

hi-fi+

Issue 54

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awards issue 2007

Holly Cole
Interview

Six Systems That Challenge
The Status Quo



Sonus faber

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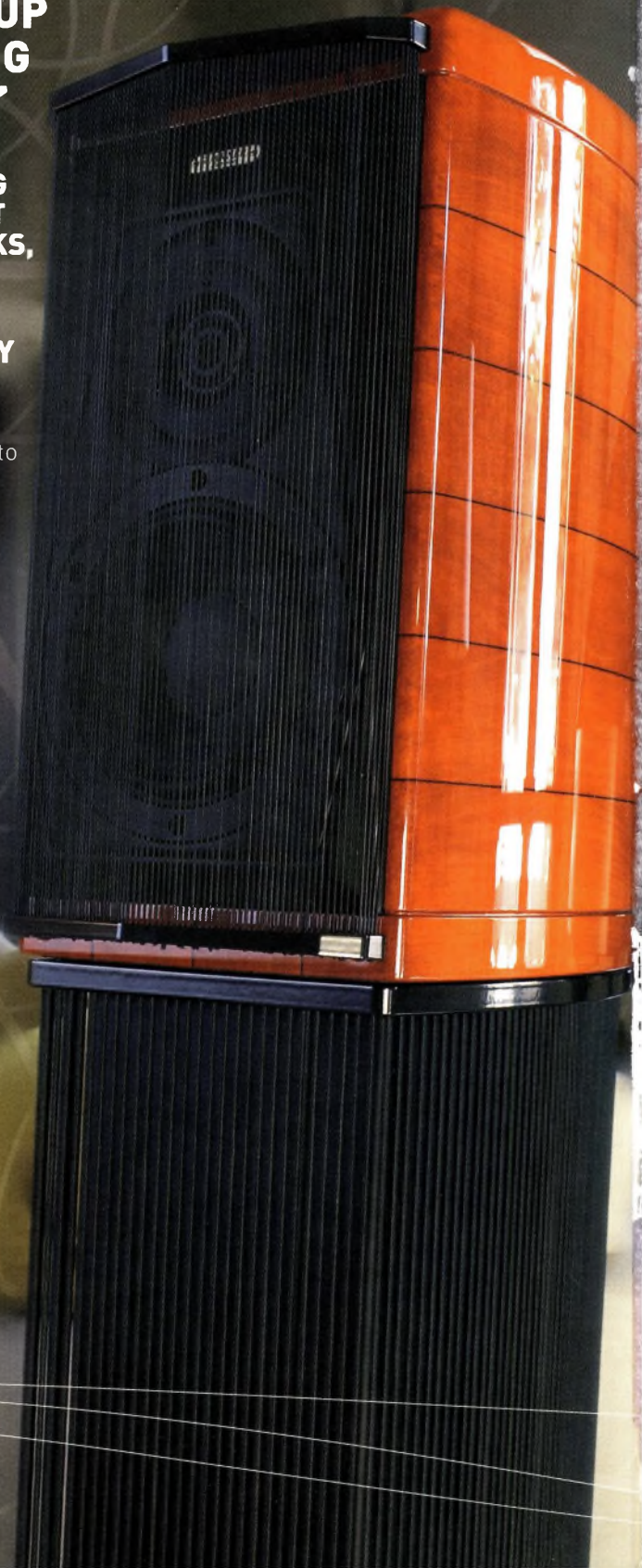
When Sonus Faber created the Homage family, as an homage to history's greatest lute makers, it was always intended that its three original members would evolve. Benefiting from the discoveries made during the development of the flagship Stradivari, both of its predecessors - the Guarneri and Amati - have arrived their in second 'generations'.

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One thing that can seldom be fully reflected in any review is the question of product reliability. Of course, there are those companies and products that are a by word for that most elusive of qualities. There are even some that sound good too... But the sad reality is that all too often the most wonderful sounding products can prove to be all too frail and fragile in the white heat of combat – or even the more relaxed surroundings of your front room.

It even happens that product fallibility trespasses on the hallowed ground of the review process. You might well think that manufacturers would go out of their way (or far beyond that) to ensure such embarrassment is avoided. Even so, shit – as they say – happens. And when it does, what with deadlines and delayed deliveries, the faeces fan interface meshes with catastrophic inevitability.

And you know all that stuff about chains? One link joined to another? One bit goes west – how many go with it?

Which is when you thank your lucky stars that the product(s) in question come from a reputable manufacturer or distributor, one who holds spares and replacement products in stock, can fix the one you have or ship you another – toute suite. Of course, as some of you have already discussed, a review is just a review, but a purchase – that comes out of your bank account.

A sobering thought isn't it...

Roy Gregory

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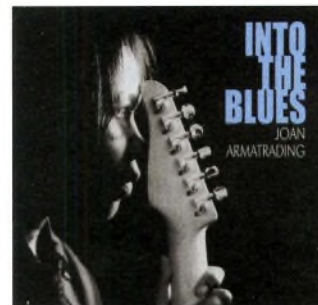
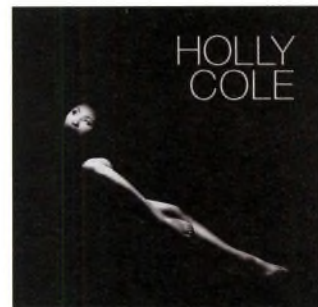
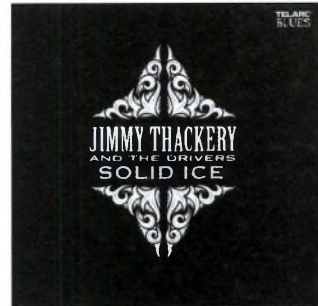
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Incoming!

Please address letters to the Editor at Hi-Fi+, 25-27 Whittle Road, Ferndown Industrial Estate, Wimborne, Dorset, BH21 7RP or via the website at www.hilplus.com

Dear Sir,

I was impressed by Roy Gregory's review of the Ayre Acoustics P-5x Phono Stage in Issue 32 of Hi-Fi+. However the long "burn-in" time, (about a year) for me, was a bit of a worry! Could Roy, or anyone tell me where the KAB PreCon LP box (described as a "burn-in" device) might be obtained. Any help given will be appreciated!

Best wishes

R.J.Pyper

Belfast

KAB products, including the excellent SpeedStrobe with its handheld lamp, are available from Moth Marketing (Tel. 01234 741152 or www.britishaudio.co.uk). The PreCon LP mentioned is a handy little device that steps the output from a CD player down to phono cartridge level, originally intended to allow you to run an extra line-level source into early pre-amps which featured fewer line inputs than modern units. However, it also allows you to run in tonearm wiring or phono-stages via your CD repeat function. Ed.

Dear Sir,

Few audio magazine reviews have ever influenced me to actually run out and make a purchase, especially when it comes to big dollar components. Music mostly and some hardware is about it. However your excellent review of the Nordost Thor electrical distribution unit and A.C. cords a while ago prompted me to check them out in my system over a weekend. I was completely unprepared for the improvement, unaware there was so much more to my system than I had been hearing. Other A.C. filters and cords that I have tried in the past were a lot of money for little effect, but not this time!

What came next was the Nordost Valhalla used as tonearm wire (the most critical application) along with the Nordost Frey interconnects and speaker wire. Once broken in the wires disappeared from the system leaving the true voice of my cartridge to be revealed through my phono-stage and the rest of my electronics. (This wire really needs to be broken in thoroughly!)

I had my tonearm rewired a few years ago with a popular, highly regarded wire. I kept with the same brand of wire throughout the rest of my system. As time went by I became bored again with what I was hearing. I contemplated a cartridge upgrade along with looking into expensive component stands

and platforms, a path I'm so glad I didn't take back then. I could see never-ending changes to my system as time went by.

Having lived with them, what the Nordost products have done in my system is truly spectacular, leaving me with a firm belief that wire (the right wire!) is as important as everything else in a system; tonearm and table manufacturers take note.

One last thing; I'm a fan of Richard S. Foster, The History Man. Richard, you have introduced me to music that I may never otherwise have come across and which I like very much. I thank you.

Regards

Don Sime

Canada

Don't neglect the question of system supports; they're the final piece in the process of establishing a really firm foundation for system performance. See the article on the Vertex AQ products elsewhere in this issue. Ed.

Dear Roy

Just received my copy of the latest edition - splendid as usual. Just a point about your review of the SA7-S1; having more or less set up a mouth-watering comparison with the Esoteric X-03SE in the opening section, you then left me in mid-air as there was no follow through to suggest the SW's of the respective candidates. They are both Japanese heavy-weights, both five grand a-piece, both over-engineered and both SACD/CD machines - a perfect match for A-B testing or even something slightly less stringent... but... no final word at all?

We know the merits of the ARC CD7 and Wadia 861SE but they are CD-only and not strictly in the right territory for this class of SACD player.

Kind regards

John

Via e-mail

The head to head comparison you suggest would be interesting indeed, however, I suspect that it is unlikely to happen.

Manufacturers run notoriously shy of such confrontation, but if Marantz and esoteric are up for it, so are we. How about it gentlemen? Two players, two systems and neutral listeners to see fair play; your customers want to know.

The references to other CD players reflect the fact that both

▶ *Marantz and other writers have made some pretty extravagant claims for the SA7-S1's Red Book replay. For me, this is a key consideration in the player's evaluation as these are the discs it will likely spend most of its time playing as well as offering the most readily made comparisons against other players. The Marantz does have a character that marks it out from other top-flight players like the Wadia, the ARC and Weiss Jason/Medea. It majors on weight, substance and stability, but lags when it comes to phrasing and the more expressive aspects of musical reproduction, characteristics that describe its SACD playback too. These differences are perfectly apparent when you compare the player against the competition. Whether you consider them as strengths or weaknesses will depend on your own system and preferences. The whole point is that the SA7-S1 sounds very different and thus offers you a choice of perspective. Certainly, listening to it side by side with the Goldmund Eidos 18 the contrast couldn't be greater, the latter's speed, agility and drama like chalk to the SA7's cheese. Likewise the McCormack UDP-1 can't match the SA7 for weight and impressively solid dynamics, sounding somewhat lightweight in comparison; yet its easy musical flow and natural tonality can leave the Marantz sounding cumbersome. Like I say, you pays your money, you takes your choice, you buy the performance that appeals to you. But let's be clear: one thing the SA7 isn't, is the best CD or SACD player in the World – at this or any other price. Its performance doesn't have the innate musical balance for that. Ed.*

Dear Sir,

After reading about the new CeraBall Universal in Issue 52 I decided to order a set of three or four of these, with the intention to place them under my CD-player. The dealer (Frank Hamann, Flensburg, Germany) suggested a set of three.

He was also very helpful when it came to positioning. He instructed me in placing the three CeraBalls like this: one under the mains transformer, one under the disc-drive and one under the output-PCB. I followed his advice with one exception: I placed the third CeraBall under the clock-circuit instead of the output-PCB.

The resulting improvement is so impressive I feel that it is like getting a new CD-player, or new speakers - or a room treatment. I hear sounds and parts of the performance that I have not heard before. The music has become more real, more live, the dynamics are so much better that it is easy to hear the difference. The improvement is easily worth the outlay. I also find that music can be enjoyed at a lower volume setting than before, which is quite nice at late hours

Thank you for the great writing and the beautiful pictures in Hi-Fi+.

Yours Truly

Bjørn Overgaard

Denmark

Via e-mail

Dear Sir,

I am writing to ask for some help regarding finite element Cerapucs and their use with the Audio Research CD3 MKII. According to reviews of both products a set of three Cerapucs was by far the best choice to give the best isolation/performance.

My question regards the ideal positioning for this Cerapuc trio under the ARC CD3 MKII? What were the findings of your experimenting?

My hypothesis (based upon theory, not practice, since I am still waiting for the three Cerapucs to arrive): one under the transformers (left back) plus one under laser mechanism (left front) and one under DAC section (right center).

Thank you very much indeed. All the best,

Jorge Roque

Via e-mail

Your theory is correct – however, a little extra experimentation with precise placement is worthwhile, given the varying nature of supporting surfaces. Ed.

Dear Sir,

Regarding Milty Permatat:

I have been using Permatat antistatic fluid on all my LPs since about 1980, in conjunction with the Pixall "Off the Record" cleaning roller. So far I've done over 3,000 and I have not noticed any long-term damage that could be attributed to the fluid. The advantage is that my LPs never pick up more than a little dust, even the oldest ones, so the antistatic protection appears to last for ever. The only problem could be that the extra coating of fluid on the grooves may have a bad effect on sound quality. Without ever having done any careful listening tests, I couldn't say whether this is true or not, but if so it must be only a slight deterioration, if any. This is in my view a price worth paying because a needle which becomes clogged with dust halfway through a side is so much worse. In my experience, when using Permatat-treated discs the needle need only be cleaned after every six sides or so, rather than after every side for untreated discs, even ones that have been cleaned with a record brush just before playing. I'd be interested to see what others think, particularly JMH, who, if he still uses the stuff, must have been Milty's biggest customer, given the size of his LP collection

Regards

Jim Taylor

Wood Green

Via e-mail

I shall be approaching JMH for comment shortly; watch this space. Ed.



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SPEAKERS CORNER

by Paul Messenger

Editor Roy and I share similar views on many things, but when discussing remote control operation, we invariably agree to disagree. I find remote control entirely liberating, because I regularly want to change sources and volume, whereas Roy cares not a fig for it.

Spawned from the arrival of microprocessors, remote handsets first appeared back in the 1970s to operate VCRs and TV sets, but only really became part of the hi-fi scene when CD appeared in the mid-1980s. One can argue at length about the various factors that came together to make CD a success. Probably the most significant was the removal of surface noise, but I'm sure the availability of remote control also played its part.

Indeed, in the earliest days of CD players, the handset was often sold as an optional extra, so it was clearly regarded as a desirable feature, by manufacturers and customers alike. Which is the reason why I believe that computers and their associated devices will play an important role in the future of hi-fi.

Let me make it perfectly clear, I'm no computer buff. I've neither empathy with nor interest in the things, and use one only because it's essential for my work. I've learnt how to process words, handle e-mail and access the internet, but I don't install or download, and if anything goes wrong, I'm completely helpless. I also find it both irritating and exasperating that innate obsolescence requires me to change computers (and learn new software) every few years, though at least successive replacements tend to work better and cost less than their predecessors. (And I never had PM pegged as an optimist! RG)

The most recent computer arrived a year ago, a MacBook Pro, which came with lots of software including something called iTunes, and operated using wireless broadband. Around the same time the CD Recorder I'd been using irrevocably broke down, and a friend showed me how to use iTunes instead, to store CDs in the hard drive and make copies with the best available quality. Very handy.

The really clever bit came just a couple of months ago, when a guy called Patrick Dixon of At-View contacted me and asked if I'd like to try his SB+ audiophile music streaming device. I had to ask what use I might have for such a component, and Patrick explained that the SB+ provided the interface between a wireless-linked computer and a hi-fi system.

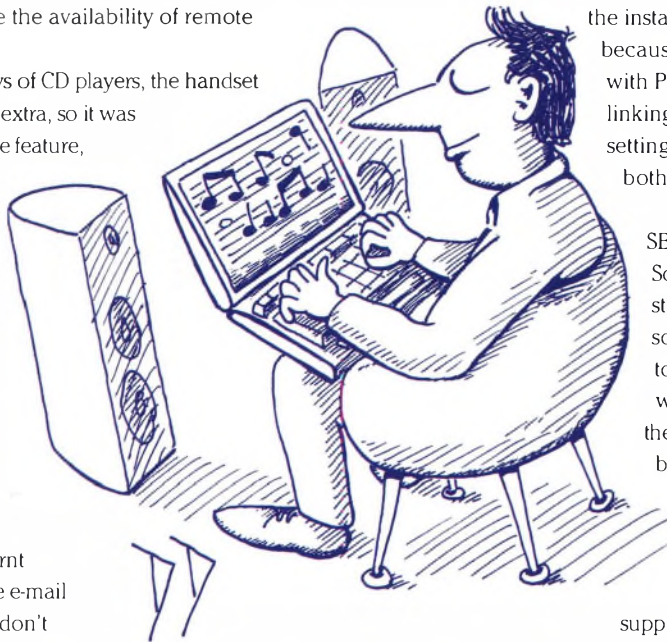
I explained I didn't do computers, and that he'd have to come and sort out the installation, which involved installing Slim Devices SlimServer software. The whole procedure did take him two or three hours, but that was because

the installation was complicated because he was used to working with PCs rather than Macs, and linking to the wireless network and setting up internet radio streaming both took some time.

As the name suggests, the SB+ is based on the SlimDevices SqueezeBox SB3. In fact it starts out as an SB3, and uses some of the innards of one to extract the data from the wireless network and generate the sophisticated display, but At-View then gives the captured digital data the full audiophile treatment, with high class DACs and multiple regulated power supplies located in a separate box.

Instead of the low cost, compact SqueezeBox in its rather cheap looking plastic case, you get two attractively neat mid-width hi-fi units with traditional wooden end-cheeks, which link together via a sturdy multi-way Burndy lead. At £1,000 (direct sale only), it costs a lot more than a SqueezeBox (typically £219), but much less than SlimDevices' more upmarket Transporter (now £1,700). I gather the latter has a few more features, but I think the SB+ looks much more like 'real hi-fi'

I was surprised by just how good it sounds too, and would judge the sound quality as more or less comparable to my favourite CD players at around the same price. But the real bonus here is ergonomic. Take the time to load your favourite (or indeed all your) CDs into your computer, and the SB+ will then provide rapid access to any individual



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Because we all have different lifestyles, priorities and systems (both hi-fi and computer), it's difficult to lay down rules that are universally applicable. Because I've chosen to use a laptop, mostly in the listening room, I have various other possible options apart from a 'Streamer'. The most basic approach could merely take the computer's stereo output jack and hard-wire connect it to the pre-amp. Or one could by-pass much of the computer's electronics by extracting digits via a USB socket and feed a high quality outboard DAC.

An 'Audio Streamer' like the SB+ is arguably best suited to a set-up where a 'proper' wireless-networked computer is located away from the listening room, maybe in a home-office. Indeed, one can easily envisage using a wireless network computer as the heart of an easily installed multi-room system, using a high class Streamer like the SB+ for the main hi-fi room and system, and cheaper SqueezeBoxes feeding integrated amps and speakers in secondary locations.

A number of hi-fi companies produce Music Servers, combining hard and CD drives, and which are designed specifically to do more or less the same record/replay task as the wireless home computer plus Streamer. I don't have any

experience of these, but presume they're rather easier to set up and install, if only because they're simpler, less flexible, and dedicated to the task in hand.

Whether to embrace hard disk CD storage, and if so how, is very much a lifestyle decision. I'm sure I'll carry on using an upmarket CD player, partly out of habit, and partly because I feel obliged to maximise my system sound quality, since the upmarket Naim player I use does have a somewhat sweeter and cleaner top end.

But I continue to be surprised by how good the SB+ sounds, and how much musical involvement and enjoyment it delivers. And there's absolutely no denying the ergonomic benefits this approach offers. Ripping software automatically drags disc details from the internet, and the computer provides all sorts of search and playlist compilation options. In extremis, and given time, a complete CD collection can be ripped, to one or more internal or external hard drives, and you can then simply box up and put most (or all) of your discs into storage.

I shan't go that far, but I've never quite got around to racking my CDs as effectively as my vinyl, so plenty of discs are sitting around in boxes and rarely get played. These will be prime candidates for my hard drive, and their considerably enhanced accessibility will be a real boon. ▶+



PLAYING THE SYSTEM

by Roy Gregory

I'm a great believer in the old adage, "the proof of the pudding is in the eating." So, when Carlsberg tell me that they make the best lager in the world... probably, I register the claim, but judgement waits until I taste the product. With hi-fi, my approach is much the same. Technical discussions are all very well; theoretical perfection or progress is interesting in its own way; but it's results that I'm really looking for. I don't care whether an amp uses triodes, pentodes, paper in oil capacitors or an output transformerless topology. I don't give a hoot whether a CD player is one-bit or PCM, top loading or drawer loading, or whether a cable is wrapped in Teflon or recycled Tesco carrier bags. I don't mind if some product, whatever it is, is knitted from fluorescent purple llama wool – as long as it sounds good. Then and only then do I wonder about

construction and technology, components and topology. That's when I ask myself whether it's the purple llama wool that makes it sound good or something else entirely?

You see, I'm not enough of a hippy to really go for purple, and most wool just makes me itch, so I tend to be awfully suspicious of so-called "silver bullet solutions". You know, those one great answers that cure all known ills. The world is full of them – but hi-fi is fuller still. There's been metal dome tweeters, triodes, bi-wiring, silver cables, diamond, ceramic, beryllium. Go back a little further and you find transistors, valves (the return of...), sandwich materials (several times and in several ways...), CD and speaker cones made out of just about everything imaginable – including bits of insect and animal! And I haven't even scratched the surface.

In fact, if you really want to get cynical you could argue ▶

Flower

by ARGENTO AUDIO



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the Power of Perfection....



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

WWW.ARGENTOAUDIO.COM

► (with some justification) that the next big thing is nothing more than a reaction or over reaction to the last big thing. Is it really any surprise or coincidence that the triode amplifier regained its place in audio society immediately after the emergence of ubiquitous metal dome tweeters – in many cases an instance of two wrongs actually making something even worse!

However, despite my somewhat flippant dismissal of such things, it's a mistake to ignore them simply because they challenge conventional or accepted "wisdom" – and yes, those inverted commas are there on purpose. There are good single-ended triode amps just as there are truly awful ones. But what they teach us is that the shorter the signal path, the less componentry there is between you and the source of the driving power, the better that power supply had better be, because that's what you'll be listening to. So simply going single-ended and direct heated isn't the answer. It simply presents a different set of design questions, which if you don't answer them properly will destroy the musical results. Which is why it's important to look at both the benefits and the costs of any design approach before accepting or rejecting it.

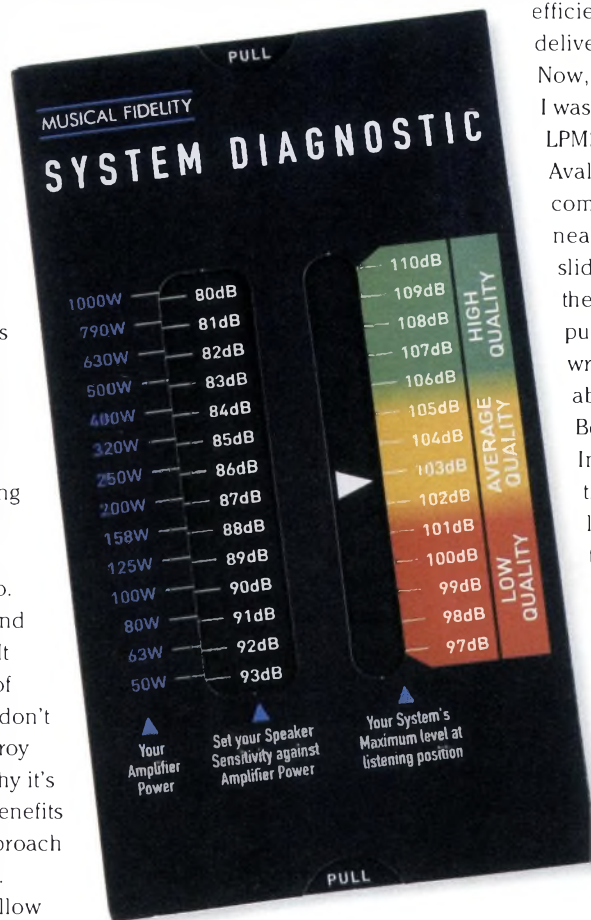
It's one of the reasons we allow designers, manufacturers, distributors and retailers the freedom to express their views through interviews. When we talk to these people we let them tell it the way they see it; you get to read what they think and any claims they make. We're not saying that they are right or that we even agree with their point of view, but we are giving it to you straight from the horse's mouth so that you can assess it for yourself. That way, when you listen to the products they produce and/or sell and experience the way they do it, you can decide for yourself whether their approach and ideas have merit – or not. Give 'em enough rope? In some cases that's exactly what happens, but in others you discover something that changes the way you think about your system and the way in which it makes music. Stick to the status quo and your progress is apt to be incremental and predictable at best, downright glacial at worst.

Inside this issue of Hi-Fi+ you should find a natty little card device, proudly labelled "System Diagnostic". It's a case in point. Not so long ago it was given away in another magazine, with somewhat unexpected results as readers failed to grasp its true nature. This cardboard "slide-rule" balances your amplifier's power against the

efficiency of your speakers and delivers a verdict as to its quality. Now, when I first saw said device I was using the conrad-johnson LPM275 mono-blocs to drive the Avalon Indra loudspeakers, a tasty combination that weighs in at nearly £40K! Yet, according to the slide-rule it just about scrapes into the "High Quality" bracket. Did I pull my hair out? Did I slash my wrists? No, but it made me think about the argument behind it. Because that's actually the point. In the top left-hand corner of the device is a Musical Fidelity logo and the whole point of the exercise is to get people interested in that company's add on system Turbo Charger, a device designed to introduce considerably more bang for your system's buck. It is, in effect, an advertisement – just like all the other inserts that fall out of all the other mags you read. But Anthony Michaelson is nothing if not clever.

Having paid to have his advert placed in the magazine, the last thing he wants is to have you upend your issue over the nearest waste bin and unceremoniously eject it. So he dressed it up and made it colourful, provocative and more than a little controversial (a bit like Anthony himself in fact).

Don't get me wrong. The mathematics that go into the System Diagnostic slide-rule are beyond reproach. But like a lot of adverts it deals with a limited question and does so in a fairly simple fashion. So, it is quite correct in reflecting that few domestic hi-fi systems come close to matching the dynamic range of real life. Musical Fidelity's solution to this is an interesting one. You could just go out and buy a much more powerful amp, but instead they suggest you add a second amp in tandem between the one you have and your speakers, taking its output and adding more besides – hence the Turbo Charger moniker. ►



"Pushing the limits is the only road to innovation; that which seems impossible simply represents a challenge."

Sentiments shared by Focal and Coherent Systems.




► Now, it's easy to pick holes in this suggestion. It doesn't bother to ask whether or not more power is the be all and end all of hi-fi performance, the silver bullet we're all looking for. It doesn't ask whether or not it might be easier, better or cheaper to simply buy more efficient speakers. It doesn't address the qualitative cost of inserting another whole amplifier, along with the cables and connections that entails, into the signal path. But what it does do is raise the whole issue of dynamic range and headroom as they pertain to musical performance – which is an extremely interesting and valid issue. It also, quite incidentally I'm sure, rattles the cage of accepted system building logic – and everybody who places rather too much reliance in it!

This is not exactly a new debate, either as far as this magazine is concerned, or the industry as a whole. We've written reams on the impact of efficiency on loudspeaker performance – specifically the ability of a speaker to sound live and immediate. We've looked at the issues around high-powered amplification, with a large article on that very subject as recently as Issue 52. And I'm constantly comparing the efficiency figures quoted by manufacturers for their speakers with the weights quoted on bicycles and their components – in both cases they can be pretty fanciful. Add in the complexity of the load presented by most loudspeakers, and the ability of the majority of amplifiers to meet the demands that result and you can see why these things matter. But then,

everybody rushing out and buying Lowther based horns with 107dB sensitivity isn't going to solve the problem either.

But I suspect that the thing that really got all those reader's goat (besides working out that someone was telling them that their beloved system was of "average" or even "low" quality) was the associated suggestion, backed up by a gushing review in the magazine in question, that they should be inserting a whole extra stage into their carefully honed, less is more edifice to the hi-fi Gods. How outrageous is that?

Well, how outrageous is it? After all, it's only the same soap sub-woofer manufacturers have been selling for years, just spread across the entire musical range. There again, I've got my reservations about that too, yet the REL reviewed in Issue 52 managed to put in an excellent performance, despite labouring under the burden of just such a handicap. And if it works as effectively as Anthony claims (well, he would wouldn't he!) it potentially rewrites our entire approach to system architecture.


Such revolutionary changes are oft announced and seldom delivered, but like I said, ignore them at your peril. I shall reserve judgement until I hear the results for myself. In the meantime Mr Michaelson has got an awful lot of people thinking about the issue – which makes his System Diagnostic slide-rule one seriously effective piece of advertising. We'll see if he can deliver the goods. You know, I tried Carlsberg and it tasted just like... 

The 2007 Hi-Fi+ Writers Competition



Well, the deadline has gone and the entries are all in – even a few that trickled in late (you know who you are). Hey, I don't see why you shouldn't receive the same latitude that the regular writers seem to need! Although perhaps the gentleman who entered four times, once for each of the titles, all within the deadline, should have his anonymity preserved lest we damage his reputation. That said, the task of wading through your offerings can now start in earnest. One look at the stack of entries tells me that either, a) there are a lot of frustrated writers out there, or, b) you all really, really want a Meridian F80. There again, maybe it's a combination of both.

Either way, we'll be narrowing the field significantly

over the next few weeks, before John Bamford of Meridian (once of Hi-Fi Answers and Hi-Fi Choice) and I sit down with a nice glass of something and the shortlist to select the eventual winner. We'll be announcing the name of the lucky individual, as well as printing his or her (and yes, a number of women entered) article, possibly along with a couple of runners up, in Issue 55, due out towards the end of November. Until then, don't despair; if you haven't heard it is because we've yet to decide on the result. Just pray we don't chance upon a nectar so appealing it impairs our performance... 

Maria Callas, Metallica, Miles Davis, Muse, Muddy Waters, Madonna, Massive Attack.

Whatever your tastes in music, the Linn Majik System enables you to experience the full emotion of the artist's original performance in your home.

We would normally let the sound speak for itself. However, in this instance it's also worth mentioning that you could own the new Linn Majik System for only **£3500**.

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DEFINITIVE AUDIO



KSL Kondo Nero Line Integrated Valve Amplifier



L to R: 1. Kuzma Stabi XL £10,000 2. Art Audio Concerto Stereo Amplifier (GE) £4400 3. Living Voice IBX R2 (Burr Oak) £4400 4. SME 10 / SME V £4115
5. Living Voice OBX RW (Santos) £7200 6. KSL Kondo Ongaku Integrated Amplifier £49,000 7. Magnum Dynalab 106T Valve Tuner £3600
8. KSL Kondo Gakuoh 300B Mono Amplifiers £48,500 9. Resolution Audio Opus 21 CD Player £2950 10. KSL Kondo V-z (1m) Interconnect £750

hi-fi+

PRODUCT OF THE YEAR AWARDS '07

As always, we make no claims as to the scientific basis or impartiality of these awards. They represent quite simply, those products that we've got most excited by this year. They might have found themselves as permanent, indispensable parts of our systems. They might have challenged our preconceptions of what is possible, or more likely, what is possible for a price. But all, without exception, have entertained, charmed or astonished us – and may well do the same for you.

If last year saw the Chinese invasion finally gain a serious foothold, this year sees the response, with the old guard rising to the challenge in the best way possible. Faced with imported products able to reap the benefits of massive savings in terms of labour costs, established high-end manufacturers have had to put performance and value first in order to maintain their market position. The result is impressive new products from companies that were founding members of our high-end society. Alongside them comes a wave of designs that combine Western expertise with Chinese manufacturing, finally delivering consistent sonic results to go along with their superb appearance and low prices.

The times they are a changing – and that's no bad thing. Now that we're moving beyond the initial xenophobia that greeted the arrival of the first Chinese imports, we're starting to appreciate both the strengths and the weaknesses of these products. Both customers' and the industry have more realistic expectations and a greater understanding of the inevitable shifts in the hi-fi landscape that are going to result. But the simple truth is that there will always be a place for quality in this market, a fact reflected in the products honoured here. We've lost a settled air of complacency, gone through the panic stage and now we're emerging out the other side, with new horizons and new opportunities. You can embrace the challenge and reap the rewards, or run and hide, but one thing's for sure – it's not the same as it was before: it's called the future and it's looking very interesting indeed.



PRODUCT OF THE YEAR

As outlined above, 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.



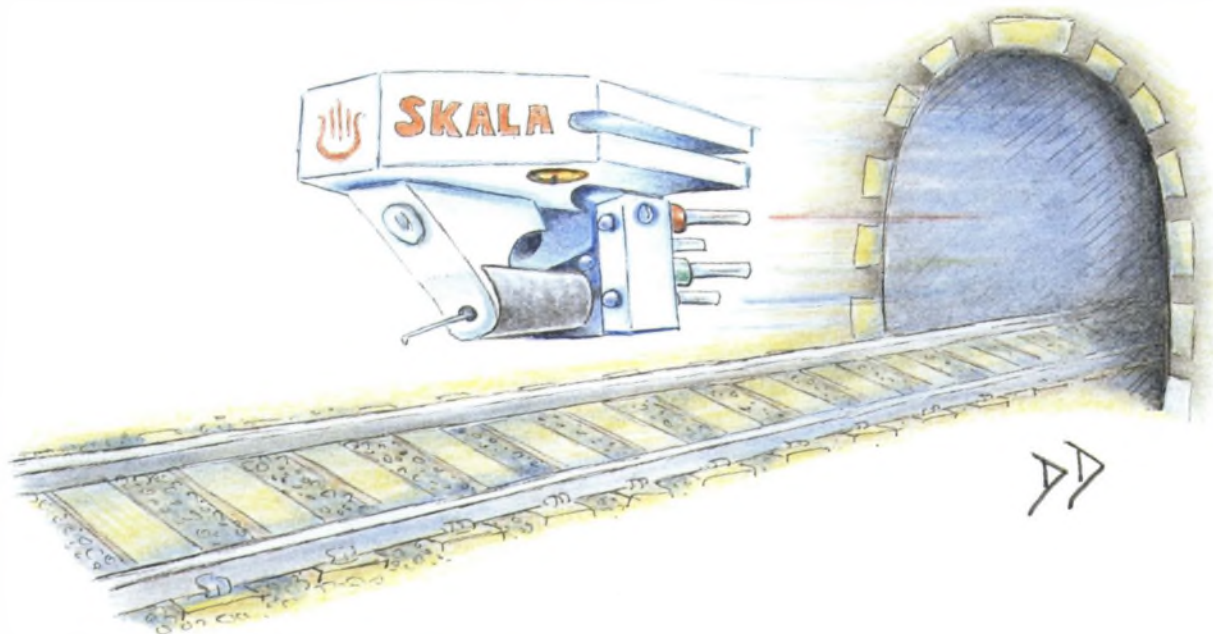
DISCOVERY

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/manufacture as well as an appreciation of second party serviceability 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!



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.



LYRA SKALA MC CARTRIDGE

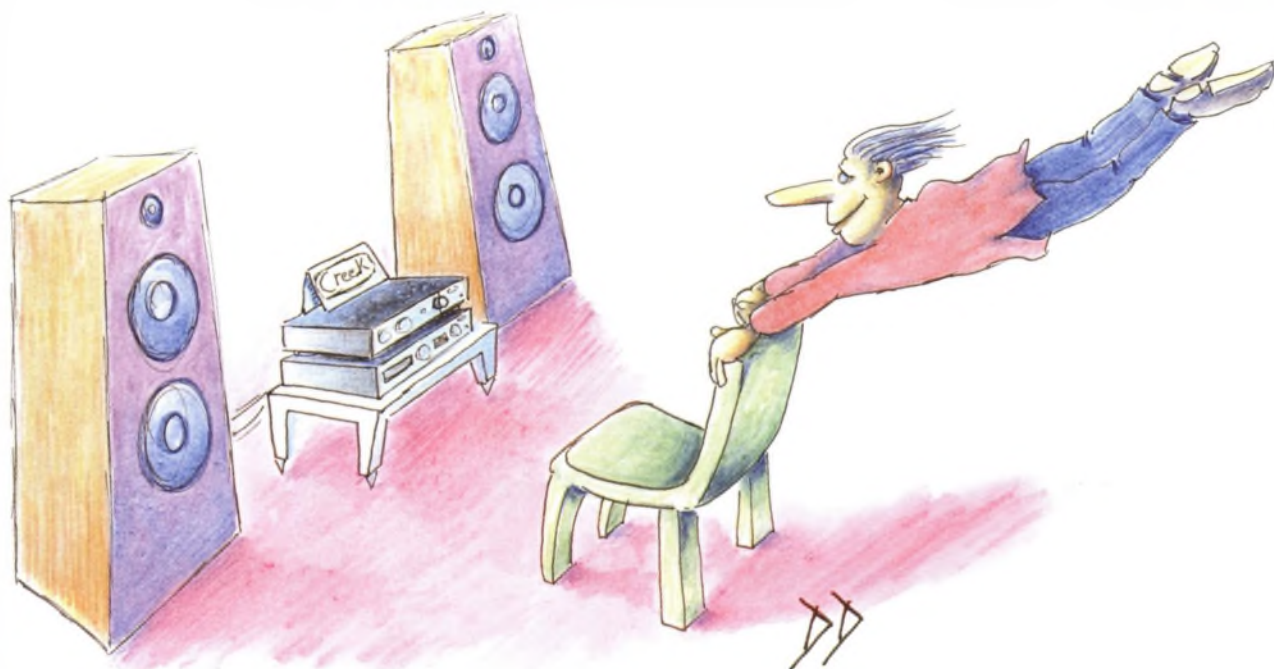


Nobody who reads Hi-Fi+ can be unaware of our affection for Lyra designed and built products. On a magazine where a disproportionate number of music or equipment reviewers still count vinyl as their primary source, the company's products are virtually ubiquitous – a remarkable achievement given the sheer range of competition on offer. The Skala signals the next major step in development. Refinements in the yokeless generator assembly have been combined with a massive alloy spine and a sophisticated engineering plastic stabilizer to create a closer bond between cartridge and headshell.

