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HI FI CLUBE / JOSÉ VÍCTOR HENRIQUES / CREMONA ELIPSA

Sonus Faber's introductions in the early "Noughties" of the floor-standing Cremona and the smaller Cremona Auditor were hailed as milestones in the industry's long standing quest to achieve the highly-desired marriage of both aesthetics and sound quality. Such a marriage would please both ends of the consumer spectrum, the audiophile as well as the cineaste.

Indeed, it seemed incredible that the legendary, exquisite craftsmanship of the original Cremona and the Cremona Auditor could have been surpassed.

However, the recent launch of two new models with 'M' designations, along with a flagship speaker, the Cremona Elipsa, were inspired by that most astounding of transducers, the Stradivari. Thus, they are testaments to the fact that Sonus Faber's designers are in a constant process of perfecting the art of music reproduction, and of pushing the boundaries in the creation and engineering of awe-inspiring handcrafted works of art. These speakers are all the more precious because of their rarity, in a world characterised by so much automation and mechanisation.

The Auditor M, the smallest of the new Cremonas and the successor of the original Auditor, is a versatile two-way system ideally suited for smaller environments craving a large-scale musical picture. Its natural maple enclosure follows the Sonus Faber signature form of a lute in cross-section, while its components and final sound have been ear-tuned by the Sonus Faber team.

For larger rooms, the original floor-standing Cremona has evolved into the new superior Cremona M, which displays a more elegant, stylish finish and benefits from the introduction of new components.

Like their Homage siblings, both the Auditor M and Cremona M reflect the findings of Sonus Faber team's longstanding research, with attention paid to every detail, from small components, to wiring, to the drive units themselves. Equally, the aesthetics and external details have been refined to indicate a new stage in the speakers' evolution.

At the top of the new Cremona range lies the brand-new Cremona Elipsa, designed for the connoisseur with both the means and the environment to exploit a larger system. The Cremona Elipsa provides near-Stradivari performance in a more compact, economical package. Its sound is room-filling, open and natural, while its form is as beautiful as the speaker that inspired it. The Elipsa is, without question, another Sonus Faber masterpiece.



Sonus Faber CREMONA M



Sonus Faber CREMONA ELIPSA

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editorial

With the Whittlebury Hall Audio Show 2009 just a few days away (on the 26th and 27th September), we're hyped up by the prospect of our Northamptonshire weekend away. With more than 100 brands on show, it looks to be an exciting event. See you there!

Now that we've revamped the magazine, it's now the turn of our website to be brought out of cryogenic storage and given a new lick of e-paint. We've more or less kept the good old home page for now – that too will change as the new site is 'populated' with blogs, features and more – but point your browser at www.hifiplus.com to find out more.

With such radical changes happening to magazine and website, as well as the large-scale shifts in the way we buy music and the products through which we listen to that music, it's time to look past the current economic crisis and see what the future holds for hi-fi.

In a way, you could be forgiven for thinking the Credit Crunch had left the audiophile world unscathed. This issue, we feature two loudspeaker designs both costing over £25,000 (one wholly new, one the most radical reworking of a product in its three decade history), as well as a preamplifier that is not far short of £20,000. Meanwhile, new and more down-to-earth products from Sugden and Naim show that as the economy starts to recover, hi-fi brands are more than ready for action.

I'd like to say a big 'Thank You' to our readers who filled in our recent survey. It makes for a vital way to help us to determine the types of products *Hi-Fi Plus* will review over the next few months and years. While we can't guarantee everyone's desires will make it to page, but it's an important indicator of what

people really want. And congratulations to Mr Hay of London and Mr Allen of Surbiton, who each win a pair of Audio-Technica AD-700 headphones. We'd also like to congratulate Mr Stallard of the Rhondda valley who won a pair of AudioSmile Kensai loudspeakers. We'll be running more competitions, just as soon as we take a breather from planning next month's Awards issue, which will be in the UK shops on October 15.

Finally, truly transatlantic publishing is not without its teething troubles... and last issue, the biggest teething trouble was the complete disappearance of two pages of our *Top Ten* feature. Although we supplied prints and PDF files to anyone who asked for them, we decided to re-run the feature in its entirety on pages 91-95 of this issue. My apologies for any inconvenience caused. +

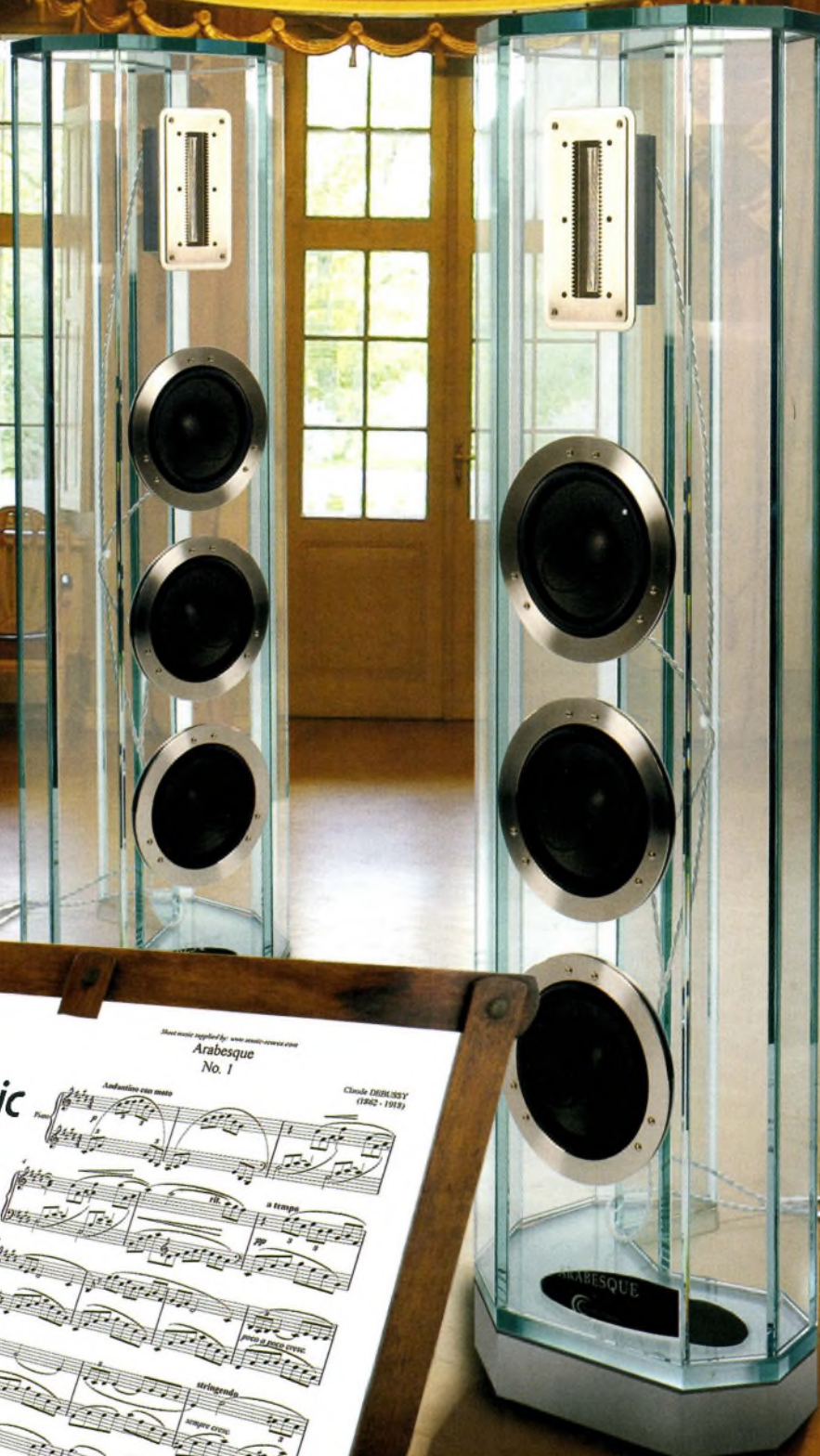
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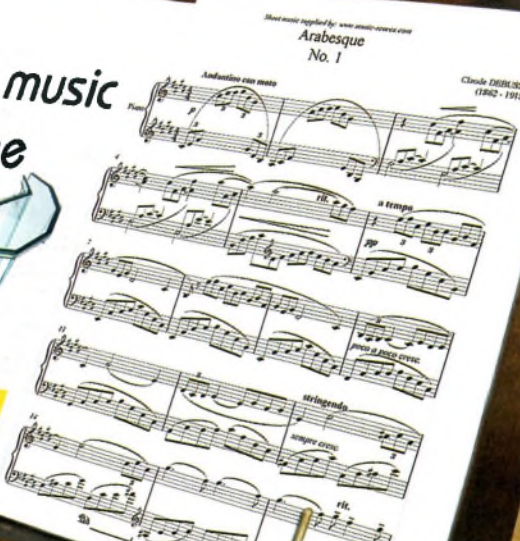


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Nostalgia ain't what it used to be

speakers corner

by Paul Messenger

WHETHER WE LIKE IT OR NOT, we should never forget the fact that hi-fi is a parasitic industry. Although the relationship is often a turbulent one, without the 'music biz' hi-fi simply wouldn't exist.

Many of us have collections going back several decades, and it's a fascinating exercise to try and track the changes in recording technologies through the impact they have had on music, but also to see the way popular music itself has evolved. And it has to be acknowledged that progress in both these sectors of the music biz has been just as uncertain and spasmodic as it has in the hi-fi industry.

The recordings of the 1950s have a pleasing simplicity, especially for vocalists, that is rarely found today. The sheer realism of the first Buddy Holly album (1958), for example, still sends shivers up the spine. (To be fair, I've heard recent stereo CD Buddy Holly releases that still sound excellent.)

It's a fascinating exercise to try and track the changes in recording technologies through the impact they have had on music..

Even in mono, wonderful classic recordings like Ella Fitzgerald's *Great American Songbook* series still stand the test of time today, though there was also a great deal of rubbish. Lonnie Donegan's version of Leadbelly's 'Rock Island Line' might have inspired the British beat group boom of the 1960s, but he also recorded 'My Old Man's a Dustman'.

In 1963, aged 14, I bought my first LP. *The Shadows Greatest Hits* cost £1 12s 6d (that's £1.63p in decimal currency). In relation to the inflation in average earnings, that price would nearer £55 today! No wonder a schoolboy found it hard to afford an album back in the 1960s.

We all seem to have particular nostalgic fondness for the era in which we first 'discovered' music, and I guess I was fortunate to hit adolescence just as both the music and its recording hit what was its most creative decade.

As the 1960s began, popular music was still 'Pop' and based on the mono 45rpm single – Tamla Motown, Stax/Volt, Atco and the British beat groups. Neither stereophony nor indeed the LP itself had really taken off as mass market items, and those early Beatles and Stones albums certainly sound better in their mono versions. But the real revolution came later in the decade, when releases like Bob Dylan's *Bringing It All Back Home* (1965) and the Mothers of Invention's *Freak Out* (1966) blew all earlier preconceptions about 'pop' music away.

Early US experiments in multi-track recording might have begun way back in the late-1940s, but its use only really became widespread during the '60s. While it certainly opened new doors to creative recording techniques, it was also responsible for its fair share of abuses, and it tended to push the recording process away from live performance and towards the studio.

While there's no denying its inventiveness and creativity, the music from this decade was very variable. This was brought home forcefully the other day when I tried to watch the movie *Woodstock*, and realised that around 75 per cent of the soundtrack music was pretty dire. The numerous LPs I have from this decade are, if anything, even more variable. Happily, some are very good indeed, but these tend to be either the simpler, more folk oriented recordings, or the very best 'live' recordings.

Recording technologies might have continued to evolve, but 'progress' is a double-edged sword, and the Law of Unintended Consequences continues to hold sway. Just as the Dance DJs helped save vinyl, the iPod might have helped preserve two-channel stereo, but it's also partly responsible for the over-enthusiastic use of compression that has become the bane of so many recent recordings.

I could probably come up with a couple of favourites from every year over the last four decades, but the ratio of quality to dross seems to increase at roughly the same rate as real price of discs falls. Today's discs might be cheaper than their predecessors, but I find I have to buy more of them to find a good one.

I wish I could guarantee an enjoyable musical experience every time. Simplicity and live recordings remain the most worthwhile, but I could also cite satisfying examples of gross over-production. So it's back to the scatter-gun approach to record buying, which thankfully costs a lot less in real terms than it did back in 1963. +



Given Focal's reputation for loudspeakers such as the 2 metre tall Grande Utopia EM, it's easy to suppose that these giants are the final stop of our development journey. In truth, they are simply the beginning. Without ultimate reference points like these, we could never have achieved the performance of the multiple 'Best Buy' and group test winning Chorus range, or enhanced the musicality of our highly acclaimed Electra series to such a degree we had to rename it Be2. Neither could we have created miniature marvels like the Dome satellite speakers and the XS computer system, or our in-ceiling and in/on-wall Custom products -systems which astound listeners with their ability to produce dynamic, natural sound from discreet enclosures. In their 30 year history, Focal have never ceased their constant desire to innovate, and make the seemingly impossible reality. Why compromise? Prices from £110,000 to £249 per pair.

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Grande Utopia EM, Hifi+ magazine

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Maestro Utopia, Hifi News magazine

"...unquestionably one of the great high-end stand-mount speakers available today.
...pure musical involvement and enjoyment...
...at its price, it is a bit of a steal."

Diablo Utopia, Hifi+ magazine



Life begins at 40... but not for hearing the view from the other side

by the Hi-Fi Heretic

PERHAPS THE BIGGEST INSULT THAT COULD BE POINTED AT SOMEONE who's interested in audio is "if you can't hear this, you must be deaf!" Aside from being deeply offensive, both to the person being talked about and to the hearing impaired, it's often more true than people expect. It's also often just as true for the person making the insult as it is for the insulted.

It's a well-worn joke that by the time people can afford high-end audio, their hearing isn't good enough to enjoy it. This is not the case – even badly degraded hearing can enjoy a good concert and the sound produced from good audio. The problem is that a compromised hearing mechanism is an unreliable hearing mechanism. In very real terms, people stop being reliable listeners in their late 30s as their ability to discriminate falls away at speed.

Of course, no audiophiles have hearing problems, no matter how old. Especially audio reviewers, who are remarkably immune to hearing loss.

That's a problem because few audio reviewers are under 40. OK, good genetics and a cloistered lifestyle might mean they are struggling with hearing loss slightly less than the next guy, but age and environment take their toll regardless.

The two 'biggies' are age-related hearing loss and noise-induced hearing damage. Both are progressive, inescapable and cumulative. At age 20, you are usually able to hear 20Hz-20kHz, but at twice that age, you'll be lucky to hear much past about 12kHz and by 60, your hearing could be down by as much as 40dB at 8kHz and above. The 'good' news is what hearing you have left at 70 is likely to stay with you until you drop off the perch; from an aging perspective, hearing loss tends to level out by that age. Of course, that doesn't mean your hearing will stay the same after 70, just that age-related loss levels out. There are still the long-term effects of hearing damage to contend with.

Noise induced damage is difficult to escape. Prolonged exposure to noise of 80dB and above can cause damage, and to put it into perspective, this equates to spending more than about two half-hour walks along a busy city street. So, simply walking to work can damage your hearing in time. Obviously the louder the noise, the shorter the exposure time needed to cause hearing damage. The audiophile world is strewn with people who went to one absurdly loud gig in the 1970s and

came home with a newly-broken hearing. Any concert that leaves you with ringing in the ears the next day will have left its mark for the rest of your life. And that applies just as much in the classical and jazz worlds as it does for head-in-the-bass-bin rockers; hearing damage does not discriminate.

Typically, noise induced hearing appears as a dip in the region around 4kHz. This is why a first sure sign of damage is 'cocktail party syndrome'. This is a lack of discrimination in noisy environments, meaning you can't hear what people say over the background noise at a party. This is understandable if the main noise is so loud it masks the quieter one, but when you are struggling to discriminate at similar sound pressure levels, being unable to hear speech at parties is a sure sign of problems.

There's more. A fatty diet, Type II diabetes, heart disease and infection can all cause deterioration in hearing, as can the temporary build-up of ear wax. The last is not likely to leave permanent damage, unless you have a habit of trying to clean out the wax with pen-tops, paper clips, Q-Tips and the rest.

Of course, no audiophiles have hearing problems, no matter how old. Especially audio reviewers, who are remarkably immune to hearing loss. Or are they? Our hearing mechanism is remarkably good at compensating for slow, progressive deterioration, but at the cost of acuity, accuracy and reliability.

I don't think reviewers should be put out to pasture simply because their ears are too old for the job. Many writers mature as they age and their work gets more entertaining and the body of experience they amass can only grow with time. But perhaps they should get younger listeners to do their critical listening for them.

In other words, can we really trust golden ears that should be getting their gold watch? +

[sometimes]
technology meets art...



Please send your letters to *Hi-Fi Plus*, Cornerways House,
School Lane, Ringwood, Hampshire, BH24 1LG, United Kingdom.
Or email them to editor@hifiplus.com

incoming!

With all the changes to Hi-Fi Plus, last issue's letters were mostly about... last issue. Here is a short selection:

I recently purchased a copy of Issue 66 at a Chapters store in Toronto. To my surprise pages 83 and 84 were missing. I returned to the store to find out that all of their copies had the same pages missing. What should I do?

Bruce Frazer, Ontario, Canada

We expected some teething troubles now we're living on the cutting edge of international publishing. Sadly, those teething troubles were pages 83 and 84. Those who asked for the pages were sent an advanced copy; those that didn't can find them reprinted in this issue (fingers crossed) – Ed.

Over the years I have looked forward to the music reviews in your magazine. I'm particularly interested in British blues artists and have many albums reviewed and recommended by Andrew Hobbs, as well as Dennis D Davis and his jazz reviews and Reuben Parry on various musical styles.

Issue 66 finds no contributions from any of these, the section being taken over by American reviewers I have never previously heard of. It is inevitable that individual reviewers will come and go over the life of a magazine but it is surely asking too much of your readers to come to terms with a complete clearout of tried and trusted contributors.

Alan Martin, via email

We received many such emails in support of our old music reviewers. So, we are putting them back into the musical mix as of this issue – Ed.

I just read your column, entitled *Hummers and Humblers* about scale in six-figure systems. As most of us peons will never get to worry about how to sculpt our six and seven figure systems, we'll never be presented with this dilemma. We will have to try mixing and matching our four and five figure systems to suit our tastes. Most of us will probably always consider this a work in progress and our tastes may change with time as we sample different designer approaches.

Richard Finegold, M.D., via email

Systems that provide an overblown sense of scale exist at all points, not just in the highest of high-end. It's just more common with high-end sensibilities.

Often, a well-matched system using small, two-way loudspeakers and a low-powered integrated amplifier is more musical than something with three times the loudspeaker volume, four times the power and five times the number of boxes.

If a six-figure system fails to sound better than a four-figure one, something is very wrong. And there are a lot of designers who equate making a good sound with making a huge one. So, in many respects, what needs to change in the millionaire system soon filters downwards – Ed.

The re-vamped look of issue 66 left me a little taken aback. What has happened?

I have always admired *Hi-Fi Plus* for the quality of the photography and the general layout. The latest issue seems to lack the 'statement' photographs that enhance understanding of a product. The review of the Well Tempered Amadeus GT turntable is a good example. To me this looked like an interesting and quirky product but the photograph does not bring any of this out. Contrast this the treatment given to the HRT Streamer and Streamer+ in issue 64.

There are other issues that give the new layout a disjointed look. Why are the Technical Specifications within the body of the text, breaking the flow of the piece? Why has the three-column page layout been abandoned in favour of two, unequal, columns? Why is the page numbering so inconsistent? Many articles start with large type, bottom left, followed by smaller, centred, type. However, others have no page numbering at all on the first page of the article. Why not stick with one format?

Perhaps you are trying too hard to change something that did not really need changing at all.

Phillip Andrews, via email

The quick answer to most of these questions is that 2009 got in the way – Ed.

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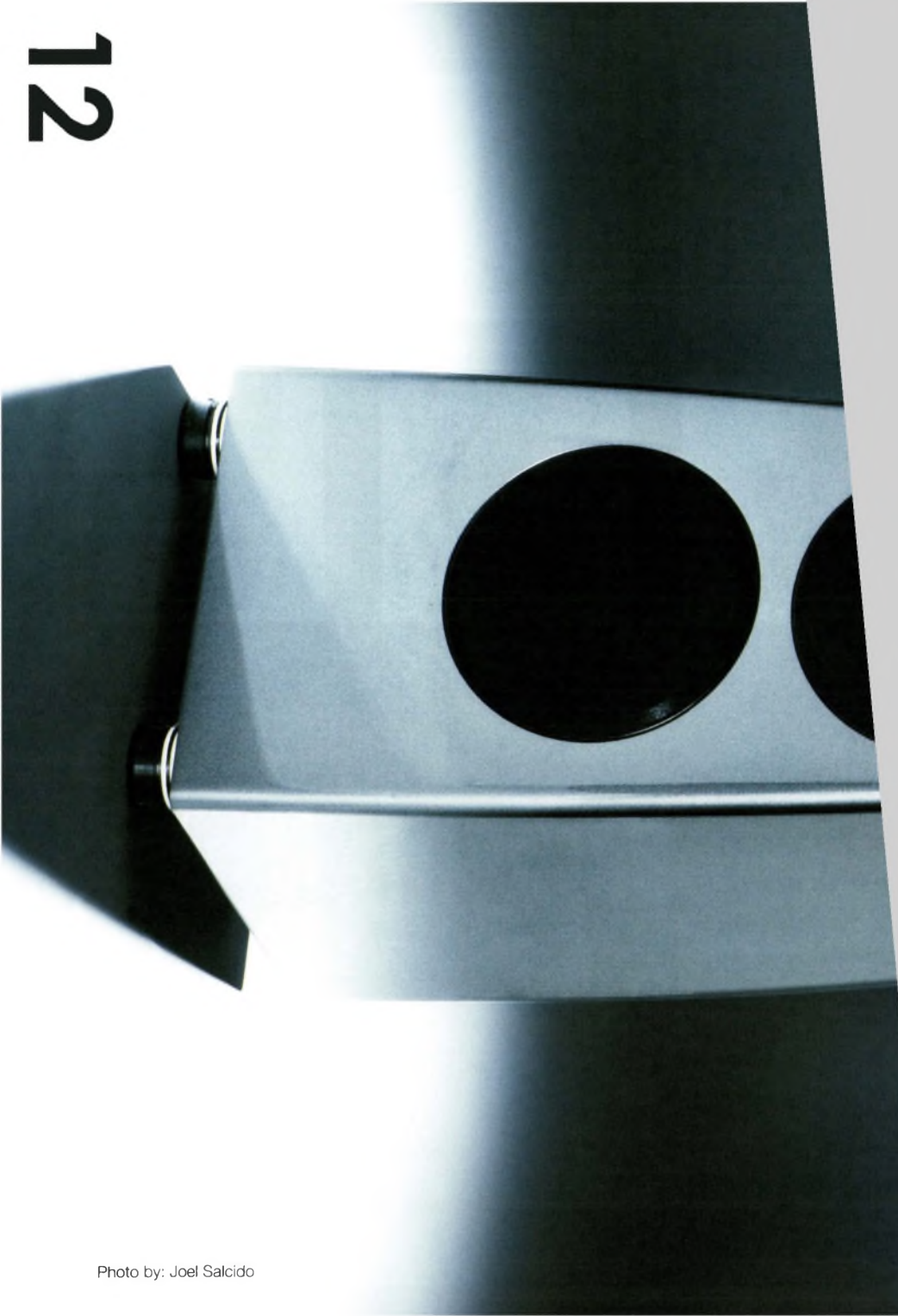


Photo by: Joel Salcido




The future of high-end

What will the next ten years bring?

by Alan Sircom

It's customary at times when a significant change happens to take stock. With a new editor and a different shape, it's a time of significant change for *Hi-Fi Plus*, perhaps the most substantial shift in the magazine's circumstances since it first hit the streets a decade ago. So, precisely what's happened to audio over the last 67 issues, what's the state of the hi-fi landscape today and just what might the next ten years hold for music replay?

A cursory glance at the products on sale in the average hi-fi shop today, and comparing that inventory with products sold ten years ago might not show a great deal of difference. There are still turntables and CD players, amps and loudspeakers on sale. Dealers are still trying to convince people to buy more exotic accessories like cables and tables and many are attempting to reconcile hi-fi and home cinema with mixed success. But this cursory glance hides a darker story. 



Tomorrow's high-end will be computer-based...

► The problem is, you'd find it far easier to find a hi-fi 'shop' ten years ago than today. Disregarding any trends toward cheaper or more high-end equipment or even moves from two channel through home cinema and custom install and back to two channel on the retailers part, there are considerably less 'bricks and mortar' stores today. Specialist retail outlets of all kinds have suffered in the first years of the 21st Century, beset on all sides by the internet, the rise of the out-of-town superstore and – more recently – the recession.

