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Issue 3 - November 1999
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Editorial

Editor

Roy Gregory

Contributors

Dave Ayres
Chris Binns
Pete Christie
Dave Davies
Wayne Garcia
Jason Hector
Andrew Hobbs
Jimmy Hughes
Fawzy Issa
Jon Maple
Jon Marks
Paul Messenger
Reuben Parry
Paul Stewart
Chris Thomas

Photography

Simon Marsh

Cartoonists

Chris Brown
Dave Davies

Design

Creative Byte
Unit 12, Albany Business Park
Cabot Lane, Poole, Dorset
BH17 7BX

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The Editorial Office can be contacted at;

Hi-Fi+ Editorial
PO Box 1716
Fordingbridge, Hants
SP6 1SL
United Kingdom
Tel. (44)(0)1425-656004
Fax. (44)(0)1425-656046
Net. www.hifiplus.com

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As the man once said, "The times they are a changein'..."

Issue 3 coincides with the Hi-Fi News and Record Review September show. Various known as Penta, Ramada, Renaissance, (all variations on the same theme), and now with a shift of venue, Novotel, the event has become both a fixture and the traditional start to the autumn 'season' of peak hi-fi sales. Yet, as I reported in my last editorial, there have been rumblings of discontent. Whether this has been the result of poor sales or the dubious quality of the new hotel, those rumblings have solidified into non-attendance by a significant number of companies. Companies which until now had been regular pillars of the show-going community.

It's one thing muttering darkly, it's quite another to actually act. I suspect that this represents the first crack in the autumn edifice, and like the first leak in a dam, it promises to have catastrophic results. Enough people have stayed away, or done their own thing, to support an alternative event. All it needs now is for someone to stand up and organise it. But how to ensure success?

Clearly, any new venture must overcome the principal complaints levelled (just or not) at the Hi-Fi News event. These run from cost and venue through to alleged political favouritism. The only real answer is to create a non-profit-making show aimed to promote the industry as a whole. Such a format would certainly best serve the interests of both the exhibitors and public alike. And before you mock, bear in mind that the ultra successful Frankfurt show has run along these lines for years, with far fewer complaints than we hear over here. And the Bristol show does very nicely thankyou. It really is time for this industry to grow-up, stop bickering, and engage in the kind of co-promotional activities that other markets have been supporting for years. The buying public aren't interested in squabbles and faction fights. They want to see well organised events, and more of them. It's up to the industry to provide them.



Roy Gregory

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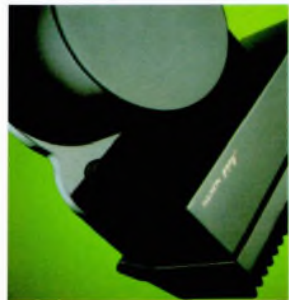
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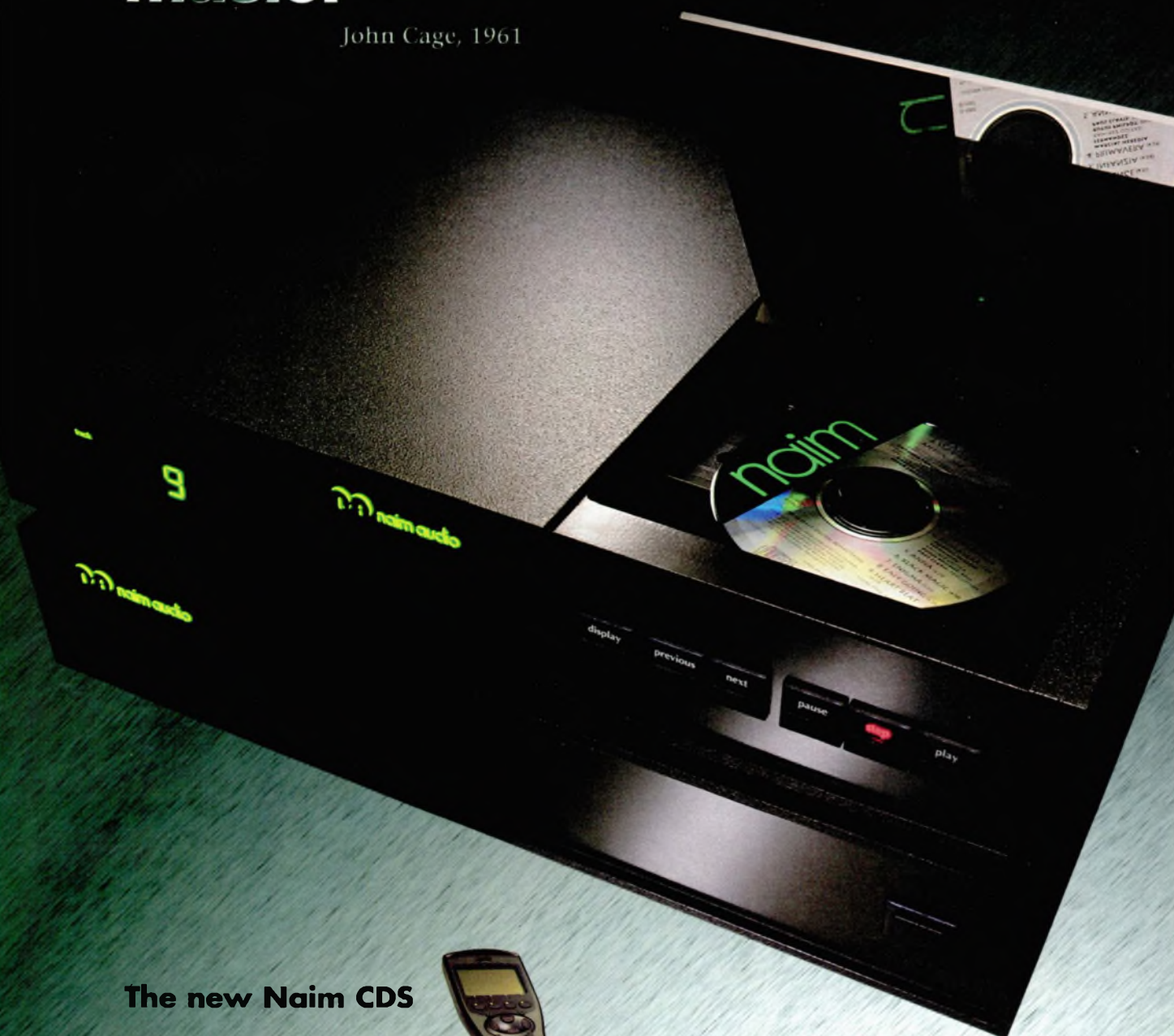
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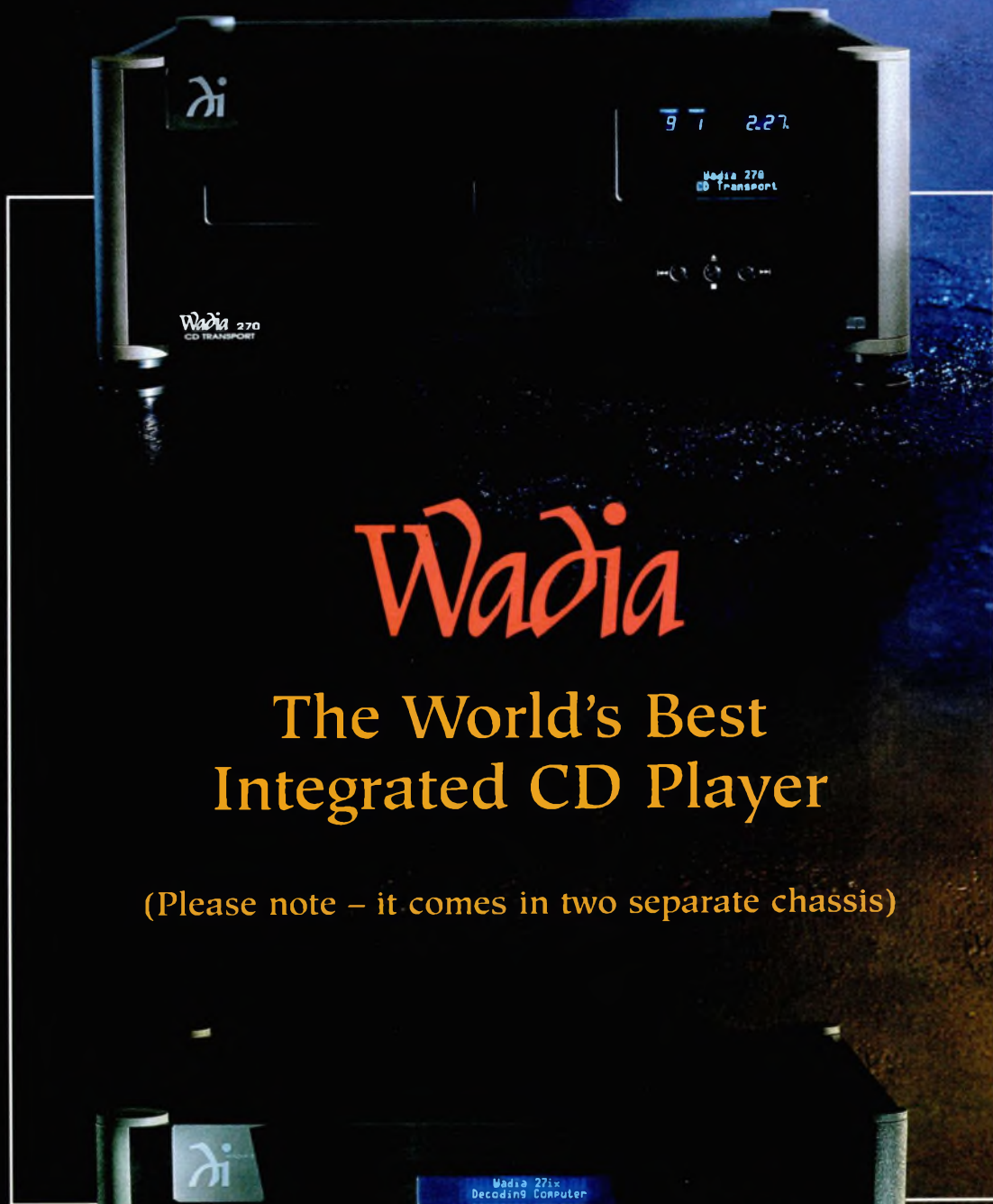
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Jack English, *Stereophile*, volume 19 no. 5.

"I am comfortable in saying that, to this point,
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Jonathan Scull, *Stereophile*, volume 21 no. 4.



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Playing The System

— by Roy Gregory —

Traditionally, people have tended to think about and discuss hi-fi systems as three part entities; the front end, amps and speakers. And certainly, on technological grounds each is quite distinct, using entirely different engineering principles, different materials, and doing a different job. But if we think about the system in terms of interfacing its components, then a rather different picture emerges.

Clearly, the matching of a cartridge to a phono stage that provides the correct electrical termination is critical to optimising its performance. And if you want to make the most of a digital source, you'll want to make sure that it's not going to overload the pre-amp's line input. Likewise, matching the power amplifier to the speakers involves a far more intimate coupling than is generally realised, and is arguably the most critical interface within the whole set-up. It's not simply a case of the amp bossing the speaker. The recalcitrant transducer gets its say too, in the form of its impedance characteristic and back EMF. It really is essential to consider the amplifier and speaker as a single entity, even if you are buying them one at a time. In other words, choose them together, even if you can't pay for them both. And then stick to the decision. Don't fly off on some flavour of the month fancy. There are plenty of examples of amp and speaker combinations that really click; the Naim 250 and Linn

Sara, the Beard P100 and Magneplanar MG1b, the Spectral amps and Avalons, the Nad 3020 and AR18. Take a little time and consider the real implications of that. Dividing the system into three parts introduces notional boundaries at the very points where we can least afford them.

What is more, the advent of predominantly line level sources (yes, stand alone phono stages mean that even turntables fit that category) has made source switching considerably easier, and in budget terms, less demanding (no costly phono stage if you don't want one). In fact, what we're seeing is the advent of two part systems, divided into the source and every thing to get its signal up to line level; and the power amp and speakers. Where the volume control fits will depend on the system. If you're using a separate pre-amp or line stage, then it goes with the front end. However, increasingly designers are simply cranking up the input sensitivity of their power amps, adding a volume control and source switching, and calling it a "line-integrated" amp. Not a bad idea, but don't think for an instant that it's a substitute for a decent line stage. Anyway, in this case the split comes at the amp's inputs, the sacred speaker interface being sacrosanct.

In reality, what this means is that you need to adopt a rather more holistic attitude to defining your system. A record player no longer simply consists of the turntable, arm and car-

tridge, but includes the tonearm cable, phono stage (with appropriate consideration of loading and gain), a support, and any necessary mains cables or filters. Likewise, a CD player will include its cables, mains leads, isolation transformer (if you can afford it!) and support.

This might seem horribly complex, but in reality it makes things very much simpler, by making them all inclusive. What you are actually doing is incorporating the mains and signal cabling, as well as the furniture, into the primary decision making process, where they belong. And you get to choose an appropriate phono stage, in terms of price and performance, rather than getting stuck with the one in the pre-amp. Now you see why you need a dealer. If I had a fiver for every thousand pound plus turntable in the UK that's being choked half to death by the crappy stock arm-lead supplied with its tonearm, then I'd be writing this from tax exile. You wouldn't dream of sticking the signal from a \$4000 CD player down a £25 lead, but that's exactly what most serious turntable owners are doing, mainly because they never even considered it! More interested in CD? Now you can downsize the turntable without compromising the line stage.

In the same way, you should be matching the second section of your system, the amp and speakers. The examples I used earlier are pertinent, but there are plenty of others. The ►

▶ legendary transparency of output transformer-less/output capacitor-less (OTL/OCL) valve amps such as the pyrotechnically inclined Futtermans, and other more recent and reliable incarnations, are often only enjoyed with electrostatic speakers. This is because OTLs generally double their rated output into a doubled load impedance, behaviour which is the complete opposite of the theoretical norm (you know, 100watts into 8ohms, 200watts into four, and so on). This suits electrostatics just fine, with their characteristically high impedances. But watch out for hybrids, which tend to the schizophrenic once their moving coil woofer enters the equation! (I have heard it argued that the main reason that OTL's really click with 'statics is the input transformer in the speakers.)

There are plenty of less obvious examples. The Wilson Watts thrive on the high damping factors provided by big Krell or Rowland Research amplifiers. Try the same thing with the superficially similar Ars Acoustica System Max, and you are in for a big disappointment. Despite the apparent similarities Max's bass loading is both unique and totally different to the Puppy's. Put it in the vice like grip of a monster Krell and you simply crush the life (and weight) out of it.

In fact, there are as many examples as there are products out there. Every speaker has its ideal match, and if you're really lucky then there might be more than one. This is where the theoretically universal amplifier designs come un-glued. By trying to be all things to all speakers, they inevitably include elements that you

don't actually need, be it too much power, too much current, low impedance drive capability, or any of a hundred other performance factors. You don't get nothing for nothing, and if it's in the box it's going to effect the sound. Just think about it for a while - you're actually paying extra for something you don't need, and it's actively counter productive.

How do you find your perfect electronic marriage? All together, on three... YOUR DEALER. Your system may only have a front end and a back end, but a bit of sensible advice should get them travelling in the same direction. On the other hand you could grow your own hi-fi equivalent of a push-me-pull-you. There's loads of them out there!



Speaker's Corner

by Paul Messenger

One thing's for certain. As the years roll by, hi-fi loudspeakers get smaller and (in real terms) cheaper. Supply and demand is the root cause of course. Buyers want small and inexpensive loudspeakers - or think they do anyway - so the manufacturers supply them. But do the buyers really know what they want, and are they given a proper opportunity to weigh up the alternatives?

Not often enough, I'd venture to suggest. One of the great joys of doing loudspeaker reviewing for a living lies in the enormous diversity of the designs I get to try. However, the cold reality of the marketplace imposes its own much sterner rule over the sort of speakers which find their way into the dealers' dem rooms.

For every genuinely interesting and different loudspeaker, there are half a dozen formulaic clones, built to fit some established price-point stereotype. These do make some sense, usually representing decent enough cost-effective compromises. But modern manufacturing methods and global economics mean that the products from different brands grow increasingly similar.

Although some speaker manufacturers still build at least some of their products from the ground up, these tend to be the exception rather than the rule today. And at the volume end of the market at least, the speaker brand usually confines its activities to design, marketing and sales. Drive units are built by drive unit specialists to the brand's required spec, and are then shipped to cabinetmakers where assembly and despatch is carried out. 'Product of more than one

country' is very much the watchword these days, as fierce marketplace competition forces all the major players to keep searching for cost and marketing advantages.

This situation might appear to benefit of the consumer - but appearances have much more to do with the art of marketing than of genuine hi-fi sound reproduction. The ever present risk is that the constant pressures on costs are more likely to result in engineering than cosmetic compromises, and consequently that sound quality is liable to deteriorate towards a lowest common denominator.

It's a scenario which tends to be supported by the long view. Thirty years ago the loudspeaker was generally (if perhaps erroneously) regarded as the most important component in the hi-fi chain, and typically accounted for 50 per cent of a system budget. However, here in Britain during that era it was also widely (and definitely erroneously) believed that the choice of turntables and amplifiers had little or no bearing on the sound quality of the system. Through the 1970s and 1980s, brands like Linn, Naim and Rega preached the doctrine that the speakers were only as good as the sources and amps which fed and drove them, to such good effect that the whole perception of the hi-fi system was changed around.

Loudspeakers remained important, but no longer held pole position, and their allocation from the total system budget tended to shrink.

Over the past thirty odd years, however, the quality of our sources, amps and ancillaries have improved dramatically, and this in turn has made

the differences between loudspeakers all the more obvious and important. In my view, the importance of the loudspeaker now tends to be seriously underrated, and a return to some of those traditional values seems to be well overdue.

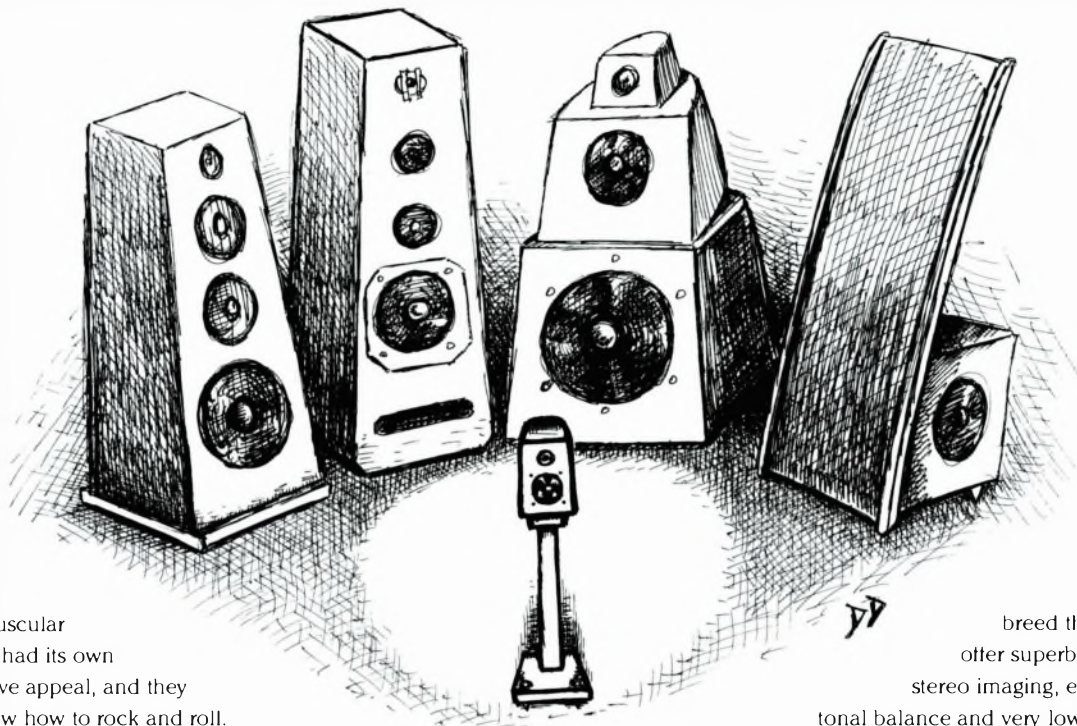
When I bought my first real hi-fi speakers, way back in the late 1960s, small bookshelf models did exist, but were more the exception than the rule, and didn't have a lot of credibility amongst serious enthusiasts. In that era the 12-inch bass driver still ruled the roost, even though the winds of change were starting to blow. Today the 12-incher has all but vanished from the domestic hi-fi scene (and is now, perversely, far more likely to be found in in-car installations).

The three models on my 1969 speaker shortlist included the Tannoy Lancaster, using a 12-inch version of the famous dual-concentric driver; the Leak Sandwich, which actually used a 13-inch bass driver alongside a 3-inch(!) tweeter; and the Lowther Acousta, whose relative modest 6-inch driver was considerably amplified in practice by horn loading. As it turned out, I went for a pair of very early Spendor BC1s instead. Using just an 8-inch driver (with no horn loading), this BBC-inspired design was enormously influential in the subsequent trend towards smaller speakers.

I've no regrets over choosing the BC1s, which were remarkable loudspeakers that still hold their heads high amongst the products available today. But I'd also heard a friend's Tannoys, and while these didn't have the mid and treble delicacy and transparency of the Spendors, their altogether ►

ultimate





► more muscular delivery had its own alternative appeal, and they sure knew how to rock and roll.

Although I didn't recognise it at the time, these two models are remarkably good examples of two contrasting and almost mutually exclusive design philosophies which remain just as relevant today. The BC1 was certainly the more accurate and neutral monitor, but this low sensitivity design lacked the dynamic drama and excitement of the older Tannoy design.

The tide of history was flowing strongly in the Spondor's favour. The bulky Tannoy seemed like a throwback to an earlier era of low power valve amps and monophonic sound - which of course it was. The dawning of the stereo era brought the need to find room for two loudspeakers rather than one, while at around the same time the arrival of transistor amplification (allegedly) made much more power available, encouraging speaker makers to explore lower sensitivity options.

Going from mono to stereo does allow a modest reduction in bass driver size, because of the way the two speakers couple at low frequencies. (Switch your system to mono and compare the sound with one and with both speakers playing, making sure to equalise the volume as best you can, and notice

how the single speaker sounds less 'bassy'. Maybe I'll get onto the implications of multi-channel surround sound in the next issue!)

Ultimately, full-bandwidth sound reproduction is possible from even a tiny loudspeaker (such as a headphone!) It's all about choosing the trade-offs between bass extension, sensitivity and loudness capability. Instead of the larger, higher sensitivity speakers which were used on the mono and valve amp era, we've moved to smaller, less efficient stereo speakers.

But the more speakers I get to play around with, the more convinced I become that we've lost something inherently important in moving away from those large, high sensitivity designs. They might be an inconveniently intrusive and costly solution, but in my experience there's no alternative if you want the 'X-factor' that only high efficiency seem able to supply.

I can think of a number of very good small loudspeakers, from the BC1s (which looked small in the late 1960s but seem quite large today!) via the classic LS3/5As to current gems like Orelle's delightful The Swing. As a

breed they offer superb stereo imaging, even tonal balance and very low coloration levels. But all seem to miss out somewhat when it comes to the dynamic tension, grip and drive I hear with high efficiency designs like my Rehdeko 175s, the full-size Tannoy dual-concentrics, a lot of horn-loaded systems, and some of the JBL 'revival' models.

Exactly why this should be the case is impossible to pin down, but I'm beginning to suspect that sheer driver area (or horn-mouth area where appropriate) may have something to do with it. The sound from many natural musical instruments tends to come from a relatively large surface making very small movements. This is bound to be more accurately replicated by a large area drive unit than the small affairs used in most regular loudspeakers, where the driver acts more like an 'air pump', making relatively large peak excursions to deliver the bass end.

Given the dictates of fashion, I can't see it happening in our increasingly techno-cluttered homes, but I for one would love to see a return to the days when real loudspeakers ruled the earth, and our listening experiences were all the more satisfying as a result.



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Home Truths

by James Michael Hughes

It's official; I've stopped collecting LPs! Had to - I got married and ran out of space. Which isn't to say I won't ever buy another LP ever again - if a tasty morsel comes along at the right price, I daresay I'll capitulate. But my days as a serious out-of-control pathological LP buyer are over. With the bulk of my listening devoted to silver disc, it's harder and harder to justify buying things on vinyl I've already got in CD format...

Yet the lure of buying a favourite recording on vinyl can be hard to resist. LPs now have a definite scarcity value - the opportunity to buy a particular release on vinyl may never again present itself. And then there's always the possibility that some new breakthrough - a revolutionary pickup cartridge, or maybe a new phono-stage - will miraculously transform your vinyl collection, revealing hidden qualities that CD, with its 'glass ceiling' resolution limitations, can only hint at. Well, one lives in hope...

Naturally, I've toyed with the idea of selling off my LPs. But I doubt I could actually do it. There are too many memories associated with each disc - parting with the actual records that introduced me to so many great pieces of music would be unbearably painful. The logical thing would be to thin-out the collection, keeping just the essentials. Again, no dice. If I could be cold-blooded and dispassionate about music, perhaps I might. But I can't.

There's a special thrill to be had when playing an LP you've had for perhaps twenty or thirty years, and hearing it sound freshly-minted. It's



like rediscovering the music and performance all over again. When I play Alfred Brendel's Philips 1972 LP of *Mozart's Piano Concerto No 23 K488*, for example, there's always a special significance because it was the first recording I ever had of the work. So playing it on LP gets about as close as one can to recreating that first magical encounter.

In the same way, I still pull out old favourites like Claudio Abbado's 1976 LSO recording of Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring* on Deutsche Grammophon, and remember the excitement I felt when I first saw the sleeve, heard the performance, and experienced DG's detailed, analytical sound. In the days when I had my Isobariks, this was one of my favourite demonstration discs. And I still think it sounds great.

Mind you, Zubin Mehta's 1968 Los Angeles *Rite* on Decca was arguably the first really good recording of this piece, sonically - the first one to really recreate the impact of this barbaric work. True, the engineers didn't quite capture the full scale of the orchestral onslaught - dynamics are good, but

close mic-ing makes the huge forces used sound like a chamber orchestra on steroids. Nevertheless, for 1968 it was a bloody good attempt.

One of the potentially disappointing things about getting 'better' hi-fi is the way it sometimes fails to recreate the full impact and splendour of some older recordings. There has to be a balance struck between highlighting what's right with a recording, and exaggerating what's wrong with it. In the '70s I often used to listen to the Brendel Mozart LP, and it sounded fine.

But during the '80s, after I'd chopped and changed my equipment, it was one among many favourite LPs that no longer sounded as good as it once had - the recording, once so lucid and clear, now seemed rather pale and colourless, and some tape hiss was audible. Of course, by then, technically better recordings of the work had come along. So perhaps the 'limitations' referred to were simply down to having become accustomed to a higher standard of technical quality.

However, on my present system, Brendel's *K488* has made something of a comeback - sonically, it now sounds much as I remember it, with the faults having become much less noticeable. For me, there's still a special thrill in being able to take an old LP, like the Brendel or Mehta's *Rite of Spring*, and reproduce it so superlatively well it sounds like a modern recording. When you hear an old favourite sounding great, it justifies all the hard work and expense... ➤+



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Notes from America

by Wayne Garcia

The audio bug bit me at the impressionable age of twelve. And though it would be nice to say that this passion sprang purely from a love of music, that would be but a half-truth. Sure, I loved music even as a kid, and before I got my first pimple became a fan of Cream, Hendrix, Procol Harum, The Grateful Dead, and other San Francisco bands of the psychedelic era. But what really made me a serious music lover, and helped expand my musical landscape beyond the realm of a few stoned-out guys with long hair and electric guitars, was the discovery of how music could sound over a great stereo system.

I heard it at the apartment of my sister's twenty-two year old boyfriend. With his Jeff Beck haircut (hey, this was 1968), python-skin cowboy boots, and Austin Mini Cooper, this guy, at least to my adolescent eyes, seemed unbelievably cool. He even built his own speakers: a pair of black painted, Frigidaire-sized horn-loaded things that sat in the corners of his room. They weren't very refined sounding, but they sure could move air.

In retrospect, it wasn't a terribly good system. But compared to my parents' all-in-one console, or the thing I was given for my tenth birthday (you know, a little suitcase-like portable with hinged speakers and a carrying handle), it was miraculous.

With the boyfriend's help I built my own mini-horns, and tinkered around with other speaker kits before realising that the stuff in stores sounded quite a bit better than our funky contraptions. Like most teenagers of the time, I played guitar in a bad

garage band, but my musical tastes were shifting rapidly. I got into classical and opera in my mid-teens, and foolishly traded in my beautiful sun-burst Gibson Firebird and Marshall amp for a baby grand piano (which I never learned to play beyond a few plinkety-plonks).

I got a job and a car and began to roam the hi-fi shops in the San Francisco Bay Area. I heard my first Magneplanars and Quads, electronics from Audio Research and Mark Levinson, as well as the Linn LP-12. A few years later, while studying painting at the San Francisco Art Institute, I got a job at one of these shops, The Audible Difference in Palo Alto, where I remained for nearly fifteen years.

At first, the emphasis was (naturally) on analogue-based systems (we sold Linn and Rega). I remained an avid enthusiast (I'll tell you now that I detest the word 'audiophile' since it implies a love of gear for gear's sake), and sold to, and I sincerely hope, helped educate, other enthusiasts. But with the coming of the compact disk things began to change. It took years for CD to sound even remotely like music, which made the job harder and a lot less fun. Plus, it scared me when I saw once normal, seemingly well balanced people morph, Jekyll-like, into scary, obsessive audiophiles.

I stayed way too long in the retail game. I was burned-out, and selling audio for me, except for encounters with a few special people (most of whom are still friends) was no longer much fun.

One day I happened to walk into a favourite used book and record store,

and, as serendipity would have it, ran into a friend who introduced me to a visiting vinyl hound, Harry Pearson. (As if he needs an intro, HP is the founder and editor of *The Absolute Sound*, arguably the most influential audio magazine of all time). I'm still not sure why, but Pearson saw something in me that I'd never really considered: the potential to write about this stuff and be part of a magazine's editorial team.

A few months later, I found myself in New York. I was originally hired as TAS' Technical Editor, which is rather implausible because I am one of the least technical people you'll ever meet. In reality I was more of a good will ambassador, and my job was to use my industry connections to help line up hard-to-get gear for review. A few months into the job I was promoted to the position of Executive Editor. I learned a lot at TAS and will be forever grateful to Harry for giving me my start in audio journalism. The experience at TAS also helped me solidify my thinking about what I considered to be good, and not so good, about the existing audio magazines (something I had thought a lot about in my retail days). My conclusions were many, and a few themes kept popping up. The first was that somewhere along the way things had got turned upside down. Instead of looking at audio gear as a means to an end it seemed to me that most magazines were presenting the equipment as objects of fetish. Instead of talking about how well (or not) equipment communicated the music, most audio writers talked about imaging, ►



▶ depth, plummy mid-bass, and how many violinists they could count in the orchestra. In short, music was missing. The little bit that was mentioned tended to be the same tired audiophile favourites (tell me, when was the last time you listened to Dusty Springfield sing 'The Look of Love' for musical pleasure?).

I decided to do what any other half-sane person would do in my shoes: start my own magazine. The goals? Approach audio from a music first standpoint. Hire the best audio as well as the best music writers we could find, and be willing to pay a premium for their talents. Emphasise the importance of system matching, and cover a broad spectrum of equipment, from \$300 per-pair mainstream speakers up to \$70,000 exotica.

So, along with my editorial partner and good friend, Jonathan Valin, and a handful of well-meaning and enthusiastic investors, I helped launch *Fi* in January of 1996.

It was a sobering experience. And one I wouldn't trade for all the tea in China (though, truth-be-told, I'm not really a big tea drinker). Publishing is a tough business. And, at least in the US, the audio crowd is equally tough. There are hidden agendas, way too much politics, petty sniping, and, in certain quarters, a lust to see others fail. Despite our efforts, and the pride we all took in the magazine we creat-

ed, forces were against us and the magazine folded last March. Being editor-in-chief of *Fi* was a terrific education. You know what else? It was also a lot of fun.

Fun. That's one of the things we often forget about. This hobby, like travel, wine collecting, cooking, or kinky sex, ought to be fun. Alas, we humans tend to forget that as we challenge others' right to an opinion. And if a system can't provide musical pleasure, be engaging, and yes, fun, then little else about it; great build quality, impressive pedigree, price tag, or great reviews, really matters a whole hell of a lot. At least that's my opinion.

I don't care whether an amplifier uses tubes, transistors, or jellybeans for output devices, as long as it delivers the musical goods. And likewise, I'm not much impressed by manufacturers' claims about their technology. That's not to say technology isn't vitally important, it is. But I want to know about it after, and only if, a component has proved its musical merit.

I also believe that simple systems are usually better than more complex ones. My listening priorities are for tonal and textural naturalness (along with top-to-bottom coherence), nimble dynamics, gear that doesn't draw

attention to itself, and a relaxed, open presentation. A big soundstage is nice, but only if the instruments occupy that space with a natural sense of weight and body, and I don't like instruments to crowd together, no matter how razor sharp the imaging might be. Extended frequency response is nice, but not a high priority (mainly because most manufacturers, especially of American loudspeakers, confuse quantity with quality).

This lengthy personal history is my way of introducing myself as the new American correspondent for *Hi-Fi+*. I will inform you of trends, news, and the general health of the American hi-fi industry. I'll tell you about gear that you may have read about, but due to its rarity, even in the States, may never get a chance to hear. This is not intended as some sort of Yankee bravado, nor is it meant to tease; instead, it's to give you a taste of what American audio enthusiasts are talking about. In addition, I'll profile some of the characters, for that they most certainly are, who populate the American audio culture. The editor of this magazine has graciously given me carte blanche to write about pretty much anything I want to, and I welcome suggestions from the *Hi-Fi+* readership. After all, it is you I will be writing this column for.

Wayne Garcia can be reached via email at wgarcia@dnai.com.





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Sharp announce new 1-bit digital amplifier compatible with new digital formats.

by Roy Gregory

In a surprise move, Sharp Electronics have announced their return to the hi-fi separates market with the launch of a new digital amplifier technology. The 1-bit amplifier employs a 2.8MHz sampling frequency and 7th order Delta-Sigma modulation, making it the theoretical equivalent of SACD in terms of bandwidth and dynamic range (5Hz - 100kHz, >110dB). As well as the profound implications for sound quality, Sharp are also keen to point out the mechanical efficiency of the new technology, the amplifier being approximately a quarter the size of an analogue equivalent, using half the electrical

the SM-SX100 integrated amp. Shorn of unnecessary foibles such as remote control and balance the unit offers two single-ended and one balanced input, and milled from solid casework that all adds up to a weight of 20 kilos! If you try to pick it up, this baby feels like it's been nailed to the ground. The last product that made this sort of impression on my biceps was the new Mark Levinson No32; two boxes and a cool seventeen and a half grand. Like I said, they want us to sit up and take

as BNC, RCA and Tos-link, their were also proprietary high density electrical and optical connectors intended for direct SACD digital connection, even though players with digital outputs won't appear until the copyright issues have been resolved and standards have been agreed.

Much more interesting was the



power, and dissipating only 20% of the heat. All of which makes the choice of launch vehicle slightly ironic.

Keen to be taken seriously, Sharp have produced a high-end technology demonstrator in the dramatic shape of

notice. Offering 100w/ch into four or eight ohms, it's sensibly powerful and should be available from around the time of the Novotel show. Sharp were unnecessarily cagey on price, but as far as I can work out, it will be around the \$4000 mark.

What is more revealing of the state of confusion within Japan Inc. is the range of digital inputs on offer. As well


appearance of a prototype 50 w/ch amp in an ultra slim midi size box. Three inputs and a volume control, and cute as a button. This already indicates the huge potential market for smaller, and particularly cooler running, amp modules in miniature hi-fi, the computer market, home theatre and a host of other applications. Whilst Sharp have chosen to launch this technology with hi-fi separates, it's impossible to ignore the fact that we are becoming a diminishing sector of a burgeoning global market place.



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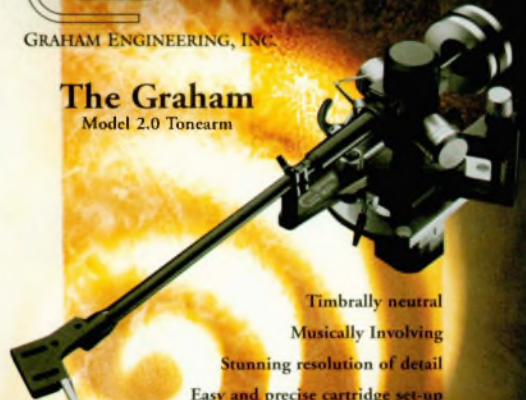


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YBA returns

(and launches budget range.)

Welcome news indeed, is the return of the highly respected YBA marque to these shores. This means that full service and update facilities will once again be available to existing owners, as well as the opportunity for new customers to hear the entire range of current product. This extends to stratospheric levels, the top of the range six-box pre-amp and Passion monoblocks competing with anything that is produced by the American solid-state manufacturers. It also represents a welcome broadening of the options available to would be buyers, and beside the long overdue arrival of Spectral products in this country, means that two new, and genuinely world class brands are here to keep the likes of Krell and Mark Levinson on their toes.

However, that's not the big story. For most of us, Passion price levels are simply out of the question, which makes the emergence of Audio Refinement very interesting indeed. Sister company to YBA, the new brand represents designer Yves-Bernard Andre's first foray into the field of budget electronics. The new range consists of three models, forming the Complete integrated system. At the heart of things is the Complete integrated amp, a 50 watt per channel, remote control design with six line inputs and a tape loop (with separate record out). Price for the amplifier is \$699. The matching Complete CD player is an 18-bit design, selling for

\$649, while the Complete FM/AM tuner will set you back \$490. Finally, the all important system remote (which I have to say is one of the nicest that I've handled, and which avoids a bewildering array of identical tiny buttons by dint of product selection controls) weighs in at an extra \$40.

Sonic judgements will have to wait until we get to hear the Complete system, rather than just fondling it, but YBA aspirants will be pleased to hear that the Audio Refinement products are an unmistakable chip off of the old block. The brushed aluminium fascias and simple round controls have a

certain Gallic something that sets them apart, and manages to convey a cool, detached elegance. For those who value classy looks as well as audio performance, (and who find sculpted wood slapped onto the front of electronics as tasteless as plaid trousers) these products may well be the kiss of life.

Further Information from:

Sound Image UK Ltd
Tel. (44)(0)181-255-6868
Fax. (44)(0)181-255-6869

YBA Web-site: www.phlox-electronique.fr/index.htm



That'll be the...

Korean hordes descend, only this time we're talking vinyl!

by Reuben Parry

Cars; domestic appliances; shipbuilding, and much, much, more....

Seemingly, South-East Asian industriousness knew no economic boundaries. It even extended to LP production, where, if the well-being of a society were to be judged solely by the executive body's commitment to vinyl, this particular corner of the Pacific Rim would definitely receive a clean bill of health.

I speak of Korea, whose Government has given commendable support to an exhaustive classical library project: two hundred LPs, reprinted under licence from the Decca, DGG and Philips back catalogues, embracing just about every conceivable movement and style in the Classical repertoire. The *raison d'être* behind this unique venture is the promotion of a facsimile - a faithful recreation of the way these performances must have sounded to the engineers and musicians present at the recording sessions. To that end only the manufacturers' original record stampers, together with contemporaneous technical equipment from the 1960s and 70s, have been used. No manipulation or alteration of the master tapes has occurred. The records, pressed from standard weight JVC anti-static vinyl, are then sleeved within replica artwork, imitation being the sincerest form of flattery. They are then brought to you by the good offices of the Moth Group.