The result is a whole new sonic signature, combining the textural insight and resolution of the Helikon with a sense of real substance and purpose in the music, giving the Skala an almost uncanny grasp of the overall shape and structure of a performance. Those who have always loved the Lyras' open sound and detail will welcome the added thrust and weight, those who have criticized their harmonic balance or impact will have to think again. But the really significant thing about the Skala is that its construction can equally well be applied to other designs in the range. The prospect of a Titan developed along similar lines is mouthwatering indeed, although the benefits further down the range could well be more significant still. In the meantime, we'll just have to live with the Skala's beguilingly surefooted musical presentation; life can be so hard...

Price: £1849

Manufacturer: Symmetry Systems
 Tel. (44)(0)1727 865488
 Net. www.symmetrysystems.co.uk



CREEK DESTINY AMP AND CD PLAYER



Far from running scared in the face of the Chinese invasion, Creek have embraced and responded to the revolution. The company's more affordable EVO range, is UK designed but built in the Far East. But Destiny's product is UK built. They represent a brave move on the part of designer Mike Creek, given the enormous cost savings available with Chinese manufacturing. He's got to be confident that he both understands and can exploit the benefits of UK construction, otherwise he runs the risk of having his flagship range undermined by the budget components. Well, his confidence is well placed and as impressive as the EVOs are, they're no match for the Destinies.

Rocksolid power delivery underlines the no-nonsense clarity and drive of the amp, qualities that are reinforced by the uncluttered solidity and lively dynamics of the CD player. They make an exciting and involving combination that is surprisingly capable of commanding both budget speakers and far more demanding ones. The generous power rating, backed up by a suitable stiff power supply keeps the music moving, while facilities and options cover all the essential bases, and a few others besides. Add in the reassuringly substantial casework and elegant styling and you've got products that are secure in their position, a cut above the budget melee and promising a long and entertaining life. Grand designs indeed.

Price: £1195 ea.

Manufacturer: Creek Audio
Tel. (44)(0)1442 260146
Net. www.creekaudio.com



FINITE ELEMENTE SUPPORT SYSTEMS



Whilst the finite element racks have received several reviews in the magazine, along with the various other isolation products they produce (CeraBalls, CeraPucs and CeraBases) their true quality is reflected in the way they've become an ever-present part of the review process, a fundamental element to be relied on to extract the best possible performance from the equipment in use. More than just a pretty face, the various racks and isolators represent a carefully structured and layered defense against the deleterious effects of vibration on fragile electrical components, whether they come from within or without the system. The parasitic resonators used in the HD Master Reference racks are carefully tuned to dissipate mechanical energy according to the resonant modes within the structure itself, making the rack's framework and shelves an incredibly efficient sink for vibration. The various ceramic couplers, varying in size and load capability, provide an efficient exit route for internal energy that otherwise cannons around inside electronics, feeding it into the "ground plane" provided by the rack. The result is noticeably more even and tonally natural than other approaches as well as maintaining a wonderfully fluid and coherent sense of pace and rhythm, allowing the system and thus the music to speak for itself.

With a range of rack heights and shelf configurations, heavy-duty options, amp stands and couplers, finite elemente deliver a sophisticated, elegant and versatile solution to supporting high-quality electronics.

Price: Various

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

A y r e

MX-R

Stereophile, April 2007 — Wes Phillips

"...its sole purpose appears to be to praise music and to glorify it."

"...full-bodied, liquid, and three-dimensional..."

"...one of the most remarkable performers at any price."

Stereo Sound, Winter 2006 — Takahito Miura

"...a radiant, supple musical quality, with incredibly spacious sound."

"The life-sized soundstage was so vivid it gave me goosebumps."

"...a magical transparency that illuminates the individuality of each performance from within."

Hi-Fi+, June 2007 — Roy Gregory

"...these amps rewrite the rulebook on power."

"...when it comes to musical enjoyment, the effect is smack you in the face obvious."

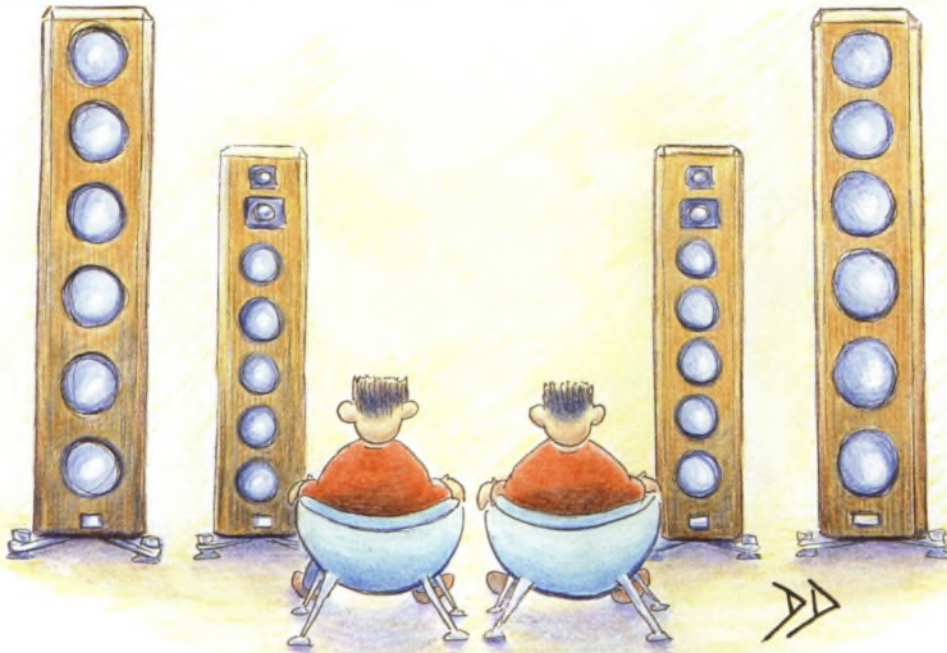
"...the Ayres establish a benchmark for all round excellence."

 symmetry

t: 01727 865488

e: info@symmetry-systems.co.uk

w: www.symmetry-systems.co.uk



MARTEN COLTRANE SUPREME LOUDSPEAKER SYSTEM

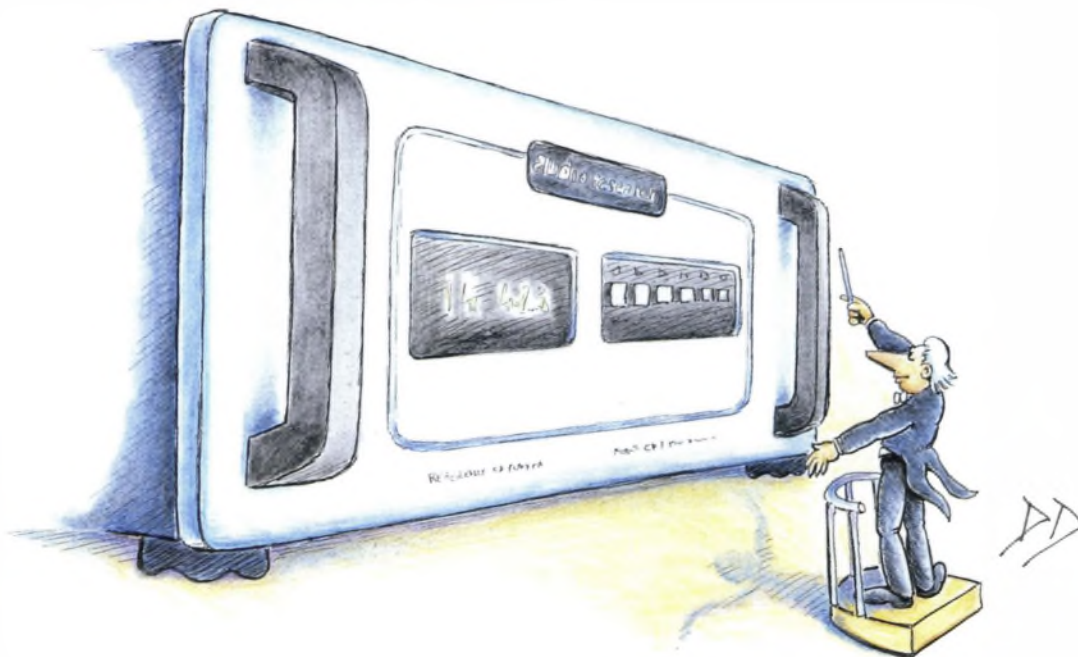


At £135000 a pair you can justifiably ask what possible relevance a product like the Coltrane Supreme has in the real world. The answer, in terms of its consideration for purchase by the vast majority of us has to be, "Not a lot". However, in terms of what it tells us about the possibilities inherent in the latest driver technologies and the way to use them, it's a fascinating product. Combining Eaton's established ceramic bowl drivers with their latest diamond tweeter and upper midrange units, the Coltrane Supreme manages to give us diamond drive from 1200Hz upwards. Also, by using a dozen 9" ceramic bass units and driving them actively, it manages to achieve the low distortion and speed for which these drivers are justifiably renowned, along with satisfying weight and truly explosive dynamics. The simple passive crossovers are constructed from the highest quality components while the cabinets are a complex composite and mixed material construction. £135K is a lot of money, but difficult as it might be to believe, it's hard to fault the Marten's material content!

The end result is a system of astonishing resolution, immediacy and transparency – qualities that put keenly honed edges on this most particular of swords. These speakers simply disappear and what you feed them is what you'll get. But once they're singing, their sheer presence, authority and insight is addictive. If the Coltrane Supreme is a harbinger of things to come then the future's bright indeed.

Price: £135000

Manufacturer: Audiocraft
Tel.
Net.



AUDIO RESEARCH CD7 CD PLAYER



This is the one that almost got away. The CD7 has become such a fixture in the systems we listen to that it has become a de facto standard. So much so that we actually thought we must have given it an award already! Well, last year it missed out to the company's stunning Reference 3 line-stage and PH7 phono-stage, a natural combination if ever there was one. This year it almost missed out to the LS26 – a genuine high-end bargain. Yet the CD7 has spent more time in the system than any of those components, its unobtrusive excellence being taken well and truly for granted. It's an unusual problem for a CD player, too many of which spend far too much of their time drawing attention to themselves.

Some have suggested that the CD7 sounds analogue. I'd demur. Listen to it and it definitely has the strengths that typify a good CD player. But it grafts them to the sort of acoustic space, fluid, unforced dynamics and musical flow that we normally hear from a record player. It's a winning combination. So much so that the player's natural warmth is an unnecessary embellishment. Carefully attention to support will tame the gentle bottom-end bloom, releasing even more explosive dynamics and even greater musical authority. And the best bit of all? Compared to the competition the CD7 is positively cheap. Nothing under five-figures comes close – and precious little at higher prices either.

Price: £7300

Manufacturer: Absolute Sounds
Tel. (44)(0)20 8971 3909
Net. www.absolutesounds.co.uk



WHARFEDALE DIAMOND 9.1 LOUDSPEAKER



Boat-backed cabinet? Tick. Woven Kevlar bass-mid unit? Tick. Fashionably low crossover point? Tick. That will be another award for B&W then? Urrr... No.

Not so long ago the salient features that define this speaker could easily have described any wannabe state of the art mini-monitor. Now, thanks to the wonders of Chinese manufacturing and a rapidly reshaped global market they're all present and correct in a speaker costing £180 a pair. And don't go thinking this is a triumph of style over substance. Wharfedale's Diamond 9.1 is a very serious product indeed; that technology is there for all the right reasons and boy can you hear it in the results. This speaker hasn't just raised the budget performance bar a bit, it's left its competitors thinking they've entered the pole vault by mistake!

The real secret of the Wharfedale Diamond 9.1 lies in its clever voicing and a balance that makes the most of its strengths without revealing its limited bandwidth. It's lightning quick and extremely clean across the mid-band, while a subtle upper bass lift provides a remarkable sense of power and scale (given the speakers' size). The top-end rolls gently, balancing the bottom and taming the wilder excesses of budget electronics. But it's that crystal clear midrange that will have your eyes popping, an object lesson in just what Chinese manufacturing can achieve, given its druthers. Looking at the cost/technology equation here one's forced to wonder, "What price a Wharfedale Diamond Diamond?"

Price: £180

UK Distributor: IAG (UK) Ltd.
Tel. 0845 458 0011
Net. www.wharfedale.co.uk

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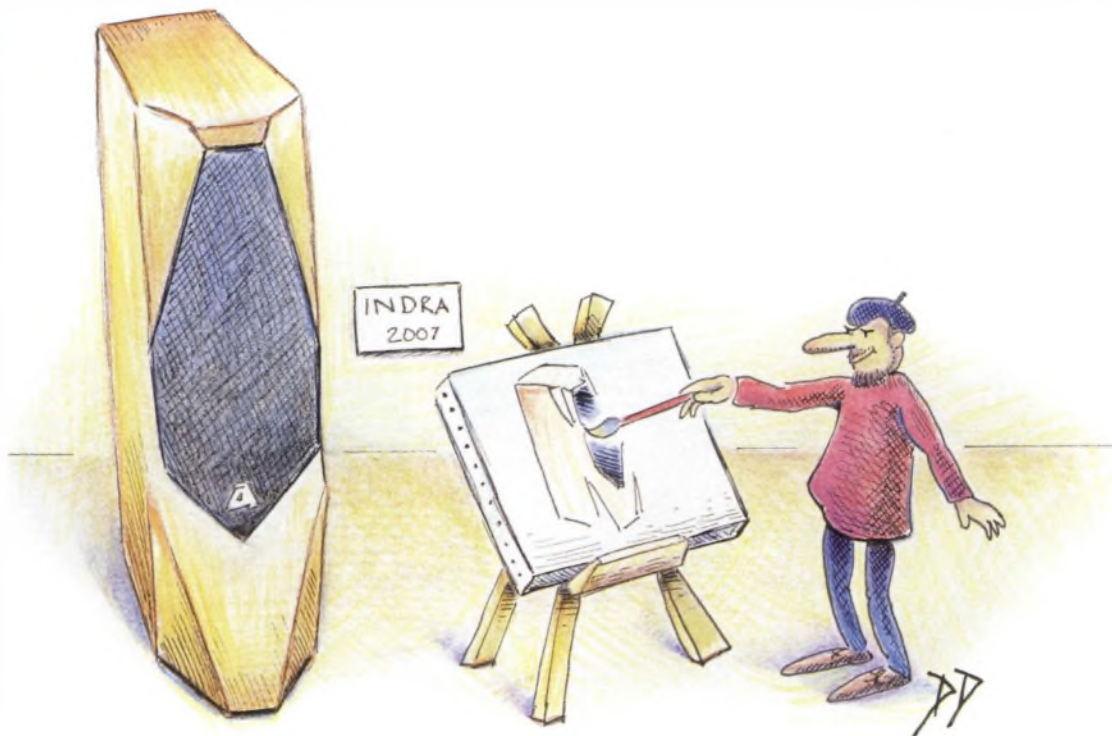


In a word, bliss. As KEF's flagship loudspeaker, the new Reference Series Model 207/2 is where all the latest KEF technology breakthroughs find their finest expression. For sheer acoustic integrity, they have no equal. The stunning new Uni-Q™ array delivers unrivalled linearity, exceptionally wide dispersion and unerringly precise reproduction across both midrange and high frequencies. A dedicated 250mm (10") lower midrange driver adds control and finesse in this crucial register, while assuring perfect integration with the paired ultra low distortion drivers of the same size. Bass extension is phenomenal – and by faithfully tracking every last subtlety of the recording, the ensemble generates a soundfield of startling realism. Close your eyes, and they disappear: all you experience is the sensation of closeness to the original source of the sound. For the serious audiophile, this is as good as it gets.

REFERENCE

GP Acoustics (UK) Ltd., Eccleston Road, Tovil, Maidstone, Kent, ME15 6QP U.K. T: + 44 (0) 1622 672261. F: + 44 (0) 1622 750653.
KEF and Uni-Q are registered trademarks. Uni-Q is protected under GB patent 2 236929, U.S. Pat. No. 5,548,657 and other worldwide patents.

www.kef.com



AVALON INDRA LOUDSPEAKER



Avalon's Isis broke new ground in several important areas of loudspeaker performance – at a price both practical and monetary. Now we have the chance to hear the benefits of the long learning curve that led to the Isis, but downsized into a physically and financially more manageable package.

Like many an Avalon before it, the Indra's bandwidth and musical authority belie its compact dimensions. But if you are expecting stilted and overly polite, perhaps misled by the superb finish and understated elegance of the cabinetwork, think again. There's nothing constrained or pinched about music from this speaker, a design that has an almost emphatic sense of musical purpose to its delivery. Just like the Isis it stands aside from the performance, allowing the music full rein. But where with most speakers you find yourself fastening on the high points of their performance, with the Indras it's the other way round; you're amazed by how little impact they have on proceedings, how small a signature they leave on the passing signal, how powerful a voice they allow the musicians. Speakers shouldn't be this hands-off, at least not if conventional wisdom is to be believed. But the Indras are, and they're inclusive too, reaching out to enclose you in the same space as the performers. It all adds up to an ease and directness of communication that moves you several steps closer to the real event – and that makes them very special indeed.

Price: £17500

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

True piano sound

Meridian Audio systems



Meridian engineers know that the sound of a Concert Grand Piano is the most difficult of any instrument to reproduce accurately.

Meridian DSP8000 digital loudspeakers, driven by the Signature Reference 808 CD player, comprise one of the very few audio systems in the world to achieve this goal from a CD source. Listen for yourself.

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Latham Road, Huntingdon
Cambridgeshire PE29 6YE, UK

www.meridian-audio.com



FOCAL-JMLAB 1037BE LOUDSPEAKER



Innovation (or should that be individuality) has been a keystone of Focal-JMLabs' designs from day one. Fitting then that their latest great leap forward, their beryllium tweeter, should build on the inverted dome, narrow voice-coil configuration that first brought the company to international notice. The beryllium story has been a huge success, but until recently, it's also been associated with the high price-tags attached to the Utopia range. Until, that is, the emergence of the more affordable 1007 and 1027 models. These were great products at great prices, but they left an uncomfortably wide gap in performance terms between themselves and the Utopias.

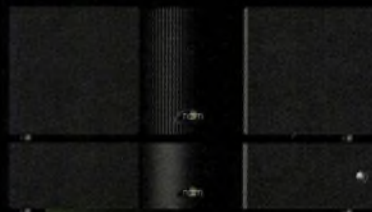
Enter then the 1037, a speaker that takes the tried and tested ingredients of the 1027 and writes them large. With three bass drivers in place of the 27's two, each one larger than the previous units, housed in a significantly larger cabinet, the 1037 clearly means business – and it certainly delivers, hitting that sweet spot between dynamic response and bandwidth that produces real impact and musical drama. The bottom end quality is now a match for that beryllium tweeter, while the efficiency makes music lucid and effortless, the performance potential easy to realise. The end result isn't the best speaker that Focal make, but it's definitely the best value beryllium package they offer. You can do better, but it's going to cost you a lot of speaker (and amplifier) to do it.

Price: £6399

UK Distributor: Focal Jmlab (UK) Ltd.
Tel. 0845 660 2680
Net. www.focal-uk.com

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CD555 - CD Player



NAC 552 - Preamplifier

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MIDLANDS Cymbiosis 0116 262 3754 Honeydale Audio 01694 771 351	SCOTLAND Loud & Clear Ltd 0141 2210 221 Robert Ritchie 01674 673 765		

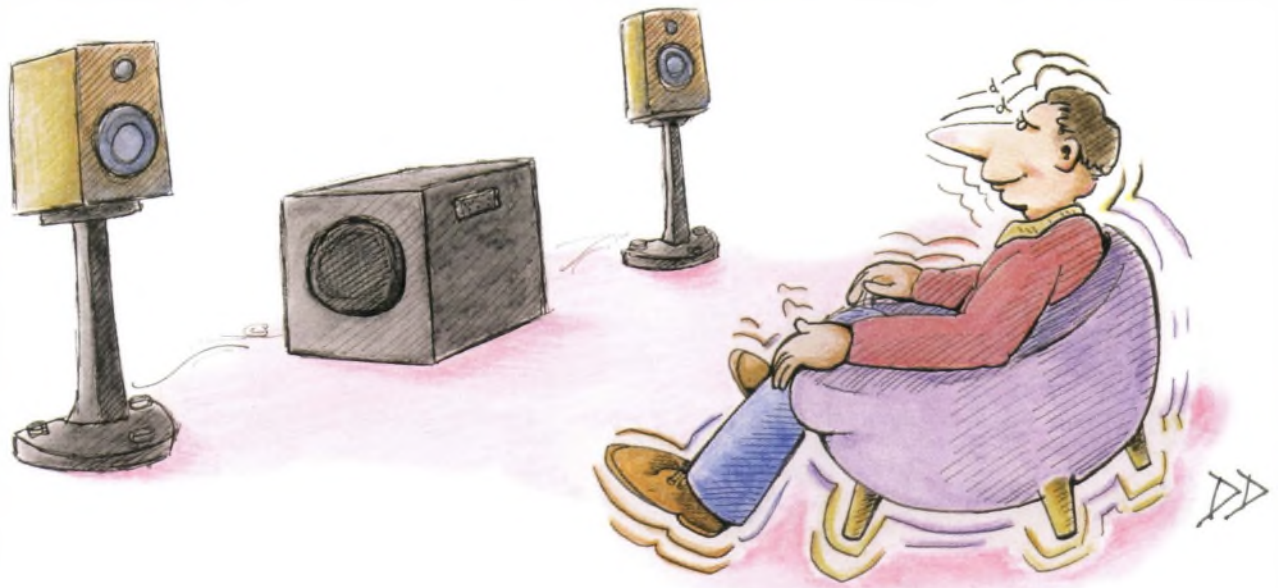


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ECLIPSE TD725SW SUB-WOOFER

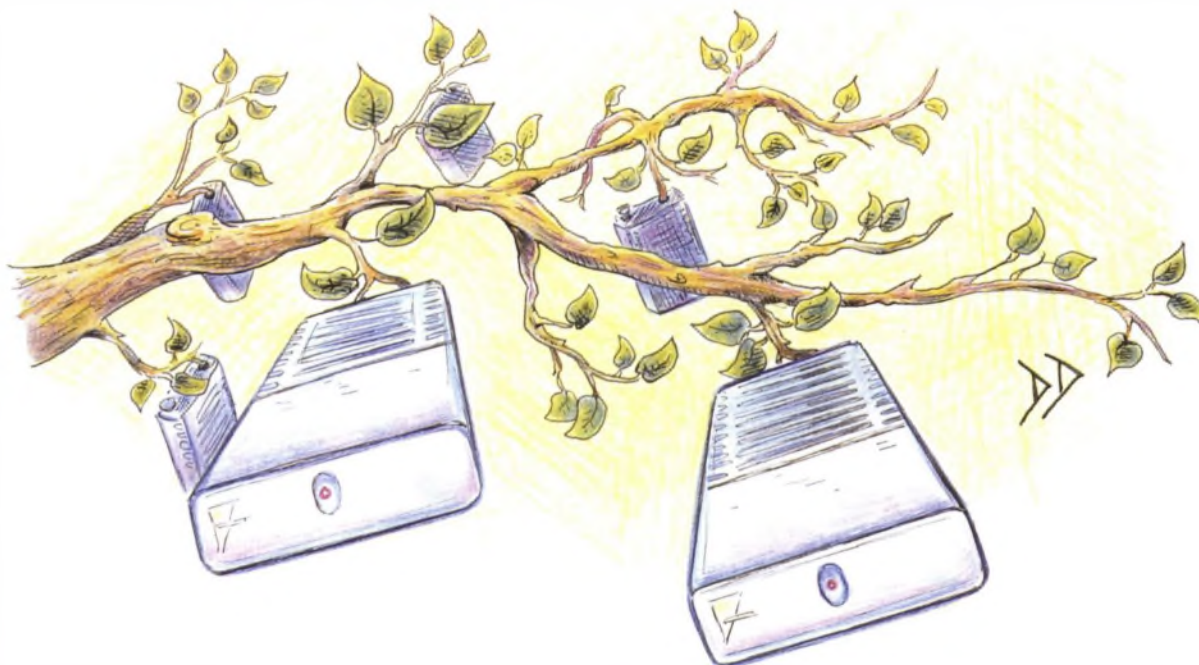


Eclipse TD are best known for their innovative egg-shaped, single driver speakers, limited bandwidth transducers which put speed, phase coherence and directness of communication ahead of traditional concerns regarding the likes of neutrality. Their musical strengths have won them a loyal following in the pro side of the industry, especially amongst more inventive composers like Brian Eno and Michael Nyman – the same composers who are fascinated by the possibilities of surround sound recording. The problem comes in trying to mate a sub-woofer to the lightning quick Eclipse loudspeakers to create a 5.1 monitoring system. Enter then, the TD725sw, a unit designed to do just that.

Of course, the very qualities that allow it to match the speed and tactile qualities of its egg-shaped satellites make it ideally suited to other applications, extending the bandwidth of systems where musical performance out-weighs the need for AV style grunt. At £2700 a piece, the price might seem steep – until you compare the performance to cheaper units on the market, none of which come close to the sheer quality on offer here. The largish dimensions and cuboid styling are strangely pleasing, and whilst the size might make positioning an issue, this is the only single box unit we've found that can compete with pairs of smaller ones. This most musical of sub-woofers is quite simply in a class of its own. If you want better – buy two of them.

Price: £2700 ea.

UK Distributor: Eclipse TD (UK) Ltd
Tel. (44)(0)20 7328 4499
Net. www.eclipse-td.co.uk



AYRE ACOUSTICS MXR MONO-BLOCS

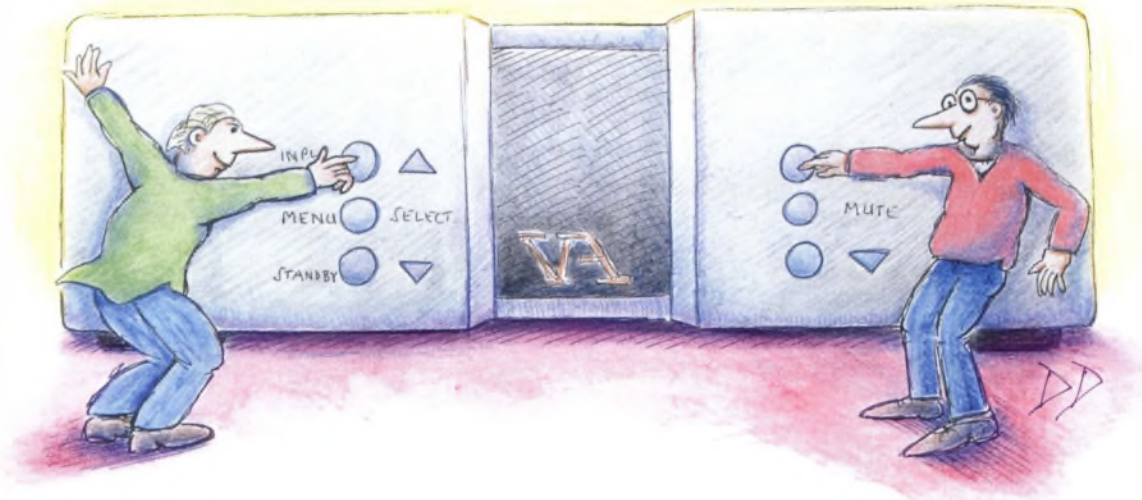


Ayre's MXR mono-blocs seemingly defy the laws of physics. Impossibly small and neat for their power rating, they're also impossibly solid in their construction. It's not just that they're heavy you understand – pick them up and they feel positively inert. Of course, Ayre are far from the first company to mill their casework from solid, but here the results are both elegant and understated, going way beyond the external appearance and literally sculpting the casework around the internal components. With the MXRs Ayre have firmly and loudly announced their arrival at the high-end's top-table, where quality extends beyond performance into the realms of constructional and conceptual excellence too. That they've done so with a product that weighs in at what has to be considered a bargain price relative to the competition is all the more impressive – and in keeping with the maverick ethos behind the company.

The MXRs excel through absence. They manage to sound, transparent, grain free and agile, just like a great, small amp, right up to the point where the music demands power – and then they deliver: no fuss, no strain, no hesitation. Their sense of grip and control is so stable that you don't notice the effect, which is just how it should be. There are amps that go louder, and there are those that put out more sheer power, but there are few if any that are as elegant, musically engaging and versatile at anything like the price of the MXRs.

Price: £5500 ea.

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



VITUS AUDIO 010 AMPLIFIER



Whilst you might be able to debate whether or not the 010 really constitutes an integrated amp (two inputs, one balanced and one single-ended, plus a volume control is all the switching you get) one thing you can't argue with is the unit's sheer density. A 1400VA transformer in a chassis this compact makes for a product that should be lifted with considerable caution! For once, when a manufacturer says "25 Watts, Class A", the weight of the amp as well as the heat generated means it carries the ring of truth. Musically, the end result of all that iron and the current it supplies is an incredible stability to the expansive sound-stage, an inky blackness to the acoustic space, an utterly unforced and natural pace to proceedings. This amp is all about control without constraint, resolution without overt or obvious detail. Indeed, the 010's musical qualities are as discrete and understated as its exterior; but just like the shock you get when you first try to move it, just wait until the music turns explosive or nasty. There's nothing shy or retiring here. This level of clarity and musical communication is rare indeed. The fact that the input options allow you to invest in it by stages, running the 010 as a standalone unit to start with until you can add a pukka line-stage later, just pushes the value quotient from "excellent" into the realms of "truly remarkable". The price might seem high for the power on offer, but it's cheap for the quality delivered. The Vitus Audio 010 is a genuine high-end bargain.

Price: £6550

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NORDOST ODIN CABLES



Just when you thought it was safe to forget about cables...

Nordost's Valhalla has enjoyed quite a run as the cable of choice for a considerable number of the audio reviewing community. All the more surprising given the fact that: a) the cable sector is the most over-populated segment of the already crowded high-end market, and b) on the whole these are folks who get to use pretty much what they want and for whom cables are a necessary evil. At least they used to be. Exposure to Valhalla had a way of rearranging your views regarding the relative importance of cables and the allocation of budget within your hi-fi system.

If Valhalla changed the way we think about cables, Odin completely rewrites the book on sonic potential. Just when a few manufacturers were starting to snap at the heels of Valhalla, Odin opens a performance gap so wide it looks like the Grand Canyon at the end of a long jump runway! Unfortunately the price-gulf is just as wide. Odin makes Valhalla look like a positive bargain, but for those who must have the best I suspect the cost will be no obstacle. One listen is all it will take...

For the rest of us? Listen and learn. Appreciate what a truly transparent, dynamically and musically coherent cable can achieve; then apply those lessons to the cables in your own system. The Nordost Odin is both a stunning achievement and a harsh lesson, whether the cost is borne financially or philosophically. It's also a brilliant, brilliant cable. Listen and be amazed...

Prices:

1m Interconnect from £8500 pr.
3m Speaker Cable from £17500 pr.

UK Distributor: Activ Distribution

Tel. (44)(0)1635 291357
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SONUS FABER CREMONA AUDITOR M

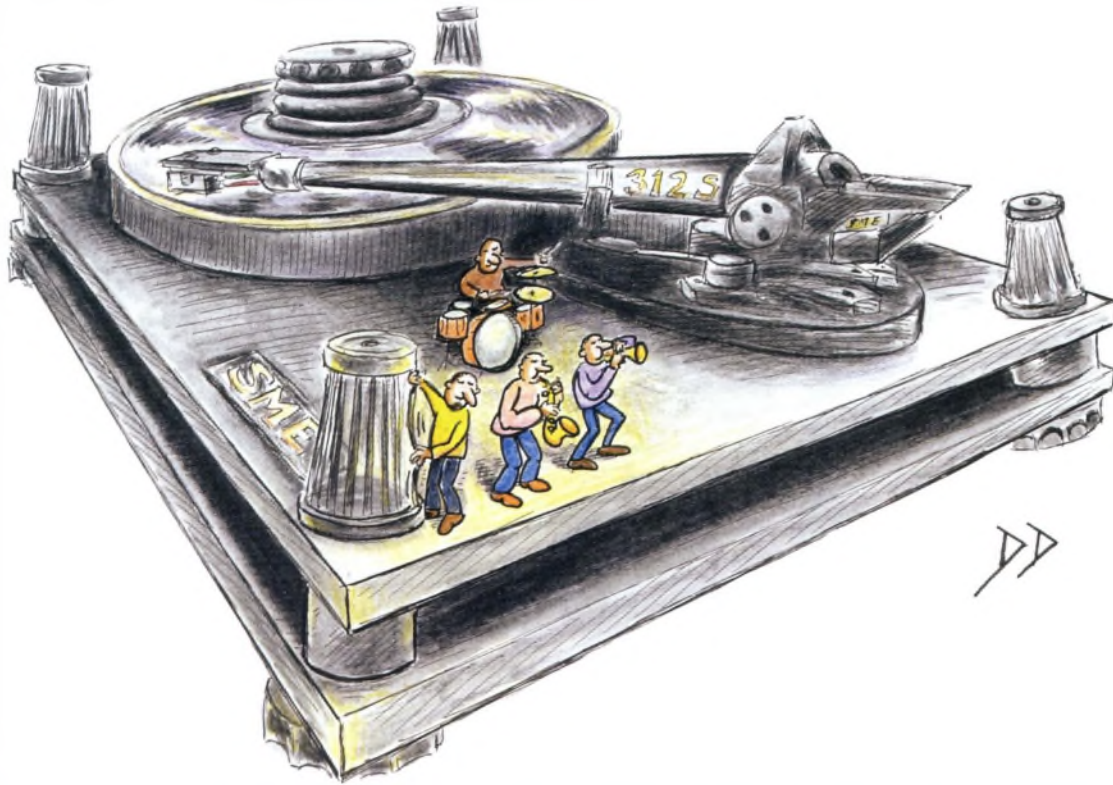


Sonus Faber have been with us so long it seems strange to be announcing their arrival, but that's exactly what the Auditor M represents; both a departure from their traditional sound and their arrival slap bang in the middle of the mainstream. Where previous Sonus speakers have tended to a warmer, fuller balance and considerable extension from their exquisitely finished boxes, leaving the door ajar for competitors with a more immediate, obviously detailed or quicker presentation (or just less demanding of power), the Auditor M is a whole new ballgame. With original designer Franco Serblin deciding to concentrate on the Homage series speakers, fresh blood has been brought in to the design process. But far from throwing the baby out with the bathwater, the result is an evolutionary step, albeit one with fairly dramatic results.

The Auditor M doesn't go as deep as previous Sonus stand mounts. It doesn't demand the same amount of power – although it surely knows how to use what's available. Nor does it err so far towards the warmer side of the musical spectrum. Instead it's quicker, more lucid, more open yet still devoid of thinness, glare or brightness. It's a balance as exquisitely judged as the speaker's elegant profile, and one that will deliver its considerable musical benefits with an astonishing range of ancillaries. A little gem whose performance puts the musical performance first the Cremona Auditor M combines style and musicality with disarming ease. Accept no substitutes – this is the real deal.

Price: £2970
including stands

UK Distributor: Absolute Sounds
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Net. www.absolutesounds.co.uk



SME 20/12 TURNTABLE



The term "benchmark" is one of many that gets horribly overused and abused by the hi-fi press. True benchmark products are stable and enduring and as a result, extremely rare in an industry as fluid and fickle as high-end audio. But SME Ltd can claim benchmark status on two counts: regarded since its inception as the standard for engineering excellence by which all others are judged, its tonearms (first the 3009 and its derivatives, later the Series 5 and its relatives) have also long established a reference point against which other products are compared.

The 20/12 is the latest twist in the long-running Series 5 saga, along with a revised and extended deck to accommodate it. The first SME 'table I've lived with long-term, it's impossible not to be impressed by the precision of its parts, the flawless finish, the elegance of the overall design. The 20/12's sheer quality commands respect. Such as its security, stability and genuine neutrality (another term that's overused and oft abused) that it allows the recorded performance to speak with its own voice and a musical authority that comes from the performers themselves. Add to that a company history that suggests a working life that should probably be measured in decades and you've got the proverbial Holy Grail, hi-fi that you'll not be needing to upgrade. The SME 20/12 delivers music, unforced and confident in its own expressive range – and it goes on doing it, day in year out. All a turntable has to do is spin at 33 RPM and do it quietly; the SME gets a lot closer to that ideal than most.