What is very interesting is the lack of change in the products on sale in those surviving hi-fi specialists. Yes, it's good to still sell and support vinyl and valves, but one of the single most important changes ever to the way people buy music has happened in the intervening decade, and it has singularly passed by most retailers. Of course, it would be commercial suicide for a retailer to give the store over to downloaded music reproduction today, because many existing LP, CD, SACD and even DVD-A playing clients have no intention of making the jump to computer-side audio sources. However, it's just as much an act of commercial suicide not to include this significant new method of replaying music in a dealer's arsenal of products. Unfortunately, a surprising number of specialists have not even explored the concept privately, to see if a Sonos (or a Sooloos, Squeezebox or some other system beginning with 'S') can be made to deliver decent audio quality. The knock-on effect of this is prospective newcomers to audio – and maybe even prospective newcomers to high-end audio – dismiss specialty audio altogether because it doesn't support their musical purchases.

Irrespective of format though, just scouring through ten years of back issues of *Hi-Fi Plus* also highlights subtle, yet significant changes to the high-end landscape. Interestingly, a decade ago, although we were more than aware of the importance of interconnects and loudspeaker cables – and of the potential significance of using a particular 'family' sound by using cables from the same brand throughout – the importance of mains conditioning or filtration, and the use of high-performance mains leads was still in a relative state of infancy.

In contrast, today's high-end is awash with mains filtration and conditioning devices, and the use of one-brand cabling throughout has spread to the mains lead, too. Even fuses have been treated to a spot of tweaking and tuning. Some suggest this is indicative of a move away from 'hard' science in audio, while others claim it is because audio equipment has reached such a

pinnacle of performance, the only places left to improve are the peripherals.

In fairness, for almost as long as there's been people listening to recorded music, there have been people interested in improving the quality of that process. Special cables designed for audio use can be seen in electronics magazines from the 1950s and as soon as the CD became widely adopted as a musical format for audiophiles, tweaks for the format began to appear. So, the likelihood is that the, er, current penchant for mains enhancements is just an extension of the same drive for perfection seen in the use of green pens on CDs, wet cleaning on LPs and more. And when downloaded music becomes more widely accepted in the audiophile community, a set of dedicated tweaks for computers and music servers will emerge. We've already seen the rebirth of the DAC (now sporting USB and Firewire connections) as a part of that trend.

Sales of CD in 2000 were higher than ever before... or since (indeed, it's been suggested that sales of CD in 2010 will be approximately one seventh that turn of the century figure). We also had high-resolution rival formats in the shape of SACD and DVD-Audio. Although SACD still has its followers, especially in the classical realm, unfortunately neither proved to be a significant success and both were largely ignored by mainstream buyers.

There is some light at the end of the high-resolution tunnel, though. Online music services (B&W Music Club, HDtracks, Linn ►



...but will it feature today's high-end brands?

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With its dedicated arm, the Model 30/12A possesses a majesty I hadn't heard before. Bereft of absurd, self-aggrandising over complexity exhibiting nothing but sane engineering and producing sound that's impossible to fault.

Ken Kessler Review – Hi-Fi News, March 2009

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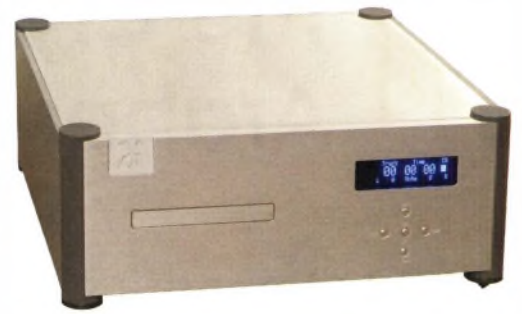
- ▶ and Naim, and more) have begun to deliver better-than-CD quality recordings direct to your computer. We hope to cover this in more detail toward the end of the year.

There have been a number of significant technological changes to the design of products in recent years, essentially opening up the options to listeners. Chip amps and Class D designs perhaps show a way forward manufacturers to deliver high performance sound without causing 'green' issues. Such products were becoming available 10 years ago, but were not at the time considered audiophile in performance. Even room correction DSP is becoming accepted now. Although these technologies have not replaced valve and class A designs, nor will these circuits do so in the next few years, they are no longer dismissed out of hand in audiophile circles. A similar thing is happening to loudspeaker designs, with new technology like the Balanced Mode Radiator seen in the upcoming Naim Ovator S-600.

We are already seeing companies redesigning products to deliver low stand-by current draw – the MartinLogan Summit X (tested last issue) runs to less than one watt per channel power consumption in stand-by, against the 20 watts per channel of its direct predecessor. This is not simply a group of manufacturers putting their respective houses in order; it reflects global changes in legislation regarding energy efficiency. And no doubt there's more to come.

A change that had already begun by 1999 was the shift away from local production. Although a decade ago, Chinese-built products were still a relative rarity especially in high-end designs. Today, we've seen an almost total about-face; products designed in one country and built on the other side of the world are commonplace, while those designed and built in the UK are rare. And now – with products like the Krell S300i tested in issue 65 – the same trend is beginning to reach the US high-end.

A by-product of the globalisation of build has been a marked increase in new brand names appearing. If you read a high-end magazine from the late 1980s and compare it with the same from 10 or 15 years later, many of the big names remain unchanged – there were still reviews of the latest Mark Levinson amp, Sonus Faber loudspeaker or Wadia CD player. Some brands may have fallen over the years and others may have risen out of nowhere, but the majority of those big name brands survived. That still holds true today, but the products are joined by a plethora of lesser-known names all vying for attention and customers. Some of these are so-so, some good, and a



few are exceptional products that redraw the audio map. This is of significant benefit for the audiophile, because if a small outfit challenges the big names head on, then the big names have to raise their game to compete. This means better products.

The continual upward spiral of product prices is a reflection of that never-ending quest for perfection. The cost of individual products have not risen dramatically (for example, if you factor changes in earnings and cost of living, the new Wilson Audio Sasha is actually cheaper to buy today than the WATT/Puppy V was 16 years ago), but extra layers of better and more expensive products have raised the bar for 'cost no object' audio significantly. Whether the pinnacle of high-end products will remain sustainable in a deep recession remains to be seen, but we suspect that as long as there's a market for Bentleys and Sunseekers, there will be people keen on £110,000 Focal speakers and the rest.

In many respects, the last 10 years have been laying the foundation stones for the way music will be played long into the 21st Century. Price and performance continue to go up, even though the number of places you can actually listen to high-end hi-fi continue to go down. And, for the next year or two at least, it looks like the next big thing is actually the last big thing of the early 1990s; the separate DAC. +



Krell's S300i – US design, Chinese build

EQUIPMENT REVIEW

The Crystal Cable Arabesque Loudspeaker

by Roy Gregory. Photography by Simon Marsh

Glass speakers are not new, and many previous designs have placed emphasis on aesthetics over sound quality. As you can see inside a transparent cabinet, the use of internal acoustic damping largely defeats the object. It's not impossible to build good sounding speakers without internal wadding – but it makes the job much harder. Consequently, glass speakers got pigeonholed as 'lifestyle' products.

That started to change with the arrival of Waterfall loudspeakers from France. With striking, clear cabinets and neat internal construction these sounded way better than anybody expected, proving that glass might well have its uses in loudspeaker construction. But if Waterfall put the material back on the map, Crystal Cable's dramatic debut Arabesque loudspeaker is tilting directly for a place at the audiophile top-table. With a price-tag of £45K, this needs to do a lot more than simply look pretty; glass needs to become an essential part of the design and construction, not just an aesthetic gimmick.

Having said that, just standing in front of this speaker it is hard not to be impressed by its material content and clean, flawless execution. It's weight will impress too; despite its insubstantial appearance, the Arabesque weighs 103kg.

Almost more so than any other product, this is one where the input from your eyes is in danger of overriding the evidence of your ears. After all, it can't be serious – can it? Well, like I said, the price alone adds up to 40,000 reasons why it better had be. Then there are the electrical specs: 95dB sensitivity and a -3dB point of 27Hz from what is, in volume terms, a pretty small cabinet.

Built from carefully cut and mitred sheets of 19mm plate glass, the intricate shape of the enclosure is far from an accident. Each panel enjoys a different width so that no two elements support the same resonant behaviour. But the really clever part of the structural design derives from the use of advanced Comsol FEA software to model both the mechanical behaviour of the cabinet and the gas dynamics of the enclosed volume. Employed by the likes of NASA for product development, it allows a designer to work with incredibly complex shapes in real time, allowing the shape itself to become a critical factor in the resonant behaviour of the system – and resulting in the Arabesque's complicated but precisely calculated, tapered footprint. Shaped rather like a Comma, the curved tail section is left open to vent the internal volume. Referred to as a friction port due to its tapered form and narrow mouth, the precise dimensions of the neck allow equally precise control of the

air mass. This, combined with Comsol's deep insights into the cabinet's mechanical behaviour allows the speaker to virtually dispense with internal damping without compromising performance, arguably actually realizing the potential of glass as a structural material for the first time.

In theory of course, you could take things further, with different thickness panels and mitred construction, the joints would introduce steps into the internal or external faces, as well as ruining the appearance. Likewise, parallel top and bottom panels (the only parallel surfaces in the cabinet) are pretty much mandatory. As it is, even using 19mm glass throughout, each pair of cabinets take nearly a month to complete.

But it takes more than a great cabinet to make a great speaker. The Comsol software allows precise tuning of the speaker's vent, its mouth being partially closed by a slotted 316 grade, stainless steel plate. This is damped to prevent it resonating, while the only other internal damping is an unobtrusive, domed cushion in the base of the cabinet to help control the vertical standing wave.

For once the drivers, that normally get all the attention in a loudspeaker, are in danger of being overshadowed by the striking, clear cabinet, but again it would be wrong to overlook them. The high-frequency driver employed is a specially modified version (employing an amorphous magnet and silver/gold alloy wiring) of the highly respected RAAL ribbon tweeter from Serbia, with an aluminium diaphragm that's claimed to be lighter than the air it drives up to an upper limit of around 100kHz. To match its polar dispersion, the Arabesque uses three of the latest Scan Speak Illuminator bass/



mid drivers, specially modified and arranged in a vertical line. These employ a double skin paper cone with offset lobular reinforcements – the retro version of composite, if you like. These are driven by a powerful motor whose neodymium magnets and contoured housing ensure a small reflecting area in the face of the driver's rear wave, current hot topic amongst cone speaker designers. The benefit is extended to the minimal but carefully profiled legs of the driver basket, whose elegant curves also serve to minimize reflections as

well as offering a pleasing aesthetic touch to the drivers' exposed backsides. The drivers are mated through a second-order passive crossover, although unusually, the tweeter is kept in phase with the bass/mid drivers for a phase coherent output.

The ribbon extends down to a low crossover point of 2kHz, again echoing an increasingly common current trend amongst high-end speaker designs. The crossover itself is housed in a separate, milled out block of aircraft grade aluminium spaced from the bottom of the cabinet proper. Components are supplied by Tritec (air-cored inductors) and Mundorf (foil in oil capacitors, but employing Siltech/Crystal's proprietary silver/gold alloy as a conductor) and hard wired with Crystal's top of the line Dreamline speaker cable, which also extends up to the drivers. ▶

SPEAKER BURN IN – IGNORE IT AT YOUR PERIL

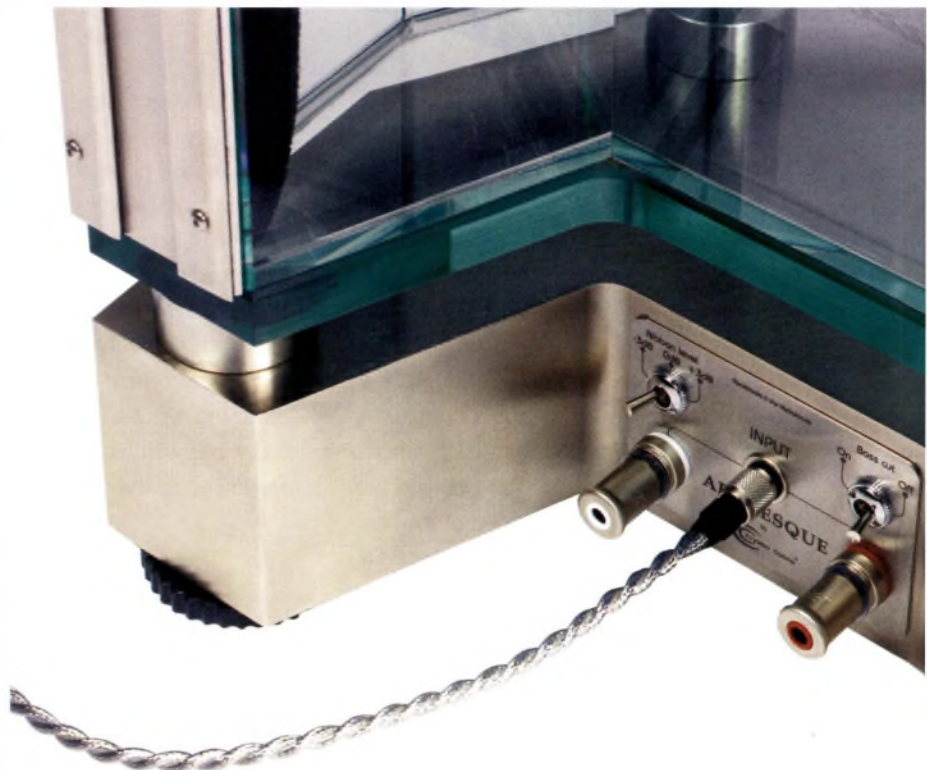
Running-in loudspeakers is one of those topics that gets a lot of loudspeaker designers hot under the collar – one way or another. There are those who swear by it, and those who dismiss it out of hand. So who is right? Well, it could be both sides of the argument as the actual running-in mechanism is poorly understood (if at all) and varies significantly from one design to another, depending on the constituent parts and materials. So, on the one hand both Avalon and Focal are assiduous in running their speakers before delivering them to reviewers, whilst other manufacturers are happy to present brand new units.

The Arabesques arrived with around 12 hours of running time – and sounded nothing like the examples I've heard at shows. Whether that's down to the drivers themselves (there's some suggestion that spider condition is critical to cone driver performance) the crossover components or the wiring, who can say, but clearly these speakers were going to need a lot of running. I left them playing at serious levels around the clock, using a mixture of dense and dynamic musical material and a purpose designed burn-in track, but it was a full six days before they really started to open up and allow music to breathe in the way that previous experience suggested they could. Another two days and they really started to sing, at which point it was high time to reassess their positioning and set-up.

Of course, the company had installed and tweaked the position of the speakers in their original form. Breathing more freely, they demanded revisions to rear wall spacing, an increase in toe-in and a reduction in the distance between them. It's this that makes burn-in such an insidious effect, because even though your speakers will get there in the end, the benefits that accrue could easily be undermined if you fail to revise and optimise their positioning. The very nature of the Arabesque and the manner in which its sound evolves makes the lesson especially stark.

On the recessed, rear face of the crossover block, contained within the curve of the speaker's footprint, you'll find the terminals, as well as a pair of level switches for the drivers. There's a single pair of WBT binding posts that will take 4mm plugs or spades, whilst the two switches allow you to adjust tweeter level in three, 3dB steps and also cut bass output if room boundaries and acoustics demand it. But in some respects, the most interesting feature is found between the WBTs: a sub-miniature four-pin screw socket allows owners to directly connect Crystal's own speaker cables whilst dispensing with the normal single or bi-wire tails. That has to be the ultimate in low-mass connection...

One other aspect of the Arabesque is deceptive. On paper at least, the sensitivity suggests that this should be an easy speaker to drive – and in some respects it is. However, two other sets of figures give rise for concern. The wide bandwidth (27Hz to 100kHz \pm 3dB) coupled with a 'nominal' 4 Ohm load suggest that things could get tricky for smaller amps. In fact, the minimum impedance dips to a 2.8 Ohms minimum and it's no surprise to discover that when it comes to lower powered amplifier options, its push-pull valve amps that seem to do the best job, with their greater control at frequency extremes than their triode brethren and the considerable shelter afforded their output stages by the large lump of iron sat between them and the speaker load. Certainly, the VAS Citation Sound mono-blocs did a sterling job, even if they didn't grip the speakers the way bigger amps did. On the solid-state front, I think around 100 Watts should be considered a sensible minimum, otherwise you'll risk seriously underselling the speakers' capabilities. That impedance dip also means that the speaker cables are under stress, with a noticeable benefit to be had from doubling up – or shotgunning – the speaker wires. Engaging the Bass Cut results in a rather kinder 4 Ohm load, but I'm not sure it's sensible to consider this as an amplifier matching solution, the trade off in bass output being a poor exchange.



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The Arabesques come with a concise but extremely useful manual that includes excellent advice when it comes to speaker positioning.

► SET UP AND SYSTEM

The Arabesque's mirror imaged and asymmetrical cabinets mean that they can be positioned with the 'tails' pointing into the soundstage or out. Which you opt for depends on the size of your room and the width between the speakers, with the argument for pointing the tails in strengthening the closer the speakers get to the corners. Despite my large listening room, I tried the cabinets configured both ways, but quickly opted for the added sense of width and space afforded by the outward pointing attitude. Initially, tails in gave a greater sense of depth to the soundstage but this soon emerged as a proportional change, with images started to clump together on a narrower frontage, robbing the music of its bounce and freedom.

Of course, this only applies to the comparative luxury of a wider room and in a more constricted environment the benefits of cleaner, more linear bass might easily outweigh or even reverse this perception. It also takes no account of the Bass Cut switch, which again was clearly inappropriate in a larger listening environment. RAAL supply sets of magnetically fixed foam wedges that can be used to tailor the tweeter response if listening in the near-field, and their inclusion reflects the lengths that Crystal have gone to, to create a speaker which will work in a range of different rooms, again helped by the sophisticated Comsol modelling software. Reluctant to cart nearly a quarter of metric tonne of plate glass up the stairs to my older and somewhat smaller room, I'm in no position to comment on the effectiveness of these steps. What I can say is that the speakers certainly work as advertised in larger spaces.

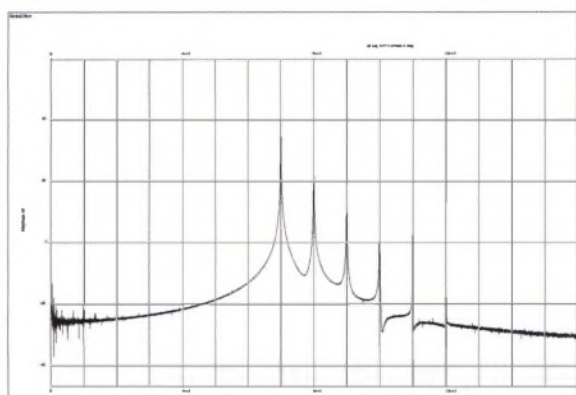
Once you've positioned the speakers you'll need to level them, essential if you want natural acoustic proportions from the longish lines generating the sound. Each cabinet is supported on seven adjustable disc feet, each one moulded from engineering polymer and designed to help spread the considerable load of the speaker evenly across the supporting surface. The small degree of flexibility inherent in the material is also designed to ensure close coupling with less than even surfaces. Trying to adjust seven feet is far from easy – so don't bother. Wind three down to support and then level the cabinet, then wind the others down to share the load.

Although I tried the speakers with various amplifier and cable combinations, the vast majority of my listening involved the Connoisseur phono and line stages, feeding the latest Berning Quadrature Z monobloc amps through a range of suitable cables including Crystal Dreamline. Sources were the ARC Reference CD8 and Wadia 781 CD players, along with the Grand Prix Audio Monaco/Triplanar turntable, carrying the Lyra Titan, the VPI TNT/JMW and the Kuzma Stabi XL4/4POINT. All played their part as I explored the limits of the speakers' musical performance. I didn't try alternative spikes or feet under the Arabesque, largely because of the practical implications of trying to hoist them off of the ground, although in situations where a really uneven floor challenges their stability or level, this would be an option.

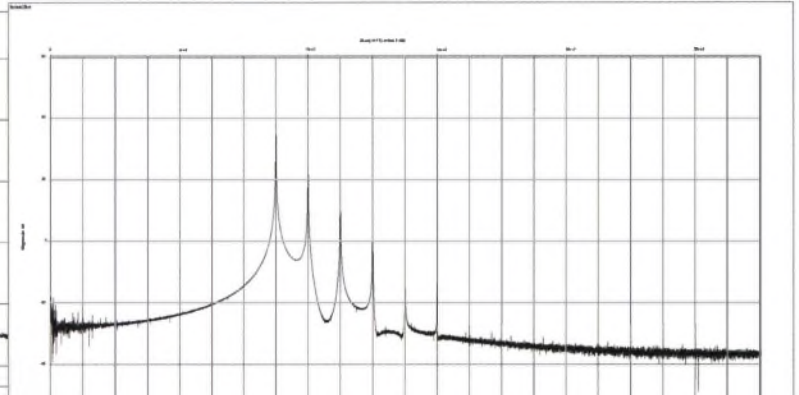
One final point: the Arabesques come with a concise but extremely useful manual that includes excellent advice when it comes to speaker positioning. It may not offer an inch perfect solution but it definitely offers a great starting point. For once, don't forget to RTFM!

Two graphs that paint a thousand words

With our alliance with defence partner Acuity, we can now clearly see what we can clearly hear



Output with CD player stood on test bench with standard leads



Output with Vertex Kinabalu platform, Roraima mains lead and Solfonn Interconnect

We gave Acuity a good CD player and a few Vertex bits and asked them to use their expertise to see if there were changes to the output when our equipment was used. In their labs, and completely independently (we were not there), they produced a range of tests and output graphs, 2 of which are shown above.

Here Acuity created a synthetic 'ting', much like the sound of a finger bell, with decreasing level tones at 7, 8, 9, 10, 11 and 12KHz. On these output graphs you can clearly see the reduction in the 'noise skirts' through the frequency ranges below and above the group. There is a general reduction in the noise between the peaks too. But not so easily seen, there is also a small increase in the peak values.

Typical noise reduction below group (dB)	Typical noise reduction above group (dB)	Typical increase in peak values (dB)
-2.5	-5.0	+0.4

In essence, with the Vertex equipment, the corruption of the signal into adjacent noise has reduced significantly.

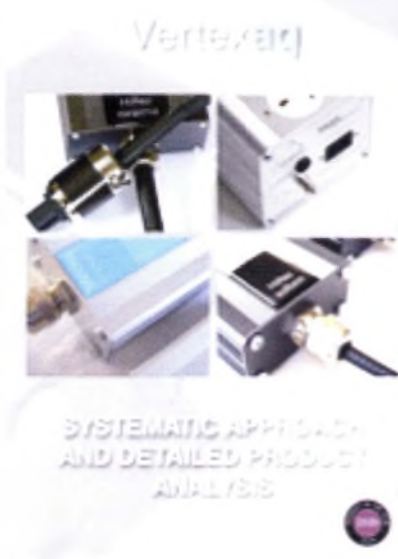
So what does this do to sound quality? Well, everything just sounds much crisper and cleaner, with far less treble hash. Instrumental tone is far more realistic and detail and imaging are hugely improved. The sense of timing and scale are in another league too.

Find out a lot more about Vertex

Over the years we have been developing the Vertex range, we have also developed a comprehensive methodology which covers just about all aspects of system architecture and performance. What we call the 'Systematic Approach' is a logical way of combining our understanding of the performance of electronics and speakers with the very real issues of system-wide vibration and Radio Frequency Interference (RFI).

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All this, along with a comprehensive description of the Vertex products, is available in a 50-page book. And you can get one of these either from your Vertex dealer or by contacting us.



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▶ Reviewing products is all about performance – and balancing that performance against cost. As I stated at the outset, given the price of the Arabesque and their high profile competition, they're clearly going to have to bring more than just a pretty face to the party. Trying to share space with established heavy hitters like Wilson Audio and Avalon, or even newcomers like Magico and YG, takes some front. Will the Crystals, with their demure, domestically friendly appearance and modest driver complement compete when it comes to sound quality?

This is *un vrai* Crystal, sharing the fluid, expressive, understated qualities that make the Company's cables so unusual and impressive. The Arabesque is that rare product that lets the music do its talking for it, a capability that's intimately connected to the lack of contribution from its cabinet.