The entire collection is divided

along six major themes. Set one is the biggest: "World of the Great Classics" consists of fifty LPs, in five boxes, devoted to symphonies, concertos, chamber/vocal, solo and orchestral music. The price is £250.00.

Collections two to six are thirty LP sets which separate into three boxes of ten records. Each complete set costs £150.00, and falls within the following categories: Piano Music; Leier and

Arias; Popular Classics; Stately Classical works; and Romantic Music.

There are many famous renditions, here, by artists who were at the height of their powers: Karajan and the Berlin Philharmonic, the Oistrakhs, Fischer-Dieskau, Bohm with the VPO,

Ashkenazy, Kempf, Mehta and Abbado, to name a few. The list is practically endless, so, as an *hors d'oeuvre*, I've selected half a dozen eye-catching discs.

A quite extraordinary version of the Brahms *Violin Concerto* with the young Anne-Sophie Mutter has everything - flair, personality, incisiveness and spontaneity, matched by the control and beautiful playing of Karajan and the BPO. DGG 2532032.

Solti's 1974 Chicago recording of *The Rite of Spring* is another magnificent, virtuoso interpretation. The original Decca SXL 6691 has tremendously vivid sound that showcases the rich

colours which underpin Stravinsky's barbaric yet lyrical work.

Beethoven and Brendel are irresistible in the Philips 6598565 cut of the *Appassionata*, *Fatigue* and *Moonlight Sonatas*. Authoritative performances and fine sound.

Perfection, best describes Dame Joan Sutherland's singing of these Donizetti and Verdi arias. *Lucia di Lammermoor's* Mad scene is unsurpassed, and the whole recital is a scintillating vehicle for her tonal beauty, drama and vocal dexterity. Top Decca recording JB97.

Igor and David Oistrakh are a brilliant combination in the Bach *Violin Concertos* DGG 138820.

Philips have recorded the *Four Seasons* on many occasions, but few sound as natural as the I Musici account with Roberto Michelucci (violin) 6500017.

All two hundred records are available individually at \$5.50 each (which is a small price to pay for cherry-picking the collection, and staggeringly good value too) but Moth Group stress that only a limited number of complete sets will

be put aside for that purpose. Hesitation could lead to disappointment.

For further information, contact:

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Chord Company Enters Filter Wars

by Roy Gregory

As if to prove our point about the importance of your mains quality, traditional bastions of the purist approach, and the flat earther's favourite 'other' cable supplier, the Chord Company, have announced a new product, the Clearway System Enhancer. It's a dinky little box, not much bigger than a packet of cigs (or should that be 'cigs pack') with an IEC mains input on one end, and a 13amp socket on the other. And it is, horror of horrors, a mains filter!

Now, knowing the total abhorrence that the average UK specialist dealer (the Chord Company's customer base) has for any sort of 'filter', this would seem to be the action of either a brave man or a complete fool. But Rob Noble, the man at the pointy end, reports that despite initial scepticism, most dealers are quick to recognise the sonic benefits once they actually bother to listen.

All of which is important for two reasons. Firstly it indicates just how far such devices have come from the days when they squashed the dynamics and destroyed the rhythmic integrity of a system. And secondly, the Chord Company's confidence in their ability to sell what was previously a taboo product category to the very dealers who branded it outcast in the first place shows just how far up the agenda the mains has got. Mind you, that's hardly news to the rest of the world, where mains

conditioning has been big business for years. Compared to the kind of products available from Germany, Japan and the USA, Chord's entry into the arena is modest indeed.

The Clearway System Enhancer has been derived from medical and defence related research, and retails for around £200. It has a current capacity of 6amps, which means that it should support a CD player and preamp, or of course, a turntable. A larger model of around 10amp capacity is in the works, and that should handle integrated amps. But the Stage 1 moniker on the unit has nothing to do with big brother. Rather, it's to do with the priority that Chord feel you should afford it in the overall scheme of things. Their logic runs that most hi-fi equipment, especially the cheaper stuff, suffers from inadequate power supplies.

Consequently you don't hear what it's capable of until you add the filtering and protection that the designer couldn't afford. One insidious effect of this is that people often end up buying cables to mask these problems rather than to maximise their system's performance. Treat the cause rather than the symptoms and you win all round.

While this argument certainly serves a purpose for cable manu-

facturers, of whom Chord are one, it also actually makes considerable sense. Especially when you consider that mains problems have increased massively in the last ten years with the proliferation of digitally based electronics in almost every walk of life. In the same period, the prices charged for budget hi-fi have stayed reasonably constant (£150 a box), and given that power supplies are inherently expensive, where do you think that manufacturers trim their costs. It ain't on the casework! Unfortunately we've gone way past shaving fat, and we're biting deep into flesh. The Clearway System Enhancer might be a rifle shot against the distant rumble of imported heavy artillery, but me thinks it signals the opening of a whole new battle, as mains quality finally hits the UK spotlight. Expect to witness an undignified scramble as all those companies afraid to take the first step, clamber over one another, petrified of missing the boat. ▶✚



Manchester Show

No, not that one. Chester dealer Acoustica is organising a one day mini show at the Queen Hotel in Chester on November 21st. Exhibitors slated to appear include Naim, Rega, Densen, Primare, Crimson, Rotel, JM Labs, Celestion, Kef, Rehdeko, System Audio, Nakamichi and Quadraspire. There will be new and used LP's and CD's on offer, as well as the real thing from Antonio Forcione.

Notable coups include the first public appearance outside London (and as I write this, Novotel is touch and go) of the new Naim NAP500 power amp. The Salisbury company will also be showing the elegant NBL,

both products marking a significant evolution in their design philosophy.

There will also be active demonstrations of the intriguing Music Works mains set-up, an absolute must for any Naim owner, if the results that we've achieved are anything to go by. It will provide you with an interesting opportunity to compare what we write with what a manufacturer can demonstrate. And as we'll be there too, you'll have the chance to tell us exactly what you think. Nothing like a bit of direct feedback to keep us on our toes.

This is yet another example of Dealers taking promotional

responsibility upon themselves, a trend we reported in the last issue. It brings manufacturers and designers out of their workshops, and gives you the chance to discuss their products and thinking with them, as well as hearing a whole slew of unfamiliar products under similar circumstances. Without having to trek down to London. If you want to see more local events, then take the opportunity to vote with your feet and attend this one. Tickets cost £2.50, and it's worth that just to see some decent live music. Contact Geoff Coleman at Acoustica, 17 Hoole Rd, Chester. Tel. 01244-344227. ➡

Rules

- Restaurant Review -

Tucked away at 35 Maiden Lane, Covent Garden, is what claims to be the capital's oldest restaurant. It started life as an oyster barrow, but it's come an awful long way since those days, counting the cream of London society and stage amongst its regular clientele.

The interior is Edwardian gentleman's club, the service everything that suggests. But it's the food that makes Rules my favourite London restaurant. The menu is traditional English cooking, the culinary standards are just superb. Everything from Steak, Kidney and Oyster pudding, to game raised at the

restaurant's own estate. Anybody who has ever apologised for English cuisine should eat at Rules. Anybody who thinks the English can't cook should do the same. Our last visit was a gastronomic extravaganza of epic proportions, the fabulous aforementioned pud being the star of the show. I've never been disappointed by a single dish at Rules, and the staff make each visit one to remember. (When your father-in-law to be orders his rib of beef "Well done", and the waiter doesn't even bat an eyelid, you know the Gods are smiling!)

You can count on £70 to £80 for

two (assuming you go the whole hog - which, incidentally, they also serve, but only to special order), so Rules isn't cheap. What it is, is a quintessentially English experience, and one not to be missed.

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Meet The Reviewers

Two more lambs to the slaughter... I mean additions to the reviewing team.



Fawzy Issa

Consultant Orthopaedic Surgeon

Hi-Fi Experience

A complete hi-fi nut for his entire life, he got so disgruntled by the state of the hi-fi press that he decided to have a go himself.

System

Roksan TMS

SME 5

ClearAudio Insider, Insider Reference and Koetsu Red Signature

Nordost Quattro-fil arm-cable

BAT PK-10 phono stage

BAT VK-5i pre-amp

Pink Triangle Pip pre-amp (modified)

Jadis JABO mono-blocks (modified)

BAT VK-60 mono-blocks

Chronos mono-blocks (Heavily modified and used for bass only)

Spendor S100, with re-built external crossovers and rewired with Siltech

Goertz Bullion, Audioquest Clear and Nordost SPM cables

Audioplant PowerPlants and mains cables

Desert Island Discs

Sonny Boy Williamson - Keeping It To Ourselves (Analogue Productions)

Fleetwood Mac - Pious Bird Of Good Omen (Simply Vinyl)

Lightnin' Hopkins - Goin' Away (AP)

The Weavers Reunion at Carnegie Hall (AP)

Sonny Rollins - Way Out West (AP)

The Doors - Everything! (Especially on DCC)

Belafonte at Carnegie Hall - Classic Records

Film

The Godfather

Luxury

A beautiful woman, who shares my interests.

Indulgence

An Editor who actually listens to me.

Wayne Garcia

Hi-Fi Experience

See this month's column.

System

Rega Planar 25 with RB 600 arm

Cardas "Heart" Cartridge

Balanced Audio Technology VK-3I Preamplifier

Balanced Audio Technology VK-200 Amplifier

Balanced Audio Technology VK-D5 CD Player

Magneplan MG 12-Q/R Speakers

Polk PSW650 subwoofer (yeah, I never thought I'd use one either)

Nirvana interconnects and speaker cables

Townshend Audio Seismic Sinks

Essential Sound Products power cords & power strip

Desert Island Discs

Bach: Cello Suites, Rostropovich [EMI]

Bartók: The Six String Quartets, The Juilliard String Quartet

Mozart: Le Nozze di Figaro, Mackerras [Telarc]

John Coltrane: The Complete Live 1961 Village Vanguard Recordings [Impulse!]

Miles Davis: Kind of Blue [CBS]

Thelonious Monk: The Complete Genius [Blue Note]

Frank Sinatra: Songs for Swingin' Lovers [Capitol]

Ella Fitzgerald: The Complete Songbooks [Verve]

Buena Vista Social Club [World Circuit/Nonesuch]

Leonard Cohen: The Future [CBS]

Bob Dylan: Live 1966 [CBS]

Breakfast at Tiffany's Soundtrack [RCA] (for my wife, you don't think I'm going alone, do you?)

Book

James Joyce, Ulysses

Film

(What torture! I tried, but couldn't pick just one.)

The Third Man, North by Northwest, (Kieslowski's) Red, Seven Samurai, The Big Lebowski, The Maltese Falcon, Grand Illusion, Double Indemnity

Luxury

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Indulgence

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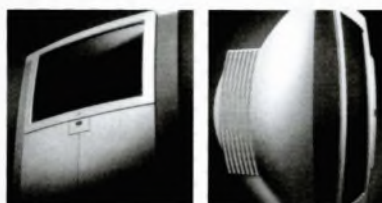
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ARC LS25	£4999
ARC VT100 MkII	£4950
Pro Ac Response 2.5	£2700
System total	£16048

Krell / Martin Logan



Krell KAV 300 CD	£4190
Krell KAV 500i amp	£4999
Martin Logan Aenius i	£2199
System total	£11388

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Above prices do not include cable connections or stands. Please contact for advice



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In the beginning there was darkness

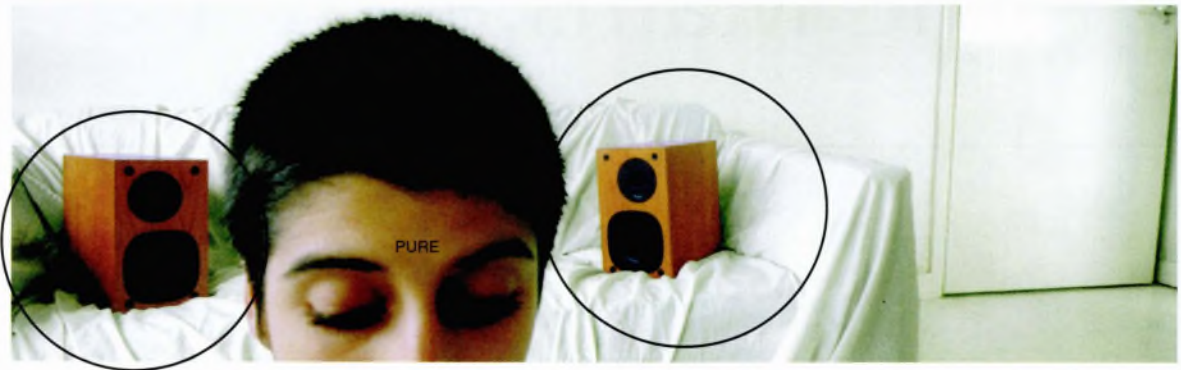
Then God created Music and it was good



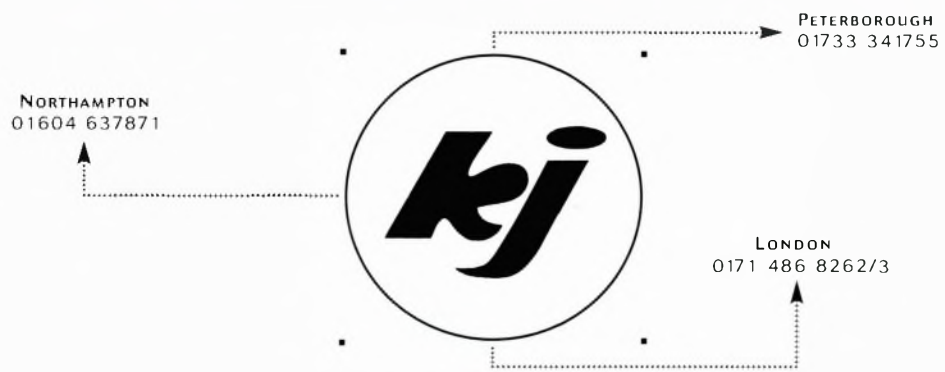
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The Mains, Part 1

When you listen to a hi-fi system, in a very real sense you are listening to your mains. Sure, it's been transformed into something else, but rather like turning a tree into a piece of furniture, the end result will depend on whether you started with a majestic oak or a knotty old pine. And there's the rub, because the mains quality is the electrical equivalent of a gnarled old hawthorn; twisted, spiky and heavily grained. And the growing number of electrical appliances, especially computers of every conceivable type from PC's to burglar alarms, throw more and more junk back into the mains supply, which means it's getting worse rather than better.

Add to that the fact that the vast majority of houses have a completely inadequate number of sockets, and that in older houses the wiring itself is deteriorating and adding to the problem, and you have a major problem when it comes to the quality of electricity that actually comes out of the wall. And it does have a very real effect on the sound that your system makes. Grain, a pallid tonal

palette, inadequate dynamics and rhythmic confusion are all signs of dodgy mains quality.

In the UK, we have always been suspicious of any sort of mains treatment, preferring the 'simple' solution of using a dedicated spur for the hi-fi. And whilst this is still valid, other countries have adopted a rather more open minded approach, and their findings indicate that there is rather more to it than that. Sophisticated distribution blocks, filters and isolation transformers have insinuated themselves into our consciousness, and have even started to emerge from domestic manufacturers. It is about time we took this a whole lot more seriously.

Basically, the problem can be divided into two halves; getting the juice up to your wall socket, and getting it from there into your equipment. In the UK, two people have been working on this for longer than anyone else, and in considerably greater depth. Both Russ Andrews

and Ben Duncan have developed 'total solutions' to providing a dedicated supply for your hi-fi system. Intriguingly, their conclusions are almost totally opposite, at least as far as the materials are concerned. Jon Marks interviews them both in this issue.

We also look at the question of mains leads themselves. Not 'do they make a difference?', but 'how consistent are the results?'. People have tended to assume that a good mains lead is a good mains lead in any situation. Unfortunately, that isn't the case, and the implications are important in considering how we approach the whole issue of getting power into a hi-fi system. ➤



Russ Andrews Interview

by Jon Marks

JM - What are the main problems suffered by the UK mains?

RA - The first that I came across was variations in the mains voltage. I couldn't work out why the sound of a hi-fi system changed so much, and it appeared to do so on a fairly predictable basis, which coincided with times of high demand for electricity. So I measured the mains and I found big variations.

To see what effect this might have, I put a Naim 160 power amp on a bench and tested its power output into an 8ohm load with a variac (variable transformer) on its mains input. To my horror, I found that, at 219V, the amplifier delivered precisely half its rated output.

JM - 219V is still within the limits specified for the mains voltage, though.

RA - It is now. It was marginal when I first encountered the problem in the Seventies. The maximum and minimum used to be 240V +6% and -10%. Now, thanks to Euro standardisation, they are 230V +6%, -10%. A transformer is wound to work optimally at a certain voltage. If you go either side of that voltage, noise goes up, efficiency goes down. Depending on how well it's made, the transformer can get acoustically noisy even if you drop just 5V off the rated 230V.

JM - At least the regional electricity boards are legally responsible for

sorting out over or under-voltage outside the specified limits.

RA - Yes. If you suspect that your voltage is either above or below the legal limits, then all you have to do is contact your local Electricity Board and ask them to check it by monitoring the voltage in your house over a 24-hour period. It might be advantageous to have an independent check on their reference voltage however! Although you can buy transformers that will step up or step down the mains supplied to your system, these introduce what, to my ears, is an unacceptable degradation in system sound quality.

Frequency stability must also be maintained within 1%. It may be allowed to drift by no more than +/-1%, but that's over 24 hours! Inevitably, when the voltage sags, the frequency is affected as well. During high demand, the frequency sags, and vice versa. Typically, you find from about 11pm to a couple of hours after midnight that the frequency is well ahead, depending on what it fell by. It varies all the time, of course, because then the generating companies can stay within the 1% limit over the day.

This variation has a direct effect on all kinds of electronics, the most obvious being the speed of a turntable driven by an AC synch-ronous motor. And if you use a strobe which runs off the mains, you'll never know the speed is out.


More unexpected victims of variations in mains voltage are CD

players. The spindle speed of the motor which spins the CD is not 'locked' to anything - it's entirely voltage-dependent, as its rpms vary according to where the laser is over the disc (faster on the inside, slower on the outside). There are checks on this speed, but they are all voltage-dependent. If you increase the mains input voltage, the player will play faster, and vice versa.

JM - What are some of the other culprits in poor hi-fi sound caused by bad mains?

RA - Well, you've got one of the best-known these days, and that's RFI (Radio Frequency Interference). This turned out to be one of the biggest nasties, but the cap-acitive weave of the Kimber Powerkords cures it beautifully. RFI is injected into the mains by things like switch-mode power supplies, fluorescent lighting and telecommunications equipment.

JM - In the past, people have tended to use 'mains conditioners', which normally involve series inductors and parallel capacitors, but I know you're not a fan of these.

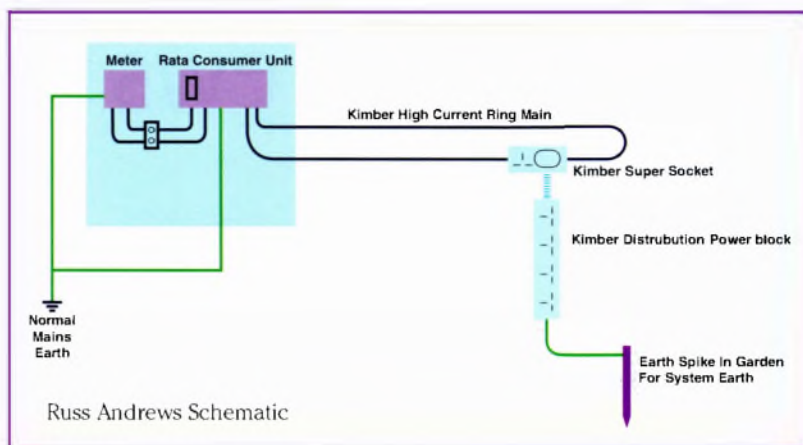
RA - I don't like what they do to the music - they ruin the sound. They give rise to another obstacle to optimal hi-fi performance, and that's the raised impedance of the mains in your own home. The impedance of the mains delivered to your house is only a 

▶ secondary problem. Within your home, all of the connections between the consumer unit and your wall sockets increase the impedance. The cross-sectional area of the conductors is another factor. There's not a lot you can do about the impedance of what's delivered to your house, but boy, you can degrade it a lot inside.

Every junction in a ring main or a spur is screwed down, and that raises impedance. The closer the screw contact, the lower the impedance and the better the sound. One free tweak I tell people to do is tighten down the screws in their various mains junctions, and they all ring up and say, "Wow!" It really can make that much difference. Another way of improving the contacts is DeoxIT, a contact cleaner which stops oxidation.

A rather more expensive modification, but which is a big, big step forward, is the Kimber High Current Ring Main. This thick, specially-woven cable comes in a double-insulated version at £18/ft and single-insulated (if you're going to run it down a conduit which will provide the legally-required second layer of insulation) at £12/ft. We do a cheaper one that's £12/ft. double-insulated, £6/ft. single insulated. It's like a double version of our more budget YeLO mains cable. On the other hand, if you just go from the standard 2.5mm sq. twin and earth to 4mm sq., you can get an enormous improvement as increasing the conductors' cross-sectional area lowers impedance.

Whatever you do, keep the mains layout as a ring. I know the idea of single and multiple spurs has been around for a while, but I don't like it - it looks fine on paper, but in my experience, it doesn't work in practice. I've come across lots of people who have put spurs in and their hi-fi has then suffered from hum, loss of bass, etc. You've got multiple mains supplies to a system whose individual components are connected through their signal ground lines, if the interconnects are



single-ended, as most are. The result is a very inferior presentation. Music just sounds so much more coherent and solid and wideband if you connect everything to one point. It's 'star mains', if you like, like 'star grounding'. A ring also has half the impedance of a spur.

JM - What about the use of steel conduit for extra protection from RFI?

RA - I'm really not a fan of steel conduits. They don't do you any favours at all. The major drawback with a steel conduit is that it disrupts the electromagnetic fields in the wires. Any time you do that, there is a major sonic penalty to pay.

JM - Denis Morecroft builds his electronics into plastic casework, and you used wooden cases on your equipment. Are we talking about the same effect here?

RA - Absolutely. Manufacturers who put metal cans around transformers are making a very, very big mistake. It's like pulling the ceiling down on the music. Suddenly, you've got no headroom - it feels as if it's all constricted, tight, and unnatural. On top of that, what you're calling a screen in the case of cabling isn't a screen at all, it's an aerial - it makes the problem worse! And if the screen is dumping RFI as it's claimed to, where is it going? It's going to end up in the ground plane of your

electronics. You don't want it there either. In a system hooked up with single-ended rather than balanced cabling, the ground plane is the same as the signal plane as far as RFI is concerned.

JM - Returning to impedance, it's basically the lower the better when it comes to earthing as well. One of the ways to achieve this is to drive an earth rod into the soil in a garden. When you're doing this, though, is there any service available to prevent you putting the rod through, say, gas or water pipes?

RA - Well, a small metal detector might help, but so far, with all the hundreds we've sold, no one has reported hammering them through anything. Fortunately, the pipes tend to be in predictable places. If your house is on a road, the pipes come straight out from the centre of the road into the front of the house, so you're pretty safe going round the back.

When it comes to the earth rods themselves, you can screw sections together and get much deeper than the standard four feet, but if you've got damp ground to within a foot of the surface of your garden, then a four-foot section is perfectly adequate. It can be very difficult to drive deeper than that anyway - you tend to need more specialised pile-driving equipment! ▶

► The more practical option is to put a couple of rods in, three maybe, to make an earth 'star' out of it. The cable from these spikes should be taken back to the ground terminal on a distribution block, or we now do Super Sockets (wall-mounted sockets treated with DeoxIT) with a ground terminal on them so you don't have to dig the wall out. And remember to keep the earth lead as short and as thick as possible - it's acting as an earth and an aerial at the same time. We do have a woven Kimber lead to overcome the aerial effect, though.

More rubbish makes its way onto the spur or ring main which supplies your hi-fi through the 230V being modulated by the power supplies in amplifiers. Any demand you draw on the output of an amp has to be recovered on the mains input. The power supply resupplies whatever is drawn by the output stage - the music signal. In this way, the music passes back onto the mains. That, of course, pollutes everything else.

JM - But, apart from making sure nobody else in the building is playing music, what can you do to stop it?

RA - I'm now working on a new device, called the Silencer, which removes this signal. Our mains Silencer is now in its final stage of development and will remove most of the noise put on the mains by equipment like TV sets, hi-fi equipment, computers, etc. The improvement in performance of the system when you clean off this kind of interference is very obvious. The Silencer is partnered by its big brother the Purifier, which goes a major step further but at much higher cost and greater physical size. Both are due for release this Winter.

JM - Another bugbear which gives transformers a hard time is DC on the mains.

RA - Indeed. As far as I can tell, all hair

dryers put DC onto the mains because they're using half-wave rectification for their dual-speed / double heat settings. The sad truth is that there is no way of cleaning DC off. As one electricity board electrician said to me, "If you can come up with a way of curing DC on the mains, you'll be a rich man!" Easier to deal with are spikes. With a high-voltage, fast spike - and we're talking up to 20kV, 50kV but for very short durations, from picoseconds to milliseconds - what happens in the transformer is that you get hysteresis 'bounce'. The transformer's electromagnetic field collapses and regenerates, and the spike on the output of the secondary can be several times bigger than the one on the primary because of the 'bounce'. While the transformer is collapsing and 'bouncing', it's not being a transformer. So you've taken your, say, 100VA transformer, and, in the presence of multiple spikes (which is the common situation), you've got maybe a 25VA transformer in practice. Take away the spikes and you have a much more powerful supply and amplifier.

JM - And it's at this point that your Superclamp comes in...

RA - Exactly. It operates in the space of picoseconds whereas ordinary varistor devices take milliseconds to function.

Faults with connections in the neutral wiring can also cause major headaches. They're a common source of clicks and pops that are incurable through the normal course of action, which is to fit suppression to the devices causing the noises. In this case, the whole mains acts as an aerial if you've got a neutral lifted somewhere, which is what we found with one customer.

The person concerned had an intractable problem. We tried everything to cure the clicks coming through the hi-fi; nothing really worked. So the customer, on our advice, got an electrician in. He eventually found,

when he took floorboards up on the landing and got to the distribution block for the upstairs ring, that the screw was loose on all the neutral cables. He screwed it down - silence!

There's another nightmare which leads to hum. A customer had a couple of monobloc power amps on either side of the room, and one channel hummed. We went through all the usual things and he subsequently discovered the hum was only coming from one socket. We tested the ground; it was fine. His electrician found it was hum pick-up through his hi-fi ring passing some fluorescent light fittings in the garage. He fitted a diode into the earth line (which was picking up the hum) and, again, silence. ►+

Components and Prices Sidebar

RATA Hi-Fi Ringmain Consumer Unit (Isolator Switch direct coupled to MCB and treated with DeoxIT, housed in plastic casework.)	£49.95
Kimber High Current Ring Main cable (double-insulated)	£18/ft.
Kimber High Current Ring Main cable (single-insulated)	£12/ft.
Hi-Fi Ring Main (double-insulated)	£12/ft.
Hi-Fi Ring Main (single-insulated)	£6/ft.
Earth rod and eyelet	£28.95
Earth wire	95p/m.
Kimber Weave	£4/m.
Single Supersocket (box)	£14.95 (£2.95)
Double Supersocket (box)	£19.95 (£5.95)
Superclamp	£15.95
Also available as a kit at	£5.95
DeoxIT Spray	£13.95
Pro-Gold Spray	£13.95

Russ Andrews accessories can be ordered on 0800 373467.

Ben Duncan Interview

by Jon Marks

JM - What are the problems that most mains supplies suffer from?

BD - Well, to start with, Radio Frequency Interference (RFI) may be divided into two kinds. One sort, whether it's generated by legal radio stations, mobile phones or garage openers, is 'airborne' and travels across space and flows as current in metal - any metal in space. These currents need to be drained to earth, which is a completely separate issue from your mains supply's need for a safety earth. However, because the mains happens, for its own safety reasons, to involve an earth, it does already have a degree of RFI drainage, but it isn't made to be best for RF, so it can't always be relied upon.

The second type of RFI is caused by a lot of RF-noisy equipment being connected to the mains. This noise then largely flows along the mains' conductors. People have to separate these two different sources of RFI and be aware that one of them can be helped by earthing while the other probably can't.

JM - Having made this differentiation, it's in earthing arrangements aimed at reducing 'airborne' RFI that earthing rods come in, I presume.

BD - Yes. The 'audio/RF-grade' rod kits that I have specified - and that are made and sold exclusively by Moth - are made of solid copper with heavy tinning, both to reduce skin effect and

also corrosion. Ordinary electrical-grade earth rods quickly become poor for RF earthing, because of the latter.

The rods don't affect electrical safety, provided they are installed according to the instructions in my 'Groundwork' and 'Super Spur' articles (copies from Moth). In electrician's parlance, they're called "supplementary bonding". Your hi-fi is hooked up to the rods with the shortest run you can manage of Radex cable, which comes in two forms: a thin, flat braid and a very heavy but highly flexible wire. Special tinning helps to reduce the skin effect, by encouraging the current's highest density away from the edges of the conductor. This helps to keep down the wire's impedance at RF

JM - In your Audio Quality Mains Supplies book of articles, you've mentioned the possibility of paralleling lengths up, especially for flat-dwellers who are forced to use longer runs of Radex to reach their earth rods.

BD - You can parallel up as much as you like. With the standard, flat Radex, I would suggest getting, say, ten pieces, putting them all in a vice or some sort of clamp (probably in the garden) and plaiting them together in a similar way to, say, Kimber cable. Any plait which keeps the conductors 'moving' with



respect to each other will effectively produce a large Litz cable. Certainly, if people are using multiple strands, they will function best when knitted together in this sort of manner.

JM - Having tried a spot of basic plaiting without doing my homework first, I know how hard weaving can be. However, I managed to dig up some worthwhile titles on plaiting and cording in my local library. If you're using multiple runs of Radex, would it therefore be a good idea to use more than one earth rod in the back garden?

BD - Yes. However, one point needs emphasizing: there's no harm in having earth rods clustered near each other, but increasing the number of rods won't bring much more sonic benefit. In other words, three rods are not necessarily three times as good as one. Because soil is quite a high-resistance medium, and the contact is very diffuse, people driving in more than one rod should separate them by a distance which is equal to the ►

► length of the rod. To provide optimal earthing, the rods need to be kept well watered too. You can put additional chemicals in the soil, but there's no real need for pollution like that. A few pounds are well spent on diverting the house's rainwater drain pipes to have outlets over the stakes.

When trying out RF earthing, be prepared to experiment with separate earths for individual components. If you have a CD player which might radiate RF badly, try giving it a dedicated earth wire and earthstake. Alternatively, someone running a purely analogue system with few

you can take off the cable's outer layer if it's double-insulated. That second layer is only there for physical protection. If you then put the cables in a conduit or a wooden cupboard - anything which protects them from scuffing, etc - you're not breaking any safety rules. The cables themselves should be thick as well. This way, you don't get any increase in dynamic resistance.

All unnecessary connections should also be avoided. I'm very dubious about most circuit breakers, for example. MCBs are seen as fashionable and 'modern' but solve no problems and are inferior to BS 1361 cartridge fuses for audio supplies. Residual Current circuit breakers (which are not just breakers - they're also safety devices) generally have not just poor contacts, but certain types even contain switch-mode PSUs

system and wiring into a crystal radio set. I recommend unswitched versions as a way of minimising contacts.

Fuses are not so much of a problem, provided the fuse contacts are clean, treated against corrosion - I suggest DeoxIT - and stay gas tight after the fuse is inserted.

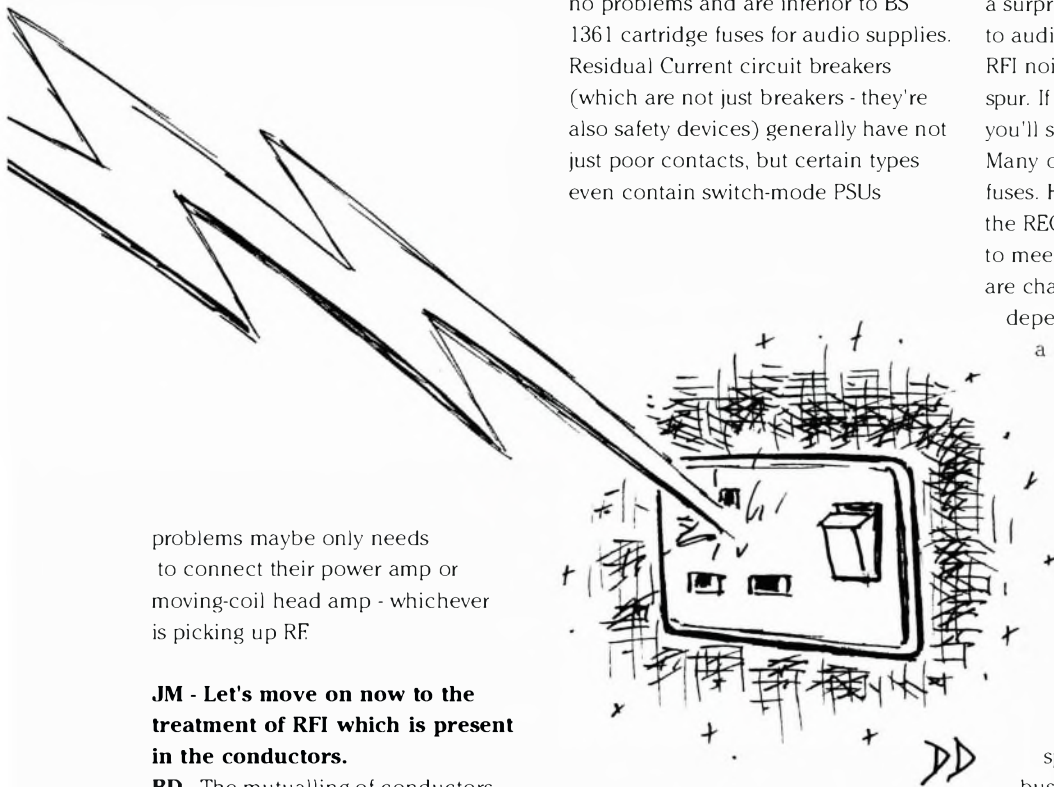
JM - Upgrading the Regional Electricity Company's main fuse is another option you mentioned.

BD - Nowadays, all modern houses are fitted with 100A fuses. These minimise unwanted extra resistance at the head of the supply, something that can make a surprisingly large difference both to audio gear's performance, and the RFI noise level on a dedicated hi-fi spur. If you go to an old, small house, you'll see they often have 30A supplies. Many ordinary houses still have 60A fuses. However, for a modest charge the RECs can uprate the fuse to 100A to meet their current standard. Meters are changed every ten to 15 years depending on type, so you if

a change is coming up, you could ask them to do the fuse at the same time and that cuts the price.

Following this main fuse the household supply is split off, and the Super Spur line-up comes in with cabling which is as thick as you can obtain, for the reason just described. At this point an optional lightning protector box is fitted. Built to my specification, with 100A-rated busbars, it's available from Moth.

It contains very high-energy handling, bolt-down Voltage Dependent Resistors. These will absorb man-made interference spikes as well. As this unit MUST have its own, separate and very good earth stake to be safe and at all useful during a lightning attack, this means that the usual curse of VDRs - that of re-injecting noise onto your mains wiring - is avoided!



problems maybe only needs to connect their power amp or moving-coil head amp - whichever is picking up RF.

JM - Let's move on now to the treatment of RFI which is present in the conductors.

BD - The mutualling of conductors helps a great deal here. If you've read the Super Spur articles see my 'AQMS' book), you'll know that I've specified Live and Neutral conductors that are very close together. Normal mains cables have the earth between the Live and Neutral, which prevents this. In effect, this creates a quite good and clean kind of RF filter.

To obtain 'maximum mutualling',

which add conducted and radiated RF noise. These should be avoided unless safety rules demand their use.

Contacts that just touch and don't wipe aren't good news either, particularly once they've closed and arced, which makes them behave in a diodic fashion, turning the mains

► **JM - Next in the Super Spur plan is a 'Pure Power' (conditioner unit, abbreviated 'PP') - if you're only going to be employing a single unit. You have said this can reduce the effects of spikes, static, motor whine, DC on the mains and RFI up to about 200kHz.**

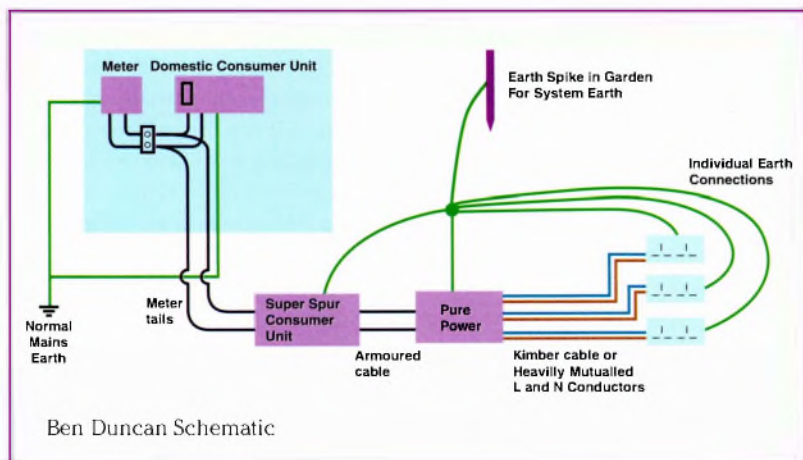
BD - Indeed, and further RF suppression from maximum mutuality and/or Kimber cable then offers RF protection far, far above 200kHz, into the Megahertz regions. You could add dedicated mains RF filters after the PP as well, but if they have a ground connection, you should take that back separately and directly to the mains earth stake to avoid just putting the noise back onto the intervening earth wires.

Pure Power is a toroidal transformer device, so it has a very small field around it in spite of its seriously high 7kVA - that's 30 Amp - rating. It is taken for granted much more in the UK that toroidal windings will be used for the mains transformers of audio gear because of their low magnetic fields, which are extremely important if you want high resolution, noise-free music reproduction without expensive, brute force solutions. But transformer types vary in terms of the way they behave with excessive mains voltages.

For instance, toroids, unless they're made with full knowledge of real mains conditions, can go into heavy saturation more easily than a C-core or laminated type. But the regulation of good ones is vastly superior. This means that, when you draw large current from them, the voltage doesn't sag so dramatically.

JM - What then can you do to mitigate the effects of a high mains voltage?

BD - First complain to the REC if you have evidence using a true rms AC voltmeter that the supply is ever above 254 volts during any part of the day.



This is surprisingly common, mostly if you live near the transformer substation - which in Britain, changes 10000V/6500V down to 415V/240V. Take a look around your neighbourhood. If the increase is more marginal, Pure Power can help. When it's loaded to less than about 10% of maximum - as it will be if you have a small, non-Class A or SET power amp and the volume turned down into loudspeakers of average sensitivity - its output rises (quite safely) to about 2.5% above the mains input.

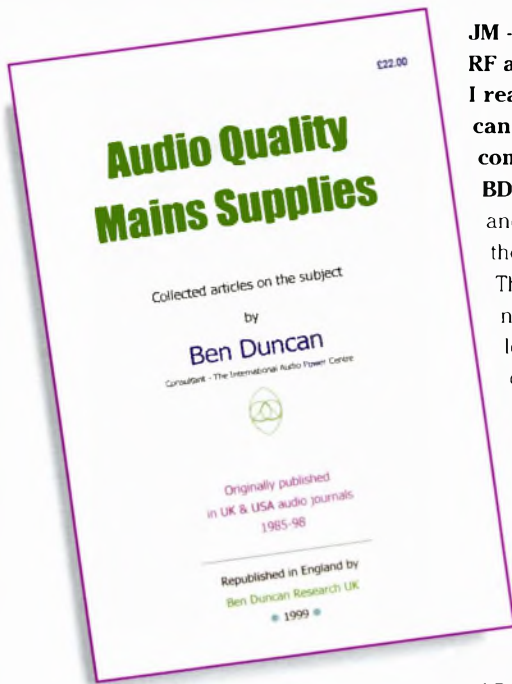
Because it has this slight boost when it's almost unloaded, by the same token, when you reverse the in/out connections of Pure Power, you can get a slight decrease in voltage with no loss in function. In fact, I use it like that as my listening room's mains regularly floats as high as 247V while averaging 240V perfectly over a period. This facility of PP is a godsend when the REC refuse to lower the substation voltage because other customers further away will then suffer a voltage reduced too far. By dedicatedly and locally reducing excess voltage to your hi-fi, audio problems are overcome without stirring up other problems.