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

Manufacturer: SME Ltd.
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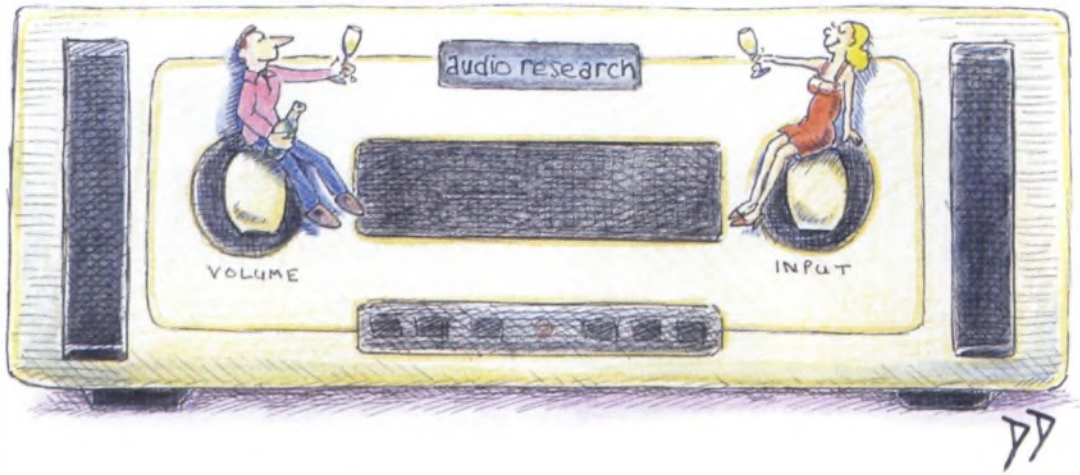
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ARC LS26 LINE-STAGE

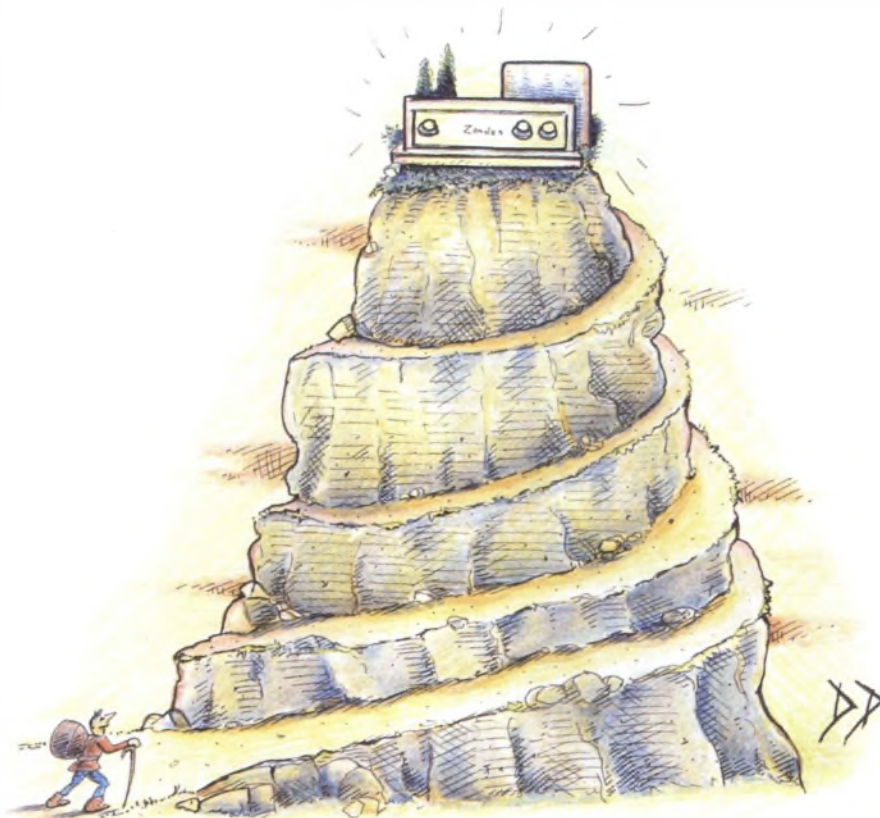


For many listeners in the UK, Audio Research's SP8 pre-amp represented something of a rite of passage, at once a rude awakening and an enticing introduction to the wonders of high-end audio, American style. Indeed, such was its impact that for years to come the terms US and high-end seemed synonymous with the ARC brand. Nor was it just the shock of the new. The SP8 was a genuinely outstanding performer, its more expensive contemporary the SP10, is still being used by CB to this day.

How history repeats itself. Having fallen somewhat out of favour, ARC are back and they're back with a bang. The flagship REF 3 line-stage is a truly state of the art contender, at a surprisingly approachable price given the cost of the competition. Now, the LS26 offers a serious slice of REF 3 performance at a significantly reduced price. But more than that, the areas in which it loses out to its big brother (absolute low-end authority, texture and the sheer space that result) actually give it a quicker, more driven sound that in turn makes it an even more attractive proposition in a UK market with few truly full-range speakers and a predilection for pace rhythm and timing. Add in a full suite of balanced inputs and outputs, a beautifully engineered, micro-processor controlled user interface and remote control as well as exemplary construction, and by the standards of imported exotica terms like "value for money" don't seem so ridiculous. In fact the LS26 is that rarest of high-end beasts, an absolute bargain.

Price: £5300

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



ZANDEN MODEL 1200 MK.2 PHONO-STAGE



Not so long ago I'd never even heard of Zanden, a small, ultra high-end manufacturer from Japan. Then I was exposed to the company's four-box CD player, a product that sounds as exquisite as it looks and which completely rewrote my expectations of the silver disc. Suddenly the horizon tilted and the hi-fi world looked like a different place. Such paradigm shifts are rare indeed but it's a fool who tries to ignore them.

Zanden products employ novel circuits refined to the nth degree through mechanical layout and component selection. The immaculately finished and proportioned casework is far more than a pretty face, establishing effective mechanical grounding and isolation for the active components. The end result is a holistic approach that gets the listener closer to the core of the music.

Could the Model 1200 Mk.2 phono-stage (there are three different versions dedicated for MM, mono and MC cartridges) perform the same trick as the CD player? Not quite, but then it's up against stiffer opposition. Nevertheless, its transformer inputs and valve circuitry delivered a combination of clarity, instrumental separation, dynamic authority and spatial coherence that put me closer to the live acoustic event than any other phono-stage I've used. Add a supremely elegant three-position switch to adjust the equalization curve, and for any serious collector of pre-80's vinyl the Zanden becomes a "must hear" product, you simply won't believe what you've been missing. Designer Yamada-san considers it his best work, who are we to disagree?

Price: £13950

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



Heavy Hitter...

A high-end system that doesn't make you suffer for your art!

by Chris Binns

As a small child, I was lucky enough to have an upbringing enriched by music; my early years were spent soaking up many of the more colourful and imaginative orchestral pieces, often inclined toward the Russian repertoire, played through homemade hi-fi courtesy of my father. Quite how I managed to go quietly off to bed after an explosive rendition of *Night On A Bare Mountain* or *The Firebird* is a mystery, but until my sisters introduced me to the perils of The Rolling Stones, I was quite happy to spend my pocket money on records, from the budget EMI 'Music for pleasure' label. Did this mean then, I naively wondered, that there was music that was not for pleasure but for some other more serious purpose? In a similar vein I recall the first time I heard (or read) the term 'musical' being used to describe a piece of hi-fi equipment, which seemed ridiculous. Surely all hi-fi reproduces music? Of course it does, to a greater or lesser extent; after all we keep telling ourselves that it is 'not about the equipment but the music'... But come on guys, we all know that none of us would be here unless we were interested in the hi-fi itself.

And we all have different ways of listening, alternative aspects of performance that give us personal

pleasure when we play a record or CD. For me, a priority for any system is that it should allow me (to an extent) to shut down; one of the side effects of working in a recording studio is that most of the time music is definitely not for pleasure but part of a job that has to be done,

continually listening and analysing, sometimes single notes, for hours at a time. The result of this is that it takes far longer for me to relax and let go when it comes to listening to music at home, and all too often I find myself spotting reverb types or figuring out recording formats rather than connecting with the performance. Either that or I'm just becoming a jaded old bastard.

So, for me a high priority in putting this system together was that it should be musically (Hah!) communicative, with a real ability to connect on an emotional level, rather than simply representing

technical perfection. I also wanted no particular bias in favour of CD or vinyl as given a free reign I would say that I rely on them both about equally. The final selection was an eclectic mix, consisting of both the unknown and the familiar, some items that have had detailed coverage in the magazine, others that have not. Having previously cleared

the room in preparation, RG and I spent the best part of a day setting the system up and making fine adjustments, and by the evening the system was about as good as we could get it. There were a few minor issues to be addressed while putting everything together; for example the Ayre pre-amp strongly favours balanced operation whereas the DartZeel does not. Both configurations were tried and for me, the single ended option won out. ►



► But with such minor house keeping attended to, all that remained was to let it settle in and see whether it hit the mark. Could it deliver music AND hi-fi or are the two mutually exclusive.

To start at the beginning...Sitting between the current Helikon and the top of the range Titan, the Skala could be considered the first in the fifth generation of Lyra cartridges incorporating as it does several innovations over previous models. One of designer Jonathan Carr's preoccupations has been to eliminate as much metal from the vicinity of the generator, and more specifically the magnetic gap, in order to minimise distortion of the field due to eddy currents. Using a plastic material for the chassis would be a considerable help, but would surely be a backward step in terms of rigidity and unwanted vibration. The solution, like many is both elegant and simple. Bearing in mind that with the previous generation Lyra successfully developed a one-piece construction where the generator chassis and body are built as a single unit, this is now made from an extremely dense alloy with a reduced top surface that forms a spine that provides the main area of contact with the arm. The plastic that surrounds it is fractionally lower than the 'spine', and deforms ever so slightly as the screws are tightened into the threaded ferrules embedded within the body, thus providing a tight mechanical coupling across a small interface area between the cartridge and arm. The cantilever system is an improvement over the Helikon and more in line with the Titan, and there have been minor updates to the output pins and their mounting.

One's first impression of the Tri-Planar mk VII tone arm is a little

daunting, as it looks extremely complicated and delicate compared to many other tone arms, almost hanging together by the skin of its teeth. In practice, it soon becomes obvious that this is a piece of precision engineering, and feels like it, the peculiar and slightly disjointed appearance providing a very elegant solution to a number of challenges that many arms find it easier to ignore. As the name would imply, the Tri-Planar offers the ability to adjust the cartridge in three planes; overhang, azimuth and VTA, without compromising rigidity or stability and thus performance. Nearly thirty years in production, like most good designs the fundamentals have not changed, but its continued evolution has seen the manufacture pass from designer Herb Papier (who you will not be surprised to learn

was a highly regarded but mildly eccentric



watchmaker - he passed away in 2003) to a young protégé who has refined the finish and assembly quite considerably. Current production (now designated VIIu) might not have quite the handmade individuality of the early models, but the consistency and precision of the manufacturing is

now exemplary. Despite the scary looks, setting up the Tri-Planar is actually quite straightforward, helped considerably by the provision of clear well thought out alignment gauges and all the tools necessary to make adjustments to the arm.

Introduced in 1990, The Kuzma Stabi Reference turntable represents a solid, no nonsense engineering approach to the process of reproducing music from vinyl, and that is exactly the way it looks; both purposeful and functional. The design is built around a base plate supported on three stainless steel cones and carrying two motors. A second 'sub-chassis' supports the bearing assembly and arm board. The bearing is of an inverted configuration utilising a small ruby ball that sits in a bath of oil. Each chassis section is fabricated from a composite structure consisting of two aluminium plates either side of a dense clear acrylic material to give an ideal combination of rigidity and resonance absorption. (The arm board is constructed in similar fashion). Isolating the two sections

are four large springs



submerged in silicone fluid to provide critically adjusted damping; turning the head of the turrets allows easy levelling of the arm and platter, the latter weighing in at a hefty 8Kg. A slim box houses an electronic power supply that provides both 33 and 45 ►



S p r e z z a t u r a

Famous for his 'Il Libro Del Cortegiano' (The Book of the Courtier, 1528), Renaissance humanist Baldesar Castiglione coined the word 'sprezzatura' to describe the ideal for courtly behaviour. He insisted that in order to be worthy, exceptional virtuosity should be conveyed with an unaffected, effortless dignity. In essence, sprezzatura is the art of making something difficult look easy.

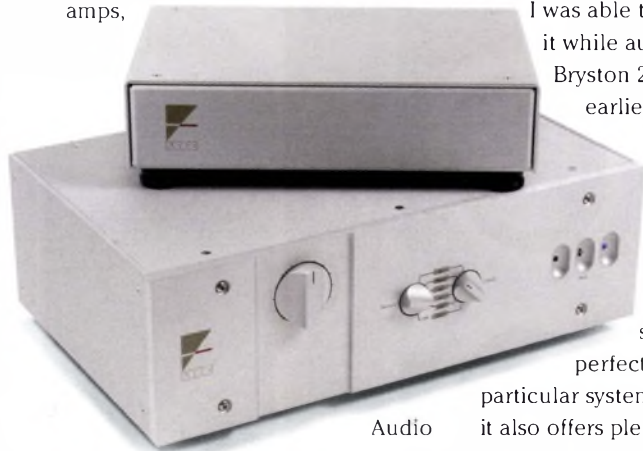
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▶ RPM with fine speed adjustment. A heavy record clamp is supplied for use with the Kuzma; through listening my preference was to leave this off unless the record was obviously not making good contact with the platter. The arm was wired with the excellent Cardas arm wire configured as a captive cable, although there's also an option to have a termination box carrying two phono sockets that sits just behind the deck.

In my list of all time favourite amps,



Audio Research would

be writ large and represented by some of their older designs such as the D115 or M100, while I still use a SP10 pre-amp today. For whatever reason, successive models never captured my ear in quite the same way, although I will admit that recent exposure to some of the latest designs sounds pretty promising. The company has also been making CD players for some time, and the CD7 is the result of the application of circuitry developed for their Ref 3 line-stage to the well-established CD3, a player that has now been around for a while. This consists of a gain stage built around the impressive 6H30 Russian Military double triode (two per channel), with another three delivering high voltage regulation, so the CD7 runs quite warm, and will draw as much juice as a small power amplifier from the mains. Aesthetics are typically Audio research, with a

sturdy aluminium front panel, while the Philips Pro 2 transport is top loading via a manual slide cover with a small puck to stabilise the disc. Once again, I chose the single-ended over the balanced output option.

My previous encounters with Ayre equipment have always made an impression, and left me with considerable respect for both the company and designer Charles Hansen. The K-1xe is no exception; I was able to spend time with it while auditioning the Bryston 28B power amplifiers earlier in the year, and it impressed me in a way that few other pre-amplifiers have, while the inclusion of a highly capable phono-stage made it the perfect choice for this particular system. (Incidentally it also offers plenty of scope for gain and impedance matching to the cartridge). While not exactly ugly, the K1 is somewhat utilitarian in appearance, particularly when judged alongside the stunning looks of the MX-R power amplifiers, but once you begin to understand the philosophy behind the design, the construction makes perfect sense. With the exception of the phono boards, all of the active circuitry is situated on the back panel allowing extremely short signal paths. The PCB is dominated by four large stepped attenuators (remember, this is a fully balanced design) that are driven by a wonderful array of belts and cogs from the remote operated volume control on the front panel. Reminiscent of the interior of a fruit machine, the large motor positively clunks away once you hit the remote control, and turning it manually feels a little stiff. But the less than svelte look and feel of the K-1xe give no



hint of its musical abilities.

Suffice to say, I jumped the review queue to include this pre-amp in the system, leaving RG to pacify a very grumpy CT. Such emotions (and blatant sonic avarice) should give some idea of the regard in which we hold this unit.

If the DarTZeel NHB108 were finished in black, there would be little to



distinguish it visually from any number of power amplifiers from the last couple of decades - but its not; the front panel has a gold anodized finish and it is adorned on either side by red heat sinks. The interior of the amplifier is quite special to look at, and once installed the transport cover is substituted by a glass top, which in any other design could be seen as horribly ostentatious. Somehow the DarTZeel gets away with it. Swiss levels of precision and engineering abound, and attention to detail is second to none both in terms of build quality and conception. The circuit is simple by solid state standards and elegantly symmetrical, honed and fine-tuned ▶

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▶ over a considerable amount of time, while all of the secondary 'housekeeping' issues have been addressed and can be ticked off the list; vibration and damping of components and structure, earthing and cable layout, component selection and positioning...I could go on. Unbalanced, balanced (transformer coupled), and special BNC (for other Dartzeeel products) inputs are provided. Output is via a single set of premium binding posts. Two large indicators on the front panel show each channel's status, and I should point out that the instruction manual is both informative and essential reading – due to the unusual nature of the protection circuit the amp must have loudspeakers connected before it is powered up, otherwise you are liable to blow the fuses. While no great power house by today's standards, the DarTZeel is capable of kicking out a genuine hundred Watts, with plenty more into lower impedances, and should you require it there is the option to switch the unit to drive into two Ohms and lower.

It comes as no surprise to learn that the man behind the Nola Viper Reference II loudspeakers, Carl Marchisotto used to work for Dahlquist, a company that had considerable success in the seventies, their DQ10 achieving almost legendary status amongst audiophiles. What distinguished the DQ10 from other loudspeakers, and is a common factor with the Nola designs, is the use of an open baffle for everything but the bass, so there is no cabinet to speak of surrounding the mid and treble units. Carl argues that any driver must produce the same amount of energy from the rear of the

cone as the front, and to successfully absorb this within a cabinet is bound to create resonances and reflections that will colour the sound. To that end, the Nola's consist of a conventional sealed enclosure to load the bass units, but the front panel is continued up to provide the open baffle for the other two drivers. With an 's' curve at the top that matches the inset black acrylic around the bass units and finished in a lacquered rosewood veneer, the aesthetics are quite elegant, though a little

ecclesiastical for my tastes.

The drive units are sourced from Seas and consist of two 220mm magnesium coned bass-drivers, coupled with a 110mm paper laminate mid and a 25mm metal dome tweeter, the latter two employing AlNiCo magnet assemblies rather than the more common ferrite

composite type. The crossovers are unusual in that they are housed in separate enclosures that sit on spiked support plates, but decoupled with ball bearings to provide a degree of immunity to both structural and air born vibration. All wiring consists of Nordost monofilament cable. While the cabinet finish was good, some of the finer points were a bit shoddy. Having specified superior, solid copper binding posts, the ones on the review samples were crooked and such details need attending to at this elevated price level.

The Finite Elemente Pagode Master Reference racks combine visual elegance with sophisticated vibration management. The basic concept involves channelling unwanted energy into tuned resonators where it is absorbed and dissipated as heat. They are also eminently practical, with enough room to manoeuvre and accommodate a wide range of equipment. This system demanded a HD-03 four-shelf rack as well as a HD-09 platform for the amp.

The Nordost cable needs no introduction in these pages, but the TYR is a recent addition to the range that comes in under Valhalla and replaces the Valkyra, complimenting the Brahma mains leads that I have been using. RG added a Thor to the mix, creating the kind of coherent cable and support set-up he's always banging on about.

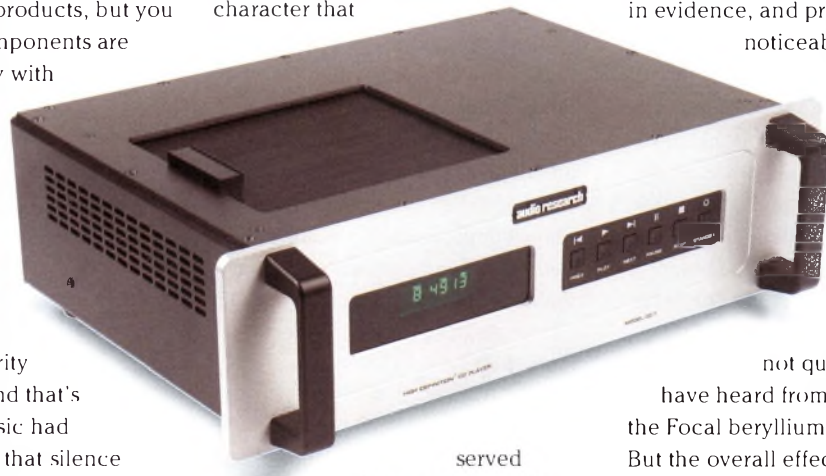
While reviewing a system can in some ways be easier than concentrating on a single product, I had more than a little say in this particular line up and was a little nervous – what if it didn't sound any ▶



► good? So I was mightily relieved to find that this was not the case, and that putting theory into practice on this occasion worked first time. There was a comfortable feeling of familiarity that I could not readily put my finger on, until it occurred to me after a couple of days that I had a real sense of nostalgia when listening to this system. If I were to suggest that it sounded 'old fashioned' it might well give you the wrong impression, but it took me back to a time when I found listening to music far easier to enjoy. Starting at the front end with the turntable, the Kuzma/TriPlanar/Lyra was special indeed. I am not overly familiar with these products, but you just know when components are working in harmony with one another as there is a synergy that transcends the individual components. Lowering the arm on to the record I was shocked by how quiet the majority of vinyl sounded, and that's even before the music had started. From out of that silence came some of the most solid and authoritative sounds that I have heard in my listening room, where the sheer stability underscored dynamics in a spectacular way with wonderful 70's recordings such as Traffic - 'John Barleycorn must die' (one of the best rock recordings on the Island label in my opinion). But the same qualities were also evident with an early 70's Decca recording of Kyung - Whachung playing the Stravinsky *Violin concerto*; never have I heard her instrument sound more convincing or the playing more evocative. Having an arm with the facility to adjust the VTA on the fly proved interesting, the initial set up with the Skala showed that a few degrees made quite a difference,

not so much to the tonal balance, but to the soundstage. There was a dimensionality that would snap into focus once you hit the spot. The annoying side effect was to discover that you could trim this for almost any pressing that you played and score some improvement – although at least the Kuzma/Tri-Planar's stability made this a simple task.

CD replay was also to a high and enjoyable standard, and while not possessing the sheer organic grunt of the Kuzma front-end, provided some of the best results that I have heard from many discs. The Audio Research is empowered with a rich and full character that



served to narrow the gulf between vinyl and CD, and together with a good sense of pace and timing, this managed to engage you with a combination of delicacy and subtlety contrasted with impressive drama when required, a feat that a lot of CD players sadly cannot match. In contrast to the Kuzma set up I felt that on occasions the bass lacked a little in terms of bite and snap, but placing a trio of finite elemente CeraBall Universal supports underneath it had more positive influence than I would have guessed. In this form, and judged by the sheer number of jewel cases scattered over the floor after each weekend, it more than held its own against the impressive analogue front-end.

The Nola Vipers seemed to be immediately at home in my room. Maybe after so many ported enclosures I had forgotten the benefits of infinite baffle loading, but the bass was tight and controlled, and rolled off in a gentle and even manner that gave the impression of being more extended than it actually was. Partly as a result of this, positioning for the best mid and top performance was straightforward, with just a small amount of toe-in proving effective. Mid-band presentation was articulate and (as you would expect) open, with only very slight cone type colouration in evidence, and probably only

noticeable due to the lack of cabinet resonances. The top-end was detailed, with an occasional mild metallic lisp apparent on speech and some vocals, and

not quite as clean as I have heard from something like the Focal beryllium unit for example. But the overall effect is one of great coherence and an ability to engage while proving satisfying to listen to over long periods of time. A revealing feature of the system that reoccurred on many occasions was the way in which it dealt with poor recordings by glossing over the technical inadequacies; a good indication that it was the music that was getting through rather than the production - or lack of it. The effect was there with both old classical recordings and material as acerbic as an original pressing of Television's 'Marquee Moon' – even at antisocially high volume levels: gripping, exciting and a lot of fun.

But of course it helps if you are being driven by the DarTZeel power amplifier. Ironically, the most ►

► expensive unit in the system also proved to be the one that was contributing the least; in so much as it was very difficult to detect any influence on the character of the system. Which is exactly what a good amplifier should do, isn't it? It had speed, control and weight where needed, an incredible liquid and at times euphoric mid and top that also portrayed the colour and texture of voices and instruments, all coming at you from nowhere, clean and very detailed. While on paper at least there might have appeared to be some conflict in terms of compatibility with the Ayre, I can assure you that there was no evidence to support this in practice. A considerable amount of the success of the analogue front end must lie with the phono stage in the K-1xe, which apart from being ghostly quiet, excels in areas of detail and resolution, presents an almost tangible, deep soundstage.

The only slight reservation I could have about this system is that in my room, I would have liked a little more power. Not that the DartZeel was complaining - even though I drove it to clipping on some occasions, there was little audible sign of it. In many ways, it was the speakers that



came as the biggest surprise; if I am honest I had slightly pre-judged them, assuming that they were just not going to be my kind of thing. But as it turned out...

It would be impossible for me to pick out any single item from this system and declare it more desirable than the others; they are all great products within their own right. But as a system they really came together, producing quite spectacular music as well as faultless hi-fi.

Single out one piece? I want it all. ►+



The system list

Kuzma Stabi Reference:	£4750
Tri-Planar MK VIIu:	£3600
finite elemente Pagode Master Reference	
HD-03 Rack:	£2995
HD-09 Platform:	£700
Audiofreaks	
Tel. (44)(0)20 8948 4153	
Net. www.audiofreaks.co.uk	
Audio Research CD7:	£7500
DarTZeel NHB 108:	£12000
Absolute Sounds	
Tel. (44)(0)20 8971 3909	
Net. www.absolutesounds.com	
Lyra Skala moving coil cartridge	£1849
Ayre K-1xe Pre-amplifier with phono-stage	£5995
Symmetry Systems	
Tel. (44)(0)1727 865488	
Net. www.symmetry-systems.co.uk	
Nola Viper Reference II:	£12000
Nola (UK) Ltd.	
Tel. (44)(0)791 617 6399	
Net. www.nolaspeakers.com	
Nordost Thor:	£1650
Nordost Brahma mains leads:	£900 ea.
Nordost Tyr interconnects:	£1250 (1m pr.)
Nordost Tyr speaker cables:	£4312 (3m pr.)
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Tel. (44)(0)1635 291357	
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Christopher Breunig, Hi-Fi News
May 2007 (Score: 20 / 20)

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Collector's Corner

A system configured to get the best out of just about anything you can throw at it!

by Roy Gregory

Not so long ago we lived in a world of three sources. The average system contained a record player, a radio and a tape deck. If you had more than three things connected to your pre-amp, chances are you were doubling up somewhere down the line. If your pre-amp had more than three inputs plus an "auxiliary" that was probably doubling up too, and top-flight Japanese contenders took to offering three complete tape loops in an effort to increase the button count on their products.

Oh, how the times have changed. It's not just the increased number of high-resolution digital formats that need to be considered: there's MP3 players and their demands for a mini-jack input, A/V connections and switching, LFE outputs and ironically, increasingly complex demands when it comes to LP playback. Configuring a system these days starts with the question of what facilities and sources you need to include, and follows that with the emphasis you place on each of them. Step anywhere off the beaten track of CD and standard LP sources and your choices start to narrow rapidly, especially if you want to try and keep the total number of boxes under control...

With a burgeoning revival in mono recordings, I thought it would be interesting to build a system capable of meeting the needs of a born again vinyl fan: born again because the existing avid collector is probably already outfitted with multiple decks and phono-stages, and a collection of original or NOS cartridges. That's a

heavy commitment in space, cost and hardware – especially if you are just getting your ankles wet. But the more you look at the problem, the more daunting it becomes, the more distant a compact and practical solution seems. Let's just examine the requirements...

Modern LPs and re-issued mono pressings are all cut using stereo cutting heads, designed for vertical and horizontal modulation in the groove. These can all be happily replayed using a conventional stereo cartridge. But as soon as you go back to an original mono micro-groove record the situation changes dramatically. These were cut with horizontal modulation only – and played with cartridges that read the same way. Use a stereo pick-up and any vertical changes or discrepancies are read as information – which is why old mono discs tend to sound thin and unbelievably noisy.

The cutting engineers didn't worry about the vertical dimension because they didn't need to.

Of course, you might well wonder why you'd want to play old mono stuff anyway? Well, I can think of at least three good reasons. The first and most important is the question of repertoire; many of the greatest performers were past their prime by the time that the stereo era arrived, and although they made later stereo

tapes, often these weren't as good as their earlier mono performances. Some simply didn't live long enough to record any real output in stereo. And I'm not just talking classical and jazz here. Or Buddy Holly for that matter. Play those original discs with a true mono cartridge and they are transformed. If you haven't heard an early Beatles or Stones album properly replayed in its mono form then you really, really should!

The second great reason to search out mono records is that during the twilight years of mono recording and its overlap with new-fangled stereo, many of the engineers were at the peak of their powers, practicing with a mature medium and technology. So, whereas early stereo



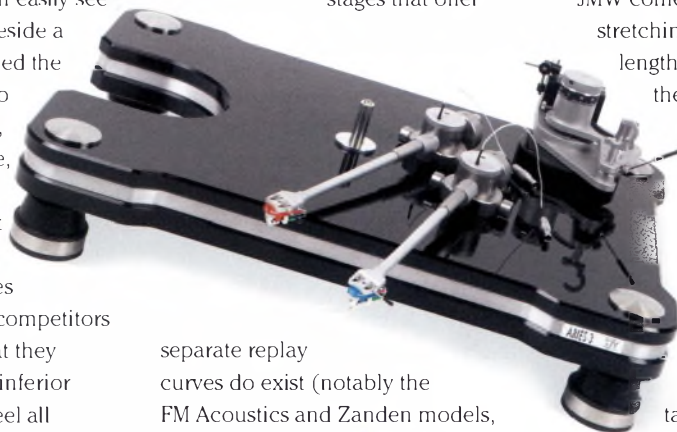
is distinctly experimental in nature, both recording and cutting, mono was a well-trying art. The result is that very often, the mono releases actually sound superior to their stereo equivalents in terms of overall balance and tonality, while the absence of phase-related problems in the recording chain give them a real sense of pace, rhythmic momentum ▶

▶ and substance.

Finally? Well, finally there's price. I know that secondhand prices for all but the most collectible vinyl are tumbling, many secondhand dealers simply putting a blanket price of several pounds or dollars on everything, irrespective of age, condition or desirability, so that you can easily see a wideband SXL2000 sat beside a Kajagoogoo LP – both priced the same. But even here, mono is at the bottom of the pile, discs often going for pence, which makes acquiring a collection remarkably cost effective as you snap up early RCA and Decca issues that your stereo obsessed competitors are passing over just so that they can drop top dollar on an inferior alternative. It makes you feel all warm inside...

However, as I said at the start, achieving the musical benefits of mono records (older records in general in fact) is far from straightforward. You need to run a mono cartridge, which means either another record player or at least an arm with interchangeable headshells or tubes. And that's just the start. Although we tend to assume that all modern records conform to the RIAA equalisation curve, that isn't actually the case, with companies like Decca, DG and EMI/Columbia all continuing to run their own equalisation curves long after supposed standardisation, in some cases well into the late '70's. Ever wonder why Philips and DG pressings tend to sound so disappointing? It's because the RIAA replay curve in your preamp is bending the frequency response out of shape. Take a look at any vintage

pre-amp and you'll see half a dozen different equalisation options for LP replay – normally listed by label name. They were a crucial part of achieving the best results from mono records. They were equally crucially for a lot of stereo recordings too – we just chose to ignore that fact, although phono-



stages that offer separate replay curves do exist (notably the FM Acoustics and Zanden models, both of which enjoy healthy sales in Japan where this issue is more widely appreciated) with others starting to appear.

So what we find is that the requirements for replaying the oldest records are more relevant than we anticipated, impacting on much more recent

material too. However, we can take this further still.

If you are serious about playing records and really getting the best out of them, adjustability becomes a critical factor in your equipment selection: you will want easily repeatable VTA, azimuth adjustment and pitch control. Increasingly, the tonearms that offer such facilities are associated with decks that will accommodate multiple arms. So you might already be part way there. You could add a second arm,

even one with a detachable headshell like an SME – new or old. But if you are buying new there's a more elegant solution in the shape of VPI's JMW tonearm with its interchangeable arm-wands.

So, time to start inking in a few names on the team-sheet. The JMW comes in three basic versions, stretching from 9" to 12" effective lengths. All of them allow you to lift the arm-wand clear of the uni-pivot bearing, so that all the geometrical adjustments, tracking force and azimuth are preserved intact. Add in the vernier type VTA adjustment and swapping from one cartridge to another whilst maintaining optimum set-up takes about thirty seconds – most of which is spent replacing the stylus guard! Arm-wands are available separately, enabling you to run as many cartridges as you require, all on a single arm-base. There's also a fluid damping trough around the bearing pivot, unnecessary for really low compliance cartridges but highly beneficial in the case of something like a Clearaudio or Grado.

I use the 12.7 on a day-to-day basis, but it's long and requires a very large 'table to mount it – in my case the TNT. By going down a size to the 10.5 version I can mount it on the more compact and easily accommodated Aries 3. This is a new 'table from VPI and although the JMW arm will mount just as easily on other makes of turntable, the rigid chassis of ▶



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HI FI PLUS / ISSUE 44 / ROY GREGORY / SUMMIT

"THE VANTAGE IS SOMETHING OF A GIFT AND ONE THAT KEEPS ON GIVING"

HFC THE COLLECTION / 06 / ALVIN GOLD / VANTAGE

Through their sheer beauty – both aural and visual – MartinLogan speakers have established hybrid electrostatic technology as the obvious choice for those who want state-of-the-art sound without suffering a profusion of ugly boxes. The company's name is now a byword for elegance in audio.

Every MartinLogan speaker, from entry level and home theatre to state of the art, is immediately recognisable as a MartinLogan product: the peerless, oft-imitated, room-friendly appearance, the captivating see-through panels and furniture grade finish. Best of all, the sound is as clear as the panels themselves.

MartinLogan has raised the bar even higher with the sublime Summit, a speaker that possesses all of the virtues of the brand in a disarmingly compact form. To make its virtues available to a wider audience, the Summit has been followed by the smaller Vantage, and – for those with space or budget restrictions – the passive-woofer Vista. We have no doubt that they are the most satisfying MartinLogan speakers ever, magical blends of electrostatic openness and the kind of bass only available from a dynamic woofer. They can charm and excite in equal measure, dealing with everything from delicate, 'unplugged' music to massive orchestras, from funk to fusion.

To augment the Summit and its sisters, especially for home cinema applications, a new baby has been added to the range of MartinLogan subwoofers. The Abyss, coming above the very successful Dynamo but below the Grotto, features a 12in woofer, and it provides a new form of convenience for true flexibility: the Abyss, driven by its internal 300W amp, can be installed with either front- or downward-firing positions. It uses inverse mathematical equalisation, for sound to suit the environment.

New, too, for home theatre and environmental situations, are the Stage hybrid centre channel speaker and the Ticket, a compact and affordable in-wall model. The Stage fits into an enclosure only 34.6in wide, ideal for the new generation of wall-mounted plasma and LCD displays. Better still, a pair of flush-mounted Tickets will complement an in-wall monitor so unobtrusively that they're ideal for studios, bedrooms and anywhere else a secondary system is used.

MartinLogan, speaking a new language.

MARTIN LOGAN VISTA

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► the Aries does ideally suit the uni-pivot arm. In this instance the deck is laid out in traditional VPI style, with a deep chassis supported in each corner by a flexibly mounted, adjustable Delrin foot, each foot in turn standing on a trio of small ball-bearings embedded in its base. The cylindrical motor assembly sits in a cut-out to the left of the platter, while the optional SDS power supply gives precise pitch adjustment at 33, 45 and even the range of speeds necessary to play 78s. The big change here between this and earlier versions of the Aries is the adoption of the waisted layout and aluminium/acrylic sandwich used in the flagship HRX for the main chassis. The distinctive striped appearance is echoed by trim on the feet and a similar sandwich construction for the platter, a heavy, one-piece design that spins on a massive inverted bearing and Teflon thrust pad. There's a one-piece screw-down clamp to fix records to the playing surface. All told it's an impressive looking but disarmingly simple beast whose brooding looks are the perfect foil to the 10.5's silver finish.

Cartridge choice was easy. Although there are an increasing number of mono-cartridges on the market, many of the more affordable ones are simply wired into one channel, meaning that they still trace vertical information while the true mono versions tend to cost a small fortune, being modified from flagship designs. But the exception to this rule is the company that kicked the whole mono MC thing off: Lyra. Needing two cartridges for the system I wanted to keep them under the £1K mark, so I



selected an Argo stereo and the cheaper Dorian mono, each with its own arm-wand. This also meant that loading and gain considerations would be common, easing the demands on the phono-stage, while both cartridges possess more than enough output for the pre-amp I had in mind.

With the record player sorted, it was time to look at the electronics. Fortunately this choice was a no-brainer, thanks to the arrival of the product that really got me started on this project in the first place. VAS is an American company that manufactures valve amplification in China. Its first two products, marketed under the Citation Sound banner, are facsimiles of the original Harmon-Kardon designs of the same name, suitably updated of course! Talk about a blast from the past; this pre-amp has no fewer than 16 front panel controls, three-quarters of them large rotaries. And glory be, what do you see at the top left, but separate six-position turnover and roll-off switches to allow correct record replay equalisation.



You've even got the original names on each setting. Add in subsonic and rumble filters, a scratch filter incorporated into the separate left and right channel bass and treble controls, the all important mono-switch and three phono inputs for MM, low and high output MC cartridges and you've got everything you need to replay just

about any record – all in one box. And the transformer coupled input for low-output MCs has more than enough gain for the Lyras. Nostalgia freaks are going to go ga-ga over this thing, but even I've fallen in love with its sheer OTT appearance and feature count. This isn't just hi-fi – it actually LOOKS like hi-fi, and with four 12AX7s and five 12AT7s horizontally disposed in cooling cans along the rear panel, it's built like hi-fi too.

After all that lot the amps have got to be simple, no? Well, no they're not, although it's actually the pre-amp that makes them that way. The matching mono Citation Sound 2 power amps are classic single-pair push-pull designs, using a 5AR4 rectifier and either EL34 or 6550 output tubes (although I'm dubious that simply re-biasing will optimise the amp for either device; surely the output transformer's input impedance would need to change). There's a neatly executed valve cage and underneath it you'll find a small switch to allow you to select ultralinear or triode operation. Once again, this should probably be left in the ultralinear position, in which mode the amp delivers 50 Watts of class AB sound. The funky part comes with a blend control on the pre-amp, and a third output for a centre channel speaker to provide stereo fill. So that's a choice of two or three amplifiers then – of which more later.

The next decision concerns the digital front-end. You what? Well, yes, because with all the re-issue programmes going on, the easiest way to get some of the rarest and most desirable mono or stereo recordings is on SACD or CD. Just think RCA Living Stereo as an example, although double disc sets like the wonderful Naxos *Women At The Piano* also make a case. This collection of mono recordings contains examples from the likes of Lili Kraus, Myra Hess and Lucette Descaves that, even if you could find original mono discs, would

▶ set you back well into four-figures. So, for anybody interested in repertoire and exploring the history of these performers, a good digital replay system is essential. However, it too must be versatile and given the emphasis on vinyl replay, it shouldn't eat too far into the budget. The McCormack UDP-1 fits the bill admirably. This universal player combines a full suite of video outputs (all defeatable) with unusually sweet and mellifluous sound from CD, SACD and DVD-A, in a single chassis whose silver front panel even matches the Citations. Job done.