When we refer to "hearing the box" of a loudspeaker, the statement is literal; you are actually hearing additional or altered output as a result of the box. Some of that acoustic output will be as a result of the cabinet panels vibrating at their resonant frequencies, directly into the room, energised by the driver baskets and the back wave that the cabinet is designed to absorb. More worrying is energy that is absorbed by the cabinet and then released back into the drivers, becoming an addition to the signal itself. But the energy that travels from the back wave, through the cabinet and back into the drive units is especially destructive, because of the additional time delay involved and the fact that it's blending directly with the driver's acoustic output, slurring detail and tonality, altering the distribution of energy within both the time and frequency domains. In other words – screwing up the harmonic character of instruments but more importantly, the

musical timing. Why is this more important than tonal aberration? Because the ear is remarkably adaptable when it comes to harmonic character – after all, we recognize a violin whether it's playing in a concert hall, our front room or the bathroom, despite its very different sound. But we can't correct its errors or inadequacies in timing, which is why they are so critical.

If you want to hear just how successfully Crystal have controlled the mechanical behaviour of the Arabesque's cabinet then just listen to the taught, uncluttered clarity of the speaker's bottom end. Play *This One's For Blanton* and listen to the shape and texture these speakers deliver on Ray Brown's plucked bass notes, the sense of catch and release. But listen too, to the spacing, the precise placement of the notes and the way they play off of Ellington's piano lines, underpinning the melodies, echoing them and stepping forward to fill the gaps that the Duke leaves in the musical fabric. With only two instruments, there's nowhere to hide and consequently, many, many systems reduce this to a meandering shapeless mess, with rounded bass and no real musical relationship between the two players. The Crystals provide clean, articulate bass lines, with an attack and vitality that gels perfectly with the percussive piano lines, the intricate bass melodies (and their demanding fingering) clear to hear, bringing the music an almost addictive groove as you marvel at Brown's dexterity and the emotional range the musicians are drawing from such sparse material. The only other speaker at anything like this price that I've heard come close on this album is the MartinLogan CLX – and that's no coincidence!

But speakers are all about balance, and a lot of that bass quality also comes from the treble, where the clean, extended top-end is devoid of ringing or glare. Ellington hammers those right hand keys and in many cases they can sound brittle and glassy as treble units struggle to handle the transient energy, but they're crisp and clean on the arabesque, emphatic without being strident, pointed without being edgy. The RAAL ribbon clearly lives up to its stellar reputation, matching the unexaggerated excellence of the better diamond and Beryllium tweeters that mark the state of the high-frequency art.

So, with both frequency extremes securely and impressively in place, what about tying them together. Lest we forget, this is a hybrid speaker, with all the potential issues that entails when it comes to integrating the drivers. Fortunately, Crystal have taken those issues seriously and the result is integration that puts the Arabesques in the very top flight. Add to that the super fast and well behaved, laminated and reinforced paper cones of the bass drivers and the shallow second-order, in-phase crossover design and you've got good impulse response to go with the even dispersion. After that, the use of identical cables to all the drivers, extending to the alloy employed within the crossover caps, becomes a fairly thick layer of icing on top. The result is a sound that is both impressively involving and singular.

One (extremely) experienced listener felt that the Crystals reminded him of the Apogees – and he is definitely in a position to know. I can see what he was getting at. I've already cited the lack of boxy effects, but with their broad, wide-open soundstage, superb definition of height and super stable image quality, the Arabesques certainly present in the same way as the Apogees. Of course, that's partly down to the ribbon driver and the use of line arrays, but it also suggests just how efficiently the rear slot port evacuates energy from the shaped, glass cabinet. Stand behind the speaker and put your hand ▶

The result is integration that puts the Arabesques in the very top flight...

The result is a sound that is both impressively involving and singular.



Building Blocks...

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Now you can take it a whole stage further. The Quantum QBASE are ultra low-loss distribution systems, employing mechanically tuned chassis parts and Focused Star grounding topology, designed to provide the most direct low impedance feed for your system, combined with the cleanest earth. Available with four or eight output sockets in the US and Europe, or six in the UK, the QBASE can be combined with one or more Qx units to provide a sophisticated, straight-line solution to your AC problems – without altering peak current capability or supply impedance. And better still, now you can invest in those benefits, one step at a time, building and extending your AC solution as your system grows and improves.

How can something so apparently simple make such a difference? By combining carefully selected components and materials with a clarity of purpose that sets it apart, the QBASE delivers clean power without the damage done by other, more intrusive designs. Or to put it another way – it delivers just what you need and a lot less of what you don't. Independently measured evidence of the astonishing sonic benefits of QRT technology can be viewed at www.quantumqrt.com.

Or go a step further still and hear it for yourself! Nordost will be demonstrating the benefits of Quantum technology in direct comparison to competing products at both the Whittlebury Hall Show in the UK (Sept 26th and 27th) and the Rocky Mountain Audio Fest (October 2nd-4th). Take a listen to Quantum and you'll quickly see that sometimes simple makes sense.



Pure Power The Purist Way

- ▶ against the port openings and you'll suddenly find it less than surprising that this speaker drives the room in a manner akin to many dipoles. Which may or may not be a good thing, depending on your point of view...

One performance trait that is definitely dipole-esque is the nature of the images themselves. While the Arabesque throws a wonderfully transparent acoustic space, with plenty of that space evident between and around individual images, those images themselves are positively voluminous, with a real sense of three-dimensionality. The fact that the speaker doesn't plumb the depths when it comes to low-frequency extension robs the acoustic space of the firmest boundaries and the images themselves of a little solidity or body, but that's only when compared to (much) larger speaker systems. More importantly, these images are refreshingly life sized, which may come as a shock and certainly a contrast to those more accustomed to the pinpoint precision and point-source imaging of the ultra-definition school of speaker design. Which is correct is a much bigger and more arcane issue than I've space for here; I'm merely pointing out the effect so that listeners can look out for it and reach their own conclusions.

The Arabesque allows the music to breathe – even more so when used in conjunction with the matching Dreamline cables. The rhythmic fluidity and expressive musical timing of the Crystal speaker, products of its low frequency agility and lack of overhang, allow music to set its own pace, the musicians deciding the tempo rather than the way the cabinet handles low-frequency energy. Changes in pace, rhythmic hesitations as a player holds a note or sustains one are key contributors to the human quality in a performance, its expressive and emotional impact. Just listening to a familiar track like 'Hard Headed Woman' it's remarkable how vivid and vibrant the presentation is on the Crystal speakers. From the opening, heavily reverbed vocal to the way the attack on the strummed guitar accents and shapes the song's progress and line. The vocal is stable and full of the subtle inflections that betray just how hard the singer is working his instrument. The wide dynamic range of the recording plays to the track's sudden contrasts, giving it real impact and drama, while the detail and immediacy allow natural decay to cymbals and a host of tiny, incidental sounds to emerge. Indeed, the air and space that these speakers reveal in recordings is another highlight, adding to the sense of musical freedom and naturalness on both acoustic recordings and even the most heavily of Protooled mixes.

That lively, responsive midrange and the way it joins so seamlessly with the frequency extremes sets the Arabesque apart. It's pristine in its delivery and full of purpose, making its musical points with a directness that's both impressive and effective. But that deft touch and lack of sloth bespeaks an absence of padding in the nether regions which whilst I'm glad to be rid of, others might not agree. After all, we are used to having that extra weight there, adding ballast and the impression of low frequency power. In comparison, the Arabesque might be found lightweight, in the same way that some listeners describe the Avalons. But just like those faceted speakers, testing the low frequencies clearly demonstrates that the notes are there when they should be – and not when they shouldn't. The Blanton is a case in point, with no loss of weight or body as the melodic lines dip down. Orchestral bass is fulsome, with both weight and texture, but there's no escaping the fact that if you are used to hearing the Gladiator soundtrack via a couple of 12" drivers with a singalong cabinet then the Arabesque will come up short. It will play loud – and it will do it cleanly if the amp is up to the job – but if you want to blow out the windows then there are other speakers that will do a better(?) job at far lower prices.

It's easy to get this speaker wrong. It's looks remarkable and it sounds remarkable, but it's really all about music – whatever that music is. So the sardonic humour of Ian Dury is served as well as the bombast of Beethoven's 3rd Symphony, the fragile angst of Janis Ian as well as the snarling defiance of The Clash. All have passed through the Arabesque without fear or favour, stress or strain. But what is most remarkable is that a company with no speaker building experience can create a design as accomplished as this from such a challenging material.

Perhaps the answer to their success lies in embracing that material and truly incorporating it into the design as a whole. For make no mistake, the conception and execution of this speaker are just as holistic as the sound it produces. With so many manufacturers making progressively more and more exaggerated claims for their products, it's refreshing to meet a speaker that lets the music do the talking. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Two way hybrid loudspeaker

Driver Complement: 1x 140mm RAAL ribbon tweeter

3x 180mm Scan Speak Illuminator laminated paper coned bass/mid

Bandwidth: 27Hz – 100kHz –3dB

Sensitivity: 95dB

Impedance: 4 Ohm nominal, 2.8 Ohm minimum

Crossover Point: 2kHz

Peak Output: 115dB

Weight: 103kg/227lbs ea.

Dimensions (WxHxD): 490mm (19.3") x 1305mm (55.7") x 570mm (22.4")

Price: £45,000 per pair

Manufacturer: Crystal Cable BV

URL: www.crystalcable.com

Tel: +31 26 353 9045

UK Distribution: Absolute Sounds Ltd

Tel: +44 (0)208 971 3909



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EQUIPMENT REVIEW

conrad-johnson The GAT preamplifier

by Alan Sircom

The GAT drew the same reaction from every one of the grockles. The real people, muggles... non audiophile types:

"What the hell's *that*?"

"It's a preamplifier. It takes signals from the CD player and controls the big power amp."

"It looks like something Captain Nemo might have used. How much is it?"

"Er, about £19,000."

"[expletives deleted due to need to stay within the 1957 Obscene Publications Act, the 1697 Blasphemy Act, and the physical impossibility of getting a horse to do that to an archbishop]. Sounds bloody *great*, though!"

The dialogue, repeated more than once (although few were quite as creatively swear-y), highlights much about the new conrad-johnson GAT preamplifier. It's big. It's visually distinctive. It's expensive. And it sounds so good you don't care. The GAT is the latest in a long line of limited-edition flagship preamplifiers from conrad-johnson, following in the traditions of ARTs and ACTs from the brand. There will be just 250 lucky GATters. The name is short for Great Anniversary Triode, but insiders (like Wes Philips) think it's there as tribute to c-j's well-loved customer service team-leader, Carwell Gatling.

Like the ACT before it, the GAT is a one-box valve line-only preamp, which only features single-ended inputs (five, two loops

for processors or recording and two sets of single-ended outputs) and one that makes extensive use of microprocessor control. Channel switching relays, the 100-step volume control, balance and basic operation are all powered by a microprocessor, and the main 'head' section (where the main controls and displays live) looks very similar to the preamp that preceded it. Anyone you has used an ACT will also be used to the ticka-ticka-ticka sound as you work through those 0.7dB volume steps.

Unlike the ACT, with its offset, back-set control panel and the four clear plastic protectors for the quartet of tubes, the GAT looks very symmetrical. The centre control unit is flanked either side by a single 6922 triode, protected from the outside world by four quartered clear plastic protectors. The overall look does highlight the substantial feel of the preamp, and opinions converge on the GAT having a 1950s aesthetic... in a good way, more '57 Chevy Bel Air than '59 Edsel.

One triode per side might invite some questions from those who know their way around a preamp circuit. Digging deeper

It exposes more of what's being played and yet doesn't make that insight uncomfortable.

finds the GAT with a high-current MOSFET buffer stage and a solid-state discrete DC voltage regulator. From a strict valve-fascist standing that would make this a hybrid design, but few will call it that in reality. The advantage of solid-state voltage regulation is complete isolation from the mains circuit, while the MOSFET buffer means very low output impedance. That makes it more power amp friendly, or rather makes the use of long interconnect cables a distinct possibility. Like all c-j preamps, it inverts absolute phase, so turn your cables hot to cold and cold to hot at the loudspeaker end.

The typical c-j 'no feedback, no electrolytics' rule has been adhered to in the GAT. Every capacitor in the audio circuits (and their power supplies) is either a polypropylene or custom-designed Teflon type, while the circuit bristles with metal foil resistors and gold-plated silver contact relays that are sealed from the outside world. This is, of course, what you'd expect from a top-class preamplifier.

I'd say the clever part of the GAT is the blending of 21st Century control circuitry with mid-20th Century amplifier technology, but I guess the point of the GAT is it's one big clever part. The microprocessor controlled start and stop processes are an example of the kind of forethought that went into the design. It goes into a minute-long auto-mute, to eliminate the sort of transients that occasionally hit during the first few seconds of tubes powering up and down. Most don't bother, assuming that these early stage transients are not much of an issue if the power amp hasn't started up. If you use these preamps with powerhouse solid-state amps that come to life in a second, those transients can get a touch alarming. In other words, if it wasn't for the two tubes staring at you from either side of the front panel, you'd never guess this was a valve preamp.

That is, of course, until a minute after switching the amp on. Then it's valves all the way, in all the right ways too. What strikes you first about the GAT is the midrange. It's got something the classic old c-j amps had and sort of lost in trying

to move with the times. That midrange is liquid silk; refined, open, natural, enchanting. The old romantic sound of c-j was made from this, but not like this. Instead, now we have new levels of openness and clarity, like you swapped your drive units for electrostatic panels... only with the dynamic drive of, er, dynamic drivers.

This is where we encounter the first bit of GAT-magic. It exposes more of what's being played and yet doesn't make that insight uncomfortable. If anything, it just makes you want to listen more to what's going on in the music, but not at the expense of the music. This might be the only time in the whole history of all 250 GATs that anyone will ever say this, but it even does a good job of playing Tool albums. Yes, the GAT's inherent 'beauteous' nature might blunt the heaviest of transients, but what you lose at the cutting edge of prog metal, you gain when you listen to anything acoustic.

Play anything with ambience and you are greeted with a soundstage that makes you feel like you were there in the room with the musicians. Move from a small jazz club to the Wigmore Hall and the soundstage resizes itself perfectly. Then you reach for those classic 1950s albums like Ella Fitzgerald's *American Songbook* series, and you realise why hi-fi was all the rage back then; the GAT ▶





WHY CHANGE?

If you follow top c-j preamplifiers closely, over the years, they've taken up less boxes and got steadily better. The Premier 7 of the late 1980s and Premier 7a of the early 1990s had separate boxes for each channel and a third power supply case. The ART (Anniversary Reference Triode) came along in 1998 to celebrate the company's then impending 20th anniversary; this had a single preamp box and a separate power supply. Over the years, the ART went through a couple of significant revisions over the years, especially when the company's original 250 models were expanded by a further 25 units in 2005's ART3. Meanwhile the ACT preamplifier was launched in the early 2000s as the then-current, one-box limited edition flagship, followed in 2005 by the ACT2. Now, all of that's gone... replaced by the GAT.

While it's wonderful for a manufacturer, a retailer and a magazine to have a constant stream of new and exciting products to attract the attention of our respective clients, should a reference point has such a short time at the top before being eclipsed? If the GAT is reaching a new clientele, this isn't a problem, but I can't help thinking some of those prospective GAT owners will be considering an upgrade from an ACT2 bought just a few years ago. In fairness, I think most people would rather see the standard being raised by ever-better products whenever they appear than held back because of last year's line-up, but too regular a series of upgrades can be a source of understandable frustration for those seeking the best of the best. And the problem is the GAT really is the best of the best.

In part, this is a problem of compulsion on the part of the listener (and, in fairness, the reviewer). You want the best and aren't happy when the best that you own is superseded, making your product now the next-best. I have the same thing with camera lenses – my big Nikon 70-200 zoom has just been replaced with an improved model and, even though there's nothing wrong with the five-year old lens I currently own, there's a burning desire to trade up. My current 70-200 lens turned in stellar performance last year and it will do the same next year, even if there's a more stellar body in the heavens. Sooner or later though, I know I'll be spanking down the readies, because last year's best is not best enough. I suspect exactly the same is true for the GAT.

raises the bar and could make the pursuit of quality music replay cool again.

It's not all Brylcreem and grey flannel suits. The way the GAT articulates sounds is sublime. Normally, articulation is read to mean the way the human voice sounds and whether you can better understand the singer. Here, it not only articulates voices perfectly, it seems to do the same to any instrument you put in front of it. I stuck on 'Sweet Dreams' from the eponymous album by the late Roy Buchanan. Being a mediocre Fender Telecaster player, this is one of the 'set pieces' I try – and usually fail – to learn to play. Here though, the GAT managed to articulate Buchanan's signature pinch harmonics well enough that I could almost copy the master, with the accent on the 'almost'. Never mind, that instrument articulation represents GAT-magic part two.

GAT-magic part three is the discovery of seemingly endless dynamic range. My new classical discovery – *The Flight of Icarus* by ▶

On most preamps, you'd be at the volume control like a safecracker, turning it up and down to get the level precisely wrong.





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- ▶ John Pickard (Christian Lindberg/Norrköping SO, BIS CD 1578) – is a perfect example of this endless dynamics in action. The title track (which just about manages not to sound like incidental music from *Planet of the Apes*) consists of an orchestra playing *pianissimo* interspersed with a percussionist beating merry *fortissimo* hell out of his instruments at key moments.

On most preamps, you'd be at the volume control like a safecracker, turning it up and down to get the level precisely wrong at every moment. The GAT just takes this album in its stride. The quiet orchestral passages are not subsumed by any hint of a noise floor, while the headroom of your power amplifier or loudspeakers are the only limits to the musician bashing seven bells out of their tympani. Just remember not to set the volume level too high when listening to the quiet bits, or you'll be wearing a pair of woofer cones as a fashion accessory.

Finally, there's the breathtaking coherence of the GAT. You can listen to the most disjointed, angular piece of Acoustic Ladyland/Polar Bear style punk jazz (pazz? junk?) that to most people will sound like someone throwing a saxophone – and the saxophonist – through a wood-chipper, and the GAT will make sense out of the onslaught. You might not think this sounds like an exercise you would wish to repeat (many feel punk jazz albums sound like disco dentistry), but you should hear what it does to less extreme recordings. It's as if everyone in music had suddenly gone to James Brown school, and started playing in that incredibly tight, close-knit way only ex-JBs (like Maceo Parker) can muster.

That's not really the true 'finally' part. These were just the observations made by someone who's seemingly most aware of dynamics, coherence, articulation and imaging. If I'd been wearing my 'detail' hat or my 'rhythm' trousers, I'd have been praising the GAT's detail and its rhythmic properties. In that wholly positive respect, the GAT is protean in its shape-shifting; it sounds good to people especially in the way they want it to sound good, over and above all the other ways it sounds good.

The GAT represents the pinnacle of c-j preamp thinking, but it's more than that. Over the last few years, the top preamp landscape has been largely redrawn, thanks to a crop of best-ever products. Ayre, Audio Research, Lyra and more have planted flags once more on this high ground. Now, conrad-johnson's back in town! +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Inputs: five line level RCA phono, two processor/record RCA phono

Outputs: two preamp out RCA phono, two processor/record RCA phono

Valves used: 2x 6922 triodes

Gain: 25 dB

Maximum Output: 20V rms

Bandpass: 2Hz to more than 100kHz

Hum and Noise: 100 dB below 2.5V output

Distortion at 1.0 V output: less than .15% THD or IMD

Phase: inverts phase of all inputs at main out

Output Impedance: 100 ohms

Mechanical

Dimensions (WxHxD): 483x122x391mm

Net Weight: 15.9kg

Price: £19,000

Manufactured by conrad-johnson

URL: www.conrad-johnson.com

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URL: www.audiofreaks.co.uk

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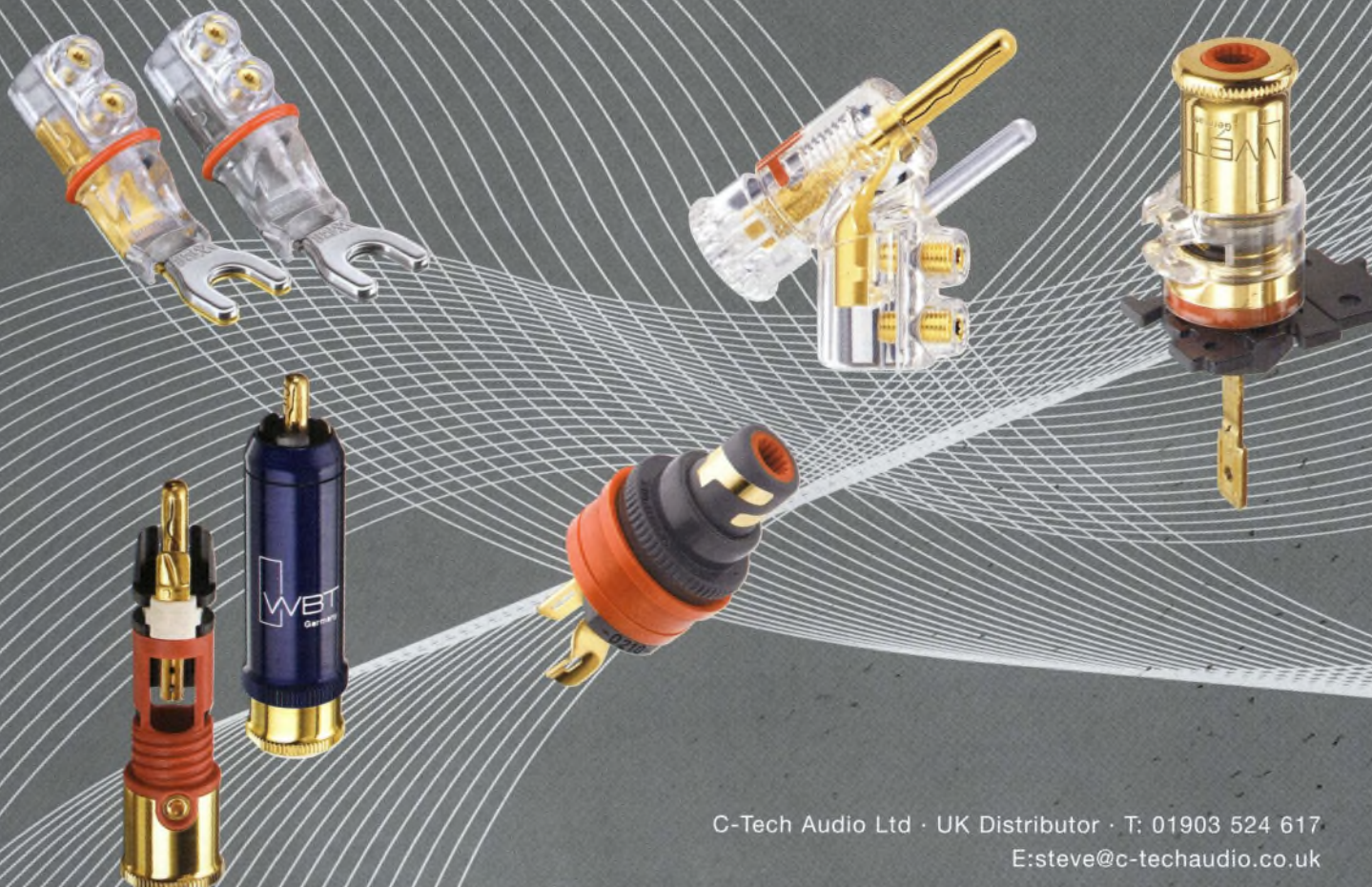
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EQUIPMENT REVIEW

The Wilson Audio Sasha loudspeaker

by Alan Sircom

The king is dead, long live the king! Wilson Audio's introductory tag-line to its new Sasha (technically, Sasha W/P) loudspeaker could be viewed as supreme arrogance or high hubris. One problem though, it happens to be true.

The Sasha is the replacement to the Wilson WATT/Puppy, a product that – above all others – has earned the right to be called 'king' among audiophile loudspeakers. First sold back in 1986, the Wilson Audio Tiny Tot (soon joined by its woofin' Puppy partner) went on to become the most successful \$10,000+ loudspeaker in history, and became a fixed point in the audiophile firmament. It set the tone for other Wilson designs, bigger and smaller. Recently though, the direction-finder in Wilson Audio sound came from elsewhere in the range. Each successive change made the W/P sound more integrated and lively and brought it more in line with the sort of sound made by other Wilsons, but the bright star of the Wilson line cannot spend its life playing catch-up to products like the Sophia or the MAXX.

In the Sasha, what could have been just another iteration of the WATT/Puppy concept (it would have been 'System 9') has undergone a root-and-branch reworking. The human brain's ability to form associations and patterns is a remarkable thing, but it can be prone to failure (optical illusions are a perfect example of this). A quick glance at the Sasha in isolation will see similarities between this new speaker and the WATT/Puppy products it replaces and we will naturally make associations between the two that simply aren't there. Because there are so many changes between the Sasha and what went before, it's almost easier to point out the bits that aren't changed rather than list what's been swapped: the cones in the bass drivers, the range of 'Wilsongloss' finishes (our ones were finished in an almost black midnight blue) and – I think – the rear port and spikes are held over from what went before. Pretty much everything else is a new speaker.