Moth are going to rent out an accurate mains voltage data logger for automatically measuring the mains over the course of a few days

or a week. Audiophiles living within a few miles of a large car-making plant have noticed a major change in sonic quality when the plant shuts down at 4pm on a Friday.

Often the mains is doing things to the performance of your hi-fi that are not so obvious. Late at night, the mains supply may be relatively pure, but as it is lightly loaded, the voltage will rise to its highest level. I have received reports of 275V being recorded in the middle of London, in Norway and in Paris, all at a location close to the substation. Think of an area like Oxford Street, and imagine how heavy the loading is on the substation during the day compared with night time, and that figure should be less surprising.

You can understand why sonics can then suffer if you have a low-grade transformer in one of your hi-fi components and it's saturating. Once that happens, the transformer's ability to pass energy at its rated capacity falls apart: the power source is strangled! This is the case in almost any hi-fi - regardless of cost - that does not use massively oversized transformers. Audio DIYers and the true high-end makers and upgraders discovered this some years ago, but mainstream makers have been both highly ignorant and also arrogant in this area. So Pure Power can help almost all hi-fi equipment, protecting it from the



► power strangulation that 'DC' harmonics, as well as excess mains voltage, both cause.

JM - What can you do if you've got an overvoltage situation which Pure Power is unable to treat, and the REC won't help you?

BD - If it's much higher than Pure Power's limit, then the special, adjustable version of PP has added output taps at -5%, and -10%. If they can't reduce the supply to be close to the declared value - which is still 240v in the UK, despite fanciful Euro-legislation - then you're likely to have an illegal voltage, and the REC has got to sort it out. The absolute maximum in Britain is 254 1/2V [1/2 is halfsign]. Anything over that and you could claim for equipment damage.

Low voltage is not so readily harmful to sonics. It would mean, though, that power amps would have a smaller maximum voltage swing at their output - but the effect should be small.

JM - In addition to helping with RF and high or low voltage, I read that the 'Pure Power' unit can prevent DC reaching the components connected to it.

BD - It's not true DC - it's second and even harmonics imposed on the mains by part-wave rectification. This typically happens if you live near an electroplating plant, or low-income housing where lots of old TVs are in use. Other causes are varied: Russ Andrews told me he discovered the phenomenon with hairdryers. The Pure Power absorbs these nasty harmonics. It may buzz loudly while doing this, but it won't be strangled, and it will pass on purer mains power.

One of the other elegant aspects of Pure Power is the fact that versions are available which double as high-power step-up or step-down transformers, so they'll clean your mains whilst allowing you to run foreign hi-fi off the UK mains, or your UK or Euro (220V) gear in 110-120V countries.

JM - So what's the next stage in the construction of Super Spur after the Pure Power unit?

BD - The Super Spur enclosure - a range of specially 'souped up' consumer units - contain both the initial 100A isolating switch and main fuse (other than the REC's fuse) in front of PP. After the lightning and spike protector, and PP, the power wires re-enter the enclosure to 100A rated busbars, that feed high grade fuseholders, that fan out to the various runs of cable that follow. Cabling from the Pure Power to the sockets in the listening room should be either closely mutualled or made with Kimber mains cable.

JM - You've talked too about steel conduit and metal socket boxes in the fight against RFI.

BD - Both can help if there's a lot of

RF about. Steel is an excellent shield against much RF. When you're talking about Kimber or tightly-mutualled cabling, they keep their magnetic fields to themselves. For this reason, the steel of armoured cable (which, as it's magnetic, you might feel would cause a problem since it would resist the alternation of current in the cables it surrounds) is actually OK.

The steel armour and conduits must have earthing separate from the earthing for your system for the shielding they perform to work well, though. Overall, immense changes in sound quality are possible by lots of attention to small details, and correct use of specially-designed or carefully-chosen hardware. ►+

Components and Prices Sidebar

(More information is available from Moth's website).

Super Spur - part 1
 Super Spur Enclosure (Steel shielded case, two parts, with main isolator and 100A fuse; and 100A busbar to high quality cartridge fuseholders for multiple 5A to 30A audio spurs);
 Lightning protector - £204

Super Spur - part 2
 All the specialist electrical accessories - heavy conductors (tails, from £2.28/m.), armoured cable (from £2.54/m.) and glands in sizes up to and over 100A rating, fuses, clips, trunking, quality 13A unswitched outlets, etc.

AES - Audiograde Earth Stake - rod and extenders to any depth. Special copper grease - £45

Radex cables, various sizes and types, from £4/m.

Pure Power conditioner, from £400.

AQMS book of article reprints - £22

Moth can be contacted on 01234 741152.

"I heard it through the grapevine.." Listening to Mains Cables

by Roy Gregory

Most people would now accept that you can indeed hear differences between mains cables (those who don't still think that all cables sound the same, CD is perfect, and that real music shouldn't involve electricity anyway!). And judging from the increasing number of after market IEC power leads being offered, the manufacturers believe that people will spend good money to obtain the benefits. And money is what we are talking. A basic 'audiophile' mains lead will start around the £20 mark, and that's one for each bit of kit, plus an extension lead for around £60. And that's entry level! Individual leads can cost well into four figures, and the vast majority are a lot closer to three figures than the starting point.

JH has written in both this issue and the previous one, about the system of mains leads and extension blocks developed by the Audio Counsel under the Music Works brand name. These are designed specifically for use in the context of the Naim systems that make up the majority of the shop's sales.

Think about that for a second. Specifically tailored mains leads matched to the particular performance traits of the Naim electronics. The implication is clear. The mains leads that improve the sound of one system may well have a different, even deleterious effect in another set-up. And yet here we are talking about

mains leads as universal components, in much the same way as people once spoke about speaker cables and interconnects. And you know where that's got us. Methinks it's time for a little investigation. So saying, I assembled an assortment of mains leads and equipment and descended upon the long suffering folks at Phonography in Ringwood.

The object of the exercise was to compare the performance of a variety of different mains leads when used in different situations. I decided early on not to get too anal retentive about this; I was looking for indicators at this stage, not cast iron science. The idea is to get a wider grasp on the problem so that we can develop an effective strategy to deal with it. So saying, initial testing concentrated on applying single leads of various price to a single piece of equipment. Controls were provided by using standard leads, both for

comparison and on the rest of the equipment. All leads were plugged directly into wall sockets.

We concentrated on two systems:

Arcam Alpha 8 CD / Arcam Alpha 7 Amp / Royd Minstrels

Copland CDA 289 / Densen Beat / Royd Minstrels

Both systems were cabled with Chord cabling, whilst keeping the speakers the same meant that everything could be kept warm, and the chopping and changing done with a minimum of fuss.

Each cable was marked relative to the control, but the results were produced by consensus amongst the three of us listening (or four when Rob could drag himself away from the customers). The scoring is on the basis of relative differences, one cable to

Identity Parade

Lead	Length	Price	Price / Extra Metre
Sonic Link S Gold	1.25m	£70	£40
Moth Leyline	1.5m	£80	£30
Kimber High Current	1.5m	£125	£18
Nordost El Dorado	2m	£400	£150



▶ another, rather than some absolute scale. The scored categories were as follows:

- Micro Dynamics - the ability of the system to track tiny shifts in level.
- Dynamic Range - the overall difference between the loud bits and the quiet bits.
- Weight - or how much wallop.
- Musical Expression - the systems ability to communicate the sense of the music. Did it hang together?
- Focus - the separation and delineation of individual notes and performers.
- Tonality - how natural does the system sound? How wide is the tonal palette?
- Low Level Information - how much is there, and how low is the noise floor?

The other entries on the table should be fairly self explanatory. We concentrated on music with plenty of vocal content and nice wide dynamics, but the onset of dementia dictated that we change the program from time to time (although the music was obviously constant for each series of comparisons).

If we look at the results displayed in Table 1, the main impression is one of inconsistency. The one thing that we can say is that in every case the audiophile leads did actually provide an upgrade, and one that was clearly discernible. We are not operating in the land of nuance here. In fact, the guys at Phonography who have limited exposure to this particular field of exotica, were actually shocked by the magnitude of the differences they heard.

If we sort the results by cable rather than hardware type, a pattern finally starts to emerge (Table 2).

What we now see is that the cables do have consistent and identifiable characters. The Sonic Link could be described as beefy, weighty and a little rounded. The Kimber could be identified every time by it's incredibly low noise floor. ▶

Mains Cable Comparisons. Table 1

	Micro Dynamics	Dynamic Range	Weight	Musical Expression	Focus	Tonality	Low Level Info	Total Score	% Preference	Comments
Arcam Alpha 8 CD										
Sonic Link	✓	✓	✓✓	✓	✓✓	✓✓	✓	10	17.5	Big, bouncy, warm and cuddly.
Moth Leyline	✓	✓✓	✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓	✓✓	✓	11	19.3	Lean and mean.
Kimber	✓	✓	✓✓	✓	✓✓	✓✓	✓✓✓✓	13	22.8	Incredibly low noise floor and very smooth.
Nordost El Dorado	✓✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓	✓✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓✓	✓✓	23	40.4	Natural, focused and dynamic. Power without excess fat.
Copland CDA 289										
Sonic Link	✓✓	✓✓	✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓	✓✓	✓✓	15	20.8	Big and beefy with good separation and warmth.
Moth Leyline	✓	✓✓	✓✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	9	12.5	Lean and a little glassy. Lacking drive.
Kimber	✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓	✓	✓✓	✓✓	15	20.8	Quiet, solid, expansive.
Nordost El Dorado	✓✓✓✓✓	✓✓✓✓	✓✓✓✓	✓✓✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓✓✓	✓✓✓✓	33	45.8	Outstanding!
Densen Beat										
Sonic Link	✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓	✓✓	✓✓	✓	✓✓	14	20	Quiet and weighty, possibly a little heavy.
Moth Leyline	✓✓✓	✓✓	✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓	✓✓	16	22.8	Lean and fast but slightly metallic.
Kimber	✓✓	✓✓✓✓	✓✓✓✓	✓✓	✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓✓	21	30	Quiet and solid with excellent flow
Nordost El Dorado	✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	19	27.1	Good but slightly insubstantial.

Mains Cable Comparisons. Table 2

	Micro Dynamics	Dynamic Range	Weight	Musical Expression	Focus	Tonality	Low Level Info	Total Level Info	% Preference Score	Comments
Sonic Link										
Arcam Alpha 8 CD	✓	✓	✓✓	✓	✓✓	✓✓	✓	10	17.5	Big, bouncy, warm and cuddly.
Copland CDA 289	✓✓	✓✓	✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓	✓✓	✓✓	15	20.8	Big and beefy with good separation
Densen Beat	✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓	✓✓	✓✓	✓	✓✓	14	20	Quiet and weighty, possibly a little heavy.
Moth Leyline										
Arcam Alpha 8 CD	✓	✓✓	✓	✓✓✓	✓✓	✓	✓	11	19.3	Lean and mean.
Copland CDA 289	✓	✓✓	✓✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	9	12.5	Lean and a little glassy. Lacking drive.
Densen Beat	✓✓✓	✓✓	✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓	✓✓	16	22.8	Lean and fast but slightly metallic.
Kimber										
Arcam Alpha 8 CD	✓	✓	✓✓	✓	✓✓	✓✓	✓✓✓✓	13	22.8	Incredibly low noise floor and very smooth.
Copland CDA 289	✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓	✓	✓✓	✓✓	15	20.8	Quiet, solid, expansive.
Densen Beat	✓✓	✓✓✓✓	✓✓✓✓	✓✓	✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓✓	21	30	Quiet and solid with excellent flow
Nordost El Dorado										
Arcam Alpha 8 CD	✓✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓	✓✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓✓	✓✓	23	40.4	Natural, focused and dynamic.
Copland CDA 289	✓✓✓✓✓	✓✓✓✓	✓✓✓✓	✓✓✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓✓✓	✓✓✓✓	33	45.8	Outstanding!
Densen Beat	✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	19	27.1	Good but slightly insubstantial.

► Preferences also reflected price, with the expensive El Dorado (you need a pot of gold to afford enough for a whole system!) doing consistently well, and in most cases showing a clean pair of heels to the field. It's effect on the Copland CDA 289 (\$1900) was felt to be so substantial that at \$400 it should be considered essential equipment!

However, whilst you could assign a character to the individual cables, predicting their effectiveness was an entirely different kettle of fish. The general trend was that they were far more effective on CD players than amplifiers, a finding supported by other listening sessions. But only the Kimber exhibited any consistency in the all important area of Musical Expression, whilst the Sonic Link performed out of its skin with the

Copland, bringing up the rear with the other equipment. Even the mighty El Dorado blotted its perfect record with the Densen, finishing a somewhat sheepish second.

Finally, we decided to see what mixing and matching leads does to the performance. We substituted a Naim CDX for the Copland, plugging it and the Densen in with Music Works leads and a matching star earthed extension block. Both products have a known affinity for the Music Works set-up, and I wanted to see whether the qualities of the mains loom as a whole would undermine or be undermined by the use of the other leads. These were once again plugged straight into the wall, and used to power the CDX.

Overall, whilst every cable changed the sound, with the exception of the El

Dorado, they all reduced the sense of musical flow and coherence. And the Nordost cable's musical (rather than hi-fi) benefits were severely curtailed, especially when you consider that it was competing with a cable less than one tenth its price! This was not the night and day result that we got with the Copland!

Incidentally, plugging the Nordost cable into the Music Works block didn't work at all, the result being horribly thin and disjointed. This doesn't make the Music Works leads better than the Nordost, it just means that they really do make the most of home advantage. In other words, the right leads for your system, properly set-up, will outperform even really expensive alternatives simply thrown in as an afterthought.

Finally, these results were



Mains Cable Comparisons. Table 3

	Micro Dynamics	Dynamic Range	Weight	Musical Expression	Focus	Tonality	Low Level Info	Total Score	Comments
Naim, Densen, Music Works Leads									
Sonic Link	-✓	-✓	✓	-✓	✓	✓✓	-✓	0	Sweeter and warmer but less coherent
Moth Leyline	-	✓	✓	-	✓✓	-✓	✓	4	Taut and clear. Slightly mechanical.
Kimber	-✓	-✓✓	(-)✓✓✓✓	-✓✓	✓✓	✓✓	✓	-5	Ghostly quiet but lethargic and congested.
Nordost El Dorado	✓	✓	✓✓	✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓	14	Transparent and even quieter than the Kimber. Superb top and very natural.

► verified using other equipment in my own listening room. The differences vary with product, but the pattern remains the same, especially the benefits of the Music Works or Audioplan distribution blocks over direct connection to the wall sockets, and the greater influence over CD players.



Conclusions

Whilst mains leads clearly make a difference to the sound of your system, the results are just as system dependent as anything else in hi-fi. The second part of our listening also suggests that the physical arrangement of your system's mains supply is actually more fundamental to decent performance than how exotic your leads are. Star earthing is very definitely a good thing, and so too is consistency within your choice of leads. The Music Works experience suggests that you will find that matching a complete mains loom to your system is far more productive than trying to mix and match individual leads to each piece of equipment. Whilst you can observe isolated effects, you are going to have to settle on a system solution. A coherent approach to your mains supply will reward you with musical coherence from your hi-fi.

We can summarise the findings as follows:

- The effectiveness of audiophile mains leads varies depending on the equipment you use them with. They are most effective with CD players, and this is the place to start.
- Whilst you can use a single

audiophile lead with a bunch of standard leads (with very worthwhile results), trying to mix and match a variety of audiophile leads within a system is a recipe for disaster.

- A system will sound best run from a single high quality mains



distribution block, especially if this uses its own independent earth. This means that you need to shop for an extension block and leads at the same time.

Do you need to worry about mains cables? Absolutely. Are expensive cables worth the money? They can be, if you use them properly, which means right through the system. Where on earth do you start? Having sorted out some ground rules, we will be looking at the range of products available in the next issue - and believe me, they go way beyond simple IEC leads and extension blocks. ►+

SUPPLIERS:

Sonic Link
 Audiokits Precision Components
 Derwent Business Centre, Clark St
 Derby, DE1-2BU
 Tel. (44)(0)1332-361390
 Fax. (44)(0)1332-298836
 E-Mail. soniclink@audiocables.co.uk

Leyline
 Moth Group, 10 Dane Lane
 Wilstead, Bedford, MK45-3HT
 Tel. (44)(0)1234-741152
 Fax. (44)(0)1234-742028
 Web. www.britishaudio.co.uk

Kimber
 Russ Andrews Accessories Ltd
 Edge Bank House, Skelmergh, Kendal, Cumbria, LA8-9AS
 Tel. (44)(0)1539-823247
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Nordost
 Nordost (UK) Ltd, 1st Floor, Unit 7
 Aber Park Industrial Est.
 Aber Rd, Flint, Clwyd, CH6-5EX
 Tel. (44)(0)1352-730251
 Fax. (44)(0)1352-731273
 Web. www.nordost.com

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 The Audio Counsel
 14 Stockport Rd, Cheadle Gtr Manchester, SK3-2AA
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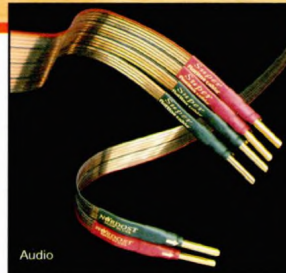
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Framingham
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Naim NBL Loudspeaker

by Chris Thomas

I bought my first Naim amplifier back in 1977. There was something, even then, about the Naim sound that immediately seemed "right" to my ears. It was the perfect antidote to the distinctly average equipment that I had been using and, along with the Linn LP12 turntable, it opened my ears and those of thousands of others to a whole new world of audio and musical possibilities. The Naim's ability to reveal the rhythmic elements that are so fundamental to music also helped my guitar playing by allowing me to hear and appreciate the architecture of songs. I could hear that great players have a natural and instinctive feel for the structure of the piece and that great expression lays way beyond just being able to play the notes. It was also when I first began to understand that time-based distortions mattered more to me than tonal differences and this is an area where all Naim equipment excels. Revelatory stuff indeed and rather exciting at the time, as it blurred the boundary between music and Hi-Fi. As I began to hear more amplifiers I soon realised that the Naim's great strengths were, at the time, more or less unique. The Naim was a fast amplifier. It was also crisp, clear and detailed, but there was more to it than that. It opened my ears to many things like harmonic structure, chord progressions and inversions and phrasing. Equally importantly, that single demonstration charted a course for me through the generally weird and occasionally wonderful world of audio equipment and now, over twenty years later, I am still a Naim user. And though I also use an American system,

I really enjoy the Naim set-up as, even after all these years, it can still make so many alternatives feel like swimming through mud.

One area where their equipment range has definitely been in need of refreshment though, is in the loudspeaker department. The venerable two-way SBL or the extreme DBL have, up till now, been the only alternatives for the serious Naim enthusiast. The SBL, good though it still is, is not really good enough to show what a NAC 52 and a pair of NAP 135's are capable of, and a DBL brings its own baggage in terms of cost and of course sheer size. It didn't need a genius to work out that something in between was desperately needed for all those SBL owners to graduate to and now, after a typically long gestation period, the new speaker is at last available.

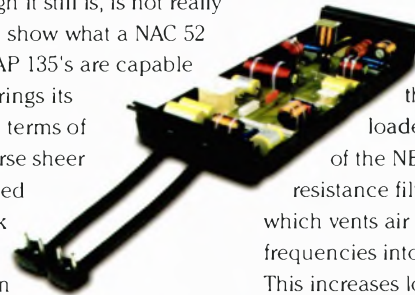
The NBL looks like no Naim speaker has ever looked, being tall, slim and elegant, with sculptural castings and a curvaceous, tapering cabinet. It employs Naim's established separate box, resistive loading and resonance control principles, but in a far more elegant and user friendly fashion.

This is a 3-way design, utilising two 8inch bass drivers (variants of those used in the SBL) and the midrange and tweeter from the DBL. The speaker comes in one piece with the separate boxes enclosed (Nested Box Loudspeaker) in the main body of the cabinet, negating the need for a silicone sealer to bond the component pieces

together. All coupling and decoupling take place within the box, and setting the system up for use only requires the removal of two sets of transit bolts and a considered and thoughtful approach to siting.

The two sideways-firing bass drivers are mounted behind quadrant grilles at the bottom of the cabinet, within their own free-standing module. Releasing the transit bolts frees their enclosure from the rear frame. The small internal cabinet that these drivers inhabit is loaded into the main body of the NBL via an acoustic resistance filter, a Naim trademark, which vents air at specific speeds and frequencies into the larger box above. This increases low frequency extension while retaining the control and leading edge transients that can be obtained from smaller boxes. Not having to deal with the resonance and vibration problems that large cabinet walls always incur means that the NBL should have a bass performance that is both deep and controlled.

Unlocking the remaining transit bolts liberates the other separate enclosure containing the midrange and treble drivers. This sits on a pair of compliant leaf springs that isolate it from the main body of the speaker. Now it is free to vertically and from side to side. The same individual driver/baffle decoupling used on the DBL is also found on the NBL. The midrange sits on its own rubber-damped cutout while the Scanspeak tweeter achieves its independence by being bolted to a sprung metal plate.



▶ The NBL's stand some 43 inches high and are quite deep at just over 17 inches. They are slim though, a shade under 12 inches at the front tapering to a mere 8 inches at the rear (another resonance control feature as well as enhancing the style and decreasing the visual impact of the cabinet). This gives the speaker a relatively small footprint. The sloped curvy top also plays the trick of visually reducing the bulk of the cabinet. The grille is a masterpiece of simple, well thought-out design. It is a stocking attached to a thick round-section rubber band. After slipping this over the shaped MDF baffle that surrounds the

floating bass/mid module, the rubber band becomes a gasket that fits neatly between the flying baffle and the cabinet proper. The NBL, I can confirm, sounds better with this fitted.

I know many people who use Naim electronics with other speakers, but I don't know anyone who uses Naim loudspeakers with anything other than a Naim amplifier. So reviewing a pair of Naim speakers is always going to be a review of a Naim system. I would say that the very least you could get away with for a speaker of the NBL's class would be a NAC 82 and a NAP 250. This is likely to be the kind of amplification many SBL owners will have. But I'll stick my neck out and say that a pair of NAP 135's are really the minimum you should aim for, and the addition of a NAC 52 will make the picture more palatable still. The active option is always tempting of course, and the familiar detachable passive crossover of the NBL makes this straightforward enough (if you can afford three 250's or six 135's plus an active crossover and power supply). I used a 52 plus a pair of 135's with a Naim CDS 11 spinning the discs.

Up until now the only siting requirement for a pair of Naim speakers was a flat wall to stand them against, and the NBL's are more than happy to continue the tradition. Not quite as hard back as an SBL or DBL though, and with a little more toe-in than either of those speakers. People will tell you that Naim equipment does not image. This is not true. Solidity and stability of musical perspectives have never been in question with Naim speakers or amplifiers but the backs to the wall approach have

restricted the systems ability to create a walk-in soundstage. The NBL tears up the Naim rule book in this respect and it is quite possible to site them away from room boundaries - with a few reservations. I placed them in exactly the same positions as the fabulous stand-mounted Revell Gems had been, relatively free from wall effects. They do not have the same holographic abilities admittedly, but they travel some way along the same road, and the whole soundstage becomes several feet deeper, and to me the speaker sounds more seductive. The problem is that, in free air, the bass loses a little power and also some focus. This can be overcome, up to a point, with precise toe-in adjustments but I doubt that it will ever be quite as good as against a wall. It's a trade-off, as all Hi-Fi installations are.

For anyone moving up from a pair of SBL's the sound will have elements of familiarity about it, but you will be unprepared for the sheer scale and overall power of the NBL. This loudspeaker sounds big! All the Naim strengths are amply evident. The

superb control and attack of the leading edge of each note, the speed and dynamic sharpness of the musical performances, the rhythmic drive and ability to stop and start on a sixpence. But add to this a much larger range of tonal color and a combination of very serious bass extension, weight and control.

Somewhat like the DBL, this speaker goes low but does so in a remarkably relaxed way. Bass just happens - with no sense of strain or looseness. It is ▶



▶ amazingly agile and informative, with tremendous delicacy, texture and total solidity. Like all really good full range speakers it can actually sound quite bass light at times, but when some serious low end is called for, it just delivers and rattles your chest cavity. Whether it is playing the singing melody of an upright bass, the percussive slap of a fretted Fender Precision or the bowed growling of a cello section, the NBL is almost arrogantly at ease, underpinning the music with verve, authority and excellent pitch definition. Take the fantastic bass playing on King Crimson's *Thrak* (KCCDY 4031329) and the track 'One Time'. The whole tempo is set by drummer Bill Bruford sitting just off the beat and showing the way forward, while Robert Fripp and Adrian Belew construct a harmonic fabric the swims and swirls through the rhythm. But when the Stick bass appears with its peculiarly shaped instant notes, the whole track knits together over its one-two-three pattern. Now the song is sitting on the bass line, which simply powers the music along. Having listened to this album on many systems, I cannot remember all of the musical elements of the song being so effortlessly knitted together as it was by the NBL's. But it achieves this relaxed performance without destroying musical drama. The tension and level of expectation that really fine systems bring to a musical experience is there alright, and it can have you on the edge of your seat.

Common Chord (CYMEKOB 803) is a beautiful acoustic album, which features Dave Grisman on mandolin, and violinist Daniel Kobialka along with many supporting musicians. The quality of musicianship is very high, with Kobialka who is a working classical

musician, taking the lead to play what might loosely be described as American Country music. The opening track is quite a well-known tune called 'Ashoken Farewell', which was the

theme for the excellent American Civil War Television series, which it fitted absolutely perfectly. It has one of those melodies that gets inside your head and shows how strong the power of a musical phrase can be. The opening lines are spoken by solo violin, stating the theme before the rest of the band join in. The all-round qualities of the NBL were never better illustrated than with this one simple melodic section. Lesser systems, and

not necessarily cheaper ones, tend to glide through this, and what sticks in the head is the main body of the song. But the Gods lie in the details, and in this case they lie purely in the expression, and Kobialka's sheer feel and empathy for the music. He wrings the notes from his violin with really quite wonderfully subtle phrasing. A pause here, a push there, a slightly longer rest than normal to break the melody, then a beautifully understated and gentle vibrato. The Naim system merely allows the freedom for the music to touch you and make emotional contact. It does all the big things well but it is the way it handles the small things that make it special. Tonality, note strength and control, and the way that the merest shift in emphasis of time and space are opened up make this a system for the real music lover.

My only real quibble is a minor one. The NBL is far more efficient than the SBL (92dB) and, when used with a 52 preamplifier and a high level source like the CDS, the system becomes very sensitive indeed to the volume control.



This means that it can go from modest to enormous listening levels with the merest tweak of the knob. Not a problem with vinyl, as the input will be at a lot lower level, but it can make the NBL a little difficult to adjust for appropriate volume.

For Naim SBL users, the NBL will be a delight. It is not a scaled up SBL but a completely different, and far more serious animal, that leans toward the scale and dynamic impact of the DBL. It has an enormous but totally useable bandwidth for its relatively humble size and modest footprint. Anyone who can comfortably accommodate SBL's should have no difficulty with its big brother. Do bear in mind though that this speaker is capable of infinite refinement of musical expression and is therefore deserving of the very best amplification and source components. And, such is its combination of qualities that, for once, it may even find its way into non-Naim systems. It is, as is usual for Naim, a totally sorted product that manages to sound both refreshing and typical. They've done the business again. I Like it. ▶

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Frequency Response:	25 Hz - 20kHz +/- 3dB (in room)
Sensitivity:	92dB / 1 Watt / 1 M.
Impedance:	4 ohms (min)
Size (HxWxD):	1140x290x430mm
Finishes:	Black Ash, Walnut, American Cherry, Ebony, Beech, Santos Rosewood (carries a premium)
Prices:	£6000 (active) £6600 (passive)

Manufacturer:

Naim Audio
Tel. (44)(0)1722-332266
Fax. (44)(0)1722-412034
Web. www.naim-audio.com

Interview with Phil Ward

by Roy Gregory

RG. What was the design brief for the NBL?

PW. The design brief started off about two and half years ago when I joined Naim, to provide a loudspeaker to sit between the SBL and DBL models. A lot of our customers were unwilling or unable to make the jump from the SBL up to the DBL. It's a heavy commitment in terms of cost, space and associated electronics, especially if they were already running active SBL's. Not everyone can take that step, even if they want to. But it wasn't until I started investigating the brief that I realised just how narrow it really was. If we wanted to offer an upgrade path to SBL users, or a replacement for people who were still using Isobariks, then it was important that the new speaker occupy the same piece of floor. So as a designer, that immediately constrains boundary conditions and footprint.

There's also a lot of technology that Roy (George) has developed, resistive bass loading, separate box technology, that works really well. So unless we choose to abandon that, a lot of the techniques used are also well defined.

The other major concern was as much about how it looks than how it sounds. The DBL in particular has a huge visual impact. It was important to provide a speaker that looked rather more contemporary and attractive, with a much higher

'furniture' value. But we had to achieve all those considerations without compromising the sonic performance, and that's the really hard part, because it defines how you can arrange the separate boxes. That's what led to the Nested Box design. By making all the split lines between the various cabinets horizontal, you can hide them all inside a single structure, which allows much greater visual unity.

RG. Looking at the speaker, it seems to me that there are two major constructional decisions; the execution of the midrange/tweeter assembly, and the location and orientation of the bass module.

PW. The way the bass unit works is the fundamental decision. It's also how we achieve the other major design aim, which was to make the speaker a lot easier to install. Dealers kept saying to us, no more Silicon. In the SBL, the bass unit simply sits on the main cabinet, which dictates using the Silicon sealant. By placing the

NBL's bass module underneath a free standing cabinet, we can fix the relationship between the two, meaning that we can use other materials to provide the seal. Additionally, using the horizontally opposed bass drivers massively reduces the amount of mechanical energy generated in the bass module ,

so that we can tolerate a far less compliant gasket.

By coupling the two drivers back to back, you cancel a lot of their mechanical output. But if you join them too rigidly it creates nasty resonant peaks that you want to avoid. Also, given the tolerance limitations inherent in wood as a cabinet material, you need to be able to adjust the spacing of the two drivers accordingly, so for sonic and practical purposes you need to introduce a degree of compliance and damping into the coupling. It took a lot of experimentation, but we eventually settled on a stack of brass washers with mastic between them. That gives us the excellent low frequency coupling, whilst damping the higher frequency spikes caused when the magnets start to bounce on the drivers. As we tighten the drivers together, any tiny variations in the cabinet tolerances are taken up by squeezing the mastic out between the washers.

RG. Between the bass module and the cabinet, you have placed an acoustic resistance (multiple layers of fine mesh). What benefits does that give you?

PW. It allows us to define the Q of the system. Normally, your Q is defined by the electrical and mechanical characteristics of the driver, and the size of the box. The acoustic resistance provides another damping mechanism, and hence another variable, and one that is consistent with level. The electrical characteristics of the driver, such as its resistance, will vary under load. The acoustic resistance remains constant regardless of level. ▶



▶ **RG. Visually, one of the biggest changes between the SBL or DBL and the NBL, is the placement of the bass drivers close to the floor and firing sideways...**

PW. The firing sideways is the one I always get asked about. In fact, the bass drivers are rolling off at around 200Hz, where the wavelength is approaching two metres. At that sort of wavelength the direction that the driver faces is completely irrelevant as the bass is omni-directional. But you can use the position to effect the drivers output. Locating them close to the floor is far more significant than firing them sideways. By putting them so close to the boundaries I get 12dB of lift at low frequencies. That allows me to use a low frequency alignment that is massively over-damped. The overall system Q is about 0.55, as compared to around 0.7 in a conventional sealed box. In free space the speaker starts to roll-off at about 150Hz, but in room it's actually flat to around 25Hz. Which is pretty impressive from a slim enclosure like this.

The other reason to put them close to the boundaries is that you get a suck-out caused by the first reflection from those boundaries cancelling the direct output. Placing the driver closer to the boundary shortens the wavelength to the first reflection and moves it above the pass-band of the drivers. You position the midrange driver away from the boundary for the same reason, increasing the distance, and dropping the suck-out below its operating frequency. This is basically the way that the Allison speakers worked. Put the bass unit low and close to the floor, keep the midrange high and away from the wall. This is the same idea. It keeps the speaker's in-



room output very flat. It also makes it less obtrusive once you get it home.

RG. The mid/treble 'head' is actually compliantly mounted within the main enclosure. How's that executed?

PW. With leaf-springs. Naim always use leaf-springs! The midrange cabinet is mounted on a single spike at the front, and two at the back. These are positioned on leaves to allow vertical compliance. The tweeter is then compliantly mounted on its own baffle, the same arrangement as was used in the DBL.

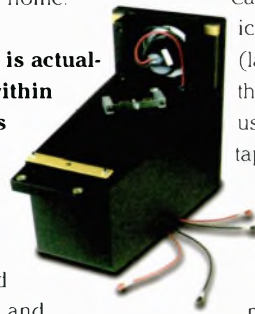
In fact the drivers in the 'head' are identical to the units used in the DBL, whilst the two bass drivers are a slight variation on SBL units. I could have opted for new drivers or different technology, but there are very real practical benefits in using the same designs and suppliers. And it's not like they weren't chosen for a reason in the first place.

RG. Is the active crossover for the NBL available.

PW. In fact it was available before the Paxo (passive crossover). It is just a variation on a Snaxo 3-6. Running the speaker active was a really big help in designing the passive crossover. When people heard the NBL for the first time at shows, it was operating with an active crossover.

RG. Where does the visual design for the speaker come from?

PW. That's me. My formal training is actually as a product designer rather than specifically in loudspeaker design.



That came later at Mordaunt-Short and Canon. So the overall aesthetic is all my own work (laughs). The key points are the tapered cabinet and the use of curves. Obviously, tapering the cabinet also has an acoustic benefit in that it helps to reduce standing waves, but it also gives the speaker a far more dramatic appearance.

Once I'd chosen the quadrants to cover the bass drivers, the curved motif became a natural progression, especially given its emergence into mainstream cabinet work. It seems to be impossible to buy furniture without at least one curved surface on it these days. So if you are going to put a curve on the speaker, put it somewhere that people will touch. If you watch people approaching an NBL for the first time, the first thing they do is run their hand over the top curve.

I also wanted to design a grille system that worked both sonically and aesthetically. The NBL is one of the few loudspeakers that uses a cloth grille and still manages to sound better with it on than off. And you can fit it first time, every time.

We have been moving toward a better quality of presentation on the speakers for sometime, and I think that the Credo and Intro are indicative of that. Although they are a very simple shape, they are also quite elegant. The fact that we also sell far more Credo's than Intro's indicates that people will choose the more expensive option, and a lot of that will be the finish options that the Credo offers, as well as its better sound. Although Naim have traditionally done all our design work in house, we are now starting to work with outside design agencies. The first fruit of that will be the NAP500, but that's another story.





KEF Maidstone R109

by Chris Binns

There cannot be many people with even a mild interest in hi-fi to whom the initials KEF mean nothing. From budget systems to esoterica, the company has held a high profile in the market place for many years. I should imagine that even if you have never actually owned a pair of KEF loudspeakers you could probably name at least one model, after all, you have nearly forty years worth of product to choose from.

Founded in 1961 by the now legendary Raymond Cooke, KEF (short for Kent Engineering and Foundry) quickly established an innovative approach to loudspeaker design that would keep them in the limelight for years to come. Their approach was novel in so much as they were one of the first companies to use synthetic materials in the cone assemblies of their drive units: polystyrene and melinex being two early examples. One of the first products to emerge from this development work with these materials was the now legendary B139 bass unit. Due to the company's policy of making their units available to other manufacturers this radical design became something of an acoustic icon - if a loudspeaker design used one of these you knew that it was serious about low frequencies.

Several years later, in collaboration with the BBC, Cooke developed the drive units that would be pivotal in the design of the highly successful and influential LS3/5A, the B110 and T27.

These groundbreaking units incorporated materials such as Bextrene and Neoprene, the characteristics of which displayed several advantages over conventional paper based diaphragms. The new devices were superior in stability over a considerably wider range of both temperature and humidity. They exhibited low coloration and were suitable for mass production to a consistent standard within close tolerances. These developments changed the course of loudspeakers for the next decade or so and provided the basic template for numerous uncoloured designs throughout the seventies.

When you bear in mind that at a conservative estimate, the B110 and T27 units found their way into some three million speakers world-wide, I think it is entirely fair to say that, on this evidence alone, KEF have been something of a major influence in audio. The KEF company's auspicious first years were followed by a whole series of innovations. The sixties saw another first in their incorporation of computer technology in designing both cabinets and drive units. KEF were also the first company to use separate enclosures for each drive unit, as exhibited in the Reference 105's

which were first produced in the late seventies. The eighties saw the introduction of the coupled cavity bass loading system which gave more control over drive units at frequency extremes. More recently, in the early nineties, they introduced the Uni-Q driver. Not always without a degree of controversy, these ideas have helped and sometimes shaped the art of loudspeaker design in the last three decades.

To the best of my recollection I have owned three different KEF loudspeakers. At least one pair (104aB's) are remembered with both affection and admiration for surviving the rigorous and unreasonable demands of student life, whilst maintaining a degree of dignity regardless of the sometimes questionable material fed to them. Post college, in the environs of the recording studio, I remember being absolutely floored by the awesome power of the KM-1 active studio monitors. Their enormous cabinets each boasted no less than four 15" bass units and a total of 1.6 Kilowatts of amplification

When a company with a track record such as KEF's decides to launch a flagship i.e. the culmination of everything that they know about loudspeaker design, the very least we should do is sit up and take notice.

Development of the ▶



► Maidstone began in the Autumn of 1995. KEF had already established some reasonably large and well regarded designs, such as the Reference four, but the company had produced nothing suitable for the world arena of high end heavyweight loudspeaker design. By contrast, container loads of large, esoteric loudspeakers were being shipped from the United States. To successfully compete in this market KEF needed to produce a loudspeaker to satisfy an extremely demanding list of criteria. The new unit would have to have a massive dynamic range, wide band width, low coloration, good imaging and overall musical quality, plus the capability to deliver high (read realistic) volume levels, with minimum compression and distortion, in a large room. The design team could take some consolation from the fact that physical size and budget constraints did not appear to be too severe. Confronted with this challenge the engineers decided to start with a clean slate. It was not a case of pressing into service existing components designed for other systems. Every part of the Maidstone was drawn up with the final product in mind. Strangely enough, the design solution exhibits a return to more traditional values. With the exception of the Uni-Q, it appears that KEF has omitted many of the other innovations for which it is famous.

The Maidstone, once fully assembled, is large and very heavy. Each of the speakers arrives in two sections, and even in this state it takes two people and a lot of sweat to unpack, move and install them. If you don't believe me yet, maybe you will when I tell you that the complete cabinet is approximately 4ft high by 2ft wide with similar depth and weighs in at around 200lbs,

or nearly 90Kgs. The weak hearted or spinally impaired should take notice of these facts and approach installation with some caution.

