the website!

HFP: Some of the lyrics are incredibly touching, the ones to 'Ebb and Flow' for instance. Does that song relate to personal experience or did it come from a different place?

AS: That first line isn't about anyone in particular and the whole song is about the way life changes. I'm at a phase in my life right now where I'm no longer a kid but I've yet to find myself; I feel I'm in limbo - a second adolescence, if you like. It's important to realise what matters in life. As a young boy I always had a strong connection with the happy side and the sad. I remember being in a service station and seeing an old woman on her

HFP: Are all the songs based on life experiences?

AS: Yes, but generally other peoples! Some of my life is in there but I see the songs as a patchwork. Songwriting is all about the truth and I tell it as I see it. 'Close To The Sun' is more about me. I was in a boring 9-5 office job and realised I needed to take a chance in life; maybe to fall flat on my arse or perhaps to succeed, but one thing's for sure - if I didn't try I'd never know.

HFP: At what point in your life did you decide you wanted to be a singer?

AS: When I first saw Elvis on the TV. It was a live performance and as soon as I heard that amazing voice I wanted to be him. You know, Elvis could

sing the worst song in the world and still make it sound fantastic... and all the girls loved him! The first half of 'Boy Who Saved The World' is about him and the second half is about how he affected my childhood. I did my university dissertation on Elvis and his effect on modern society. Before him there was no rebellion between adults and kids; he gave kids an identity separate from their parents.

HFP: Are you a self taught musician?

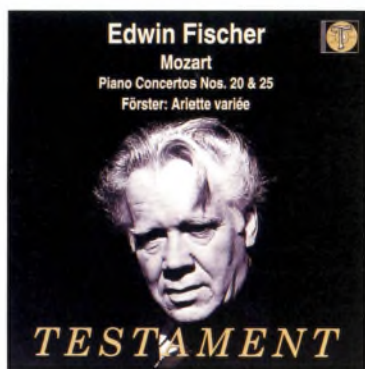
AS: Yes, and I can't read music... but I had the best teachers. Elvis, The Eagles, Paul Weller - in those three artists I have all the inspiration I need to write. They have everything in terms of writing and singing.

HFP: And finally Andy, what are your aspirations for 2006?

AS: On the musical side of things, I really want Sequoia to keep growing as a band, enhancing our reputation and getting more airplay, better gigs and media coverage. It is hard for a new band on a small indie label to get the attention we think our music deserves, but we love doing it and really believe in it. We love gigging and hope to do some abroad too, and behind the scenes we're working on material for a second album. It's all new to us, and one 'break' can suddenly change everything, so who knows...

On a personal level, I am officially excited about 2006! Obviously doing the music full time is an amazing thing, I am very lucky to be able to do that as it is my passion. I also feel healthy and my mindset is positive. The last couple of years have been about making difficult changes, ones which have required me to face the force of my true convictions. Sometimes the correct route is not the easy one, which is why many people unfortunately stay with situations they aren't happy in. But I am now spending my time as I would like and feel very free - it's a thrill to feel free and fresh. It would be great to meet a fab girl as well, but I feel so happy that if that doesn't happen then so be it. I would like to see my team QPR do well in the Championship, and for Ian Holloway (the manager) to get the success he and the fans deserve after some tough years. Also for England to win the World Cup in Germany and for us to retain the Ashes. My poker game needs improving this year, and I am determined to start on the sitcom I have always wanted to write.

Anyway, what I do know about 2006 is that I am here, I am like a dog in the traps, and I'm up for it!

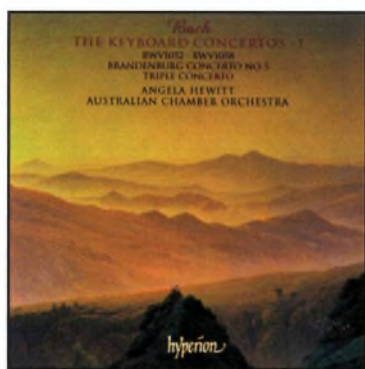
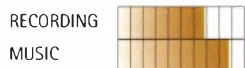


Mozart & Förster
Piano Concertos No.20 & No.25,
Ariette Variée
Krips, Philharmonia Orchestra
Fischer, pno

Testament SBT 1218 (CD) 1

Edwin Fischer belonged to a school of classical piano playing which pursued musical truths not through uninspired note perfect readings but with performances of interpretative genius that strive to reveal those elusive emotional, often contradictory attributes underpinning the human experience. His Mozart piano recordings are spontaneous, spirited, wonderfully open and generous accounts in which the many beautiful opportunities buried within the written score are fully explored. Fischer's visionary approach comes as close as is possible to both encompassing and unpicking those elusive thematic riches. A lightness of touch, charm, piquancy and the delicate balance between keyboard technique and creativity makes for a hugely enjoyable disc. And the re-masters (including that affectionately played and previously unreleased Förster encore piece *Ariette Variée* dating from October 1947) barely show their age. Anyway, when performances are this captivating there is always a willingness to accommodate any slight engineering frailties. Fischer's style throughout has an exceptional fluency and it is this quality that generates an unforced natural momentum to propel you from idea to idea and through a range of feelings until the end of each movement brings us to a fulfilling conclusion.