For speakers I wanted something easy to drive and not too large, especially when it came to accommodating three of them – 'cos you just know it's going to happen. Although the Citation 2s deliver 50 watts and are tapped for both four and eight Ohm loads, there's no harm in making their task easier, especially if you want

scale and substance in the finished article. With that in mind I chose the Coincident Triumph Signatures, tiny cousins to the massive Total Victories that I enjoyed so much last year. The Triumph Sigs are moderately sized two-ways, with a taller than average cabinet accommodating a 25mm soft dome tweeter and a 165mm doped paper coned woofer with a huge magnet driving it. Single

wired and rear ported, they present an attractively narrow frontal aspect, a flat 8 Ohm load and claim 94dB sensitivity. I stood them on 24" Garrick limbre stone stands, which suited perfectly.

Housing all those electronics was an issue; the Aries 3 might be smaller than a TNT but size is relative and this thing is still built on resolutely US lines. Add in the need to place three mono amps across a single shelf – because you just have to, on the "if you've got it, flaunt it" principle of audio exhibitionism, and you are talking some serious real estate. But the large footprint and adjustable shelf spacing of the Cambre Core rack proved ideal, accommodating everything in a single stack and placing the record player at a comfortable height.

Cabling, in keeping with the price-conscious nature of the other decisions – not too cheap but not ridiculous either – came from The Chord Company, with their Epic twin loudspeaker cable and Chorus interconnects serving signal duties,



while Power Chords delivered the juice via a Nordost Thor distribution block. The other non-Chord item was a Nordost Tyr tonearm cable, chosen because it's a dedicated lead and also matches

the Nordost internal wiring in the JMW arm-wands.

And last but by no means least, we reach the final part of the basic set up – a VPI HW16.5 record-cleaning machine. If you are going trawling through the second hand bins, a decent wet cleaner is essential. It will also improve the sound of new records, removing MRA and other surface contaminants left behind by the presses. At less than the cost of one of the cartridges in this system the 16.5 is simple, unbelievably effective and a critical contributor to overall system performance.

So much for the theory, how does it sound?

Well, first order of business is to get the system singing, which does require a few finer points of set-up. The speakers – just a single pair initially – require minimal toe-in and careful spacing from the back wall. They don't go really deep but their mid-bass punch makes them seem a lot bigger and more powerful than their size suggests. Too close to the wall and they get a bit leaden and heavy, losing the spritely dynamics that make them so engaging and exciting to listen to. The second factor here is impedance matching to the amps. As a true 8 Ohm load they really benefit from connection to the 8 Ohm taps on the output transformers. Unlike more complex loads which often benefit from the 4 Ohm tap, gaining grip and control, the Coincidents simply sound clumsy and constrained if you take this route. The 8 Ohm tap delivers more volume but more importantly, far greater musical fluidity and rhythmic expression.

Turning to the turntable, you need to pay exacting attention to cartridge alignment and VTA. However, don't forget tracking force, which needs to be minutely adjusted and balanced against the VTA setting (decrease tracking force, increase VTA and vice versa). Fortunately, with the JMW this (like everything else) is simplicity itself. A grub screw ▶

▶ inserted in the counterweight stub allows tiny, incremental and repeatable adjustments to VTF to be made with an allen key. The angle of the key tells you where you are at any given point – just make sure you lift the arm clear of the slender bearing pivot when making adjustments! Once the balance between these two critical factors is correct you'll hear a combination of substance and purpose to low frequencies, as well as pace, life and musical momentum in the performance as a whole. If this record player ever lets your attention drift, this is the first place to look for the solution.

With the necessary fine-tuning taken care of you are going to hear a sound that's big and bold and powerful. Far more so in fact than the modest power rating of the amps and even more modest dimensions of the speakers should ever deliver. Sit back, shut your eyes and you will be transported to another place, the system simply disappearing into a massive soundstage that spreads way beyond the limits of the speakers themselves. There's substance, a real sense of power and drive, vivid colours and a presence and dimensionality to voices and instruments that brings a performance to life. With Rickie Lee Jones' 'Last Chance Texaco' on the platter, there's an unmistakable purpose to the music, right from that first guitar chord. As the track gains momentum, driven bar by bar, chorus by chorus up the ladder of level and musical density, the system tracks the dynamic steps effortlessly, teasing out the anxious longing in the vocals, the emotional power that underpins the song. It's a wonderful but also a revealing rendition.

Balancing the bottom end substance, all drive but little real deep, deep bass, is a beautifully tailored top-end. The sweetness of the single pairs of EL34s combined with the well-behaved soft-dome tweeter in the

Coincidents creates high-frequencies which are incredibly kind to tape and surface noise, but are also slightly shut in compared to the best (and most expensive) tweeters on the market today. In this context it's a trade off I'll happily make. When RLJ really lets rip the system delivers her slightly shrill voice without hardness or edge, the only strain being the natural effort she's making to hit those high notes at such a volume. At the same time,



the subtle reverb that adds so much atmosphere to the track is superbly realised, space around and behind her as it decays. You're losing little and the upsides are significant, especially when it comes to older and less than cherished records.

At the other end of the spectrum, 'Easy Money' from the same album reveals a lack of immediacy and absolute resolution. There's no doubting that the performers are "over there" rather than "right here" and despite the sure footed pitch and pace of the plucked bass line, there's a lack of texture and inner harmonics to the notes. Musically it's fine, with everything in its place and a place for everything, but the presentation lacks the ghostly reach out and touch

transparency that characterizes this track. Even the familiar steps and breaths that presage RLJ's opening line are hard to pick; they're there, but they don't make the immediate and obvious sense they do with a higher resolution system.

These contrasting tracks typify the strengths and weaknesses of this system, the way it leans in musical terms. Ultra detail and resolution are not its forte; instead it majors on musical structure, a solid foundation, scale, substance and the purpose that drives a performance. It won't ever fool you that you are in the presence of real live musicians. It will deliver a captivating sense of performance. I guess that whether or not you get it depends on whether you want to listen to music or incidental noises, because music it definitely does.

At this point it's awfully tempting to point a finger at the complexity and cluttered circuitry of the pre-amp, but let's not be too hasty. Instead, let's examine things literally one stage at a time. Turning to the McCormack UDP-1 and the RCA Living Stereo SACD of the Reiner/CSO *Scheherazade*, as expected the system masters the scale and massive range of the performance with impressive ease. Once again, the soundstage extends well beyond the speakers, with excellent depth and height, a nicely defined rear wall even if the sidewalls simply fade out. The sheer scale of the picture is matched by the orchestral weight and substance of the beautifully terraced orchestra, the instrumental spread clearly defining the majestic sweep of this romantic of works, the vivid instrumental colours adding further to the sumptuous presentation. The stereo perspective is slightly closer than RCA's traditional mid-hall ▶



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

Dave Thomas, The Stereo Times, June 07

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

hifi+

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

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

Chris Thomas, HiFi+, Issue 49

SS010
AMPLIFIER



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► balance, so familiar from the record, which reflects in part I suspect, the bottom-end balance of the speakers. I wonder whether a really good sub would restore the correct distance as well as the sidewalls in one fell swoop? Meanwhile, the natural pace, timing and sophisticated phrasing which are all strong points of the highly musical UDP-1 are perfectly preserved by the VAS/Coincident combination – to stunning final effect.

Turning to CD and the Geffen/Japanese mastering of *The Best Of Buddy Holly* (equivalent to the *Legend* double LP on MCA), the track ‘True Love Ways’ is revealing. Once again, you get the wide, wide-open soundstage, almost a little left/right in this instance. But the focus and inner detail are lacking. In positional terms, everything is exactly where it should be (once you use the Stereo Reverse facility on the pre-amp to correct the switched channels), but it’s harder to locate the control room loudspeaker, there’s a smoothing of the texture and reed detail on the sax. Our lack of resolution comes not from the phono-stage but the line stage of the Citation 1. The questions are, can we do anything about it and are we prepared to live with it in order to preserve the control and switching options it provides?

Well, to cut a long story short, we’re in the happy position of being able to have our cake and eat it. The Citation Sound 1 is indeed built like a brick outhouse, something that counts against it once you factor in the large frame type mains transformer securely bolted to its rear shelf. It soon became apparent that support is critical with this component and a trio of Stillpoints cones, one directly beneath the transformer, in turn transformed the sound, bringing focus, precision, increased transparency and space around and between performers. The

studio details on the Buddy Holly took on their correct positions and heights, the voice and sax becoming far more immediate and detailed. Okay, so it’s still not high-res in the sense of ultra-tech solid-state gear, but it’s more, much more than acceptable. And the greater precision, spatially and temporally just added extra impetus to the unit’s other musical strengths. Things were really starting to cook.

Time to play. Cueing up a fairly battered mono copy of the Toscanini/NBCSO Beethoven ‘*Eroica*’ pressed by HMV I lowered the Argo into the lead-in groove and the salvo of cracks and pops that resulted had me diving for cover, so loud they almost obscured the thin, narrow sound of the orchestra, scratching away behind the blizzard of noise. Swapping arm-wands to the one with the Dorian mono cartridge wrought what can



only be described as an astonishing change (if you are not expecting it). The noise was virtually gone, and if the music still tended to the tubby yet thin, at least the vim and vigour in the performance was apparent now. But this is where all those switches on the pre-amp come in. First select mono, then switch the contour and roll-off

controls to the Columbia setting, sit back and listen again. Not only is the correct tonal balance restored but the poise and pace, the real purpose in the performance becomes apparent. Old Arturo could certainly conduct a bit – and with the Citation Sound 1 in the system you can really appreciate that fact. Combine it with a mono cartridge and a whole vista of recorded performances, most of them at bargain prices, opens up before you. Suddenly, mono pressings are objects of desire, rather than simply worthless chaff obscuring the stereo ‘gold’.

Next up was a Karajan recording on DGG, the same *New World Symphony* that featured in the Zanden phono-stage review. Swap arm-wands, switch to stereo and RIAA and re-experience the turgid and disjointedly mechanical sound I’d come to expect from Maestro von K. But switch to the LP settings on the pre-amp and suddenly the tension and drama in the performance is there, tangible in the playing, the control and intent of the conductor directing his well-schooled orchestra. The transformation is astonishing, barely credible unless you hear it – and once again all those DGG pressings that I’ve acquired over the years, often as filler in bulk purchases, take on a whole new life. Indeed, anybody who buys old records who hears these changes will be looking to add this facility to their system with almost indecent urgency.

At first, those two controls, each with six settings can seem daunting. That is until you realise that there’s no right or wrong (well, there is but no one actually knows what it is). A mono Heifetz Tschaikowsky *Violin Concerto* on RCA but of unknown national origin, sounded terrible on the RCA settings. Switching to LP brought the recording to life, restoring its weight, emotional and temporal centre of gravity. What’s correct? I have no idea. Which do I prefer? No contest? And that’s the beauty of the VAS

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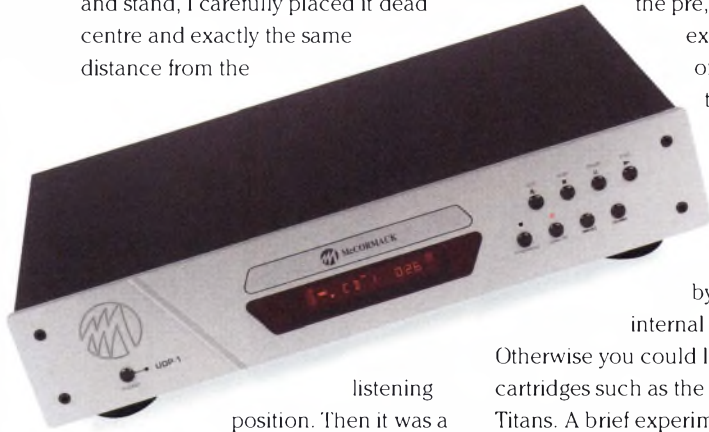
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▶ pre-amp; simply cycle through the controls until you hit the best setting. When you do its very, very apparent, both tonally but more importantly, musically.

By now the system was producing superbly engaging results no matter the type or vintage of software thrown at it. But it still had one trick up its sleeve – that third speaker. Wheeling in another Coincident Triumph Signature and stand, I carefully placed it dead centre and exactly the same distance from the



listening position. Then it was a case of experimenting with the level on the blend control, a somewhat alien experience given the very real presence of that third speaker right in front of you. However, it soon became obvious that the technique required owes quite a lot to setting up sub-woofers. First shut your eyes so there's no visual distraction, then set the level so that you are not quite aware of that third speaker. If you can hear it, it's too loud.

Now sit back and run a few comparisons, stereo against the three channel blend and it soon becomes apparent that the third speaker anchors the sound, bringing substance to the central instruments or voices, headroom to the music as a whole. It's a subtle effect until you run those direct comparisons – where upon the thin vagueness that divides the stereo stage we're all so used to becomes all too horribly apparent. Of course, an extra

amp and speaker is no small cost, but then it delivers no small benefit – and one that once you get used to you'll be loathe to do without.

Which brings me finally to the question of upgrades. Frankly, this system is so much fun that upgrading seems like something of a pointless extravagance. However in the spirit of completeness I did plumb in a Music First transformer to the MM stage of the pre, gaining a useful extra degree of focus and transparency along the way. It's certainly an option for those who feel short-changed by the pre-amp's internal arrangements.

Otherwise you could look at better cartridges such as the Helikons or even Titans. A brief experiment with the latter demonstrated that the system is perfectly capable of delivering the benefits it brings to the party. But more intriguing to me is the possibility of a surround sound processor like the Arcam. This would give the option of true three channel sound, opening up new areas of software, such as multi-channel SACD and concert or opera DVDs.

Meanwhile I'm enjoying things as they stand. I'm even getting used to the visual intrusion of that third speaker, and feel no desire to dismantle this system and move on. But move on I must; it's the nature of the job. But this experience has left its mark. With the option to run multiple tonearms I'll be expanding beyond simply running a mono cartridge to running a second pre-amp too. Like I said, once you've lived with switchable EQ, anybody serious about playing older records will find it hard to live without. ▶+

Prices and Contact

VPI Aries 3: £2350
 (with super platter shown): £3100
 VPI JMW 10.5: £1850
 Spare 10.5 arm-wand: £720
 SDS turntable psu: £750
 HW16.5 cleaner: £475
 Audiocraft
 Tel. (44)(0)1895 253340
 Net. www.audiocraft.co.uk

Lyra Argo: £795
 Lyra Dorian Mono: £549
 Symmetry Systems
 Tel. (44)(0)1727 865488
 Net. www.symmetry-systems.co.uk

McCormack UDP-1: £3000
 Audiofreaks
 Tel. (44)(0)20 8948 4153
 Net. www.audiofreaks.co.uk

VAS Citation Sound 1: \$5000
 VAS Citation Sound 2: \$2745 pr.
 (Add VAT and duty to prices if importing to the UK)
 Cayin USA
 Net. www.cayinusa.com

Coincident Triumph Signature: £1895
 Musicology
 Tel. (44)(0)1273 700759
 Net. www.coincidentspeaker.com

Chord Co. Chorus (1m pr.): £250
 Chord Co. Epic Twin (3m pr.): £289
 Power Chords £140 ea.
 The Chord Co.
 Tel. (44)(0)1980 625700
 Net. www.chord.co.uk

Cambre Core Rack: £780
 Nordost Thor: £1650
 Nordost Tyr arm cable (1.25m): £690
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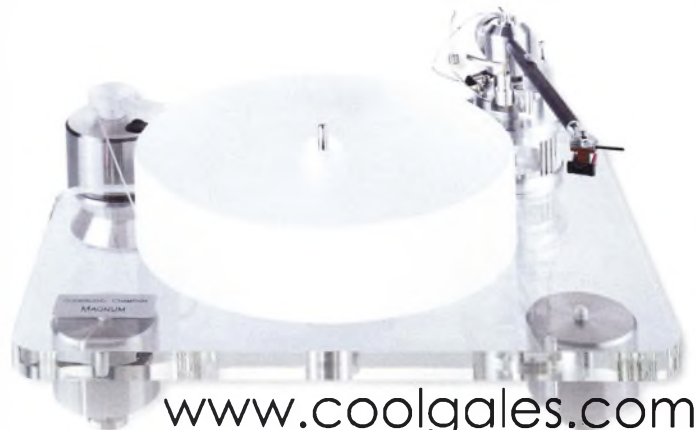
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Deceptive Simplicity...

The few good boxes that could!

by Alan Sircom

Future-proofing. It's a journalistic conceit without merit or demonstrable proof that a given 'future' can be 'proofed' against. If this were the early 1950s, a future-proofed hi-fi system would be nuke-proof, communist-proof and very possibly flying-saucer-proof... but not have any provision for stereophonic sound.

By the late 1960s/early 1970s, a hi-fi would have to be impervious to hippies and people in silvery Jetsons costumes... but had no concept of multi-channel music or the impact of CD.

Nevertheless, with a succession of different formats currently vying for dominance on our stereo systems, some degree of insurance against redundancy is a useful goal in any system. And that's the key point of this system... insurance against redundancy. This means the system acts as an open-ended concept, with multiple digital and analogue options in two channel and an easy 'in' for multi-channel, should the need arise. And yet, for all this talk of 'open-ended' and 'future-proofed' equipment, only two of the components are truly modular. Instead of being modular (like an Ikea bookcase), this system is modal in its upgrade path. The system as it stands comprises a disc player with built-in pre-amplifier, a DAB/FM tuner, a power amp, all the attendant cables,

rack and a pair of speakers. From a purely surface inspection, that's a bit of a closed loop, and no more or less insured against redundancy than most £1,000 CD/amp/speaker systems. Then you look closer...

Start with the Polyhymnia (good name that, if your company is called Muse, she's the muse of the sacred hymn, lyric poetry and dance – and yes, there is a Muse Terpsichore, too). It's called a 'Multi-Format Digital Player', and for good reason – it plays DVD-Audio, DVD-Video, CD, SACD and MP3 tracks burned to a CD-R. So far, so budget universal player. Where the Muse really comes into its own is in the execution of that universal disc player concept, inside and out.

Under the hood, the Polyhymnia supports all PCM data rates and types as well as 5.1 channel versions of Dolby Digital and DTS. It's fully chummy with MLP (for DVD-Audio) and DSD (for SACD) coding formats, and – in its standard guise – includes digital audio (in either S/PDIF or AES-EBU electrical connection) and

analogue video outputs (in composite video, S-Video and component video (interlaced or progressive) form). The Polyhymnia sports the new MAP (Modular Audio/video Platform) front panel and chassis finish, the new MAP feet and the absolutely bewildering, but built like a truck Remote-2 handset. 64 identically sized tiny buttons on the front-face, each one with a legend that is both in a muted shade of grey on grey and set in teeny-tiny two point (that old typographic joke – two fonts walk into a bar and the barman says "Get out! We don't want your type in here" – seems to fit); bewildering... oh yes indeed.

This is only the beginning to the Muse concept. This is that one modular component in the system discussed earlier. The player comes with a series of options that move the Polyhymnia out from being just a universal player into a full-grown system integrator. There are five modules in total; an unbalanced or a balanced multi-channel output option, the ultra-performance analogue audio processing option, the input module, which only comes to life with the last option, the attenuator module.

Given there are four identical plates on the back panel, it's clear all five modules are not going to happen.



► The input and attenuator modules in combination turn the Polyhymnia into a full-blown pre-amp.

The pre-amp module is a good thing. We used it with an Arcam DT91 DAB/FM tuner. This might not be the most high-end product in the magazine (every other component in this line-up costs less, if you take the cables as a complete entity) but manages to build in the flexibility of both old and new radio sources. It's not designed to take advantage of DAB+, which uses more efficient AAC and AAC+ codecs but for now at least the original iteration of DAB will remain all we get in Blighty. However, with no formal switch off date for FM, there's no sense that this tuner will be relegated to the recycler any time in the foreseeable future, even if DAB+ became a part of the UK digital radio scene tomorrow.

If the Arcam tuner is not future-proofed in that it has DAB+ codecs running through its circuitboards, it currently nevertheless represents the best of what DAB and FM can do when they sit snugly together. Like almost all such machines, it's essentially a chipset in a box, but this is not necessarily a bad thing (you do get easy and seamless integration from one source to another). The downside – for some users – is that the DT91 uses only one aerial socket, and this can be a problem if you are in an area where your FM stations are from one direction and your DAB is from another.

A quick aside. The whole system rests upon a Finite Element support system, but not the one that's usually rolled out. The UK hi-fi fraternity is so impressed by the Pagode system, the Spider tables are often overlooked. Perhaps it's because Spider isn't as big or traditional, or perhaps it's 'cos people don't like to rest their hi-fi on spindly arms and prefer big ol' shelves. Fact remains, this is an utterly excellent support system, especially

when used with the company's CeraPuc isolation system. It can also expand to order, with the option to add shelves, adjust their spacing and even add additional uprights. You can happily place some exceptionally heavy kit on those spider arms and not have any worry about its safety.

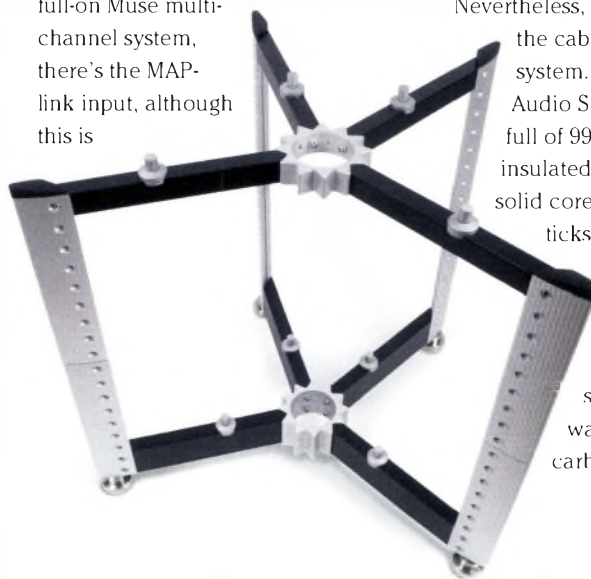
Which is precisely what we did with the Muse Model Two Hundred power amp. Well, sort of half way power amp, sort of half way to being a integrated and sort of half way to being part of a home cinema system if needed. Three halves? That's how good the Model Two Hundred really is. As the name suggests, this is a 200 Watt per channel stereo power amplifier, again with optional modules. You can specify the amp as a power amplifier only, or add in a high-quality attenuator/control function. So technically, although this is a one-source deal, There is a twist. If you plug a single-ended phono source and a XLR balanced source into the inputs of the Muse amp, adding the Active Front Panel display/control module means you can switch between the two and set the level, using the tiny buttons in the corners of the display. You can even put an AES/EBU balanced digital audio input on the back of the Model Two Hundred, keeping digital signals in the digital domain right up until the power amp stages. And for those intending a full-on Muse multi-channel system, there's the MAP-link input, although this is

still an uncommon feature this side of the Great Divide.

So, perhaps now we begin to get to the modal, not necessarily modular, nature of this system. The system as it stands today allows for use in stereo mode, balanced mode from the player and single-ended from the tuner. These can be input and output in both all analogue or even all digital modes and if you decide to move from stereo mode to multi-channel mode, all you need is more, not different. The best thing about this modal future is how little compromise is made whether you decide to stay in the stereo, all analogue mode or the full on digital multi-channel mode. That's real future-proofing; no sacrifices today, to make room for a potential option tomorrow. Few can make that claim with any authority.

The rest of the system need not be so open-ended. Cables, by and large, are cables; reacting to the changes in the system rather than influencing its direction toward or away from a possible multi-channel future.

Nevertheless, it's good not to skimp on the cables in so forthcoming a system. We went for the Clearer Audio Silver-line Optimus range, full of 99.9999% purity silver with insulated cores of multi-strand-solid core throughout. It certainly ticks all the right audiophile



boxes; Caig treatments, Eichmann plugs, cable burn-ins, twin Weber carbs and RFI suppression rings. OK, I was lying about the Weber carburettors, but there are ►

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▶ separate earth drains on the speaker cables. From a purely subjective standing, the Silver-Line Optimus products do sound good, especially in combination, their extensive shielding delivering ghostly silent backgrounds.

Finally, we come to the Cygnis, by Revolver. This came as a bit of a shock when launched, because Revolver's loudspeaker range has hitherto been distinctly budget in nature; it's bit like Kia releasing a Bentley challenger. This big but not tall three-way floorstander is made up of two sections, akin to a WATT/Puppy design on a smaller scale and physically joined together. The top box contains a 26mm aluminium dome tweeter and a 130mm woven glass diaphragm midrange unit, both built specifically for Revolver. Bass is handled by the bottom unit and features a single 254mm doped paper unit.

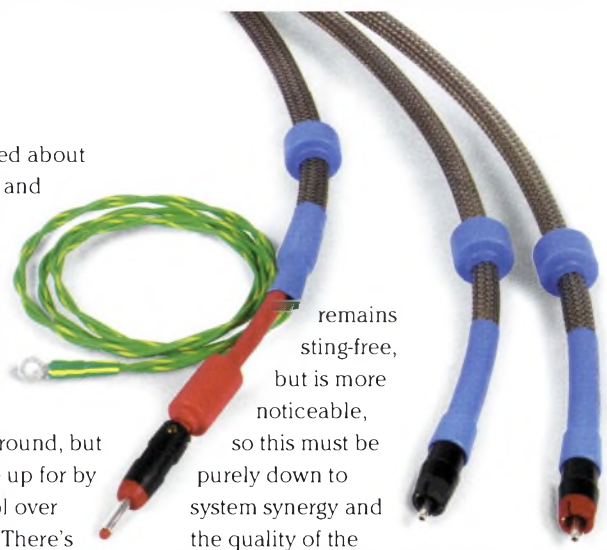
One of the most interesting parts of the Cygnis is the change in tech from top unit to bottom. The curved top-box is a fully sealed, moulded infinite baffle design, while the 50-litre base is vented through the slot between the bottom of the cabinet and its plinth. It also comes supplied with chrome tank-busting spikes which ensure the proper distance between port and floor. The sealed top and ported bottom does make the speaker sensitive, with a claimed 91dB efficiency and easy eight Ohm nominal impedance (4.3 ohms at its worst). Revolver puts the Cygnis' +/-3dB points at 45Hz and 22kHz, which is ideal for most UK living rooms, but will necessitate a good metre from the rear and side walls, if you don't want overblown bass.

The bottom end was, in fact,

the first thing we noticed about the system. It's elegant and well controlled. Not cavernous, but still just deep enough to begin to move from the 'hear' to the 'feel' part of low frequency action. It's not the fastest bass response around, but this is more than made up for by the tonality and control over low frequency energy. There's a distinct dryness to the sound – more like a good Martini rather than going three rounds with a tumble dryer – and this helps the system to sound good through an extremely wide range of music.

What this system has in spade loads is clear, unforced and exceptionally natural top end. We half expected hardness and spit from the alloy dome tweeter, but this was a refined performer, far better than most examples of the breed. This meant listening to even hard, poor recordings was an extended-listening joy, allowing you to skirt round the inherent weaknesses of the disc and concentrate instead on the music behind the recording. This didn't mean the system is in anyway veiled or masking off some parts of the HF to make things more listenable; far from it... if you have lots of HF energy, it will come through. It's just

the sound is far more relaxed in the process. This has been done before, plenty of times; all those classic thin-walled sealed box BBC-derived speakers managed to achieve the same feat, but they never managed it with alloy tweeters. We've heard the Cygnis in anger elsewhere and the HF

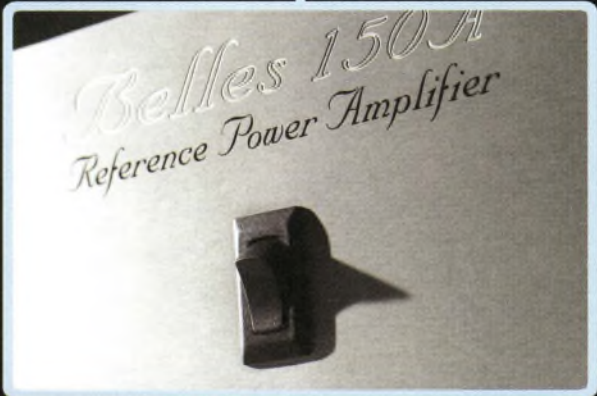
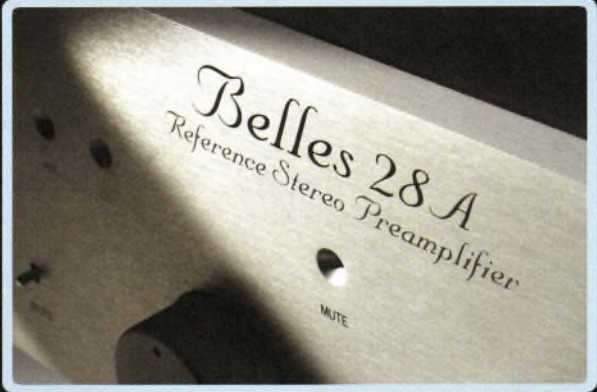


remains sting-free, but is more noticeable, so this must be purely down to system synergy and the quality of the Muse electronics in the chain (most of the critical listening was through repeatable disc sources, rather than relying on radio to repeat itself). Using the speakers with the grilles on helps on other systems, but was unnecessary here.

Moving down the frequency chart, the mid-range was remarkably open, too. Sounds were very free of the boxes and beautifully solid in the soundstage. There was more stage width than stage depth, but the sound was impressive in that it made two big speakers disappear. Like the treble, the midrange shone and made the case for high-end audio very eloquently. There was infinite control, with a clarity, openness and expansiveness that is impossible to replicate with lesser equipment and the whole exercise was remarkably detailed. You could happily pick out individual members in a recording, each one given their own physical space and each instrument articulated as the instrument should be. This helps pluck away some of the layers of artifice that separates mere audio from audiophile.

In a way, this system is sort of the anti-Naim, both to the good and the detriment of the sound. Where it's good is in an ability to get detail across in an utterly unforced and yet precise manner; there's never a sense of music being 'squirted' at you electronically. It simply sounds like your house got infested with





Bringing it all together

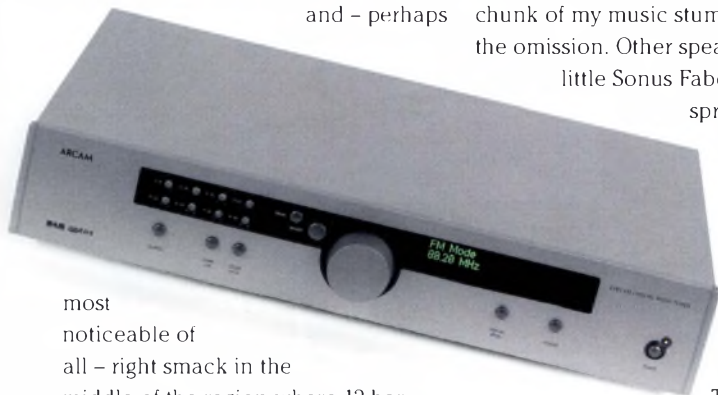
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▶ talented musicians. Where it's bad is when it comes to laying down some bangin' tunes, especially in 4/4 time. If you tend to play air guitar to Little Feat, air drums to Led Zep, and air keyboard to Kraftwerk, you'll find this less of an exercise regime. That said, moving from studio Kraftwerk (on CD) to live Kraftwerk (on SACD) showed just how much more there is to be had from the superior format and before long you find yourself dancing along to the live cuts.

There is a sin, here, and it's a sin of omission. There's a point in the upper bass where things just taper off, although they kick back in slightly lower down. This is the point bass players head for when they get all expressive in solos and the upper registers of some drums and – perhaps

point, though; the 50Hz region is still tailored, just not as dramatically as before.

Whether it's a deal-breaker or a minor observation comes from what sort of music you listen to and how you listen in general. In other words, are you a cerebral or a visceral listener? If you fall into the former camp, the rest of the system performance more than makes up for this minor indiscretion and you'll go back to your music (which probably includes more than its fair share of Bach) without complaint. If you are more visceral in your tastes, this might cause you some consternation. Of the two of us who listened to this, one had no problems, one simply couldn't get over it. I was the 'not getting over it' guy, because a fair chunk of my music stumbled over the omission. Other speakers (the little Sonus Faber Auditor M



most noticeable of all – right smack in the middle of the region where 12-bar blues grind on. Roughly low A on a six-string guitar. If the mid-band is the presence region, this is the land of the foot-tapper.

Possibly the reason why this is so specific is that the rest of the speaker is so good, it doesn't mask its own limitations. And this is once again speaker derived, although it would only manifest itself on a system that was good enough to give the speakers the freedom to express their own limits. Up to a point, moving further back in the room than usual, with the listening position being reinforced by a bit more rear wall reflection than is commonplace, can rectify this upper bass limitation. Only up to a

springs to mind) might have matched my tastes better, but there's no denying the quality of the Revolvers. The real question is

whether theirs is a quality you value.

Even being the 'not getting over it' guy, I couldn't help liking the system overall. It's fundamentally honest and likeable sounding and even the limitation demonstrated the sense of honesty in the system. I think there's a learning curve to get over; there's so much detail on offer in the bass, the midrange and treble, that once you get over the upper bass limit, you settle back and enjoy the ride. Even being the 'not getting over it' guy, I found myself getting over this limitation by the time the system departed. I had adapted, and surprisingly found a lot

of other systems sounding bloomy and artificial by comparison. It's the antithesis of cheaper systems then, which seem designed to mask their problems for just long enough to make its return to the retailer impossible. Instead, this system presents its warts up front, leaving the 'and all' bit a far more refreshing experience than you might at first expect. Which is a good thing, because with the sheer modal nature of this system, anyone owning it will do so for years to come. ➤

Prices and Contact

Muse Polyhymnia:	£4250
Muse Model Two Hundred:	£2290
Active Front Panel Option:	£800
finite elemente Spider Rack (2 shelf, 60cm tall):	£440
Audiofreaks	
Tel. (44)(0)20 8948 4153	
Net. www.audiofreaks.co.uk	
Arcam DiVA DT91:	£500
Tel. (44)(0)1223 203200	
Net. www.arcam.co.uk	
Revolver Cygnis:	£8000
The Acoustic Partnership LLP	
Tel: 0870 047 0047	
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Net. www.revolveraudio.co.uk	
Optimus Interconnects (1.0m pr.):	£525
Optimus Speaker Cables (3m pr.):	£1860
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Less Is More...

When a three box system is all you really need!

by Paul Messenger

This delightfully simple system consists of just three components and a couple of speaker cables, all of which come from brands I already hold in some esteem. At its heart is a unit of a type one rarely encounters these days: a stereo receiver (which for many years we Brits insisted on calling tuner-amplifiers). These were popular right up until the end of the 1970s, and rather longer in the US of A, but seemed to go out of fashion thereafter for no obviously good reason, especially in view of the emptiness usually found inside a separate tuner's casework.

The increasing integration and miniaturisation of electronic components in recent years has led to a revival of 'one-box' solutions like the Arcam Solo, incorporating disc drives, tuners and amplifiers in a single sleek unit. However, the Magnum Dynalab MD208 receiver at the heart of this review system is very different in conception and intent from those newcomers. It has genuine audiophile aspirations at a not too extravagant \$2,500, and styling that's deeply rooted in nostalgia, even down to little curved, polished wood end-cheeks. Although the core of the casework is traditional ventilated pressed steel, those end-cheeks and the thicker alloy front panel both conspire to add a good slice of class, aided and abetted by the patently hefty build.

Partnering the Magnum Dynalab receiver is a pair of the recently

introduced Momentum 4i speakers from Neat Acoustics. The Momentum models, two of which have so far appeared, sit between the Motive and Ultimatum ranges. The \$2,695/pair 4i is a stereotypically slim, compact floorstander, sharp-edged, very nicely finished in fine quality real wood veneer, with oak, cherry, maple, walnut and



rosenut options. What looks at first sight like a simple two-driver two-way actually has a downward-firing isobaric sub-woofer arrangement built into the lower section of its enclosure, and operates as a two-and-a-half-way.

And then there's the invisible bonus inherent in this system; free software. Being built round a radio, once you've got the equipment, you've also got unlimited access to music and speech broadcasts – you just don't get to choose the programme material, which can be a real bonus in itself!

But back to the hardware itself. A Canadian company based in Ontario, Magnum Dynalab is unusual – indeed to the author's knowledge unique – in being first and foremost a radio tuner specialist,

and is certainly one of very few that still provides the flexibility of analogue tuning across the FM band, backed up by a good sized digital frequency readout. FM is the only band covered here, and is tuned by a four-stage front end, with the help of a large and very nicely weighted tuning knob and two illuminated 'swinging needle' meters, for signal strength and centre-tune. Other tuner features include automatic stereo

blend for weak signals, stereo/mono, optional muting and adjustable selectivity.

The sheer weight of this handsome full size unit attests to the substantial linear power supply used by the amplifier section. The rated power is a generous 100W into 8 Ohms and 160W into 4, with a 30 Amp peak current capability. Oxygen free copper wiring is used, and generous heatsinking keeps things cool. The pre-amp section has an electronic digital volume control driven from a large knob with good weighting backed up by a very legible numerical readout. Besides the built in tuner, six line inputs are provided for other sources, including one with unity gain that can be configured for use alongside a home cinema processor, all selected by a cycling front panel pushbutton; pre-out and tape-out are also available.

The whole thing can be controlled from the supplied RCB remote control for most functions, including storage and selection of presets. Whilst some (notably Mr Gregory) demur, I consider ►

▶ the convenience and elegance of remote control essential. Magnum Dynalab handsets tend to be a bit bulky and heavy, but they're welcome nonetheless.

The Neat speaker uses the same 165mm bass/mid driver and 25mm inverted alloy dome tweeter found in the Ultimatum models. The former has a 120mm doped paper cone and alloy 'bullet' phase plug, while the latter resembles but is different from the Focal tweeters that Neat used to use. Both these units are neatly flush-mounted in a clean front panel that is unadorned by grille mounting lugs, simply because no grille is provided. Indeed the tweeter's metal diaphragm is entirely unprotected, and therefore somewhat vulnerable to prying fingers, though it is quite high off the ground, and the concave shape should be far less susceptible to damage than the usual convex 'button'. Less elaborate 165mm units are mounted in the base and internally, loaded by the bulk of the enclosure and a large rear port; a smaller port high up on the back loads the much smaller cavity behind the front bass/mid driver. A simple 1st/2nd order crossover network is fed from widely spaced twin terminal pairs.