Each assembled cabinet comprises a bass bin, an upper bass cabinet and the mid / top box. The substantially braced bass bin has an internal volume of a 145 litres and is reflex loaded by



two ports, each 100mm diameter and 420mm long, flared to avoid turbulence. KEF supplied a spare bass drive unit - not I might add because there was any likelihood of one failing but because they are proud of it. And so they should be. This is not just another 15" bass unit; it

is one of the most beautifully engineered devices I have ever seen. Technically it is something of a masterpiece, incorporating a short (10mm) voice coil immersed in a long magnetic gap. This provides lower distortion and greater stability than the more conventional motor structure which utilises a long coil and short gap. The adopted approach is a lot more expensive to produce, primarily due to the cost of engineering the massive magnet assembly needed to generate and focus the flux evenly. The cone is a slightly flared, bonded pulp structure, terminated in a synthetic rubber suspension and complimented by a double rear spider assembly, again aiding stability. This unit covers the bottom end of the frequency spectrum up to about 100Hz.

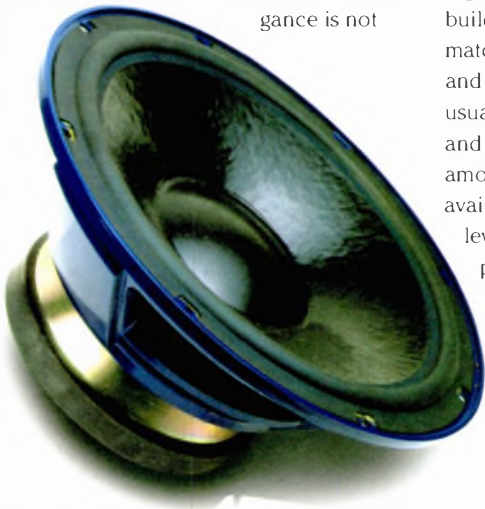
The two upper sections of the cabinet sit on the bass cabinet, coupled to it by 3 gold plated cup and cone assemblies. The lower of these contains a 10" drive unit built along the same extravagant lines as its big brother i.e. over engineered and dead gorgeous. The internal volume behind this upper bass unit is 14 litres and it works in the range from 100Hz to 400Hz. It also marks the Maidstone's first divergence from conventional practice. A lot of full range speakers step straight from a very large bass driver to a very small midrange unit, which can cause problems with the integration of the units, and the continuity of the bass. KEF have stepped the drivers far more gradually, going 15" - 10" - 6.5". This, and the fact that they all employ the same doping, should produce musically far more coherent results, from the deep bass right up into the low treble. Or so say KEF, and it has to be admitted that this is one of ►

► the R109's great strengths.

The top enclosure is bolted, via (gold plated) spacers, to the upper bass cabinet which contains a 6.5" Uni-Q driver handling (almost) the rest of the frequency range. The chassis of this unit, like the others, is a high quality die-casting finished to an excellent standard. For those of you who haven't encountered this KEF innovation, the Uni-Q driver demands closer investigation. Their design features a highly developed tweeter situated within the coil assembly of the mid-unit, thus approaching the ideal of a 'single point source' delivering a well behaved dispersion pattern with good phase characteristics off axis - or so we are told. The mid-range cone material is doped polypropylene with a gentle curve whilst the tweeter is a 1" fabric dome, ferrofluid cooled within a neodymium magnet assembly.

The overall look of the Maidstone strikes me as something that started out as an ugly, functional object, before being tamed to make it more aesthetically acceptable. The 25mm thick (50mm in the bass unit) front baffles are curved in an easy going fashion and veneered in handsome grain matched mahogany, whilst the back, top and sides of the cabinets are finished in a satin black. KEF have lavishly adorned the Maidstone's by gold plating virtually all the exposed metal

parts. This extravagance is not

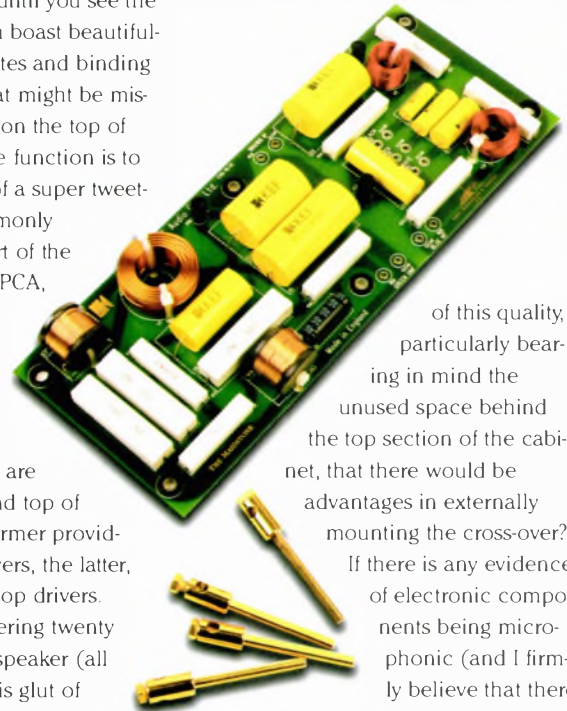


too much in evidence until you see the back of the units which boast beautifully finished terminal plates and binding posts. There is also what might be mistaken for a name plate on the top of the mid/HF box. Its true function is to facilitate the addition of a super tweeter, not something commonly encountered in this part of the world except by the RSPCA, but apparently becoming a trend in the far east. One wasn't supplied and I certainly didn't miss it.

The terminal plates are situated on the back and top of the bass cabinet, the former providing input to the crossovers, the latter, output to the mid and top drivers. This adds up to a staggering twenty binding posts per loudspeaker (all gold plated...). With this glut of connections available, various configurations for set-up present themselves. Everything from single wiring (using supplied gold jumpers) through to full 4-way active drive can be accomplished. KEF advocate an approach which lies somewhere in between. They recommend passive bi-amplification, for which, as we'll see, they have good reason.

Below the terminal boards lie the crossovers. One unit serves the two bass sections, the other the mid and high frequencies. Once again, high build quality is evident and KEF's matching of crossover components and drive units is second to none. This usually pays dividends with imaging and presentation of detail. A small amount (± 1 dB) of level adjustment is available for the high frequency energy level, via a screw terminal, to compensate for different acoustic environments (and of course it too is gold plated).

One minor reservation about the crossover layout. I might be out of line here, but it seems to me that in a speaker



of this quality, particularly bearing in mind the unused space behind the top section of the cabinet, that there would be advantages in externally mounting the cross-over?

If there is any evidence of electronic components being micro-phonous (and I firmly believe that there is) surely the last

place you would want to situate them is inside a bass cabinet - especially one generating the volume levels of which the Maidstone's are capable.

Finally, on the construction front, the bass cabinet is supplied with cones which screw into the bottom plate. The front ones are quite a bit taller than the rear, thus tilting the system back by a few degrees. As one would expect, the Maidstone comes with a full and lavishly presented handbook for installation and operation - yet again typical of the attention to detail throughout the whole system.

In spite of their size, the KEF's are not especially sensitive: 91dB is specified, along with a 4 ohm load. KEF's Conjugate Load Matching is not in evidence here - a lot of their earlier models incorporated circuitry to ease the load on the amplifier and thus make them easier to drive. Ironically, I think we can safely say that the Maidstone is something of a power hungry monster, and the preference for bi-amping is understandable.

The system I used with the big ►

▶ KEF's comprised the Meridian 508.24 for CD replay and the Linn for vinyl. These were coupled with the Pass Labs phono stage, Primary line stage and mono blocks, which rose to the occasion admirably. It is rare that I'm able to safely unleash over 300 watts into any loudspeaker but it was clear that the Maidstone's were having a good time with them. Connections were made with Chord Company Chorus and Odyssey, which did sterling service. Towards the end of the listening, and feeling the demand to try something a little more exotic (and in keeping with a twelve grand speaker) I prized a set of the ruinously expensive Nordost SPM from the editor's sticky grasp. And yes, it made a big difference, building on the already impressive performance.

The Maidstone's need plenty of space around them which was no problem fore and aft but unfortunately in my room I could not quite give them the clearance they deserved to the sides. They constantly reminded me of the fact, so be warned, you will need a lot of space.

The first thing you notice about the sound of the Maidstone's is the sheer, enormous scale that they present. There is an impact to music that a good large speaker can provide by way of a combination of dynamics, bandwidth and effortlessness that can be totally addictive. The Maidstone's are good. There is a sure footedness to their presentation that instils a confidence not available from lesser designs. To be more specific, the Maidstone puts all the fundamentals in the right place, and at the right time,

with such authority that all other aspects of the performance fall into place.

Rhythmically complex music, such as Peter Gabriel's soundtrack to *The Last Temptation of Christ* is con-



veyed in a fashion that leaves no doubt as to who is in control. The drummers, all twenty of them! As the music builds up, and each successive layer of percussion is added, there has been a sense of doubt with many systems that they might lose the plot or even their

bass units when things start getting frantic. Not so with the Maidstone's. I have never heard a speaker remain so totally in control with this music, even at really fright-ening levels. They manage to pass it off with a slight sense of

arrogance as in "is that the best that you can do?" No problem. There is something about the combination of the two bass units that gives music of this sort both the weight and agility which makes it so exciting. In my experience a single large bass driver cannot successfully deliver both of these qualities.

Likewise, large scale orchestral works such as Brahms' *Symphony Nos. 3&4* are beautifully reproduced, again with that sensation of immense scale countered with poise, and where called for, drama. It was impossible for me to listen to just one movement, I had to play the whole thing through. By contrast, small scale recordings such as the Shostakovich string quartets (all of them!) were reproduced with an intimacy that was enthralling, combined with a lush but accurate string tone, built on the resonant presence of the instrumental bodies. Although there was plenty of depth, the Maidstone's found it difficult to define a convincing lateral image of the instruments, resulting in a lack of precision across the soundstage. Traditionally the Uni-Q drivers have excelled at image definition, to the extent that it wasn't essential to be square in the middle of the loudspeakers. This is where I suspect that the width of the room was upsetting the situation but unfortunately I didn't have the opportunity to ▶

► try them in a wider one. Besides, moving them would have been a nightmare! I have heard them produce lateral images (although not of the exaggerated, pin-point variety so fashionable at present), so this will have to remain a 'listen to them in your own room' judgement.

A session which remains highlighted in my memory of these loudspeakers occurred late one night, listening to the Naxos recording of Arvo Pärt; *Fratres*. This eerie music has a quiet, pensive beginning which grows to a thunderous dynamic crescendo before dying down again, all within the first movement. It is intensely emotional stuff, and I was left enthralled and not a little scared, particularly as I was in the house alone.

As you will probably gather, I was enjoying myself. I had to force myself to explore some of the other possibilities using ancillary equipment that I had on hand, because every time I went into the room I just wanted to listen to more music. I did get round to bi-amping the Maidstone's with two Naim NAP 250's, and this proved to be a good match, sounding a little tidier and more controlled, although lacking the drama and sense of scale that the Primary valve amps could generate. The attributes of the Naim amplification shone through, with good rhythmic delivery and timing. I began to wonder what four NAP 135's would sound like....but there just wasn't time, and by this stage I felt as if I already had a good feel for the KEF's capabilities.

It was also interesting to observe the reaction of other people, especially those not interested in hi-fi. The normal response to a pair of loudspeakers the size of the Maidstone's is an immediate 'How much do they cost?' closely followed by remarks concerning the justification of such expenditure, prior to a cursory listen. These KEF's elicited somewhat different behaviour. Possibly because of the grand scale

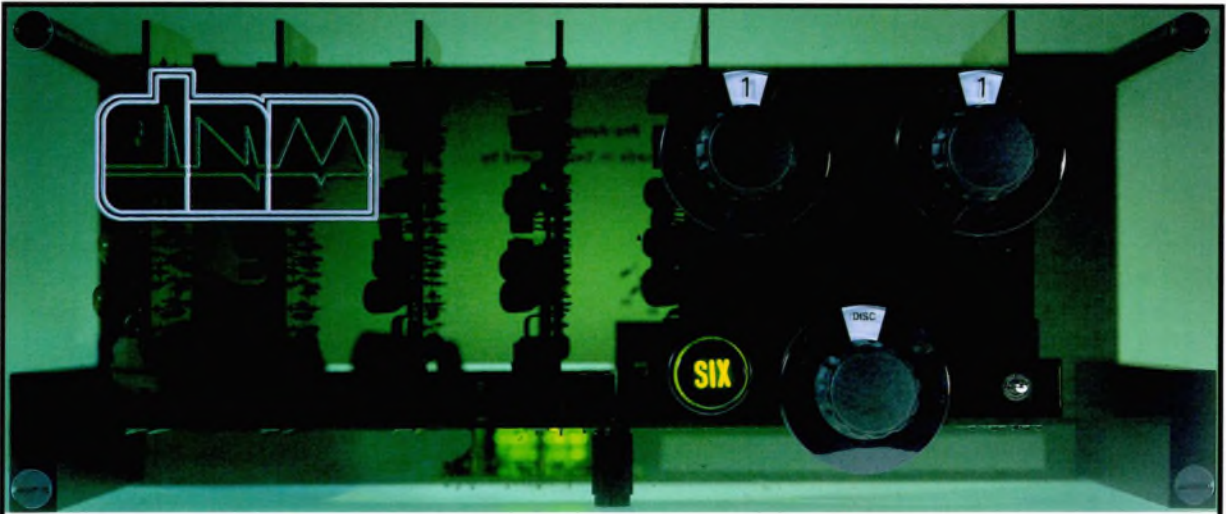
with which they reproduced music, the normally casual listener was often seduced into a longer relationship. At one stage whilst the review pair was in residence, what started as an evening barbecue instead became an intensive listening session. I ended up with eight people present (none of them remotely interested in hi-fi), rifling my music collection for requests, and wallowing in the sheer enjoyment of the sound, to the virtual exclusion of conversation. This continued until just after 5 o'clock in the morning!

There is no doubt that the Maidstone's are remarkable. Like any esoteric product, they demand skill and patience in setting up, and the choice of suitable amplification is certainly a limited one. Yet again we are confronted with a product that demands the agility and subtlety of a small amplifier combined with the sheer muscle and current drive of a much larger unit. Fortunately, because they work so well with bi-amplification, this dichotomy is not the problem it might otherwise be. Similarly they are demanding of the room. These loudspeakers excel at presenting music on a large scale and in order to achieve their full potential they need plenty of space to breathe.

Have KEF met their design objectives? Yes, I believe they have. The Maidstone's did all the things that you would expect a large loudspeaker to do and with supreme confidence. Are they value for money? I just don't know. That depends on your particular outlook and circumstances. I know that I spent as much time as I possibly could listening to the Maidstone's, and when the time came for them to go I realised that there was going to be a considerable period of readjustment. I still miss them. ►+

TECHNICAL PANEL

Product Description:	4-way, stacked enclosure loudspeaker.
Drive Units:	
Bass:	380mm doped paper cone, double suspension, under hung voice coil.
Bass/Mid:	250mm doped paper cone, underhung voice coil
Midrange:	160mm doped polypropylene cone.
Tweeter:	25mm ferrofluid cooled, fabric dome.
Cabinets:	
Bass:	145 litre, 25mm braced MDF, 50mm baffle. Reflex loaded.
Bass/Mid:	19 litre, 25mm braced MDF.
Mid/Treble:	6.5 litre, 25mm braced MDF.
Crossover Frequencies:	100Hz, 400Hz, 2.8kHz
Frequency Response:	35Hz - 20kHz ± 3dB. -6dB - 30Hz
Sensitivity:	91dB/w
Maximum SPL:	118dB
Power Handling:	400 watts
Impedance:	4 Ohms
Weight:	87kgs
Dimensions (WxHxD):	600 x 1188 x 671mm
Finish:	Mahogany / Black Satin
(Other veneers available to special order.)	
Price	£12000
Manufacturer:	
	KEF Audio (UK) Ltd. Eccleston Road Tovil Maidstone Kent ME15 - 60P
	Tel. (44)(0)1622-672261 Fax. (44)(0)1622-750653 Net. www.kef.com



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Secret Speakers

In the world of hi-fi, there have always been hidden products. Products which command the industry's respect and affection, but never penetrate the public consciousness or establish a market presence. It happens to products of every type, but it happens to speakers more. Perhaps it's because they have to qualify on the grounds of cabinetry as well as sonic performance. You can't put a speaker in a cupboard, and that makes it furniture, whether we like it or not. But whilst that might explain the public's apathetic response to the likes of the Gallo globes, it doesn't even begin to suggest why Vandersteen speakers never made an impact this side of the Atlantic.

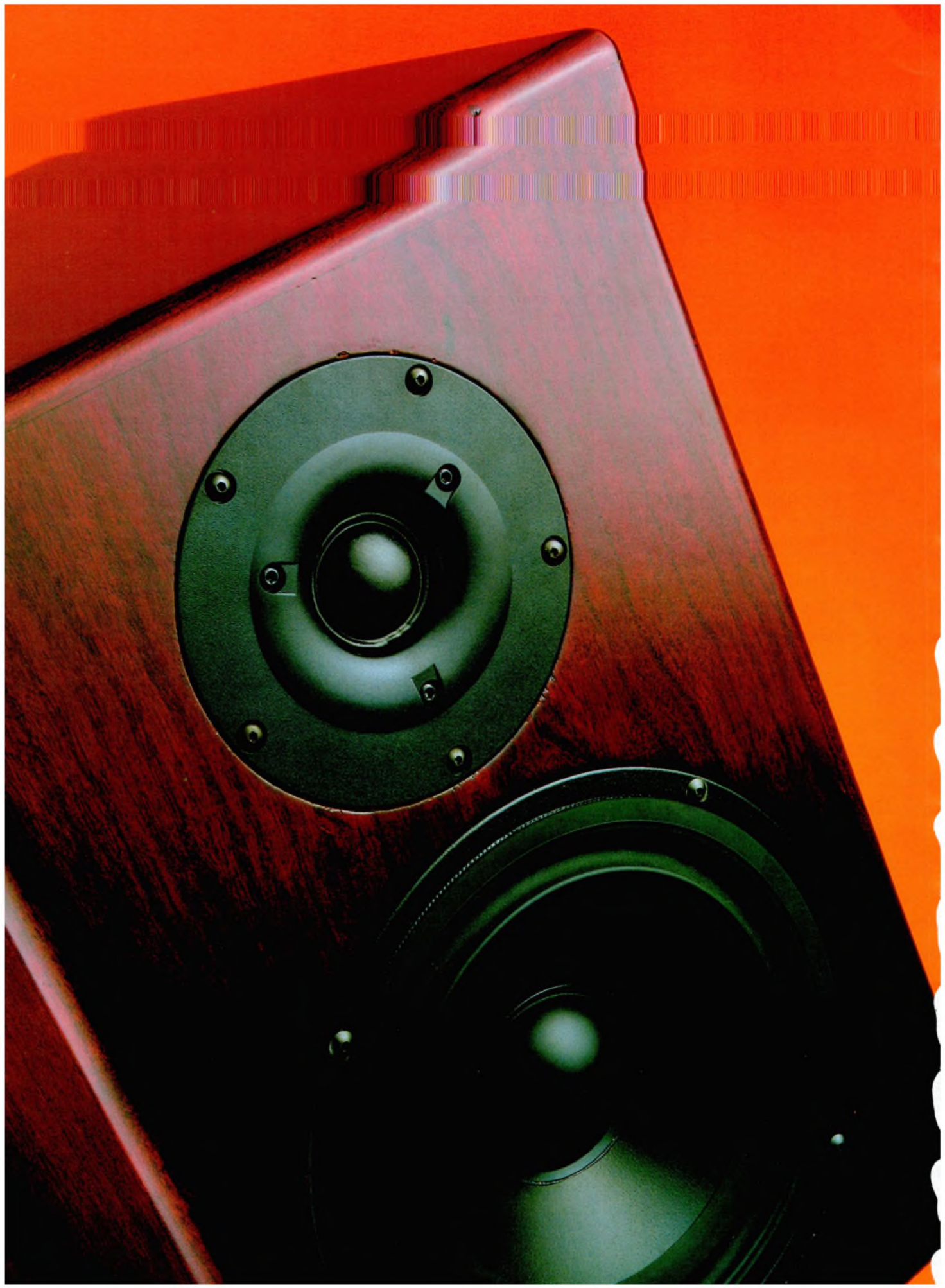
There has always been this sub-cultural flow of cult products. The ones the industry buys but somehow never seems to sell. But why keep them to themselves? It's not like they're rationed or anything. As often as not it's the nature of the product itself. It's perceived as difficult to sell, and consequently, a lot of dealers don't even try. To understand why, we need to dig a little deeper.

When you work in a shop all day, or cart kit from one dealer to another, you spend a lot of time listening to music, and most of it is played on systems that you didn't choose. Sadly, many manufacturers have one eye (or should that be ear) on the dem room when they design a product. They want it to be able to stand out from the crowd, and that normally means exaggerating some aspect of performance. And while the deviation will be small, just enough to make things interesting in a demonstration, over days and weeks, the constant parade of tweaked products can really start to grate. The constant flow of different equipment mixes things up, and helps stop any single product from attracting the blame, but the simple truth is that it's all too easy to begin to lose interest in music as a result. You listen all day to things that jangle against your sub-conscious, the last thing you want to do when you get home is listen to more of the same.

What happens is the cruellest form of natural selection. These people either stop listening at home or they find a product that they can live with.

And that means one that is devoid of the exaggerations and artifice that are designed to impress in the short term. That's why these speakers, which are amongst the most natural and musically rewarding available, are considered hard to sell. You actually have to want music rather than "Hi-Fi" if you are going to appreciate what they are about.

All four speakers here are products which fit the profile. Both the Ars Acoustica Diva and the Audioplan Kontrast have achieved modest sales despite finding their way into a surprising number of industry homes. The Starter is just the latest in the range of speakers from iconoclastic designer Dick Shahanian. I could have chosen the Super Elf or Obelisk just as easily. They're all woefully under-appreciated this side of the Atlantic. Finally we get to the Kochel horns, a rather different beast, but again one that has been cutting a swathe through the assembled ranks of industry sceptics. Seek them out. You will be surprised, and for some of you it could be the end of a long search. ▶



Ars Acoustica Diva

by Roy Gregory

According to a dealer friend of mine, the market for two-thousand pound plus stand mounted loudspeakers is almost non-existent. Instead, people shopping at this price level are tending to dispense with the ironmongery and are going for floor standing models instead. Altogether more elegant! But the decision effects more than just the look of the speaker; its whole performance envelope, and consequently its balance of virtues, will also change.

There are very few stand mounted speakers which have sufficient internal volume available to simply have their shape squeezed and extended down to the ground. Sure, you can build in a bulkhead, turning the cabinet into two boxes, one on top of the other, but given the additional volume available, most designers opt to use it to increase the efficiency and bass extension of their designs. Louder, deeper and better looking, who could resist the combination? Unfortunately, there's no such thing as a free lunch, and all those benefits come with a cost attached.

In most conventional speaker designs, the box gobbles up the lions share of the build cost. It's complicated to manufacture out of pricey materials, and then you have to finish it. The bigger the box, the more it's going to cost, and therein lies the problem. The additional size more than consumes the money saved by dispensing with stands, and those long panels need heavy, and very expensive, internal bracing in order to stay rigid. Guess where the corners get cut? Where you can't see them. What this means is that you get increased levels of colouration to go along with all the benefits of your nice, tall, slim cabinet.

One of the few expensive stand mounted speakers to hold its own is the much copied Sonus Faber range (and even they make floorstanders now!). And whilst their popularity undoubtedly owes a lot to those curvaceous solid walnut cabinets, let's not forget how rigid those small, inch thick panels are. Where low colouration is a serious consideration, small is definitely beautiful!

All of which is a rather roundabout way of reaching the Ars Acoustica Diva, a small and rather plain looking speaker, which, whilst it's much admired by hi-fi dealers, is seldom sold. And let's face it, a quick glance shows little to justify a price the wrong side of two grand. It looks nice enough, but nothing special. Which is where you'd be wrong.

The first clue comes when you pick one up. This is a seriously heavy little speaker (and they arrive boxed in pairs!), and not one you pick up without thinking about it first. The small and incredibly rigid cabinet is built from the same proprietary mineral loaded polymer as the company's larger, four box System Max. This material, which combines rigidity with excellent self damping properties, is poured into a mold to create the monocoque cabinet, which is then veneered to render a rather softer aesthetic than the Darth Vader looks of the Diva's big brother. As I suggested earlier, this might not result in the spectacular looks of a Sonus Faber, but then that wasn't really the intention. Instead, designer Irv Isenberg wanted to offer something approaching the performance of the System Max, in a financially more accessible and domestically more discrete package.

Well, the Diva's are nothing if not discrete, even if its beauty really is only skin deep.

From the designer's point of view, whilst the inclusion of such a costly and proven cabinet material is clearly a bonus, it does create phenomenal pressure on the budget left for the rest of the components. Just to put this in context, most of the speakers that use similar cabinet materials run well into five figures, the best known being the Wilson Watt. To employ a cabinet like this at this price level is as big a surprise as the first hundred pound speaker with a metal dome tweeter was, way back when. The Celestion 3 halved the entry fee for metal dome ownership overnight, and in a slightly less obvious way, the Diva pulls the same trick for its own little bit of magic technology. The question is, is there enough left over to provide drivers and a crossover worthy of the box?

The answer is in the careful selection of those components, and choosing a design path which stresses simplicity rather than, for ▶



▶ example, complex crossover slopes. In this, the fact that many basic drivers are intended for use with minimal crossovers clearly helps. After that, it's down to choosing the right bits and pieces, which is where experience comes in. This attention to detail even extends to the nasty looking terminal block, which was actually selected as the next best sounding alternative to the bespoke copper terminals used on the Max. And the binding posts angle up because Iv prefers spades to 4mm connections. Likewise, notice the superb profiling on the lip of the rear facing port. Every aspect of the design has been considered, and that includes the lack of a grille; who spends this sort of money on a carefully optimised loudspeaker and then compromises it with a tacky clip-on cover? I heartily concur.

Of course, all this only matters if the speaker's performance justifies the effort. Listen to the Diva and that is never in doubt. This is a perfectly recognisable junior relation to the large, costly and demanding System Max. So you don't get the scale, or the widest dynamics and top-end air, and clearly you don't get the bass depth of the larger speaker. But in the all important midrange the Diva gives surprisingly little away to the much more expensive Max.

But let's start at the bottom. There seems to have been an obsession with extracting deep bass out of little boxes since infinite baffle designs first appeared. In fact, not a few small speakers have achieved respectable sales based on that attribute alone. The Diva doesn't play that game, partly because its design brief precludes the use of the kind of behemoth power amps demanded by the load and efficiency characteristics that go hand

in hand with those sorts of sonic fireworks, and partly because its cabinet refuses to supply the thickened thump that, more often than not, passes for deep bass. Instead, the Diva offers a clean clear bass down to about 55Hz



or so, before it rolls off cleanly. Try to extract more by pushing it back against the wall, and you simply ruin what's there, a definite case of over egging the pudding! The up side is a bass which plays tunes, without a sing-a-long-a-box to interfere with the gorgeously transparent and tactile mid-band. You also get an efficiency that's pegged a shade over 90dB, and an amplifier load that, whilst it measures in around 4 Ohms, is at least fairly benign. Whilst the Diva will run with my JA30's, it really wants just a touch more than their 20watts. Both the Copland CTA402 (35watts) and the Lavardin IT proved to be more than capable partners.

Set-up is fairly straight forward as long as you take the appropriate care over the distance to the back wall (I settled on a front baffle to wall measurement of 28"), and equal trouble over the modicum of toe-in required. That aside, you'll need some good stable 24" stands to prevent the

somewhat dumpy Divas (how art mirrors life!) being too precarious. The risk of an involuntary tumble is increased by the fact that the speakers are supplied with a dozen decoupling pads to be placed, in pairs at the front and singly at the

rear, between speaker and stand. This imparts a tiny degree of tilt to the baffle, and the decoupling makes the speaker (and therefore your wallet) less susceptible to stand quality, both of which are welcome. It does however, make for a less secure mounting than Blutack, being more akin to upward facing spikes.

To get the best out of the Diva, like any decent speaker, you need to play to its strengths, and first amongst them is musical coherence, built on the solid foundation of uncluttered micro-dynamics. You'll notice that all the amps I mentioned place finesse and agility ahead of brute force and aural mayhem. They are perfectly in step with the Diva. Sitting down in front of these speakers is a truly out of the box experience, with the music arrayed in a single coherent space, behind and quite separate from the enclosures. Shut your eyes and there is

▶ absolutely no sense that the soundfield emanates from distinct boxes or drive units, you just get the space in which the performance occurred (whether that's the Wigmore Hall or a collection of sound booths in a studio).

This holistic character, combined with the sheer quantity of unsullied low-level information (another benefit of the cabinet material) make the Diva capable of spookily natural sound. It can catch you off balance, especially if you aren't concentrating on the music. Suddenly a voice or sound will grab your attention. I find myself rushing into the listening room to find out what the cats are up to, only to discover that it was a musician kicking his music stand on the recording.

It also makes the speaker a natural for small scale music. The spoken introduction to *Julian Bream In Concert* (RCA SB6646) retains the wry humour of the soloist as he talks from his elevated position on the stage, and the applause is not only properly explosive, but arrayed in front and to the sides of him. The Divas also give his lute just the right, slightly tangy tonality. There's no way you'll mistake it for a guitar, which is a sadly common occurrence with some speakers. At the other end of the social spectrum you'll find the Special AKA's triumphant album *in the studio* (CHR TT 5008). The

compassionate demand to 'Free Nelson Mandela' is charged with staccato power as the band push the vocals to even greater heights. Yes, you can identify each individual voice in Afrosisiak's opening chorus; and yes, you can hear that Stan Campbell is recorded in a separate booth, but that's all peripheral to the message in the music. Likewise, the fabulous 'What I like Best About You Is Your Girlfriend' is full of the sly and insidious menace

that makes the track so, well, special.

This chameleon-like quality that allows each piece of music's character to survive intact is great when the system is right, but it can be a real double edged sword if you try to match the Diva to something inappropriate. Quick and clean are the order of the day. In fact, the combination of the Lavardin IT and the Divas, used with Lavardin or Nordost SPM cables has become a standard, no nonsense package that I rely on for a lot of preliminary listening and system comparisons. So few boxes; so few connections; so easy; its great! And whilst they don't plough a furrow through the musical nether regions, there's plenty of well defined bass there to maintain musical impact and momentum. You really get the sense that these speakers convert all the electrical energy they receive into sound. And whilst that's impossible, they allow music to set its own pace.

When you first hear the Divas you might suspect a lack of slam, or bass weight, even an overall lean-ness, but it's actually to do with the lack of added padding. An additional benefit of this top to bottom clarity is that you don't keep turning the system up, looking for wallop, because the bass notes are already arriving at the right time, instead of still wading through knee deep cabinet resonance. In fact, and in common with the Max, you

can listen to the Diva at surprisingly low levels, especially with the IT.

Both products are so free from the gross compression that seems to be the accepted norm, that they maintain a satisfying sense of solidity and dynamic range, even at early hours listening levels. It's no surprise to find that Irv Isenberg does a lot of his listening in a house in which his wife and kids

are asleep.

The Baby Ars Acoustica speaker won't impress your neighbours with thunderous bass, or their wives with its sumptuous cabinet work. Carefully matched it won't impress you - until you realise that you are listening to the music rather than the speaker. You could view it as a hand ground lens in a world full of plastic sun-glasses, or more prosaically, as a careful blend of the musically and domestically acceptable. Me? I don't view it at all. I turn the lights out and let the Ricci *Carmen Fantasy* unfold before me. That's quite impressive enough for me.



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Drivers	25mm Silk Dome Tweeter 170mm Treated Plastic Cone Bass / Mid
Cabinet	Mineral Loaded Polymer Monocoque
Frequency Response	45Hz - 22kHz (± 3 dB)
Efficiency	90.5dB/w
Impedance	4ohms
Cabinet Dimensions (WxHxD)	217 x 340 x 308 mm
Finishes	Light Cherry, Red Cherry, Black
Grilles	None Supplied
Stand Height	24"
Price	£2200

Distributor:

Trilogy Audio Systems
72 Shooters Hill Road
Blackheath
London
SE3 - 7BG

Tel. (44)(0)181-856-2499

Fax. (44)(0)181-856-6899

Manufacturer:

Ars Acoustica
E-mail. max@interlog.com



Shahinian Acoustics Starter

by Chris Thomas

The world of Hi-Fi has always taken itself far too seriously. The industry sometimes seems to have lost sight of the fundamental fact that the majority of customers just want music in their homes. After all, it was not so many years ago that most members of the family would be encouraged to learn to play an instrument themselves, even if it were just tinkling with the piano in the living room. But of course we are all far too busy and sophisticated for that now as, having paid thousands for a Hi-Fi system, we can sit back in our favorite chair, and listen to other people expressing themselves. In my role as Hi-Fi psychiatrist I have often advised those poor souls who have come to me with Audio Angst or Equipment Nervosa to pull off the upgrade trail, buy an instrument and spend some time learning to play it. You could buy an absolutely superb guitar for the price of a good set of speaker cables, a simply amazing keyboard for the price of a moving-coil cartridge or a complete kit of drums for much less than you might fork out on a preamplifier. Imagine the lack of stress involved reaching for your clarinet as opposed to listening to some anally retentive Hi-Fi crank telling you how much more fulfilled your life would be if you upgraded your interconnects.

You don't need to spend a fortune to get a great audio system. Less grand affairs that feature more humble components are more interesting in many ways than the "super-systems". I say they are more interesting because often they can be more musically enjoyable, and certainly more relaxing

and less relentless to listen to. The more successful ones will almost certainly avoid being particularly "Hi-Fi" at all. Perhaps there will be no thunderous bass or soaring treble, but the room will be remarkably free of cables and custom-built black metal racks. Successful professional musicians, who could afford just about anything that took their fancy, have such systems. Often, when they ask me about an upgrade and I explain what is involved; they just do not want to know about all the paraphernalia that goes along with a step upwards. To them the music is the message - the hi-fi an inconvenience. Well from now on I shall be able to recommend a speaker, that at least does not require you to lay out your living room like a cinema, drill screw holes in the floor or even to rearrange the furniture. It's small, it's light, it's reasonably priced and it is called the Shahinian Starter.

The Starter is the latest and least expensive in a six-speaker range designed by Dick Shahinian in New York and imported into this country by Pear Audio. Dick himself believes fervently that most loudspeakers are variations on a theme and based on a design concept that is, in itself, flawed. He states that the second worst shape for a loudspeaker, after a cube, is a rectangular box with a driver stuck in the middle of it. And that certainly sounds familiar, doesn't it? His argument is that drivers should be polydirectional and not mounted face-on, as this is the best way to mimic the radial waveforms of music. Neither does he think in terms of left and right and quotes another colleague when

saying that he knows of no music which starts out as two sources. I understand where he is coming from with this, but when my friend and I play guitar together, as a duet, surely that could be seen as two sources. But Dick prefers to concentrate on his speakers presenting music as a complete entity. Rather like a live performance in fact.

The Starters certainly look different and have their units mounted atop the cabinets on a small, stiff, sloping baffle, seemingly firing upwards at an angle towards the ceiling. The cabinets are small, measuring only 25 inches at their highest point, subtly grained and constructed of Finland Birch plywood, chosen for its diffuse resonant character, and the unusual consistency of the bonding process, thus eliminating voids between the layers. The overall effect is to create a far more consistent box. I like the look of them, and top quality ply is an interesting material, especially when the corners are left open-edged, revealing the layering, like these. The two drivers are a 6" plastic cone SEAS unit, made for Shahinian, and a 1" domed tweeter from the German company LPG. To avoid standing waves and other resonant nasties the internal mechanical loading of the driver consists of two unequal length chambers with wooden filters located at different positions, venting the SEAS unit downward. Another unusual aspect of their design is that they sit on hard and slippery plastic feet and not spikes. Importer John Burns assures me that if you were to mount spikes ►

► to the Starters you would lose all the bass into the floor. Some Shahinian models even sit on castors - heresy indeed, but I predict a trend of non-spiked loudspeaker designs over the coming few years.

These speakers are something of a reviewer's dream even before you start to listen to them. They are easy to carry, even easier to site and they do not harbor the threat of sharp spike mutilation. Where to put them in the room is simple - put them where they sound best or where they cause the least disruption. The cabinets are small enough to be located in any room without problem. They are the most room tolerant design I have yet heard and you do not need to worry too much about symmetry. If you are sitting closer to one speaker than the other then nine times out of ten it will not matter much. I have even tried them behind chairs and completely out of sight without paying huge sonic penalties.

They deserve a good source and a good amplifier, though this does not necessarily mean expensive. I used a Naim NAC 72/NAP 140 combination with a CD3 Compact Disc player though I reckon a Nait 3 would do an excellent, and more cost-effective job, too.

No matter how many speakers you have heard I promise you that the Starters will surprise you with their presentation. Dick Shahinian's notion of no left or right sources comes home with a bang. The whole concept of the twin speaker/central image goes out of the window. There is no sense of bass and middle with a high frequency unit working away on top but rather an unusual and very interesting integration of sound, which all seems to be coming from one area. This does not mean that the soundstage is not broad and large, because it is. It also has great stability and presence, and is not remotely flimsy or diffuse. Initially

it is the way these Shahinian speakers do things that holds your attention, rather than what they do. How do the Starters manage to produce a soundstage that is so broad and integrated and yet still maintain such a coherent sense of individual focus to the instrumentation? You can sit between them (or beside them) and point in space to a particular instrument, then move your position and the



perspective of the sound will change, but that instrument will still be locked into the soundstage in relatively the same place. The closest thing I can liken it to is watching a band perform on stage while walking around the auditorium. The view is different, but the performance is the same. Nevertheless I still think that some people will hear the Shahinians as being "wrong". We have all been weaned on two-channel stereo, and the way it portrays music, and we inevitably accept this as being "right". Shahinian speakers challenge the status quo by daring to be different in the way that they do things.

Never has the old adage of the whole being greater than the sum of the parts been more appropriate. The Starter does not have the deepest or tightest bass in its class, but it certainly has one of the most musical and

rhythmically progressive. It powers along with tremendous verve and assurance and a remarkable sense of togetherness, never sounding detached but always having its own space and freedom of expression. There is a slight boxiness here, though it can be minimised to some extent by swiveling the Starter around its own axis so that the speaker units themselves are firing at a different angle, and this can certainly help bass focus too. But this is not an overly critical exercise as the Starters definitely do not require the minute and precise degrees of positioning that most designs seem to need these days. There is no single position "sweet-spot", but rather several of them, and depending where you are sitting you simply get a different view of the recording.

Marcus Miller's *Tales* (Dreyfus 36571-2) shows just how musically cute the little Starter can be. If you like bass playing then Marcus is your man. He doesn't just play; he thumps, slaps, caresses and programs bass synthesizers to give his music a complexity of low-end drive, texture and colour. Often he will layer the bottom end with three or four tracks of different basses and record a lot of the midband instrumentation with contrasting inverse phase to give it a hollow effect. He'll then slap on a really firm drum sound and biting cymbals over the top as if to throw the bass tracks into greater relief. Although this gives an air of distinction and separation to the recording it has, on more than one occasion, given real problems to loudspeakers. More than one bass track, and I mean big bass tracks, can give the impression that the system is floating rather than swimming. The Shahinians were remarkable here, staying well in control of the colour and pace of the low frequencies. They were leaner, sharper and more rhythmic than I expected, with a really neat ability to keep ►

▶ hold of the different elements of the performance and not blur them into one. Holding down a mean bass line while allowing the mid and top full harmonic rein is a good trick for a such a modest sized speaker, though they do seem to enjoy being driven hard, and their abilities encourage such use. At lower levels their performance can seem a little muted and the bandwidth somewhat restricted at the extremes. The lowish height of the cabinet works against the speaker to some extent, and the projected soundstage perhaps feels a little low and flattened. With a more conventional speaker, increases in volume tend to push the music out and toward the listener but the Shahinians spill the sound into the room in more of an upward direction. Hard driving reinforces their soundstage, and gives them more space to integrate in free air.