RP



Johann Sebastian Bach
The Keyboard Concertos Volumes
1 and 2
Angela Hewitt, piano. Tognetti,
Australian Chamber Orchestra

Hyperion SACD 67307/8 (SACD)

Listening to Angela Hewitt play Bach is one of the great joys. I own every Bach recording she's ever made (including a rare DGG digital LP). Hyperion has released well over a dozen recordings of Hewitt, and in my mind, there is only one person today who comes remotely close to her skill level and that is Murray Perahia (who recorded the seven *concertos* only, with the Academy of St. Martin (Sony SK89245 & SK89690-on CD)). The liner notes tell us that "On this recording we have done something slightly unusual (although certainly it has been done before). To better distinguish between the solo and tutti passages, we have decided to use a harpsichord in its traditional role as a continuo. The baroque orchestra is not complete without it, and there is no reason why it shouldn't be part of a modern-day recording, even when the piano is used as the solo instrument..." These are sumptuous performances that are so involving, time stands still. There is absolutely nothing not to like here. The CD layers of both discs are excellent, and I would presume that they are probably down-converted from the DSD layers. These performances are the cornerstone for any classical music enthusiast. Do not pass them by.

RSF



Paganini
Twenty Four Caprices
Michael Rabin

EMI 7243 5 67986 2 5 (CD) 1

This technically brilliant, astutely and affectionately observed stereo version of Paganini's devilishly tricky *Twenty Four Caprices for Solo Violin OP.1* was recorded in late 1958 at the New York Capitol 46th Street Studios. Michael Rabin, with remarkable dexterity, fluency and superbly controlled pitch, gives a sympathetic performance that traverses and goes well beyond the dazzling intricacies of this music to develop much deeper understandings of each individual vignette. He is at the very peak of his powers. The display pieces are handled with spectacular virtuosity and fully satisfy these demanding scores, while elsewhere the intensity, eloquence and undeniable splendour even in those passages that require breakneck speeds or an iron grip reveals the amazing range and expressive power of the violin when placed in the hands of such a maestro. The original tapes re-mastered by Simon Gibson at Abbey Road have a wonderfully fresh, beautifully detailed and dynamic sound that keeps pace with the fleet footed Rabin while presenting a truly life sized violin. It also accurately picks out those subtle nuances, rich tonal qualities and that sense of vitality that enhance what is already an emotion filled and emotionally draining performance.

RP



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Nicolas Meier

Orient

Naim naimcd 091 

Guitarist Nicolas Meier is a new name to me although he's apparently well established with his Meier Group elsewhere in Europe having toured extensively in his native Switzerland, as well as Italy and France. Now based in London and with a new band, he's set to embark on a UK tour. The new band and this recording include a key member in the great Gilad Atzmon on clarinet, Turkish clarinet (yes, you can distinctly hear the difference), and soprano sax. And with Atzmon's powerful playing complementing Meier's sinuous lines on guitar and Turkish saz supported by sterling support from Asaf Sirkis on percussion, Tom Mason on bass, and Dave O'Higgins and Rob Lavers on soprano and tenor sax this is a very fine band indeed. The set draws on a multitude of influences predominantly middle-eastern but also taking in flamenco and Latin flavours. Throughout it's propulsive, melodic and entirely absorbing. So strong a set is it that it's very difficult to single out favourite tracks, but if pushed I'd go for 'Season' as a showcase of the strength of this tightly interlocked band, showcasing Meier's dexterity with Atzmon's soprano setting the seal on a sensuous and atmospheric experience. Complemented by another superb, warm 'you are there' recording from Naim this has quickly become a treasured CD and has really whet my appetite to catch the band live. Check out their schedule on www.meiergroup.com

DD



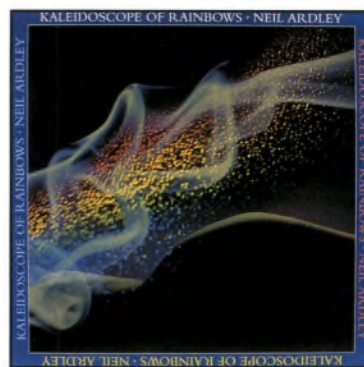
Django

The Modern Jazz Quartet

Analogue Productions/Prestige LP 7057 

Ljongo was a 12" re-issue of two earlier 10" LPs (PRLP 170 and half of PRLP 160). These early sessions from 1953, 1954 and 1955 include Milt Jackson on vibes, John Lewis on Piano, Percy Heath on bass and Kenny Clarke on drums. Drummer Connie Kay replaced Clarke later in 1955, after which the group remained stable for more than 20 years. The quartet never explored the more avant-garde element of jazz in the 1950s and 1960s, but that does not mean that it lacked innovation. Musical director John Lewis constantly explored and fostered new developments in music, and was instrumental in nurturing the talent of such progressive musicians as Ornette Coleman and Eric Dolphy. Although the vibes have never enjoyed the popularity of other jazz solo instruments, Milt Jackson was unquestionably one of the greatest solo artists in the history of jazz. *Ljongo* was one of the group's finest albums, and is a welcome addition to the re-issue market. While not audiophile grade recordings, these sessions provide quite good sound given their early provenance. Rudy Van Gelder recorded the later sessions, but the uncredited 1953 session does not suffer by comparison. I compared the Van Gelder recorded sessions to the original 10" LP. The remastered LP wins hands down, the purity of the vibes being the most conspicuous evidence. I will return to this LP many times.