The enclosure itself is built from 19mm MDF, and the whole thing sits on four large adjustable, lockable cones, quite sharp enough to penetrate carpets. Sadly, from an aesthetic point of view, there's no additional plinth here. The cones fit directly into the base, providing

correct spacing from the floor and resulting in a very modest footprint, but the considerable mass supplied by those drivers near the base helps ensure good physical stability.



I put the Momentum 4i through my regular (very basic) measurement programme, which is always useful in pinning down a speaker's behaviour. The claimed 88dB sensitivity is a shade optimistic, as our test regime, based on far-field in-room conditions suggests that a figure of 86.5dB is more realistic. That's a little below average, but that is fair enough in view of the impressive bass extension (-6dB at 23Hz under in-room conditions)

and a very straightforward impedance that never drops below 5.5 Ohms and averages around 8. Best used when sited well clear of walls, the frequency balance is somewhat uneven, especially through the upper bass and lower mid-band, but it holds within good overall limits right across the audio band. That said, the tweeter level is rather stronger than average, and is also a little uneven.

It was no great surprise to find that the MD208 incorporates a first class FM radio tuner. While this clearly falls some way short of the sonic performance of my regular (and considerably more costly) MD106T FM source, it gives nothing away in terms of radio reception (RF) performance, and is probably equivalent

to the MD100. Indeed, the front end here is exceptionally sensitive, pulling in plenty of stations with good signal-to-noise ratio even before I'd got around to connecting the aerial, which is a little surprising as the 106T remains entirely mute under the same circumstances.

Although I normally leave my own tuner more or less permanently on the Wrotham transmitter some 40 miles distant, scanning the band showed that this radio was very capable of pulling in plenty of weak stations; that the front-end was usefully symmetrical; and that the muting threshold was well chosen. The signal strength meter lacks any real discrimination above a rather modest level, which is a shame, but the centre-tune metre is very useful and effective.

Inevitably the radio sound quality lacks some of the top end sweetness and delicacy of the company's more upmarket standalone tuner-only units, but it's still very satisfactory nonetheless in the way it communicates. Direct comparison to the 106T revealed that voices were a little less convincingly human, but the most obvious difference lay in the imaging, which showed a reduced precision, depth and focus and general all round solidity and believability compared to the triode-equipped model, all of which seems logical enough.

After all, it is considerably cheaper and it's mightily impressive that it stands such comparison at all. The shortfalls are minor, and really don't interfere with its fine music-making ability.

Like the tuning knob, which it closely resembles, the volume control has a really nice feel and weighting, and its remote response speed is very well chosen. Input selection proved a little tedious, however, as it's handled by a single pushbutton on either the unit or the handset, and therefore has to cycle its way right through the complete input complement. Although balance and muting are both available on the handset, the feature complement isn't particularly generous. There's no ▶

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▶ provision for headphone listening, and only the tuner section has a mono option, which vintage vinyl collectors will regret.

Sonically speaking the amplifier proved thoroughly capable, if a little restrained in terms of top end air and 'sparkle' when simply plumbed into my regular system. It also occasionally showed a slight looseness of grip and a mild thickening of textures down in the bass region. Happily, and certainly fortuitously, both these characteristics happened to complement those of the Neat speakers rather well.

Assessed in isolation on the end of my regular Naim-amplified system, the Momentum 4i's top end delivers plenty of fine detail, but is a little too obvious in the way it draws attention to itself. Connected up to the Magnum Dynalab receiver that slight treble excess added the sparkle which the amplifier section lacks, and the net result proved a fine match. The two worked well together at the bottom end of the audio band too, where the Neat's slight dryness and general freedom from resonance sat well alongside the amplifier's slight tendency towards excess. Both components have superior dynamic range and resolution especially through the mid-band, and the speakers are generally quite transparent, if a little weak on dynamic grip.

Although I was using Chord Signature

speaker cable when the system first arrived, I substituted them with the Vertex AQ Moncayo set I've been using regularly for the past



few years. These cables have a brighter, dryer character than Signature, and seemed a

rather better match in this particular system. With everything connected up, I got fine results from good quality radio broadcasts.

Investigating the line-stage I got excellent results when using a Naim CDS3/555PS CD player, and also the At-View SB+ 'Streamer' from my MacBook Pro. At the time the review was under way I was using a Roksan Xerxes 20 turntable with Artaxerxes tonearm and Rega Apheta cartridge, via an Anatek MC1 phono stage for vinyl replay. This combination proved rather less satisfactory, due I believe to the innate brightness of the otherwise lovely Apheta cartridge, which tilted the system balance just a little too far out of kilter,

emphasising the slightly coarse nature of the Neat tweeter. I strongly suspect that changing the cartridge for Roksan's Shiraz would likely have redressed the balance, but it was time to tramp the corridors of the Park Inn Heathrow, and deadlines caught me out. But clearly, the MD108 will happily grow with your system if required.

The Magnum Dynalab MD 208 and Neat Momentum 4i proved a thoroughly satisfactory system overall, with the undoubted virtue that it's relatively compact and doesn't take up too much shelf space. I still think BBC FM radio is one of the better reasons for putting up with the British climate and Government, and a Magnum Dynalab tuner is definitely one of the best ways to enjoy our fine broadcasts. Although the amplification side falls a little short of serious audiophilia, it does a thoroughly workmanlike job, with plenty of welly to make the most of Neat's fine new speaker when the occasion demands. ➤

Prices and Contact Information

Magnum Dynalab MD108 Receiver

Price: £2500

UK Distributor:

Audiofreaks

Tel. (44)(0)20 8948 4153

Net. www.audiofreaks.co.uk

Neat Momentum 4i Loudspeakers

Price: £2695

Manufacturer:

Neat Acoustics Ltd

Tel. (44)(0)1833 631021

Net. www.neat.co.uk

Vertex AQ Moncayo Loudspeaker Cables

See the Vertex system review on page 76 for details.



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Parallel Universe...

Seeking system stability with Vertex AQ

by Roy Gregory

Like the other reviews in this issue this is a system review – but it's a system review with a difference. Say the word 'System' to most people interested in hi-fi and they'll start mentally ticking off a source, amplifier and speakers. They might even get as far as cables, but the lion's share of their attention is definitely going to be directed at those boxes full of electronic components. But, in the same way that you can't listen to an amp without giving it a signal and connecting it up to some sort of speakers, you can't listen to electronics without providing power, signal transmission and some kind of physical support. So, if the speakers are just as important to the notion of 'System' as the amplifier, then so to are the other elements, such as cabling. Yet all too often, despite recent realisations of the impact that these elements have on overall performance, they are dismissed as peripheral or mere ancillaries, despite their fundamental role in the great scheme of things.

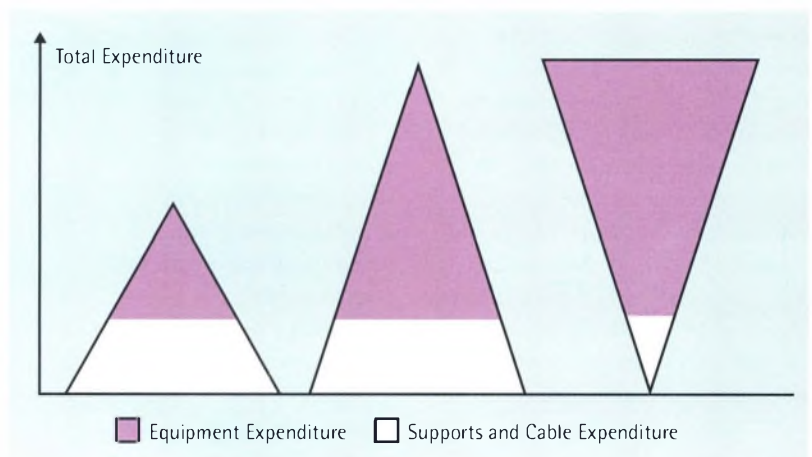
Which brings us to this system and an alternative approach in which the electronics are considered secondary and we instead concentrate on those elements that define the system environment and conditions of operation. After all, when we build a house, it's the walls, windows and roof that get all the attention, but it's the foundations that hold them up and keep them in place. In building, a firm foundation is critical to the longevity and stability of the structure as a whole: it's no different in hi-fi. Those foundations consist of the cabling and

physical supports within the system, and just like with building, if you try and add them as an afterthought, it's apt to be expensive and ultimately disappointing!

So far so good: the concept is clear, and even if it's a little alien it's not too hard to grasp. After all, when we listen to music reproduced by a hi-fi system, we are in a very real sense, listening to the electricity that comes out of the mains, the signal that passes between the boxes. What makes this system different is that it proposes a whole new concept or approach to understanding the way in which spurious energy within the system is transported and effects what we hear. The implications are such that "ancillary" aspects of system construction take on a new and fundamental importance, not just as enhancements to the performance of the electronic boxes, but as critical to them delivering any sort of meaningful performance at all. If that

sounds like exaggeration, consider this; if when you build a house, you overspend on the structure and skimp on the foundations, you end up with something that might look initially impressive, but all too quickly the cracks start to show. Better by far to pour the money (quite literally) into the foundations and dial back on the structure itself; you can always add a second storey later. I've long believed that the vast majority of hi-fi systems are top heavy; it's only recently become apparent just how precariously balanced most of them are; a fact which explains why a) most of them are so musically disappointing and b) why the law of diminishing returns applies to attempted "upgrades" with such a vengeance.

Imagine a system as an equilateral triangle, sat on one edge: It's an incredibly stable structure. Add something to the top of it and you increase the height without the whole thing moving. Now stand it one of its points: add anything to the top



▶ edge and unless you happen on the point of perfect balance, the whole lot is going to teeter and topple over. Yet that's exactly what we are trying to do with hi-fi systems, simply because we haven't invested enough time, attention or money in the fundamentals on which they're built. The problem is that new approaches require new understanding, new rules and new priorities, which is exactly what we're going to attempt to establish here.

It's also important to point out that the Vertex AQ products are far from the only solution on offer. However, they do embrace all aspects of the approach into a single, coherent product line, as well as extending the understanding of what is happening within the system itself in what is an essentially unique and I believe vital way, which is why I chose to use them.

As to the electronics, I established basic four-box systems of digital source, integrated amp and speakers, with equipment variously drawn from dCS, Goldmund, Bel Canto, Gryphon and KEF, allowing us to ring the changes while keeping the basic set-up as simple as possible. The electronics were installed on a Cambre Core rack and wired up with Acoustic Zen signal cables and a mix of Siltech and chord mains leads. In other words, a situation representative of what might be considered a pretty well sorted system, with a coordinated cable loom as far as signal goes, and probably more attention paid to the



mains and system support than most. (Many thanks to Jeremy Baldwin at The Right Note for help with the loan of equipment.)

Initially at least, the results were far from encouraging, with a thin, disorganized and disjointed sound, opaque soundstage and minimal dynamic range. It's immediately tempting to start pointing fingers, so ingrained is the impulse, and it was hard to stop my hands closing inexorably about the chassis of the Bel Canto, prime suspect as far as I was concerned. Instead, Steve Elford of Vertex, on hand to advise on strategy, managed to hold me back, insisting instead on the alternative approach. After all, it's one thing making a well-sorted system sound better, it's quite another (and far more relevant) to transform the proverbial bag of spanners – and this wasn't sounding THAT good.

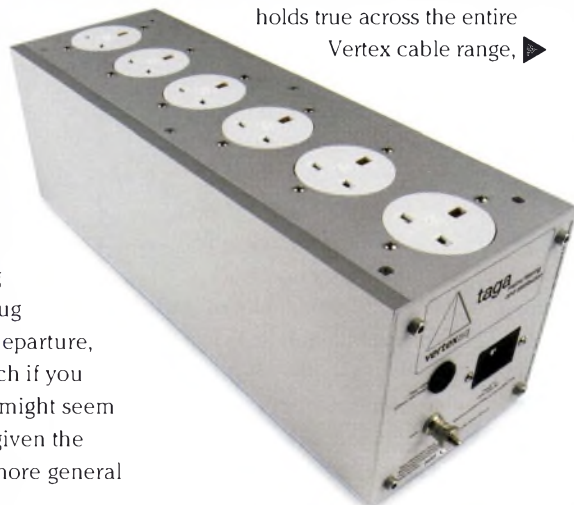
The question of course is where to start. After all, laying a foundation gets awful messy if you start pouring concrete before you've dug the trench. Our point of departure, primary priority, our trench if you will, was the mains. That might seem like a surprising choice, given the priorities that pertain in more general

understandings of system balance, but that's exactly the point. Cables, or more specifically changing them, is often regarded as "tweaking", terminology

that reflects the magnitude of change expected. Well, this system didn't need "tweaking" it needed a full-scale overhaul. As I said earlier, you should consider the electricity feeding the system as its basic raw material. Gross flaws here will easily obscure more subtle changes within the system infrastructure, so first priority is to sort out the source (sound familiar?) otherwise you won't be able to hear what's going on later. This really is front-end first – it's just that in this case the front-end in question goes beyond the signal itself and into its very fabric.

Our first step was to place a Vertex mains lead and Taga distribution block between the existing mains leads and the wall. Long time readers will be familiar with the Vertex mains leads, or more specifically the large, extruded aluminium boxes part way along their length that set them apart from the competition. Of course, these aren't the only cables with boxes in them, but they're the only ones where those boxes are designed to absorb and dissipate energy from the conductors themselves. It's a concept that

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► from mains to speaker leads. It makes them heavy, often awkward to use and position, definitely hard to hide but also unique. At £342 for a 1.5m lead, they are also far from cheap, although that price puts them solidly in the middle ground rather than the upper reaches of expense – power cords are like anything else; you really can pay as much as you want just to get electricity into the system.

The Taga six-way distribution block is new. Neatly built into an attractive, square-section aluminium chassis constructed from panels rather than the more usual (and far cheaper) extrusion, it's six 13 Amp sockets are star-earthed with an external post for attachment to an external earth spike. The casework also contains additional mechanical absorption and a passive shunt filter to reduce RFI carried by the mains. The Taga costs £795, which seems like a pretty good deal given that the equivalent standalone Silver Jaya filter weighs in at \$545. It's also mightily effective. In one sense, we took three steps at once, adding not just the star-earthed distribution block, but the mains lead and a clean earth



all at the same time – but the results spoke for themselves. We used a range of discs during the direct comparisons but there were two constants: Joe Jackson's *Summer In The City*, a live trio recording of enormous energy and atmosphere; and Coltrane's *My Favorite Things*, chosen for its complex patterns

and inter-relationships – and its less than wonderful recording.

Given the flat, opacity of the original sound you might consider improvements easy to be had, but consider too just how destructive that disjointed presentation is. Even expecting the change and hardened by exposure to similar equipment, I still wasn't ready for the impact delivered by the Roraima mains lead and Taga block*. The improvement in separation and transparency along with the removal of the insidious grain that had seeped into every corner of the soundstage, blanketed every bit of life or energy in the music, was like having a London smog lifted clear of the speakers. Disconcerted by the initial results from the system, the transformation rammed home with a vengeance the basic levels of performance I take for granted on a day to day basis, simply because my set up does mirror the Vertex approach. Of course, the changes I've just described could be dismissed as

merely cosmetic, but that's to misunderstand the way in which systems make music.

The added clarity and lower noise floor delivered a significant

increase in dynamic range, producing a more expressive and involving performance. We're talking piano here remember, which means that weight and placement of notes are the player's main modes of expression. Cleaning up the mains input transformed the playing of both Jackson and McCoy Tyner from one-dimensional plinking

into something with musical range and a relationship with the other instruments. There was still a long, long way to go, but this was one major step in the right direction. And that's only one effect. The deep, churning bass line of 'Fools In Love' actually started to gain some shape, the beginning and end of notes emerging from the murk, while the



entry of the voice and piano no longer simply pushed the low-frequencies into the musical farscape. So, both the intelligibility and the inner balance of the music have changed significantly.

Now bear in mind that we haven't actually changed the basic system in any way. All we've done is placed the distribution block between it and the wall. Much conventional thinking would actually decry such a step, dictating separate sockets for each unit; so much for convention. The sad truth is that we've been getting it wrong for years – despite the readily audible evidence of that fact. Except that all too often the evidence itself has been obscured behind poorly executed cable and support strategies; or more likely, no strategy at all. Time to turn your thinking on its head, if you haven't already done so, and understand that your system starts at the wall socket...

Just to ram that home even further, the next step in the process was to get rid of the mix and match mains leads. Out went the Siltech and the Chord, to be replaced by a Roraima Silver Lite for the CD player (£623 for 1.0m) and the higher current Roraima Silver (£799 for 1.0m) on the amp. That's a pretty big step up in price, especially given the ►

* I can't help feeling that Vertex might help themselves by adopting no less memorable but at least more pronounceable names for their products!

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The alien concept of mechanical absorption...

The notion that vibration in systems is a "BAD THING" is hardly news. We even have a word for it – microphony. To that end, people have spent years talking about isolation and damping devices designed to protect systems from external mechanical interference – and very effective they've been, at least in some cases. However, there's been a massive blind spot in this approach: What about vibration generated within the system itself? After all, electrical components rattle when they pass a signal, transformers vibrate as soon as you turn them on, disc transports spin at high speed and speaker drive units are actually designed to vibrate. What's more, all these bits and bobs are joined together by strips of metal, metal that transmits vibration from one place to another really, really efficiently.

So, consider the mechanical energy generated by a speaker drive-unit. That is directly coupled from its chassis down a metal rod or wire to the crossover components and then the terminals. These will carry that energy into the speaker cables, which will pass it straight back to the output devices! (Yet another reason why the output transformers in a valve amp help its sound.) That's the most extreme example but it's one that applies to every single system. The same process occurs throughout your electronic components, just at a lower level – but then the signal is at a lower level too.

The Vertex approach is two-fold: firstly to sink energy out of the

electronics themselves and secondly, to prevent it passing between them. The former isn't news, with established products from the likes of finite elemente, Stillpoints and Symposium all taking this approach. Within this pantheon the Vertex platforms and couplers are amongst the best and easiest to use. But what really sets the company apart is that second part of its strategy, isolating components one from another through the signal path. This is done by blocking the transmission of energy down the cables, by applying mechanical absorption to the conductors themselves. That's what's in the boxes.

At this point I can see eyebrows raising and the cognoscenti preparing to scoff... Well, Vertex were on the receiving end of that reaction quite a lot – so they developed a simple demonstration. They'll have you don a stethoscope and then, holding one end of one of your cables against its mouth, they gently rub the other tip with a coin. Gently, because if they hit it your eardrums would probably meet in the middle of your skull! You hear every single scrape of metal on metal – that's how effective a mechanical conductor your cables are. Repeat the experience with a Vertex lead and you hear next to nothing – even if you do hit the end of the lead.

It's a mightily effective demonstration of just how much mechanical energy can pass down a conventional cable – and how little gets past the Vertex absorbers. Of course, the cable itself still has to sound good, but that's easy – you just listen for that!

▶ fact that the leads being replaced are themselves perfectly respectable. Note also that we're using the silver leads on the equipment, but a standard copper lead on the Taga. Shouldn't it be the other way round? Actually, the system hierarchy is such that the benefits of the silver leads won't be heard until after the mechanical damping and RFI filtering of the Taga has had its effect. They in turn add another layer of mechanical absorption, creating a cascade of diminishing interference, a cascade that's all too audible as the silver mains leads simply extend and refine the benefits of the Taga still further. Greater texture, separation and more delicate discrimination of tiny dynamic shifts all contributed to a greater sense of life, immediacy and individuality to voices and instruments, helping to lift them out of the recording and into the room.

Having sorted out the raw materials being fed into the system, next step was to create effective exit paths for the energy generated within the electronics themselves. Enter then equipment supports in the familiar shape of the Kinabalus I've discussed at some length in previous

issues. These are basically platforms, topped with granite that covers an absorptive matrix and shrouded by a cosmetic surround, all standing on four squidgy feet. They come in three varieties: Standard, Super and Hi-Resolution, the difference being the degree of absorption provided and the resulting cost. But you don't just sit these under the equipment. Instead you use them in conjunction with a trio of couplers. These consist of two aluminium cones, tipped top and bottom with rubber and a third piece of the same height. This is a complex shape machined from tool steel, with a sharp point on its upper tip, three curved arcs that form a tripod around its lower edge. It looks for all the world like a particularly savage drill-bit. These three pieces are placed between the equipment being supported and the Kinabalu platform, bypassing the standard feet and instead providing a single extremely efficient route down which mechanical energy can pass from the unit's chassis into the dispersive matrix. At Steve's direction I placed a Hi-Resolution platform under the CD player, a Super under the

amp, using standard 35mm couplers in both cases. (Prices for a Kinabalu set up start at £327.50 and go up from there, depending on size and platform/coupler choices. The items we used totalled £627.50 for the Super, £877.5 for the Hi-Res versions)

The sonic impact was immediate, in every sense of the word. You couldn't miss the increased information, separation and



focus, the way instruments, especially the bass, were able to retain their own space and identity irrespective of what was happening around them. Likewise, the increase in dynamic range and energy in the playing gave a serious injection of life and musical contrast, although interestingly, although the soundstage now reached forward in a more inclusive way, the increased ▶

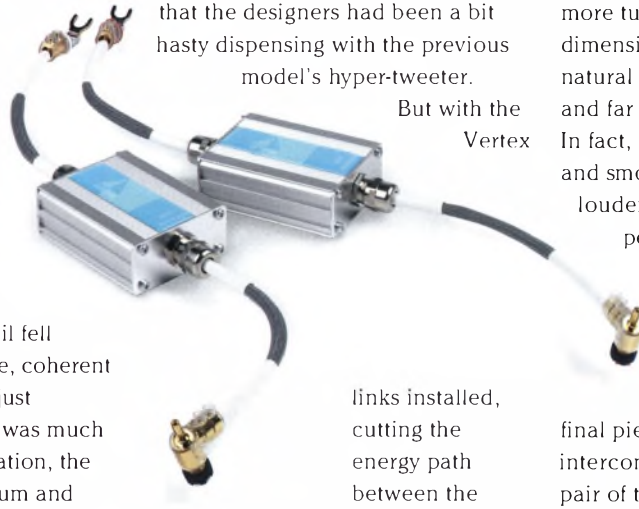
definition had if anything revealed the shortcomings in the sense of musical flow and coherence. Mr Elford, matching my quizzical look with a faintly maniacal grin, produced with a flourish a pair of Hi-Res couplers, identical to the 35mm high, tool steel standard versions, but with a mini-matrix built into their lower cavity. These he substituted for the standard couplers already in use.

Suddenly all the extra information and detail fell into place, creating a single, coherent whole. Now there weren't just increased dynamics, there was much greater dynamic discrimination, the weight and emphasis of drum and piano, the shape of the plucked bass notes far more emphatic and expressive. But the most impressive change was that for the first time the subtle phrasing that underpins Jackson's work became evident; for the first time the piano and vocal parts were connected, one underpinning the other rather than divorced and disjointed. Musically, this was the biggest change yet, making the up-charge of £50 each for the Hi-Res couplers over the standard ones an absolute no-brainer. For the first time the system really started to hold my attention, allowing the music and musicians a range of expression and colour that was previously totally lacking.

Having achieved such spectacular results by draining energy from the equipment, I couldn't wait to try cutting the other exit paths – the ones down the cabling. But once again, Steve surprised me by started where I least expected, replacing the mid to treble jumpers on the KEF 207/2s with a set of Mini Moncayo links (£495 for four). These short cables

replace bi-wire links, inserting one of Vertex's absorptive boxes in the process. They may not be particularly elegant, but boy do they work. As detailed in the KEF review, prior to their introduction I thought that the designers had been a bit hasty dispensing with the previous model's hyper-tweeter.

But with the Vertex



links installed, cutting the energy path between the mid and treble drive units (even though they share a common chassis) immediately restored the sense of air and space as well as removing a nasty layer of grain. Whispering noises on the Coltrane disc which had previously sounded as brush work, texturally and rhythmically intact. Of course, such detail was welcome, but the real difference was in the unforced sense of clarity that illuminated the music, allowing you to hear further into the soundstage, to position things more precisely in space. Such insight is critical to musical coherence as a whole, helping define the precise relationship between performers, so often heard as the chemistry that energises a great performance. Sure enough, Joe and boys were really starting to cook!

Next up was a set of Moncayo bi-wire speaker cables (£1769 for a 3.0m bi-wire pair), and

for the first time leads with boxes at both ends. It creates something of a logistical nightmare, but once again, once you hear the benefits you'll be loath to let them go... Deeper, better defined and far more tuneful bass; greater solidity, dimensionality and presence; more natural tonality, especially on vocals, and far less strain across the range. In fact, the whole system was sweeter and smoother, able to play far louder if required, while musical performances had a clearer structure, hanging together better and making far more sense and for far easier listening.

And so to the final piece in the jigsaw – the interconnects. First up were a 1.0m pair of the Silver Solfonn leads (£895). Once again, these have boxes, but although the original design had one at each end these latest versions have a single, larger box with feet, making them far easier to handle and dress. Once installed the benefits are obvious, the Vertex interconnects lifted a veil from the music, improving resolution, transparency and detail, heard as increased instrumental texture and colour. But most importantly of all, they removed a final blockage from the sense of musical flow. Finally, the ▶



► musicians and their music stood away from the speakers, which totally disappeared as a source of sound. Shut your eyes and you were greeted with a single coherent space, performers and instruments within it, the boundaries defined by the reflected notes of their music.

Mr Elford couldn't help but ice the cake, substituting the Hi-Res version of the interconnects (£1295) for the standard leads. These use identical plugs and conductors, but offer more sophisticated absorption and unbleached cotton insulation in place of Teflon, delivering even more resolution, and a more natural

to system support and the cable loom, the fundamental foundations of system performance. The Vertex components deployed here are far from cheap, but in purely performance terms they represent a bargain, both as upgrades and in releasing the performance potential in the electronics you've already paid for. At no point in the process did the cost of the upgrade seem expensive given the musical results. Indeed, translated into equipment terms, you'd be well pleased to achieve these levels of improvement from a change of electronics costing many times as much.

But the real lesson is in the result as a whole; the way the completed system allowed the music to free itself from the shackles of reproduction. A good foundation is a good foundation: once you've got it you can build

pretty much anything on top of it, as long as you don't overdo it and make it top heavy. That's why this "system" is all about the fundamental elements. It doesn't overly concern itself with the electronics because it will make almost anything you add to it work to its best advantage. I'm not saying you don't need decent electronics, but don't buy a Ferrari if you live at the end of a cart track. Get your drive tarmaced first... And as we've discovered, the impact of this approach on the performance of even quite basic electronics is frankly astonishing. The simple fact is, most of us have never heard what our expensive electronic boxes can do; but as the man said, "The times they are a changin'."



warmth and weight to the tonality of instruments, without any clogging of their dynamic or energy envelopes.

Whilst I've played with various of the Vertex pieces before, this is the first time I've experienced the whole range working in concert. Likewise, whilst the basic concept is familiar, indeed it's the basis on which I set up and cable all the systems that I use, I've never been able to extend it to blocking the transmission of energy between equipment, an approach that's unique to Vertex. But what is blindingly, staggeringly obvious once you've trodden this path is that we've grievously underestimated the importance of a coherent approach

Prices

Vertexing a complete system is clearly a potentially costly and complex proposition, the bottom line damage varying enormously depending on the level of cabling and supports chosen. Consequently I'm simply going to list the cost options for each category of product. However, before I do so, I'd just like to point out the following:

- a) This is a strategy based on a coherent, coordinated approach to the problem.
- b) Vertex offer an extremely sophisticated and in some ways unique solution. But there are other, far more affordable routes that can get you at least part of the way there. (See Issue 41 for more on this).
- c) It's entirely possible to adapt or build on the strongest elements of what you already own.

The ground rules are always the same. They can be used to assess existing products or select new ones in order to create a systematic solution. Above all it's recognizing the importance of the problem that counts. Once you do that the solution should follow as a matter of course.

Vertex AQ Mains

Taga Distribution Block:	£795.00
Jaya Mains Filter:	£295.00
Silver Plus Jaya Filter:	£545.00
Roirama Power Cord (1.0m):	£317.00
Roirama Plus (inc filter, 1.0m):	£482.00
Silver Roirama Lite (1.0m):	£623.00
Silver Roirama (1.0m):	£799.00
Silver Roirama Plus (inc filter, 1.0m):	£999.00

Vertex Equipment Supports

Kinabalu Platform:	from £132.00
Super Kinabalu Platform:	from £382.00
Hi-Res Kinabalu Platform:	from £632.00
Coupling Tripod (small):	£119.50
Coupling Tripod (large):	£149.50
Coupling Tripod (large, hi-res):	£199.50
De-couplers (1pr, small):	£76.00
De-couplers (1pr, large):	£96.00

Vertex Signal Cables

Mini-Moncayo Links (x4):	£495.00
Moncayo Speaker Leads (3.0m):	£1296.00
Moncayo Bi-wires (3.0m):	£1769.00
Silver Moncayo Leads (3.0m):	£3168.00
Solfonn Interconnect (RCA-RCA, 1.0m pr):	£495.00
Silver Solfonn Interconnect (RCA-RCA, 1.0m pr):	£895.00
Hi-Res Solfonn Interconnect (RCA-RCA, 1.0m pr):	£1295.00

Costs on cables vary with termination.

Contact Details

Vertex AQ
Tel.
Net.



The shape of music

Whether it is the Sydney Opera House or High End components from Gryphon Audio Designs, the Danes have a definite predisposition for innovative departures in design that effortlessly strike a perfect balance between form and function.



Bits And Pieces...

The arrival of the first off-the-shelf HTPC solution – and it comes from Audiolab

by Alan Sircom

This is not a review of a product; it's a review of an idea. You see, the way people are listening to their music and watching their films and even TV programmes is changing. And the change is far-reaching. It will get to you, too. It's just a matter of time.

That change is the move to a media server of some description, and you could

already be further down that path than you realise; iTunes turns your PC into a music server; even Sky+ qualifies... Not that there's no 'from' here... just 'to'. The hi-fi luddites might have it that any step on the road to hard disc storage sacrifices sound quality and disc peripherals for convenience, but I don't agree and nor does RG. Instead, we see a server sitting

comfortably beside a disc collection and performing a subtly different role.

However, there is at least one important philosophical change that hits the media server owner on the purchase of their first all-digital product. A disc becomes a data carrier, not a format. It carries data from the hard disk drive in the studio to the one in your server. ▶

Alternatives

There's a whole terminology game that's new to hi-fi. When is a HTPC a 'server'? What's the difference between a 'music server' and a 'media server'? What's a 'media client'? Is this something that can be done by normal human beings?

Put simply, all HTPCs and server systems are computers. Some (HTPC systems) are essentially a conventional PC, albeit geared to maximising the task of replaying audio and video. This type of device is typified by the Audiolab 8000DT, as well as the many Uvem PC chassis, the MetaVision, Hush computing and any custom-made or even off-the-shelf PC.

The other type of system is a server. This is still a PC, using the same components a PC uses. The key difference is the server often uses a stripped-back operating system, because it's limited to providing files and little else. This makes the server ultimately more robust, but means it limits the flexibility of the product. Examples of this server concept include the hifidelio, Mordaunt Short Azur 640H, Linn's Knekt Kivor, Imerge's S3000, and the Yamaha MusicCAST.

All these products listed are music servers, because they are designed to play music sources.

Media servers on the other hand, can handle audio and video files side by side. Often, the difference between an HTPC and a media server is hard to define easily from external inspection alone. The difference is one of location rather than design. A HTPC is usually 'front of house', sitting in the living room next to the CD player, amplifier and plasma screen. A media server, as its name suggests, sits 'back office', hidden with the rest of the

Generally, it's possible to run a HTPC as a media server, but not the other way around. In addition, media servers are usually sold through custom installation providers because of the inherent complexity of installation.

Media server systems are supplied by companies like Kaleidescape, Imerge (the new MS5000), Living Control, Axonix and currently client systems are provided by the likes of AMX and

Crestron controller systems, along with new network system hi-fi and home cinema products from Denon, Yamaha and the forthcoming Audiolab product.

Most of these systems are still relatively complex to install. This is where the HTPC wins out. Place it where you might plonk down a DVD player, connect it to the hi-fi, a video screen and your broadband router. Sit back with your remote keyboard and let the installation process roll, hitting the start sequence from the comfort of your armchair. Generally, you don't need to have a fundamental understanding of TCP/IP or any other

networking basics. If you are using the HTPC as a media server, the complexity of install becomes exponentially more difficult. In fact, this is when it gets more important to call on your friendly neighbourhood CEDIAman, who will crawl through your walls with cables and do all the difficult stuff



custom install system, operated by local 'media client' systems. A media client can be as simple as a remote control (albeit a pretty advanced one) or can be a full player or amplifier in its own right, but also has an Ethernet connection and the ability to control some of the server in its own right.

► Once loaded onto the server, the compact disc, DVD or high-definition disc becomes an archive product, something you hold onto just in case your server and back-up crash catastrophically.

Back-up; now there's something we never had to contend with before. If a disc got scratched, we either got rid of it or replaced it; now we have to worry about a disk going bad and taking out our entire music and/or video collection (this is why those who have put all their CDs on eBay are playing with fire... that or they have a lot of back-up). But this extra consideration is a small price to pay when you have a properly sorted server in your system... and here's why. Let's play a game of audio librarians (I don't remember playing that one when I was six years old. I was always at the top of the stairs throwing hand grenades made

out of socks at Nibby the cat, at the time better known as 'the enemy'). You and I have to seek out and load a copy of a specific recording that we just happen to both own, and it's against the clock. You have a CD collection and a player, my collection is stored on the hard disk of a music server. Here we go; tick, tock, ti... I'm done. Now let's find another recording. Oh, another win for the server. And so it goes on. Even if you had the disc and player in front of you, by the time you got said disc out of the jewel case, opened the transport, put the disc in the drawer, closed the transport, pressed play, waited for the player to read the table of contents and finally got to hear track one, I'd be well into the first chorus of a song.

But if this isn't a review, there is still a sense of focus, and its directed at Audiolab. The hitherto slightly staid

image of IAG's grey eminence is about to be shaken to the core. The new 8000DT and 8000AP owe more to the brief but significant TAG McLaren Audio days than the long years of 1980s Audiolab. Perhaps more importantly, the 8000DT and 8000AP may just form the prototype of every major hi-fi-meets-home cinema system from here on in.

The idea behind it is simple, and perhaps best left to David Patching, Marketing Director for Audiolab to explain. "We've had this idea for a while now that PC manufacturers are starting to move into home entertainment – and especially home cinema. They don't really understand how audiophiles work, the level of quality, or the level of performance that's required. And yet, a lot of the computer manufacturers have achieved an impressive level of

for you. As many of the best media server products are only sold through custom installers, this is probably the best route.

Can you do it yourself? Yes, of course... although don't expect to save any money, or make your life simple. Windows Media Centre or MediaPortal as front end? What about the ins and outs of TwonkyVision or Vibe Streamer? Driver clash... you are on your own. The whole thing sounds like a jet engine when you turn it on? The same applies.

Generally, if you are building the product yourself, it's better to start from scratch, rather



for example; a cheap PC case can cost less than £50 including power supply. A good one for a psycho gamer PC might cost £100 and the power supply might cost the same again, a quiet HTPC chassis might set you back nearer £300, the power supply could cost £150. Factor in additional noise reduction hardware and suddenly you will end up spending the same amount as you might on the Audiolab for something not as finished or as complete a solution as the 8000DT.

Of course, there is an alternative... the Apple iMac, or one of its smaller brothers, the Mac Mini. This is a more 'sorted' solution than standard off-the-shelf Dell or HP computers in audio terms, but is arguably a limit in its own right, because some of the Windows only music options are not available. Nevertheless, this has become the source component of choice for companies like AVI and its active speaker systems. Or there are complete internet-downloading solutions like Sonos... but that's something different entirely.

Whatever you choose, sooner or later, you'll outgrow your hard disk. If you are plugged into to a home network (wired or wireless), the simple and best solution is the Network Attached Storage unit, which can be as simple as the Buffalo LinkStation – essentially a hard disk and a power supply in a box – or as advanced as the Netgear ReadyNAS NV+, essentially lots of (swappable) hard disk drives and a power supply in a box. Terabytes of storage under the stairs... now we're talking!



heatsink coolers) and the ideal components (like ATI graphics cards, Creative Labs sound cards and so on). You'll need to visit deep-geek websites like Overclockers and Quiet PC, but it can be done. If you've never built your own PC, it's not that daunting to build a good one, but building a quiet good one

than modifying an existing PC design. That way you can specify a low-noise case (such as a Zalman HTPC case), specially designed products designed for quiet running (like a Xilence or Nesteq power supply, Acousti fans and Thermalright CPU

takes time and a very thorough approach.

Strangely, though, you'll find the costs rise exponentially as you begin to get specialist quiet and near-quiet components required to run the system in the living room. Take the case

▶ functionality in their products.

"So, we had this concept, of developing a bespoke, off-the-shelf Home Theatre PC that's built to the specification and performance required by audiophiles, but with the ease of use and functionality that computer manufacturers have been so good at. Where we've added value is that this is a ready-to-go package. We are going to be offering on-line support with the latest updates as well as software packages that could be added to the system, but essentially what you are buying is an off-the-shelf PC that's ready to go.

"The video card is HDMI 1.2 compliant, it can deliver very high-quality multi-channel audio or exceptionally high-quality two-channel audio, all stored via a hard drive. All of the things that many younger customers have been doing for some years, particularly if you look at the American market. That's been dominated by HTPCs for some time. At the moment, the only way to achieve that is to buy lots of products from different brands, assembling them yourself, dealing with all the software conflicts within the system – of which there are many – and basically having to go through the whole rigmarole of making it work."