One of the reasons I like Jennifer Warnes is that she is one of the few contemporary singers I know of who can actually sing in tune. I've always liked her *Famous Blue Raincoat* album (Cypress 258418), where she sings the songs of Leonard Cohen. Her vocals on these songs are nicely recorded and it's no surprise to see the name of Henry Lewey on the credits, as he is the man responsible for all the really good Joni Mitchell albums of the seventies and eighties. The title song builds sparsely on a plaintive sax intro over a fat, rich bass, and it shows all the aspects of the Starters performance to the full. The sax appears in the room and hangs in the air before the fretless bass lays the mood and foundation of the song down. The vocals are almost touchable, full of emotion and clarity. One of the reasons that the album has worn so well (it was recorded in 1987)

is its lack of studio effects, and apart from a bit of early digital "pinching" it still sounds good. I really liked the way the Starters lay the song open in front of you, avoiding sounding overly processed or nasal. All the instrumentation has its own individual range of expression, with great depth and space, yet is all bonded together within the song. The little Starter just keeps bringing you back for more.

Shahinian speakers are different, and may fall into the love 'em or hate 'em category. I am firmly in the former, and believe that when driven with a suitable amplifier, and fed with a good source, they are capable of a truly musical performance. I applaud Dick Shahinian and his ideas, and would urge you to give them or their bigger brothers a serious listen. ▶+



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Frequency Response	50Hz-20Khz +/- 3dB
Sensitivity	approx 88dB /1 Watt /1M.
Impedance	6 ohms nominal
Size	540x240x240mm (HxWxD)
Finishes	Maple, Black or natural (unfinished)
Prices	£1195 or £1095 in natural

Importer

Pear Audio, 7 Prospect Place, Alnmouth,
Northumberland NE66-2RL
Tel. 01665 830862
Fax. 01665 830051

Manufacturer

Shahinian Acoustics, New York
The best source of internet information is via the
Australian distributor at:
www.dynavector.com



Audioplan Kontrast IIIi

by Roy Gregory

The Audioplan Kontrast speakers labour under a heavy handicap in the UK. After all, the wrong side of three grand looks like an awful lot of money for a two-way speaker of limited size, and it's German! For whatever reason, and I can't find a good one, German speakers have always struggled in the UK, saddled with a totally unjustified reputation for searing treble and oom-pah bass. And yet the Kontrast graces not a few systems belonging to retailers, reviewers or manufacturers. Clearly there is more here than meets the eye.

What exactly sets the Audioplans apart from the crowd. The easy answer is their sound. They have a seamless, holistic quality which is normally the preserve of single driver designs, but without the bandwidth and coloration costs that normally go with those, not to mention the domestic impact. In fact, the Kontrasts are unfailingly natural in their handling of music, almost the epitome of some idealised "Englishness" in their even-handedness and sense of musical balance. They are all to do with self-contained manners and restraint, in a world awash with flashy show-offs. Which goes a long way to explain their popularity with the industry's insiders. After a day spent listening to every kind of musical exaggeration clamouring for attention on the sales floor, the last thing you want when you get home is more of the same.

The really clever bit about the Kontrasts is that they manage the trick of being both polite and inherently musical at the same time. They don't shout at you or pull the music apart, but they don't round it off or smother it with nice either. What they do is

present it properly, unimpeded by the distortions and excess that infest the vast majority of speakers. To understand just how they achieve it we need to take a closer look at the design.

I first came across the Audioplans over ten years ago, then in Mk II guise. Once I'd listened to them I had to know a) what made them sound so good? and b) why did they cost so much? The answer it transpires, is the same in both cases; attention to detail. Let's start with the cabinet. Nowadays, slim floorstanders are ten-a-penny, but the Kontrast was one of the first. Whilst it's a very space efficient design, it also needs extensive bracing to prevent the whole thing becoming a singa-longa-box. (See the Diva review for more on this subject.) The Kontrast's cabinet is also extensively and selectively damped to reduce the thickness and congestion that can infect large MDF panels. Internally, standing waves are dissipated by a clever multi-cellular arrangement of differing densities of felt. The crossover is potted in resin to prevent vibrational interference with its operation.

Perhaps the most obviously radical feature of the design is the decoupled tweeter housing, featuring its own, narrow baffle. This prevents inter-modulation distortion from the bass-mid driver effecting the tweeter. Less apparent are the custom built, silver plated copper binding posts sunk directly into the crossover, and the use of Audioplan's own LS6 loudspeaker cable to hook up the internals. Even the bi-wiring bridges are heavy, silver

plated items.

Most of these elements have featured in other designs. The Audioplan Kontrast was the first to combine them all, and to such good effect. Naturally, designs evolve, and the Kontrast has reached Mk IIIi status. In the intervening years I have seen the port move to the bottom of the cabinet, and the arrival of a new bass-mid unit. The new position for the port allows greater control over its interface with the room, the boundary conditions being far more predictable.

It also reduces the egress of unwanted midrange energy, further impeded by felt damping of the port's surfaces. Changing to the current AeroGel drive unit has also widened the dynamic window, and allowed a modest but worthwhile increase in efficiency. The final surprise comes underneath, where nice carpet piercing spikes (although still supplied) have given way to screw on mineral loaded polymer pucks christened ironically, Anti-Spikes by Audioplan's Volker Kuhn. Ever diligent

I did the comparison, and in my carpeted room I found that the Anti-Spikes gave better results, with a more natural tonal balance, and getting rid of a last hint of boxiness that persisted with the metal spikes.

Set-up is very straight forward, and actually adds to the Kontrast's appeal. Basically, they prefer to be listened to from fairly close range. That and their small footprint makes them ideal for small rooms, or firing across larger



Once. To give their best you need to

have 18" between the back of the speaker and the wall, and you should use Audioplan cables, not just for the speakers, but throughout the system. But while they demand space behind them, they also need to be vertical, and firing almost exactly straight ahead, which allows them to line up with the room, and somehow makes them less obtrusive. Finish, once of the 'anything you like' school, is now confined to mat lacquer and a range of three wood veneers. Quality is absolutely superb. Despite the relatively low efficiency, the JA30's had no problems driving the Audioplans, and I got similarly good results from the Lavardin II. I didn't get to try the Illi's bi-amped, but the II's used to love it.

If you want an instant introduction to what these speakers are all about, I can't think of a better place to start than the Analogue Audio Association record of the Dvorak *String Quintet in G Major Op. 77* (Edition Phoenix EPH 02). This vibrant and immediate recording should flow seamlessly from the grumbling double bass to the violins' upper register. With the Kontrasts there is no discontinuity in the musical range, nothing to suggest a crossover point or the fact that the sound comes from two distinct drivers. Each instrument is precisely positioned on a shallow arc, behind and beyond the speakers. The recorded acoustic is clearly defined in space, and as if to allow for the near field listening position, slightly smaller than normal. The effect is immediate and at the same time intimate.

It was the Kontrast's that first made me realise that a correctly proportioned and defined soundstage is a prime indicator that a speaker has got all its ducks in a row. You really need to be coherent if you are going to get the image right. Get it wrong and you either don't get an image at all, or it gets all bent out of shape. It's all to do with the controlled

dispersal of energy. If the cabinet allows resonances to build within its structure, those modes will suck energy from one frequency, and release it at another frequency, and later than it should be. The result will be to slur musical information, both in positional and



temporal terms. Sometimes people think that the Kontrasts have no stage width. That's because they give you hard side walls, rather than simply allowing the sound stage to fade out at the edges. They also have greater than average depth, allowing you to see and hear the rear wall. This kind of spatial

precision is so unusual that it actually throws people.

Getting back to the Dvorak, there is absolutely no confusion between the various instruments, the speakers getting the character of the viola spot on, never losing it amongst the violins.

The instrumental interplay which is, after all, the whole point of the piece, is full of poise - dashing when it needs to be, restrained and understated where appropriate. The end result is an almost perfect balance, the showy violins underpinned by the solid foundation of bass and cello, the development by the middle three clear and purposeful. The music simply bounds along, always on track and never becoming aimless.

The same is true of the Klimo disc *Italianische Violinmusik 1600 - 1750* (Edition Open Window OW 002).

The Kontrasts allow you to hear right into the music. The harpsichord is a vibrant buzzing box, full of complexity, and the bowing on the violin and cello is so full of energy as to be almost physically apparent. But don't get the idea that the Audioplans will only play small scale classical music recorded on audiophile labels. These recordings stretch the performance envelope of the speakers in terms of low level information, tonal neutrality and harmonic accuracy (in all of which fields they excel), but they do big and bad as well. Take 'Someday' from the Steve Earle album *Guitar Town* (MCA MCF 3335). The opening guitar chords have real attack as the plectrum bites the strings, even though the playing is deliberately reticent. The blurring interruption of the first electric jag comes as quite a shock, rude and raw. And so it goes, each layer adding to the track, creating an undulating yet carefully sculpted whole. You only have to listen to the piano cascade that balances the vocal ion the chorus to understand just ▶

► how much care has gone into the track. The Kontrasts trace the music's dynamic density effortlessly, giving it just the right punch in just the right places. Let the arm run on into track two ('Think It Over'), and the speakers are just as comfortable with the two dimensional dynamics of this Holly pastiche.

The Alto re-pressing of John Lee Hooker's *Real Folk Blues* (Alto AA07) really lets a system hit its stride. The opening track, 'Let's Go Out Tonight' rolls along at quite a clip, and the Audioplans provide plenty of energy. The insistent guitar, stage left, and the hand hit tambourine, stage right, lock in the rhythm, and everything else just flows. The slightly slurred lyric is easily understood, and the guitar breaks are just out of this world. You listen to a track like this and you realise where the Stones came from (and just where they lost it!). It's not a hi-fi recording; limited deep bass, artificial staging and a dodgy piano. But it's great music, and the Kontrasts tell you just that. It's also just the kind of up-beat/off-beat kind of rhythm that gives polite speakers indigestion, but the Audioplans keep everything intact and where it should be.

On really big stuff like the Reiner *Scheherazade* (RCA LSC-2446), the timing and stability stay locked in place. The Oboe solo at the start of the second movement is held beautifully in space, as is the pizzicato violin. And they remain there, even as the music builds. The first massed violin entry reveals the players arrayed in a row, slanting across, outside and behind the left hand speaker. The plucked bass floats, its definition limited only by the capabilities of the JA30's in the nether regions (this is one area where the IT really does excel). The music's overall pace and that inevitable sense of momentum as each wave crashes, building to the looming crescendo,

is perfectly preserved, even down to a triangle, separated in space from the musical maelstrom of the finale.

As a musical communicator, the Audioplans have few peers, effortlessly retaining the sense of a piece, as well as moulding to its scale. They are rhythmically coherent, and dynamically



expressive.

Are they, then, perfect? No. They have a number of failings. They have a limited loudness capability compared to larger systems, and although the AeroGel driver has improved their transparency and low-level dynamics, wider jumps are still slightly constricted. They don't reach a level and stop getting any louder, they simply scale

down the range as a whole. Their bass, whilst deep considering their cabinet size, doesn't really plumb the depths, and their extreme treble could use a shade more air. So no, they aren't a perfect loudspeaker. But like the Diva, they may well approach a perfect compromise.

They combine superb tonal, musical and rhythmic coherence with dynamic discrimination which belies their moderate efficiency. They do it in a beautifully finished and domestically low impact enclosure. Their natural, unforced presentation means that you can listen to them for hours. As a way of enjoying music at home, a carefully set-up pair of Kontrasts is a hard act to beat.



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Drive units -	
Tweeter	28mm hand doped fabric dome
Bass-mid	170mm AeroGel sandwich
Efficiency	88dB/w
Impedance	80hms
Bass Extension	-3dB@38Hz
Dimensions (WxHxD)	208x970x310 mm
Finishes	Black or White Structured Lacquer Black or Natural Ash Cherry Apricot
Floor Coupling	Spikes or Polymer Pucks
Price	DM8400 -DM9600 (£1 = approx. DM3)

Manufacturer:

Audioplan
Goethestrasse 27
D-76316 Maisch
Germany
Tel. (49)(0)7246-1751
Fax (49)(0)7246-5254
E-mail audioplan@t-online
Web www.audioplan.de



Kochel K300 Loudspeaker

by Chris Binns

One of the more endearing aspects of the audio industry is the sheer diversity of available product. Scratch the surface, and there appears to be nothing but black boxes and two-way loud speakers in wood veneer cabinets. Go a little deeper, and thankfully, more interesting items appear, until eventually you discover the existence of the strata that contains highly individual, imaginative and sometimes eccentric designs, surviving in their own little niche markets.

You can interpret this any way you like, but amongst these murky depths, passions run deep. They have to, as we are now so far away from commercial reality that they remain the only possible driving force behind many products. Every now and again something emerges and attempts to burrow its way to the surface, presenting us with a taste of hi-fi extremism in the real world. And you don't get much more extreme than the Kochel K300. In case you hadn't guessed, it's a horn. There. I've said it. Few loud speaker design concepts provoke so much controversy and argument. Maybe I am being unfair, but try taking a pair home and see what happens. So what's the problem? Horn loudspeakers are big. They have to be - that's how they work. They have also been tainted with prejudice. Exposure to PA systems and badly engineered product has left people with the impression that they always sound coloured and harsh.

So what is the attraction? What makes people want a loud speaker that

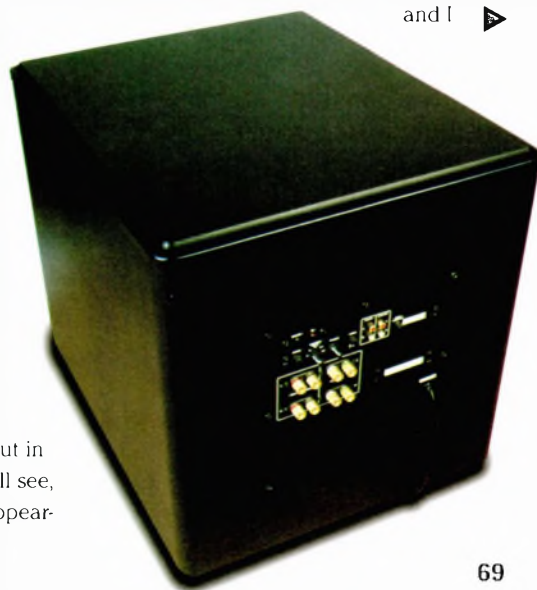
rates, say, zero on the domestic acceptability scale, where the average box speaker could score an eight? In a word, sensitivity. Horn speakers as a breed can be incredibly efficient compared to conventional box designs. Hence their popularity for PA systems. Where volume is your prime concern, and an extra 3 dB equates to a doubling of amplifier power, horn speakers begin to make considerable sense. I'm sure that a lot of people's prejudice stems from hearing PA systems where a little coloration is unimportant compared to the ability to knock people to the ground at a thousand paces. And that's inside the beer tent. Turn that on its head, and in a domestic system suddenly you can enjoy the benefits of tiny little amps and still obtain sensible levels. And, as any horn enthusiast will tell you, addictive detail, speed, dynamics and sheer scale as well.

Having filled in the background, let's talk about the Kochels. They are the brainchild of one Mr P Y Park, a man who clearly believes that the only way of reproducing the full dynamics of a musical performance is with a horn loud speaker. Yes they are BIG, wife approval does not enter the equation, because if she does throw you out you could move into one of the Kochels. They are certainly not pretty, but in a large room (which, as we will see, they need) they assume the appear-

ance of rather austere 1930's furniture, particularly as this pair were finished in an exemplary mahogany veneer. Designed and built in Korea, they are nicely put together and are supplied with a grille to stop domestic pets getting lost inside.

As far as horns go, 97dB is not especially sensitive, however, amplifiers with a nominal 10 watts had no trouble in blowing my brains out when I so desired. The bass unit is loaded from the rear, while the mid and top units are compression drivers similar in type to those seen in professional equipment. The rear panel sports a single pair of terminals, which as I discovered later was something of a blessing

I've never had a pair of horn speakers at home so there was a certain amount of excitement at their impending arrival. Translate; I have no neighbours, and I



▶ was fully intending to behave badly at the first opportunity. Horn speakers go loud, don't they? I was already lining up CD's and records with the evil intent of upsetting the environment. And I did. Even at moderate levels there was a hardness to the sound that was potentially lethal, and at higher levels threatened to clear the surrounding area of anything showing signs of life. After a couple of hours of experimentation with cables and equipment I took pity on the sheep in the neighbouring field, and concluded there must be a problem. Several faxes later, it came to light that these speakers had been re-wired to bring them into line with current production. I checked the internal wiring against a schematic diagram and found that the tweeters had been wired out of phase. In defence of the manufacturers this was a one off problem and will not be encountered in future production models. Believe me, you do not know what 'out of phase' means until you have experienced the effect with horn speakers.

Huge sighs of relief! The speakers now wired correctly, I could begin listening properly. With things sounding far more civilised, my first impressions were of a highly articulate loud speaker, somewhat lacking in extreme bass. What there was at the bottom-end was fast, controlled and dynamic, with tremor

dous slam, but with next to nothing below 60 Hz or so. That's about the extension you get out of an LS3/5a! Fair enough. With proper horn loading this is what you'd expect from a cabinet this size, but it does cause a jarring visual discontinuity. What my eyes told me did not correlate with what I heard; huge loud speaker but no bass. Did I mention that the importers also supplied a sub-woofer? The K250S is designed to supplement the K300's below their cut-off frequency. The idea of integrating any kind of sub-bass unit with a horn system struck me as almost impossible, but due to the very sharp roll-off of the main units, the task is made a little easier. Careful experimentation with level and turn-over settings resulted in just enough extra weight at the bottom end.

Any more and you started to notice a discontinuity. Set just so, it provided enough additional output for the system to approach full range. Only you can decide the importance of that extra octave.

My first misconception was soon corrected. Although they do go loud (and how!), a few days listening got that out of the system, and I started to realise that this is not really where they're at. What the Kochels offer you is the potential to handle the full dynamic range of the music. Once I got over the initial excitement of being able to play music at ear splitting levels, and the volume returned to something nearing nor-

mality, I began to appreciate their real strength; the ability to play music without compressing the signal, confident in their ability to respond to even the largest dynamic demands. They excel at portraying detail and musical dynamics. Small-scale acoustic instruments were presented with the utmost clarity, almost as if you were examining them through a magnifying glass. As time passed I felt an intimacy with the presentation of instruments and voices that I have rarely encountered with other loud speakers.

This could prove fascinating, and occasionally disturbing. The very attributes that laid bare musical detail also exposed differences in, for example cabling, and of course ancillary equipment. So, as I mentioned earlier, it was a relief not to have tri-wiring capability as things could have got very complicated. One of the attractions of horn speakers is that they offer, at least on paper, compatibility with lower powered amplification. As we all know, single ended triodes are highly fashionable at the moment, and would seem to be the obvious partners for the Kochels. I tried several, these included the Wavac 811 (also imported by Wollaton Audio), the Unison Research Simply Two. I also used the solid state Pass Labs Aleph 3, whose praises I sung in the last issue. They all sounded very "nice". But.... The Kochels positively raced ahead - these speakers are extremely fast. Unless the amplification can keep up, the speakers will ruthlessly expose their shortcomings. To put it another way, the loud speakers were exposing the fact that these amplifiers have a tendency to sound sluggish and rounded.

The majority of listening was done with either my 250 W/ch Primary valve mono-blocks or the Lavardin IT (see last issue), either of which might seem an unfashionable partner, but they both seemed to provide the speakers with exactly what they needed; speed, control and clarity. The wider you can ▶



► open the electronic window the better. I know that every loud speaker manufacturer would describe their product as ruthlessly revealing, but I can honestly say that the Kochels are in a different league. The impact, and immediacy of their musical presentation can sometimes feel as if it is pinning you to your seat. Not in volume terms you understand, but just with the sheer precision of the delivery.

Contrary to popular belief horn loudspeakers can image. Well, at least these can! They were able to position instruments and voices precisely, although they never managed the trick of disappearing in the way that the best small speakers can. Even with your eyes closed, you could never ignore the Kochel's presence. The sound is always focused on you, the listener, and consequently they sometimes don't develop the scale that you would expect from such a large cabinet. It's almost as if the musical event connects so directly to you, that it tries to happen in your room. Great if it's a four-piece rock band, not so clever when it involves 120 musicians. To be fair, I suspect that this probably indicates that they could do with a bit more space, and I sometimes felt that I was listening a little too close (4 metres).

Playing different types of music on the Kochels was always an interesting experience. As time went on, I found myself gravitating toward small-scale orchestral work and marvelling at the finely etched detail they produced. Every now and again the desire to be

uncivilised would surface, and I would keep the lodgers awake by playing embarrassingly old rock music just to remind myself of what it's all about. But by and large as I have said before, the strength of this loudspeaker lies not so much with their head-banging qualities, but with natural presentation. Coloured? No I don't think so. Aggressive? Not if you are prepared to invest the time and consideration that any loud speaker at this price level should demand, particularly regarding the finer points of system tuning. My time with the Kochels was never less than interesting, albeit a little frustrating. They never did what my pre-conceptions predicted. They worked with all the wrong things, and simply spat out the stuff they were supposed to like. Which meant that realising their potential

was a long and tortuous learning curve. Likewise, as you have probably gathered, I found their strengths in the areas I least suspected.

For a small minority, horn speakers represent the only way of listening to music. For others, the mere mention of them provokes at best a pained expression, and at worst downright disgust. But the Kochels succeed in bridging the gap between the extremes of horn advocacy and the low-colouration school. The very real shortcomings of so many horn speakers are not apparent with the K300's, providing you take the necessary care

over set-up. P Y Park has caged the beast, without destroying its spirit. Ignore their size(!) and think of them as the most immediate and tactile little speaker you've ever heard, and you'll be a long way toward appreciating their considerable strengths. If you have an environment large enough to accommodate them, both sonically and visually, you should certainly listen to them. This really is the perfect horn primer. ►+



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Kochel K300	
Product Type:	Large floor-standing speaker
Enclosure Type:	Three-way, folded horn
Floor Coupling:	Adjustable gold plated brass cones
Driver Types:	HF - Slot horn MF - Front loaded compression driver LF - 12" Doped paper cone
Frequency Response:	60Hz - 20kHz
Impedance:	8 Ohms
Drive Characteristic:	Easy
Efficiency:	97dB/W
Power Handling:	100W (200W peak)
Dimensions (WxHxD):	420 x 1450 x 525mm
Weight:	63kg each
Finishes Available:	Wood Grain or Black Vinyl (£7450) Sapele, Oak or Black Ash veneer (£8950) Cherry or Rosewood veneer (£9950)
Price:	As above.
K250S Sub-woofer:	Wood Grain or Black Vinyl (£1995)
Delivery:	Built to order. One month lead time.

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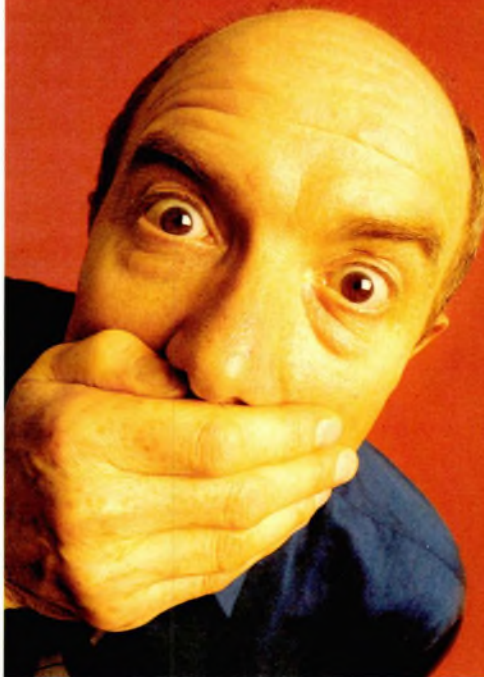
Roy Gregory AQ Feb 98

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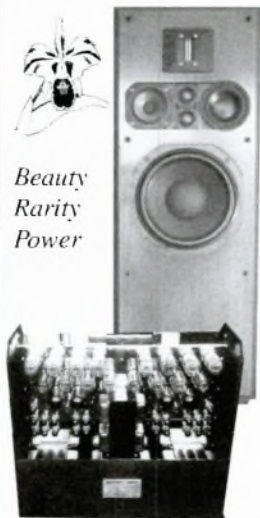
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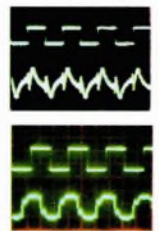
If we had just stopped there - made a 4 way system from premium quality drivers, it would be a good 'speaker but it would not have been a great one. You must remember the other criterion, the one nobody mentions, the *PHASE RESPONSE*. Without a good phase response, you will always be conscious that you are listening to electronic equipment and you can do better, as we hope to show you.

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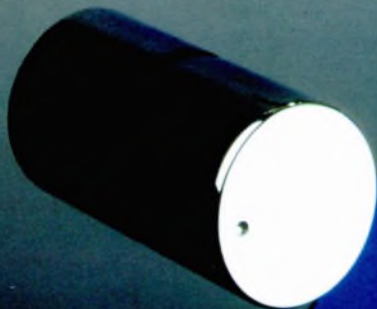
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LEFT
BALANCE

PRE
EQ

VOLUME
LEFT
VOLUME
RIGHT



Klimo Merlin Pre-amp

by Chris Binns

Pre-amps just aren't what they used to be. I'm not being flippant you understand, but technological progression has stripped them considerably of their function, and in extreme cases, dispensed with them altogether. Just consider the passive pre-amp, which is a contradiction in terms, consisting as it does in most cases of just a switch and a potentiometer (it cannot amplify the input signal). Twenty years ago, a description of the *modus operandi* for a pre-amplifier might have read thus: (take a deep breath) a device for accepting a range of varying signal inputs and amplifying them all to the same level to pass on to a power amplifier, while providing control over volume, tone and channel selection, and in some cases filter functions. As time passed, the 'less is more' philosophy came to the fore and tone controls, filters et al, very quickly became *personae non-gratae*. This was fair enough since the assumption was that your signal source was a) good enough b) not to be tampered with anyway.

Once CD began to claim dominance as the most popular medium for carrying music, a lot of pre-amp manufacturers saw no commercial reason for continuing to include a phono stage in their designs. This was on the basis that to many customers the stage was superfluous, and in component terms it could easily take up to two-

thirds of the budget per unit. As the hi-fi fraternity seemed to be split in two different directions - the vinyl junkies and the more mainstream CD based population - specialist stand-alone phono to line stages quickly appeared. In many ways this approach made good marketing sense. People obviously

didn't want to pay for something they were not going to use, but if they were into vinyl the chances are



that they took it seriously, and consequently benefited from the availability of a range of specifically designed high quality phono stages. It also made good engineering sense because, due to the low level output of the cartridges and their need for equalisation, the 'Phono' setting was always the odd one out on the input selector.

Coming up to date, it seems to me that vinyl replay has started to claw its way back into the mainstream, emerging from the specialist domain to

which it was once consigned, (that's mud in your eye for all those who ten years ago were stating categorically that vinyl was dead). So, you now want to play records as well as CD's but you don't want the inconvenience, multiple boxes and probable expense of an outboard phono stage. Don't worry too much; it's still possible to find a sensibly priced one box pre-amp with a phono stage. Included in this select range of units - if you haven't already guessed - is The Klimo Merlin.

To my eyes, the Klimo is beautiful. It makes something of a design statement, having both elegance and simplicity without appearing too minimalist. Sure, there are plenty of plain black boxes around that can also make this claim, but very few would have what I call a visual identity. The Klimo's lines struck me as being vaguely reminiscent of classic post-war audio units by companies such as Braun. The main case work of the Merlin consists of a genuine piano black lacquered wooden frame, and a plate glass top which sits clear by about 5mm to provide airflow from the perforated base. The glass top also carries the legends for control orientation, leaving the front panel blank except for the controls and the on/off indicator. And what an indicator. I'm going to show my age here, but anyone who spent part of their youth trawling the short waves with old radios, amazed at the plethora of different voices and languages produced by every

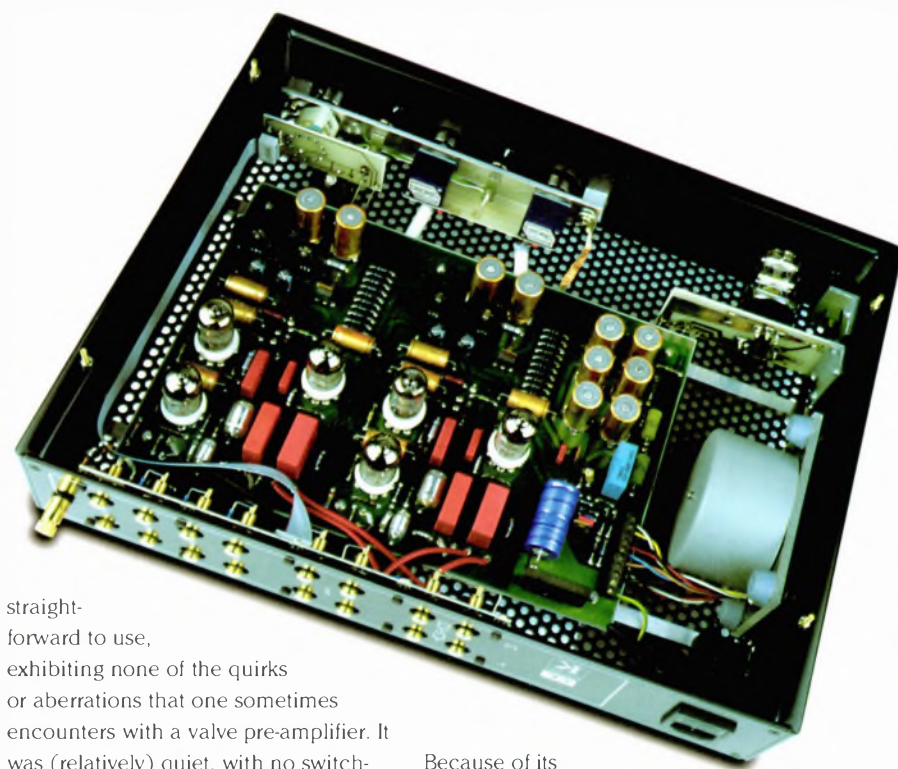
▶ twitch of the dial, will instantly recognise this for what it is; a magic eye. For those who don't know, these devices were commonly used as signal indicators on radios and tape recorders from the war years onwards. Sheer nostalgia. The Merlin's indicator glows a dull green after a few seconds, give it a full minute and it brightens into four segments to show that the unit is in full operational mode.

Internally, the Klimo is well constructed. All components bar the controls, input connections and transformer are mounted on one substantial printed circuit board. Wiring is minimal, with the input switching conducted via a series of high quality reed-relays situated next to the phono sockets. Component quality is high, the circuit being predominantly dual mono using three selected valves per channel, two of which comprise the phono input, cathode-coupled to the line stage. The output of the pre-amp is also a cathode follower, giving a relatively low output impedance and therefore a degree of immunity to high frequency roll-off with long / high capacitance cables.

The power supply offers individually regulated HT and filament rails to each stage and, reflecting consistent attention to detail, the encapsulated mains transformer is mounted on a mechanically isolated plate of acrylic, away from the sensitive areas of the circuit. Build quality is good throughout – it has to be if

you're going to put it all on display by using a glass lid.

In operation the Merlin proved



straight-forward to use, exhibiting none of the quirks or aberrations that one sometimes encounters with a valve pre-amplifier. It was (relatively) quiet, with no switching thumps or nasty noises and for this I was extremely grateful, particularly when using large power amplifiers after pub hours. I say relatively quiet because the phono input is essentially designed for moving magnet cartridges. One could just about get away with a moving coil type of healthy output (possibly a Koetsu or such) but anything less and the noise would start to become obtrusive. This is only to be expected when fighting against one of the poorer properties inherent in thermionic valves – they are noisy.

As I was not sure how much this unit had been used, I let it run in the background for a couple of a week or so, without taking too much notice of how it sounded. When it came to serious listening, my first impressions were of a lively, well balanced and inviting sound, with plenty of depth to the sound stage.

The Merlin subsequently formed the basis of my main system for about three weeks while various cartridges and power amplifiers changed around it.

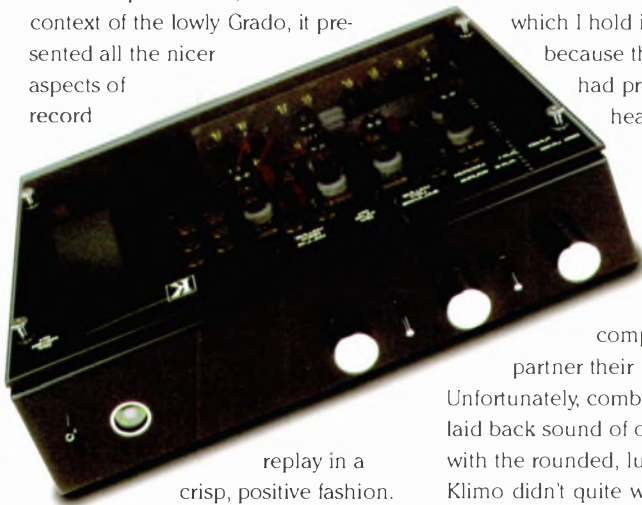
Because of its higher output, a Roksan Shiraz was substituted for my usual cartridge, and although this sounded great, I think it represented the border line for acceptable noise performance. I ended up using a Grado Prestige Black (£50), altogether a more comfortable match. The sound through the phono stage seemed to be consistent with what I heard from the line stages, leaving no doubt that it had been engineered to a high standard. It's nice to know that Mr. Klimo takes his vinyl seriously. There again, he is president of the German Analogue Audio Association.

When it came to partnering the Merlin with power amplifiers, I tried quite a few. Once I began to get more of an idea of the character of sound that it produced, I was led to some interesting combinations. More vintage designs, such as the Radford STA 25 III, gave an almost over rich, rather ill-defined sound, still with great depth but badly lacking in definition and timing. Likewise, the little Aleph 3 sounded just too soggy and lacked any authority. Bigger valve power amps, such as the Audio research D115 and the Primary 250 watt units, proved to be far happier ▶



► companions – the warmth and friendliness of the Klimo complimenting the dynamics of the bigger amplifiers. Consequently these partnerships became firm favourites for listening to large scale orchestral works such as a Mahler or Shostakovich symphony, but there was still a shadow of doubt about the 'precision' of the sound with rock music.

Acoustic instruments had a good sense of realism with the Merlin. String tones were vibrant and harmonically accurate, while the ambience of the recording venue was well defined. Take the Cesar Franck *Violin Sonatas* (Philips LP 416:157-1), where the slightly bright reflections from the walls of the recording venue are clearly apparent. This sense of the music's environment helps recreate the atmosphere of the recording, making for far more enjoyable listening. The Klimo clearly stated the differences between vinyl and CD reproduction, and even in the context of the lowly Grado, it presented all the nicer aspects of record



replay in a crisp, positive fashion. Surface noise and scratches were unobtrusive, never distracting from the musical flow. It's not that there's anything wrong with the line stages, it's just that comparison really highlights the quality of the moving magnet stage. (Incidentally, the Klimo is available as a line only model, and at a considerable saving.)

More out of curiosity than anything else, I tried using a Rotel RB 971 which

I had to hand. Although modestly priced, the Rotel is a dynamic and taut performer. Providing it's not driving silly loudspeaker loads it can handle complex rhythms with pace and clarity. In the illustrious company of the Merlin it sounded great. The trade-off between the Rotel's slightly hard, bland performance (compared to expensive valve power amps) and the slightly soft but very colourful Klimo was a real pleasure to listen to. And while it isn't necessarily a combination I'd recommend, it shows exactly how the Klimo counteracts the rather dry and constricted effect of a lot of transistor power amps. Not unlike the SP8 / Krell KSA50 combination which did so much to rehabilitate valve pre-amps, the Klimo breathes life into a world of control, albeit at the cost of some bass slam.

Having rung the changes, I was left impressed by the Merlin's performance, but also a little disappointed. Not

because of its musical capabilities, which I hold in high regard, but because this beautiful box had promised to be a heaven sent solution for the many people who use vintage valve power amplification but cannot find a fully fledged, competent pre-amp to partner their units.

Unfortunately, combining the typically laid back sound of older valve amps with the rounded, lush sound of the Klimo didn't quite work. Too much of a good thing to these ears.

But let me put this in context. The Klimo is a great pre-amplifier and the above comments are only intended to enlighten you as to its compatibility with different amps. It's better suited to jazz, classical and acoustic music than driving rock with slam-dunk dynamics. Its character tends towards the traditional, being a little soft and lacking the finely etched detail of the better

solid state designs. Partnering it with a similar sounding power amp takes the tendency too far. BUT, when used with more compatible units, it is highly musical and easy to listen to. The sound is engaging and lively, with a brilliant array of tonal shades. It never became obvious or got in the way and, whatever it was partnered with, the Merlin always proved highly enjoyable. In fact, it did everything that brought valve pre-amps back into fashion. With careful choice of cartridge and power amplifier, the Klimo is capable of wonderful performance. Its fuss free, one box operation is an added bonus which, at the price, makes it something of a find.

And those looks.....



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Valve Complement:	4 x ECC88, 2 x ECC808
Inputs:	Phono (MM) and 4 Line
Phono Input Sensitivity:	1mV
Phono Overload Voltage:	350mV
Overall Gain (phono):	61dB
Outputs:	2 Main and 1 Tape
Output Impedance:	124 Ohms
Maximum Output:	25 Volts
Dimensions (WxHxD):	430 x 120 x 300mm
Weight:	12 kg
Price:	DM4995 (Line Only - DM3200) Currently £1 = approx. DM3

Manufacturer:

Dipl.Ing.D.Klimo Gmbh
Pestalozzistrasse 5
D 72762 Reutlingen
Germany
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ADVANTAGE

Line 4

Advantage I 200 - Integrated Amplifier -

by Roy Gregory

In a world where marketing is king and style consistently triumphs over substance, hype has become the norm, and 'mere' competence has become a dirty word. And now that every product has to be a stellar performer, the good all-rounder has fallen out of fashion too. And yet, ironically, at the same time domestic pressure has created a market for a high quality, one box solution to amplification. The answer has been a flood of expensive line-only integrated amps, started by Krell, and sustained by the likes of Rowland Research, c-j, Gryphon and even Sutherland. But now the established brands are facing competition from the likes of Plinius from New Zealand, and Advantage from Sweden, who have simultaneously cut the cost of admission and upped the ante.

The Advantage I 200 amplifier is aggressively priced at £1795, and whilst it may take minimalist styling to its logical extreme, the amplifier itself doesn't exactly break any conceptual molds. Operationally however, it's a different story, the unit operating from a beautifully executed remote control handset which gives the user access to the comprehensive range of input and configuration options (see side bar). Under the lid is a beefy and load tolerant 120 w/ch Class A/B amplifier with full on-board protection circuitry. All those options are just the ticket to keep you occupied whilst the Advantage warms up. It's sound from cold is most politely described as

ordinary, and it takes at least a couple of days to come on song. Then you'd better watch out.

The I 200 is all about control. Out of the box it sounds as tight as an air jacked wheel nut, but give it time and it begins to stretch itself and take a few deep breaths. What develops is a musically capable and totally unflappable performer; an amp that simply gets on with the job; an all-rounder in a world of specialists. And like any good all-rounder, the Advantage offers a set of well balanced virtues. But whilst it doesn't scream its character from the roof tops, it still has its own set of strengths and weaknesses. Most of these have to do with the power necessary to qualify as an all-rounder in the first place. Musically speaking, there's always a price to be paid for excess power, which in turn means that the I 200 is happiest when its considerable reserves are being used to terrorise some small box of lowish efficiency, or drive a system to decent levels. And whilst it's far from sluggish, it doesn't have the agility to compete with low-powered designs driving efficient speakers when it comes to sheer delicacy and really complex rhythms. But give it its head and a trip hammer beat, and it's away.