DDD



Neil Ardley

Kaleidoscope of Rainbows

Pure Pleasure Gull PP1018 

Originally released in 1976 squeezed onto a single LP at 27 minutes a side, Pure Pleasure have done us all a huge favour by unlocking more of this gem. Groundbreaking in its time, analogies to a jazz 'Tubular Bells' don't really do it justice. With clear influences from Ellington and Gil Evans it also reveals its roots in the five-note scale of Balinese music. Ardley assembled a superb band for this recording with the stellar likes of Ian Carr, Barbara Thompson and Tony Coe. Completing a trilogy, this piece was preceded by *The Greek Variations* and *A Symphony of Amaranths*, the work was originally commissioned for and performed at the Camden Festival and was later re-worked and expanded for a 12 piece band. It flows organically, opening with 'Prologue' as each musician enters and held together by Roger Sutton's bass lines, before moving to the delicate slower paced 'Rainbow Two'. And so it goes, weaving seamlessly and delightfully through the four sides of this superb set to the closing 'Epilogue' where the opening bass figure and instrumental motifs reappear. In this Ray Staff re-mastering now sensibly spread across two Pallas pressed discs, the set sounds as fresh as if it were recorded yesterday and is an essential component of any jazz lovers collection.

Supplier: www.purepleasurerecords.com

DD





Horace Silver

Six Pieces of Silver

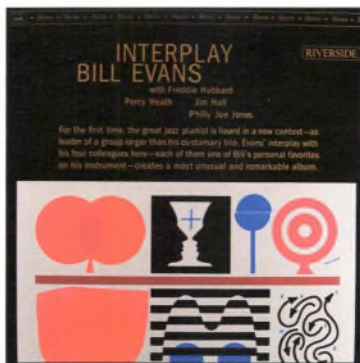
Classic/Blue Note 1539 **200g**

Horace Silver is a prime exemplar of hard bop, a key driver from the outset he wrote a good number of its most influential and long lasting tunes including of course the solid gold classic 'Song for My Father'. Silver was remarkably consistent throughout his output for Blue Note and this release stacks up with the best of them. Accompanied by Donald Byrd (trumpet), Hank Mobley (tenor), Doug Watkins (bass) and Louis Hayes (drums) this constituted Silver's first permanent band on record, having previously worked and recorded with the likes of Coleman Hawkins, Lester Young, and as part of the Jazz Messengers.

This set comprises seven numbers all, with a single exception (the standard 'For Heaven's Sake'), Silver's own compositions. Standouts include the delicate soloing from Silver's piano on 'Shirl' written for a young friend of his, the soloing from Mobley, Silver and Byrd in 'Camouflage', and the gripping 'Enchantment' a number that echoes 'Song for My Father'. All the numbers here are strong though, with perhaps the best of the lot being the triple time 'Senor Blues'. Just listen to Mobley's soloing and the extraordinarily tight ensemble playing for yet another example of why this is such a powerful and hugely enjoyable set. Classic's superb Quiex pressing does this great music full justice.

Supplier: www.vivante.co.uk

DD



Bill Evans Quintet

Interplay

Analogue Productions Riverside RS 9445 **45**

There is nothing not to like on this two-record set from the Fantasy archives brought to new life by Messrs. Hoffman and Gray. While side one begins with the fast-paced, 'You and the Night and the Music', side two opens with a wonderful arrangement of 'When You Wish Upon a Star'. Acoustic Sounds are half-way home with this, their third series of 45RPM re-issues. These releases have done wonders for my greater understanding and appreciation of jazz, simply by providing the best, most enjoyable sound from landmark albums such as this. When you see the names in this quintet, you can rest assured you've got some first-rate musicians waiting to perform. Add to this the history and depth of repertoire in the Riverside label (as well as the other catalogues that fall under the Fantasy – now Concord Music – umbrella) and you can see why this project just keeps on giving you great performances by great artists offered up in studio quality sound. There is something for everyone on this album and the pristine surfaces accompanied by excellent artistic arrangements and playing, set the stage for a real treat. Evans is so easy on the ears and his carefree, articulate style is mesmerizing. Side three offers up 'Interplay' a showcase piece for Evans and Jim Hall in particular, while Freddie Hubbard really shines on 'Wrap Your Troubles in Dreams' as side four ends. Highly recommended.

RSF



Oscar Peterson Trio with Milt Jackson

Very Tall

Speakers Corner/Verve V6-8429 **180g** **3**

Recorded in 1961, this Verve recording casts Peterson in the unusual role of supporting artist. With Jackson, Peterson, Ray Brown and Ed Thigpen on duty you know that the playing will be flawless. The question, as with so many temporary meetings of greats, is will the music get beyond virtuoso jousting to result in something really special. Well, this is one of those rare occasions when the participants really click, and the resulting performances shine. Peterson, used to making space for his compatriots in the Trio simply extends that courtesy to Jackson, whose fluidity and changes of density turn the vibes into so much more than a one-dimensional instrument. Throughout, Ray Brown provides an authoritative foundation, but it's the contrasts, patterns and interplay between the three percussion instruments that provides the fascination. Peterson's excursions into the far left hand spar with Jackson's liquid lines, the opening 'On Green Dolphin Street' setting the mood, before more adventurous excursions through the likes of 'Work Song' and 'John Brown's Body'. Those who see Peterson as a consummate technician should experience the range of moods he throws behind Jackson's flawless playing. Soulful, they're what transports this album beyond the ordinary and turns it into a record you should buy. That and the excellent Speakers Corner pressing which easily improves on my somewhat tawdry original.