A fair chunk of Sasha – the 25.4mm inverted titanium-foil dome tweeter and the proprietary 178mm paper/carbon-fibre composite cone midrange driver, for example – are a direct 'lift' from Wilson's MAXX 3. These new units were chosen after a moment of audio epiphany at the Musikverein Concert Hall in Vienna by David Wilson. Other parts are total newcomers, such as the cabinet. Not only is it made from a new kind of material, developed out of the X (cellulose/phenolic composite) and M (wood fibres in phenolic resin) materials found in previous Wilson speakers. The new cabinet material doesn't have a capital letter name, but features as yet undefined natural fibres set in a phenolic resin laminate. This is suggested to make for a low coloration cabinet material with a particularly good midrange. ▶



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▶ The new material has allowed Wilson to completely redesign the chassis, making for increased volume in both cabinets and a head unit with more nonparallel lines. Inside, there's a new bracing design. All of which helps aid rigidity and minimise resonance and standing waves. Those surviving woofer cones are backed up by a new motor and magnet arrangement, which basically means more magnet for the same cone mass.

The crossover has been moved from inside the mid/treble head unit to a rear panel at the top of the bass unit. The panel allows components in the crossover to be altered to suit specific rooms, and also gives the midrange driver more legroom, and supposedly more midrange clarity. One legacy point that is missing from both the Sasha is the grab-handle at the back of the WATT. This marks the end of the WATT's vestigial standalone monitor role; the new head unit is adjustable to better integrate the speaker with the room and the listening position, but it's got nothing to do with being used as a solo speaker.

On paper at least, the end result of all this change is just 2Hz more in the bass. The relatively high sensitivity (91dB/W/m) is tempered somewhat by the impedance plot. Although nominally a four-ohm load, the Sasha is claimed to dip to 1.8ohm minimum impedance at 92Hz. In practice, this means the Sasha is not a friend of the Single-Ended Triode brigade and does place a limit on the choice of amplifiers used with this speaker, but the sort of amplifier one would normally consider a comfy partner for a speaker costing nigh on £28,000 will have no problems handling the Sasha. And when used with a pair of Krell Evolution 900 monoblocs, which deliver upwards of 900W per channel, you have nothing to worry about, except losing hearing. The rest of the system in this case was a four-box Krell Evolution Two twin mono preamp and a Metronome Kallista CD transport and C2A digital converter. Heady, bank account draining stuff indeed. It was playing into a room about 18x24x9, with the main listening position about 10' into the room. The speakers were about four feet from the rear wall, but only two-and-a-half feet from the sides and had about a 20° toe-in.

The Evo 900s demonstrated one of the joys of the Sasha; no limits imposed. With nigh on a Krellowatt being pushed up its speaker terminals, the Sasha has the throat needed to roar, but does so with subtlety as well as gusto. That means you can play at the sort of levels that cause rimshots and massed choirs to leave your hearing relaxing between notes and yet allows you to hear the springs beneath the snare resonating and lets you pick out individual singers in the mix. Normally, this is an either/or situation; either you get the full-blast sound, or you get the subtlety. Here, you get both.

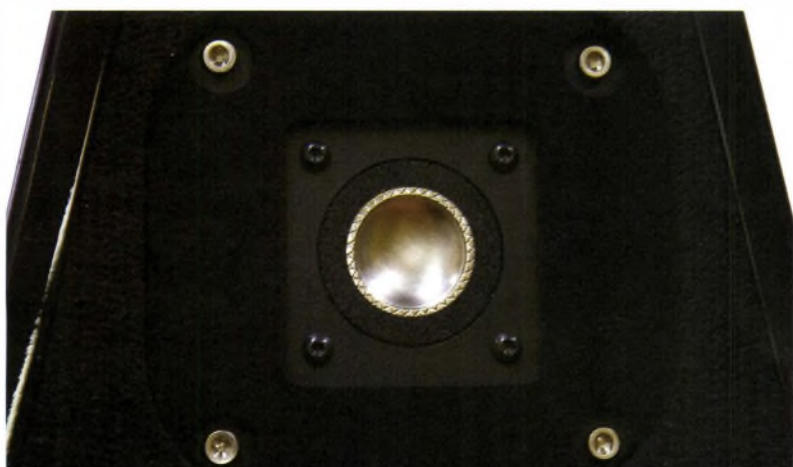
It's also a bigger speaker squeezed into a Sasha-sized box. Those who know their way around the Wilson portfolio are in for a surprise here. "Hey, where did you hide the MAXX'es?" will likely be the stock question. It's got most of the bass dynamics, bass depth, almost physical solidity and power

of the MAXX models – as well as its utterly transparent midrange and soaring top end – but in a smaller package. You get more from the MAXX, but the gap has closed considerably with the launch of the Sasha. In fairness, much of this is based on exposure to the MAXX 2; I'm pretty far from instrument rated on the new model.

Recently, I highlighted a step-change in audio, that I called the difference between 'Hummers' (big and bling) and 'Humblers' (forget the speakers, the music impresses first and foremost). The Sasha is very much on the Humbler side of the equation. It scales beautifully – swap a Big Band sound for a fey girl-with-guitar and the soundstage accommodates accordingly. Now move from breathy songstress to full-on dub reggae then to large-scale orchestral work, a jazz trio, live rock at full tilt and all points in between and the Sasha adapts beautifully. You don't get eight-foot tall singers or an inch-high second violin... everything played has an appropriate sense of scale. Wilson has been moving the W/P design further from the enlarged sound of the footie score models (WATT 3/Puppy 2, Caledonians vs Queen of the South... match abandoned due to catastrophic pie failure) for some time.

A lot of this comes from the work done (both in the cabinet and the use of that MAXX driver) to improve the midrange. The W/P always had a good, clean and extended treble (it's got better, cleaner and possibly more extended in the Sasha, but the improvement is more like a developmental progression than a jump) and has been well-respected for its big, powerful bass (once again, a developmental improvement), but the midrange was always a big part of the Wilson character. And the move to the Sasha brings the Wilson midrange in line with the MAXX above and the Sophia below. It gives the Sasha something of an electrostatic-like transparency to the midrange.

That beacon for audiophiles – imaging – is excellent, but curiously it will take you some time to notice this. Because your attention is focused elsewhere, like on the dynamic range, the solidity, or even the sheer exuberance of the sound, that reference-class imaging passes almost unnoticed. Part of this is because the overall performance is so very, ▶



Because your attention is focused elsewhere, like on the dynamic range, the solidity, or the sheer exuberance of the sound, that reference-class imaging passes almost unnoticed.

▶ very natural – the ‘holographic’ cliché doesn’t apply here, because the sounds are too controlled and solid for that.

We’ve supposedly been ticking off all the boxes for superlative loudspeakers for some years now, and the Wilson WATT/Puppy ticked them all a long time ago. What’s left on offer and what makes this one so much better than what went before? Along with the bigger speaker in a smaller box and the more open than ever midrange, the Sasha does something very, very few loudspeakers can do, irrespective of price. It manages to reconcile the world of the audiophile with that of real people. Audiophiles choose – and design – products in adherence to Harry Pearson’s benchmark of the sound of live, unamplified music occurring in real space. However, there are people (a lot of people) who do not possess a single piece of live, unamplified music and typically find systems designed for audiophiles to sound ‘boring’. Products – especially loudspeakers – that reconcile the two are extremely rare. The Sasha is one of the very few exceptions.

The reconciliation process is not perfect – play a compressed or badly-mastered recording and the Sasha keeps it distinctly in the sow’s ear region. But what it does well is exactly what the predecessor was praised for, only more so. The studio sound that Wilson tried for with the WATT/Puppy is here in full effect. Play the Sashas and you are in the control room, listening to the sort of sound the producer and engineer always wanted you to hear.

Although the Sasha changes are not necessarily driven by increased competition, the days of Wilson Audio having this market more or less to itself are long gone. And the new speaker gives us a perfect opportunity to remap the high-end landscape, to see just where products like the Sasha fit in. Of course, there’s no easy way to compare large, top-grade loudspeakers. This is because it’s almost impossible to compare them side-by-side; it can take as much as five days just to install, set-up, fine-tune, bed in and repackage a pair of speakers like these, and often the best place in the room for one pair of speakers is the same place for another. But, we can draw parallels and this reasserts Wilson’s place at the acme of speaker design at this price. It was never really in doubt.

Broadly speaking, there are four equally valid ‘sounds’ at this price level; there’s ‘music as art’, ‘music as magic’, ‘music as science project’ and ‘music free from influence’ loudspeakers. Wilson has always been firmly in the last camp, and with the Sasha it digs its heels in still further. The Sasha is not a magical window on the composer’s soul, a talisman to make all music wonderful or a product that lays music bare. It does all these things, but it’s principally the studio monitor we all wish every studio used, because they’d make better music in the process. It will expose weaknesses in the recording, in the performance and in the audio system with stark clarity, but curiously these don’t detract from the enjoyment, any more than the surface noise on a good LP played through a top turntable stops you from enjoying the music.

Sasha highlights a difficult admission for reviewers. We are apt to look at incremental changes in designs as dirty great changes in sound.

It comes from many of us getting our degree in Reviewology from the Centre for the Easily Impressed. The problem arises when we actually happen across a genuine large-scale change in sound and we end up like the (middle-aged, beer gutted) boy who cried wolf. And Sasha is a dirty great big change in the right direction for the W/P system. In fairness, previous W/P designs did offer distinct improvements over earlier models; however some – like System 6 – were bigger and more significant than others. Sasha is the biggest change of them all.

So, should you turn in your WATT/Puppy system for the Sasha? Not necessarily; the W/P remains one of the few legends in high-end and that reputation is still richly deserved. Just one thing though; if you aren’t planning to upgrade soon, you might want to steer clear of hearing the Sasha. Even the briefest exposure may make you change your mind about upgrading.

Le Roi est mort, vive le Roi! +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Three-way, two cabinet floorstanding loudspeaker

Drivers: 2.54mm titanium-foil inverted dome tweeter; 178mm paper/carbon-fibre composite cone midrange
2x 203mm poly-coated woofers

Frequency Response: 20Hz-22kHz ±3dB

Sensitivity: 91 dB/w/m at 1kHz

Impedance: 4 ohms nominal, 1.8 ohms minimum at 92 Hz

Minimum Amplifier Power: 20 watts per channel

Dimensions (WxHxD): 356x1118x539mm

System Weight: 89.36 kg

Price: £27,900 per pair

Manufacturer:

Wilson Audio

URL: www.wilsonaudio.com

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Absolute Sounds

URL: www.absolutesounds.com

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Blue Horizon's unique products are engineered to the highest possible standard and designed by a highly qualified, award-winning team with over 70 years combined experience in specialist audio.

CABLE BURN-IN **An acknowledged problem in need of better solution.**

It is a well-known fact that high-quality audio and video cables improve over time when used in a hi-fi or home cinema system. A hard, closed-in sound with a distinct lack of bass are the qualities most noted when a cable is new; a cable that has been 'burned-in' will sound more open, extended and three-dimensional, with a more natural, less sterile performance overall.

Unfortunately, most high-quality specialist cables only get close to realising their full potential after months of use. Playing wide-bandwidth music gradually improves the performance of speaker and interconnect cables, yet technically they will never reach optimum performance with music signals alone.

The problem is quite simple. Real music has very little high-frequency energy, and thus will have a limited ability to improve a cable. Research shows that musical instruments may produce energy above 20kHz, but there is little sound energy above 40kHz. Also, most microphones do not pick up sound at much over 20kHz.

Furthermore, even the best burn-in CDs have a limited effect, owing to the limited frequency range of a CD player. A typical CD player has a sampling rate of 44.1kHz (Red Book standard). Digital theory (Nyquist) suggests a maximum frequency of 22.05kHz; the highest frequency is always half the sampling frequency. In reality, 20kHz is about the maximum because of the need to filter within the replay device.

Therefore, while it is accepted that sound, be it composed music or carefully-generated frequencies



Blue Horizon Proburn Cable Burn in machine

played through an audio system, will improve a cable's performance over time, it must also be accepted that the overall effect is limited technically. Cables conditioned in this way will never reach their true performance potential. Thus, an alternative method is required.

The challenge is two-fold: burn in time and burn in effectiveness. How can a cable be fully conditioned, and the time required to undertake this conditioning decreased from several months to just one day?

Proburn's patent-pending technique fully prepares cables for audio or video use in a way that no amount of music ever can. To put this into context, Proburn produces 10,000 times the upper frequency limit of a typical CD player, which not only dramatically reduces the burn-in time for new cables but also fully prepares and conditions your existing cables. Proburn will also keep your cables performing to their full potential; condition them for 24 hours every six to eight weeks and your cables will remain free from negative charges and static problems.

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EQUIPMENT REVIEW

The SRM Arezzo Reference Turntable

by Roy Gregory

Are we witnessing a quiet revolution in turntable design? Are we seeing significant advances in musical performance that result not from new technology or materials but from a recasting of relative priorities? Or, to put it slightly more contentious terms, has speed stability re-emerged at the top of the turntable performance heap for the first time since the LP12 read the last rights over the quartz locked, direct drive turntable? Of course, direct drive has made its own comeback in the form of the Grand Prix Audio Monaco, with other companies also pursuing the approach, but the rejuvenation of idler drive and renewed interest in multi motor systems also mine the same rich vein of musical communication. To date these evolutions have tended to be confined to the upper echelons of the market, but evidence is emerging that, if anything, they might be even more important with more affordable designs; enter Exhibit Two...

'Stuart Michell's SRM turntables' first appeared in these pages when JMH reviewed the original Arezzo model, along with the Arezzo Kinetic and Arezzo Ultra upgrade options, back in Issue 58. He was so impressed that he's still using the Ultra version of the table. Now comes the Arezzo Reference, a flagship model that whilst clearly a linear evolution of the earlier and more affordable versions, is actually an entirely separate design rather than an extension of them. Which means that the

upgrade path ends with the Ultra, so the step up to the Reference involves a whole new deck. Having said that, as flagships go, the Arezzo Reference is surprisingly affordable – all the more so when you take in the material content.

Echoing the layered dissipation design of the other Arezzos, the Reference shares the basic structure of the Ultra. This involves a two-tier isolation base, with soft polymer pucks separating the layers and separating them from the outside world. On this stands a spike-decoupled plinth, supporting the motor and flywheel assembly (the latter still something of a rarity in the UK, although common in both Germany and the US). Top layer, comprises a sub-chassis again separated from the motor plinth on polymer pucks, which supports the main bearing and tonearm. In the case of the Reference, the ▶

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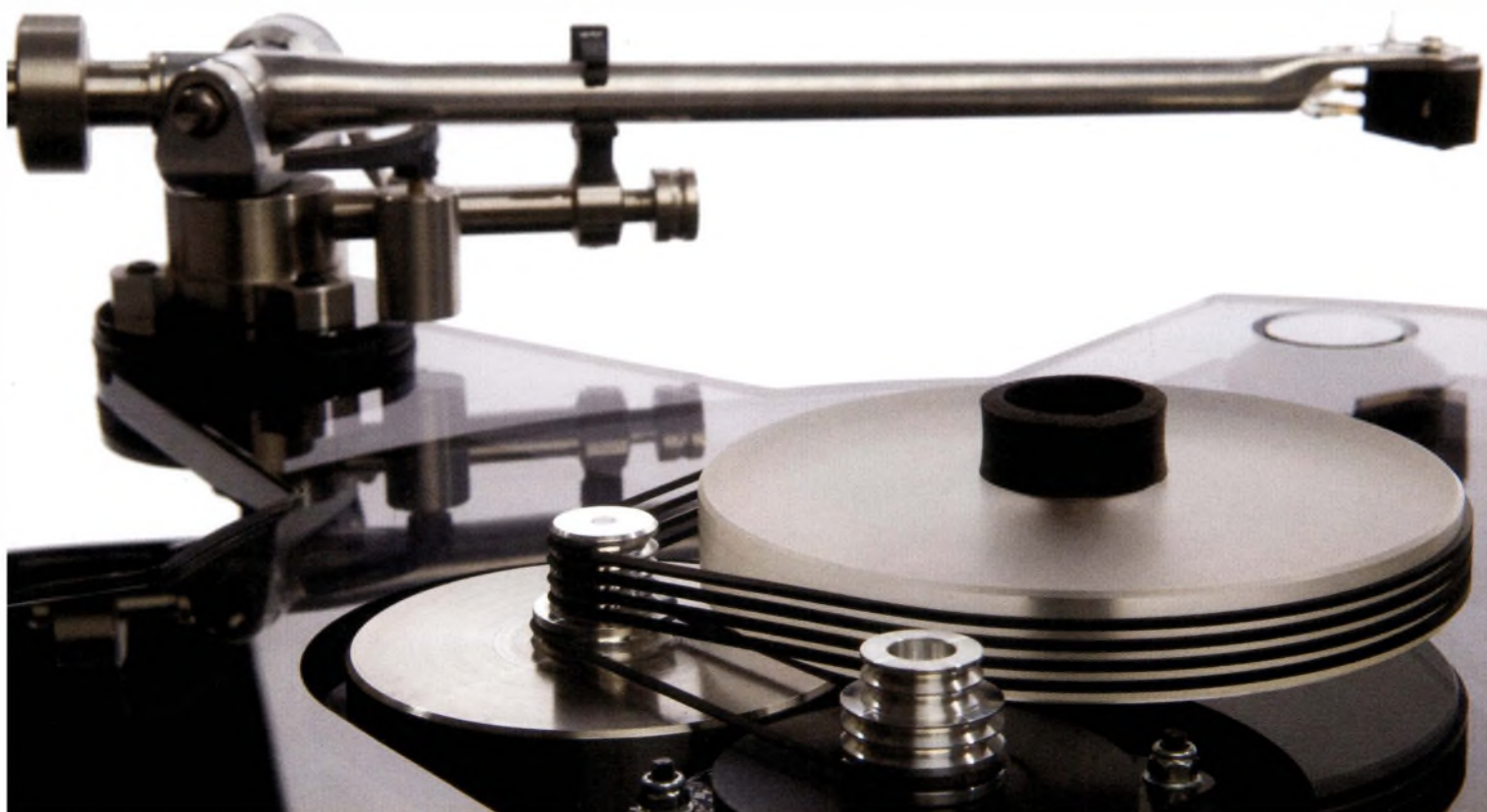
► four layers are all cut from black acrylic, adding a pleasingly sculptural quality to their curves and angled projections. Chromed metal work on the cones and discs that interface between the layers adds contrast and a subtle touch of elegance. Atop the lot sits the nicely profiled, opaque platter, machined from engineering polymer and decoupled from the main bearing shaft. The platter is instead supported by the acrylic sub-platter and located by a rubber bush around the record spindle, itself also decoupled from the bearing shaft proper. Talking of bearings, the long, standing shaft of the Reference bearing runs between widely spaced phosphor-bronze bushes, sited to break up the main resonance, which is further damped by the oil bath bearing design, fully filled with a special, high-tech oil.


The almost obsessive decoupling extends further still, to encompass the tonearm. Only available in Rega mount at present (although other cuts will become available), the arm is bolted through a sandwich of Acrylic, neoprene and silicon rubber above and below the sub-chassis. This locates the tonearm by clamping it in place, but oversized holes in the sub-chassis prevent any direct contact between it and the arm or its mounting hardware, even though there's no chance of the arm shifting. The arm-cable is carefully tied back to the sub-chassis, again to prevent any short-circuiting of the decoupling layers.

The drive system itself is closely related to the one used on the Ultra (a single square section belt driving the flywheel, with four similar belts driving the sub platter) but in this case the motor is a low-voltage synchronous design, fed from a massive external power supply. Housed in a matching acrylic case, complete with spikes and decoupling platform (of course) this is no fancy-Dan electronic supply. Instead it relies on good old-fashioned brute force, containing a pair of large toroidal transformers to isolate the motor from the worst vagaries of the AC supply. The lack of electronics also means that shifting to 45rpm necessitates lifting the platter and moving the belt onto a bigger pulley – well, I did say “old-fashioned”!

Along with all the essential parts that make up the deck, SRM also supply an assortment of different silicon rubber arm mounting rings to allow height adjustment of Rega arms, as well as fluids for cleaning the platter and the driving surfaces, and spare bearing oil. There are even comprehensive instructions – so there goes all pretence to high-end credibility...

With an RB1000 duly installed and a Dynavector DV20X mounted upfront, the Arezzo was installed atop a finite element HD03 rack. I also used the Lyra Skala to good effect, but there's no escaping the exceptional value of the Arezzo/Rega/Dynavector package. But, before you get started, one word of warning: the Arezzo Reference provides no means of levelling and with so many compliant layers involved in its construction the chances of the platter and base being perfectly parallel in all planes are pretty slim. In other words, levelling the supporting surface isn't good enough: you need to use the adjustments available to the shelf or rack to level the platter. No big deal, but it is easy to assume that getting the shelf level is good enough. It isn't – and in turn, this 'table is easily good enough to tell you that. ►





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▶ So, after that lengthy preamble, how does it sound? In a word, 'confident'. JMH was wowed (if you'll forgive the terminology) by the other Arezzos' speed stability and the Reference is no different. I can't say, without having the junior versions here, whether the flagship is superior in this regard, although the power supply and platter in combination with the same drive system would suggest that it should be, but one thing is clear: this 'table possesses a rock-like stability and unflappable mastery of the time domain that sets it apart from all but the most accomplished competition.

How does this quality manifest itself? Firstly, in the sheer stability of the musical picture. This may not be as immediately apparent with a multi-mic'd, studio recording as it is with a minimalist, acoustic one, but it is no less important. The ability of the system to hold instruments and voices really stable in space is key to both the sense of musical presence but also the ease with which we listen and relax. Machines (both turntables and most CD players) that allow the musical picture to shift or shimmer microscopically undermine our suspension of disbelief. It's yet another clue to our brain that it's hearing a recording rather

The result is that musical tempi are much freer and less forced, the thumbprint of mechanical reproduction reduced from a greasy smear to an almost invisible texture.

than the real thing. Of course, our brain can hear past this effect, but remove the need and it's rather like switching off our error correction. It might be subtle but it is also pervasive, and if you can remove it, listening becomes much more relaxed and the musical performance more involving and convincing. It's exactly this trick that the SRM Reference achieves.

The second aspect to this more convincing performance is the placement and spacing of notes, which is both more natural and far easier to decipher. The shape and accenting of melodic lines becomes much clearer, the inter-relationship between the musicians much more apparent; it's simply more obvious why a note is where it is and how it is. The result is that musical tempi are much freer and less forced, the thumbprint of mechanical reproduction reduced from a greasy smear to an almost invisible texture. Like the absence

of shimmer in the image, this is far more apparent once you've heard it removed – evidence of just how adaptable our perception is. But live without this intrusive effect for even a short while and its influence will become all too obvious as soon as it is reintroduced.

I was so intrigued by the SRM's advances in these important respects that I conducted a few LP versus CD comparisons, using the superb Wadia 781. But as good as the digital player is (and it's very good indeed) there's no escaping the fact that the turntable consistently generates a more natural perspective and an easier, more fluid and graceful sense of musical line. The images themselves are more dimensional and much better defined in terms of height. The easy swing that makes 'Do Nothin' Till You Hear From Me (This One's For Blanton)' escapes all but the best systems, reducing the track to a tedious, clash of ponderous bass notes and glassy, strident piano chords. But the SRM captures the loping stride of Ray Brown's phrasing, the stabbed interjections of the Duke's rhythmic accents, the elasticity of his longer phrases with a complete absence of apparent effort or drama. This is how it is, this is how it should be, seems to be the message – a musical message that'll have you playing through whole sides instead of just the track you thought you'd try. Indeed, whether it's the underlying sense behind a vocal (the very different demeanours of Lloyd Cole, Leonard Cohen or Robert Smith – miserabilists all, but each in their own distinct way) or the

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- ▶ stylistic variation between instrumentalists (Heifetz, Perlman and Marty for instance) the SRM lays these musical differences bare.

One other thing underpins its fluid, rhythmic performance and natural sense of instrumental weight; the even energy spectrum from bottom to top. There are no bands of emphasis, thickening or subtle thinning on show here. While a little extra heft down below can add a sense of weight or power, a leaner mid can add a sense of transparency and focus, the Reference is pleasingly devoid of undue emphasis, instead deriving definition and drama from the recording itself. If it has a character (and what doesn't) then it's a slight tonal lightness that increases its deft sense of musical agility. It does not go as deep and is not as texturally explicit at the lowest frequencies as the likes of the Grand Prix or the Kuzma XL4. However, while this is consistent across cartridges, I haven't been able to remove the RB1000 from the equation so this might be more to do with the arm than the 'table. Certainly, the notion of mounting the JMW on the SRM is tantalizing indeed...