If you want to hear what I'm

describing, you could do worse than reach for the Chuck Brown and Eva Cassidy duets disc *The Other Side* (Blix St Records G2-10066). Track five is the smoochily languid 'Gee baby, ain't I good to you' and whilst it's nice enough, the Advantage lacks the directness and micro dynamic clarity which really brings these two performers' special chemistry to life. We're talking two people who both

worked together and, perhaps more importantly, trusted and encouraged each other as only an old-timer and first-timer can. Instead it's a little veiled and reticent, almost as if they've only just met. There's no sense of that sixth sense that connects artists who play ▶



Plenty More Beneath The Surface.

If the ideal amplifier is a straight line with gain, then the Advantage I 200 gets pretty close, conceptually at least. This is a black box with gain. A very pretty black box I grant you, but pretty much as featureless as can be. Without a control knob or button in sight, it's fairly obvious that the I 200 can only be operated via its remote handset. What is less obvious is the degree of control that affords.

The back panel offers connections for five single-ended and, unusually, a single balanced input. There's also both a tape and pre-out, along with a single set of loudspeaker binding posts. Other than that you get a switched IEC mains socket and a pair of Comms connections, enabling you to link the I 200 to other Advantage components, such as a CD player and external power amp.

What isn't immediately apparent is that as well as all its normal switching functions, the remote control also allows you to drive an Advantage

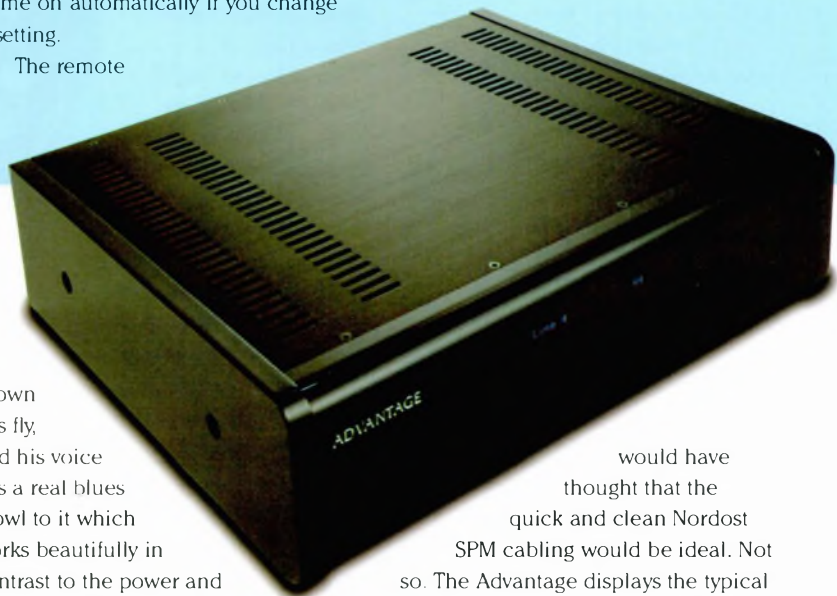
system as a whole, as well as configuring the various inputs. Basically, each input can be individually configured for gain and balance, making it easy to ensure that every source arrives at the same level, thus making those sphincter loosening moments when you inadvertently switch from Phono to CD a thing of the past. It also makes matching the I 200 to an external processor a piece of cake, although Advantage are yet to produce such a product.

In the context of a complete Advantage system, the Comms links allow you to control the system through a single unit, switching the whole lot to standby, automatically switching to a new source as you activate it, and even dimming the displays in sync. But bear in mind that once the displays are off they don't come on automatically if you change a setting.

The remote

handset itself is one of the nicest I've used, being solid without weighing enough to make it a two hand lift. It's nicely laid out, and the buttons have a crisp, positive feel. You won't be left wondering whether you pushed them hard enough. Despite a personal loathing for the things, I soon settled down with the Advantage remote, my only real complaint is the narrowness of its operating window. Why can't companies get this right. If they are going to insist that we use handsets, they might at least ensure that they operate from anywhere within the room.

That aside, it's nice to see a company actually building so many useful and well considered facilities into what is (in terms of the competition) a budget product. Thumbs up to Advantage.



▶ together a lot. And there should be.

Track Six is a complete contrast, the out and out rock belter 'I'll Go Crazy', which comes on like a pile driver. The I 200 gives it all the solid presence you could ask for. Filling out both the band and the arrangement plays straight into the hands of the amp's ability to control and keep things separate but together. The more you give it to get its teeth into, the happier it is. It's never going to be top of the class when it comes to intimacy, or the kind of immediacy that's tailor made for small scale recordings, but its version of keeping a grip on things thankfully doesn't involve crushing the life out of them altogether. Chuck

Brown lets fly, and his voice has a real blues growl to it which works beautifully in contrast to the power and pure control of Eva Cassidy. The band are tight, the arrangement works, and you don't get a brain strain trying to work out why these two people chose to sing this song. It's made for them.

Under the circumstances you

would have thought that the quick and clean Nordost SPM cabling would be ideal. Not so. The Advantage displays the typical tonal bleaching which goes hand in hand with curtailed micro-dynamics and thus harmonics. (Don't panic, like I said, it's actually typical of nearly all affordable high powered solid state designs. You know, that old cost / benefit thing and the price you ▶



► pay...) The I 200 is best used with a cable that doesn't exhibit the slightly hollow upper mid that characterises so many silver plated / teflon insulated conductors (and which adds to that open, fast sound). I opted for Reference Cables monocrystal MS2.15, whose combination of good dynamics, evenly spread harmonics and easy rhythmic flow proved ideal.

Having sorted that out, the Advantage really settled into its stride. Never less than competent, its preference for larger scale works really came into its own on the mainstream classical repertoire. The *Brahms Symphonies* (Boult / LPO / LSO. EMI SLS5009) were handled with aplomb, as was a brief flirtation with Shostakovich (Berglund / BSO. *The Leningrad Symphony* EMI SLS897). Looking to lighten the mood I settled on the Reiner *Pastoral Symphony* (Chesky RC109) and was immediately rewarded with a broad and ultra stable soundstage. Combined with Reiner's discipline, this allowed the music to unfold through each succeeding theme and movement, Beethoven's grasp of structure and his rhythmic solidity playing straight to the I 200's strengths. Each step on the gently rising path to the crescendoes was beautifully differentiated, the resulting climax satisfyingly solid and powerful. Tonally the Advantage errs to the light and lean through the midband, though not

destructively so.

More the difference between the Festival and Wigmore halls than anything more sinister. And it certainly adds to the separation of instruments on complex works or lazy speakers.

But don't go getting the idea that this is a 'classical music' amp. Far from it. I knew Victoria's collection of dance CDs would come into its own one day. The Advantage simply lapped up everything from Sash to Paul Oakenfold, Pete Tong to Robert Miles. Like I said, this amp just loves a trip-hammer beat. The busier the better, just so long as it arrives in slabs. On the kind of rollicking forays beloved of the Fairports, or the fractured rhythms of an Ulla Meinecke, you can trip it up if you really try, but it recovers more gracefully than most, and consequently, the lack of agility is far less intrusive than it might be.

But let's not get too picky here. Once set up, the Advantage I 200 is capable of fuss free delivery of musical enjoyment no matter what you throw at it. It's never less than competent, and on large scale orchestral work it is capable of magnificence out of all proportion with its price. If you live on a diet of exclusively small scale acoustic works, then look elsewhere. But if your tastes are catholic and

include the odd party, you are more interested in music than hi-fi, and you want fit-and-forget, you'll not be disappointed.

The I 200 is an accomplished entry into the two box system market. Add one of the company's equally stylish (or should that be featureless) CD players, and you have the heart of the perfect no-nonsense music system, just the thing for the house proud executive seeking quality relaxation. And the available power means that speakers can be suitably discrete. Is it the last word in hi-fi performance for the dedicated audiophile. Probably not, although its ability to remain unphased despite the indignities thrown at it would probably go some way to compensating for such an owner's wilder flights of fancy. This amplifier is a genuine all-rounder, and offers the ability to build through the range of matching power-amps. A genuine eight out of ten for everything merchant, it's probably the product that Audiolab wish they'd built. ►+

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Input Impedance:	
Single-Ended:	50 kOhms
Balanced:	100 kOhms
Output Impedance:	0.01 Ohms
Power Output:	150 w/ch into 8 Ohms
Bandwidth:	1 Hz - 100 kHz, ±0.2dB
Dimensions (WxHxD):	450 x 130 x 370 mm
Weight:	18 kg
Price:	£1795

Distributor:
Zentek Ltd.
Tel. (44)(0)1892-616383
Fax. (44)(0)1892-547004



Michael
ALBERTO

Michell Stereo Alecto

New and improved?

by Dave Davies

As a long time user of the old Stereo Alecto, in fact I use a bi-amped pair, I was a natural choice to review the new and 'improved' version. Outwardly identical to my amp(s), retaining the highly individual 'potty from hell' look, the guts have been thoroughly revised and Michell claim improvements in all areas, particularly speed and detail retrieval. This sounded promising but a slight warning note sounded somewhere in the dusty cupboards at the back of my mind: The original Alecto is in my opinion a rather special and magical beast, at least when it's connected to the right accompanying kit. So before getting into the review proper, I think it would be useful to consider just why it is that I rate the older amps so highly.

My speakers are Ruark Paladins, an unjustly maligned (and no longer in production) speaker, that when properly matched can produce an almost panel like sound that on acoustic material, and with vocals in particular, is very beguiling. In common with any well-balanced speaker, matching is critical, and having tried everything from small Meridian amps (close, but no cigar) to the big Meridian 557 (not even in the same fairground and barely worth a chocolate cigarette), the Stereo Alecto immediately did the trick. It brought the Ruarks alive. The main quality was a valve-like presence to vocals, and whilst there was a slight



softness to the treble and bass extremes, the amp produced an open and airy soundstage. Seeming much more powerful than its predecessors, it created a real sense of dynamic clout.

It's hardly surprising that the amp demonstrated this valve-like tendency since conceptually it was inspired by the legendary Leak Stereo 20, a '60's classic that is still sought after today. Inspired in terms of its musical performance rather than its circuitry you understand. The 20 had that magical combination of just enough power to drive most contemporary speakers, and few enough output devices to have the midrange agility and dynamics to make really enjoyable music. You know how it is when after many years of searching and countless 'near misses', you finally hit on a product that is simply right. One that allows

music to be reproduced in a way that'll have you leaving record sleeves and CD cases littering the floor as another brief listening session turns into a four-hour journey of re-discovery through. That's the Leak. It's also the Stereo Alecto. My only mild concern after some months of use was that I felt that the Paladins could do with a little more control, particularly at the bottom end where they tend to the vague and woolly if not tightly gripped. Since I was sure that this was the amp for me, the simple solution (at least it seemed simple when Roy suggested it to me), was to add another Alecto to bi-amp the system. Voila: A small overdraft enhancement and sheer happiness. Without losing any of the magical qualities, the bottom end was now better controlled with the added bonus of further improvements in staging, dynamics and detail retrieval. Vocals were if anything even better, full, rounded and three-dimensional, and the sheer naturalness of acoustic instruments was a delight.

Having now lived happily with these amps for over three years, the thought of a totally revised model brought an inevitable sense of trepidation. Would this be another special product where the baby was slung out with the bath water at update time? Even though the amp was from the same designer (Graham Fowler of Trichord Research), could he manage a repeat performance having



▶ already (in my highly satisfied and therefore slightly biased opinion), painted a good part of the Sistine Chapel ceiling with the original design?

The new amp, although it looks identical, is a completely novel design, and part of Michell's drive to re-vamp their entire range of electronics in order to maintain their status as affordable, but truly high-end products. The new Stereo Alecto is intended to offer improvements in all areas at (approximately) the same price as the original amp. Key to the new design, and replacing the original Hitachi devices, are output devices from Exicon. Design principally for the pro-audio market, these mosfets are intended to radically improve the 'grip' and speed of the amp.

Since I had but one new amp to play with, it was a case of back to the single, bi-wired stereo set-up to allow proper comparison. Re-wiring the system to connect the new amp brought about an immediate criticism. A little re-tooling of the casework could make it a lot more user-friendly and flexible: the heat sink fins run across the entire back of the unit with the speaker terminal block cut into the centre. This provides adequate space to single wire any cables, but installing a bi-wire set of my fairly chunky Audio-plan LS6 is another matter. New and richly descriptive Celtic expressions were brought into play before a set was safely installed without fear of immediate shorting. And whilst this hasn't changed from the original design, time had allowed the painful memories to fade. By simply removing the heat sink fins above the terminal block, much better, and importantly, much safer access would

be possible. I know it wouldn't be quite so pretty to look at, but think of the benefits to my blood pressure.

Hooked up initially to my Meridian 501 pre-amp/Michell ISO/ Hera, I selected a few favourites and settled down for a quick pre-run-in listen. First impressions were that Michell were spot-on about speed. If my older Alecto



is an Alpha GTV, then the new Alecto belongs at Silverstone. This, and the much improved resolution were immediately apparent. Equally apparent was the loss of midrange, at least at this somewhat premature 'fresh out of the box' stage. Clearly a period of run-in was required and after extensive casual listening, coupled with playing CDs on repeat whenever we left the house, I settled in for a serious session.

As expected, the mechanical constriction that had been clamped around the mid-band pre-run-in had now disappeared. Whilst vocals didn't have quite the life and dimensional presence that the old amp demonstrated, everything was much more even-handed. You didn't get that sense of mid-range uber alles. I suspect that this amp is simply more accurate whilst the older amp demonstrated a degree of (very beguiling) voicing.

The speed was still very much in evidence. Steve Earle's all acoustic *Tain a Comin'* opens with 'Mystery ▶

Michell Orca - First Impressions

Unlike the revised Stereo Alecto, the Orca is a totally new design looking quite different from the old Argo. First impressions on unpacking the beast are that Michell have once again produced a really distinctive design. With curved ends, the gloss black acrylic fascia rises to form an apex with the centre 4cm or so higher than the ends. Centrally located is a massive volume silver fronted volume control flanked by source and input selectors. These give a faint impression of hubcaps adding to the distinctiveness of the design. The casing is in yacht grade stainless steel, which looks and feels superb. Silky smooth in operation the controls are a big improvement over the slightly wobbly Argo versions.

Also totally new is the power supply. Gone is the massive 'big toroid in a box' Hera to be replaced by a smaller and more sophisticated beast again cased in stainless steel. Great attention has been paid to filtering and hf noise reduction in the design of this this supply. Impecunious purchasers do however have the option to purchase the Orca for approximately £400 less than the full purchase price with a simple off-the-shelf in-line transformer. This will obviously compromise performance but will provide a simple upgrade. Disregarding this cheapo option, I went straight for the full monty.

Keeping the new Alecto in the system, the Orca was rapidly plugged in, fired up and Alternate Blues which I'd used to evaluate the Alecto bunged on the Gyrodec. Every improvement that the new Alecto had brought about was now enhanced, and then some. Staging gained in height, width and depth and the performers became markedly more three-dimensional. Both information retrieval and speed were further enhanced. Switching to CD, the performance was still excellent, albeit not up to LP levels. Michell will shortly be introducing a brand new and much improved replacement for the ISO, and we'll look at that along with the Orca, in much greater depth in a later issue.

One other special touch: with the Orca you get the most sensuous little remote volume I've ever used. It's a small black aluminium "Smartie" that fits neatly into the palm of your hand. As sculptural as it is functional, it's a device I actually enjoy using, unlike most remotes that end up gathering dust down the side of the sofa.

▶ Train Part II', the attack of fingers moving over strings as they're strummed at manicure threatening speed is palpable. Throughout this superbly recorded album the tone and character of each instrument, whether it's guitar, fiddle, mandolin, or acoustic bass, is both identifiable and full of character. The bass, because it's better defined and tighter, excites room resonances (where are those BassTunes?) in a way that is much more akin to the real thing than the slightly soft and bloomy version I'd become used to with the older amp. The gruff edge to Earle's voice is also caught in a way that allows that crucial bit more expression to come across, making the whole performance absolutely riveting.

And the improved broad band resolution was there regardless. A recently acquired Japanese pressing of the Kenny Burrell/ Gil Evans LP *Guitar Forms* took on new life. Take 'Lotus Land'. Pretty impressive stuff with the original amp, with plenty of crisp drum rolls, castanets, horns with real weight and presence, forming a backdrop to Burrell's Spanish flavoured guitar work. With the new amp the whole piece was simply more real, more involving and more musically convincing than the original. Similarly, on the track 'Terrace Theme' with its slinky rhythms and loping bass, the newly expansive sound-stage was immediately obvious. Bongo's that had sat firmly around the left speaker were now a couple of feet outside it. Each element of the drum kit was now more clearly defined, and the relationship between Burrell and the band took on the 'proper' proportions.

Moving to a treasured first pressing of Borodin's *Fololtsian Dances* with Kubelik and the VPO, the chorus is spread in a natural arc between the speakers and there's much clearer definition between the separate voices that make up the choir. There was a much greater sense of group, a collection of individuals acting as a



whole. String tone is also more natural, with much more clearly defined separation between the various instruments. And this definition holds rock-steady during crescendos, with no card-house collapse to mar the integrity of the performance.

On the Clark Terry, Freddie Hubbard, Dizzy Gillespie and friends *Alternate Blues* album, Terry's muted trumpet is more precisely defined with less 'fizz' than with the old Alecto, and Bobby Durhams cymbals have a more natural hiss and decay. Ray Brown's plucked bass strings carry more weight, and you are more aware of the body of the instrument. To be honest, this is a performance that would get you moving even if it was played with a chipped porcupine quill on a Dansette, but the enhanced pleasure that the new Alecto brings are a joy.

You've probably gathered by now that I like the new Alecto. It is yet to develop the same magic as the old amp (give it time) but it already does much more, more accurately and with greater finesse, and as such offers another and more powerful magic

of it's own. From album to album, it enhanced my listening pleasure, helping to give greater insight to recordings and performances, and that surely is what it's all about. And for me there's an additional fringe benefit: My Paladins are now held in a vice-like authoritative grip with but a single Stereo Alecto. Like all the best power amps it does it with a sense of ease and unflappability. And since Michell can upgrade older amps to the new specification via a simple change of board I'm left with one simple problem. I'm going to upgrade an amp but will have one spare. Does anyone out there want a much loved, low mileage, bodywork in immaculate condition, used Alecto? (Oh sod it, what are overdrafts for?)



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

No of outputs:	one pair per channel
Peak output current:	8 amps
Power output:	70 watts into 8 ohms
Input impedance	47Kohms
Frequency response:	0.3Hz to 275KHz (-3dB)
Distortion:	<0.005%
Gain:	33dB
Sensitivity:	750mV
Stability:	unconditional
DC offset:	<10mV
Dimensions (W x D x H):	318x360x198
Weight:	11Kg
Power 'on' indication:	8 green LED's through acrylic cover.
Price:	£1,150
Upgrade cost, old to new Alecto:	£400 (approx)

J A Michell Engineering Ltd.
2 Theobald Street
Borehamwood
Herts
WD6 4SE
Tel: (44)(0)181-953-0771
Fax: (44)(0)181-207-4688



Elac CL310 Jet Loadspeakers

by Pete Christie

There is absolutely no way that a loudspeaker cabinet made from aluminium and measuring a miniscule 8" high and 4 1/2" wide is ever going to be taken seriously, even if it is 10 3/4" deep. Obviously, it will be too small for any real bass, and aluminium? Someone's having a laugh.

OK, the good old metal Teac LSX8's are still a fairly effective little monitor for near-field stuff, and at £90.00, they're a reasonable price. These Elac people want £800.00 for the CL310's, and they're only a tad bigger than the Teac's. Someone is definitely having a laugh.

Which is exactly what I thought when Dave from Elac brought them in to the shop for us to have a listen to (he always was a bit of a wag!). After the initial size thing had been overcome, the aluminium front covers were removed revealing very strange drive units, causing even more head-scratching and eyebrow-raising.

Pete "What's that thing?"

Dave "That's the tweeter."

Pete "That's not a tweeter!"

Dave "Yes it is."

Pete "Right!"

Pete "What's that thing?"

Dave "That's the bass driver."

Pete "That's not a bass driver!"

Dave "Yes it is."

Pete "It's silver"

Dave "Yes."

Pete "What, like Monitor Audio's?"

Dave "No."

Pete "er... Right!"

So, let me recap. I'm standing there, holding a small (but chunky) sil-

ver, shiny, metal box containing a tweeter that doesn't look like a tweeter, and a bass driver that looks like the inside of one of Madonna's bra cups. And this is hi-fi?

"Try them out" was the invitation. We thought that it was rude to decline. We were fairly busy at the time, and a quick listen was all we could afford, so we bolted (yes, bolted) the speakers onto their matching stands, hooked them up to whatever was connected together at the time and shoved on a CD.

It's funny how appearances can be deceptive, isn't it?

After a couple of bars of one of the many sampler CD's strategically placed around the shop, it became very apparent that the Elac have managed to confound the "big bass needs big speakers" theory. Quite how was a bit of a mystery, but believe me, this is one of the most exciting developments in loudspeaker technology that I have come across, and I couldn't wait to get them home for a serious listen.

But first I'd better explain a little of what's behind these speakers. Elac are an established German company, and they seem reassuringly obsessive about the engineering quality of their products. When it comes to the CL310, virtually all the components used, cabinet aside, are manufactured "in-house", thus ensuring consistency. In fact, they give their products a full 10-year warranty, and are justifiably proud that over 94% of the Jet 310 is recyclable.

As a cabinet material, aluminium has a lot going for it. As long as the dimensions are small, precision extrusions can produce identical units of great sophistication. For instance inter-

nal bracing is unnecessary as the wall thickness of the Jet cabinet is 6.5mm (1/4"). Internal resonance can be "designed out" and therefore, represents less of a problem. It is an ideal medium for mounting loudspeaker units accurately and firmly. In fact, the only down side is that it is a metal, and therefore does not have the aesthetic quality of a wood veneer finish. For a lot of people, it wouldn't qualify as "furniture". The pair I was supplied with were silver, but there is also the choice of black or white, and a limited edition of red or blue lacquer. The optional stands are available in matching finishes.

Think of a tweeter, and a dome-like construction springs to mind. We've all seen them, we know what to expect. The Elac Jet tweeter is not like any other tweeter, either in design, or appearance. It is, according to the information pack I received, a seven-piece construction with the business end being a folded lamellar foil membrane. This device is driven by an extremely strong magnetic system composed of neodymium rods, creating high efficiency with an outstanding dynamic range. I can't argue with that, largely due to the fact that I don't have the remotest idea what it means! What I do know is that I had the impression that the tweeter started lower, and went higher than most tweeters I have heard. Also, the top end appeared seamless and very fast.

What about that bass driver. Ah yes! Madonna's bra cup. What we have here is a 115mm (4 1/2") diameter driver. Yes, 4 1/2". Now, that has got to be too small for any deep stuff - right? I would like to pass on some more information from the manufacturer. ►

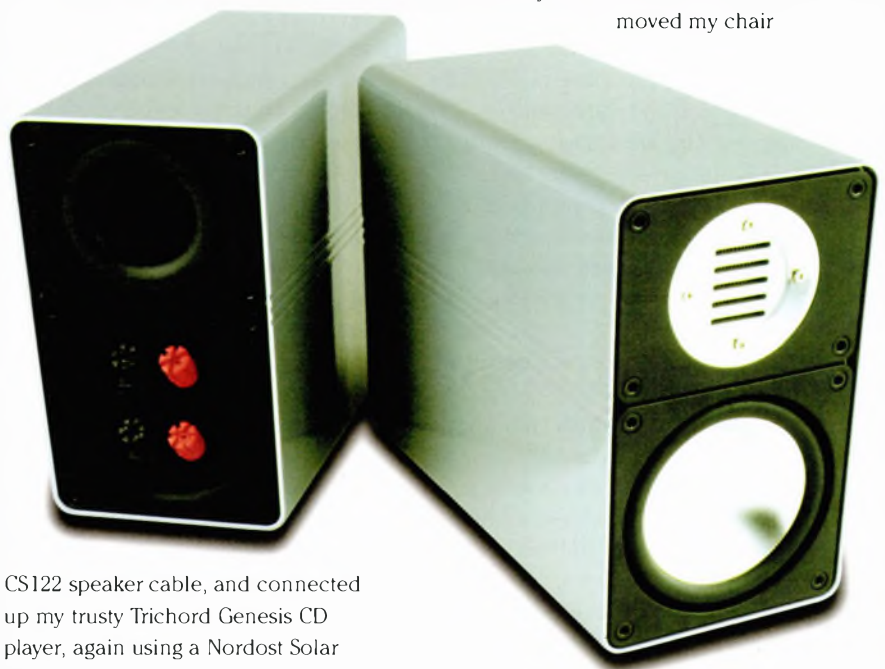
▶ This is not a mere bass driver. It is a long-stroke woofer which is rumoured to produce the best possible large-signal behaviour, and most linear frequency response possible. Also, what's with the shiny stuff? This is a 0.2mm aluminium layer which has been bonded to a more traditional pulp fibre cone to create a sandwich membrane. This not only stiffens the overall construction, but actually acts as a damper, muting any spurious, unwanted distortion. So there!

The crossovers are fitted with protection devices, however these will be omitted from future production, which can only make a great product even better. They also incorporate something called "dynamic high frequency adaption", and claim that "at high levels, this gently reduces the high pitch range so that a pleasant, balanced acoustic pattern is produced at all volumes". Hmmmmm.

Thus armed with all the technical information, I gave them a serious work-out. Using the supplied stands, I connected up a system comprising a Marantz CD17 KI and its matching amplifier the PM17 KI, with Nordost Solar Wind speaker cable and interconnects. As usual with any listening test we do at work, interruptions always get in the way, and I aborted the test after a period of about 30 minutes. This, however, was long enough to get a feel for just what dynamic little speakers the Jets are. They are immediately expressive - there is a massive loudspeaker lurking in these diminutive boxes. It didn't take too long to see why they called the bass driver "long throw". On highly-charged bass tracks such as 'My Brother, My Enemy' from the Lucky Dube album *Trinity* (Tabu Records 31453-0479-2), at high volume levels it moves in and out like a deranged piston. On a serious reggae album such as this, it was fairly obvious to me that the Jets are indeed capable of reaching unlikely depths in the bass department. That's not all

though. They do the lot - from the sharpest cymbal to the grunt of the B string of a five-string bass guitar. Having my appetite suitably whetted, I tucked one under each arm and scuttled off home.

Alone at last, I connected them to my Shear Audio Phase 2 Integrated amplifier with van den Hul



CS122 speaker cable, and connected up my trusty Trichord Genesis CD player, again using a Nordost Solar Wind interconnect.

It wasn't long before I realised that changes were needed. The stands were far too high - so they went. I substituted the tubular silver things for a pair of stone stands of the correct height, and used some Stands Unique isolators as the interface (seriously, the supplied stands are over-tall at well over a metre high). Next to go were the grilles. The only thing they are good for is protecting the speakers from sticky little fingers. To hear these babies at their best, dispense with the covers!

I began by playing the Lucky Dube album again, to refresh my memory. Something wrong here! It was a good sound, but it didn't groove as it should. So I dispensed with the van den Hul, and tried a few cables until I finally settled on Chord Legend. Now

we're cooking!

I wandered on through the album a bit further experimenting with toe-in, and found the best set-up was to point the speakers at my shoulders. Great focus, but now there was a horrible "booming" in the deeper bass parts. This confused me for a while until I discovered that it was due to that common enemy, rear wall reflection. I moved my chair

forward about a metre, and at last it all made sense.

The soundstage was now open, detailed and uncannily transparent. I'd just spent two hours of moving, pointing, connecting, re-connecting, and generally re-designing my lounge with a reggae band who started off in the background, and gradually got closer until they joined me in the room. And we all had a splendid time!

I returned to the speakers the next evening, and picked out a selection of my usual "test" pieces. Starting with something classical, I gave the Jets a taste of the 'Dies Irae' from Verdi's *Requiem* (John Eliot Gardiner conducting the Orchestre Revolutionnaire et Romantique, with the Monteverdi Choir Philips 442.142.2). Anyone who ▶

► has heard this particular performance will be well aware of the sheer power and presence it generates. I always start with this piece, as it represents a mighty hurdle for any component. With the room lights off, the Jets disappeared from the equation both visibly and audibly. The music flowed through effortlessly with absolutely no perceived restrictions.

For piano, I played Beethoven's *Piano Concerto No 5, The Emperor*, Claudio Arrau and the Staatskapelle Dresden conducted by Sir Colin Davis (Philips 416 215-2). I particularly enjoy the sympathetic rendition on the Adagio, and once again the Jets did not fail to impress. Claudio Arrau's lightness of touch was as noticeably subtle as the Verdi *Requiem* was powerful and

dynamic. The gradual evolution into the third movement (Rondo Allegro), and the reintroduction of the bulk of the orchestra was fairly breathtaking.

Something more contemporary, and instrumentally challenging - an album my brother Alan tracked down for me in Paris. *Hadouk* by Didier Malherbe and Loy Ehrlich (Tangram TC 30 27). The sleeve notes are fairly sketchy, but this album is superbly performed using a staggering array of traditional instruments. The recording quality is A:1, and I may well review it in its own right at a later date. Suffice to say, if you want real acoustic, it's here. A melange of ethnic styles which again flowed through the Jets with no apparent difficulty, track 4 'Loukoumotive' fairly dancing into the room.

From Rachmaninov to Suzanne Vega via the Beatles, with diversions into the extremely obscure, I could only find one recording that gave me a problem. *Ritual* by the Bulgarian State Television Female Vocal Choir (Elektra Nonesuch Explorer Series 7559 79349-2). Now this is a fairly obscure album, and I'm putting the rather nasty grating top end down to the actual recording rather than the Jets.

It was on the third evening of testing when I was visited by a customer (and friend) of mine. He came in, spotted the Jets and recognised them from a recent review in another well-known publication. He intimated that the verdict was less than ecstatic and asked me what I thought of them. I said nothing, but sat him down and played a selection of classical pieces. He was (as I had expected he would be), totally impressed. "But they're marvelous!" he enthused. He went home, and about an hour later, he 'phoned me, saying that he had just re-read the

review, and in his opinion, he couldn't believe the review was describing the same speakers as he had just heard at my house.

Which brings me to the point.

The Elac CL 310 Jet loudspeakers are certainly a hugely massive small speaker. They are not forward, neither are they "laid back". In my system, they perform so well, I am prepared to go to fisticuffs before I have to hand them back. They have impressed me with their ability to fill my room with a sparkling reality, and without a hint of the tiring top-end apparent in a lot of smaller boxes. I like them, my wife likes them, my wife's friend Ruth likes them, even my mother who is going deaf said-"they've got a nice tone dear!" BUT! - It is absolutely vital to set them up properly, or you'll probably miss the point, and that really would be a shame! ►+



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Dimensions (H x W x D):	208 x 123 x 282
Gross Volume:	7.2 litres
Weight:	5.5 kg
Crossover Frequency:	3.3 kHz
Nominal Power Handling:	60 Watts
Peak Power Handling:	80 Watts
Frequency Response:	42 Hz - 30 kHz
Sensitivity:	86 dB
Nominal Impedance:	4 Ohms
Price:	£800.00
	(Optional stands extra)

Sennheiser UK Ltd.

3 Century Point

Halifax Rd

High Wycombe

Bucks HP12-3SL

Tel. (44)(0)1494-551551

Fax. (44)(0)1494-551550

Elac Phonosysteme GmbH

Tel. (49)(0)431-6477415

Fax. (49)(0)431-682101

Web. www.elac.com

E-mail. ELAC-Phonosysteme@t-online.de

ClearAudio Victory-Gold

Moving-Coil Cartridge

— by Roy Gregory —

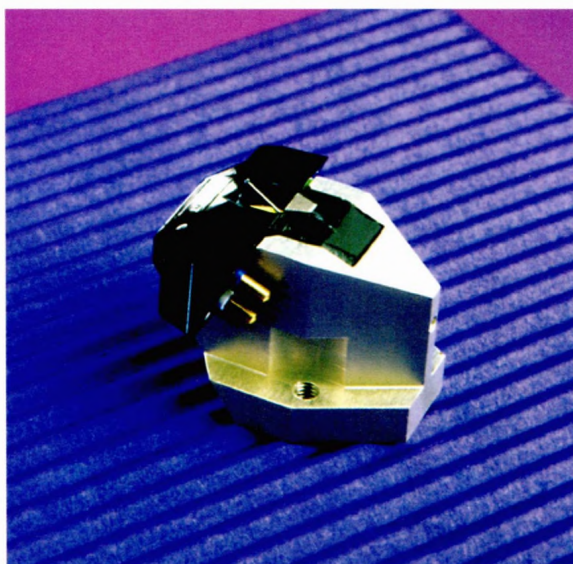
ClearAudio have been producing moving-coil phono cartridges for more than 20 years, and throughout that period they have stuck to their patented symmetrical generator design.

This arranges the coils and magnets about the pivot point in such a way that the generator is mechanically, magnetically and electrically balanced. Every cartridge they've produced has been a development or refinement of this basic electrical layout. Until now.

The new Victory Gold cartridge employs both an entirely new body design, and an evolutionary development of the symmetrical generator. Whilst it retains the gold coils of the other cartridges, the moving mass has been reduced to 0.009 grams. The familiar ClearAudio hammerhead is still in evidence, but it is now virtually enclosed by a handsome new MgAlSi alloy body. This has been shaped to eliminate parallel surfaces, whilst at the same time reducing the overall mass of the cartridge to 8 grams, where it fits neatly between the 'too light for comfort' wooden bodied designs, and the 'too heavy to handle' lead alloy models. This makes it far more compatible with the majority of medium-mass tonearms, like the Naim Aro or Linn Ekos.

The other big change is output level. Historically, ClearAudios have enjoyed healthier than average outputs, up around the 0.6mV mark. Partly as a result of the quest for reduced

moving mass, the Victory puts out a mere 0.2mV. And that is low, placing it below the notional 0.25mV point at which a lot of moving coil stages start to run into trouble with noise levels.



Installation is a breeze, largely due to the eradication of the hideously fiddly recessed circular nuts, replaced by tapped holes in the cartridge body. The downside is that the multi-faceted bodywork makes fitting a stylus guard impossible (at least they haven't come up with one yet). This doesn't worry me, but if you are of a nervous disposition.... The clearly visible cantilever makes optimum alignment a doddle, helped by the threaded body, which makes minute adjustments far simpler. The hammerhead retains its traditional white vertical, which makes setting correct VTA considerably easier. Work around the vertical setting, and I'll be very surprised if you need much by way of adjustment. Bear in mind that

with the correct VTA, the cartridge sits noticeably tail down, which might produce problems with wide bodied arms (Wilson-Benesch, SME) as they approach the inner grooves. I haven't

tried it, so I can't be sure.

Tracking force needs to be set towards the higher end of the recommended range, for sonic rather than security reasons. I settled on 2.7g as optimum (and you will need to be precise), although the cartridge tracked just fine as low as 2.0g.

Experimentation with loading showed a marked preference for the 100 ohm mark (slightly less if you can manage it). And when I say marked, I mean marked. Load the Victory too high, say 200 ohms, and the sound becomes insubstantial and

thin. So much so that unless you can load it properly, I'd have serious reservations about recommending this cartridge. Playing 'Someday' (Steve Earle Guitar Town MCA MCF3335) at the higher setting produced a waffly bass performance and left the song to meander. Reducing the loading tightened the bass, as well as giving substance and attack to the guitar barks that drive the stabbed rhythm, restoring the song's insistent, yearning quality. Given that the low output could easily result in a thinning of the sound if the phono stage is teetering on the edge, you need to get this right.

Once you've got the cartridge installed and torqued down, what should you expect? I'm tempted

▶ to say "a shock", but that's too flippant to be helpful. Correctly aligned and loaded, the Victory is a bit of a surprise package. I was immediately struck by its large and precisely defined sound stage. Images extended well beyond the boundaries of the speakers without losing their correct proportions or body. But it's the combination of that transparency and focus with a wealth of really well integrated information that makes this new ClearAudio so exciting. Images are beautifully focused and scaled, but they also have the correct character and colour. When Martin Stephenson sings 'Coleen' to his sister (*Boat To Bolivia* Kitchenware KWLP5) the poignant combination of sadness and hope is palpable. The pacing of the electric piano is spot on, as is the fuzzy roundness of its notes. The delicacy of the brushed cymbal work is astonishingly good, for its definition and tonal shade, and for the way its locked in both space and time. It accents the rhythm perfectly. I ran on through 'Little Red Bottle' and before I knew it I was marvelling at the guitar sat between the speakers on 'Tribute...'. The Victory got the size spot on, and also the wooden raps on its body, the squeak of fingers on strings. But it was the way it showed the difference between a single string exciting the body, and the richer weight and complexity of a strummed chord that was really impressive. This detail makes the tune so much easier to engage, and disbelief so much easier to suspend.

Bass is light but sure footed. Unusually, it also occurs on a height with the other instruments, rather than being exaggerated, and pushed forward and down to drag its sorry ass along the floor. If you value accuracy and a natural spectral balance this won't be a problem. If you have the (entirely understandable) desire to feel your bass, any bass, regardless of the music, then this is where you and the Victory may part company. For me, it

was a joy to hear double basses reproduced at the correct height and position in the soundstage. The cellos' drone that underpins the woodwind themes at the opening of the Second Movement of *Scheherazade* (Reiner / Chicago RCA LSC 2446) is full of texture, and hangs, separate in the air. The soundstage is cavernous but full of presence. Again, you can feel the tension in the performance.

In many respects, the Victory marks another step in ClearAudio's pursuit of neutrality. It has something of the same character (or lack of it) that the Reference turntable possesses. In fact, experience shows that its sonic character tends to be dictated by the matching phono stage rather than inherent colourations within the cartridge itself, a remarkable observation about a mechanical transducer. Its intimacy and natural sense of expression is enticing, pulling you in and holding you there.

No it doesn't have the low frequency extension and dynamics of the (three times the price) Accurate. Nor does it have its vivid tonal colours, drawing from a more muted palette. And it lacks the more expensive cartridges' uncanny ability to distinguish individual voices in a choir, be they human or instrumental. But at its price its performance is revelatory. Play the Vivaldi *Gloria* (Argo ZRG 505) and marvel at its light and air, the different, layered elements of the choir weaving their complex patterns without ever swamping the small Academy of St. Martin-in-the-Fields orchestra. Even the harpsichord survives intact - and is especially effective in the *Laudamus*. The whole feel of the piece is a vivid evocation and celebration of God, its combination of pathos and welling joy perfectly captured by the new ClearAudio.

The middleweight champ is ageing, and while the analogue world bides its time and awaits the new Clavis replacement from Lyra, the

Victory, with its ability to cut straight to the heart and soul of a performance, is a considerable threat to the crown. Its low output and loading requirements might prevent its universal application, but it still represents one hell of a pre-emptive strike.

As this issue is put to bed, what should arrive, hot foot from the fatherland, but a huge box containing but a single cartridge. (My neighbour who signed for it refused to believe that it was 'only a stylus'.) Inside was the first sample of a new design, the Victory-Gold H, and you guessed it, the H stands for higher as in output. A far more healthy 0.6mV to be precise - and enough to drive even valve MC stages. Initial results are interesting, but whether the extra moving mass of the larger coils is off-set by the increased output depends on the phono stage, and how happily it tolerates meagre rations. Let me investigate further, and I'll produce some conclusions in the next issue. ▶+

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Design Principle:	Low output moving-coil
Weight:	8g
Cantilever:	Boron
Stylus Tip:	Trigon II
Compliance:	15cu
Tracking Force:	2.0 - 2.8g
Recommended Loading:	80 - 100 Ohms
Output Level:	0.2 mV
Price:	£960

Distributor:
Audio Reference
Tel. (44)(0)1252-702705
Fax. (44)(0)1483-301412

Manufacturer:
ClearAudio Electronic GmbH
E-mail. clearaudio@t-online.de

Densen DP Drive Phono-stage

by Roy Gregory

It's no secret that we like the Densen Beat integrated amplifier. Reviewed by PC in Issue 1, it has become something of a benchmark, one of those products that you reach for when you want nice, safe, fuss-free performance. Which is one of the reasons that it crops up with regularity in our group listening sessions. In fact, there's only one cloud on the horizon. It's a line only amplifier, and unfortunately, up 'til now, the matching stand alone phono stage has been, how can I put this?... a disappointment.