RG





Mitty Collier

Shades of a Genius

Speakers Corner/Chess Records LPS 1492. 


This has been sitting in my "to listen" pile for the last four months. I kept putting it off because of nothing more than sheer ignorance. Who is Mitty Collier? Well, I'm here to tell you that she is one fabulous vocalist with a stunning husky-voiced rhythm and blues style that will absolutely knock your socks off. I remember when Kai Seemann mentioned this to me, I said, "Who? Why are you releasing that?" Boy, was I way off on this one! This woman has a great vocal range and this is another one of those, 'grab your baby and a bottle of wine and shut the lights down low' kind of albums. Collier's first love is singing Gospel and in 1972 she left secular music behind. Later in Chicago in the 1990's, she became a minister. We are extraordinarily lucky to have this document. Collier was under contract to Chess as of 1960. She was just 19 years old. She had some singles hit the charts in 1963, but this is her only album. The arrangements by Riley Hampton, Bert Keyes and Phil Wright are wonderful and this is a treat you won't easily forget. It's too bad this is all that's available, but it's a solid gold effort and I'm glad to have learned about her. You will be too.

RSF



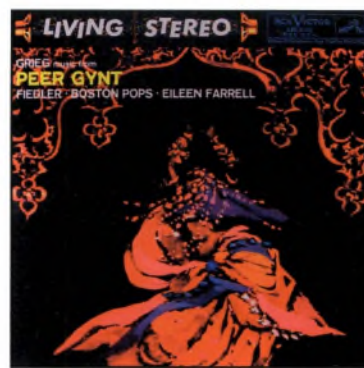
The Art of Galina Barinova

Performances recorded between 1940 and 1960.

Melodiya CD 10 00997. 

I'm fortunate to own most of Barinova's records (there aren't many) and with this issue, both her compact discs. These recordings include works by Schubert, Massenet, Brahms, Delius and others, mainly short encore pieces. Born in October 1910, she came from a very creative family. Her father, a lawyer, had studied the violin and was an amateur of some standing. Her mother was a pianist who studied with Josef Hoffman, Frederico Busoni and Rimsky-Korsakov. Galina started playing early in her life and at the age of 14 was sent to France to study with Jacques Thibaud. Her career began to evolve but then WWII came and she gave up traditional concerts to entertain the troops. After the war she again toured extensively in the East and in 1956 also began an illustrious career teaching at the Tchaikovsky Conservatory. Barinova had a vast repertoire of over twenty-five concertos she played at various times. Aside from her schedule of teaching, she also transcribed over one hundred compositions for the violin. She's recorded Bach with Richter as well as a fabulous Sibelius Concerto. Barinova is one of too many artists we here in the West should spend some time researching and getting to know. This is a performer of the highest caliber and this compact disc offers both fabulous playing and excellent sound.


RSF



Greig

Peer Gynt Suites Nos. 1 and 2; Lyric Suite

Eileen Farrell(S), Fiedler, Boston Pops Orchestra

Cisco/RCA LSC 2125. 

Arthur Fiedler and the Boston Pops were very popular half a century ago. They recorded some wonderful encore orchestral pieces and of course the (in)famous early Living Stereo of Offenbach's *Gaite Parisienne*. This, in the right pressing has always been regarded as a sonic spectacular. However, whether or not the music is your cup of tea is another matter entirely. I'd always dismissed Fiedler as a serious conductor. The man was a great talent but because I'm so familiar with his 'wallpaper' recordings, having him record say a Beethoven symphony would be quite a shock to me. I don't have, and didn't want, an original of this recording so have nothing to compare and my feelings about this issue are mixed. I find the sound quality excellent. If only all Living Stereo re-issues were given this treatment! But I find *Suite No. 1* frankly boring. *Suite No. 2* is much more interesting. The second side finishes with quite a lovely *Lyric Suite* which is comprised of four movements: *Shepherd Boy*, *Norwegian Rustic March*, *Nocturne*, *March of the Dwarfs*. You'll have to decide if the performances are for you, but I can assure you that you won't be disappointed in the sound quality.