The 8000DT is classed as a HTPC, in that essentially it's a PC that does Home Theatre. Beneath that bluff exterior is a fully operational Windows PC, running (for now) Windows XP Media Edition. The screens might say Audiolab, but it remains a PC, with twin disc drives and configured to accommodate memory in 500GB storage steps.

The PC market is a fast-moving stream, so Audiolab will keep the specification up-to-speed by reviewing the state of the PC-maker's art every six months. This does not mean you have to upgrade your 8000DT twice a year, merely that today's 8000DT owner will have the best possible HTPC they can own today, and the person buying one a year later will have the best possible HTPC then, too.

So, as it stands today, the 8000DT will have a pair of digital TV tuners (allowing

you to watch one Freeview channel while recording another), an HDMI-equipped ATI graphics card and the ability to handle many a HD source. That said, it's unclear as yet whether those HD sources are purely video-based, or whether it will cope with DVD-Audio or SACD. It can be connected to the internet and your own home network to act as an Audio-Video hub (Audiolab is planning net-connected client boxes with DVD players to work in other rooms and feed from the 8000DT's



server resource). Even though the 8000DT is still in final prototype form, Audiolab is already planning the second generation. This faces a potentially big hurdle, in the move from a Windows XP to a Vista-based operating system.

If you speak to US high-end videophiles (I hate that word perhaps more than 'audiophile') and 'home theater' buffs, the server or HTPC is a done deal. It was a done deal not long after HDTV began to appear over there. Perhaps this is why the impetus to flood the market with HD DVD and Blu-ray players is less than the drive to put DVD on the map a decade ago. The 8000DT and its peers demonstrate that the same thing is coming this way. Fast.

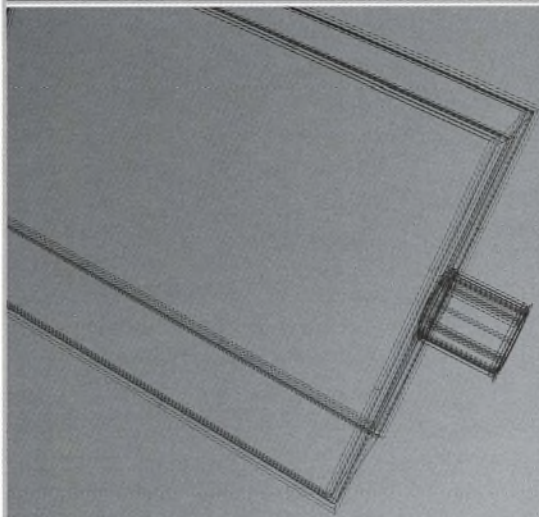
The 8000DT is designed to be wired up to Audiolab's new audio processor, the 8000AP, using HDMI. Although this processor sports HDMI inputs and outputs and Dolby and DTS processing,

it's clear this is an audio-first product – it does not touch the potentially sonically deleterious video handling side of things (HDMI aside). And it triumphs precisely where other HTPCs struggle and fail by providing no facility for passing the signal on to a decent processor or amplifier. The analogue and digital audio outputs of most HTPCs are rudimentary at best.

This brings up the first big objection to HTPC designs; the 'I can do it cheaper' argument. The Audiolab 8000DT is likely to cost somewhere around two grand. That buys a lot of PC, like a very powerful off-the-shelf Dell XPS games PC. Or, it buys you an awful lot of bling self-assembly equipment from somewhere like Overclockers. For that sort of dosh, you can get fancy liquid cooled processors, eerie blue glows from the cut-outs in their sides, all the memory you would ever need and some extremely good video components. And yes, you would get a very good performance. However, would you be able to have a silent-running PC for the money, especially one that did all the things the 8000DT potentially does so well? Will your DIY HTPC be tightly specified to serve up (groan) a consistent and thoroughly predictable set of audio and vide specifications? Ultimately, it's like the difference between a factory made car and a kit car; the kit car can be built to a very high specification, but it's still a kit car and will never have that level of assured solidity that a factory made car can have (that's me off the DAX Cobra club Christmas card list). An off-the-shelf PC is designed for different requirements than HTPC designs, and a custom-made PC is often very custom indeed. And that's before you start dealing with the software!

Although PC components live in a happy, carey-sharey world of Windows plug-n-play compatibility, the truth is that putting together a HTPC to react to sound and vision with accuracy and fidelity is very difficult. Programmes run when they shouldn't, drivers clash with programs, other drivers or even themselves if they feel like it, all things to help slow down a PC to glacial speeds; precisely what ▶

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PUTTING SOUND INTO FOCUS

▶ you don't need when using it for critical audio and audio/video work. Audiolab has discovered this the hard way... and are counting on you not wanting too in order to sell you their hard won knowledge. The 8000DT is the result of months and months of intense experimentation and implementation – all by people who know far more about this stuff than you, me or is strictly healthy. Deep, deep down, the HTPC operates like Europe; a collection of individual member states, all notionally with the same goals, but all with their own secret agendas to deal with first.

Part of the reason for this is the intended broad-base compatibility of Windows. It's designed to work with almost every peripheral ever designed; so Windows has to be flexible enough to accept not-very-robust drivers from obscure and outmoded products as well as commonplace and state-of-the-art devices. This is also one of the reason why Macolytes believe (with some justification) that Apple computers sound better – Mac software engineers work with a smaller palette of potential peripherals for each iteration of Apple's operating system, thereby not needing to be so deeply inter-compatible.

This is also the big potential stumbling block with a HTPC against a dedicated Media Server. Because of the PC part of that name, there's a temptation to introduce PC elements on the HTPC. Things like word processors and e-mail clients, web browsers and games. This should be resisted at all costs; keeping the HTPC as free as possible from non-audio or non-audio/video data is a great way to prevent it from slowing down, filling up with web caches and junk mail and just generally moving away from the HT side of things.

You have a degree of flexibility about the storage medium you can rip your discs with. FLAC (Free Lossless Audio Codec)

seems to be the most popular choice for PC users, freeing up enough space to increase the number of CDs stored on each HDD without sacrificing the musical quality in the slightest. The 'Free' bit helps, too. But, even if you stored your CDs bit-for-bit, you would still be able to hold more than 750 discs on a single 500GB drive. With the possibility of terabyte upon terabyte of NAS (network attached storage, basically powered standalone HDDs) running alongside the disks built into the 8000DT, the storage options are near limitless.

Video cuts into your storage with greater alacrity, and 10 dual-layer Blu-ray discs could easily fill up the basic half terabyte HDD, but once again, the open-ended nature of an HTPC means this is no real limit (theoretically, a Windows PC



running the FAT32 file structure cannot address a volume size larger than two terabytes; running it under NTFS extends that limit to 256 terabytes... but this is merely a ceiling for one given drive or array of HDDs. It's possible to have a string of 2TB storage arrays networked together). Ignoring video for a moment, with a single 2TB storage box hidden under the stairs and a couple of 500GB drives in the 8000DT, you have instant access to 4,500 CDs.

Loading up all these discs is easy, as the 8000DT hooks up to CDDDB on-line and downloads track and album data and it is even possible to have the cover on display. Access, as mentioned before, is super-quick (although thumbing through

thousands of titles isn't going to be a quick task), with recordings playing almost as soon as you access them.

There's another seemingly obvious issue, although it often gets totally overlooked in the evangelical pro versus anti-server debates. No more disc means no more error correction. Of course, that means the initial reading should be a good one, but the chances are the very best pass you are going to get from your CD is the first one, before all the fingermarks and scratches get in the way. What's more, the server can take several passes if it wants to, even conducting a bit-by-bit comparison before declaring itself satisfied.

Once your cherished CD or DVD has been burned, the performance you get from the digital code stored on hard disc has better timing integrity than any optical

disc you can think of. This takes a little getting used to, and rather like master tape at first it sounds remarkably bland. Just as a little bit of LP crosstalk arguably seems to make people enjoy the format all the more, so a little bit of jitter and some timing issues could make CDs sound more exciting

than they really should. But once you get used to it, and it's an effect that's common to several of the better server systems out there, the natural pacing and tonal neutrality are addictive.

There is another big area where a dedicated HTPC or music server wins over the does it all PC. If you open the back of a PC or go to a car boot fair where some vaguely dangerous looking large bald guy sells off loads of PC gear, have a look at the connections on the back of a CD-ROM drive. There are usually three sets of connectors – a power connector (big round pins) an ATAPI data bus connector (a series of small pin sockets, like someone flattened a SCART with a hammer) and a smaller bus connector about a centimetre long, typically at the far bottom left side of the back of the ▶



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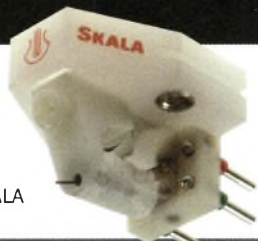
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LYRA
Connoisseur

▶ drive unit. This is the dedicated digital audio connection and it's seldom used in standard PCs because the digital audio stream can pass along the data bus connector. Here's the difference; the standard data connection arrives at the ATAPI controller (short for AT Attachment Packet Interface, with the 'AT' taken from the original IBM PC-AT design), the audio data-stream is then rerouted through the PC's motherboard to the either integrated or daughterboard sound card. If you use the smaller digital audio connector as well, the digital audio data-stream passes from the transport or storage area direct to the audio card. This is pretty much exactly how digital audio works inside any standard player that uses a CD-ROM mechanism (and if you want to make a small but substantial improvement to a PC as it stands, this little cable is one of the best ways to do it). Dedicated HTPCs offer far more direct, but also far more audio aware routing within their chassis.

Then, there's the case itself. There are an awful lot of heat-generating devices inside a modern computer and that heat needs dissipating. Some of this heat is local – the main processing and video processing chips, for example – while some is just global heat. That heat is usually removed thanks to a series of fans; on the processors, on the power supply, even in the case itself. And many fans means noise. However, there are other methods. A clever case can do two things; it can lower the noise generated from the fans that must be there (like the processor fans) and it can allow clever airflow to minimise the number of supplementary fans required.

It's more than just a cable and a case though. The whole HTPC has similar little touches that separate the dedicated from the general. Taken singly, these changes are small and incremental; taken as a front-to-back solution, the

HTPC offers a significant improvement over the home PC.

So, what's it like to use? Given this Audiolab product was a late prototype, discussing its performance with a wholly critical eye and ear might be uncalled for, but it definitely has enormous potential. One very quickly becomes acclimatised to using a keyboard for control (it's possible to drive the system with a more regular remote, too... you quickly become friends with the little Nintendo controller



navigation key to move up, down and side to side on the screen filled with disc names) and just as quickly find the use of a screen to access your discs a boon, not a stumbling block.

Anyone who's ever used an iPod will know how quick access can be and only a DJ queuing up a disc while the current one is playing is faster. The jump from recording to recording happens in less than a second. Unlike a regular PC, the Audiolab has three major bonuses. The big one is no clashes, no warning screens to ping up with big black on yellow screamers and easy to understand messages like 'the application Arglebargle.ghb has suddenly quit due to an error of type H0AA034FFFFFF'. Then, it's so well integrated into the 8000AP processor that the connection is effectively seamless, moving between stereo and multi-channel as the source code dictates and doing so in a decidedly

natural and hands-off manner. Then finally, there's the actual performance itself, which seems to be smoother and less jitter-fraught than most simple PC set-ups.

This is hardly scratching the surface of the 8000DT/AP combination. It comes into its own when video and audio co-exist in the same line-up, because you can flit from CD, to DVD to HD DVD source code in an eyeblink, both in terms of the files and the way the processor reacts to those files. It comes into its own when you start to feed these files into a network, with clients in other rooms, meaning that now you can listen to J.Lo in one room and watch her in a movie in another (if you really must). It comes into its own because the hard work of installation is already done.

But, best of all, the system is set to do all of this at a price that's lower than you might expect. We're talking potentially having change from five grand for HTPC, processor and matching 8000X7 seven by 100W/channel amp, all linked together. Throw in a set of 7.1 speakers (which another IAG brand, Wharfedale, are perfectly placed to provide) and a savvy chain of retail outlets, and you've got a one-stop home entertainment solution, ready to roll – a fact that hasn't escaped the parent company.

Is the Audiolab 8000DT the future? Based on limited exposure it certainly could be! Or at least, it should be part of where we are going. Along the way we'll be renegotiating our relationship with our disc collections, as well as moving inexorably towards music and AV system convergence. But that doesn't mean sound quality inevitably suffers. The review of a production unit (as opposed to just the concept) is on the way. The proof of this particular pudding will be in the listening, watching, streaming, storing... ➤

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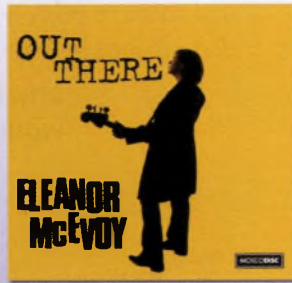
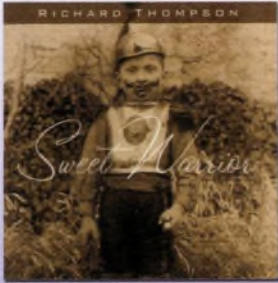
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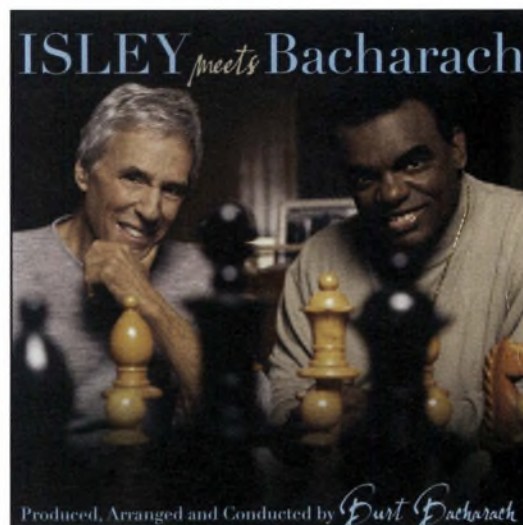
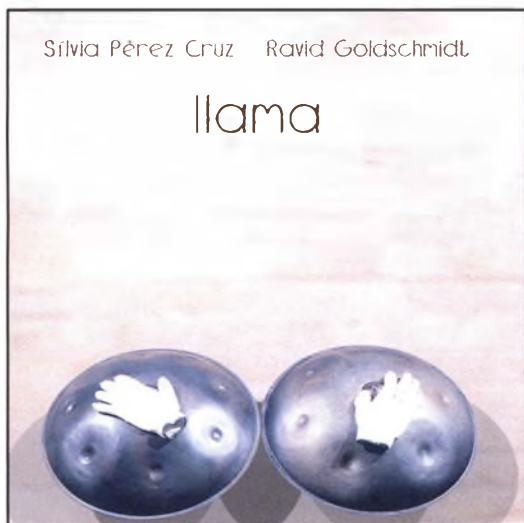
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ANKE KATHERIN BRONNER



It is always hard to name just three recordings that have influenced my life during the past 12 months. There have been a lot of great albums – mainly in niches like world music or audiophile recordings. There have been recordings that interested my intellect. There have been recordings that touched my heart and soul. But there are only a few recordings that reached out to capture me entirely – heart and mind.

It may be hard to find a good female jazz vocalist – to find a great male voice seems to be almost impossible. Imagine my surprise when I listened to *Love Is What Stays* by Mark Murphy (Verve/Universal 06025 1721090 LP; 06025 1714489 7 CD). After my first listen, the album left a melancholic impression. But after listening twice, you realise: It is optimism that prevails. A memorable album and my No. 3.

On *The Violins of Cremona: Homage to Fritz Kreisler* (fonè 003 LP 180g Vinyl [4x45rpm box]; 030 SACD Salvatore Accardo, the Italian master of Stradivari Et Co., raises a musical monument to Cremona, the cradle of violin makers. Fantastic instruments from Amati, Guarnieri and Stradivari bring the smell of rosin into your listening room – my No. 2.

Silvia Pérez Cruz and Ravid Goldschmidt, A young singer from Spain and the Hang, an incredible instrument from Switzerland have created some mystic moments in my life. *Llama* (MA Recordings M070A swept me away from the here and now – out of time, into lost cultures from long ago. I have been touched deep inside my heart and moved to tears. What could be a better proof for music? What other role should music play? Without any doubt this is my recording of the year!

CHRIS THOMAS



Here I Am by Ron Isley and Burt Bacharach (Dreamworks Records 1005-12 IN01) is an album that has been put together using an old fashioned formula. Take a truly great singer, give him some songs by one of the best and most prolific songwriters of recent times and let that man produce, arrange and conduct the sessions with a full orchestra at his disposal. It's just about as far from the "riff-based" music of today as you can get. Burt is a proper songwriter and clever arranger and Ronnie Isley fits the bill perfectly and makes the songs his own. I'm the first to admit that sometimes it strays near the middle of the road but Burt's arrangements are sparing and tasteful. At times the poise of the music is breathtakingly beautiful. I've played it to many friends and even those who don't like this type of music have gone straight out and bought it.

Shawn Lane died too young several years ago but this was one of his finest hours. *Good People In times Of Evil* (Jonas Hellborg, Shawn Lane and V. Selvaganesh Kanjeera. Bardo 040) is a Shakti-esque blast through Indian rhythms, structures and ideas and this must be just about the most demanding framework for a Western based guitar player to operate in. Hellborg has played with John McLaughlin of course, who is the master of this style of crossover. The fusion of musical influences and the intensity of the blend is what fascinates me and keeps me coming back for more.

I've always been a big fan of film music as I find that I listen to it in a different way to regular albums. From the Pedro Almodovar film, the *Talk To Her* OST composed by Alberto Iglesias (Sony Pictures Classics 36005-2) is music that encompasses a broad spectrum of vistas and influences but always comes back to the essentially Spanish essence that churns away beneath the surface throughout. Musical pictures of Spain on a CD.



RICHARD S. FOSTER



I mentioned so many positive attributes regarding *L'Archet d'Or Series 2* when we last gave out our music awards I'm almost at a loss for superlatives in discussing Series 3. I didn't think Glenn Armstrong was capable of surpassing his previous releases. It will come as no surprise for everyone who read my review in Issue 46, that *L'Archet d'Or Series 3* (Volumes IX – XII) is way ahead of the field when it comes to Recording of the Year.

Here we are exposed once again to some of the world's finest musicians. The pianos of Agnèle Bundervoët, Germaine Thyssens-Valentin and Geneviève Joy; the Loewenguth Quartet; the violin of Jeanne Gautier and the violoncello of André Levy. Musicians aside, it's always about the music, and the works here from Ravel, Fauré, Bach and Turina are sublime. Of course the other *L'Ad'O* constant is the analogue lacquer cutting of Nick Webb at Abbey Road, which is as sensitive and dynamic as ever.

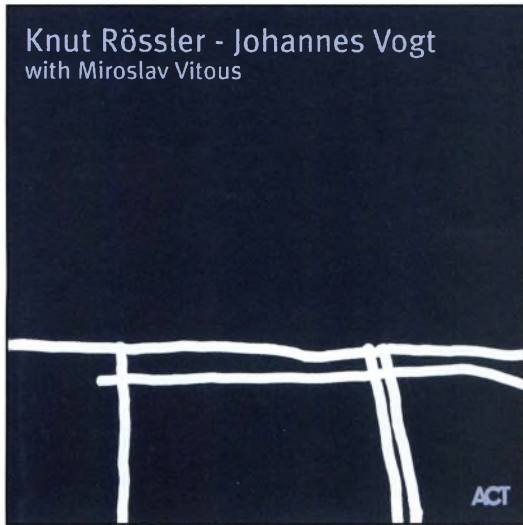
The recordings – made between 1958 and 1968 – are all issued here for the first time, and we are treated to a simply blissful selection of near mythical music making. In the connoisseur collectors market these musicians are household names, even if those with more mainstream tastes will greet them with a blank stare. The problem is that original releases by practically everyone featured on *L'Ad'O* are so rare and highly prized that they are near impossible to afford. These artists are also often overlooked by companies offering re-issue CDs, though Thyssens-Valentin has had her Mozart and many of her Fauré recordings re-issued. Needless to say those offered here have never before seen the light of day.

Every issue from *L'Archet d'Or* is important, but I feel *Series 3* sets the bar higher still than the previous issues. This is a project that needs to be supported because of the

quality of the material Armstrong has mined and hopefully will continue to release. This is the best four record set of music I own. www.coupdarchet.com

By now most of you know my penchant for Mozart. I marvel at the simplicity and yet the complexity of his music. I'm lucky enough to have explored many different performances in a variety of media but one really stands out: *Chamber Music for Winds and Strings* – Boston Symphony Chamber Players - BSO Classics 0601 (Hybrid SACD). Containing the Clarinet Quintet, Horn Quintet, Oboe Quartet and Flute Quartet, this is one of those magical SACDs offering warm, heartfelt playing accompanied by stunning sound. I've been a big fan of the BSCP since I first heard their recordings for DGG in the 1970's. While the players have changed, the quality of their playing continues to soar. The finest 'all Mozart' disc I've heard this is simply superlative. www.bso.org

One of my favorite symphonies, "*The Resurrection*" is also one of Gustav Mahler's most exciting works. While there are many great Mahlerians including Bruno Walter and Otto Klemperer, Ivan Fischer is a name to add to the short list. Fischer founded the Mahler Society in Hungary and as such, has had a long relationship with the composer and these works. The performance (with the Budapest Festival Orchestra, Hungarian Radio Choir, Lisa Milne, soprano and Birgit Remmert, alto) is near spiritual in nature and the sound quality given us by Jared Sacks (Channel Classics CCS SA 23506 Hybrid SACD) is nothing short of astonishing. Although a large scale symphonic work with soloists and chorus, the glorious tonality and inner detail means even those with smaller systems will enjoy this performance. www.channelclassics.com



DAVE DAVIES



ANDREW HOBBS



First choice has to be Knut Rossler Et Johannes Vogt with Miroslav Vitous: *Between the Times* (Act 9463-2 CD). Based loosely on 17th Century French lute music this set could have turned out too twee for words. That it emphatically avoids this fate is a tribute to the master musicians involved. With a solid (and how) grounding from Miroslav Vitous' double-bass the original tunes form a launching pad for some inspired improvisation from Rossler on soprano sax and flute, and Vogt on lute and synthesiser, with additional texture being provided throughout by Mani Neumeier on percussion. This disc brings so much to the table, the delicacy of the original tunes being so artfully expanded and the whole so well recorded that it's guaranteed to pay dividends for years to come.

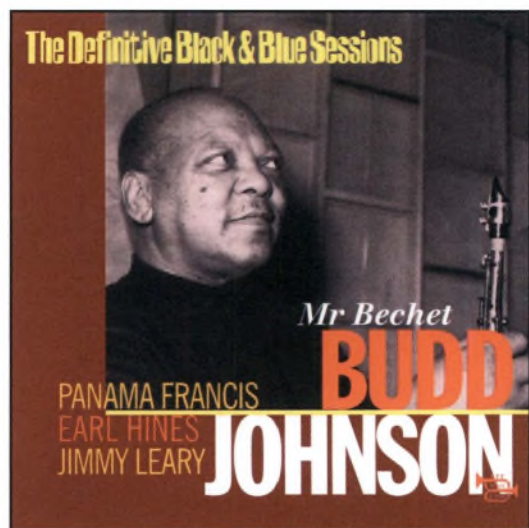
Pipped to the post is Budd Johnson Et Earl Hines: *Mr Bechet - The Definitive Block Et Blue Sessions* on Pure Pleasure PPAN 006 (180g LP). This is a fantastic album of sheer unpretentious enjoyment from these old masters. Great recording too.

Thirdly, I have to mention Kate Rusby's *Little Lights* (Pure Records PRCD07). Shame on me for missing this first time around; I only heard this 2001 release recently and it's been a near permanent fixture on my home playlist since. Her pure voice, the unpretentiousness of her delivery and the seamless quality of both the traditional and Rusby's own songs make this a truly delightful set. Now I'd better get hold of her latest album and start working backwards.

Oh God, where does one begin? Not enough space to mention everything but for starters anyone into the blues should head straight towards Tab Benoit's new album, *Power Of The Pontchatrain* on Telarc for a splendid romp through Louisiana-infused blues.

Then there's Peter Himmelman, a New York singer/songwriter with a back catalogue to die for. He's just released a new album/DVD package called *The Pidgeons Couldn't Sleep* on his own Himmasons label. I haven't heard it yet but such is my confidence I'll stick my neck out in print. Rest assured it's on the 'buy' list and a review will follow in these pages shortly.

However, the best album I've heard in the last ten years comes from an amazingly talented American by the name of Jack Savoretti. He's got a blistering voice forged from honey, bourbon and molasses, songs that linger on long after they've gone and lyrics that reach in and warm the walls of the iciest heart; all the best qualities that make this incredible artist the finest singer/songwriter since Paul Simon. The album's called *Between The Minds* (it's on the De Angelis label) and it's an absolute must for everyone's collection. Terrific live performer too; to think he's only 23 almost beggars belief. Then again, he is a very old soul...



DENNIS D. DAVIS



JASON KENNEDY



First choice goes without hesitation to Pure Pleasure's re-issue of *Mr. Bechet* on 180 gram vinyl (PPAN006). Why pick this fairly obscure title given such a wealth of choices this year? First, the sound is absolutely wonderful. Budd Johnson's tenor and soprano saxophone sound is lush, sexy and exquisite. And forget paying high prices for Earl Hines on M Et K, and listen to his piano sound on this disc. From a sonic perspective this is the best new thing to hit my turntable this year. Second, I'm a sucker for soprano sax. Third, the music swings like crazy. And finally, I'd never even seen this record before. The original Black Et Blue issue never crossed my path, but I can't believe it sounds any better than this marvelous re-issue. It's available on a Black Et Blue CD, but I'm guessing its not going to sound as good as the Pure Pleasure vinyl.

Second choice goes to Neil Young's *Massey Hall 1971*, a Reprise CD (43328-2) of material never previously released from a concert at Toronto's Massey Hall. Unlike last year's release of *Crazy Horse At The Fillmore* (also an outstanding disc), this concert was a quiet, laid-back affair. This CD sounds better than a CD has any right to sound, and there is no record I've played more this year. It was the first disc to go into my new Audio Research Reference CD7 player, and it left me slack jawed.

Third choice goes to Art Tatum and Ben Webster's *Tatum Group Masterpieces* from Analogue Productions' 45 RPM vinyl re-issue series. Great Music, Great Sound.

My Record of the Year runners up are two old-timers. Keith Jarrett - *The Carnegie Hall Concert* on ECM is a superb live recording of a remarkable musical event with incredible atmosphere and the best sound I've heard on regular CD in ages.

Stevie Ray Vaughan Et Double Trouble - *Couldn't Stand the Weather* (Epic/Pure Pleasure 2x 180g vinyl) is an audiophile classic, and Pure Pleasure's reissue of this blues/rock album reveals a recording of unprecedented resolution: the great music helps too!

But top spot goes to *The Legendary Eva Taylor - Live at the Pawnshop* (an Opus3 stereo/multi-channel SACD). This music was taped way back before digital recording, at a jazz club in Stockholm since immortalised in hi-fi lore. It features a performance by the octogenarian Eva Taylor who enjoyed her heyday five decades earlier in the company of jazz giants such as Louis Armstrong and Sidney Bechet. She is accompanied by the Maggies Blues Five which were named after Eva's husband Clarence Williams' band, made up of talented Swedish musicians who, to these ears at least, play the material with considerable authenticity and panache.

What makes this such a great sounding disc is the combination of fabulous acoustic instrumentation (only the voice is amplified), a great venue and real "you are there" ambience. The presence of Taylor undoubtedly heightened the experience for the audience and band alike, with the resulting joy coming through loud and clear on this fabulous transcription. This was recorded in 1976 but thanks to the quality of engineering and equipment (the tape recorder was a modified Sony TC-756, and was also used for the transfer to DSD via EMM Labs converters) it sounds like it could have been made 20 years later. Interestingly the multi-channel mix is in 4.1, omitting the centre channel and specifying that bass below 60Hz is allocated to the LFE or sub output.

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ROY GREGORY



Just three recordings from the last year or so: which genius thought that one up? Well, after long and careful consideration I've reached the following shortlist, bolstered by the knowledge (sly dog that I am) of choices made by others that help relieve the pressure at least a little.

My runners up:

The fabulous *Heartworn Highways* (Loose Music VJCD167) reviewed in the last issue, a musical masterpiece that truly captures the immediacy and intimacy of live acoustic performances as well as documenting the first rising ripples in the dramatic sea-change that was to engulf sequin encrusted country music.

The Speakers Corner 180g re-issue of the Dorati *Pictures...* on Mercury; for the excellence of the performance and transfer and even more for the second disc that includes the brilliant Byron Janis performance of the piano version, only previously available on CD.

But the winner is... Testament's live *Elgar Cello Concerto* (du Pre, Barbirolli and the BBCSO – SBT 1388). The original EMI recording was in a class of its own, propelled there by the emotionally charged power in the solo performance, and its contrast to the poised control of Barbirolli's deft orchestral backing – until now. This live concert recording injects added frisson and drama into an already dramatic work, with Barbirolli finding an explosive energy to match du Pre's forceful playing. Together they get quite carried away! If you thought the Elgar had nothing new to tell you, think again. This is simply captivating.

JIMMY HUGHES



A set that gave me a lot of pleasure in 2007 was the BIS cycle of Glazunov symphonies. Alexander Glazunov's *Eight symphonies* are rarely played or recorded outside Russia. Which is a pity because the music is melodic, beautifully harmonised, superbly-crafted, and well-worth taking trouble over. Although Glazunov lived until 1936, his music is firmly based in the late 19th century. Avant-Garde works like Stravinsky's *Rite* and the noisy aggressive iconoclasm of early Prokofiev passed him by completely. Yet, while his writing style was overtaken and eventually became totally outdated during his lifetime, this hardly matters now. His symphonies exude charm, elegance, and a certain something else that's harder to define. Glazunov's world is frequently a magical one; full of fantasy and imagination. Take a slice of Borodin's yearning Orientalism, spiced with Tchaikovskian opulence and a seasoned with a good measure of Rachmaninov's bitter-sweet nostalgia, and you get the picture. Even when upbeat, Glazunov's music often exudes a quiet sad melancholy. It was almost as though the composer - uncomfortable and ill at ease in later life with the huge changes that had transformed Russia during the early 20th century - sought solace and escape by writing music that reflected happier more certain times. He had a wonderful ear for sonority, and his harmonies are often surprisingly subtle. This BIS cycle with the BBC National Orchestra of Wales conducted by Tadaaki Otaka was recorded between 1999 and 2004, and reissued in 2007 in this specially priced boxed set – BIS-CD 1663/64; five CDs for the price of two. Otaka's performances are spirited, well-played, and the BIS sound is smooth and easier on the ear than earlier digital releases.

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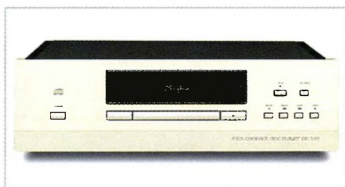
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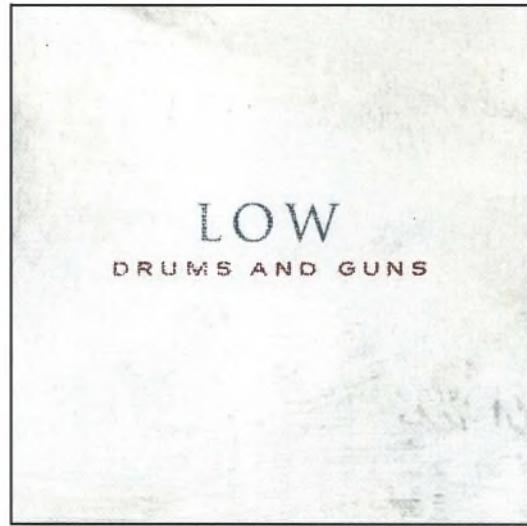
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RICHARD CLEWS



PETER DOWNARD



I dread the day when re-mastered discs are a thing of the past. Downloading something as vital as music seems positively abnormal to my nerdish sensibilities. Thank goodness then for another twelve months of excellent re-issues to keep the super-tweeters warm.

One of the year's happier SACD stories has been the Depeche Mode re-master series, and *Construction Time Again* (Mute DMCD3 / Hybrid Multi-channel SACD) stands out as my recording of the year. It contains the band's most successful blend of catchy pop and experimental 'found sound' sampling. 'Everything Counts', 'Two Minute Warning' and 'Told You So' sound ludicrously good in SACD, arguably better in the stereo mix than the new 5.1 versions (just personal preference, but I think they nailed it first time round).

With *Odes* (Universal 06025 1720633 5 / CD) Vangelis used the synthesizer to reinterpret traditional Greek melodies, with stunning results. The composer has spent the last couple of years re-mastering his back catalogue, the fruits of which will mostly be seen in 2008. *Odes* is available now in the UK on import, and if it is any indicator of the other re-issues, a lot of his fans will be seriously out of the pocket by this time next year.

The Enid's *Sheets of Blue: an Anthology* (Inner Sanctum ENID012CD) does a good job of highlighting the best moments so far in the fascinating career of Robert John Godfrey and his legendary squadron of musical aces. If you value dynamic range, true virtuosity and sweeping romantic themes, this double CD will see heavy rotation on your setup.

This has been a good year for new releases. Lucinda Williams, Bright Eyes and Wilco, among others, have released new music of high quality. For my record of the year, though, I'm going with something a little more experimental.

Low's *Drums and Guns* (Sub Pop CD/LP) is a somber, stately collection of low-key soundscapes that fuses a quiet and tuneful pop sensibility with audacious and vibrant electronic sounds. Think of the Velvet Underground's third album, or early Cowboy Junkies, infused with the spirit of Brian Eno's early Island solo albums. From left field not only aesthetically but at times politically, this is compelling work from a group with an authentic and distinctive voice.

For runners-up I'm picking two recent archival releases that speak more clearly to the sheer joy of musical performance than anything I have heard in years.

Charles Mingus' *Cornell 1964* (Blue Note CD) is a good live recording of a superb Mingus group. Mingus' moods could swing as hard as any music, but here he is consistently in a state of ecstasy. The material includes some of his greatest compositions. I don't know of any better proof of Mingus' greatness as a performing bassist.

My second alternate is a recent CD/SACD issue by Orfeo of Carlos Kleiber conducting the Bavarian State Opera Orchestra in Beethoven's *Seventh*. Many years ago Orfeo released a live Beethoven *Fourth* by Kleiber with this orchestra that came with a sleeve note by the great conductor. Kleiber, often so reticent to issue recordings, emphatically stated his delight that the performance was being released. The recent Orfeo *Seventh* is from the same concert. It is intensely inspired and a sheer delight.



REUBEN PARRY



Once again this year the musical and technical standards set across the recording formats have been very high. This is especially true among the audiophile labels. SACD continues to go from strength to strength, while the artistry and attention to detail shown in the latest vinyl releases has impressed as well. Even the mainstream behemoths like BMG and Polydor picked up the pace at mid-price with polished RCA Living Stereo classical SACD releases hailing from the Golden Age of stereo and a notable contribution to popular music with those "special edition" re-releases containing alternative takes, live cuts and improved re-mastering.

My nominees, in no particular order, are: the Bach, *Sonatas and Partitas for Solo Violin* (Pentatone Classics PTC 5186072) Julia Fischer, violin, Stevie Ray Vaughan, *Texas Flood* (Pure Pleasure Records PPAN 38734) and Eleanor McEvoy, *Out There* (Mosco MOSACD303 Et Diverse Records DIV 010 LP). Why these? Now there's a question that really deserves much more than the abbreviated answers here.

Fischer's *Sonatas and Partitas* is an exceptional SACD release. Her exquisite approach to the great man's most demanding of chamber works is nothing less than a revelation. These interpretations show incredible maturity and a profound understanding of the compositional and emotional complexities inherent in this music. Allied to an impeccable technique Fischer's genius belies her tender years. It is a performance that can comfortably stand shoulder-to-shoulder with the good and the great, be they a Milstein or a Martzy. It is immensely satisfying to find music of real substance and significance delivered in such an intuitive and empathic way by one of today's most promising of violinists. This two-disc recording should be a cornerstone of any serious Classical music collection.

If we had a category for "record label of the year" then Tony Hickmott's work at Pure Pleasure Records would take the highest accolade. His excellent series of 180g LP

releases mastered by Ray Staff and Graeme Durham have, almost without exception, resurrected musically significant moments from the recorded Jazz Et Blues canon. Outstanding examples during the past twelve months have included *Sarah Vaughan In Hi-Fi*; Booker Little, *Out Front* and Budd Johnson Et Earl Hines, *Mr Bechet*. I could have easily selected any one half a dozen brilliant re-issue LPs, but have instead chosen an album that rejuvenated blues in the early 1980s – Stevie Ray Vaughan's debut, *Texas Flood...* The album, cut over just three days, opens with excellent Vaughan originals 'Love Struck Baby' and 'Pride and Joy'. The set then motors on with the title track and a dynamic cover of Howlin' Wolf's 'Tell Me'. Stevie Ray instinctively chews over classic blues material, thematically biting off and spitting out great meaty and atmospheric chunks from the past while offering a seizure inducing instrumental excitement from the present. Expanding the release into a double album was a masterstroke as it allows for the inclusion of live tracks including 'Testify', 'Mary Had A Little Lamb' and 'Wham!'