Built into a narrower version of the Beat's elegant extruded aluminium casework, and powered by a plug-top transformer, the DP Drive certainly looks the part. And adopting the novel approach of using photo-electric cells to pass the tiny signal from a phono cartridge with minimum noise, it has the flash circuitry (literally) to impress the techno crowd. And indeed, it could sound really good.... some of the time. And yet in another set-up it would sound positively awful. Dealers and customers alike were left wringing their hands in frustration. The problem was that nobody could rationalise the situation and arrive at a sensible diagnosis.

But that was then, and this is now. Densen have discovered that the original plug-in boards used to configure the DP Drive for moving-magnet or moving-coil sensitivity were suffering from overload. In a spooky inversion of normal events, they'd concentrated so hard on making a phono-stage that was compatible with really low out-put cartridges, that anything that produced a signal stronger than Carling Black

Label simply overdrove the input, with a variety of unusual, interesting but universally un-listenable results.

I now have a DP Drive complete with new boards, redesigned to offer massive amounts of headroom as well as the ghostly quiet background noise of the earlier version. What a relief for everyone! I can attest to the noise performance because the new unit arrived at the same time as the ClearAudio Victory, with its ruinously low 0.2 mV output. No problem at all. Loads of gain, and plenty of substance, with no intrusive noise to mess things up. Of course, the Densen could always do that, so I also used my resident

Accurate, whose 0.6 mV output represents a pint of Old Thumper compared to the Victory's ginger beer, and thus exactly the kind of thing that would have given the original DP the DT's. No problems at all. The new cards made the Densen a model of good behaviour, taking even the most explosive dynamics in its stride. Fortunately, the good ▶



► manners don't extend as far as emasculating the music.

Sonically, the market for reasonably priced stand alone phono stages is dominated by the Iso, the original, and arguably still the best. The Densen is appreciably cheaper, and a lot less fussy, especially when it comes to placement. It's also bomb-proof, which the Iso definitely isn't, as a history of broken phono sockets and the odd fried chipset reveals. In normal use, as opposed to shop demonstrator / review hack mode, the Iso should be fine, but there's no ignoring the DP's reassuring solidity. About the same size and shape as a house brick, it feels about as fragile.

And the products' relative characters extend the contrast. The Iso is all about speed, transparency and resolution. It is capable of breathtaking delicacy and a level of detail that put most high-end pre-amps to shame when it was originally launched, ten years ago. This is territory on which the DP simply can't compete. However, it's not without strengths of its own, and they are in exactly the areas that most worry people about the Iso. Top of the list is sonic substance. Where the Iso's resolution can leave it wanting a sense of solidity, the DP has presence to burn. The music it makes is big bold and solid, underpinned by deep, powerful bass which has both weight and agility. The undulating bottom end of 'Fall At Your Feet' (Crowded House *Woodface* EMI 064-793559) treads unerringly on precisely defined stepping stones, each of a different pitch. The pace and direction of the bass notes is never in a moments doubt. Nor is the way they propel the songs suggestive, ebb and flow rhythm. And if Neil Finn's vocal is a tad recessed and enclosed by the mix, at least its welded to the structure of the song.

At the opposite end of the spectrum Valerie Carter's sublime voice (*Just a Stone's Throw Away* CBS PC34155) loses some of its ethereal

delicacy. The plucked acoustic instruments that open 'Face of Appalachia' lose a little attack, and the plectrum played chords tend to run together, smudging the leading edge of each individual note. There's also a subtle tang of colouration, which can make some voices slightly more nasal, and which gives guitars a little extra twang. So the DP Drive isn't perfect. But then what is at this price? Let's bear in mind that we're talking in absolute terms here, about a product that doesn't even pretend to be high-end. Back in the real world, the Densen has a lot going for it.

What really makes the DP Drive worth considering is its ability to handle the structural elements in the music, a clearly essential task that seems to get forgotten as designers scramble after the last piece of window dressing. It doesn't matter how pretty the store looks if you can't get in because the door frame's warped. Whilst it might not be the last word in resolution, it makes damned sure that the information it provides is properly arranged, and arrives in the right order. That keeps music recognisable and engaging, letting you hear the patterns that stop it being "just noise". That may not seem particularly exciting, but then wait until you hear what it means to an album like John Cougar Mellencamp's *Lonesome Jubilee* (MFSL 1-222). The opening track 'Paper In Fire' is a high energy roller-coaster laced with rapid fiddle runs and frantic percussion. It can easily become an unholy mess, especially with the slightly hashy recording quality. Not with the Densen. It fairly rollicks along, the phono stage keeping all that energy intact and under just enough control. This is exciting music. The DP Drive keeps it that way.

It is this essential musical honesty that makes both the phono stage and its big brother the Beat, so appealing. They are largely unobstructive

(particularly in the context of the systems in which they tend to find themselves), and pin their musical hearts firmly to their sleeves. The DP Drive in its latest guise is just as versatile and fuss-free as its more popular brethren, a fact which should recommend it to more than just Densen amplifier buyers. If your taste in music tends to the modern or large-scale, and on the whole you probably wouldn't notice if chamber music went the way of the chamber pot, then the DP Drive could be your cup of tea. I suggest you investigate - a good time will be had by all.

Owners of the original boards can have them replaced for the cost of postage only. Contact either of the numbers below for details. It's nice to see a company that supports its products, and looks after its customers. A rare commodity, ►+

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Gain	Separate boards for MM or MC. MC can be factory adjusted for sensitivity.
Loading	Self-adjusting to match cartridge.
Dimensions (WxHxD)	120 x 72 x 330 mm
Price	£300 for MM, £350 for MC (MM can be changed to MC for difference in price.)

Manufacturer

Densen Audio Technologies
Randersvej 28
6700 Esbjerg
Denmark
Tel. (45)(0)751-81214
Fax. (45)(0)754-53938
Net. www.densen.dk

UK Contact

Russell Kauffman
(44)(0)1582-561227



ROTEL

STEREO INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER RA-9071

POWER

PIONEER

SPEAKER RELAY

BASS

TREBLE

TONE

VOLUME

BALANCE

REVERSE

Hi-Fi Level Peak Converter

Pioneer PD-S507
COMPACT DISC PLAYER

INSERT DISC LABEL SIDE DOWN

The Real Deal

Pioneer PDS507 CD player and Rotel RA931 amplifier

by Pete Christie

Face it! There are absolutely dozens of plausible ways to spend a budget of over \$800.00 on "real" hi-fi. The mainstream magazines are crammed full of five-star; not to be missed, best ever, editor's choice, state of the art machines. The first-time buyer is literally spoilt for choice, and, no doubt, at the hands of a highly qualified and experienced 19 year old High Street electrical superstore trainee, will blow the proverbial hard-earned wad on "flavour of the month" hi-fi. He/she will then take the boxes home, content in the knowledge that the purchases hold more stars than a small galaxy, and that all the items are the absolute dogs' wotsits because it said so in the magazine, and they wouldn't lie, would they?

Of course they wouldn't - but they can fail to always give the most important advice - personal system matching.

In the important area where electronic music reproduction equipment becomes hi-fi, there are certain grey areas that need careful aural navigation to isolate your own personal good from the bad and the ugly. It should always be borne in mind that magazines (yes, even this one) will never be able to tell you what you will like - only you know what that is. A magazine should be used as a guide to what is currently available within your budget, as there is absolutely no substitute for a personal listening test.

In my day job as a hi-fi demonstrator, I find I have to spend a great deal of time persuading customers intent on high fidelity to leave their inherited prejudices on the doorstep and allow me to help them discover their own personal version of the truth by the trial and error method of building on sound quality. Once I have persuaded them that it really doesn't matter if you "mix and match" products from different manufacturers, life becomes a lot simpler.

Which is why I'm writing about the Pioneer PDS507 CD player and the Rotel RA931 integrated amplifier, and why I think that at \$200.00 and £175.00 respectively, £375.00 can get you a lot of real quality for your money. This is a combination which have proved their performance, together, over a very long period of time.

The Pioneer PDS 507 CD Player

This is the current version of the good old PDS 505, a CD player which has passed into the hi-fi hall of fame as the forerunner of the legendary Trichord Genesis. When I asked Tom Evans (the designer) why he had chosen the PDS 505 as the basis for the Genesis, he told me that, amongst other technical reasons, he considered the stable platter mechanism second to none for minimising disc run-out (wobbling

about and making life difficult for the laser). Fair enough!

Anyway, the PDS 507 (which is basically a PDS 505 but better looking) uses the same transport system, and incorporates Pioneer "High-Bit Legato Link Conversion". In simple terms, and according to the Pioneer brochure,

this is a method of restoring very high frequency sounds originally sampled during recording, which are not stored on compact discs. In other words, this conversion calculates and introduces additional values to create a smoother signal that is closer to the original sound.

So, how does it know how to do that then? To be honest, if I had read this explanation in advance, I would have probably not bothered to actually spend much time in listening to the machine. I would have been ever so very slightly cynical that a CD player could accurately guess which sounds were missing from a compact disc! Fortunately, never being one to bother much about spurious information printed either on the front of equipment or in manufacturers' press releases, I listened to it first.

The front panel is fairly attractive, with all the right buttons in all the right places. The usual functions to be found on most CD players are pre ▶





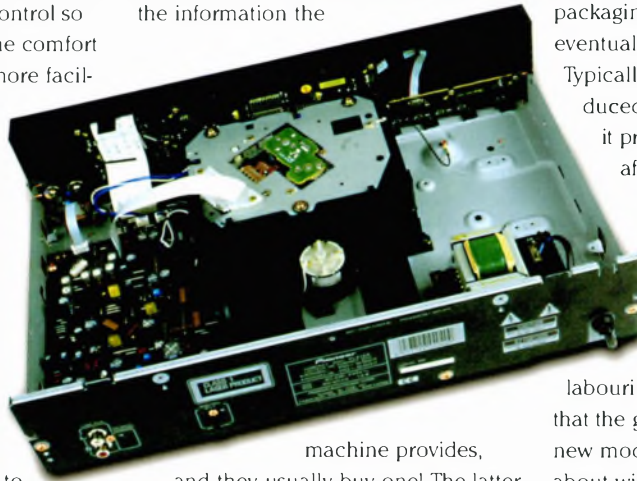
have to deal with as much information as possible rather than being in the unfortunate position of not having the full story in the first place!

Amusingly, the PDS 507 has one of two distinct effects on customers. They either take to it immediately, or they seem to be almost intimidated by it. The "first impression" thing is certainly well in evidence here. Most of the former group tend to be "musically aware". This may sound pretentious, but I've noticed that anyone who has experience of live music (in whatever form) can easily accommodate the amount and quality of the information the

▶ sent here as well. There is also a headphone socket with accompanying volume control. The supplied remote control unit is small but adequate, with the same facilities as on the front panel, and an output level control so you can turn it down from the comfort of your armchair. All in all, more facilities than most people would ever really need - just like all the other CD players available at this price level.

In fact, there are, as you are probably well aware, dozens of CD players in and around the £200.00 budget area, and you can easily be totally bamboozled by the reams of good advice from the mainstream hi-fi press as to the perceived qualities or shortcomings of all of them! When it comes down to personal preference however, an audition within the framework of your own existing system is vital.

Having spent a considerable amount of time listening to just about all the permutations of amp, CD and loudspeakers in the relevant price area, the immediate impression made by the PDS 507 is of a marked increase in detail and rhythm. With the wrong interconnects or speakers, this extra detail (especially in the treble) can be guilty of appearing "edgy", though with a modicum of system matching, this should not be too much of a problem. Anyway, I feel it is preferable to



machine provides, and they usually buy one! The latter group will invariably opt for a 'safer' sounding machine which will smooth out rather than expose the 'warty' bits. That's OK by me. In something as personal as hi-fi, one persons' opinion is just as valid as anothers', and it doesn't matter how good something is supposed to be, if you don't like it you shouldn't buy it!

Time and time again, in a demonstration environment, this CD player has brought a sense of reality back into the sonic equation, and has given an awful lot of customers an introduction to real hi-fi. I'm not saying that the PDS507 is the best player

in the world - it isn't. I'm not even saying that it's the best player at the price point. All I can suggest is that at £200.00, if you want your system to give you a slice of reality, you should definitely consider it.

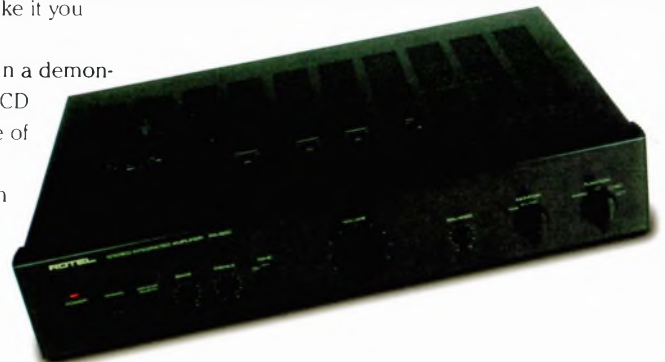
The Rotel RA931 Integrated Amplifier

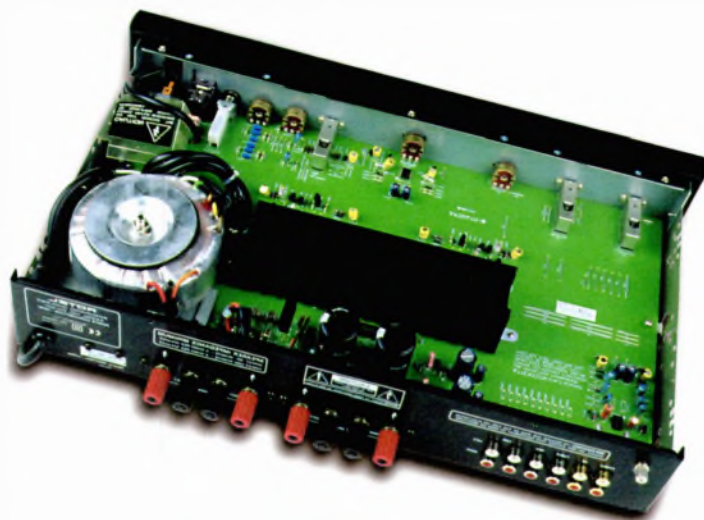
Being able to watch the process of evolution in hi-fi from the relative safety of a retail establishment is a fascinating pastime. How it usually happens is that someone in the design team at Whatever Electronics Incorporated comes up with a bright idea. An amplifier is made, and after the usual testing, packaging and all that other stuff, it eventually arrives in the market place.

Typically with most Japanese produced equipment, if it sounds great, it probably won't look great, so after a suitable period of time, a new, better looking case is designed, and hey presto, the MKII is born. Designers are renowned for not being content to leave well alone. So,

labouring under the misapprehension that the general public must have a new model every year, someone fiddles about with capacitors, power supplies etc. and before you know it, what was a thoroughly good piece of kit has had all the life 'designed' out of it.

So far, this has not been the case with the Rotel. The RA931 is, to all intents and purposes, sonically identical to its predecessor, the RA930. ▶





► It's a slim and attractive amplifier that delivers a surprisingly big sound at an affordable price. And whilst there is an RA931 Mk II looming ever closer, it's one of the few 'upgraded' products that I await with confidence. Besides, for those on a budget, the current 931 is going to be relevant for a good time yet.

Facility-wise, it's got just about everything most people need. CD, Tuner, Aux, Tape, and an adequate moving magnet phono input. There are tone controls if you want them, and a tone defeat switch if you don't, a balance control, a headphone socket, and the facility for running two pairs of speakers, again, switchable. Rated at 35 watts per channel, it's a jack of all trades which actually masters all jobs surprisingly well. OK, it isn't remote control, but at £175.00, I don't consider that to be an issue.

What is an issue is the consummate ease it demonstrates in taking all the available information out of the source and putting it into the loudspeakers. For a 35 watt amplifier, it possesses an idiotic amount of sheer drive. Don't get me wrong - it's not a 'boom box', rather, it 'manages' the information sublimely well. Using all manner of different loudspeakers, the RA 931 never fails to put in a solid performance. It is sweet without being lightweight, it is fast without demonstrating any "edginess", and it is as smooth as silk when it comes to allowing the most dynamic transients to whiz through its internal

components and out the other side.

It can Rock and Roll with the best of them, but it can also deliver the sweetest and most delicate of single instrument pieces, from cello to flute, with unobtrusive ease. Voices are natural, strings are vibrant, brass is brassy. In fact, at the budget, it's high on faultless! For fun, I once put together a £4,000.00 system comprising the Helios Stargate CD player, Celestion A2 loudspeakers and the Rotel RA 930 amplifier and invited a few people to criticise it. Nobody had any serious complaints. Obviously, I'm not recommending this as a viable option as the amp did show signs of running out of steam when pushed a bit hard. Be honest, nobody in their right mind would bolt a Mini engine into a Mercedes! The point I'm making was that at lower volume levels, the amp held its head high in superior company.

The Pioneer PDS 507 and the Rotel RA931 are two bits of hi-fi that work exceptionally well together. I am not saying that the Rotel RCD 951 CD player is not a splendid partner for the RA 931; neither am I saying that The Pioneer A300r amplifier is not to be considered with the PDS 507. What I am saying is that aesthetics and Wife Compatibility aside, a mix and match, wallet-friendly, REAL hi-fi system based upon these two has proved itself time and again under the spotlight of in-depth customer auditions. We don't sell on a commission basis at our place. We

don't mind what people like or dislike. We like to ensure that they take time listening to as much equipment as we can offer them. It follows that if they hear something that makes sonic sense to them, and brings the music to life, then they will buy it. And this is where it starts.

We've sold an awful lot of Pioneer PDS 505/7's and Rotel RA930/931's. ►

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Pioneer PDS 505 Compact Disc Player

Frequency Response:	2 - 20,000 Hz
Signal to Noise Ratio:	110dB
Dynamic Range:	99dB
Distortion:	0.002%
Power Consumption:	13 Watts (3 Watts on Standby)
Dimensions (W x H x D):	420 x 112 x 283 mm
Price:	£200.00

Pioneer Hi-fidelity (GB) Ltd

Pioneer House
Hollybush Hill
Stoke Poges
Slough
Berks SL2-4PQ
Tel. (44)(0)1753-789789
Fax. (44)(0)1753-789528

Rotel RA 931 Integrated Amplifier

Power Output:	35 Watts into 8 Ohms
Frequency Response	
CD/Tape/Tuner/Aux:	10 - 100,000 Hz +1dB/-3dB
Signal to Noise Ratio:	95dB
Tone Control Range:	+/- 6dB
Size (W x H x D):	440 x 92 x 347 mm
Price:	£150.00

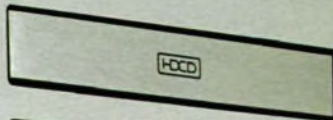
Gamepath Ltd

25 Heathfields
Stacey Buses
Milton Keynes
Bucks MK12-6HR
Tel. (44)(0)1908-317707
Fax (44)(0)1908-322704

COPLAND
COMPACT DISC PLAYER CDA 289



HCCD



OPEN

OPERATION MODE



COPLAND
INTEGRATED VALVE AMPLIFIER CTA 402



System Review - Part 1

by Roy Gregory and Dave Davies

One of the major problems facing any hi-fi reviewer is trying to place products into a sensible context. It's easy enough to describe how a product sounds in the system being used, it's far more difficult to suggest how it will sound in other circumstances, and which particular set of circumstances will be optimum. Reviews of single products tend to separate the elements that constitute a system, and dilute the influence of interaction between and matching of components. The problem is that you can't listen to a component, only a system. And the definition of a good system is one where the whole is greater than the sum of those parts. By concentrating reviews on individual products, or even worse, a group of similar products, we are promoting the particular at the expense of the far more important whole.

By reviewing systems we can redress that balance and give the products a context. We can show examples of systems that do work, and most importantly of all, we can examine why they work. And by system, I mean system. I want everything necessary including mains cables and supports. One of the great debates which used to dominate the pages of hi-fi magazines concerned the issues of system balance and structure; how much you should spend and where. It's disappeared from view! Are we to assume we answered all those questions? Listen to the systems at a hi-fi show, or in too many dealers, and the answer is clear. We didn't solve the problem, we just ignored it and hoped it would go away.

The first of our system reviews goes straight to the heart of that issue. It also addresses the question of component

synergy. Richard Allan, of the RIAA public relations company, who was responsible for the choice of equipment, was quick to stress that whilst the Copland electronics each enjoy an excellent reputation in their own right, they really do move up a level when you use them together. The JM Labs and Nordost products also hail from his PR portfolio, whilst the Townshend supports are present on merit. A quick glance at the running order reveals that this is a far from conventional set-up. The electronics and speakers seem quite straight-forward, but there's more than meets the eye, and the budget for the supports and cables comfortably exceeds the hardware spend.

I guess there's two ways to look at this. You could argue that the expensive ancillaries are going to screw every last drop of performance out of a basic system. The way Richard put it was that these are the kind of accessories you'd lavish on a really top-notch system, and in scaling down the expenditure he prefers to look at cheaper electronics which are still capable of outstanding performance, albeit at the expense of power and bandwidth. I have to admit that makes a certain sense, and helps explain the inclusion of Nordost's otherwise

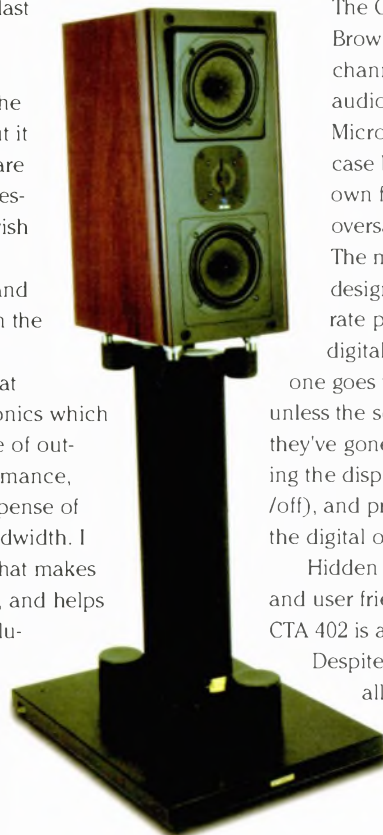
ruinously expensive SPM cables.

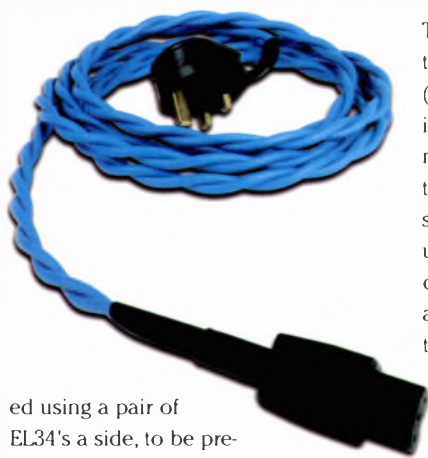
So let's start at the beginning. The Copland CDA 289 CD player and CTA 402 integrated amp are wolves in sheep's clothing. On the surface, they are a pair of beautifully finished and immaculately styled products with the kind of clean good looks that the Scandinavians do so well. In fact, they look so good that they often find themselves labelled as 'Life Style' products, an image which is further underlined by their full-facilities nature and shared remote control. But dismissing them as just a pretty fascia misses the point. Lurking beneath those Audrey Hepburn exteriors are the kind of circuitry more commonly associated with the hair-shirt brigade. And it's an illusion that is backed up by some really clever thinking.

The CDA 289 uses a pair of Burr-Brown 20 bit dacs for each channel. It also uses the current audiophile darling Pacific Microsonics HDCD filter, in this case backstopped by Copland's own filter which doubles the oversampling rate from 8 to 16. The master clock is an in-house design, and the player has separate power transformers for its digital and analogue stages. No-one goes to this sort of trouble unless the sound quality matters. And they've gone the extra yard too, making the display defeatable (bright / dim / off), and providing a switch to short the digital output.

Hidden behind the conventional and user friendly front panel of the CTA 402 is an even bigger surprise.

Despite appearances, this is actually a valve amp; an ultra linear 35 w/ch integrat- ▶





▶ ed using a pair of EL34's a side, to be precise. And this is no hybrid, containing a few token bottles. This amp is fully thermionic from front to back, using ECC83 driver valves and ECC82 phase splitters. Even the moving-magnet phono stage relies on a pair of ECC83's. It has four line inputs, a tape loop and a balance control, and both source switching and volume can be adjusted from the remote hand-set. But look a little closer at the source selection switch and you'll see that the extreme right hand position is labelled R/C. Park the switch here and it activates the remote control receiver and the motor for the volume pot. Otherwise, you can switch everything manually and benefit from the exercise that you'll get adjusting the level as well as better sound quality.

The whole ethos of these products is sound quality without the traditional ergonomic and aesthetic price that entails. Despite being a valve amp, the CTA 402 requires nothing more than a sensible degree of ventilation to work at its best, and both products allow you to choose between convenience and performance. I don't use remote controls anyway, so for me the choice was easy.

JM Labs are relative newcomers to these shores, although they are quickly building an enviable reputation. In fact they are one of the largest speaker manufacturers in France, and represent the loudspeaker arm of the parent company that produces Focal drivers.

Their flagship line is the Utopia range, topped by the \$35000 Grand Utopia (and it is!). The Electra 905 is the baby in the next range down, and shares much of the technology developed for the flagship models, including the foam sandwich cone material and the titanium oxide inverted dome tweeter diaphragm. The drivers are arranged in a symmetrical array designed to make their axes coincide at the listening position. The heavy MDF cabinet is rear loaded by a slot port, and further braced by the solid wood cheeks.

The modest cabinet offers a -3dB point of 57Hz, reflecting the easy load and 91.5dB efficiency which make the 905's such an ideal

match for the Copland.

The total for this little lot comes in at a little under five grand. Which, by any conventional wisdom, makes the six grand spent on cables and supports a mite excessive. They're going to have to go some to justify that. The cables are the by now familiar Nordost SPM, with their stand-out lilac colour, and equally stand-out performance. They got a full review in issue 1, so I won't spend too long on them. Basically, they're the best I've used, with a performance that makes the price seem almost acceptable once addiction has taken hold. Price? How about \$825 for a meter pair of interconnects, and a wallet wringing \$2795 for a three meter set of bi-wires. Add another \$800 for a pair of Nordost's El Dorado mains leads and it makes the Townshend supports look like an absolute bargain.

First of course, is the infamous Seismic Sink Stand, a device so cunning that you could stick a tail on it and call it a weasel. It uses two air isolation platforms to create a rack which is actually an air-suspended pendulum. They come in various shapes and sizes, of which this, the 3-1, is the smallest. It costs \$915. More surprising are the Seismic Speaker Platforms. Richard supplied a pair of Partington A 7-60 speaker stands to get the JM's up to a sensible height, but along with them came a pair of Seismic slabs which look for all the world like original

Sinks. Pump them up and you soon discover the difference. These things allow the speakers to sway like a fir tree in a high wind, which given the current obsession with rigidity seems, frankly,

bizarre. In fact this is neither a new idea, nor is it unique. In the past Griffin loudspeakers used a sprung suspension, while currently Rockport and several German companies also employ this thinking. Of course pushing the speaker and watching it rock is rather misleading. In practice, the suspension is tuned to around 1Hz so that it appears rigid to the drivers. What it does is pre-

vent external ▶



▶ energy passing from the floor back into the speaker cabinet, where it causes colouration and smearing. The Speaker Platforms weigh in at £498 a pair. The final links in the chain are four sets of a Nordost Pulsar Points which sit between the hardware and its supports. Tot that lot up and it runs out at £6171. To get £4700 of electronics and speakers to come alive. Hmm....

Set-up is remarkably straight forward, at least for the electronics. Place the Coplands on the rack, wire them up, and then put the Pulsar Points underneath. If you put the Pulsar Points in place before the cables, the electronics start to slide as soon as a plug makes contact. Then you pump up the air platforms in the rack until the whole lot floats, and use the counterweight to level it. This is a lot more straight forward than it seems, as long as you remember to align the various interlocking sections of the stand before inflation. You also want to use the minimum amount of air which actually floats the system, as this sounds best. Fortunately, the leaks

which required the original Seismic Sinks to be re-inflated once a week seem to be a thing of the past.

The procedure for the speakers is similar, but here you have to move the speaker and stand around the platform to get it absolutely level. This starts out as disconcerting, and fairly rapidly becomes frustrating. The problem is that the speakers are extremely critical of positioning and toe-in. I'm talking millimetres here, if you want to get the best out of them, especially in the bass.

The problem is that the stand and platform is difficult to move as a unit, and as soon as you move the stand without the platform you alter the level. The degree of precision required is largely due to the performance of the platform, which improves low-level information and bass linearity to such an extent that the smallest changes in position and angle are readily heard. A double edged sword if ever there was one. On the plus side, once you get it right everything can be left in place. I took the precaution of marking the positions of everything with tape, especially once I started playing with cables. Clearly, this

is less of a problem with floorstanders or speakers with a positive connection to their stands. Floorstanders? Yes, the platforms are good for 80 kilos each, which covers most eventualities, and special versions can be made to order.

Having got the whole thing singing and dancing, it was time to do some serious listening. We installed the system in two different rooms, mine and DD's. Dave had the first crack at it.



Richard's System

Copland CDA 289 CD Player	£1898.00
Copland CTA 402 Amplifier	£1698.00
JM Labs Electra 905	
Loudspeakers	£1095.00 pr
Townshend Audio	
Seismic Sink Stand. Model 1-3	£915.00
Townshend Audio Seismic	
Speaker Platform. 2.5-2D	£498.00 pr
Partington A7-60	
Speaker Stands	£139.00 pr
Nordost SPM Interconnect.	
1 metre ph-ph.	£825.00 pr
Nordost SPM Speaker Cable.	
3 metre bi-wires	£2795.00 pr
Nordost Pulsar Points	
(Set of 4)	£50.00
Nordost El Dorado Mains	
Leads. 2 metres	£400.00 ea

Part 2

by Dave Davies

It's easy to become immersed in the minutiae of hi-fi terminology. After all, much like wine writers, hi-fi reviewers have to use common terms and descriptions to communicate what is a fairly abstract and personal response. When listening to a live band very few of these terms make sense, or matter. You don't wonder about rhythm, timing, soundstage, or dynamics. You just

get on with enjoying the music. The resolution and everything else are simply there, not obviously but just part of the overall experience. Why am I rambling on about this? Well, once in a while a system comes along that, whilst it may not be perfect, can get pretty close to this experience.

As Roy has pointed out, the system has been assembled around the synergy between the Copland electronics. Both the CTA 402 amp and CDA 289 CD player ooze quality and style. Their silver aluminium faceplates are visually a near perfect match for the Seismic Sink

stand. They are more than faintly reminiscent of (but better finished than!) the vastly more expensive Cello equipment. The silky smooth and silent operational 'feel' of the controls underlines the design and build quality of these units. On the CDA 289, an on/off control and a play/pause control flank the central CD drawer. A tiny chrome button on the right opens and closes the drawer, this is balanced on the left with an HDCD indicator light, and that's it. All other controls are on the remote allowing the unit to retain a simple, uncluttered fascia. A particularly ▶



▶ neat touch is the combination play control which is rotated left or right to select tracks, but depressed to play or pause.

The quality of construction is again demonstrated by the near silent drawer operation.

The Townshend Seismic Sink stand, is a great looker. With five stainless steel uprights on each side, and sculpted black shelves, it is one of those pieces of engineering that have an innate class and style, born from their function. It's a refreshing break from many of the hideous 'butchers block and mechanoid exoskeleton' stands that are, sadly, still so predominant. The first thing that becomes apparent in use is that this is distinctly different from the opposition. It's a little unsettling (to say the least) to reach for the volume control and set the whole system swinging gently back and forth. A quick check of the bottle told me it wasn't the Cotes du Rhone. Over the weeks, try as I might, I could never quite get used to it.

The JM Labs Electra 905's may not belong to JM's Utopia family, but they clearly share a quality of construction and componentry in line with their more august brethren. The Partington A 7-60 stands are good, heavy, double column supports, whose sculpted look you'll either love

or hate. I love 'em, Roy hates 'em if that's any sort of measure! Starting with Pulsar Points underneath both the speakers and the stands, the lower set was quickly removed. These raised the speakers just a little too high for optimal performance, and with the Pulsar Points it's possible to have too much of a good thing: if used too freely they will improve resolution but can thin the sound out too much.

If the rack is a culture shock, the Seismic Speaker Platforms really take some getting used to. They're a slap in the face of conventional 'rigid is best' philosophy, and I have to question their compatibility with small children (or large pets). Like the Seismic Stand, the first thing that strikes you is the very difference with convention. It just feels wrong to touch a stand mounted



speaker and feel it sway back and forth. Initially I wasn't too impressed, but with careful set-up the dividends began to become apparent. Having spent a useful half-hour with Roy, the platforms were carefully levelled, and positioned exactly equidistant to the back and side walls. Some Room-Tunes were also brought into play. From a performance that initially sounded a little shut in and dynamically restricted, the sound stage opened up, and musicians/instruments took on more presence, becoming more solid and three-dimensional. As ever with hi-fi there is some trade-off and some bass slam was lost. In my trampoline floored living room, bass was not felt to the same degree, the trouser legs just didn't flap like they used to! For me though this was outweighed by the very real gains in every other respect, staging, dynamics and overall naturalness. The only other caveat is that to provide a reasonable load bearing platform, the speaker platforms are relatively large (approximately 50 x 40cm). This is not a problem where space is not at a premium, but could be a bit of a tripping hazard otherwise. The less than securely mounted speakers are also too unstable for anything but a dedicated listening room. Particularly so since the gorgeous lilac SPM speaker cables are just begging to be played with. Just ask the Gregory family tortoise!

So, how does the whole system sound? As I crassly hinted in the opening paragraph, it has a natural, even real, quality which every decent system should aspire to (but which so few attain). Instruments and singers have a tangible presence within a properly proportioned soundstage, whether it's a closely miked acoustic session like the superb Geoff Muldaur *The Secret Handshake* (Hightone Records HCD 8097), or a large-scale orchestral performance. The Hanson *Merry Mount Suite* from *The Composer and his Orchestra* (Mercury 434 370-2) reveals beautifully layered strings, weighty brass and percussion, all within the familiar Eastman ▶



► Theatre acoustic. The sense of realism extends to being able to locate distinct individuals within the orchestra. In the 4th movement prelude, a tambourine which, in my slightly more mundane everyday system is a rather distant flat sound, is suddenly being struck by a real person, in time, properly proportioned within the orchestra. This sense of humanity and realism extends to the whole orchestra, which becomes a single, but at the same time, complex organism.

Resolution and dynamics are there, but like live music, not obviously so. Although the system seems particularly at home with acoustic music, when required it can summon the necessary gonads to shock and offend. A spell with my old favourite The Pixies' *Doolittle* (4AD GAD 905CD) demonstrated that the system was able to handle serious bass punch and dynamics, whilst still resolving vocal nuances like the 'I love you's' panning across the



stage at the start of 'La La Love You.' And given the relatively small size of the JM Labs, I was never aware of their limited bandwidth unless I went looking for it. Sure the bottom octaves are missing, but the music had a rightness about it that rendered the lack of passing concern.

It is this completeness, this rounded musical character, that sets this system apart. It does what it does so well, and at the same time keeps its failings unobtrusive. They're there if you look for them, but then why bother? Shucks, you mean you want a review! The other important thing about this system's shortcomings is that they are subtractive in nature. That means it doesn't try to fudge the depths it doesn't explore. It just don't trouble to go there, which is a lesson a few other systems could usefully learn.

This is a remarkably synergistic system. Forget the fact that the proportional spend is contrary to conventional wisdom, it works! Vast piles of CD's have accumulated in my listening room, vying for space with the normal stacks of vinyl. The TV has never gathered so much dust. I shall sorely miss this highly musical and let's face it (if only my bank manager would agree), affordable system. ►+

Part 3

As you can see, DD really liked this system, which is interesting in itself, given the similarities between his and Richard's listening tastes. Both show a strong interest in jazz, and it's certainly a great choice to show off the system's considerable strengths. But is this just a case of horses for courses, or can the system compete as a genuine all-rounder?

The short answer to that is yes, but there's rather more to it than that. The thing this system has in spades is finesse. Not the rounded off politeness and stodgy warmth that critics identify as 'valve sound', but a combination of low-level information and overall coherence that makes the finest details of a musical performance apparent,

without making them so obvious that they stand out from the whole. This is the finesse of a great performer, and it's to do with both detail and timing. This is a system which integrates all that information into a coherent whole, not just shaping the notes but placing them properly too. Richard's stated aim to 'down-size' the performance of a notional ultimate system makes perfect sense. But what about his reasoning?

Take a look at the budget breakdown and the obvious target is those pretty, purple cables. I mean, \$3620 worth of cable to hook up less than five grands worth of electronics and speakers? Someone's ladder doesn't go all the way to the top. Work this out a bit more conventionally and you get a sum that goes something like this: \$5000 on equipment plus \$600 on cables leaves \$400 for stands, and it puts the cable budget bang on the ►



▶ 10% figure that seems to be the accepted norm. There are plenty of people who would consider that over the top, but that's another story. Me? I got a hold of a £600 cable loom from a very credible manufacturer and plugged it in. Oh dear. Suddenly the finesse, the grace, the sophistication was all gone. The track in question was 'You Do Something To Me' (*Ella Fitzgerald Sings The Cole Porter Song Book* DCC GZS(2) 1079) and the change was staggering. Ella went from being recognisably one of the great voices of the twentieth century, to sounding like a so-so bar singer. Her voice became thick and her phrasing clumsy, with none of the effortless control and soaring delicacy of minutes before. The band didn't lose the plot to quite the same degree, but their easy grace was replaced by something altogether more muscular and rigid. The space was gone. Not just the physical volume of the recording, but the space around notes and phrases. The very space that makes Ella's singing so expressive in the first place.

Other discs showed similar results.

The Rachmaninov Symphonic Dances (Analogue Productions APCD 006) lost the clarity of melodic line which gives the Johanos reading its dramatic sense of thrust and purpose, the very quality that raises it above the herd. These are not cosmetic differences. They are both real and musically important (or should that be vital!). £3000 important? As a few experiments proved, I would be hard pressed to offer an alternative upgrade for that kind of money which would offer this system the same improvement in musical communication and overall credibility. I could offer other things, like more bass or wider dynamic range, but to make more musical sense? Difficult. And whilst this is a clear indicator as to the performance of the cables, don't underestimate the synergy between the various elements within the system as a whole. And just to add insult to injury, the mains leads do a similar, albeit less spectacular job.

Changing my line of attack to the Townshend stands produced similar results. Having got used to the sound of the system as specified, I rebuilt it onto a conventional rigid rack and

spiked the Partington stands top and bottom (Much as I admire Max's party piece of playing the system and then repeating the track having deflated the stand, the enormous difference reflects the totally inappropriate nature of the resulting bag of spanners as much as the efficiency of the air suspension!). Once again the sound congealed, with the bass in particular becoming turgid and ill defined. The speakers started to draw attention to themselves, fastening the sound to their position, whereas before the soundstage had floated free on its own cushion of air. Timing and tension within the music became a thing of the past. The opening pizzicato bass passage in the second movement of the Barbirolli *Sibelius 2* (Chesky CD3) became a trudge, as the melody meandered aimlessly along, eventually fading from view somewhere below the bassoons. Substituting the Pulsar Points in place of the spikes, and beneath the electronics brought things back to life, injecting some much needed pace and transparency into proceedings, but it wasn't until I substituted first the rack and then the speaker bases that things returned to normal. Those plucked bass notes were so much easier to

hear and follow, with a spring in their step and some real texture and shape, not just the dull thud that we seem to have grown accustomed to. They carried on, undaunted, underpinning the bassoon theme, bringing back the balance and stability to the music. And that surefooted agility extended right across the range. Rewind to the closing moments of the first movement and those tumbling notes that build to the closing fanfares are beautifully handled, as is the change of pace from the enthusiastic approach to the stately conclusion.