As it stands, the SRM deck delivers an engaging and incredibly informative musical performance. It's quick and dynamic without being obvious, unobtrusive yet capable and unflappable. Above all it offers a level of musical insight and involvement, together with a visual elegance that I thought was well beyond 'tables in this price range. Neat, petite and sonically discrete, this is one player that can deliver both musical and domestic harmony in equal measure – and that alone sets it apart from the crowd.

An unqualified recommendation then? Oh yes – but for one little caveat. Waiting in the wings is Exhibit One: the VPI Classic, a turntable of similar price that also shows similar concerns, even if its approach is diametrically opposed to that of the SRM (so much so that if you love one you'll almost certainly turn your nose up at the other). The comparison is fascinating – but alas, will have to wait for the next issue, where I'll also place these two giant killers in the context of the much more expensive decks out there. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Belt driven turntable with integral fly-wheel

Speeds: 33 and 45 (manually adjusted)

Motor: AC synchronous

Lid: Yes, free standing

Dimensions (WxDxH):

Turntable: 438x390x125mm

Finish: Black

Price: £2,998

Manufacturer:

SRM

URL: www.srm-tech.co.uk

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EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Lyngdorf CD-1

by Alan Sircom

With a number of high profile projects, such as the Steinway Lyngdorf range, the Millennium digital amplifier and the clever Room Perfect DSP-based equalisation system, you could be forgiven for overlooking the Lyngdorf CD-1 CD player. But, cast any ideas of 'range filler' from your mind; in the topsy-turvy audiophile landscape, the CD-1 is perhaps the most important component in the Lyngdorf range.

We're finding the number of products that use a real audio CD tray becoming increasingly rare, but the CD-1 eschews CD-ROM or DVD-ROM drives in favour of a proper Philips CD-Audio mechanism. The DAC is a Wolfson WM8470 converter chip, which is designed to work in balanced mode. As a consequence, the rear panel sports XLR and phono analogue outputs. There are also transformer-coupled S/PDIF coaxial, Toslink optical, AES/EBU XLR digital connections and a pair of RS232 slots for connection to PC or remote systems. You can switch between 115v and 230v at the mains socket.

One of the smartest aspects of the player is its use of what Lyngdorf calls ICC (Intersample Clipping Correction). The resampling process reduces the gain at the DAC, then the low-pass filters reshape clipped samples back to something resembling the original shape. The result is less brash sounding modern discs (with their pushed to the max loudness causing clipping) at the expense of a couple of decibels in dynamic range at the DAC output. This of course doesn't count at the standard 16bit, 44.1kHz, because there's no sample rate conversion deployed, but works at the default 96kHz and the optional 48kHz or 192kHz (all at 24 bit precision).

The sample rates are all controllable from the menu, accessed via the front panel or the remote. Other options from the menu include display level, repeat and random track controls, some Comms control (for talking to PCs), disabling the infra-red remote (useful for custom installers), switching off the analogue section and analogue gain adjustment. This gives a handy range from -12dB to 0dB in 0.5dB steps and means level matching between the CD-1 and other products is relatively easy. ▶

But cast any idea of 'range filler' from your mind; in the topsy-turvy audiophile landscape, the CD-1 is the most important component in the Lyngdorf range.

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" ...but all I can say is that this remains a
remarkable amplifier and I can only give it and
the cabling a huge thumbs-up. "

Chris Thomas, Hi-Fi+ Issue 65 (Vitus SS-010 v2 / Andromeda Cables)



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▶ Lyngdorf has taken a leaf out of its own book, building the player as if it were an amplifier. Heavy build on solid feet, side heatsinks (a trifle redundant, as the player doesn't run hot) and sporting Holmgren toroidal transformers and large power filters all make for a rigid and very OTT build.

I don't know how much run-in the player needs though; the well-used box, the finger marks on the remote and power button and the thin layer of dust it came with makes me think our sample is the demonstrator. Nevertheless, the upside here is this is a fine example of how well the product works after a lot of use, and it works well. The remote is one common to products like Arcam and Linn and the front panel – with nine buttons and a two-deck green display – is easy to operate.

Operationally, there's nothing out of the ordinary at all with the Lyngdorf. It's superbly well built and if there's one criticism of the functionality, it reflects that solid build; the CD tray reacts fast and positively. So fast in fact that the disc can sometimes jump out of the tray and cause a misread. The onus is on the person loading the CD being very careful when centring the disc on the tray.

Another observation is the player seems mains sensitive. UK mains can pitch up to as much as 255v, which can be tough on a 230v input, and although there is a seriously good mains filter in place, a good mains feed helps the matter too. On the other hand, an extra mains filter or conditioner in the chain does nothing for (or, in fairness, against) the CD-1.

From the start, it was clear this is something fighting way beyond its weight class. Three 'S' words appear again and again on the note pad; 'spacious', 'subtle' and 'silent'. The sound is expansive and possessed of the sort of big-scale imagery you'd not normally expect from a player at this price. There's a palpable sense of depth and even height to the sound here, as well as width as good as the speakers can provide.

Then, there's the subtlety factor, which relates to the silence bit. The player is extremely good at retrieving those low-level details that mark out the best machines, rising out of a silent background that shouldn't be rare in digital, but is surprisingly hard to come by. This becomes apparent when listening to the alternatives, which seem to have a higher digital noise floor than the CD-1. This is not something that's immediately apparent, especially on rock programme, but playing John Rutter's *Requiem* or D'Anglebert's *Harpisichord Suites* clearly demonstrated how important that silence and subtlety really is.

This last could have been made to show off what the Lyngdorf does best. A recent Naxos release, with Elizabeth Farr on Harpsichord and Lute-

That Intersample Clipping Correction makes 'Wild Orchid' by the White Stripes sound fan-bloody-tastic.

Harpsichord, this excellent recording is both remarkably detailed and recorded in a natural environment, with a lot of spaces between *pizzicato* notes, and occasional sustain. The precision of the presentation moves it out of mere ornamentation and a series of trills and into a series of suites worthy of the Sun King. The music had all the space needed (both spatially and temporally) to come to life, without blurring or blunting the performance.

Don't think that this means the CD-1 fails at delivering the rock goods of the rock gods. It's powerful, dynamic and exciting sounding, too, nailing the country blues wailings of the late Roy Buchanan's eponymous album perfectly, cleverly balancing the bright Telecaster tones without squashing the life out of the music. Also, in some respects, the Lyngdorf's ICC makes this better than almost every player with modern rock discs. Take something really compromised by the Loudness War – *Black Holes and Revelations* by Muse, for example – and the CD-1 will make this disc sound better than any player irrespective of price, because it pulls it back from overload. It still sounds loud and compressed, but the music ▶

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Nevertheless, some have criticised the CD-1 for being unexciting sounding, and this complaint is not wholly groundless. But it needs setting in context. If you place the Lyngdorf in a system where it's the most expensive product (the classic top-down setting so beloved by 'flat earthers'), the 48kHz setting works out best, but you will find more exciting-sounding players from the likes of Marantz and Naim at the price. So the criticism is not wrong.

Except that the criticism *is* wrong. Put this into a system that is looking upwards, possibly where the CD-1 is not the most expensive component in the system, and a very different result quickly proves out. And once again, the settings dictate the performance, but not in the way you might expect. In most cases, 44.1kHz and 46kHz begins to look less exciting, but 96kHz becomes the default choice for those who want an Esoteric and the 192kHz setting is like a set of training wheels for a Wadia. Like most people, it seems, I preferred the 96kHz setting, although you can go quickly crazy trying to work out the idea setting on each disc if you want.

The adaptability, the 'training wheels' comment and the relatively low price for a high-end player might make you think the player is merely a placeholder for a better device. Wrong! The Lyngdorf is in no-way compromised, or leaves you waiting for the next upgrade. In fact, it's the sort of player you could put into a system costing £10,000 and still have it in place if you turned that into a system costing £50,000 or more. Think of it as an adaptable product that will happily see you through the next decade of CD play, no matter how high-end your system becomes. Yes, you will hear better sounds from a true top-line player, especially when playing beautifully recorded discs, but the CD-1 never shows its hand and will never sound like it's outclassed.

The Lyngdorf CD-1 is true high-end player without the high-end price or the prima donna sensibilities. Better still, that Intersample Clipping Correction makes 'Wild Orchid' by the White Stripes sound fan-bloody-tastic, and it's the first player that makes me want to turn 'Knights of Cydonia' by Muse 'up' instead of 'down'. That it does this without compromising more audiophile recordings in the process might just make it one of the best players money can buy, irrespective of price. +



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: CD Audio player

Compatible disc types: CD-DA, CD-R

Analogue Outputs: RCA phono single-ended, XLR balanced

Digital Outputs: AES/EBU, S/PDIF coaxial, Toslink

Odb analog output level: 3.8 Vrms

Selectable sample rates: 44.1kHz (16-bit), 48/96/192kHz (24-bit)

Frequency response: 20Hz-20kHz (± 0.02 dB)

Balanced analog output impedance: 50 ohms

THD+N, A-weighted: 0.00018%

Crosstalk: -114 dB

S/N ratio: 115 dB

Dynamic Range: 100 dB

Power Consumption: 2.5W (standby), 20W (operating)

Finishes: Black, Silver

Dimensions (WxHxD): 450x100x357mm

Weight: 6.9kg

Price: £1,795

Manufacturer:

Lyngdorf

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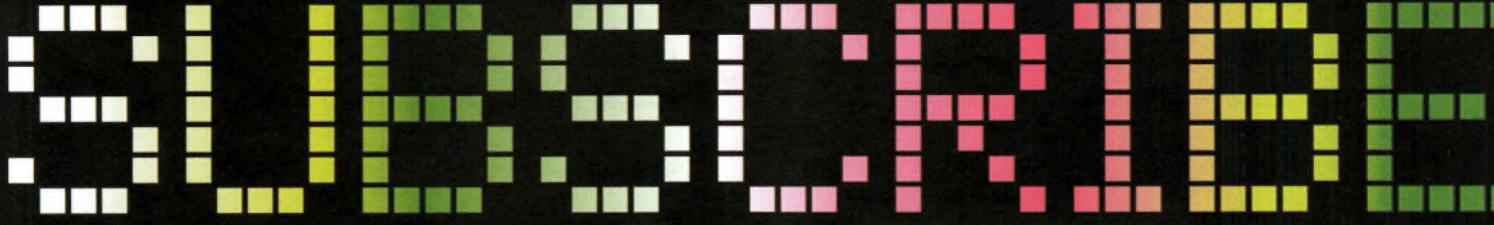
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EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Belles LA-01 preamplifier

by Alan Sircom

Waaaaay back in the before time, in the long, long ago, Roy Gregory made a promise. Coming at the end of a review of a pair of Belles MB-200 mono amps, he said something like 'if you think that's good, wait until you hear the preamp'. It's my turn to deliver the goods with the LA-01 preamp. And it is good.

Belles is one of those secret weapons in the audiophile's arsenal. It's not one of the superbrands, but that only means it delivers a performance you cannot easily get at the price. The designer, David Belles of Pittsford, NY, is clearly one of those no-nonsense amp designers who isn't locked into using valves or solid-state exclusively; he goes with the device that best suits the product at the time. So the LA-01 is a completely solid-state preamp, while other devices in the portfolio take great advantage of tube performance (the same applies to the power amplifiers, although these are all solid-state – the 200 Watt mono MB-200s we used with the preamp are Class AB affairs, but there are several Class A designs too).

The preamp is a two-box, line-level affair. There are just four line-level, single-ended RCA phono inputs and a pair of single-ended RCA phono outputs. There is no phono stage. Aside from a volume control, the sole concession to flexibility is the mute control (replicated on the remote) and a 12v trigger on the back to allow the power amps to power down with the preamp. You want balance adjustment... buy another preamp. Trimmable inputs with fancy LCD readouts and home cinema by-passes are not on the Belles roadmap. You do get a multi-pin cable connecting preamp with power supply, but that's it.

So, flexibility and a bewildering array of readouts and adjustments will never trouble the LA-01 – what does it have in their place? Good, solid, no-nonsense engineering, that's ▶

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- ▶ what. Like an exceptionally simple and direct signal path, combining high input impedance (100k ohms) and virtually no output impedance. That alone makes the Belles LA-01 almost textbook in terms of how a preamp should 'see' its sources and 'be seen' by power amplifiers (an ideal preamp would have infinite input impedance and zero output impedance across the frequency range); the zero crosstalk between inputs and 60dB between channels, allied to a claimed distortion figure of better than 0.001% help, too.

Belles has chosen to drive the preamp as if it were a power amplifier, using power MOSFET devices in the output stage. This means you'd really need to select a broken power amplifier, or dozens of metres of interconnect cable, to find an incompatibility between preamp and power amplifier. You could almost run a pair of speakers off the preamp on its own, because those MOSFETs run at about 10w in Class A. This is kind of why balanced operation isn't important here, even when there's a goodly distance between preamp and powers.

The separate power supply case sports four stages of decoupling to keep the preamp from the mains. While that is not quite a virtual battery design, it's a very practical solution that gets close enough for most. It's also considerably more real-world practical than going the real-battery route. There's also a level of mechanical decoupling too, in that the chassis for both preamp and power supply (as well as many of the other amplifiers in the Belles range) sport Stillpoints feet.

'No-nonsense design' extends to the exterior, which is on the functional and bluff side of things. There are thick black or silver aluminium front panels and top-plates with the matching italic-script Belles logo inset in an oval, and everything is built to an exceptional standard. The three switches are tiny toggles and the volume control is distinctly ordinary. If beauty is skin deep, these things were built inside out. It's a remarkably British design for that; nothing fancy, it's a roll-yeer-sleeves-up kind of minimalism, the sort of preamp you expect would be 'handy' in a fight and would even bust you a fiver for a kebab and the end of the night.

The 'handy in a fight' point is not just because it's built solidly. The Belles LA-01 has a lot to commend itself in the sonics bit, as well. It manages to combine excellent solidity of sound with the sort of slippery-fast transient speed of the likes of a darTZeel. The pace is incredible; one of the many sad musical passings this year was jazz drumming legend Louie Bellson; at his peak Bellson (like Buddy Rich) played the drums with the sort of lithe expression that turned the drum kit into a fluid, *legato* instrument. The LA-01 has that kind of quality; dynamic classical passages hit you with an intensity that almost hurts, Gregorian chant ebbs and flows with such grace, you feel the need to burn a few witches while 50s jazz draws you inexorably toward the drummer as you hear them move around the kit.

The leading edge of music is preserved with the LA-01. That simple statement sounds obvious, but it masks the fact that so few products do this as precisely. Those musical transients that make you instantly recognise live music from recorded are retained perfectly here. And again, we come back to drummers; the splash of a cymbal, the delicate stickwork of an Art Blakey, or the not-so-delicate pounding of Meg White are all in perfect temporal alignment (the online video of Meg White receiving a not-so-delicate pounding is probably fake, by the way). You notice this especially in comparison, this time to the otherwise very good Coda 05X preamp. Sounds seem half a step behind the Belles; softer and perhaps more rounded, yes, but not as fast or as immediately dynamic. This applied both with the matching Belles powers and the Coda CX; the Belles-Belles combination being the most expressive and ▶

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TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Inputs: Four line-level stereo RCA inputs

Outputs: Two pairs RCA stereo

Manual & Remote controls: Input, Volume, Mute & Power

Frequency Response: 0.2Hz to 200kHz +/- 3 dB

Hum and Noise: >100 dB (A weighted)

Input Impedance: 100k ohms

Output Impedance: Less than 0.1 ohms

Distortion: Less than 0.001%

Maximum Output: 6.7 volts RMS

Gain: 4.92 or 13.84 dB

Crosstalk: Unmeasurable between inputs, 60dB between channels

Filter Capacity: 4 stages of decoupling, 400,000µF total

Dimensions (WxHxD, per chassis): 432x88.9x330mm

Weight: 10.9Kg

Price: £6,000

Manufacturer:

Power Modules Inc

URL: www.powermodules.com

Distributed by:

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▶ exciting, the Belles-Coda being the more sumptuous. But every time the LA-01 was put in the system, things just seemed to get a little bit faster. If anything, it's almost too fast; combining the seeming pace with the Stillpoints feet (especially on a Townshend VSSS rack) is pushing 'excitement' into 'brightness'.

The Belles preamp is not simply a speed-freak though; there's a lot of dynamic weight and solidity to the sounds too. Play something Wagnerian and that sense of rootedness, coupled with the pace really makes for a maelstrom of sound. All of which means the Belles will never be consigned to making background sounds. You wick it up and listen captivated. The idea of talking over the LA-01 is absurd; it won't let you. You're there for the musical duration. In this, I'm reminded of the Magico experience; it's not as enchanting and pausing the disc does not seem like an affront to music, but you find yourself struggling to pull away from sounds played on the LA-01.

There are more subtle preamps around, and what the LA-01 does to the leading edges of music, you can find preamps that do the same to the sustain, decay and release of individual notes too. And even ones that address the



whole musical entity with more excitement and drama, but in all these cases the preamp that's better is also a lot more expensive. Then there's the whole issue of stereo imagery; the LA-01 is squarely locked between the speakers. The imagery does not draw attention, either in a positive or negative light. But those who set their store by expansive soundstages and stereo you feel you could walk into are going to be looking elsewhere. Others will find this a triviality and love the amplifier for its excitement first and foremost; soundstaging's suddenly not going to be a priority for you after listening here.

The Belles LA-01 preamp is surprisingly good. It's one of the fastest and most exciting sounding preamps you can buy, in very much the darTZeel mode (only without the battery power and the fancy multicoloured Swiss casing). It will take feed from any CD player and drive pretty much any power amp you can think of without a grumble. For some, the lack of even a balance control is a minimalism too far, and just four inputs and a complete absence of funky features will make it impossible to countenance. Others will find it the perfect combination, in a package that challenges considerably more expensive preamps. That could prove irresistible for many seeking top class sound over fancy frills. That's a heady brew. +



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EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Atlas Asimi interconnect & Mavros loudspeaker cables

by Adam Blake



Atlas Cables is a Scottish company, best known for resisting the fetish for obscure materials surrounding high-end cables. Even its top Mavros speaker cable and new Asimi interconnect feature sensible things like high-purity copper or silver and top-grade Mylar and PTFE.

Atlas uses OCC (Ohno Continuous Casting) conductors. In the late 1970s, professor Atsumi Ohno found that if you heat the mould to a higher temperature than the melted metal you intend to cast, and cool it soon after, the result is one long, pure metal crystal. For Mavros, that spells 99.9997% pure copper conductors; ditto for Asimi, except in silver. In the Asimi and the bass runs of Mavros, these high-purity monocrystal conductors are used in a multi-stranded layout, while the HF runs of Mavros are 1.77mm² solid copper cores, all of which are wrapped in individual special low-loss microporous PTFE insulators, and twisted to help lower electromagnetic interference.

Asimi has the two conductors individually wrapped in a jacket of Mylar, packed in cotton, wrapped in a copper/Mylar electrostatic screen and a silver-plated copper braid. This is then housed in a PVC outer jacket which is then wrapped in a sleeve of silver cotton yarn and finished off with a pair of silver-plated OCC plugs, custom designed for the cable.

Mavros speaker cable wrap the four separate conductors in cotton, wraps them in paper, shields them in PVC and shrouds them in a black cotton yarn sleeve. The connectors extrude from a thick metal block and you have a choice of shot-gunned single-wire, bi-wire or bi-amp connections. In other words, both cables are reassuringly rugged and both cables come with a complementary run-in CD.

Taken separately or together, these cables are creamy smooth, dynamic enough to simultaneously rattle fillings or play at a whisper without problems, extremely detailed and extraordinarily neutral; all of the things you want from a cable with none of the things you don't.

There is a slight synergy in using the interconnect and speaker cable together, more because of trying to mix a fundamentally neutral sound with something less close to the ideal. Of the two, Asimi is the more immediately 'impressively unimpressive' cable, by having even less of a tonal influence than the Mavros. This, by comparison, does have a very slight transparency loss in the lower mids.

It's hard not to be seriously impressed with Atlas' Asimi and Mavros pairing. These are two of the very, very best. Plus, it's good to find a truly UK high-end offering. Atlas is definitely on the high-end map! +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Atlas Asimi

Silver pseudo-balanced interconnect

Resistance: 0.0181Ω/m @ 27°C

Conductor to screen capacitance: 112.52 pF/m

Inter-conductor capacitance: 50.17 pF/m

Conductor - screen inductance: 0.3496μH/m @ 1 kHz

Conductor - conductor inductance: 0.7162μH/m @ 1 kHz

Price as tested: £2,000 (1m pair)

Atlas Mavros

Copper bi-wire loudspeaker cable

Resistance: 0.0035 Ω/m @ 26°C

Capacitance: 111.14pF/m

Inductance: 0.3412μH/m @ 1 kHz

Price as tested: £1,390 (3m pair, Z-plugs fitted)

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EQUIPMENT REVIEW

The Sugden Mystro amplifier and CD player

by Steve Dickinson

Heckmondwike, in West Yorkshire, may not be the first place that springs to mind when world-class technical innovation in hi-fi is being discussed, but it is here, on the edge of Yorkshire's famous rhubarb triangle, that JE Sugden produces its legendary A21 amplifier. The A21 has been around since the 1960s and, at the time of its design by Jim Sugden and his dog, Gromit, in nearby Cleckheaton, it was the world's first commercially available, class-A, solid state amplifier, immediately challenging the supremacy of the valve designs of the day.

I'm not entirely sure about the name of Jim Sugden's dog, nor even if he had a dog at all, but I do know that early versions of the A21 had looks only a mother could love, even the cosmetically improved A21a version, produced in the eighties, had a somewhat homespun appearance which belied its performance. It was not until the comparatively recent A21a series 2, that an element of industrial design crept in with a solid stainless steel faceplate and chunky knobs and switches. It is a classic and purposeful look, worthy of far more expensive equipment, which is entirely proper because the A21 will easily see-off significantly pricier competition in its sheer musicality. It is fair to say, I think, that the A21 made Sugden hi-fi what it is today.

The Mystro amplifier carries on the look established by the A21a, series 2; it still boasts the solidity of the stainless steel faceplate and chunky selectors and switches, but with a little less adornment. It remains, by any measure, a very attractive

design with a reassuring solidity. This is no cost-pared, Chinese-built, entry-level model either; the Mystro is built in Yorkshire, alongside its more expensive siblings and, like many things to come from Yorkshire, it is robust and built to last. It features an honest and useful 50 Watt output and even has a decent (moving magnet) phono stage thrown in for the price. If you read the words 'entry-level' and decided to skip this review you should read-on, because the Mystro is better than the A21. No question about that. The accompanying Mystro CD player is also better than the current CD21, too, but more of that, anon.

There is another significant difference between the Mystro and the A21 amplifiers: the Mystro is not a class-A design. Sugden have used class-AB amplifier designs before, notably in the dinky 'Bijou' system, but a central tenet of the Sugden philosophy has

been a steadfast belief in the inherent superiority of class-A amplification. The interesting thing here, I think therefore, is not so much that Sugdens have espoused class AB technology at all, but that the Mystro so clearly outpoints the A21.

It does it by employing an entirely new preamplifier stage. Coupled to the latest development of the class-AB power amp stage in dual-mono configuration, this preamp section is clearly something very special. It seems to connect directly with the music in a way I've never heard in such an inexpensive component. It isn't that it is obviously uncoloured, or obviously fast and agile, or obviously clean and uncongested, it is that it simply isn't obvious at all. That the comparatively modest 50 Watt output is unlikely to make itself known, except perhaps with bass-heavy material, played loudly, is just another aspect of the general un-obviousness that defines this amplifier. Its defining characteristic is that it doesn't have a defining characteristic, it just gets out of the bloody way and lets t' music do t' work.

I used the amplifier with a variety of CD players, ranging from Sugden's own Mystro, via the Rega Saturn and my own Cairn Fog3 to the dCS Puccini. In every case, the strengths and flaws of each player were clearly laid out, even the seemingly absurd price mismatch between the £10,750 dCS player and the baby Sugden was simply not an issue. Like a true son of Yorkshire, the Mystro simply tells it as it sees it. The Mystro's timing, its simple sense of pace, rhythm and flow complimented the dCS in that respect admirably. Oh, sure, something like an Accuphase amp will give you even more of the same, and with more confidence, control and overall authority. But, for a third of the price, the Sugden concedes embarrassingly little to the Japanese heavyweight.

The Mystro has an untroubled naturalness, a real sense of immediacy and presence, the sort of élan you expect to carry a much higher ticket price.