And finally... there's Eleanor McEvoy's latest offering – the inspired and sumptuously recorded, *Out There* which offers soulful and jagged edged lyricism at its very best. The SACD was issued back in 2006, but the half-speed mastered 180g Vinyl release pressed in Germany by Pallas has been a little longer in coming because of manufacturing problems. However, stellar production and a classy recording from the Grange Studio in Norfolk is a heady mixture that's worth the wait. Whether on vinyl or SACD this is an album overflowing with insight. Eleanor's wry observations in these beautifully crafted, intelligent and mature songs not only communicates those millpond ripples in our lives, but also takes moments of pure anguish, intense pain and intimacy and offers more than a glimmer of hope where none is readily apparent. She delivers music that combines permanence and pertinence in equal measure. For her relevance, and a deep-rooted understanding of the perverse, contrary and unpredictable human condition, *Out There* takes top spot this year.



STEVE DICKINSON



My first choice is Pink Martini - *Hey Eugene* (Wrasse Records WRASS 193). The 12-piece band that is Pink Martini centres on pianist Thomas M.Lauderdale and vocalist China Forbes who share the writing credits for most of the material in their repertoire, a repertoire perhaps best described as "multi-cultural". With strong influences from Latin America, with lashings of Golden Age Hollywood and a louché, Berlin/Paris/New York nightclub vibe, Pink Martini inhabit a black and white photograph world where cigarette smoke is an essential part of the décor, not a pariah's pastime. Songs are sung in English, Spanish, French, Japanese and Arabic, with a bit of stolen Chopin thrown in for good measure. If this sounds like a recipe for over-complex, mismatched disaster, all I can ask is that you take a listen. Forbes isn't the greatest singer in the world, but she has a voice which captivates, with its own distinctive and unmistakable character whose flaws are just as much part of the appeal as the strengths. This is a refreshing, delightful listen. There's barely a second-rate track on the album and certainly no fillers. Recording ambience and quality is also top-notch. Listen, and be transported.

Second up is the Tord Gustavsen Trio with *Being There* (ECM ECM 2017). If I had to find one word to sum-up the music of TGT it would have to be, "contemplative". If you're an ECM habitué, you'll recognise the cool, calm packaging with its promise of cool, calm content. In that, you'd not be too far off the mark, the simple trio of piano, bass and drums goes long on understatement. What sets Gustavsen apart, however, is the skill with which he takes quite small amounts of musical material and moulds them into perfect, elegant miniatures. No long, rambling, self-indulgent solos or

contrived set-piece showmanship, just immaculately conceived and executed, simple jazz. Neither traditional nor self-consciously modern, this is sometimes criticised as jazz for people who think they don't like jazz, but which talks the same musical language as Evans, Corea or Ellington, just the same. This is the trio's third album, and in many ways it is the best of the three. Where the preceding couple could get a little introverted once in a while, this has enough variety to keep you listening to it all in one sitting. It's the sort of album that you put on for a particular track, then find you've listened right through to the end. If you like your jazz strident, look elsewhere; if you just want music which will lift your mood while simultaneously lowering your blood pressure, I commend it to you.

I'll make no apology for my third choice, a second disc from Pink Martini - this time *Symphonique* (Wrasse Records WRASS 143). I also make no apology for including an album recorded and released in 1999 because worldwide sales have barely reached three quarters of a million copies which is, frankly, shameful. This 12-piece band is the best thing to cross my CD player in, oh, ages. I discovered P-M through their recent third album, *Hey Eugene*, and immediately sought out their first. The opening few bars of the first track, 'Amado Mio', burst forth like a musical mission statement, and this statement says "You're gonna have a great time, tonight!" The first three tracks show the varied, positively eclectic nature of the songwriting, then along comes a curve ball you simply didn't see coming. 'Quê Sera Sera' done in a way you definitely haven't heard before, and won't hear again. Doris Day, it ain't! Buy the album, hear it for yourself, and tell me I'm not right, if you can.

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HOLLY COLE

SINGER, IRONICAL OBSERVER, DEDICATED ARTIST

Interviewed by Anke Kathrin Bronner

When one thinks about great female jazz voices names like Ella Fitzgerald, Sarah Vaughan, Billie Holliday, or Anita O'Day come to mind. But these are all names from long ago. Nowadays we seldom see (hear?) vocalists with the power, improvisational talents or deep musicality of Ella and Co. Why not? Well, it's almost as if that era died along with Ella herself, a singer who knew how to handle her voice, to interpret the pearls from the Great American Songbook in a unique way and to dedicate her life and her soul to jazz. Now it seems such abilities are out of fashion – just as jazz itself seems out of fashion – at least for the post-Ella-generation. Which makes it all the more exciting to listen to a singer who not only has the voice and the technique, but also the heart and the mind to follow in the footsteps of those legends – as Holly Cole does.

We met Holly midway through a European tour, a tour on which we'd already seen her perform twice. You soon realise that she turns on the charm off stage just as readily as she does when she's out there singing. More to the point, after several excursions into jazzy-pop or poppy-jazz it seems that the Canadian vocalist might finally be prepared to accept her natural inheritance. Maybe it's hidden more behind recordings that follow the zeitgeist, combining jazz with pop influences and easy listening, but on stage she gives proof of her artistry and the audience more than a glance into what jazz really means.

Anke Kathrin Bronner: Holly, when I saw you live in concert, I was really surprised – it seems that your recordings and your live show, it is like two different Hollies. The recordings are more for audiophiles, a sort of jazz-pop. But live you are a real jazz singer. You handle your voice like an instrument!

Holly Cole: Well, a voice is an instrument, you know. When I first started singing and decided to become a singer, it was not because I thought I would ever record. It was because I love to sing live. I love to be in front of an audience. I mean, I love to make records now, but that's a new love. An old love is to sing live. And I love the communication that happens live between the band and myself, between the band members and themselves, what I love so much is the communication

between myself and the audience. It is really not like a Miles Davis concert, if you know what I mean – as much as I admire him and respect him. He was very much like: Well, if you get it, you'll get it. I WANT people to get it, and I make a real effort for them to understand it. I need their energy, you know. And I love their energy. I'm really about the energy from the audience going back from them into me back to them. It's cathartic, it makes me a healthy person. And I'll tell you another thing: I have this thing where – especially when I play in smaller places like tonight, in a club – this is the thing I call "the face". And it's that every place I play, a face occurs. It is not male or female, and it is not black or white or anything like that. It's just a generic thing, but it has a face that tells me whether it wants to laugh, whether it wants to cry, whether it wants to be introspective. The different audiences, I mean they want many things, of course they do. But the thing is some audiences really love the dark things, some of them really love the slow things, some of them really love the sad things, some of them really love the up things, some of them really love the humour, some really love the "bebopadopda". And it really changes my perspective as I go along. And I love this. Because it is communication. Women are communicators! That's what I believe.

AKB: So, you actually change your programme whilst you are on stage?

HC: Somewhat. I don't usually. But I'm changing my attitude towards my programme, towards my set-list. I don't change my set-list that much, because it's a rollercoaster. Look, I really like the show to be a story, like telling a story. And any story has its ups and downs. So, I don't really change it that much. It is not like: Okay, let's have only ballads instead of fast songs. Like that it is not a good story. A story that has an interesting through line. And so, it isn't so much that I change the set-list, but I may change my attitude towards songs. And since we are playing jazz music and we improvise, the songs can be different things on different nights, you know, according to what the audience seems to feel.

AKB: Totally different? You mean one song can be totally different?



Biography HOLLY COLE

<p>1963: Holly Cole is born on 25 November in Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada, into a musical family.</p> <p>1980: Holly decides to spend some time with her elder brother, a gifted jazz pianist, at Boston – this changes her life as she gets into jazz music.</p> <p>1983: It is in Toronto that Holly's professional musical career starts.</p> <p>1985: The Holly Cole Trio is founded, consisting of Holly, pianist Aaron Davis and bassist David Pilitch.</p> <p>1986: The trio makes its debut on stage.</p> <p>1989: Holly signs with Alert Music – the first EP <i>Christmas Blues</i> is released – featuring a cover of '2,000 Miles' from The Pretenders.</p> <p>1990: With <i>Girl Talk</i>, the trio presents its first full album.</p> <p>1991: The second release, <i>Blame It On My Youth</i>, is presented on Blue Note Records; the album earns huge international acclaim, especially in Japan.</p> <p>1993: Johnny Cash's 'I Can See Clearly Now' (from the album: <i>Don't Smoke In Bed</i>) sees the first pop cover interpreted by Holly – a sort of a trend reversal in her repertoire.</p>	<p>1995: <i>Temptation</i>: On album number four, Holly presents a selection of Tom Waits cover versions – not performing as The Holly Cole Trio, but under her own name.</p> <p>1997: Due to the change in her style (more towards pop-jazz) on <i>Dark Dear Heart</i>, the trio is disbanded.</p> <p>1998: Holly is part of the Lilith Fair Tour with other female artists such as Sarah McLachlan, Suzanne Vega and Erykah Badu.</p> <p>2000: <i>Romantically Helpless</i> is another pop album with Paul Simon songs and cover versions from the Tin Pan Alley of the Twenties.</p> <p>2001: <i>Baby It's Cold Outside</i> is another concept album – Holly presents swinging Christmas songs.</p> <p>2003: Holly takes a step back towards her roots: <i>Shade</i> combines The Beach Boys with Cole Porter and Irving Berlin.</p> <p>2007: After almost ten years, Holly again co-operates with producer Greg Cohen – her self-titled album <i>Holly Cole</i> is a return to jazz; for the first time Holly presents one of her own compositions and it fits seamlessly between the jazz standards.</p>
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► **HC:** Surprisingly different, you know. Well, tonight for instance, I did a long improvised part with the trombone player. Last night, I did too - but that's never happened before. It is the first time it has ever happened. These two nights. Just because I felt that there was something with the audience. Partly because he's a German trombone player, and he's a brilliant musician. But five shows before this, we never did that. That's because of a relationship that developed through being here. And also, I felt like the audience tonight and last night were into the groovy songs. If they weren't, then I wouldn't have done it. So, the songs, they don't suddenly become like happy cookie eating songs when they used to be dark songs. But they can change their form. And it's jazz. That's what is so wonderful about jazz, that I can feel the audience and feel what they like and go: Okay, you would love this groove. It is improvising with the audience in a sense.

AKB: Is it the first time that you have such a big ensemble with you? And is it different for you to sing with more instrumentalists on stage?

HC: For sure it's different. But I sing in Canada and the US with a symphony. So, that's a really big ensemble.

AKB: And do you have to sing differently when in compared with the trio?

HC: Oh, it's very different than the trio, yes, of course. Because people are playing parts. With the trio there are certain parts, but they can very easily be manipulated. And the bigger the ensemble gets, the more difficult it is to improvise. Now, with a symphony, you get 85 people on stage. Improvising is just about not gonna happen. But with a band like this, it's a bigger band,

sure, but it's not a big band. It's not a "beeb bop buda-ba", it's not a big band. It's three horns. And we have certain things that are worked out, but there are also things that are manipulable. So, it is different, yes, to work with a horn section and with a bigger band like this. But when you have the right band and a band with an open minded, thinking approach and with such skill as we've got, this is the top draw of the world. And what could make a girl happier than that, you know, really!?

AKB: Are you proud of your band? And proud of being on stage with such great musicians?

HC: I'm proud of it, and I'm doing it. And I'm doing it! You know, and that's all there is to it. I mean, on the side it is great because I am selling records and I have this international career. But my dream was actually to play live. Not to record. I love recording with them, too, but to play live. 'cause live is all of what I dream: To play live with some of the best musicians in the world. And that's exactly what I'm doing. And that is my vision of success. You know, people ask me all the time: What is your dream of success? Like: When have you succeeded? How many records do you sell? Or how many whatever... And I just say: "It has nothing to do with that!" When I got into music... Both my parents are classical musicians, and my older brother is a jazz piano player. And everywhere in my family is musicians. And my dream of success is to play with some of the best musicians in the world. And that's what I'm doing. And I've achieved that. The funny thing is: since I was a kid, I always wanted to perform. Not make records, perform. And not only music, just whatever. I grew up in Nova Scotia, and my grandmother had this beautiful cottage – she is a rich woman, you know – and her cottage is like everybody's dream home. It was old, but it had antiques and all kind of like crystal ►

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► things that you shouldn't smash, whatever, like all over the place... So, I was nine, I learnt to do six cartwheels. You know what a cartwheel is? I could do it now, but it would probably be a bad idea. Okay. I learnt to do six in a row. And I was really proud.

AKB: Sure!

HC: My great uncle, my grandmother's brother, was on Broadway, he was an actor. Actually he was in the original musical *The Boy Friend* with Sandy Duncan. Oh, it's so long ago, nobody cares about it, except for the jazz singers. But anyway, it's an old, old musical that became a big, big movie in the musical time period. And he was really handsome with black hair, and he took all these vitamin and carrot pills (his was a carrot tan really). And he always wanted to stir up shit in my family, like to make somebody mad or whatever.

AKB: Well, this might be where your talent is from!

HC: Also my nasty little side (laughter). So, my uncle, he would always try to encourage me to do anything that would make anybody mad. So, I said: Uncle Leon – I am nine years old – I know how to do six cartwheels in a row, six in a row. And he goes, "Go right to the living room." He's all excited about this. And so I say, "Really?" And he goes, "Yeah! Your grandmother will love it!" (laughter) The whole point of the story is this: I'm nine years old, and my uncle Leon, the guy from Broadway with the orange tan, is telling me: "Go to it, go to it." And I said to everyone: "Sit down and be quiet!" And I said: "Now you are going to watch me do six cartwheels in a row." Through the glass and antiques and stuff... I did it, and you know, I didn't smash anything! So, I was really into performing from the beginning. Like this is the part that I remember: "Pay attention!" So, I guess I have always wanted...

AKB: ...to be the focus?

HC: To be the focus, yeah. I mean... I don't think I'm constantly going "Look at me, look at me." At least not any more – well, maybe just a part of me, I don't know. But, the time when as a child I'm going: "Sit down and be quiet! And watch me do six cartwheels while I ruin your China!" There has got to be something of the performer about that, I think.

AKB: And how would you describe your music or your performance today? Because for some people jazz means retro and "dusty".

HC: I think what I do is contemporary versions of older songs.

Some of them are not even that old... like the one that I wrote. But the one that I wrote sounds like an older song. I don't care really. I think that it isn't necessary for things to be contemporary anyway. In my opinion, my perspective on older songs is often a contemporary one that reinvents them, that suggests a subtext. Subtext is

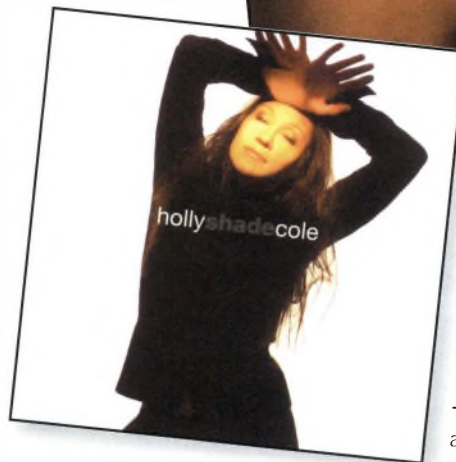
my favourite thing in the

world! I want the song to be reinvented and I want it to be reinvented in a way that means something now. So, it can be a subtext that can be explored. It can be a musical thing being explored. But it has to be something that comes from my heart. It has to be something that speaks to me very personally. Old or not – who cares? If it doesn't speak to me personally and I'm singing it, who cares about what I am singing? The point of being an artist is that you are singing and it's something you care about and

something that is striking you and something that is compelling to you and something that is emotional for you and something that means something for you. Whether it's new or old, it's got to be that, you know. And for me, most of the time it is new, even if it's old, because of my love of subtext! And because of the fact that I'm not an old-fashioned girl. YOU know that from talking to me right now. You know this. My morals are not old-fashioned. I don't believe in sexist ideals. I don't believe in racist ideals. Frankly, I'm not very conservative. So, the songs that were written a long time ago, some of which include almost in passing, racism or sexism, or gender specific issues, or they may be pretty conservative. Those aren't my morals. But I think I sing the songs in a way that challenges those notions.

AKB: A little bit ironic sometimes?

HC: A little bit ironic! But some people think irony is sarcasm. And sarcasm and irony are close, but they are not the same cigar. Some people don't understand the difference between sarcasm and irony. Sarcasm is cheap, and irony is subtle. Like I'll ►



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1989:	Christmas Blues (EP)
1990:	Girl Talk
1991:	Blame It On My Youth
1993:	Don't Smoke In Bed (200g LP: Classic Records)
1995:	Temptation (200g LP: Classic Records)
1996:	It Happened One Night (live)
1997:	Dark Dear Heart
1998:	Treasure 1989-1993
2000:	Romantically Helpless (180g LP + bonus 45rpm LP: Grooveland)
2001:	Baby It's Cold Outside
2003:	Shade
2005:	The Holly Cole Collection Vol. 1
2007:	Holly Cole (180g LP: Tradition Et Moderne)

► make ironic comments or ironic things, and they'll think it may be sarcastic. No! Sarcasm is you! (laughs) Sarcasm is cheap and easy, I think. Cheap, easy humour. And also often times nasty, like not very nice. Irony is clever, I think, funny and subtle. And interesting. And sarcasm isn't.

AKB: Sarcasm always contains a little bit of jealousy, I think.

HC: Yes! There's a good point, lady! That's a very good point! I have never thought of that before. But you are absolutely right! A little bit of jealousy! Yes, it's a little bit like your slip is showing... It's an expression like: "Oh, who are you really mad at!?" Like: "Oh, gracious me", or like: "Me thinks though dost protest too much", like in Shakespeare, you know. That's great. You are right. Who are you trying to convince, me or you, you know? No, that's really good. I absolutely am going to quote you. That sarcasm always includes a little bit of jealousy. So smart! Irony is pointing out something that is kind of funny, but also something you should think about.

AKB: How do you approach new songs? And how do you choose them?

HC: Well, this new record, I decided that I wanted to work with Greg Cohen, and he's a genius and a soul mate to me. He co-produced this record with me (he also produced my second record by himself). He plays bass on this record, and he selected the musicians and he's just a kindred spirit musically and personally. When I decided to make this record, I phoned him up. I hadn't talked to him in like ten years. And I said: "Greg, do you want to do a record together?" And he said: "Yes. But only under one condition. I don't care what kind of record it is." I didn't even tell him like what kind of record I want to make, 'cause we change our minds along the way. But he just said: "There is only one condition. I wanna challenge you." And I said: "Okay!" (laughs) And he did! So we went through all manner

of things. And I said: "I want to have a theme run through this record. I want to decide upon something thematically, lyrically, that will connect the songs." And I made a list of about maybe ten ideas, like surprise, denial, blame, or abandonment. These were all ideas that I had to make a record about, you know. And denial became the one. So, this new record is about denial. Not every song is about denial, but for the most part they are. When I looked for material, because I gleaned it from so many places, I looked for songs that dealt with denial. And then I wrote my own song that dealt with denial. But I realised it is a journey to self-discovery. I realised as I was making the record that I'm doing songs about denial all the time. And they are not maybe written about denial, but I make them into that because it is something that I'm interested in. And I think it's universal! There's no human being on earth that does not deal with the issue of denial, I think. It's completely a human condition. To what degree varies. But denial is a harsh word. Maybe self-deception is a better way to put it. Because denial sounds like: Oh, you abuse this child, or whatever. Yes, that is a kind of denial, and that is a horrific thing. But I mean like even everyday thing, even funny kinds of denial. There are funny kinds of denial that I do. Like when I was a kid. (laughs) I lived in Canada, so we had a lot of snowy days. So, my mom would come into my bedroom to wake me up for breakfast, and she would go: "Okay, Holly, it's time to get up." And I go: "Oh, mom, it's a snow day. No, the school's cancelled, it's cancelled!" Like in my sleep, in complete denial, I'm wishing it's true. But I'm not even lying, I just think it is, cause I dreamt that it's true, you know. And she goes: "No, Holly, it isn't." And that used to happen two times every week. And she got used to it... So, I mean of denial or self-deception not only in the really negative way, but in the funny ways that are keeping us alive and happy.

AKB: The album was originally entitled *This House Is Haunted*, but the actual title is now *Holly Cole*. The first thing I thought after listening to it: You just had to change it! It's so personal.

HC: (draws a deep breath) Here's what it is: The first song I picked for the record was 'This House is Haunted'. That song was really important for me, for the record, because it is a clear analogy for denial, or for... It's analogous of like "The House is Haunted" – this is the house, it's haunted. Not the house I live in, but the house I really live in, like my body, my mind, myself. This house is haunted by the echo of your last Goodbye. It is not a matter of what house I live in.

And I really love that idea. And it's not really sad. It's got some melancholy, but it's got a bit of humour. I think it's beautiful. It's a very obscure song and it's got an unusual form musically. And I almost called the album that, but with the graphics I felt it was too indicative of something that wasn't true of the record. The graphic, you know, is based completely upon Marlene. And she is one of my idols, Marlene Dietrich. She is a person that no one will forget. And she's so intelligent,

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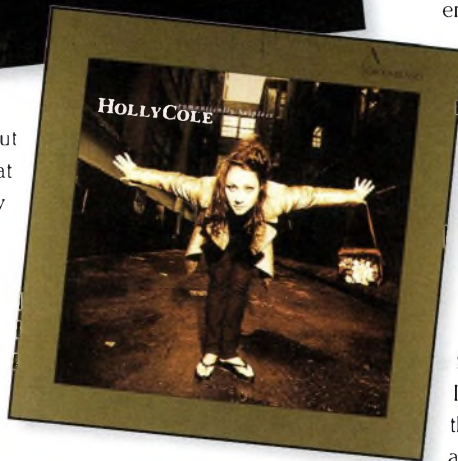
▶ and such a great actress, and not such a great singer (laughter) – but I don't care. But I can do a little impression of her, too. Okay? (starts to sing: "It's not because I couldn't...") (what follows is a stage-ready vaudeville act of Marlene Dietrich) Like I mean she's not a great singer. It's like so bored!

AKB: It's such a pity that we are a print medium and we don't have audio files for our readers!

HC: I'm so glad you won't be putting this on the internet, I beg you. I mean, I love her so much. She was a brilliant actress and a strong human being. And she's always made a big impression upon me. Even her singing, even though her singing's not that great, I don't care. Her acting and her opinions and her way of being are... She's a big influence on me. When I spoke earlier about subtext, to me the great thing is this about subtext, is that text is great... Well, subtext can't exist without text (laughs). But the subtext is all about suggestion. And that means that the listeners can take it anyway they want, you know. To their scariest place, to their happiest place, to their most romantic place, to their most erotic place, to anyway they want. Whereas text is where that person meant, subtext is suggestion, and you're like: Oh! And you go to your place, you know.

AKB: And you can adapt?

HC: Adapt, yes, and it can be very intense for you. Where I take me with my subtext, that is my place. But I'm suggesting something, and you can take it anywhere you want. And that's your place. And for each individual, my mother, my father, yourself, your husband, any individual in the audience, anyone in the band, whoever, everybody is taking it to their own interesting place. It's like watching... I'm a big film fan. And I love Alfred Hitchcock movies. These are old movies, but they depend completely on the power of suggestion. There is no violence in these movies. There is only the suggestion of violence, and psychological threats. And that means that I go to my place, and I go: "Oh my god! That's the scariest place in the world." Whereas if I see somebody's head cut off, that's just some violence that I'm seeing, somebody else's ideas.



AKB: It's often disgusting.

HC: And it's not that interesting. And I'm not going to my dark place, I'm going to their dark place, whereas if you just suggest something to me, I go to my "Oh my god" place, and everybody goes to theirs.

AKB: So, that means that in your concert and through your music, you are giving me a part of me?

HC: Yes, that is ex-act-ly right! No one's ever said that before! If I'm doing my job right, you find yourself. Because you see me finding myself and you go: "Oh God, there's me." And that's scary for people, you know. (laughs) They want to hear somebody else's world, because it's too scary to hear their own world.

AKB: Is that because they're not strong enough to go there?

HC: Yeah, they only want to be happy, happy cookie land. They only want to eat cookies, you know. They don't want to drink grappa, they want to eat cookies. (laughs) That's a good point, actually because it's the big point for me. The thing that really makes people scared or happy or sad or thrilled or whatever, they find in their own place of emotion. If I do my job right, then they find it in themselves, and it's confrontational, and that's what is scary for people: It's confrontational!

AKB: And will we hear some more songs composed by Holly Cole in the future?

HC: Coming up? Maybe. I don't know. People ask me all the time: "Why haven't you recorded your own songs before?" And I say to them: "There's a very clear reason why! And that is because I have written a stack of songs, but when you put them next to Cole Porter, or when they are next to George and Ira Gershwin, when they are next to Jerome Kern or Kurt Weill, they better be really good!" (laughs) You can't just have decent songs, they have to be really good. And this is the first song I have been really, really proud of, so that's why. But maybe, maybe the next record will be Holly Cole songs.

AKB: Thank you very much!



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



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

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

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

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Tab Benoit

Power Of The Pontchartrain

Telarc Records CD83654 

Like his label mate Jimmy Thackery, a guitarist he's shared stage and studio time with, Tab Benoit is a furiously inventive player who very rarely makes a bad album. Being a Louisiana native Benoit incorporates elements of Cajun and Zydeco in his music, but always at the forefront is his smoky toned guitar sound.

Power Of The Pontchartrain finds him working with famed Louisiana combo Leroux, a potent group of musicians who, like The Meters, manage to infuse any recording with copious quantities of southern funky soulfulness. Benoit's also reeled in legendary producer David Z, whose list of credits include Kenny Wayne Shepherd, Prince and Jonny Lang, and he's given this recording a real 70's rock feel. As I listened, what came to mind were those fabulous Doobie Brothers albums like *Stampede* and *What Were Once Vices...* not so much for the music but the great vibes found in their grooves. Benoit's a great innovator, as he shows with a sparkling cover of Stephen Stills' 'For What It's Worth', replete with changed lyrics - a barbed swipe at the powers that be for their lack of compassion towards Louisiana's less fortunate natives. Every time I hear a Benoit recording I always wonder how he's going to better it, but better it he has; in fact, I think he's just gone and made the best album of his career.

AH



Candye Kane

Guitar'd And Feathered

Ruf Records RUF1127 

For her new album Candye Kane has invited some of her favourite guitarists along to help out. Their contributions alongside her touring band help *Guitar'd and Feathered* romp along in fine, time honoured fashion, with each guest stamping their own individual style and phrasing on the thirteen tracks. First up to swing his thing is Junior Watson and he brings a real party atmosphere to 'My Country Man'. Next in line is Dave Alvin, and although not really an out and out bluesman his National Steel playing is as authentic as it gets on the old time sounds of 'Back With My Old Friends'. Sue Foley shares duties with Muddy's ex-guitarist Bob Margolin on 'When I Put The Blues On You' and the pair repeat the teaming on Guitar Slim's 'I Done Got Over It'. Yugoslav Ana Popovic throws down typically smouldering lines and one of the best performances on the sultry 'I'm Lucky' before Margolin surfaces once more, this time with Papa Chubby, the two of them rocking their little socks off on closer 'Crazy Little Thing'. Candye's kept it in the family by including her two sons; Tommy Yearsley II plays the Hammond B-3 and Evan Caleb hits the skins for all he's worth. Then there's Candye: big in stature, huge voice, talent in abundance and impossible to ignore. As always, she's the real star of the show.

AH





Erja Lytinen

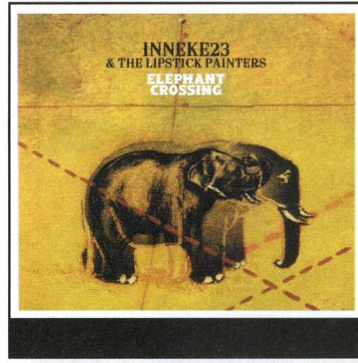
Dreamland Blues

Ruf Records RUF1114 

It doesn't matter what country we're born in, as human beings we'll go wherever it takes us to find our spiritual home. When Erja Lytinen went to Mississippi with stablemates Aynsley Lister and Ian Parker to cut the *Pilgrimage* album, the pull to go back and record again became overwhelming and unquenchable. She returned to cut this album and did it in four days using the same musicians as the ones on *Pilgrimage*. One would imagine a young lady from Finland not having much of an affinity with a bunch of hard core, down south American musicians, but the results to be found here suggest otherwise. Lytinen's often referred to as 'the Bonnie Raitt of Finland', a tag that probably has more to do with the way she plays guitar (slide heavy) than her singing voice. There is a trace of an accent but thankfully it doesn't detract too much, and her guitar work is a constant delight throughout - the girl can play! The speed with which this album was recorded has afforded it an organic feel, and the lack of studio messing about means it sounds like all blues records should sound - unforced and in the moment. Lytinen's also pretty handy with the pen; apart from a cover of Elmore James' 'It Hurts Me Too' and a Parker original, the rest are all hers. Great stuff.

AH

RECORDING 
MUSIC



Inneke 23 & The Lipstick Painters

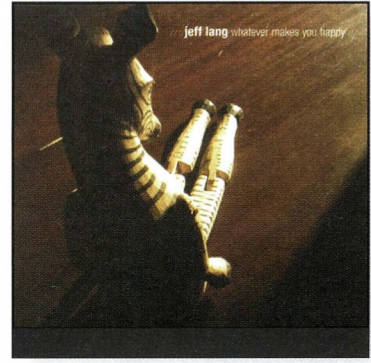
Elephant Crossing

Corazong Records 255094 

It's not every day I get to review an album by a Belgian band, especially one with a lead singer who used to play bass in a garage rock outfit and who was once a member of an all-girl punk band called Hari-Kiri! Inneke 23, for it is she, is now fronting The Lipstick Painters, a cute and quirky band specializing in americana, pop and folk. This is their second album and has enough about it to suggest that the change in direction was a smart move. Of the twelve songs, ten are penned by Ingrid Veerman (Inneke's real name) and the other two by Bob Dylan ('Oh Sister', changed from the original title 'Oh Brother') and Inneke's favourite source of inspiration, Lucinda Williams ('I Envy The Wind'). Inneke's own songs occasionally hint at the musical chameleon in her, none more so than 'Hate Song'. With tongue firmly in her cheek she sings: "this must be the most stupid song you've ever heard", and if it wasn't so damned catchy I might be inclined to agree with her. Points of reference are Lucinda Williams, Mary Gauthier, Loudon Wainwright III, The Jayhawks and to a lesser extent, Jonathan Richman. Richman gets a mention for the quirkiness factor running through this record, not because she sounds like him.


AH

RECORDING 
MUSIC



Jeff Lang

Whatever Makes You Happy

No label, number or barcode!! 

Australia provides rich pickings right across the musical spectrum. They've got great rock bands like Powderfinger (check out lead singer Bernard Fanning's fantastic solo album), inventive blues artists (Harper must be heard) and first class roots singers (Emily Barker's a divine talent). And, lest we forget, Australia gave us the greatest boogie band the world has ever seen or heard in AC/DC. Here we are with yet another gem, slide guitarist and lap steel player extraordinaire, Jeff Lang. This guy's racked up a pretty impressive back catalogue that shows off his amazing virtuosity with six strings, and his skills as a slide player come close to rivalling Ry Cooder for sheer emotional intensity. If you want to experience his gifts to the full buy a copy of *Cedar Grove*, then sit back and marvel at what one man can coax from his instrument. Alternatively, grab this new album which is chock full of cracking Americana, earthy pop, country and blues with enough high energy guitar work to satisfy the most demanding listener's ears. Honourable mention must also be given to Lang's voice, the perfect foil for his constantly inventive songs and playing. The weaving of his and Suzannah Espie's voices on the beautiful 'By Face Not Name' evokes memories of Gram and Emmylou at their most heartfelt.

AH

RECORDING 
MUSIC



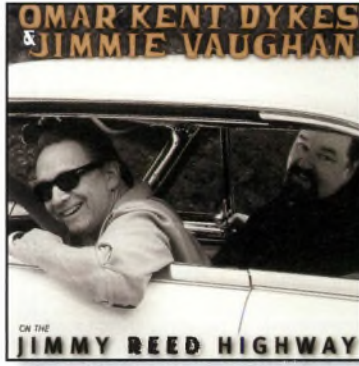
Robb Johnson & The Irregulars

All That Way For This

Irregular Records IRR066

The great thing with music is you just don't know when you're going to discover something new that pins your ears back and makes you turn the TV off. I have to confess Robb Johnson's a new name to me, but I'm rather glad this record found its way into my psyche because it's a smashing listening experience. Apparently he's pretty sought after as a writer for others, and not just in his chosen field of folk/rock. He's even had songs covered by acclaimed cabaret diva Barb Jung – how's that for diversity! Last year, Robb celebrated his 50th birthday with a live album, *Saturday Night At The Fire Station* where he collaborated with some of his favourite musicians. He's invited them back for this new studio album, and what a fine band they are too. The blending of Saskia Tomkins' violin and whoever's playing the accordian (my notes are sketchy and there's no liner information) is a constant joy to the ears, and that coupled with Johnson's beautifully written and arranged songs keep interest levels to the max. Johnson injects humour into his lyrics and on one track, the so true 'Moronland', comes across like a folkier Ian Dury as he berates the state of play in modern day England. However, if I had to make one comparison I would say Al Stewart.

AH



Omar Kent Dykes & Jimmie Vaughan

Jimmy Reed Highway

Ruf Records RUF1122

In the world of the blues Jimmy Reed occupies a slot as revered as any of the old masters. His particular brand of lazy, loping rhythms and laid back boogie shuffles have that special something guaranteed to make a dead man groove in his grave. Fellow Mississippian Omar Dykes and legendary Texan Jimmie Vaughan pay tribute to the great man with this collection of Jimmy Reed classics. Both men possess an enviable back catalogue and have considerable skills on the guitar and egos could quite easily have got in the way, so pleasing to report that that's definitely not the case here. Things get underway with the one original, 'Jimmy Reed Highway' and from the off it becomes evident that this record has the all important groove going on. Dykes' growl of a voice leaps out of the speakers, rasping away on a heady mix of Jack Daniels and too many Marlboros, whilst Vaughan adds in plenty of his trademark licks to make it an intoxicating brew. Some pretty heavyweight friends drop by to help the proceedings go with a swing. Kim Wilson and James Cotton blow most of the mean harp, Texan Lou Ann Barton's pipes grace three of the tracks and Delbert McClinton also lends a hand on the classic 'Hush Hush'. It's all very simple but so effective, and a rollicking good listen.

AH



Murcof

Cosmos

The Leaf Label BAY59

Murcof is Fernando Corona a Mexican musician whose previous outings have been in ambient electronica, usually with a beat of some form but always with something different in the mix. In *Cosmos* he has moved into less familiar waters, using recordings of acoustic instruments to produce extremely powerful and dark sonic vistas that are often truly cosmic and just as often quite terrifying; prepare to be disturbed by the warped and dirty sound on these six tracks. But don't be put off, just think *2001 a Space Odyssey* and add the grit and grime of long distance space trucking into the mix. It's not always a pretty thing but sometimes beautiful vistas open up, as in the *Close Encounters* organ riff on opener *Cuerpo Celeste*, albeit accompanied by waves of bass undercurrent. There are two beat driven numbers on here that provide a link to earlier works, *Martes* and *Remembranza* but even these are plain filthy by the standards of the Orb for instance. While the sounds here are acoustic in origin it's not always clear that this is the case, nonetheless the presence of cellos, violins and mighty organs is apparent, quite strange and beautiful in the context of this murky music. While dark, *Cosmos* makes for a great sonic landscape in the atmospherically adventurous home or automobile. It has a high specific gravity though so watch your step.

JK



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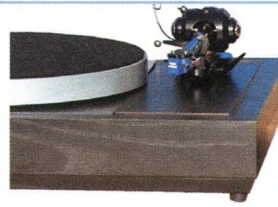
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Martin Sexton

Seeds

Kitchen Table Records KTR005

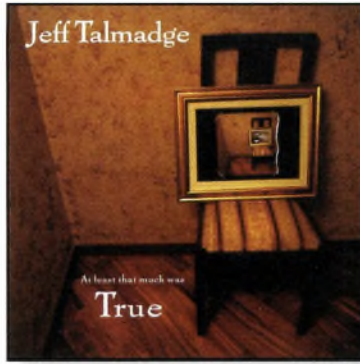
Martin Sexton once sold 20,000 copies of a home produced demo, and that was way before he ever got signed! That in itself is a phenomenal achievement, but just goes to prove if you have the talent it will shine through, no matter what.

Sexton eventually signed for Atlantic and released two fabulous albums, prompting Billboard to label him as "the finest new male singer/songwriter in recent memory".

Now a fiercely independent recording artist and much travelled live performer, Sexton continues to push out an extraordinary body of work. *Seeds* being his latest masterpiece. Containing elements of soul, funk, R'n'B (the real thing, not the dreadful chart stuff dominating our airwaves), rock and folk, *Seeds* is beautifully underpinned by a voice of majestic power, control and flexible grace. In fact, if you really want to hear a master at work take yourself off to the bonus track 'Keep It Simple', it features all manner of vocal gymnastics and goes to prove a song doesn't necessarily need a backing band to capture the imagination. Having said that, Sexton's band are a top notch bunch who really know how to make a song swing and breathe, their input is always just what is needed and impeccably delivered.

Chuck in a beautifully organic production job and what you have is a record pretty damned close to perfection

AH



Jeff Talmadge

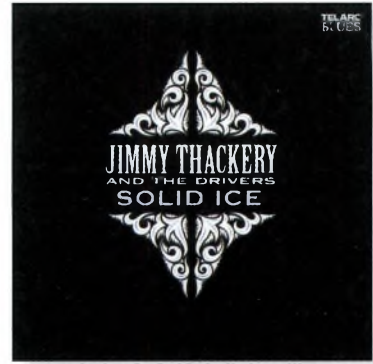
At Least That Much Was True

Corazong Records 255096

Just because an artist is deemed to be 'the darling of the press' it doesn't automatically mean they're any good. I've lost count of the number of times I've bought an album by 'the next big thing' only to scratch my head in bewilderment.