RSF





Rheinberger, Strauss & Elgar
The Trumpets That Time Forgot
 John Wallace & Jonathan Freeman-Attwood, trumpets
 Colm Carey, Organ

Linn Records CKD 242 (SACD)

This Hereford Cathedral recording has a lovely tactile quality. The space and ambience found in such an atmospheric location allows the brass to reach out to the very limit of its range without ever becoming overextended, while ripening organ notes so plump and resonant apply that attractive and quite dignified juxtaposition to the soaring brilliance heard in the trumpet music. Of course in a forty minute composition like Rheinberger's *Suite for two trumpets and organ, Op.149* only Colm Carey pulling out all the contrapuntal stops (both physical and metaphorically) can sustain a four movement work of this scale. Flashes of brilliance in darting solos and flourishes from the Jonathan Freeman-Attwood piccolo trumpet and John Wallace trumpet in b flat providing a vocal quality in this chamber piece. The three Richard Strauss vignettes taken from his *Le Bourgeois Gentlehomme Suite* also have many moments of virtuosity running through them in a recital peppered with fine exchanges and engaging dialogues between the differing instrumental registers. In their last transcription, a reworking of the Elgar *Organ sonata No.2*, the players achieve surprising heights of passion and majesty especially in an expressive fugue. Overall, these trumpets that time has forgotten deserve to be remembered and the Philip Hobbs engineering and this ecclesiastical backdrop provide a superb setting.

Supplier: www.vivante.co.uk

RP

RECORDING 
 MUSIC 



Prokofiev
Alexander Nevsky
Lieutenant Kije
 Carlson(MS); Voketaitis(B); Slatkin
 SLSO and Chorus.

Mobile Fidelity UDSACD 4009 (SACD)

I'm a big Prokofiev fan, and *Nevsky* and *Kije* are right up there with some of my favorites. While they evoke similar emotions, they are actually at almost opposite ends of the dramatic spectrum. It's nice to have them both on one SACD. I'm not set up for multi-channel replay so I cannot offer you any insight into how these performances fare in that medium, and while the CD layer is excellent, it is the SACD that really shines. While the *Nevsky* is not the complete film score, it gives you enough to want to explore the work further (try Temirkanov and the St. Petersburg on BMG 09026-61926-2 if it's still available). Slatkin does a fine job with the St. Louis and I'm sure you're going to enjoy his performance. Before Prokofiev was commissioned by Serge Eisenstein to compose the music for the films *Ivan the Terrible* and *Alexander Nevsky*, the Russian producer/director Alexandre Feinzimmer asked him to score the film *Lieutenant Kije*. While this is a suite, made up of five movements, and is only about nineteen minutes long, it's delightful. I've saved the best for last: the *Kije* is just spectacular... especially spectacular. I'd never heard this performance before and was immediately captured not only by the outrageously great sound, but the subtle control and excitement Slatkin is able to coax from his orchestra. Superb.

RSF

RECORDING 
 MUSIC 



Anton Dvorak
Concerto for Violin and Orchestra,
Op. 53.
 Johanna Martzy, Ferenc Fricsay,
 RIAS S.O.

Clearaudio/DGG 18152 LPM (180g)

My original DGG has dates on the stitched, gatefold jacket of September 1954. Clearaudio's jacket says 9/53. Damn... if this came out in '53 I'm looking for an earlier copy. The only bad Johanna Martzy is no Johanna Martzy. There is a sonority and richness to her tone, playing from another era and I absolutely love it. Make no bones about it, this lady can play the fiddle. Her touch is ever so delicate with passionate finesse when this is called for and as fast, strong and fiery as a lightning bolt when the score demands. She has a style that is technically near perfect but I feel, because of the tone of her instrument, she tends to be a little on the romantic side. What I really like about her playing is that she doesn't interpret – she plays what the composer wrote. I like this record for both performance and sound. I hope Clearaudio gets into the DGG catalogue and releases the other two Martzy recordings: her Mozart/Beethoven *sonatas* and another LP with short, encore pieces. Considering the original of this recording sells for upwards of £200, this is a bargain purchase. This is one of the great performances of a wonderful violin concerto and I applaud Clearaudio for releasing it. I'm looking for more great historical releases from them.

RSF

RECORDING 
 MUSIC 

"6-Eye" ...

The golden era of Columbia jazz

by Dennis Davis

Where does one start when it comes to describing a jazz catalogue as rich as that released by Columbia during the years 1955 through 1962 on the fabled "6-eye" label? 6-eye records have always sung a siren's-song to collectors, and for good reason. The late 1950s and early 1960s served up performances from the golden age of jazz, recorded during the golden age of the recording arts, when the recording chain was still made up of more vacuum tubes than silicon. Columbia contributed an outstanding combination of musical talent, engineering talent and a prime recording studio, preserving a jazz archive that stands with, if not above, the best of the best.

Rather than dwell on the famous and fabled records that everyone already knows about, I'll confine myself to passing mention of them and move on to lesser known and more obscure 6-eye gems – personal favorites or guilty pleasures. The mother of all Columbia 6-eye records is, of course, the Miles Davis classic *Kind of Blue* and many collectors who have read this far will have multiple copies of both the mono (CL 1355) and stereo (CS 8163) releases. Almost as sought after are the studio soundtrack

makeover of *The Sound of Jazz* (CS 8040), Duke Ellington's *Ellington Indigos* (CS 8053) *Jazz Party In Stereo* (CS 8127), *Mingus Ah Um* (CS 8171), and Dave Brubeck's *Time Out* (CS 8192). One great thing about these titles is that being produced by a major label in relatively large numbers they are all fairly easy to find. With the exception

of *Kind of Blue*, they are not

all that scarce or pricey in their earliest stamper numbers. Six classic titles would be enough to anchor the reputation of any record label, but Columbia offers up much more than these well-known gems.