The Mystro has an untroubled naturalness, a real sense of immediacy and presence, the sort of *élan* you expect to carry a much higher ticket price. 'Roxanne' from Sting's live album *All This Time* has a vividness born of the attack of struck strings and fast percussion, the Mystro gives you all of this and also a strong sense of the interplay between musicians. 'Clandestino' from Roberto Fonseca's *Zamazu* has a lot of rhythmic give and take, together with Fonseca's dramatic but effortlessly fluid piano technique and immaculate timing, there is quite clearly a great deal of interplay between the musicians, which the Sugden conveys without fuss or fanfare. The only time I caught it out was largely my own fault: 'Station Approach' from Elbow's *Leaders of the Free World* starts innocuously enough with vocals and acoustic guitar and, forgetting just how loud and driving the track finishes, I had the volume set a little too high. Realising my mistake, I left it alone anyway and waited to see what would happen. What did happen is that it all got a bit shouty and over-excited, but it didn't collapse into a mess, the fundamentals were still there: it still timed properly, the bass and treble stayed together and it was still perfectly intelligible. It was still music, in fact it was still compelling music. It seems that even when it is trying too hard, the Sugden just can't help being a great communicator.

On acoustic, classical recordings, or any music recorded in a venue rather than a studio, the Mystro recreates a convincing sense of place and space, for example 'Sã qui turo' from L'Arpeggiata's *Los Impossibles* (Naïve V5055) the depth and size of the acoustic is clear from the opening note, and the wonderfully nuanced playing and rich timbral textures are quite delightfully portrayed, attributes rarely more than hinted at in this price range. The Sugden Mystro amplifier has that disarming ability to be all things to all men. Urbane and charming, or jokey and blokey. Perhaps a little more Michael Parkinson than Geoffrey Boycott.

The companion Mystro CD player is derived from Sugden's established CD21, the main difference being the loss of the CD21's digital output, the Mystro comes equipped with just the regular pair of phono sockets for its analogue-only output. Remarkably, the removal of the digital output stage has significantly elevated the performance of the player, the Mystro is a clear step up from the (more expensive) CD21, but before you accuse me of getting carried away, I should explain that I was never a fan of the CD21, finding it a bit 'nice but dim'; the CD21 is a player I always wanted to like, but could never bring myself to do so. The Mystro, on the other hand, captures rather more of the excitement, dynamics and drama of a proper musical performance than the CD21 could ever hope to achieve. It pains me, therefore, to report that the Mystro CD player doesn't approach the amplifier's levels of general wonderfulness, it might perhaps be fairly described as a decent performer at the price ▶

- ▶ rather than something which takes you further than you have a right to expect for the money.

There is no shortage of CD players at the £1,200-£1,500 point, and the Mystro is certainly in the front rank of those, but it can't withstand comparison with my long-term favourite at the price, the Rega Saturn. Compared to the Rega, the Mystro sounds held-back and rather inhibited, an altogether more languid, softer-focus presentation. Where the Rega is quick and dynamic, the Sugden player, in contrast, lacks definition, with less instrumental separation and leading-edge attack. Bowed and plucked strings, in particular, are slightly more rounded off and diffuse. Vocals don't separate themselves from the mix and music is presented more as a homogeneous block of sound rather than a set of interwoven threads. In this respect, the Sugden also concedes to the less-expensive Cairn Tornado.

Returning to Elbow's 'Station Approach' the middle section features a long-ish passage where Guy Garvey sings on just the one note, (known in the trade as a 'pedal') and the reason this doesn't become dull is partly the changing harmony, but mainly the steady build up of tension in the music, released at the start of the no-holding-back final section. Through my (£900 more expensive) Cairn Fog3 this is one of those great musical moments, the Rega also makes a fairly convincing stab at it, but through the Sugden player the vocal doesn't float free and the percussion just squats in the background so when the moment comes it just gets louder without getting any more dramatic, simply because there isn't the same level of built-up tension for the music to release.

While we're on the subject of obscure musical terminology, I also played David Rees-Williams' 'When I am laid in Earth' from *Hidden Colours*. This features a great baroque musical device, the 'ground bass' – the bass simply repeats an unchanging six-bar figure from the beginning to the end of the piece. Disappointingly, this served to illustrate a mild vagueness in the bass, vagueness which is not just confined to attack and leading-edge definition, but which also blurs the tunefulness of bass lines. Unless you knew about Purcell's famous ground bass, you could quite easily sit through the whole

five or six minutes without noticing anything remarkable about the way the bass line is constructed. That might sound academic but in truth, you just have to listen to a player which gives tight and tuneful bass to realise how essential it is to a properly intelligible reproduction of music.

The Sugden is not a bad CD player, it isn't even poor value for money. It does a lot of the right things perfectly well: tonal colour is rich and lush, without being overblown; imaging and soundstage depth are exemplary; high frequencies are crisp and clean without obvious roll-off, little grain and no obvious edginess; there is a very honest and natural, organic feel to its presentation. It will tell you what instrument is being played, how it is being played, it will even give you a fair idea how well it is being played. What it won't do is give you any special insight into why it is being played.

The thing is, most of what I have written about the CD player needs to be kept in ▶

Tonal colour is rich and lush, without being overblown; imaging and soundstage depth are exemplary... there is a very honest and natural, organic feel to its presentation.



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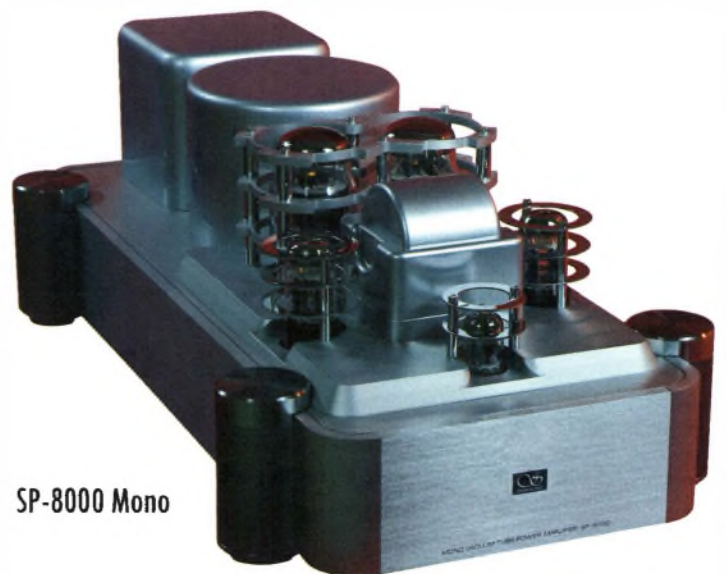
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► context if it isn't to sound unfair. Most of the above applies in some degree to the great majority of middle-ranking CD players, indeed with the notable exceptions of the Cairn Tornado and Rega Saturn, I've not heard any other comparable players that I would definitely take in preference to the Sugden. The biggest problem the Mystro CD player has is, quite simply, the Mystro amplifier. There is so much to like about this simple little amp, and so little to criticise, that it is tempting to judge it using criteria intended for much loftier components, forgetting that in the real world the Sugden products occupy a position not too many rungs up the ladder from entry-level. If this had been two separate reviews, the criticisms of the CD player would be entirely in keeping with its cost.

I've written the review this way simply because many people will buy these components as a pair, and they do work well together to give a satisfying musical performance, significantly above par for the price. If you are the sort who likes components to be an aesthetic match, then the Sugden couple will be very, very hard to beat for the money. At some point, the upgrade bug may bite, and when it does, the CD player is where you should apply yourself. The amplifier has the ability to rise to the occasion to a quite unexpected degree, as I found out when reviewing the dCS Puccini. Unless you are spending several multiples of the amplifier's price, you would be hard-pressed to find anything with the same mix of genuinely high-end qualities. As they might say, round Heckmondwike way, 'If tha's thinkin' of parting wi' yon amplifier, tha' needs tha' bloody head examined'. +

There is so much to like about this simple little amp and so little to criticise, that it is tempting to judge it using criteria intended for much loftier components..

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Sugden Mystro amplifier

Type: Integrated, class AB, stereo amplifier (dual-mono)

Power Output: 50 watts per channel, 8 Ohms; 75 watts per channel, 4 Ohms

Input: 3 x line level; 1 x mm phono stage

Input Sensitivity: Line level 155mV
mm phono 2mV

Frequency response: (Line level input)
20Hz-20kHz ± 0.5 dB

Distortion, 1W @ 1kHz: <0.2%

Output types: 1 pair loudspeakers, gold-plated binding posts

Dimensions: 430 x 92 x 310mm (WxHxD)

Weight: 8 kg

Available finishes: Titanium

Remote Control: Yes, system remote

Price: £1,225

Sugden Mystro CD player

Type: One-box CD player

DAC: Phillips TDA 1547 (DAC 7)

Outputs: 1 pair RCA phono analogue

Output Level: 1.95V

Dimensions: 430 x 92 x 310mm (WxHxD)

Weight: 8kg

Available finishes: Titanium

Remote control: Yes, system remote

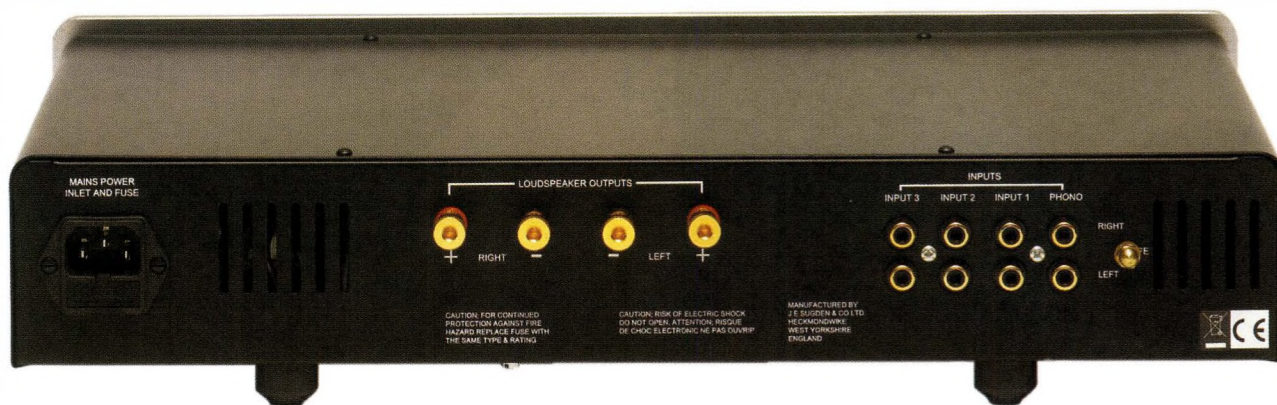
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Manufacturer:

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Ayre lightning strikes twice



In 1996 Ayre introduced the K-1 preamplifier, a design so innovative and with such advanced technologies that more than a decade later it is still considered one of the finest components available. Now in 2008 history repeats itself, the new KX-R elevates the art of preamplification to a higher plane.

Building on Ayre's zero-feedback, fully balanced foundation, the KX-R transcends all other designs with its radical new concepts. The revolutionary Variable Gain Transimpedance (VGT) amplification circuit eliminates the conventional attenuator based volume control completely. This simplified signal path renders music with power and grace against dramatically silent backgrounds at any listening level.

Ayre's Equilock circuitry and Ultra high-speed circuit board material combine to provide an unprecedented level of clarity and resolution delivering the music directly for a full and complete experience.

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EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Naim NAIT XS integrated amp and FlatCap XS Power Supply

by Ed Selley

From the launch of the original NAIT (NAim InTegrated) in 1983, Naim has done things a little differently to their competitors. Small in size and never overtly powerful on paper (the original had a marvelously Rolls Royce-esque 'sufficient' given as its output), they nonetheless sold like hotcakes thanks to an engrossing sound that, quite separate from the rated output, was powerful and engaging. NAIT's have come and gone in the ensuing three decades, changing in appearance and more recently migrating to the full width casework. The premise has stayed the same, however – as much of the Naim essence that can be forced into a single box with a reasonable spread of connections. The NAIT XS is the latest in the NAIT family and part of an entire new XS family of products. It borrows heavily from the amplifier section of the larger and more sophisticated SUPERNAIT while shedding the digital inputs and larger casework of its big brother.

One definably new area for the XS and its forthcoming siblings in the XS range is a new board fixing intended to

reduce the amount of external vibration meeting these sensitive circuits. Larger Naim components use a bespoke series of floating brass chassis that are extremely effective, but not entirely practical at this less rarefied end of the market and this 'bayonet' type mount is intended to give the XS some of the same attributes at a more realistic material price point. As ever, Naim has expended considerable effort in making the chassis as inert as possible while other features such as the 'wobbly' sockets on the rear panel continue as before to reduce the effects of the outside world on the inside of the unit as much as possible.

Power-wise the XS produces a claimed 60 watts into eight ohms, rising to 90 into four ohms with the almost obligatory sense that the reality of those numbers is rather higher. There are six inputs which offer the option of connection via either DIN or RCA phono. While the latter is a useful nod to compatibility, experience suggests that the DIN inputs are still Naim's preferred connection and sound the better of the pair. One of the inputs ▶

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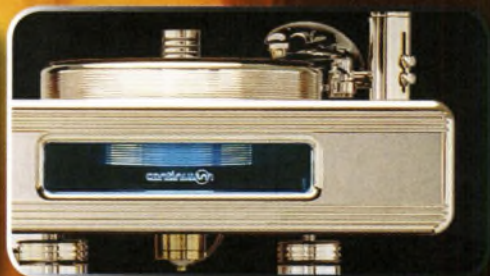
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- ▶ carries power for the Stageline phono stage and another is shared with a 3.5mm input on the front panel for quick MP3 duties. There is also an AV bypass for placing the XS in a multichannel system. A system driving remote control is also supplied.

The accompanying FlatCap XS is simple by contrast. A refinement of the earlier FlatCap, it offers two 24v outputs that have benefitted from Naim's studious attention to power regulation. Usefully, these outputs are multi functional – they can be used to provide power to exclusively to a Naim preamp or one apiece to other equipment. As tested here, the FlatCap had one output powering the preamp section of the NAIT XS while the other was diverted to my own Stageline S phono stage which is normally powered by the smaller off board iSupply in a non-Naim system. Both units are in the same slim chassis and in keeping with the XS range sport the new anodized finish. This, coupled with the standard Naim build quality gives the pairing a very solid feeling indeed. There are no front panel power controls on either of the units so they were plugged in and left on.

The Nait XS is able to reproduce detail and attack extremely well, but without tipping over into harshness or stridency even under provocation.

The NAIT XS arrived some time before the FlatCap XS, so I had a useful period of time to listen to the amp on its own. This sample unit had seemingly led an active life up to this point and seemed to be well run in. The legendary Naim warm up period seemed truncated as well, the XS sounded pretty good within an hour and did not really change behavior after the first day – in the case of the XS at least, your introduction to Naim ownership need not require the patience of a BBC wildlife cameraman. Operation of the XS is simplicity itself as controls extend to the input buttons and a volume knob, all of which have a reassuringly solid feel.

First impressions were of an amplifier that has great civility in its presentation. This should not be confused with a dullness or lack of sparkle however. The Nait XS is instead able to reproduce detail and attack extremely well but without tipping over into harshness or stridency even under provocation and considering that my time with the XS coincided with my purchase of *Invaders Must Die* by the Prodigy, there was ample scope for it. The classic Naim virtues of timing and low end grip are still present and correct and few amps anywhere

near the price of the XS will give anything like the sense of intensity and drive that any up tempo recording has. The bigger Naim amps drive lower and harder still as will some other more costly amplifiers but the XS is certainly no slouch in this regard. There is a sense that music starts and stops instantly with no bloat or overhang impeding the silences that make musical peaks so much more profound.

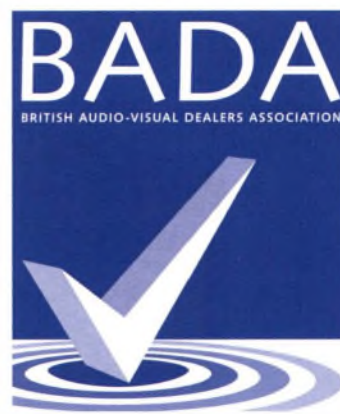
This is matched to a natural and very engaging tonality that gives instruments such as the piano and guitar a tangible level of realism. Vocals too have an unforced quality that avoids the sensation that the amp is ever working hard or being pushed too far – indeed it is possible to push the NAIT XS very hard without any sense of compression or discomfort. There is a slight sense that the very top end of the Naim's frequency response is very slightly rolled off in comparison to more expensive offerings but the rest of the spectrum is so well reproduced for it to escape attention most of the time. An interesting departure from older Naim designs is the sense of soundstage that the XS produces. Any group of musicians from a vocalist and backing piano through to full orchestra are given more opportunity to escape the confines of the loudspeakers and assemble themselves in a believable manner between them. This is especially true with the Stageline phono stage in attendance where the results are truly panoramic in scope.

Adding the FlatCap XS does not bring instant sonic fireworks to the party, because the overall balance of the XS is too well ▶

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TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Naim NAIT XS integrated amplifier

Audio Outputs: speakers, preamp, and variable sub

Power Output: 60Wpc into 8Ω, 90Wpc into 4Ω

Analogue inputs: 6 DIN and RCA on rear plus 3.5mm jack on front

Input overload: 34 dB

Input sensitivity: 130mV at 47KΩ

Remote input: 3.5mm rear panel jack (modulated/demodulated RC5 system)

RS232: Optional Naim RS232 board

IR remote (handheld): NARCOM 4

Supply Voltage: 100V to 120V or 220V to 240V, 50/60 Hz

Power Consumption: Quiescent 20VA Max 290VA

Dimensions (WxHxD): 43.2x7x30.1cm

Weight: 8.6kg

Price: £1,350

Naim FlatCap XS power supply

Power Output: 2x24V dual-rail feeds (to power two components)

Mains Supply: 100V to 120V or 220V to 240V, 50/60 Hz

Dimensions (WxHxD): 43.2x7x30.1cm

Weight: 5.5kg

Price: £675

Manufacturer:

Naim Audio

URL: www.naim-audio.com

Tel: + 44 (0) 1722 426600

- ▶ sorted for that. What it does do is augment the positive qualities of the amp and push the performance still further. The richness of vocals improves and with it the sense of space around performers. The already unflappable presentation takes another step forwards becoming almost impossible to upset or wrong foot. Although the power amp section of the NAIT XS is not directly affected by the addition of the FlatCap, it is as if taking the preamp section off it removes a distraction and enables it to drive a little harder with even less of distortion or grain. The effects of using the second output on the Stageline were even more profound. While the logic of adding £675 of power supply to a £250 phono stage might be questionable on paper, the actual results of doing so were convincing enough to quell any doubts I might have had. Given that if you were to buy the FlatCap to augment the NAIT XS, the second output to a Stageline would essentially be 'free', it makes a great deal of sense. For those of a digital persuasion, this second output would be equally applicable to the forthcoming CD player in the XS range.

Any group of musicians from a vocalist and backing piano through to full orchestra are given more opportunity to escape the confines of the loudspeakers.

The Nait XS is an immensely likable product. It builds on the classic Naim virtues we have come to expect and adds a civility and balance that in partnership with that row of RCA connections on the rear panel should win it friends outside of the traditional Naim clientele. It is a great product for £1,350 and the addition of the FlatCap XS turns it into an exceptional £2,000 one. The fact that it will function extremely well without the FlatCap if you wanted to stagger your purchases is an appealing proposition as well. The NAIT XS is an altogether larger and more complex device than the original NAIT, but the lineage is clear. Beyond the numbers is a satisfying and genuinely musical amplifier. +



EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Furman IT-Reference 16E i power conditioner

by Alan Sircom

The Furman IT-Reference 16E i is called a 'discrete symmetrical AC power source'. It has eight isolated IEC sockets for low-level analogue, digital or video sources, four high current isolated sockets (three 10A, one 16A) for power amps and eight connectors for satellite or radio sources. And inside the box is enough dual-screen transformer action to make the damn thing weigh so much.

The IT-Reference 16E i has a soft-start. If your lights dim when powering up, you need one. Also, if you have anything with transformer hum (like using a product designed for 220v in the UK, where 240v is commonplace), the IT-Reference 16E i power conditioner is often an effective cure.

It doesn't undermine the performance of connected equipment. There's no sense of music sounding weedy and

breathless in dynamic passages, although there is a small amount of the sound being slightly 'pumped up' when playing quiet passages. But, given the alternative is the quiet passages battling a less quiet noise floor, the times when the IT-Reference 16E i is called for, it's a useful addition. At its best (or rather, when it's most needed), it gives the midrange more freedom, the bass more impact and the treble less grit; not significantly, not like the difference from swapping from one pair of speakers to another, but enough to make its presence felt.

Living in suburban London though, the power conditioner did significantly improve the mains during key early evening moments (where every neighbour was watching TV, on that t'internet, listening to music or cooking) and that was a significant bonus. Even here, some products (mid-priced solid state electronics) needed the firm hand of the Furman more than others (valve amplifiers). And then, during those two heady days of high summer, we got some short on-again, off-again short, spiky power cuts (using semi-skilled mole people to attempt to fix Victorian water mains makes these brown outs irregular, but annual local events). With the Furman in place, no fuses blew in the system, and both light circuits tripped. The same thing happened a few months earlier. Both light circuits also tripped then, and two fuses blew in a very similar system. Anecdotal, of course... but that does suggest the Furman is adding a level of protection to products under its very heavy wing.

The Furman IT-Reference 16E i power conditioner might just be the real-world antidote to 'foo' mains products. When you need it, it does what it's supposed to; when you don't, it doesn't get in the way. There are a lot of products that claim more and deliver less. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

AC Current Capacity

Input: 16 Amp capacity required

Output: 8-16 Amp RMS

Outlets: 8 symmetrical balanced 10A IEC outlets; 4 outlets (3x 10A IEC, 1x 16A IEC); 4 pairs satellite protector sockets

Transient Voltage Surge Suppression:

230V AC Line (Series Multi-Stage Protection, non-sacrificial, 376V peak clamping @ 6000V 3000A input)

Shutdown Range: 275 VAC \pm 5 VAC

Linear Noise Attenuation: Transverse (Differential) Mode; >20 dB, 1kHz-2kHz >40 dB, 2kHz-100 kHz.; >80 dB, 100kHz-1GHz.

Linear attenuation curve from 0.05 – 100 ohms line impedance

Common Mode: >95 dB, 10Hz. - 50 kHz.; >40 dB 50kHz. – 1MHz.

Dimensions (WxHxD): 432x152x413mm

Weight: 40 kg.

Power Consumption: 8.5 Watts for display and control circuits independent of actual load

Price: £2,225

Manufacturer:

Furman Sound LLC

URL: www.furmansound.com

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N Grove Manchester Aug 2009

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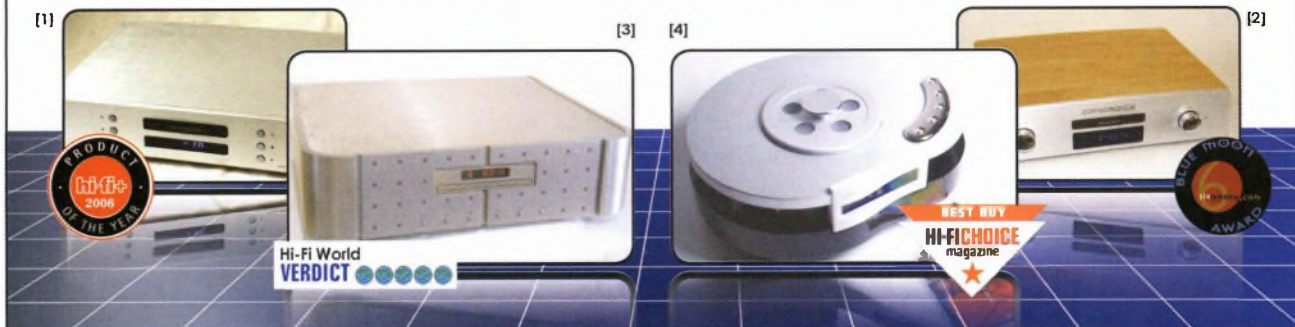
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EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Blue Horizon Proburn cable conditioner

by Adam Blake

There are those who think cable sound is nonsense, so the idea that 'burning in' can influence that cable sound is nonsense squared. This is not their product. I suggest they look away now.

Blue Horizon is the company Keith 'IsoTek' Martin formed in that brief time between leaving and restarting IsoTek, during its 2008 wilderness period. The company is said to exist to make real 'blue sky thinking' (hence the name) in audio, and the Proburn is the result.

The Blue Horizon Proburn is designed to speed, automate and improve the burning in of cables. It delivers high level signals from anything between DC and up to the gigahertz-range to anything connected to it (don't be tempted to try and actually hear this by plugging the Proburn into an amp and speakers, as you'll kill your system). The idea is these signals shake down your cables and aren't the sort of noises you will ever get close to generating through normal music playing; even test tones won't do, apparently.