Jeff Talmadge has been receiving great press since the release of his debut *Secret Anniversaries* in 1999; fortunately he has the talent to back up the kind things people say about him. An easy going singer in the same mould as fellow Texans Townes Van Zandt and Guy Clark, Talmadge also shares their storytelling way with a song. With a whole host of great Lonestar musicians at his disposal, including the wonderful Lloyd Maines on Dobro and Steel, Talmadge weaves his own inspired fingerpicking style around the rich imagery of his lyrics. 'Wrong Train', a true story about - you've guessed it - getting on the wrong train, is a classic example of all that is good and great about this Texan troubadour. He's much better when he stays with his own material but can't resist a bash at Dylan's 'Girl From The North Country'. It's a bit fruitless really, as it adds nothing of any real note to the original. Talmadge is best experienced after a hard day at the office and hey, we've all had one of those.

AH



Jimmy Thackery

Solid Ice

Telarc Records CD83661

For 14-years Jimmy Thackery was the guitar heartbeat of Washington DC combo, the Nighthawks. Renowned for their gruelling touring schedule, The Nighthawks gained massive respect amongst their peers and fan base, not least for Thackery's wildly inventive guitar playing. Since leaving the band Thackery's carved a name for himself as a solo artist of considerable imagination and diversity, as this new album proves. Taking a six-month hiatus from the road Thackery recorded *Solid Ice* in an unhurried atmosphere, but if you think that makes it elevator music - think again. No sir, this is a guitarist more than capable of ripping it up with the best of them, as he proves with the 70's riff rocking 'How Long' and the explosive opener 'Hit The Big Time', which contains one of those solos you wish would carry on just that little bit longer.

Diversity can be a great distraction but the beauty of Thackery is he's just as comfortable with a jazzy instrumental or a country-infused ballad as he is with rocking blues or bluesy rock. 'Blue Tears' is one such ballad, a real tearjerker that brings out a great vocal performance too. Throw in a sympathetic reading of Jimi Hendrix' 'Who Knows' alongside the brilliant originals and you've got yourself yet another great Thackery album.

Air guitarists have your broomsticks and tennis rackets at the ready.

AH



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Jinder

I'm Alive

Folkwit Records F0011

The term 'Americana' covers a vast spectrum but is generally considered sole ownership of one country - America. Well, ladies and gentleman, let me introduce you to a young man who is about to prove that theory well and truly wrong. His name is Jinder and he hails from the south; not Nashville, Texas or Georgia but Bournemouth in Dorset, England. Jinder's first album, a folky low-key affair with more than a twist of Townes Van Zandt about it certainly showed a lot of promise, but this...well, this deserves to place him shoulder to shoulder alongside the greats: the Steve Earles, the Van Zandts, Terry Allen, Guy Clark, Tom Petty - pretty much any American you care to mention who knows how to write a killer song. Jinder is not only blessed with great writing skills but a great voice too. Witness the sheer power he rustles up on the traditional 'In My Time Of Dying', he fills it full of pain and suffering but at the same time somehow manages to make it sound incredibly uplifting. It's totally pointless trying to pick a favourite because all twelve songs have something magical about them and hang together beautifully on the strength of this young man's majestic talents. If he keeps this standard up Jinder's going to be huge. Make no mistake, this kid's got what it takes.

AH



Joan Armatrading

Into The Blues

Hypertension Records HYP7255

Joan Armatrading has always been something of an enigma; a fiercely private individual but an artist able to connect with millions through her intense skills as a songwriter. Who can forget her most famous composition, the haunting 'Love And Affection'? She's no one trick pony though, her back catalogue is as revered as any of her contemporaries, and just to prove she's not an artist to stand still this album finds her stepping into the blues for the first time. It suits her too, but because of who she is and how she writes it was never going to be a straightforward wander into the genre, Lyrics have always played a major role for Joan, and they come to the fore once again here. She's even talking about 'taking her clothes off when her baby sings the blues', regardless of the fact he has 'ears like handle bars' and 'pimples on the cheek'. Time hasn't diminished her highly distinctive voice either; it's in fabulous condition throughout and never better than on 'Secular Songs', a track more reminiscent of her early work. Apart from employing Miles Bould to handle the drum parts, all other instruments and backing vocals are handled by Joan, and she also handled the excellent production. The blues suits her, she should hang around it a while longer and see where it takes her.

AH



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The Art Tatum – Ben Webster Quartet

Verve/Pablo/Analogue Productions 2310-737



Re-issued here on two thick slabs of 45 RPM vinyl is true desert island fare. Originally issued as Verve MGV-8220 and much later as Pablo 2310-737, this 1956 session matches two jazz giants whose different styles would not at first thought seem sympathetic, but Tatum's florid style and Webster's lush, deliberate melodic lines fit together like butter and jam. Musically speaking, it doesn't get much better than this. Webster carries the day with his lush sound and Tatum carries Webster on starlight. To top it off, the recording is near perfection in big, full, mono sound. As good as original pressings sound, this re-issue goes to the head of the class and Kevin Gray and Steve Hoffman again deserve kudos for an outstanding mastering and cutting job. While expensive, this issue costs a third of what an original copy would cost you in near mint shape, and this one is available new. Why this issue was not released until the fourth set of Analogue Productions "Top 100 Jazz" re-issues remains a mystery. Unfortunately, the set is released in the Pablo cover instead of the much more elegant Verve cover, and bears stereo labels. Fear not, this is not the electronic stereo version, but a true mono release. Essential.

DDD

RECORDING
MUSIC



Helge Sunde Norske Store Orkester

Denada

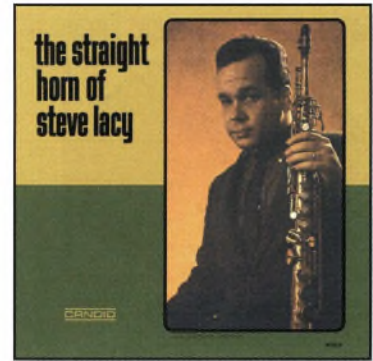
ACT ACTSACD 9805-2



This is a record of what can only be described as contemporary big band music that owes its roots to Duke Ellington's more left-field productions yet which is very much 21st century in content. Two musicians are given headline credit alongside composer and horn player Sunde: Marilyn Mazur on percussion and Olga Konkova who gets to play the only solo number on her piano. This album has phenomenal dynamics, a result of wide bandwidth, wide dynamic range and high-energy instruments. The mood varies but the best tracks have a vitality and realism that will literally get the joint jumping if your system has enough power and extension at the frequency extremes. Fortunately this sonic quality is allied to musical quality thanks to the writing skills of the Norwegian at the helm. As a rule I struggle with music that is high on brass content but Sunde uses the tonal colours of his band in such a way that it works. He also produces plenty of variety across the album so that only a couple of tracks are brass extravaganzas, while elsewhere these instruments are just one part of the mix. The 24bit/96kHz original recording was made at the Rainbow Studio, Oslo by Jan Erik Kongshaug using Dynaudio monitoring and a Harrison analogue mixer resulting in an album of great music with great sound and one that's definitely off the beaten track.

JK

RECORDING
MUSIC



Steve Lacy

The Straight Horn of Steve Lacy

Candid/Pure Pleasure 9007

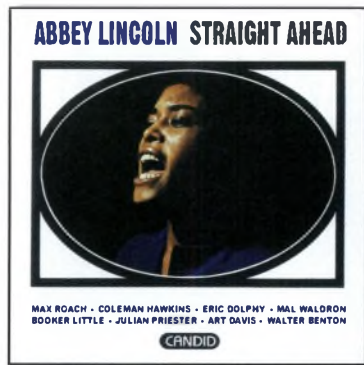


Steve Lacy, one of the all-time top jazz soprano players, has recorded dozens of albums, and this is one of his best. Propelled forward by Roy Haynes' insistent percussive drive, Lacy's imaginative explorations of the "straight horn" in this 1960 session keeps the listener on the edge of his listening chair, wondering what Lacy will do next. Lacy has always been fascinated by Thelonious Monk, and here he is accompanied by two Monk sidemen (Charles Davis and John Ore) and half the numbers on the album are Monk compositions. If you like soprano sax, avant-garde jazz, or any type of edgy imaginative music, you either know this album already or you need to. For those new to Lacy, this is a good place to start before going on to some of his incredible duet recordings from later decades. There is not a mediocre record in the Candid 1960's catalog from either a musical or sound recording standpoint, and this stereo re-issue is up to Pure Pleasure's usual high standards. The record presents a fairly compact stereo image that works well for this music. The rhythm section is particularly well captured. The re-issue, mastered by Graeme Durham at The Exchange and pressed by Pallas, surpasses the quality of the Candid original, which is saying a lot indeed.

DDD

RECORDING
MUSIC





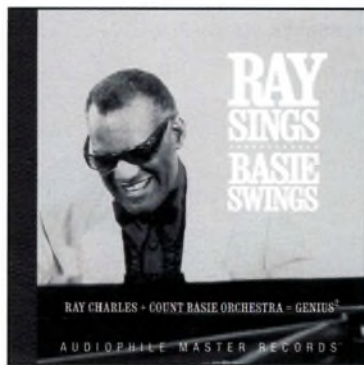
Abbey Lincoln

Straight Ahead

Candid CCD 79015

Stellar would be an **understatement** for the backing musicians here since the band includes the likes of Eric Dolphy, Coleman Hawkins, and Abbey Lincoln's sometime husband Max Roach. Following her great work of a year earlier in Roach's *We Insist! Freedom Now Suite* (also available from Candid and an essential purchase), this features pretty much the same band, her vocals here as in that album have a similarly declamatory and slightly strident edge. It all works superbly though, the warmth and fluidity of the accompanying playing, and the convincing way that Lincoln can get a lyric across (once you've become accustomed to her style), makes for a deeply satisfying experience. There's not a weak track here but particularly enjoyable are 'Blue Monk' with the addition of Lincoln's own lyrics and some neat muted trumpet behind her voice from Booker Little, before Hawkins delivers a great solo. 'Left Alone' with Billie Holiday's lyrics and Mal Waldron's melody sees Lincoln taking a slightly more melodic approach with more than a hint of Holiday's own style in her reading, with a haunting and absolutely beautiful solo from Hawkins, this number becomes a particularly bright gem in this jewel box of a set. Also available in a superb vinyl pressing from Pure Pleasure, I wouldn't want to be without either version.

DD



Ray Charles and the Count Basie Orchestra

Ray Sings-Basie Swings

Concord/Pure Audiophile Records PA 012-(2)

At first I was put off by the idea. Tapes were discovered of Ray Charles singing with the Basie Orchestra in 1973, but the quality of the orchestral recording was terrible, so the producer commissioned new orchestral recordings of the current Basie Orchestra. Frankenstein music, I thought to myself. But then I listened to the discs and was captivated, because it really works. This was not the first such collaboration. Charles' 1961 Impulse! release *Genius + Soul = Jazz* involved the same forces, but here a handicap was thrown in the mix. Ray sang his parts in 1973. The band recorded its parts in 2006, mastered by legend Doug Sax. This double vinyl album release was half-speed mastered by Stan Ricker, and like all Pure Audiophile Records releases is beautifully packaged and pressed. The vinyl is worlds better than the CD release and is some of the best sounding Ray Charles you are likely to hear. Thirteen tunes are well spaced over four sides of vinyl. The discs also have a new innovation of Stan Ricker's design – what he calls a "stopped groove" which arrests the travel of the stylus before it speeds towards the label. A fun record easily recommended.

DDD



Mark Soskin

One Hopeful Day

Kind of Blue 10019

Hitherto lacking recognition as a leader, Soskin has certainly earned his top billing here. With 11 years backing Sonny Rollins along with performing and recording with the likes of Joe Henderson, Billy Cobham, Randy Brecker and Stanley Turrentine, his expertise is more than proven. Backed here by a fine quartet comprising John Abercrombie (guitar), Chris Potter (sax), John Patitucci (bass), and Bill Stewart (drums), the album launches with a sprightly version of 'On the Street Where You Live', Soskin's deceptively gentle intro lulling you before Stewart's drums kick in and Potter's sax introduces the melody. Better yet this is followed by an excellent version of Monk's 'Bemsha Swing' powerfully driven by the rhythm section, including particularly fine bass from Stewart. Chick Corea's 'Innerspace' gives Patitucci an opportunity to stretch out and he delivers a great solo followed by an equally fluid performance from Soskin. Amid a strong selection of numbers Soskin contributes three of his own compositions to the set including the gentle, reflective title number and 'Step Lively' a tune that greatly benefits from the added texture of Abercrombie's guitar and is for me the standout number from this strong album. With a warm, full-bodied recording this is a great showcase for Soskin's undoubted ability as a leader and for this very fine band.

DD



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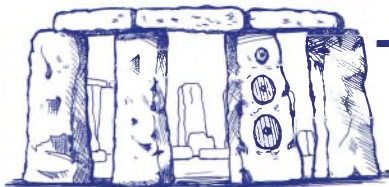
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The History Man...

by Richard S. Foster

EMI Classical Records, The amazing legacy...

It began quietly sometime in 1959 when EMI released their first stereophonic classical records. But, within a period of less than 20 years, EMI would create one of the finest catalogues of classical music in the World. Not only were they able to release the essential building blocks of any classical library – Bach, Beethoven, Brahms, Chopin, Haydn, Handel, Liszt, Mozart, etc., they were committed to offering outstanding performances from the great modern English composers – Sir Benjamin Britten, Frederick Delius, Sir Edward Elgar, Gustav Holst, Sir William Walton and Ralph Vaughan Williams. So comprehensive was this coverage that it stands almost alone as a separate block within the catalogue, and it's here that I shall start...

Conductors like Sir Thomas Beecham would champion Delius; Sir Adrian Boult produced a great body of Elgar works as well as his legendary performances of the music composed by Vaughan Williams; Sir John Barbirolli would create some of the finest performances of Delius, Elgar and Vaughan William compositions. Let's also not forget the wonderful chorale works of RVW under the guidance of Sir David Willcocks. Sir Malcolm Sargent would offer up some tantalizing discs containing works by Arthur Bliss, Britten and Delius. While these conductors are some of the great champions of English composers, let's not forget the significant contributions to the catalogue made by Norman del Mar and Sir Charles Groves; for those into minutiae, there is even a fabulous disc by Andre Previn containing works by Sir Benjamin Britten to stand beside the RVW symphonies he recorded for rival label RCA! There are others as well, but these names constitute the core contributors to what has become known amongst collectors as EMI's English music series.

No serious discussion of these recordings can ignore the central role of Elgar and Vaughan Williams, twin pillars at the centre of proceedings, yet vastly different musicians and composers in person.

Elgar was extremely conscious of his popularity and often

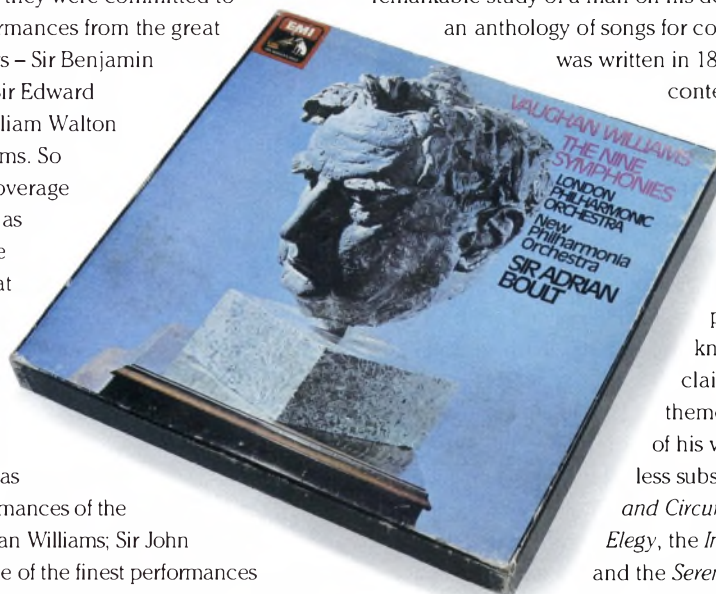
played to the public's sentiments. As well as Symphonies and the more regular parts of the classical repertoire he wrote a number of oratorios and works for chorus and orchestra. These include *The Apostles*, *The Kingdom*, and the cantata *Caractacus*. But the most significant is *The Dream of Gerontius*, with words by Cardinal Newman, a remarkable study of a man on his deathbed. *Sea Pictures*, an anthology of songs for contralto and orchestra, was written in 1899 and was a huge contemporary success.

The Enigma Variations, with its unnamed portraits of the composer's friends and its unsolved musical puzzle, in the well-known melody that Elgar claimed would go with the theme itself, is one of the best of his works. More familiar, if less substantial, are the *Pomp and Circumstance Marches*. The *Elegy*, the *Introduction and Allegro* and the *Serenade*, all for string orchestra, offer music of the highest quality. But the *Cello Concerto*, written

in 1919, is perhaps the best known and loved of all Elgar's works, especially as played by Jacqueline Du Pre, perhaps the most famous of all EMI's many recordings.

Ralph Vaughan Williams was a far more reserved but no less intense character than Elgar. He wrote nine symphonies, the first of these with solo singers, chorus and orchestra *A Sea Symphony*, with words taken from Walt Whitman, the second a "*London*" *Symphony* and the third a "*Pastoral*" *Symphony*. The *Sixth Symphony*, completed in its first version in 1947, seemed to break new ground and was followed by a seventh, the incredibly atmospheric *Sinfonia Antartica*, that had its origins in a film soundtrack.

His Compositions for solo instrument and orchestra include the pastoral romance *The Lark Ascending*, for solo violin, and a *Concerto Accademico* for solo violin and string orchestra as well as concerti for a host of other instruments, including brass. ▶



▶ Vaughan Williams made direct use of folk-song in his three *Norfolk Rhapsodies*, his *Fantasia on Greensleeves* and his *English Folksong Suite* for military band. His *Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis* for two string orchestras takes its musical inspiration from the 16th century.

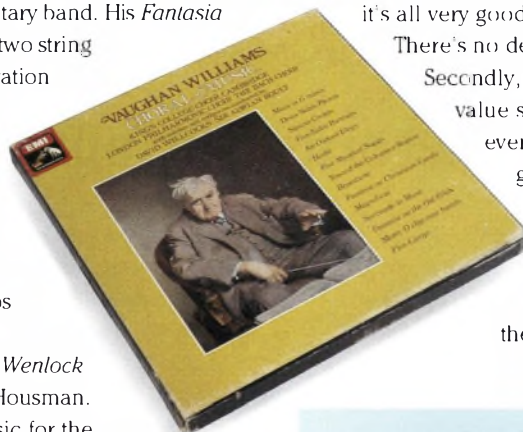
RVW made a substantial contribution to the English choral and vocal repertoire, including the *Serenade to Music*, completed in 1938. Other compositions range from oratorios to hymn tunes, from folk-song arrangement to the evocative *On Wenlock Edge*, a setting of poems by A.E. Housman.

He also wrote incidental music for the stage, including the Shakespearean opera *Sir John in Love* (based on *The Merry Wives of Windsor*) and *Job*, a masque for dancing, as well as many film soundtracks.

Once you begin to realize the breadth of creative output from just these two masters of English composition, you begin to fathom just what a great job EMI did in bringing these works as well as those of other English composers, to the public. It was a truly monumental task. Simply peruse the catalogue or sales lists and fascinating, collectible and recommendable albums leap out at you. Even so, there are certain key recordings or box sets that should sit at the heart of any EMI collection. I've listed some of these works, in no particular order, in the sidebar, so if you are starting from scratch these are the ones for which to keep your eyes peeled.

I wouldn't worry about pressing vintages when you first begin, partly because these records cover such a long time span in both recording and catalogue terms. So, the earliest labels don't always exist, and EMI's quality was consistent enough that even later pressings tend to be pretty good. You know by

now if you like the music; it's only going to sound better in an earlier pressing. The great news is that these records were so popular that supplies are plentiful and many of these records are available at second hand shops for not much money, so you won't get fleeced by dealers.



There are two final points that I should make. Do not be afraid of the vocal music that I've included; it's all very good and surprisingly accessible.

There's no denying that Elgar loved a tune!

Secondly, the box-sets offer particularly good value simply because not everyone played every record, so the condition will generally be good and in many cases mint – and prices are often lower.

As you can see from the photos, EMI's boxes didn't survive as well as some, but that's no reflection on the records inside. ➤

Box Sets

SLS 822 Vaughan Williams Symphonies
Sir Adrian Boult, LPO and NPO

SLS 939 Elgar's *The Kingdom* w/ Sir Adrian Boult and the London Philharmonic (with Margaret Price, Yvonne Minton, John Shirley-Quirk, LPO Choir)

SLS 987 Elgar's *The Dream of Gerontius* w/ Sir Adrian Boult and the New Philharmonia Orchestra (with Helen Watts, Nicolai Gedda, John Aldis Choir, LPO Choir)

SLS 5082 Vaughan Williams Choral Music

David Willcocks and Sir Adrian Boult, LPO

The Kings College Choir, Cambridge and The Bach Choir

Individual Albums

ASD 357 *The Music of Frederick Delius* conducted by Sir Thomas Beecham and the RPO

ASD 443 *English Ballet Music* w/ Sir Malcolm Sargent

ASD 521 *English String Music* w/ Sir John Barbirolli

ASD 644 *Delius Violoncello concerto* w/ Jacqueline Du Pre, Sir Malcolm Sargent conducting the RPO

ASD 655 *Elgar Violoncello concerto* w/ Jacqueline Du Pre, Sir John Barbirolli conducting the LSO (also includes the fabulous *Sea Pictures* song cycle w/ Dame Janet Baker, mezzo-soprano)

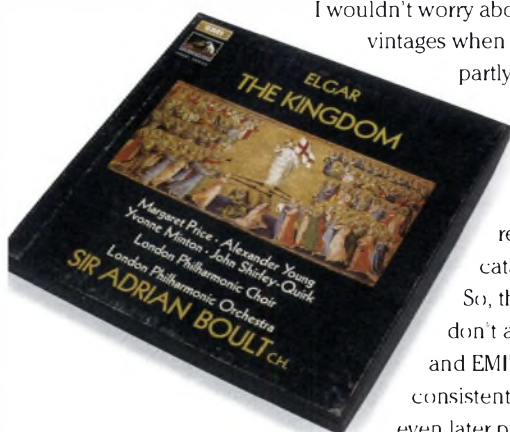
ASD 2259 *Elgar Violin concerto* w/ Sir Yehudi Menuhin Et Sir Adrian Boult conducting the Philharmonia Orchestra

ASD 3154 *Britten's Four Sea Interludes* w/ Andre Previn

ASD 3190 *Frank Bridge: The Sea* w/ Sir Charles Groves and the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra

ASD 3317 *Walton's Façade Suite* w/ Louis Fremaux conducting the CBSO

ASD 3483 *Britten Et Walton Violin Concertos* w/ Paavo Berglund and the Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra w/ Ida Haendel, violin



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Charles-Valentin Alkan
Concerto for solo piano &
Troisième recueil de chants.

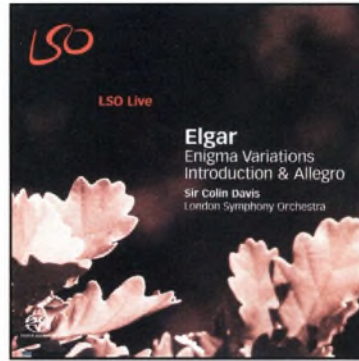
Marc-André Hamelin

Hyperion CDA 67569 

Think about the title of the main work, *Concerto for solo piano*, and it sends your brain a mixed message. But Alkan's composition will change your mind and Hamelin's performance and Hyperion's wonderful sound will have you totally mesmerised. It's a complex work which gives the listener insight into the stunning skills of both the composer, and those who dare to play his music. Hamelin is a champion here and I just can't get enough of his ingenious shadings and tonal blending. In the score for this work, the first movement is an epic 72 pages in length, 1343 bars, making it longer than Beethoven's entire 'Hammerklavier' sonata. I am sure many are not familiar with these works but I do urge you to expand your horizons. Do so and you will be enchanted by the superb music on this disc. (For those interested in vinyl, there are three individual LPs and one box set of works by Charles-Valentin Alkan on EMI, performed by the great Ronald Smith. Some have been re-mastered for digital and are available now on compact disc.) The performances presented here are exciting, the Steinway's big, complex and sound perfectly captured, as is Hamelin's superb artistry. Top recommendation.

Supplier: www.hyperion-records.co.uk

RSF



Elgar
Enigma Variations; Introduction
and Allegro.

Sir Colin Davis, LSO

LSO Live-LSO 0609 

While these live performances were given 'rave' reviews in the UK by the major print media, you can now enjoy the experience in your own home. *The Enigma Variations* were composed between 1898 and '99. The liner notes are extensive and for anyone even slightly familiar with Elgar, the most famous of these variations is of course, 'Nimrod' (variation IX, a portrait of Elgar's close friend, A. J. Jaeger). This is an immensely popular work and has had many champions, with favourite performances from conductors including Barbirolli, Boult, Monteux and even Davis himself with the RPO on Lyrita, but I consider this current Davis recording worthy of similar respect. There is a lushness and rich harmonic structure built into the fabric of this work and this is the first time, in the digital domain, I've felt completely satisfied.

Fascinating to note that the exhilarating and exciting *Introduction and Allegro for Strings*, was written for the London Symphony Orchestra in 1905. The LSO strings are at their best and I think this is another outstanding performance. The CD layer is outstanding, but bettered by the SACD layer. Highest recommendation.


Supplier: www.iso.co.uk

RSF



Franz Liszt
Totentanz, Piano Concerto No. 1,
Piano Concerto No. 2

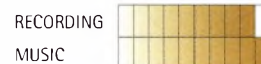
Cohen, São Paulo S.O. Neschling

Bis-SACD-1530 

In 1847, Franz Liszt stopped giving public performances and moved to Weimar, Germany at the invitation of the Grand Duchess Maria Pavlovna of Russia. During an extremely productive period Liszt completed *Totentanz* (Dance of Death) in 1849. This is a fabulous, electrifying tour-de-force for piano and orchestra. There have been many great Liszt interpreters (Claudio Arrau is one to explore). Arnaldo Cohen, a Brazilian born virtuoso, currently resides in the United States, where "As a former professional violinist, teacher of physics, mathematics, cocktail pianist, and avid soccer fan, Mr. Cohen's unconventional background contributed to the aura of surprise and discovery that attended virtually every one of his public performances..." One of the qualities I admire in these performances is the cohesive relationship between soloist and orchestra. Sometimes, as with say the great Richter/Kondrashin collaboration on the piano concertos, Richter seems to run the show. Here both are perfectly synchronized and the result is fabulous music making. No doubt about the excellent sound quality here and absolutely no doubt that Cohen is playing a Steinway D. The CD sound is excellent but again it's bettered by the DSD layer. This is a thoroughly enjoyable and highly recommended disc for your library.

Supplier: www.bis.se

RSF





**Sibelius
Complete Symphonies, Finlandia,
Violin Concerto**

**Segerstam cond. Helsinki P.O.
Polytech Choir, Kuusisto, violin.**

Ondine ODE 1075-20

I'm sure every reader who loves classical music has his or her favourite performance of one or another of Jean Sibelius' seven symphonies. Conductors including Von Karajan, Barbirolli, Dorati, Berglund, Maazel, Gibson, Szell, Davis and even Monteux have given us complete or partial cycles of these fantastic and evocative symphonies. You can pick and chose and are sure to find several that will please, until now, I'd never heard a complete cycle by one conductor that I felt really captured Sibelius for me. Well, with these compact discs, that has now changed. Over the past five years, Segerstam and the Helsinki Philharmonic have been recording these works for Ondine, previously releasing them, with other couplings, on four separate compact discs. They have now all been repackaged in a small box that includes Pekka Kussisto's beautifully considered performance of the most challenging of all Violin Concertos. But what makes it even more enticing is that the complete set is offered at mid-price.

Segerstam is a conductor I've long admired

and although I've only been exposed to a small portion of his work, this set clinches the deal for me, compelling me to explore him in greater detail. An accomplished musician, he received diplomas from the Sibelius Academy in both the violin and conducting. He won the Maj Lind Piano Competition in 1962 and gave his first violin recital in 1963. He went on to complete his studies at the Juilliard School in New York, where he was awarded a conducting diploma in 1964. He has been a resident or visiting conductor at many of the world's greatest opera houses and Chief Conductor of the Helsinki Philharmonic Orchestra since 1995.

Right from the opening notes of the first symphony, Segerstam brings new colour to these distinctive melodies, enticing deeper and deeper into the fabric of the compositions. As you delve further into Sibelius's work: it's like hearing each symphony anew. These are exciting, yet heartfelt performances filled with magic and painted with a lush, sweeping brush, fleshing out the broad musical panoramas that make these symphonies so powerful. With sound to match the quality of the performances I cannot recommend this set more strongly.

Supplier: www.ondine.net

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**Dvořák
Symphony No. 8, The Wild Dove,
The Noon Witch**

Kreizberg cond. Netherlands P.O.

Pentatone PTC 5186 065

The great Czech romantic composer wrote this symphony in 1889. While not an immediate success, this has turned out to be one of Dvořák's most popular symphonies. The character and flavour of Czech folklore abounds, and this is now considered one of the composer's most popular compositions. I too, feel this an exciting symphony and in the hands of Kreizberg and his Netherlands Philharmonic, coupled with outstanding sound quality, makes for a very enthusiastic thirty-seven and a half minute reading. *The Afternoon Witch* is a ghostly entity employed in folk tales to scare naughty children, *The Wood Dove* tells of a beautiful young woman, who poisons her husband and, shortly afterwards, marries a young man, at least so say the liner notes. Kreizberg is one of the great current conductors and can be favourably compared to the greats of yesteryear. If you've heard performances by Fricsay, Monteux, Karajan and even Reiner, you're going to be very happy to hear what Kreizberg does with this music. The bonus of the two symphonic poems, round out this 72+ minute disc. The CD layer offers exceptional sound but as anticipated, the disc really shines during SACD playback. There's great music on this disc and with performances and sound quality not to be missed, it is highly recommended.

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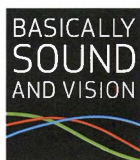


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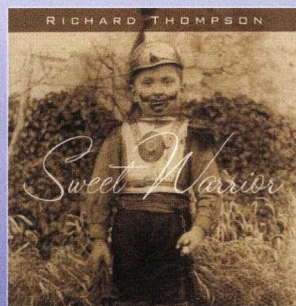


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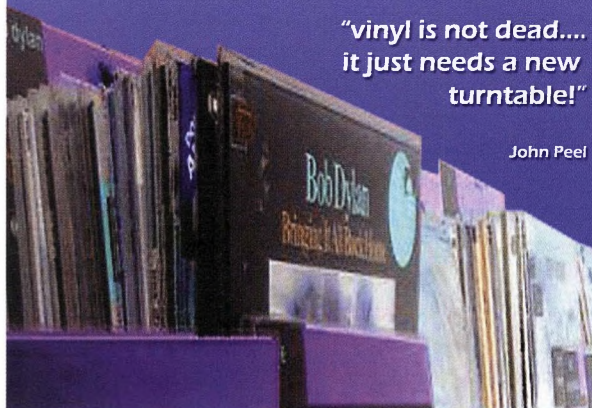
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by Reuben Parry

Joy Division escape classification, the first of their kind as well as the last. Bastard off-shoot of new wave, progenitor of New Order, Factory Records and the hard edged electro dance beats that pillaged the legacy of Kraftwerk, with nothing more than two albums and an assortment of singles and rarities to their name they changed the musical landscape for ever, and if it was New Order (amongst others) who put their shoulders to the lever, it was Joy Division that were the lever itself.

Bass heavy and jaggedly Spartan, their sound was hypnotic enough to presage the advent of sequencers, menacing enough to grab your attention and hold it. Built on Peter Hook's melodic, broodingly catchy bass lines and the sparse insistence of Stephen Morris's drum work, the tone of urban nihilism and the undercurrent of drab violence is laid over the top by the slash guitar of Bernard Albrecht and most tellingly of all, by the haunting vocals of Ian Curtis. First formed as Stiff Kittens, their seemingly, inevitably tragic path passed through the name Warsaw before reaching its perigee with the deceptively light hearted Joy Division, a moniker whose Nazi associations were grim indeed.

Their first outing on vinyl came with the five-track EP *An Ideal For Living*, whose title sent the anti-fascist lobby into anxiety overdrive. They needn't have worried, the wanton obscurity of the references marks them out as a naïve and ill-considered piece of willful ignorance rather than anything more sinister. Instead, the band's sinister side was reserved for their music, reaching a disconcertingly direct and unsettlingly addictive peak on their first album. Enter then *Unknown Pleasures*, a record that grabs your attention like a hand on your throat, with stark assertive sound and a sleeve that launched a million tee shirts. The summer of '79 was the year that jeans turned black and so did attitudes. The moppish hair-cuts and leather jackets, greasy docs and attitude of the disaffected had found their sound track and they played it to death, slouching with



wavy lines adorning their chests. The sublime desolation of 'New Dawn Fades', the inevitable desperation of 'She's Lost Control' captured the mood and atmosphere of a depressed economy with three million unemployed; 'No Future' in '77, even less in '79.

But whilst this music was undoubtedly spawned by its time, its appeal remains universal, its power pertinent. Listen now and you realize just how trite today's wannabe edgy bands really are. This is the real deal, raw and uncut and unmistakable. The coruscating vocals make for demanding, even draining listening, but their intensity and emotional gravity make it rewarding and compelling too. Too compelling as it turned out; Ian Curtis was to take his own life in May 1980, before the release of the band's most successful single (Love Will Tear Us Apart) and second album, the almost presciently funereal *Closer*. It's a tragically limited monument to a talent that burnt too bright, even if the real legacy changed the face of pop. The name *Unknown Pleasures* is as much a double entendre as everything else about this band, an enigmatic formation that revealed in suggesting one face whilst presenting another. Yet the album stands more solid than stone, an edifice built to represent the soft, cringing underbelly of the human condition. Stark and stupendous, revisit it every time you get a little too comfortable.



Joy Division

Unknown Pleasures

Originally released on Factory Records in Aug '79 (FACT 10)

Track Listing

1. Disorder
2. 2.Day Of The Lords
3. Candidate
4. Insight
5. New Dawn Fades
6. She's Lost Control
7. Shadowplay
8. Wilderness
9. Interzone
10. I Remember Nothing

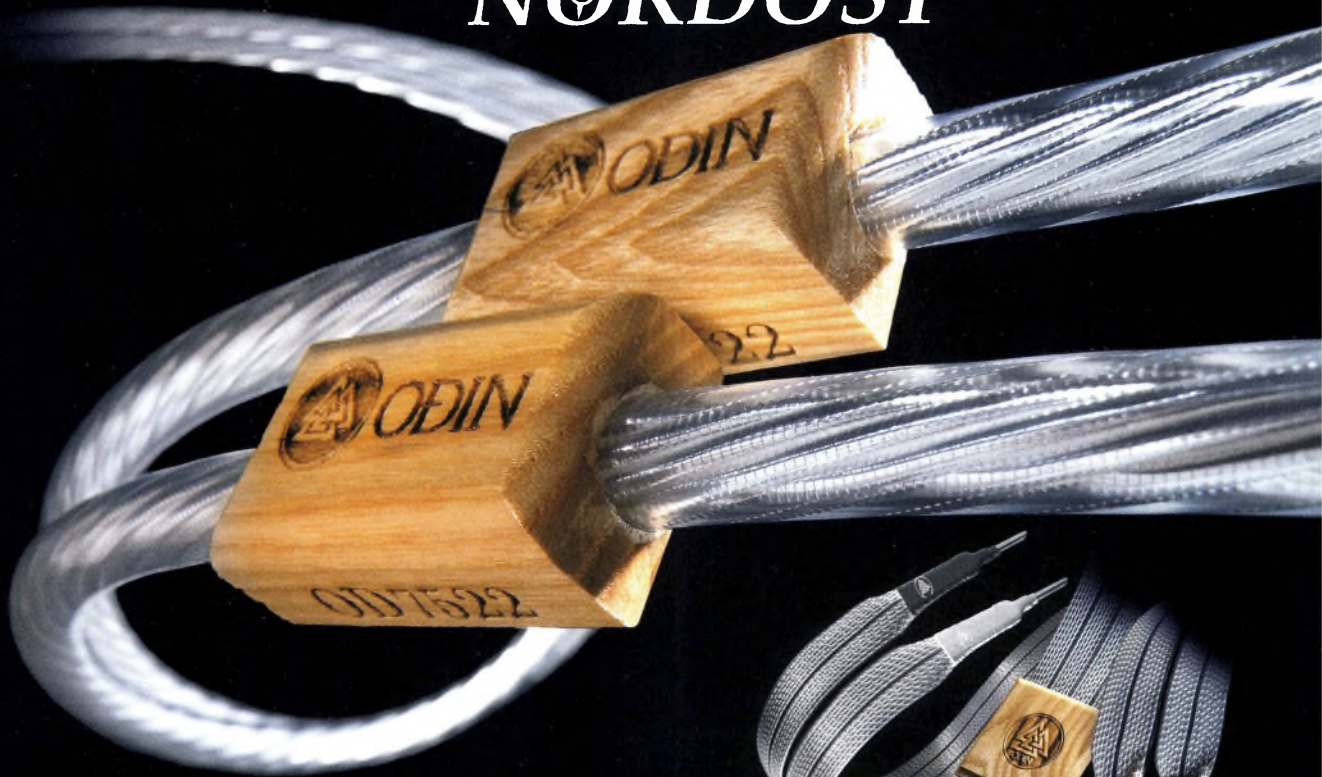
Personnel:

Ian Curtis – vocals
Bernard Albrecht – guitar and vocals
Peter Hook – bass
Stephen Morris – drums

Recorded at Strawberry Studios, Stockport
Produced by Martin Hannett

LP re-issued Jul '82
CD (FACT 10) issued Apr '86
CD re-issued on Centredate-London Jul '93
US release (LP, CD) on Qwest in 1989
LP limited re-issued 2007 (1000 pieces)

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