Miles Davis' *Round About Midnight* (CL 949) is an indispensable record that is as close to recorded perfection as vinyl comes. John Coltrane, Red Garland, Paul Chambers and "Philly Joe" Jones accompany Miles. This record sounds better with each change

in my system. The stylus lowers into the title track, diamond meets vinyl and very little in recorded sound can compare. This is Miles at his singular best. This recording of the Davis/Coltrane quintet differs from the familiar Prestige recordings in two ways. The sessions obviously benefited from greater rehearsal time although this



▶ difference can be debated as either a plus or minus, with some jazz fans preferring the spontaneous feel of the Prestige sessions. What is not debatable, however, is the superior sound provided by Columbia. Hearing this piece is not unlike turning a corner in Paris and seeing Notre Dame Cathedral for the first time. The quasi-religious experience provided by the sound and performance is enhanced by one of the most attractive record covers ever produced. A Marvin Koner photograph of Miles bathed in red light against a black background dominates the sleeve, and whilst it is reminiscent of Blue Note covers of the era, it has greater emotional impact.

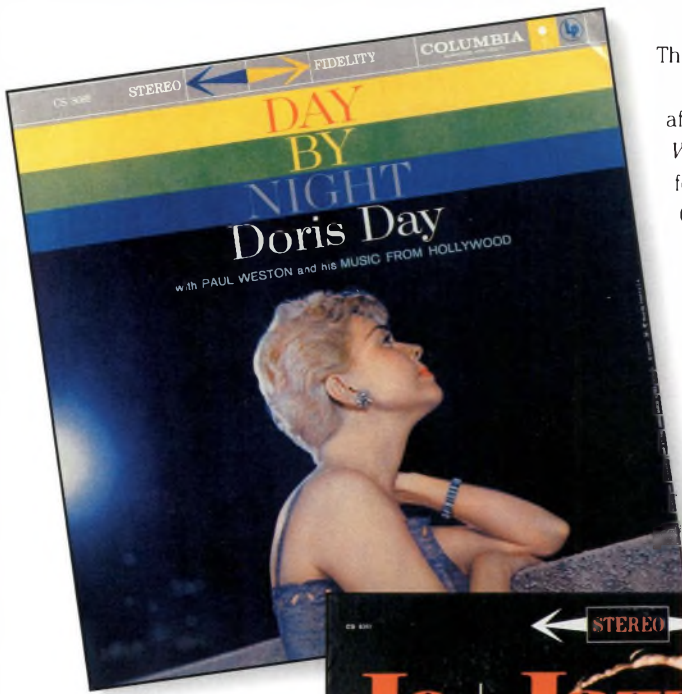
Louis Armstrong's *Satch Plays Fats* (CL 708) is one of the very first (if not the first) Columbia jazz albums issued with the 6-eye label. Like the earlier release *Louis Armstrong Plays W. C. Handy*, it sports first class sound and captures Armstrong at a personal high. Exquisite performances of Honeysuckle Rose, I'm Crazy 'Bout My Baby, Squeeze Me, Ain't Misbehavin' and five other Fats Waller classics round out a toe tapping disc. If forced to choose ten albums to carry out of a fire, I fear the house would burn down while I tried to pick between the *Handy* and *Fats* albums, so I file them side-by-side for insurance.

Another very early Columbia 6-eye album equally deserving of veneration is *Sarah Vaughan In Hi-Fi* on CL 745. The backing musicians suggest the quality of these sessions with Miles Davis performing on eight of twelve cuts in one of his rare appearances behind the headline act. A couple of my favorite jazz guitarists, Mundell Lowe and Freddie Green, also share honors on several cuts. Vaughn's rendition of 'Nice Work If You Can Get It' is enough to carry a whole album. If you can only have two Sarah Vaughan albums (no one should have only one), this must be one of them. The other, *Sarah Vaughan* on EmArcy MG 36004 with Clifford Brown on trumpet, is not on Columbia, so I will not mention it other than to suggest picking up a copy of the recent Speakers Corner re-issue if an original seems too elusive.

Another great vocal album is *Carmen McRae Sings Lover Man And Other Billie Holiday Classics* (CL 1730 and CS 8530). This was released as a "late" period 6-eye label (see sidebar). Backed by a very strong band (Walter Perkins, Bob Cranshaw, Norman Simmons, Mundell Lowe, Nat Adderley and Eddie "Lockjaw" Davis), McRae turns in one of the best Billie tributes on record as well as of the best McRae records too. While we're on vocalists, I'll confess to one of my guilty pleasures – Doris Day's *Day by Night* (CS 8089 or CL 1053). I prefer the stereo version, which presents a very nice sound stage for Paul Weston's Orchestra, with Doris floating along on



a fluffy pillow of easy swing sound. These are confections, including 'Close Your Eyes', 'Dream a Little Dream of Me', 'Stars Fell on Alabama' and 'Moonglow', and they go down as smoothly as my favorite icecream. The mono copies are common and can be had for next to nothing. Stereo copies are far more difficult to find, but Doris does not fetch high prices for even hard to find items. Hold out for the stereo copy, and be rewarded with a treat.



This album swings and is not to be missed.