A compact, well-made box, the Proburn holds two sets of phono sockets and speaker terminals, but only one set of XLR terminals, because these cables can be joined together. Bi-wired speaker cables could be a problem. Blue Horizon

is also designing breakout box 'funnies' to connect mains leads, BNC connectors, turntable phono leads and more. Little red and yellow flashy LEDs under the tinted top panel show what's connected and a big, bright, blue LED under the same shows it's working... to people on the International Space Station. An external power supply hooks the Proburn to the mains. It comes supplied with a little vial of Clean-IT contact cleaner in the box, a sweet taste of another potential audiophile addiction.

Blue Horizon suggests a minimum 24-hour burn in on any copper wire product, more for silver cables. There's no timer on the Proburn, but apparently it's not possible to 'over-burn' cables. The unofficial advice is 'let it run for a week'.

We tested this by using new sets of reasonably exotic phono interconnect and speaker cables, played just the once to determine changes in performance. Suitably 'conditioned', the sound appeared to improve on the already natural sounding cables, making it more open and even-handed. We also

compared two sets of years old, well-used, but still good interconnect cables (and two pairs of some very cheap XLRs) and the conditioned set sounded like they'd grown more bass, the soundstage increased in width and the treble seemed more alive. It's hard to say with any reliability how big a change or how it will improve a specific cable – it just seems to bring out the best in a cable, and the specifics of that 'best' largely relate to the cable being conditioned. But it's consistently 'best', because I've zapped a few different cables already, and none got worse in the process. And, although I did hear Danny Kaye singing 'the King was in the altogether...' during my listening sessions, he was very much in the background. Honest.

It won't turn giveaway cables into audiophile masterworks, but it does seem to help a cable sound more like it's supposed to sound. I could repeat the claims made by Blue Horizon about what Proburn does to cable, about how the signal penetrates the conductors and how it rearranges all the electrons in the dielectric, but I am frankly sceptical of the explanation. Truth is, I have absolutely no idea why it does what it does, but it does it all the same. The next stage to see if cables need reconditioning every couple of months as Blue Horizon suggests, so check back in a couple of issues! +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Price: £695

Available in black or silver

Manufactured by Blue Horizon

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WORKSHOP NOTES 9: SOUND FOR POUND

While £10K+ players may well be better than £5K players, they are probably not twice as good; more like 15% better. So when a respected US reviewer suggests that the Ayre C-5xe is the best CD/SACD player he has ever heard and it is priced at a modest £4495, one does have to think very hard before spending more. Our own experience is that players like the Ayre C-5xe (above left), the Esoteric X-05 (above) and the Moor Supernova represent superb value for money, offering 90% or more of the sound of much more expensive players at a fraction of the cost.

So call me, Julian Musgrave, and book an appointment to hear how these exceptional players can transform your enjoyment of music.

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lindsey buckingham

Fleetwood Mac's 'fringe element' and soloist extraordinaire

by Bob Gendron

Lindsey Buckingham knows thrills that few musicians ever experience. Along with cohort Stevie Nicks, he helped turn a British blues band into one of the most commercially successful acts in history.

Less celebrated for his solo work, Buckingham seems to be saving the best for the twilight phases of his career. The delicate *Under the Skin* from 2007 is full of complex arrangements, gorgeous melodies, virtuosic playing, and soul-baring emotions. And last year Buckingham released *Gift of Screws*, a catchy and mature set that finds the 59-year-old returning to his rock and pop strengths as he reflects on life's joys and struggles.

BG: You've made only four solo records in 25 years, but *Gift of Screws* came out just a year after *Under the Skin*. For you, that's warp speed.

Lindsey Buckingham: There has been more than one occasion when, in the past, there was an intention to put out a solo album and it either was shelved or, in one case, folded over into a Fleetwood Mac studio album. And being a band member, you want to think about the good of the whole. So that has certainly played a part in several attempts to get solo work out. In this particular case, there's another element that comes into play.

About four years ago, I said to the band, "I want to put a three-year boundary around my own time because I have an intention of putting out a solo album and touring behind it, and then putting out another solo album and touring behind that. So please just don't come knocking on the door. Let me do this." And it worked like a charm.

BG: There's some great upbeat material on *Gift of Screws*, particularly the title track.

LB: We're talking *Tusk* there, or something. What's great about the track is that one of the things Mick Fleetwood and I share is the sensibility for the wild edges of rock and roll and being able to express them in an explosive and somewhat tasteless way.



Photo by: Kristen Buckingham

BG: And while cribbed from an Emily Dickinson poem, the song's title even goes hand in hand with the music.

LB: It's abrasive and intriguing, and ultimately intellectual, even though the song is anything but. It's not like I'm a scholar of Emily Dickinson by a long shot. But I had a little pocket book of her poems. Anything of value is going to be a combination of what happens naturally and what you do with those things that you have to work with. As a concept, it seemed to apply quite well not to just the album but to the whole approach to a career.

BG: Those themes struck me in terms of the shift in how you're addressing relationships in recent songwriting.

LB: You are absolutely right. During *Rumours* and most of the time I spent with the band after that until I took off in 1987 for a while to regain my sanity—in 1987 everyone was at their worst and it was really not functioning [so] it was a time to regain a sense of self—in order to do any of that, where you had two couples breaking up, no time away, no space to get any kind of closure, it was like picking at a wound all of the time. And as someone who was in the studio producing songs for Stevie [Nicks], you kind of had to compartmentalize and almost live in little states of denial in order to rise above the emotional side ▶



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lindsey buckingham

▶ of things and do the right thing—get done what needed to be done for what was obviously a very important situation for us. Those walls went up and stayed up for many, many years for all of us. I think a couple of things have happened that play into a song like ‘Did You Miss Me’. Obviously the time that has lapsed since those difficult days. A very key thing for me personally is that after having watched many of my friends who were either parents or spouses (or both) not be particularly present as family members during those days, [it was about] not wanting to be one of those people.

BG: Is it safe to say that at this point your relationship with Fleetwood Mac is as good as it as ever been?

LB: A lot of it has been from a distance, and it's been over the phone, because we don't get together a lot. But yes, it's pretty fair to say that. The potential for that is perhaps a more conservative way of looking at it because we haven't yet gotten in one room. And intention and outcome can sometimes be two different things. But I think we're all at a point now where we have a lot of resolve for that. And I think it's safe to say that, even when we first joined the band in 1975, Stevie and I were already having problems as a couple. And John and Christine McVie were already having problems as a couple. So we went into the situation with a certain level of dysfunction and that played out for everyone to see, and it never sort of resolved. So this is a coda to some of that.

BG: You address some of that tumultuous chemistry on the new record. That at least seems obvious on “The Right Place to Fade.”

LB: I think so. And again, generalizing it out in the sense of living a life that was for a number of years lived a bit underground, narrow, and cut off from my own emotions and the broader sense of involvement in the world. Certainly, I was completely focused and enriched by the music I was making, and the music at that point still had the religious context that it still has and always did have. In fact, even more so. It's just about saying it's time to let go and let's reinvent ourselves slightly.

BG: You have a distinctive guitar tone. How do you get those sounds?

LB: It's not really anything too mysterious. I started playing very young and was interested in music even when all I had to listen to was what my parents had: Patti Page, theater soundtracks, and things like that. But then my older brother brought home ‘Heartbreak Hotel’, [when] I was about six years old. I started playing guitar because of that and because of the rest of the rock and roll that followed. I was picking up on Scotty Moore's stuff. He

did play with a pick but he did use a couple of his fingers as well. And people like Chet Atkins played on a lot of those records. Later on I got into folk music a lot, I moved on over to something else and picked up on the Travis three-finger pick and learned how to play some bluegrass banjo. All of that remained in the vocabulary of how I approached guitar.

BG: Do you think there is a large audience out there that isn't aware of your brand of newer, mature pop-rock?

LB: I think about it and obviously, you want to be understood and appreciated, or at least heard by as many people as possible—even if they don't like what you're doing. I think I used to worry about that a lot more. Obviously, the bar was very high if you were holding yourself up to Fleetwood Mac. If you look at the kind of commercial success that *Rumours* had, and then look at me, basically the culprit behind *Tusk*. That completely subverted the model that made *Rumours* as successful as it was. It was a big jump to the left. Early on, I had some cynicism for that aspect, and then if you cut to solo records, there was a time where I wished I was selling a few more. The more you sell the easier things are, the more you can get done, the larger places you can play.

I'm at a point now where I really just can't worry about that. I have to assume that the people who are going to appreciate what I'm doing are going to find it. I'm out there, sort of a fringe element of Fleetwood Mac—and always have been. I've come to terms with that and in a way, defined myself by that. And with that goes a certain diminishing of the numbers in terms of your audience.

Do I worry about where the business is going in general? Yes. Do I think that the corporate record company model is broken? Yes. But all of those are side issues to what is still really important, which is to go into the studio to go through a valid process of creating something and to see it though to fruition and to hopefully play it live.

BG: What are you doing as a producer that makes your most recent records sound so good?

LB: Well, in the last couple of years, I've used a lot of echo [laughs]. Before these [two records], there were outside mixers who were interpreting the things. I just decided I wanted to be involved in the mixing process. Beyond that, there's really not one thing I can even describe. It's like a painter with his canvas and you're just slapping the paint on. Some of it gets painted over, some of it stays. It convolutes into something it wasn't intended to be. It's not a methodical process. I'm the last thing from a technically knowledgeable engineer. It's the way I approach the guitar—I don't know anything about it. It's more like turn the knobs until it sounds good. +

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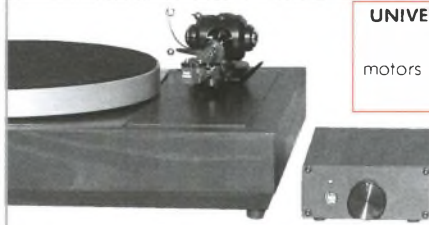
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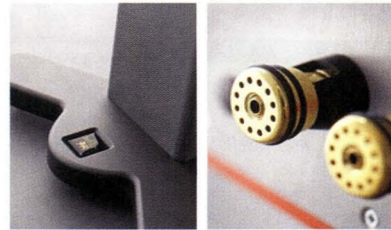
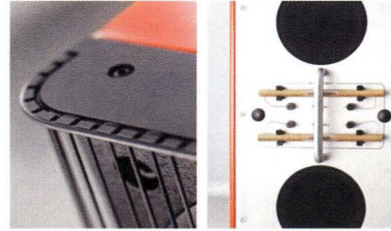
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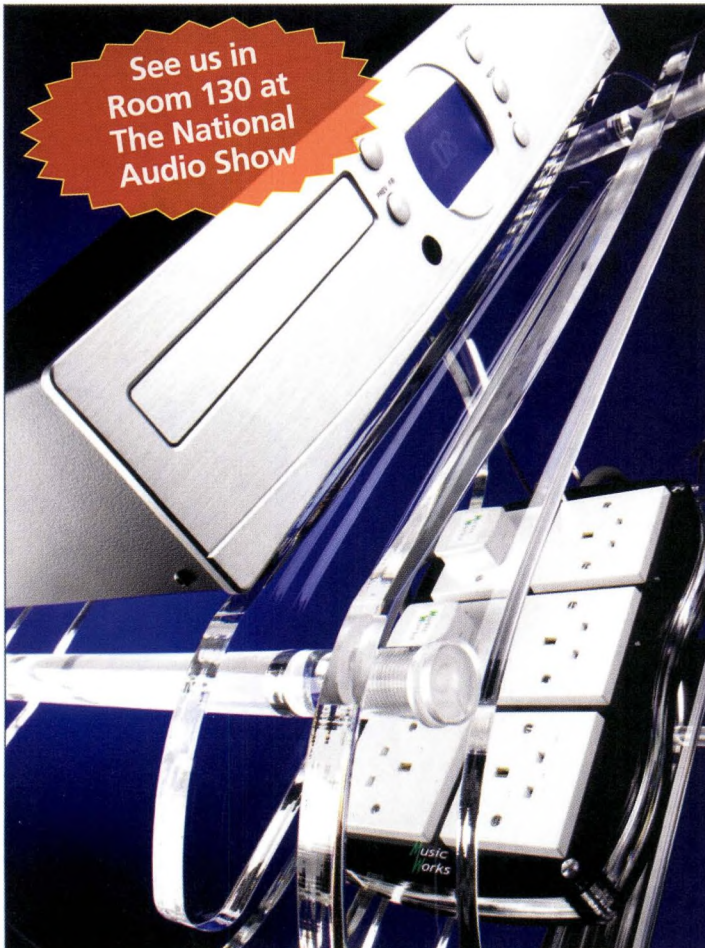
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record reviews

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This issue's featured reviewers are:

- DB** – Duck Baker
- GC** – Greg Cahill
- DD** – Dennis Davis
- AD** – Andy Downing
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- JK** – Jason Kennedy
- DR** – Derk Richardson
- AS** – Alan Sircom

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Fink Sort Of Revolution

Ninja Tune



This is Fin 'Fink' Greenall's third album for Ninja Tune. His voice is the key element in the mix; here it is more intimate and confidential than on previous outings and the sound is warmer which enhances the effect. This could be down to it being a self-produced album, or it could be that time and a hectic touring schedule have mellowed him. Whatever the cause, this is an engagingly mellow album. It contains fine songs and great grooves, the latter always a factor on his albums and used here in tunes that build up from sometimes the voice alone to a multi instrumental crescendo. That sounds a little dramatic though, what actually happens is that the density of backing slowly increases and, on the title track at least, turns into a dub workout before a calm denouement.

There are contributions from soul star John Legend who plays piano on 'Move On Me' and some rather fine harmonica from Son of Dave on 'Pigtails'. The latter adding tension that gives the tune a bit more edge than its companions. With drums and bass behind Fin's acoustic guitar and voice many of the tracks are simple affairs but they have emotional depth that is not masked by the rather vague vocal recording. **JK**

RECORDING



MUSIC



Get The Blessing

Bugs in Amber

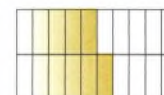
Cake



Adding the Get... for legal reasons, the Blessing is a four piece post-jazz combo started by Clive Deamer and Jim Barr, the rhythm section of Portishead. Spurred on by the success of their debut *All Is Yes* album, they have come back with a less raucous follow up. It's still lively in places, the opener very much so but the feel overall is of a 1960's film soundtrack. While there are strong jazz and rock elements it never comes close to jazz/rock, probably because there are no guitars in the mix. In fact, there is little in the way of soloing either, and this can leave them sounding like a backing band. But there are plenty of those around already and it's refreshing to hear solid grooves with an unusual mix of instrumentation. Typically Barr's chunky bass lines provide the meat around which Deamer's drums, Jake McMurchie's sax and Pete Judge's trumpet are allowed to produce a cauldron of funk that pulsates and occasionally explodes.

Overall the album is a little short on variety, but it has some fine highlights such as the final 'Yes I Said Yes I Will Yes', a top title and a piece that builds up to a scorching finish. The recording is pretty compressed; not disastrous, but limits the level at which it can be comfortably played. **JK**

RECORDING



MUSIC



Icy Demons

Miami Ice

Leaf Label



This eclectic album is the third from Chicago's Icy Demons a group that revolves around bass player and vocalist Griffin Rodriguez and his broad musical influences. He is joined by Jeff Parker of Tortoise on guitar, Chris Powell (drums), Josh Abrams (double bass), Tomeka Reid (cello) and Russell Higbee (guitar) among others. The use of Beefheart style monikers for the central contributors also helps to keep things vague, I mean who on earth is Ta Freak Ya?

Despite a strong Talking Heads/Tom Tom Club influence, Icy Demons are clearly breaking new ground. They have a strong rhythmic drive and plenty of percussion to keep things interesting, alongside a bent for unpredictable twists.

Lyrical content sets the Icy Demons apart, 'Crittin' Down to Baba's' being a paen to the joy of a particular eatery, quite possibly Baba's Mediterranean Kitchen in Baltimore.

The recording is compressed but not overly so, although the opening track does its best to give the opposite impression, and while fidelity was clearly not the goal it doesn't push things into the red and has enough contrast to warrant a decent replay chain. My only complaint is that at 31 minutes, it's too short. **JK**

RECORDING



MUSIC



The Maccabees

Wall of Arms

Fiction



There's a widespread grumble that music isn't as good as it once was. The Maccabees snort disdainfully at such a notion. Where their first album was pure Brit Pop, The Maccabees second cut – *Wall of Arms* – is very Arcade Fire (perhaps unsurprisingly, given the two bands share the same producer in Markus Dravs). This is no bad thing, but perhaps it should be called *Wall of Sound*.

It's all very young, very big and more than a little very self-knowingly pompous, which is where anyone who wore a granddad overcoat and grew a floppy fringe in the mid-1980s should buy a copy right now. It's like listening to Echo & the Bunnymen all over again, only this time relocated to South London; filed with grumbly lyrics set to the sound of a guitar with a bit too much chorus pedal action.

It's no pastiche, though. The title track blends African Soukous rhythms with indie power chords and a brass section. Overall sound quality isn't really remarkable, again more 1980s wall of sound with a big wailing voice in between the speakers, but nevertheless it is good to see pretention levels on the rise in music again, and proves there is more than Emo and vapid Girl with Guitar coffee-shop folk on the scene. **AS**

RECORDING



MUSIC



Regina Spektor

Far

Sire



Regina Spektor's fifth studio album finds the 29-year-old singer-songwriter exploring all manner of human disconnect. On the grandiose ballad 'Eet', one gentleman closes himself off from the outside world with headphones. 'Dance Anthem of the 80s' takes listeners inside a discotheque where there's plenty of bumping and grinding, but little genuine human interaction. Indeed, even when Spektor seems to find a connection on the strikingly simple 'Wallet', she realizes any recognition is fleeting, singing, "You'll never know me. I'll never know you."

Since breaking out with the appropriately titled *Soviet Kitsch* in 2004, Spektor has continued to embrace her role as a slightly off-kilter musical presence. On *Far*, the singer, working with four producers, refines her sound—note that ample soundstage—while preserving the oblique angles that make her unique. The singer seems enamored with the possibilities offered by the human voice. She ably swings from a delicate whisper to a bawdy, brassy chorus—often in the same song—and fills her lively tunes with a flurry of vocal tics that mimic everything from a bustling dance floor to a solitary high hat. **AD**

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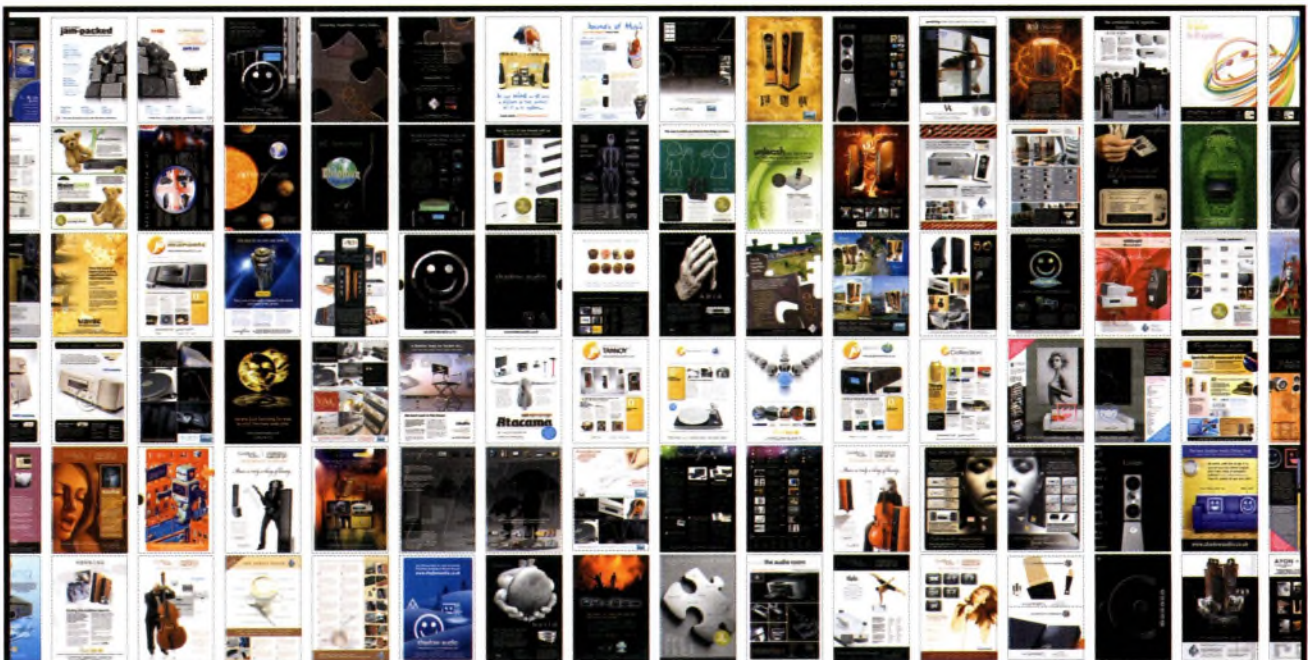
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TOP 10 – 21st century test discs

(part II)

by Alan Sircom

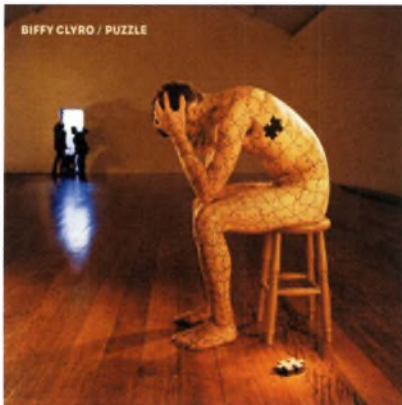
Last time, we served up 10 discs that have been made in the in the last nine years, but still offered the ultimate in sound quality. Then we asked you to do the same. This is the result.

To recap, we tried to find the replacements to *Couldn't Stand the Weather*, *Famous Blue Raincoat* and the rest of the pantheon of test discs all created more than a generation ago. The records had to be within the rock/pop/ contemporary realm (because jazz and classical enthusiasts usually know their genre well enough to know – or reject – what's current) and not necessarily audiophile recordings, because these should be the sort of albums normal people can buy on the high street... if there's still a place to by CDs on your high street.

We picked the 10 most talked about, most recommended and most interesting discs from your letters and emails. They seemed to divide into three categories; new recordings from new bands, new recordings from old faithfuls and 'lads and dads' transmissions from teenage iPod to parental hi-fi system. Realistically, we could have put together a top 147 discs. So, our apologies if some or all of your recommendations didn't make it; we consider all of them, but those who got more than one recommendation generally made the grade. ▶

Top Ten - 21st century test discs

► **Biffy Clyro** **Puzzle**



Puzzle was the first major-label album from the Scottish rough-hewn trio. It's a smoother, more poppy CD than previous outings for the band; this has caused the band's original following some upset, but this meant *Puzzle* has migrated from teen iPod to home CD player. A small army of dads have heard their kids playing this album... and liked what they heard. Think Foo Fighters-esque raw rock with Queen meets Muse-like pomp, all wrapped up in an energetic and extremely dynamic recording. It's not for everyone – it's still raw, still angry and sometimes more than a little bit swearsy – but it's one hell of a disc... and it gives you a small amount of street cred with the younger generation. Outstanding tracks (for us old gits, at least) include 'Living is a Problem because Everything Dies', 'Saturday Superhouse' and 'As Dust Dances'.

LCD Soundsystem **Sound of Silver**

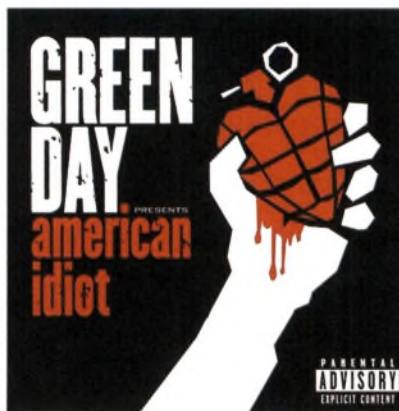
A healthy contingent of audiophiles were forged in the 1980s, which is why so many called for the inclusion of James Murphy's second outing. Why? Because the NYC producer mixes in elements of everything from Brian Eno to Kraftwerk to Cabaret Voltaire and more besides. But it's not stuck in the 1980s, there's intelligent dance, post punk (and Daft Punk) music in there, with a wry sense of humour permeating the whole album. Taut and upbeat with a

clear, deep bass, the album is as much geared toward listening as it is dancing. A sure sign of a good album is being unable to pick out a good track, but the first three – 'Get Innocuous', 'Time To Get Away' and 'North American Scum' – are real stunners.

Radiohead **In Rainbows**

Perhaps better known for the controversy than the music, *In Rainbows* was first released as a 'pay what you like' digital download from Radiohead's website directly before it was released on CD and vinyl. In fact, it's also an excellent album, a far less politically-motivated version of Radiohead than previously seen in albums like *Hail to the Thief* and *OK Computer*. It's also far more guitar-oriented than we've seen from Radiohead in quite a while. It takes a few listening sessions to get into, but the stark and sombre *In Rainbows* is in many respects Radiohead's most complete album to date. Another album that's hard to pin down, because every track works best when taken as a whole, although 'Nude' is a fine and very typically Radiohead song. Sonically not quite demonstration quality (although the 45rpm vinyl version is pretty damned excellent), it's still one of the best albums of the last decade.