Another Columbia album that has long been sought after by those in the know is Hank Garland's *Jazz Winds From A New Direction* (CS 8372 or CL 1572), featuring Joe Morello, Gary Burton and Joe Benjamin. Garland, a legendary Nashville session guitarist, recorded this tour de force shortly before coming close to death in an automobile accident, from which he never fully recovered. As a result, we'll never know how much more jazz he had to offer. This crossover masterpiece pits Garland's nimble guitar work against a young (17 years old) Gary Burton's spectacular vibes. As you listen to Garland's playing here, you might well wonder why you wasted all those good years becoming a brain surgeon or rocket scientist instead of learning to play the guitar.

And speaking of crossover albums, pick up a copy of Babatunde Olatunji's *Drums of Passion* (CS 8210). This is not a jazz album, but Olatunji's early version of what we now call world music had its impact on jazz. Olatunji brought

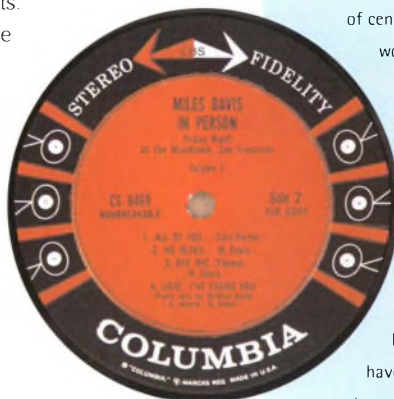
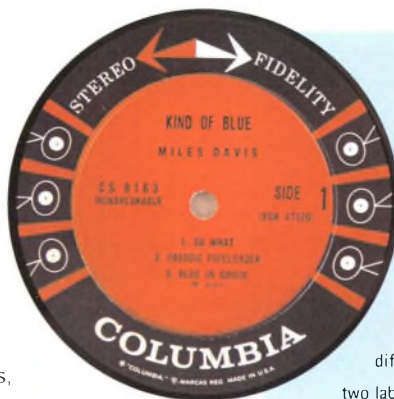
▶ Jo Stafford's *Jo + Jazz* (CS 8361 or CL 1561) is another outstanding jazz vocal from the Columbia 6-eye period. This is a blockbuster performance, with orchestral arrangements and conducting by Johnny Mandel, featuring Ben Webster, Johnny Hodges, Ray Nance, Jimmy Rowles and Don Fagerquist. The sound, in either stereo or mono, is Columbia sound in its prime. Stafford was married to Paul Weston (who conducted the Doris Day album mentioned above) and was a very popular singer of big band jazz and pop in the post-war period. This 1960 recording is the gem of her catalog, which includes many albums on Capitol and Columbia recorded throughout the 1950s. It has long been sought after by collectors because of the superior performance, backing musicians and great sound. It used to be difficult to pick up a copy for under \$50, but with the advent of eBay, careful shopping might easily snag a copy for half that amount.



► his Nigerian drumming to the United States in the 1960s when he arrived as a medical student and turned his part-time drumming into a string of hit albums, beginning with this LP. He opened the Olatunji Center of African Culture in New York and was instrumental in drawing increased attention to the African rhythmic roots of jazz to many artists, including John Coltrane. The album is composed of drums and vocal chants. I've played it countless times over the years and it still remains one of my all time favorites.

This list really only scratches the surface of the deep wealth of 6-eye albums that combine great music and sound. I could easily have written at length about a dozen other gems in the 6-eye collection. J. J. Johnson's albums are all worth exploring (*Trombone For Two*, *Dial J*, *J. J.*, *Jai and Kai*, *J. J. In Person*, *Blue Trombone* and *A Touch of Satin*). Almost anything by Miles Davis (*Miles Ahead*, *Milestones*, *Porgy and Bess*, *Sketches of Spain*, *Someday My Prince Will Come*, *Friday Night at The Blackhawk*, *Saturday Night at The Blackhawk*), Duke Ellington (*Hi-Fi Ellington Uptown*, *Ellington at Newport*, *A Drum Is A Woman*, *Indigos*, *Newport 1958*, *Anatomy of A Murder*, *Blues in Orbit*) and Billie Holiday (*the Golden Years boxes*, *Lady in Satin*) is essential. Other great albums not otherwise mentioned include Michael Legrand's *Legrand Jazz*, Gerry Mulligan's *What Is There To Say*, Charles Mingus' *Mingus Dynasty*, and Lambert, Hendricks & Ross!

In the first part (Issue 39) of my Columbia exploration, I failed to mention one of the great early Columbia LP releases, because I had never heard a clean original of *Masterpieces* by Ellington



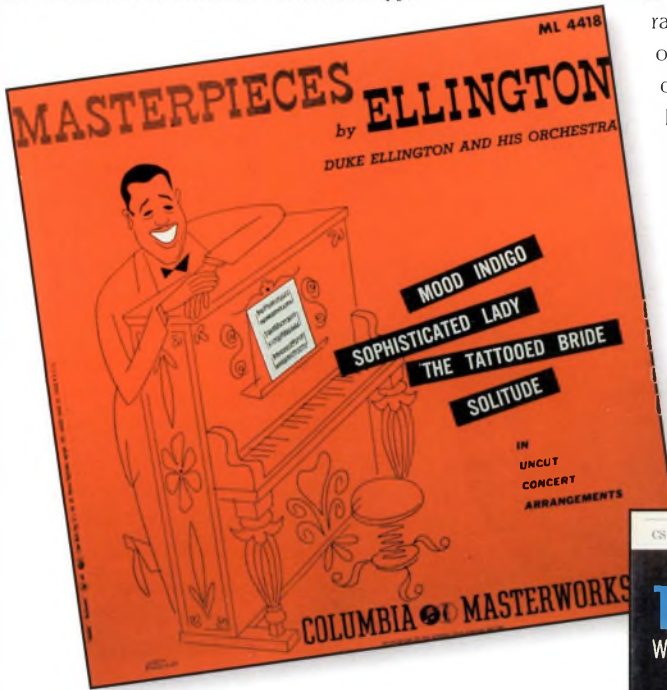
The 6-eye identification primer

The 6-eye label was used from 1955 to 1962.

The earliest example of an original release on the 6-eye label that I have actually seen is CL 708 (Louis Armstrong's *Satch Plays Fats*). I know that CL 701 comes in the earlier label, and I can't account for 702-707. The latest mono example is CL 1812 (*Miles Davis at Carnegie Hall*) and latest stereo example CS 9619 (*Marlowe Morris' Play The Thing*). Leaving aside differences between stereo and mono labels, there are only two label variations to contend with. First lets deal with the eye count. The classic six-eye label has three "eyes" grouped left and right of center. The stereo label is red with a black perimeter and the words "Stereo Fidelity" bracketing a two-way arrow at the top and the word "Columbia" at the bottom. Mono labels have only the eyes bracketed in black, and the word "Columbia" at the top. There are some minor variations in the trademark language over time, but these differences are not significant to identification. A later version of the label has the initials "CBS" centered at the top of the label. The earliest Columbia pressings have the "deep groove" ring pressed into the label area. The pressing plants used by Columbia must have been retooling around the time of the CS 84xx series, at the same time that it switched over to the newer "CBS" version of the label, because the deep groove pressings disappear almost coincidentally with the newer label. The latest original label with a deep groove ring I have found is CS 8397 (Ellington's *Selections From Peer Gynt*). The latest original label without a deep groove ring is CS 8470 (Miles Davis' *Saturday Night At The Blackhawk*). My earliest version of the CBS version of the label is CS 8469 (Miles Davis' *Friday Night At The Blackhawk*), which is also the only CBS label version I have found with a deep groove. Every copy I have seen of Brubeck's *Time Out* (CS 8192 and CL 1397) has the later "CBS" label version, although the catalog numbers would suggest the earlier label. This is the only 6-eye record I have found out of sequence, and I assume the catalog number was assigned, but then the release was delayed.



▶ (ML 4418). 6-eye re-issues are common, and purple label second issues are out there to be found. The original LP, however, has the green “Long Playing Microgroove” label and a unique red cover with a Stan Fraydas drawing of Ellington leaning against the back of a piano. For decades I’ve looked for a clean copy,



but found only trashed rejects, until a few months ago when a pristine copy fell into my hands. Ellington’s rendition of four masterpieces (‘Mood Indigo’, ‘Sophisticated Lady’, ‘The Tattooed Bride’ and ‘Solitude’) makes this album one for the ages. And the sound... is to die for. As you flip through the Ellington stacks, keep your eyes peeled for that red cover; hold your breath as you check condition, and good luck!

The traditional wisdom in collecting jazz records is that the mono version is always better than the stereo version, a dictum that is more often than not true. It is perhaps universally true with the Blue Note, Prestige, Atlantic and Riverside catalogs, as well as most smaller label catalogs. But when it comes to Columbia, and to some extent Contemporary, most of the true stereo recordings are so good that one can easily be forgiven for preferring the two-channel sound. Whichever you choose, 6-eye pressings from Columbia’s jazz catalog are some of the best additions you can make to your record collection.

The best evidence of an early pressing, however, is not found on the label, but in the dead wax. Columbia uses a system combining numbers and letters, with 1A being the earliest. The commonly accepted wisdom is that the best indicator of an early pressing is the number one followed by a single letter code. These range from 1A up the alphabet to 1K. You also occasionally see codes beginning with 2 (e.g., 2A or 2B) and on rare occasions beginning with 3, but I have never seen anything higher. After that the codes go into double-digit letters (e.g., 1AA or 1AF). The number 1 precedes almost everything issued with double letters, but I have seen a few exceptions as high as 3DH. My experience tells me that the double letter codes are older than the single letter codes. I have many records with codes that defy any attempts at categorization. For example, I have a white label promo of CL 1730 with 2A on one side and 1A on the other, and a white label promo of CS 8171



with 1C on one side and 1AA on the other.

Promo labels were produced during the 6-eye period in two different styles. One is the familiar white promo label. The other is a normal looking red and black label with the words “Demonstration Record Not For Sale” printed across the label.





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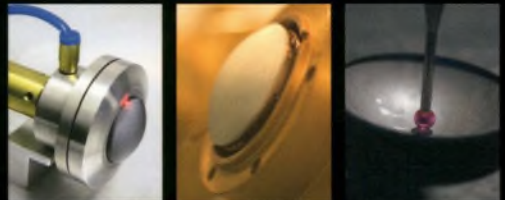
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