Green Day **American Idiot**



Another generational crossover, another shift from young punks to commercial rockers. Green Day's early

output – such as *Dookie* – was loud, raucous and entertaining punk-kid pop trash. By comparison, *American Idiot* is virtually a concept album, charting the life of a disaffected teenager in Bush's America. Once again, the hard-core fans rejected this as mere commercialism, the themes of the album were far from clearly defined and their nature made the album less than palatable to American conservatives.

It's still a raucous and often foul-mouthed ride through Americana, but like *Puzzle*, it's worth the effort.

Shelby Lynne **Just a Little Lovin'**



Country singer Lynne teamed up with producer legend Phil Ramone a couple of years ago and released this album of tributes to torch-song superstar Dusty Springfield. The 11 tracks – taken mostly from *A Girl Called Dusty* and *Dusty in Memphis* – are given a sparse, acoustic treatment (very different from the big orchestra works backing Dusty's 1960s versions) and an almost root-and-branch reworking on each one. Perhaps not as forceful as the original Dusty recordings, this is nonetheless one heck of an album with Doug Sax mastering, and engineer Al Schmitt was nominated for a Grammy for the sound quality of this album (it lost out to *Consolers of the Lonely*, by the Raconteurs, which was in the first part of this *Top 10* in issue 65). The outstanding track here is the first (the title track), but they all have their own worth. ►

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Top Ten - 21st century test discs

► Diana Krall

Live in Paris

Al Schmitt may have missed out on a Grammy for *Just a Little Lovin'*, but he fared better when he engineered Diana Krall's seventh album, *Live in Paris*. The album won the Grammy for Best Jazz Vocal Album in 2002. As the name suggests, it's an album of live sets of jazz standards recorded at the Paris Olympia, between November 29 and December 2, 2001. Krall (on piano, vocals and Fender Rhodes) is at her improvisational peak, and her associated musicians are exceptional here, both at traditional standards like 'I've Got You Under My Skin' and 'S Wonderful' and with more contemporary classics, such as Billy Joel's 'Just the Way You Are'.

The whole album gives a sense of live, natural recordings space and soundstaging that could put many an audiophile recording to shame.

The White Stripes

Elephant



Jack and Meg White's fourth studio album saw the duo pitch up at BBC Maida Vale and the famously retro and analogue Toe Rag Studios in Shoreditch. Staying within the band's successful garage blues rock formula, this time with a big label and just as grumpy as ever, *Elephant* features perhaps the best opening track of any album this decade – 'Seven Nation Army'. Add in sultry numbers like 'In the Cold, Cold Night' (featuring Meg's coquettish vocals) and showy tracks like 'Girl, you have no faith in Medicine', and

the whole package takes the lo-fi White Stripes and gives them a recording with as much zest and energy as the band itself. And that's impressive.

Early White Stripes albums sound like they've been recorded on a portastudio in a living room (because, sometimes, they have) and later albums suffer from 'loudness war' compression, but *Elephant* got the formula just right. Perfect for checking out dynamic range of any system, especially at volume.

John Fogerty

Revival

Best known as one of the founding members of Creedence Clearwater Revival, Fogerty returned to the public gaze in the late 1990s. His first studio album in three years, 2007's *Revival* sees Fogerty back with his old Fantasy label and on top form with an album of solid country-infused swamp rock. He's never far from his old Creedence roots – one of the best tracks on the album is called 'Creedence Song' – but it's now a happier connection than it has been for many years. Don't expect earth shattering, ground-breaking stuff – although 'I Can't Take It No More' brings a smattering of Punk to the CCR rock 'n' roll formula – and there's lots of songs about cowboys and gunslingers, but it never once descends into soft-rock Eagles style country. A good no-nonsense album, but one that's also perfect to give your speaker cones a good rattlin'.

Mastodon

Crack the Sky

The most recent launch in the list is also one of the heaviest ever recommended in *Hi-Fi Plus*. As you might guess by the name, Mastodon are officially Very Metal; the Georgia based band are a key player in the New Wave of American Heavy Metal movement (along with acts like Biohazard, Prong and System of a Down). Mastodon's fourth album was released in March this year and is the tale of an astral projecting quadriplegic, mixing in Rasputin, the devil and

Stephen Hawking. Think Hawkwind, but with more graunch.

This marks a bold shift for the genre, a more away from just grinding guitars and throaty lyrics and toward more structurally dense, progressive and thematic form of metal. It's hard to develop grown-up themes in a genre that is often dismissed as the domain of teenage boys, but if anyone can, Mastodon can. And, from a musical perspective, it's good to hear a new metal album that is not beset by compression.

Katie Melua

Piece by Piece



Breathy Georgia-born jazz songstress Melua hit the ground running in 2003 with her *Call off the Search* debut. It brought her fame, fortune and a perfect songwriting partner in one-time Womble Mike Batt. She had the perfect singing voice for the music too, but by her second album that had been smoothed and refined still further.

Beautifully produced to stay just the right side of saccharine, the dozen tracks on *Piece by Piece* are bluesy, jazzy and elegantly crafted.

You could be mistaken for thinking you are listening to Norah Jones-lite, but the bright and breezy summer's day sound draws you in all the same. Outstanding tracks include the singles 'Nine Million Bicycles' and 'I Cried for You', but except for the almost unforgivable cover of 'Blues in the Night', every track offers up perfect slices of adult oriented jazzy pop. +



Duke Ellington

The Nutcracker Suite

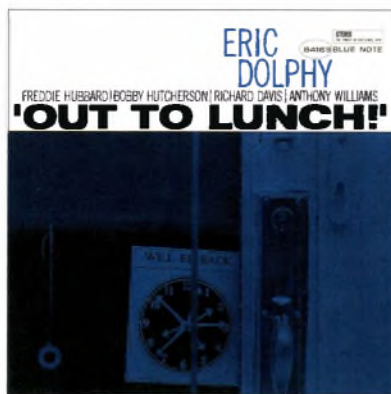
Pure Pleasure/Columbia CS8341



Duke Ellington received his best-recorded sound during the late 1950s and into 1960 when re-recorded a series of albums for Columbia, many of which have become audiophile favorites. At first blush, the thought of a jazz band playing a classical composition seems suspect, and playing the Nutcracker even more so—it conjures up visions of a jazz legend playing Christmas favorites for holiday cash! But on closer examination, the fit is a good one. Some of Ellington’s best work was recording suites of music, but for once he recorded a suite he didn’t compose. The band is Ellington’s star-studded ensemble of the period; the arrangement is Ellington at the top of his form, the playing is top notch and the recorded sound is splendid.

This session was recorded in Los Angeles in May 1960, and the uncredited recording engineer did an excellent job. This reissue was remastered by Steve Hoffman and Kevin Gray of AcousTech and the result is first rate, sounding even better than the original LP. This will be the best sounding Christmas season LP in the house, and one of only a handful with enough musical substance to deserve repeated listening. **DD**

RECORDING
MUSIC



Eric Dolphy

Out To Lunch

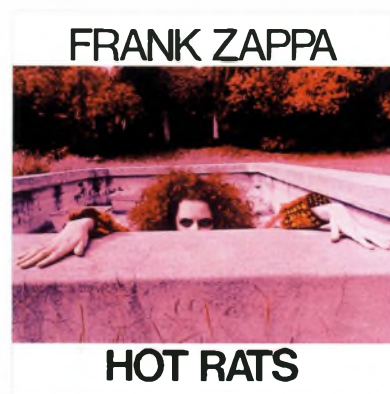
Music Matters/Blue Note 84163



Eric Dolphy released only one album as a leader for Blue Note during his lifetime, but what an album. It’s one of a handful of Blue Note reissues at the top of my wish list. One of the greatest jazz albums of all time, and among Dolphy’s masterpieces, this all-star session included Freddie Hubbard, Bobby Hutcherson, Richard Davis and Anthony Williams. Recorded in February 1964, this was an avant-garde recording by a label that was increasingly headed in the direction of soulful funk, while the Impulse! label was carrying the flag for the edgier sound exemplified here. This is also one of the best-designed covers in the Blue Note catalog. The “will be back” clock on the cover reminds us that Dolphy, who died later that year, was almost out of time.

Although this was not one of the best of Rudy Van Gelder’s recording efforts (for that listen to Music Matters recent release of Lee Morgan’s Candy) but it in the upper echelon. Hoffman and Gray have done their usual magic to make this classic sound better than ever before. The foldout cover includes a full-page reproduction of one of my favorite Blue Note session photos of Dolphy in a particularly pensive moment. Highest recommendation! **DD**

RECORDING
MUSIC



FRANK ZAPPA

HOT RATS

Frank Zappa

Hot Rats

Barking Pumpkin/Classic Records

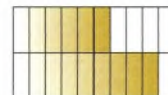


Hot Rats is famous for the two tracks that start it off, ‘Peaches en Regalia’ and ‘Willie the Pimp’ with Don van Viet (AKA Captain Beefheart) on vocals. Indeed that tune is the only one on the album to feature a singer; the rest feature extended guitar solos of a length and variety that must have made an impact even in the era of Clapton and Hendrix.

The musicians chosen for the recording included top notch session players max Bennett (bass), Paul Humphrey (drums) and John Guerin (drums). Alongside them was long time Zappa cohort Ian Underwood on keyboards and wind and a young Shuggy Otis on bass. *Hot Rats* sees Zappa’s guitar work step into another league, the professional backing keeping step at every turn. In many ways it would provide the formula for most of the work that followed, Zappa hiring the best musicians and pushing them and himself that extra bit.

An early 16-track recording it lacks bandwidth and dynamics, but Classic and Bernie Grundman have done a superb job. It no longer sounds tinny and you can hear right into the mix. The Quix SV-P vinyl can play as loud as required. The first audiophile pressing of a Zappa album – I pray it’s not the last. **JK**

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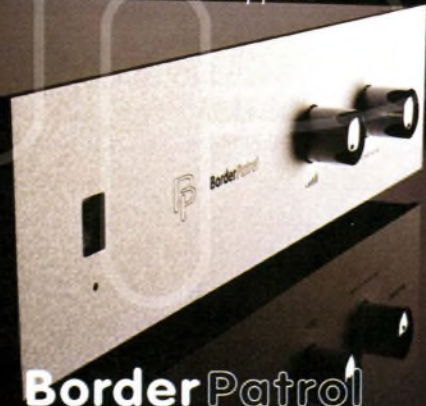


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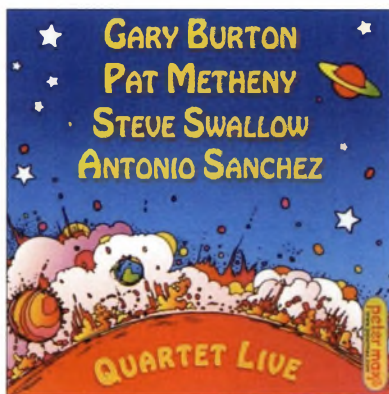
Miroslav Vitous Group
Remembering Weather Report
 ECM 2073



When bassist Miroslav Vitous co-founded Weather Report in 1970 with saxophonist Wayne Shorter and keyboardist Joe Zawinul, musicians were still figuring out how to make music in a jazz world upended by Coleman and Coltrane. They were also dealing with the electric fusion revolution fomented by Miles Davis, in whose bands both Shorter and Zawinul played crucial parts. With *Remembering Weather Report*, Czech bassist Vitous reminds listeners that Weather Report was originally a far more acoustic and free-form band than *Heavy Weather* suggests.

Vitous and his quartet—trumpeter Franco Ambrosetti, tenor saxophonist Gary Campbell, and drummer Gerald Cleaver, with guest Michel Portal adding bass clarinet—dedicate pieces to Shorter and Zawinul, but *Remembering's* original music sounds little like Weather Report and everything like a group of virtuoso musicians at ease with spontaneous interaction within sturdy but open compositional frameworks. Nearly ideal sonics give realistic placement and breathing room to drums, reeds and brass, and especially Vitous' bowed and plucked double bass. **DR**

RECORDING
 MUSIC



Gary Burton, Pat Metheny, Steve Swallow, Antonio Sanchez
Quartet Live
 Concord Jazz 31303



After nurturing the next generation of jazz players on two albums, the vibraphonist and bandleader Gary Burton returns with a live release that reunites him with three of his alumni. It's a tight unit with an ace rhythm section, sparkling vibes, and atmospheric guitar solos.

This isn't the first time Metheny, who served as Burton's guitarist from 1974-1976, has rejoined his former boss—he also can be found on Burton's 1989 *Reunion* album.

Metheny sounds very comfortable in this setting; there's real chemistry among these players, too. You hear it in the gentle jewel-like melodies of Carla Bley's 'Olhos de Gato', on Metheny's 'B and G (Midwestern Night's Dream)', and on the band's outside spin on Ellington's classic 'Fleurette Africaine'.

Fans of tasteful percussion won't want to miss Sanchez's performance. He's a master at weaving his drum lines through the airy sonic maze laid down by Metheny and Burton. An expansive soundstage complements the sparse arrangements. The bass is somewhat subdued and Sanchez's drums are prominent, but never overbearing. **GC**

RECORDING
 MUSIC



Bobby Broom
Bobby Broom Plays for Monk
 Origin Records 82534



The first records dedicated to the music of Thelonious Monk really started with Steve Lacy's *Reflections* in 1958. But it wasn't until the 1980s that all-Monk projects began to appear with regularity, and their number has steadily increased each year. This new release by guitarist Bobby Broom's trio compares favorably with the best of them.

Broom is, in many ways, a throwback. His sound, phrasing, and oh-so-hip sense of time hearken back to the hard bop/soul jazz era when guitarists were making their marks. Broom's musical intelligence and sense of humor are also notable. The former is apparent in his arranging ideas, from the chord-melody of 'Rhythm-ning' to the reinvention of 'In Walked Bud' as abstract funk. The humor comes through in the musical quotations Broom interjects in his solos; there must be about ten in the last-named number, culminating with 'Chicago' and 'Eleanor Rigby'. This trio has been together for some time and it shows. Bassist Dennis Carroll and drummer Kobie Watkins seem to anticipate everything Broom does, adding just the right touches in just the right places. Production values are topnotch, from the warm sound to great notes and cover art. **DB**

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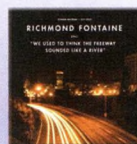
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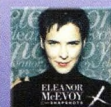
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Beethoven:
String Quartets, Op. 59 No. 2 & 3 "Rasumovsky"

Quartetto Italiano, Paolo Borciani, 1st violin; Elisa Pegreff, 2nd violin; Piero Farulli, viola; Franco Rossi, violincello. PentaTone Classics PTC 5186 176



Along with the first release, PentaTone PTC 5186 175, the 3 "Rasumovsky" quartets of Beethoven are now complete, and I cannot think of another set that comes close to setting the standard for how these should be played. Recorded in December of 1973, while the Philips engineers did a superb job with the original recordings, PentaTone has taken these discs to the next level in refreshing the analogue tape to DSD. Beethoven wrote these quartets in a 'new style'. Rather than writing for the aristocracy of the day, he wrote these for an open-minded public audience. Outstanding sound quality of exceptionally played chamber music offers the listener a thrilling experience. While there is much to like in some modern interpretations, I think you would be remiss in not adding this outstanding disc (as well as the first release) to your collection. I think it will be a long time before you get to hear the Quartetto Italiano as well presented as you do in these discs. Highly recommended! **RSF**

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Danses et Divertissements

Berlin Philharmonic Wind Quintet with Stephen Hough, pianist. Bis SACD 1532 SA CD SA

The Berlin Wind Quintet (Michael Hasel, flute; Andreas Wittmann, oboe; Walter Seyfarth, clarinet; Fergus McWilliam, French Horn; Henning Trog, bassoon) have been playing together since inception in 1988. This wonderful disc contains music by Paul Taffanel, Francis Poulenc, André Jolivet and Henri Tomasi. One of the most exciting aspects of these performances is the outstanding sound quality created by the engineers. If you have even the remotest interest in hearing some of the finest wind instrument discs in recent memory, I urge you to look into this recording. As this disc begins, you are instantly struck by the captivating sounds created for Paul Taffanel's Quintette. This is very accessible 19th century music and will set the tone for the balance of the composers. I can assure listeners they will continually be enamored with the realistic sound of the Berlin Philharmonic Wind Quintet and the playing of Stephen Hough. Francis Poulenc's *Sextour for Piano and Wind Quintette* is a delightful three movement work that is sure to please the most ardent musicophile. In short, this is a disc that is not to be missed. **RSF**

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Johann Sebastian Bach:
The Well-Tempered Clavier, 48 Preludes and Fugues BWV846-893 Complete

Angela Hewitt pianist. Hyperion CDA67741/4 (4 compact discs) CD

Angela Hewitt first recorded the *Well-Tempered Clavier* for Hyperion Records a decade ago (1997-9). While many artists might be content with their performance of a decade ago, Hewitt recently went back to listen to hear earlier performances, as she has recently been putting together a Bach World Tour. She first completed Book I in her repertoire and later Book II. Here she made notes concerning the various preludes and fugues and how she now felt some should be played anew. In her mind not all had to be changed. She felt she had 'grown' in her playing and felt this needed to be reflected in her upcoming tour. She approached Hyperion about re-recording these works and, they soon realized what an undertaking this would be and so decided on recording the *Well-Tempered Clavier* in the 'studio'.

While I have listened to the original set often, I can say that the new performances are a very rich, rewarding experience. The sound quality is outstanding and the performances sublime. **RSF**
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Mahler: Symphony No. 8.

London Symphony Orchestra conducted by Valery Gergiev. Victoria Yastrebova, Ailish Tynan, Liudmilla Dudinova, sopranos; Choir of Eltham College, Choral Arts Society of Washington, London Symphony Chorus. LSO Live, LSO0669



Anytime there is a recording of Gustav Mahler's 'Symphony of a Thousand', it is generally well worth hearing. Although one can never find the perfect 8th performed, Gergiev gives a not-too-rushed outing and the engineers have delivered excellent sound quality. Time is a respectable 77 minutes and 22 seconds and while this is not quite a redbook CD, it is quite convenient to have the entire symphony on one disc.

Producer James Mallinson and engineer Jonathan Stokes have done an admirable job in giving us exceptional sound in a work that is massively dynamic and quite frankly a very difficult composition to record. Recorded in St. Paul's as opposed to the usual Barbican the LSO utilizes, the listener will not find any dryness in this outing. This a committed spectacular. Excellent soloists abound and there is no hesitation in recommending this recording to both the novice and advanced Mahlerian. **RSF**

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RECORDING
MUSIC



Manuel de Falla: The Three Cornered Hat

Ernest Ansermet conducting L'Orchestra De La Suisse Romande, Theresa Berganza, soprano. Esoteric ESSD-90016(480 1592) (SA 1D) (SA 5.1)

Once again we delve into the magical reissues that have been re-created by Esoteric for the consumer market. Limited editions they may well be, but certainly worth preserving and absolutely worth listening to. Third in a current series of four, this 1961 classic Decca performance offers a very excellent Swiss Romande Orchestra under the baton of Ernest Ansermet. I've owned this recording in its original Decca form for many years and have always been amazed at the sound quality the engineers were able to capture in Geneva's Victoria Hall.

Esoteric, in keeping with its tradition of re-creating these analogue masterpieces to DSD using their own equipment have done us proud with this release. While there are a couple of areas where the strings in high C maybe a little bright sounding, the whole of the production is infinitely satisfying. It is great to have this performance, and I would not want to be without this Spanish *tour-de-force* and anyone with the slightest interest in great performances must own this disc. **RSF**

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RECORDING
MUSIC



Mozart: Complete sonatas for keyboard and violin. Volumes 7 & 8

Gary Cooper, fortepiano; Rachel Podger, violin. Channel Classics CCS SA 28109 (SA 1D) (SA 5.1)

I have been anticipating the final two installments in this excellent series. I can easily say these are some of the finest performances of Mozart's works I have in my library and they definitely contain some of the best sound quality also. Podger and Cooper are just excellent in playing off each other and Jared Sacks has given us another outstanding recording.

These final two discs in this series offer many early sonatas (KV 10 through 15) as well as an allegro in B flat from KV 372, a Fantasia in C minor for piano, KV 396 and 6 variations in G minor, KV 374b. If you have not explored any of the other Podger/Cooper recordings in this series, I urge you to please do so. These are important performances of Classic Mozart. I am lucky enough to have the complete set of these discs and I can assure you there is not a week that goes by that I don't listen to portions of one volume or another. I find the Podger/Cooper collaborations most satisfying and am a big fan of both. Do yourself a favour and look into these performances. You'll be pleased that you did. **RSF**

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by Alan Sircom

NEVER ONE FOR HIDING FROM THE LIMELIGHT, MUDDY WATERS FACED A PROBLEM IN THE LATE 1950s.

The world was moving on; his electric style of Chicago blues had been a success during the early days of Rock 'n' Roll and Rhythm 'n' Blues and he was one of Chess records leading lights, but that was half a decade ago and white folk were not buying black music anymore.

So in 1960, Muddy Waters pitched up at the Newport Jazz Festival, and played a scorching blues set. The audience quickly moved from shock to awe (the National Guard were called), and Muddy Waters was back on top.

At the end of 1963, Waters went into the studio with his acoustic slide guitar, Willie Dixon on string bass, Clifton James (the one who worked with Bo Diddly, not the one who played tobacco-chewing Sheriff J.W. Pepper in *Live and Let Die*) on drums and a young Buddy Guy on accompanying guitar. The result is called *Muddy Waters Folk Singer* to attract the Bob Dylan-buying folkies, but the sound is pure acoustic blues.

The nine original tracks from the session (joined by five more in subsequent releases) are a mix of Waters and the band originals and classics like 'Good Morning Little Schoolgirl'. In some respects, this is a departure for Waters, more rootsy and Delta Blues than his later releases, with just a smattering of the more electric and boogie-oriented Chicago style (although the bonus tracks are much more in line with his best-known material). If you are expecting 'Mannish Boy', look elsewhere; instead what you get is a versatile blues musician at the top of his game, surrounded by some of the best of blues breed too.

From a hi-fi perspective, this is one of the shining stars. It's been released several times – including on SACD and Mobile Fidelity half-speed master audiophile vinyl and gold CDs (now all long discontinued) – but even the standard Chess remaster CD is excellent. It's a simple, live stereo recording of musicians playing acoustic instruments with none of the overdub culture found in more modern recordings.

Those first nine tracks in particular are still of demonstration quality to this day. Each instrument has its own three-dimensional space and the sense of occasion and location are hard to better. The first track on the album 'My Home is in the Delta' still has the ability to raise hairs on the back of people's necks, both from the musical performance and the sheer sound quality. In many respects, this sets the standard many audiophile recordings strive to follow, but many fall short because of the lack of rehearsal or musicianship involved. It also

created the 'Unplugged...' album concept, decades before the likes of Nirvana. Things came together beautifully here, and the result is as fresh today as it was 45 years ago.

Despite the success of the Newport festival and *Folk Singer*, Chess effectively hung Muddy Waters out to dry. He spent the rest of the 1960s and early 1970s doing 'themed' music, like the so-so 1968 psychedelic-blues outing *Electric Mud*, until Texas blues legend Johnny Winter revitalised his career with the bare-bones *Hard Again* album from 1977. But *Folk Singer* remains the first choice for the blues-lovin' audiophile. +

MUDDY WATERS – FOLK SINGER



Recorded Sep 1963

Released Apr 1964

Released by MCA/Chess

Personnel: Muddy Waters (vocals, guitar), Buddy Guy (guitar), Willie Dixon (bass), Clifton James (drums)

Original track listing:

1. "My Home Is in the Delta" (Waters) – 3:58
2. "Long Distance" (Morganfield, Waters) – 3:30
3. "My Captain" (Willie Dixon) – 5:10
4. "Good Morning Little Schoolgirl" (Williamson) – 3:12
5. "You Gonna Need My Help" (Morganfield, Waters) – 3:09
6. "Cold Weather Blues" (Morganfield) – 4:40
7. "Big Leg Woman" (Temple) – 3:25
8. "Country Boy" (Waters) – 3:26
9. "Feel Like Going Home" (Morganfield, Waters) – 3:52

Bonus Tracks (recorded Apr 1964/Oct 1964):

10. "The Same Thing" (Dixon) – 2:57
11. "You Can't Lose What You Never Had" (Morganfield) – 2:46
12. "My John the Conqueror Root" (Dixon) – 2:22
13. "Short Dress Woman" (Brown) – 2:49
14. "Put Me in Your Lay Away" (Welch) – 2:56

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