Incidentally, one difference ▶




▶ between my room and DD's was that while the system benefited from the Pulsar Points under the electronics in his warmer acoustic, used with the Seismic Stand in my dryer listening room, they left the sound a little thin and threadbare. I opted to use the Stand on its tod, which gave those bassoons the necessary pathos. All of which tends to underline the importance of matching equipment to both the system and the listening room. This set-up was originally tuned for Dave's environment, and moving house meant adjusting accordingly.

It is impossible to argue with the results, no matter how unlikely they may seem. The system as presented represents exceptional musical value for money, even at its elevated price. It

also offers that performance in an elegant and fuss free package. It is a perfect example of the whole being greater than the apparent sum of the parts. And hard as the lessons may be to accept, it would be sheer idiocy to ignore them. The first and most important conclusion is the critical importance of matching your electronics and speakers. Get the combination right and it's remarkable how far you can take it given the right environment. The strength of that performance rests on the foundations provided by the ancillaries; the cables, racks and mains leads. The better the foundations the more stable the structure.

Whilst I've never been shy of advocating expensive cables, I've tended to use them by default, and often with

expensive equipment. Even I was surprised by their effect (along with the rack and speaker platforms) on what is, by my standards, a fairly modest system. I wanted to see just how far I could take this, or whether it only applied to the Coplands and JM Labs. Experiments with even budget kit suggest that, assuming you get the equipment right, the old 10% rule is about as relevant today as archery practice. Think in terms of 50%! If your cables and stands are papering over the cracks then slum it with a mix and match collection of audio potty-putty. But if the electronics are good enough to let them do their real job, you are going to be surprised just how far they can take you. 

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Copland CDA 289 CD Player

D/A Converter	Burr Brown
PCM63P	20 bit
Digital Filter	Pacific Microsonics PDM 100 HDCD
Output Level-Analogue	2.7 volts
Digital Output - Phono	[Defeatable]
Dimensions (WxHxD)	430x175x375 mm

Copland CTA 402 Amplifier

Inputs	5 x Line and MM Phono
Outputs	1 x Tape
Input Sensitivity - Line	280 mV
- Phono	3 mV
Input Impedance - Line	100 kOhms
Output Power	35 W/ch (4 or 8 Ohms)
Tube Complement	4 x ECC83, 2 x ECC82, 4 x EL34
Dimensions (WxHxD)	430x175x375 mm

Absolute Sounds

Tel. (44)(0)181-947-5047
Fax. (44)(0)181-879-7962

JM Labs Electra 905 Loudspeakers

Drive Units	25mm Tri-Oxide inverted dome tweeter
Loading	2 x 125 mm sandwich cone bass-mid units Rear slot port
Nominal Impedance	8 Ohms
Efficiency	91.5dB
Frequency Response (± 3 dB)	57Hz - 23kHz
Power Handling	125 W
Dimensions (WxHxD)	235x470x280 mm
Finishes (Side Cheeks)	Natural, red or black Cherrywood

Sound Image UK Ltd.

Tel. (44)(0)181-255-6868
Fax. (44)(0)181-255-6869
Web. www.focal.tm.fr

Townshend Seismic Stand Model1-3

Dimensions (External WxHxD)	530x815x400 mm
Dimensions (Shelves WxD)	430x400 mm
Vertical Space	250 mm
Other shelf sizes and numbers are available.	
Internal dimensions of 480 x 450 and 560 x 510 are standard, with anything up to six shelves.	
Vertical spacing varies. All stands are built to order.	

Townshend Audio

Tel. (44)(0)181-979-2155
Fax. (44)(0)70707-21385
E-mail. townshend.audio@dial.pipex.com.
Web. <http://ds.dial.pipex.com/townshend.audio/>

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The advertisement features a dark, high-contrast photograph of audio equipment. A large, white, serif font spells out 'Crimson' across the top. Below the text, a close-up of a piece of audio equipment is visible, showing several knobs and a green illuminated section. The background is a gradient of blue and green.

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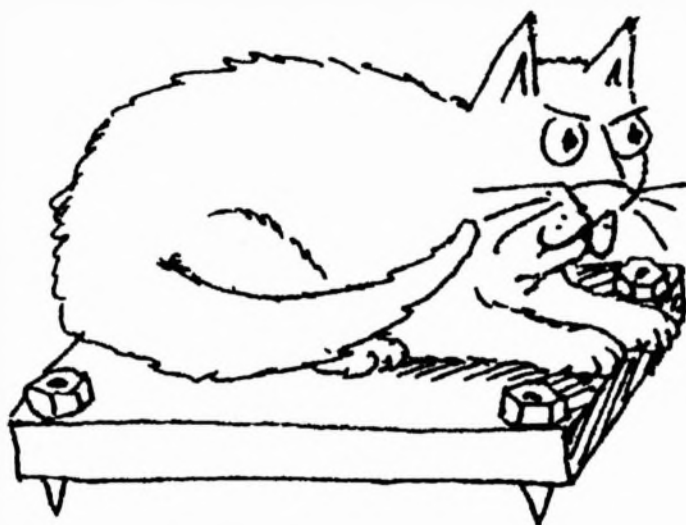
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69 London Road, Brighton Tel: 01273 609431

**Music
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Shut That Door

by Roy Gregory

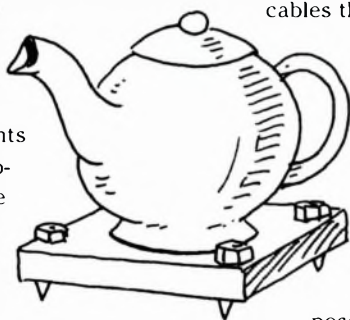


One of the problems with reviewing equipment, and especially A/B comparisons, is ensuring the consistency of the system. You need to be sure that any differences heard are down to the change you've just made, rather than some other factor. This is a seriously complex issue, with concerns ranging from interaction between components (one piece of equipment degrading the performance of another) to the impact of physical disturbance. You can try to account for everything, and even then you can be sure there's something that you've overlooked. And that's just within the system itself.

I suffered a salutary experience

the other day whilst A/B-ing a set of cables for a visitor. We were comparing two versions of an inter-connect, only the construction being slightly different. The changes should have been relatively slight, in line with the differences between the cables themselves. Sitting down to listen to the second sample it was hard to believe the transformation in the music. It had literally fallen apart, losing all sense of drive and dynamic coherence. We were shocked. This couldn't possibly be down to the

constructional details of a cable! We scratched our heads and swapped the cables back again, whereupon the original (better sounding) sample promptly performed in similar lack-lustre fash-



ion. What had changed?

After some serious puzzlement I resorted to recreating the chain of events. My guest got up to change the cable, and I retraced my steps into the kitchen to fetch the tea. And then it dawned on me. Walking back into the listening room with both hands holding mugs of Jackson's finest, I'd left the door open. The door at the far end of the listening room! Sure enough, shut the door and the system came back to life.

Which just goes to show that the most innocuous things can undermine the performance of your system. Without the straight A/B comparison I would probably have felt the system had gone "off" and started searching for an internal remedy (internal to the system that is, not alcohol). All that cleaning and adjusting when I should be enjoying music. So don't always look for the obvious, all manner of things can attack your system's performance. It's not that I'm paranoid, it's just that I haven't sussed out how to fit tip-toes to the cat.



Music Works

Six-Pack

by Jason Hector

As I recounted in Issue 2, the Music Works mains leads and distribution blocks provide a serious improvement to the sound of Naim systems. Not ones to rest on their laurels, they have now released a new distribution block and what a beast it is. Retailing at £200 this is a serious piece of hardware! Basically the construction consists of 6 independently switched single wall sockets mounted in a long plastic tray. As with the 4-way block, all ferrous materials have been replaced, and the individual sockets are star-earthed. The mains inlet cable is heavier than the one used in the 4-way block (the 6-way device is rated at 20 Amps) and beneath the grey sleeve appears again to be loosely twisted. The cable is terminated in a Crabtree plug and the resulting product looks professional and purposeful in a lab-oratory sort of way. And yes, they did try nonswitched sockets, and they sounded worse.

Knowing from the previous review how important set-up and arrangement was to extract the very best performance from the distribution system (even down to which of two adjacent outlets were used), the comparison between the old 4-way and new 6-way blocks was approached with a degree of trepidation. After systematic experi-

mentation, and considerable guidance from the Audio Counsel, I managed to get a pretty complete picture of the differences between the two, and yes, there were big differences.

One important new aspect in the set-up of the 6-way block is the order in which you connect the components. With the 4-way block that order didn't have a profound influence on the sound of the system, but with the new block a strict hierarchy should be observed. Starting at the mains inlet my Naim Audio components were arranged as follows; turntable power supply, phono-stage power supply, pre-amplifier power supply (powering a NAC82), power amplifier (NAP250) and lastly a digital power supply for the NAC82. A CD player would be expected to enter before the amplifiers, but The Audio Counsel recommends experimentation with these and any other components.

So how do the 4-way and 6-way blocks compare? The 4-way block and IEC leads improves Naim systems in certain ways which, I believe, all stems from the removal of sonic grunge. Not that your Nirvana will end up sounding like Sinatra, but your music will be less distorted and hence clearer. This new clarity results in a whole host of improvements; the increase in detail

allows for a more natural instrument presentation and an improved sound-stage, but before you Naim lovers get the wrong idea and start muttering darkly, the usual Naim hallmarks also receive an uplift. The rhythm and timing of my system was never this good using the standard Naim mains cables.

What does the new 6-way block bring to the party? Unsurprisingly, more of the same. Starting with Victoria Williams' *Happy Come Home*, an excellently recorded album, the sound picture was better resolved. In one track where a gospel choir and an orchestra provide the backing, the two are now held completely separate, each section seeming to occupy a space all its own. The sound was much more natural and lost a last lingering edginess not cured by the 4-way block and leads. Transients also received a cleaning, seeming faster than with the 4-way, with no overhang even on the deepest notes. Nowhere was this more apparent than with Dead Can Dance. Their album *Aion* contains some amazing medieval sounds overlaid with rhythmic beats from a variety of percussion instruments. Again the performers were given more space, and the ancient instruments were presented in all their analogue glory. You just had to love ►

► the energy in this performance.

The 6-way block also worked on modern sounds, allowing much more of the music through. And with the decrease in pollution over the 4-way block, you can appreciate the improvement for longer. Madonna's *Ray of Light* LP is a great album, and with the new block the swirling layers of music were presented as a huge open soundscape. From the soaring highs (which lost a slightly brittle quality) down to the really deep bass, which could sound a little flabby before, the music was really driven along.

One of my recent successful purchases was *The Green Fields of Foreverland* by The Gentle Waves. This largely acoustic album is a LoFi recording with simple production which has helped to produce an album of haunting beauty. The new 6-way block revealed its true worth. The acoustic spaces heard were amazing in their depth, and the wonderful female vocal hung in the room. Without a hint of extra emphasis it was just so natural. Particular instruments were easier to identify, and the way the musicians used those instruments was much more apparent, communicating far more of the

musical intent. Notes now had a complete structure; a beginning a middle and an end, which is what brings the naturalness to the sound. Without the 6-way block, even using the 4-way, the system accentuated the leading edges of notes and attenuated their decay, and whilst that gives the music a satisfying sense of snap and attack, it also separates the reproduction from reality.

This in turn effects the timing. Whilst this was always a strength of my system, the 6-way block revealed that I'd been living with something rather more two dimensional than it should have been. The system had been relying on predictability to compensate for the lack of clarity. Shaping the notes more precisely allows the system to place them far more accurately. As a result, the musical framework loses its

unnatural rigidity and takes on a more elastic and expressive quality. The end result is that it sounds less mechanical, and much more like people. I know drummers take a lot of stick, but do you really prefer drum machines? The melodies were easier to follow, and I was humming snatches for the rest of the week. Just what a decent system should do, but so few manage. Incidentally, whilst nearly all my listening was done with records, both blocks are even more effective with CD. More to work with I guess. Whatever the reason, they certainly narrow the quality gap.

To sum up, the Music Works 6-way block gives more detail, more air and space, cleaner transients and, most importantly, an enhanced feeling for the music over their 4-way block (which already out performs anything else I have tried with Naim systems). And these aren't small effects. The improvements are large enough to be heard as soon as you insert the block, but once the leads and the new block are optimised the choice becomes a no-brainer. The 6-way block is worth every penny of its £135 price increase over a single 4-way block. And remember that if you need five or six sockets (a surprisingly common occurrence with Naim kit) the price difference is just \$70. I can't think of anything at five times the price that gives this magnitude of improvement in a Naim system. I haven't tried it with different equipment, but it's got to be worth investigating. Non Naim users watch this space.

The Audio Counsel

14 Stockport Rd
 Cheadle
 Cheshire
 Tel. (44)(0)161-428-7887
 Fax. (44)(0)161-428-3633
 E-mail. musicworks@audiocounsel.u-net.com



KEF Cresta II

by Roy Gregory

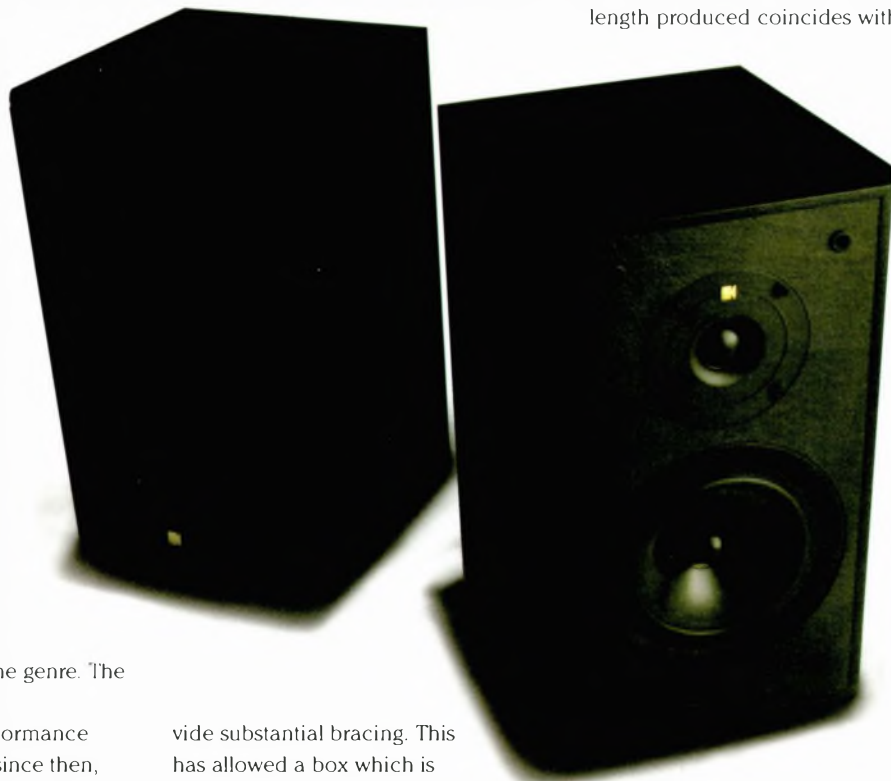
Here we are reviewing a new flagship speaker from KEF, one that visits totally new territory, price wise, so what better time to examine their cheapest speaker? The Maidstone may signal a complete technological reappraisal, it may be an engineering tour de force, and it certainly qualifies as BAJ (big audio jewellery), but it's also £12000 a pop. Which rather limits its commercial relevance. In reality, the £150 Cresta II is far more critical to the company's financial well-being.

This is the most hotly contested price point in the market, embracing as it does, not just the sub-£1000 hi-fi sector, but midi-system upgraders and people who want a decent pair of extension speakers as well. And while competition cuts profits to the bone, the volume sales more than compensate. Whichever way you cut it, the entry level model is a key product in any speaker range. And over the years KEF have produced some classics of the genre. The Coda 2 established a whole new level of performance from budget boxes, and since then, models like the C15 and Coda 7 have regularly jostled their way to the front of

the budget crowd. Which gives the Cresta II a long and illustrious lineage to live up to.

The heart of any speaker is really the cabinet, and whereas the C15 (the Cresta's nearest relative in terms of approach) exploited its diminutive dimensions to create a rigid structure, the desire for greater efficiency ruled that out. Instead, the Cresta uses a 12mm MDF carcass but employs the

a healthy combination of bass weight and efficiency. Other similarities to its spiritual forerunner are the solidly engineered bass-mid unit, and the unusually complex crossover for a speaker at this price. KEF of course benefit from buying and matching huge numbers of crossover components at any one time, which means that they can produce surprisingly accurate networks even at a budget price. They have also included a gentle midrange dip to equalise the peak caused as the wavelength produced coincides with the ►



vide substantial bracing. This has allowed a box which is noticeably larger than the class norm, which endows the Cresta with

▶ baffle width, a technique previously applied to the LS3/5a. This level of sophistication is unusual to say the least, in designs where every penny counts.

The Cresta is a particularly pretty little box, nicely proportioned and with a surprisingly convincing vinyl finish (black or cherry are the options on offer). Terminals are provided for bi-wiring/bi-amping, fitted with gold plated bridges inherited from the more expensive Q series. Unfortunately, the Midas touch doesn't extend to the terminals which are plain nickel plated. If you are going to single wire the speakers, get the dealer to fit short jumpers made out of the cable you've chosen. Far more satisfactory all round. Finally, you should space it a minimum of nine inches from the rear wall. KEF have foregone the bottom end boot that comes from near wall positioning, and so much a part of budget box sound, in favour of greater bass articulation and midrange clarity. Another advantage of that slightly bigger box; it gives you more to play with when you come to choose your trade-offs.

So what we have here is a £150 box with pretensions to genuine hi-fi performance. All that refinement and neutrality that KEF are famous for, it's got to be as dull as dish water, right? You couldn't be more wrong. Stick the Crestas with the latest teenage dance vibe (if you don't own said disc then children, nieces or nephews are normally a good source), and they will knock you sideways. Deep mobile bass that actually plays tunes, plenty of attack and an impressive dynamic range add up to quite a surprise package. The little KEFs will respond with gusto. Which demonstrates that the designers have got rather more than a weather

eye on 'real world applications'.

But don't dismiss the Cresta as a pop orientated boom box. What makes it so impressive on dance music is that it achieves the necessary enthusiasm and sheer energy through the application of real hi-fi type performance. Like I said, the bass has pitch and texture, which is a nice change from the one-note hump that passes for bass with so many budget speakers. And the two drivers are actually really well integrated; no nasty tweeter spitting away and drawing attention to itself. This means that playing something like the AAA Dvorak *String Quintet* is a musically rewarding experience involving recognisable instruments, rather than a confused and screechy mess. The tonal refinement easily distinguishes each player's contribution, and retains

the structure of the piece as a whole. This is a trick that stumps not a few far more expensive speakers.

And that evenness across the midrange makes voices a joy. Clean, clear and intimate, they allow the singer to communicate, and you to hear how they're doing it. Even Nick Cave's sonorous counter tenor (*The Boatman's Call* Mute Stumm 142) is reproduced with a fitting sense of gravitas, the left hand chord patterns of the piano beautifully present and textured, but never allowed to plod, despite the slow tempo. Rhythmically this speaker is no slouch.

The Cresta is far from perfect. It could do with more air and transparency, and its micro dynamics are a bit on the clumsy side. However, that's ignoring the price. What it does give you is a speaker that is both refined and dynamically lively, and which

manages to extend that performance across the vast majority of its output.

There's no ugly lumps and bumps drawing attention to themselves, and the bass is weighty and mobile enough to keep all but a died-in-the-wool head-banger happy. Experiments with more expensive kit have shown just how effectively it will grow with the system, and yet it remains tolerant in a budget set-up. Offering a near perfect balance of bass extension, life and refinement, the baby KEF has succeeded in doing the important things right.

Expect to hear a lot more of this speaker, including the PC view in the next issue. ▶



Clearlight Audio RDC Support Products

by Roy Gregory

If you read my Frankfurt show report in Issue 2, you'll know that I was impressed by a whole range of products manufactured by Clearlight Audio in Germany from a proprietary material, RDC. This is a resin based compound which contains grains of numerous different materials, stretching from lead on the one extreme to rubber on the other. The intention is to create a random structure incapable of sustaining resonance, and thus able to pass energy in an extremely linear fashion.

The applications for such a material within hi-fi engineering are legion, and already Thorens and Loricraft amongst others are employing precision RDC castings in their products. But while Clearlight wait for the rest of the world to cotton on, they have created a range of support products, and I've managed to lay my sticky fingers on some.

What we are talking here is cones or feet, and platforms/shelves. I started out with an Arcam Alpha 9 sat on a RoomTunes DeLuxe Justarack, mainly because the 9 is notoriously finicky about its supporting surface. The first

products I tried were the small cones, the RDP feet and the SPP platform.

The results were as follows:

RDC 2 Cones (27mm high, 30mm diameter) £25 / 4

Slipping three cones under the Alpha 9 had a profound effect on its performance. Listening to the title track from *A Few Small Repairs* (Columbia 484327 2), the whole soundstage became more focused and stable. The guitars had more attack and body, the drums more power, depth and texture. But it was the voice that really did it. Far more real, the breathing a totally natural part of the performance, the vocals suddenly became warmer and more solid, yet at the same time more detailed and intimate. Drive and attack both improved, no doubt helped by the increase in instrumental presence.

The differences were consistent across a whole variety of discs and musical genres. Large scale classical pieces in particular, benefited from the organisation that the cones brought to the 9's prodigious detail retrieval capabilities.

RDP Feet £42.50 / 4

These are not strictly an RDC product, more of a spin off. They consist of a small cylindrical foot, supported by a net which is stretched over a ribbed ring. Energy fed into the foot travels down the net's fibres which are held in tension against the convex ribs, rather like a guitar string against a fret. The

uneven spacing of the ribs allows the energy to disperse across a range of frequencies, translated to heat. The overall result is perhaps best understood as akin to what happens when a person jumps into a blanket held by Firemen. In this case the ridges and fibres take the absorptive role of the firemen's arms.

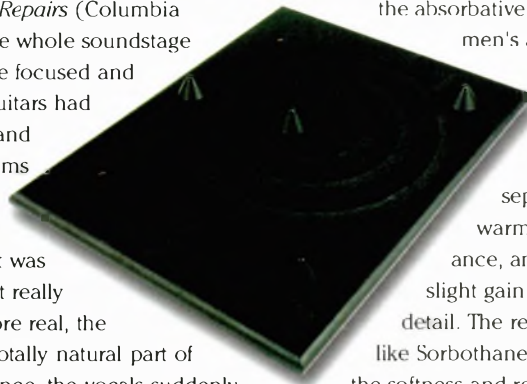
Putting the feet under the nine produced better separation and a warmer tonal balance, and perhaps a slight gain in overall detail. The result was rather like Sorbothane, but without the softness and rounding that goes with that material.

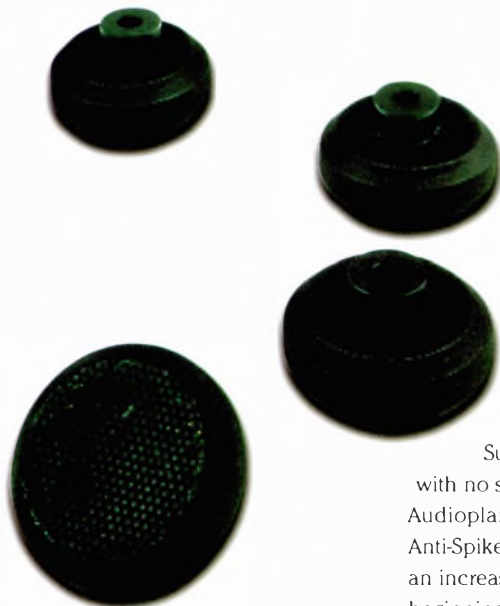
Better, but not as good as the cones.

SPP Platform (425mm x 330mm) £96.50

Finally I tried the SPP platform. This is basically an MDF shelf which has had a spiral groove cut from its underside, into which fits a moulded snail of RDC. The whole thing is supported on RDC 2 cones, screwed onto M8 posts. The idea is to create a structure which will dissipate standing waves, feeding the energy down the cones.

In use the results are similar to the RDC 2's, but with better separation and a blacker background to the music. The platform drops the noise floor to a point where the instruments hang in an inky black space, further adding to the attack and dynamic improvements ▶





wrought on the music. Removing them left the beat blurred and tempo lacking tension. The big RDC 1's are really aimed at speakers rather than equipment, but I haven't had a chance to try them in that role yet. What is interesting is that if you look at the system review with the Townshend Seismic Speaker Supports, the Shahinian Starters

with no spikes at all, and the Audioplan Kontrast III's with their Anti-Spikes, it's becoming clear that an increasing number of people are beginning to question the accepted wisdom of direct coupling speakers to the floor using sharpened steel.

I am writing this as the copy date passes, so further experimentation (including comparisons with the Nordost Pulsar Points) will have to wait. In the meantime RDC has made a stunning debut, more than rewarding my interest. For further information contact:

Loricraft
Tel. (44)(0)1672-511401

Clearlight Audio
Tel. (49)(0)781-970-9991
Fax. (49)(0)781-970-9993

Postscript
I just couldn't let this one lie, so risking a severe battering about the bonce from my editor's hat, I fearlessly pushed on into that twilight zone beyond the deadline. Well, actually I took a couple of sets of cones down to Phonography in order to try them under a few different bits of kit, not least the aforementioned Shahinian speakers.

We started with a Naim CDX/XPS, 82, 180, Obelisk set-up. After demonstrating the benefits of manual over remote operation (See "Its ill-logical.." on the next page) to general bemusement, we moved onto the RDC cones,

starting with three RDC 2's under the CDX. The results were just as expected: greater clarity, more information better integrated, faster attack, clearer decay. Very worthwhile, with vocals in particular becoming obviously more natural, both tonally and in terms of pace and expression.

Next, it was time to tackle the speakers. Unfortunately, the RDC 1's weren't tall enough to by-pass the Obelisks' casters (!), so we wheeled in a pair of Arcs instead. Now, I am an acknowledged fan of the Shahinians, but the Arc is my least favourite model. I'm tempted to point a finger at its MDF cabinet (the others all use ply), but it has always sounded rather thick and sluggish to me. Sure enough, replacing the Obelisks was a salutary experience. The music definitely thickened up, and the sound stage became opaque. The vocals took on a chesty, deeper tone, and the pace slowed.

Slipping four RDC 1's under each corner of the Arcs lifted them off their nylon(?) feet. (Experiments with three cones were unsuccessful.) Suddenly the heaviness was gone. The sound-stage opened out and instrumental definition and attack was dramatically improved. The voices soared clear of the murk, full of vitality and life. The greater attack and clarity meant greater rhythmic integrity, as leading edges improved right across the frequency range. Drums took on a sense of volume and texture which had been entirely lacking. They actually started to sound like a tuned instrument! In case you are still in any doubt, these changes are not subtle. They change both the quality and character of the Arc, moving it far closer to the Obelisk, and offering much greater musical insight without compromising the coherence which is a Shahinian hallmark. Would the cones be as effective under the ply-bodied models? That really will have to wait for another day, but rest assured, I will be finding out. ➤

▶ generated by the cones.

Clearly these improvements are far from subtle, and particularly given the modest cost of the RDC 2 cones, exceptionally cost effective. The RDP feet are a definite alternative to the cones, and I can see situations where they might be the preferred option. However, given a well balanced system, the cones are going to win out most of the time. The shelf is also excellent, although necessarily more expensive. Whilst it will justify its price as a platform, I suspect that where it really comes into its own is as a replacement shelf (£58) in an existing rack, where the glass or MDF boards supplied will undo much of the good work done by the cones. Clear-light already manufacture shelves sized specifically to suit the more popular racks on the market.

Fascinated by these results, I slipped four of the large RDC 1 (£35) cones under the rather promising valve pre-amp that's sitting in the system at present. It's already standing on a Townshend Seismic Stand, so it's well isolated from the outside world, therefore any benefits would be in evacuating internal energy. This the cones proceeded to do with aplomb. I really wasn't prepared for the dramatic improvement in the rhythmic integrity and sheer get up and go that the cones

It's ill-logical...

by Jimmy Hughes

This is one of the strangest things that I've encountered in something like thirty years involvement with hi-fi. Doubly strange! Strange because I can't explain it, and strange because the effect seems to be universal. No matter who made your CD player, whether it's old or new, cheap or expensive, the effect always seems to be the same. What am I on about? Try this experiment.

Choose a track off of a CD - preferably one with nice crisp frequency extremes with lots of information - and, starting with the CD player at Stop, cue the track and press play. Listen for

about 20 seconds to get a feel for the sound quality. Next press Pause, and then cue back to the beginning of the track. Release Pause and listen again, without changing anything else.

It should sound identical, right? But, if your experience tallies with mine, you'll notice that the sound is not as crisp and fresh the second time round. Putting the machine in pause, or simply re-cueing the disc to skip a track without passing through the stop mode, seems to impair the sound. You only get maximum sound quality if you start a new command from Stop.

Any interruption while the disc is playing, be it Next, Previous, Pause or Search, and you will suffer a loss of sound quality. The only way to avoid this seems to be to start each operation with the disc stationary.


As I said, the effect appears to be universal, and I have been able to demonstrate it in a variety of systems using different players. Talking to RG after he experimented, he commented on the differing results from using the manual controls or the remote, but I haven't experienced this, so I'll leave that to Roy.

By Roy Gregory

I was fascinated when Simon, our photographer, first demonstrated this effect, and lost no time trying it for myself. But the player in question (a Copland) had no direct access keypad, so I started by controlling the comparison from the remote handset. Sure enough, I heard exactly the same result as JMH describes, and quickly went on to investigate the influence of other controls, including the ones on the player itself. If you think the result of the original experiment is obvious (and even the most severe sceptics that I've tried it on have been easily convinced), wait until you compare

the difference between using manual commands as opposed to remote ones, remembering to go through stop each time, of course.

Manual commands give a much more immediate and lively sound. Jimmy's description of the difference as "fresher" and "crisper" is spot on. And like him, I've found that the difference is there on every player I've tried. This is not a subtle or unimportant difference either. It's plain to hear, and corresponds not so much to a significant upgrade, as to the system being on song or off. In other words, enjoying the music or not!

What really worries me is the implications of all this for A/B comparisons, whether carried out in shops or by reviewers. This is a big enough difference to totally skew the results of such a comparison, and given that we've been entirely unaware of the risks, prevention would have been a minor miracle. My only consolation is that I hate remotes anyway, but when even the LEDR computer generated set-up tracks are easier to use when keyed in manually (track 24!), that pause button can be awfully tempting. 

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Musical Fidelity XA50 Mono Blocks [Ex-dem]	£499	£399
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Trilogy 902 Pre Amp (Chrome)	£2000	£1399
Unison Research Simply 4P Int Amp	£1595	£999
Unison Research Simply 845 [Ex-dem]	£3095	£2399
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Note: All previous prices as shown are either the former manufacturers' list price when new. Prices paid for their equipment or the estimated price of comparable equipment / models at today's value.

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Wheels on Fire

by Roy Gregory

For most of us, car hi-fi is summed up by the thud-thud-thuda-thud of Kevin's battered XR3i, cruising the streets on a Saturday morning. It has little to do with music, and less to do with quality. At least as we understand it.

It's reassuring to be so certain of your views; to be a member a group that clearly now the way it really is. After all, the hi-fi cognoscenti are only too happy to poke a finger at the huge boot-filling bass bins and power at all odds amplification used 'in car'. Push them harder and they'll start to talk about ambient noise levels and the impossible environment presented by the interior of a car. No. Hi-fidelity reproduction and the insides of motor cars have absolutely nothing to do with each other. But then that's the beauty of conventional 'wisdom'; you get a free set of blinkers with every dollop.

Let's look at this another way. An awful lot of serious domestic hi-fi owners spend a lot of time in their cars. Perhaps it would be worth digging a little deeper into this 'in car' question.

Do the digging and you are going to be surprised. Most of us know that the In Car crowd go in for competitions (yet more opportunities for poking fun at Max Power style

'Sound Offs'), but how many of us have bothered to investigate further. In fact, the competition scene is highly organised, and as well as the much mocked SPL contests, includes serious sound quality categories.

The whole set-up runs under the auspices of the International Auto Sound Challenge Association (IASCA), who produce an incredibly detailed rule book. And this is where it starts getting interesting. As well as giving points scores for the installation of the system, and its various trick features (by which they mean alarm systems, safety considerations, integrated LCD displays and just about anything else you can dream up), they give a specific set of parameters for judging the sound quality of a system. Parameters which are just as applicable to a domestic hi-fi, and which cover and organise a lot of familiar ground. And to back-up these categories they provide a test CD, renewed each year and until recently, produced by audiophile sound house

Sheffield Labs, to illustrate and assess each parameter. The disc comes with notes which explain in detail, just how each musical excerpt should sound (see sidebar). What this amounts to is the creation of a level base line for the assessment of audio system performance. Me thinks we could learn a thing or two here!

The other thing which might surprise you is the number of respected hi-fi companies involved in the In Car market. And I'm not just talking about the likes of Kef, Mission, B&W, Infinity and Nakamichi, who have all dabbled from time to time. I mean the seriously tweaky end of the domestic market. The likes of Ted Jordan and Tom Evans. The people who got me involved in all this are

Excell Power Solutions, a marketing company who exist to promote Jordan and Acoustic Precision products into the In Car arena.

And their weapon of choice is a top grade competition car.

But as the competitions depend on installation as well as sound quality, Excell have teamed up with established installers Huets, based in Hove. The vehicle in question is a dark green Fiat Turbo Coupe, and the results are impressive. Excell provide their Competition Shuttle CD player (an Alpine model which benefits from



The IASCA Test CD's

The current IASCA Competition CD is a compilation disc produced by Autosound 2000. As described in the main text, this consists of a host of top notch recordings, drawn from audiophile record labels, and chosen to examine specific aspects of system performance. Now, this in itself isn't that unusual. All reviewers, and most hi-fi buyers, have their favourite test tracks. You know, the ones you reach for when you want to hear what the system is doing. The beauty of the IASCA disc is that it takes the guess work out of the equation. You are no longer working on what you think the track should sound like, because the listening notes describe it precisely.

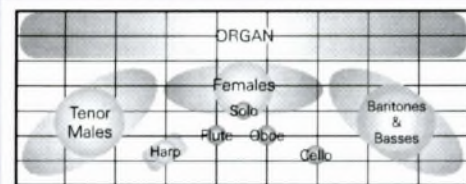
Let's use track 9 as an example:

'Requiem' from Reference RR-57CD

This track was recorded in the same large hall that contains the huge organ of track 5. Your system should transport you out of the vehicle and into this large hall, where you are seated near the front. The ambience is very dense, with a very long decay time. You should be able to picture a large stage as the music begins with a cello playing right of centre. It is soon joined by an oboe slightly right of centre, followed by

a flute just left of centre. When the soloist starts she should appear to be behind the instruments and flanked by the choirs. The harp is left of centre. The soloists and instruments should sound just as pinpoint and focused as the choirs sound large....

Which is about half of it! You also get a soundstage map, just to dispel any lingering positional doubts. These vary from the example



here, which demonstrates the layout of 'Requiem', to far more explicit lay-outs for simple four piece band (Track 15. 'Early Morning Blues' Ben Andrews / Mapleshade MS 56962).

The tracks are drawn from the likes of Chesky, DMP and Bainbridge/HDS, as well as Reference Recordings, and the music covers everything from jazz to studio rock. There are also structured tests for dynamic range, low-level linearity and noise floor, as well as other useful things. Such precise information is an absolute Godsend when it comes to setting up a system, and it's not available anywhere else.

And if you want to take technical evaluation a stage further, the separate test and set-up disc is loaded with creatively configured, frequency specific test Tones, which enable you to isolate spectral balance or phase anomalies, as well as other common problems.

Both discs are available from the SCA, priced at around £15 each.

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► reclocking, and Lithos regulation of both the clock and DAC), and the Jordan drivers. Huets chip in with a pair of Phoenix Gold power amps and the expertise which shoe-horns the whole lot into the less than spacious Fiat. The system is laced together using a KEF (USA) active cross over, and Excell line level and Electrofluidics Monolith 20/20 cabling. But the simple list of componentry doesn't even begin to tell the story here. The shuttle, amps, crossover and associated paraphernalia are plumbed into the boot, hidden behind beautifully sculpted panels and perspex covers, combining exquisite finishing with a surprisingly practical cargo space. But even this pales in comparison to the speaker install. The two JXA 53 midrange/tweeter drivers are built into extensions of the windscreen pillars, which mate seamlessly with the interior trim, a task which required Huets to work all the way back to the roof lining. The JXA 150 bass drivers are carefully sited in the footwells, spaced and angled to be the same distance from the listener as the 53's. Protected by robust grilles, they are rear loaded by sealed enclosures which are sculpted into the car's floor pan.

What, no sub-woofer? The Coupe is a purist set-up with the bare minimum of elements needed to get the job done properly. Hence the almost unheard of total of only four drivers and a single pair of amps. Sound familiar? The whole car is a rolling demonstrator for the benefits of front-end quality and driver technology in a market dominated by high power amps and acres of cone area. In fact, both the quantity and quality of the Fiat's bass is superb, as is its integration with the rest of the sound. Sitting in the car for the first time it was impossible to ignore the fact that the musical performance of the system has a lot more to do with



a domestic hi-fi system than any car hi-fi I've ever heard. Playing familiar discs, the performance was articulate and engaging. Forearmed with a healthy dose of scepticism I'd deliberately loaded up with hi-fi torture tracks, but the system made a better job of maintaining the tension and controlling the pizzicato bass of the Barbirolli *Tallis Fantasia* (EMI CDC 7475372) than many a domestic system that I've heard. The soundstage was wide and deep, and naturally positioned out across the bonnet. Likewise the vocal gymnastics and troublesome bass of Shawn Colvin's 'Every Little Thing (He) Does Is Magic' (*Cover Girl* Columbia 477240 2). Every mannerism of the stretched out lyrics was reproduced in tact, along with the feeling

and fun that make this such a great cover. The bass was tight and powerful, and never tripped over itself when the going got tough. Right from the word go it was obvious that all the parameters and expectations that I apply to domestic hi-fi were perfectly applicable here. Make no mistake, this is a serious hi-fi system by any standards. The fact that it is in a car merely makes it more remarkable.

The problem is that it is also a very expensive system, and a lot of that cost goes into the immaculate installation, which you can't take with you when you sell the car, and I can't see too many second-hand buyers shelling out for. Not exactly the last word in practicality. With that in mind, Ex-cell have produced a second car on an altogether more modest basis. Built into a Subaru Imprezza, the system is pretty much a straight bolt-in, driven by a four channel integrated Alpine head unit and shuttle. A pair of JXA 92's are a straight replacement in the door panels, with bass provided by a pair of parcel shelf mounted 150's. Again the results are quite surprising, ►

▶ albeit less refined than the Fiat. The modified Alpine provides the same sense of life and musical coherence whilst the bass trades subtlety and integration for sheer enthusiasm. Venting into the boot provides a less than ideal termination, but it still plays tunes with gusto. What you don't get is the same sense of integration, which combined with a soundstage that lurks in the footwells, detracts from the 'you are there' perspective which makes the Fiat so



impressive. Rhythmically and dynamically the system is a hit, but its shortcomings are simply more apparent. Ex-cell are aware of the failings and plan to replace the dash corner air vents with a pair of JXA 53's, and whilst this won't do anything about the road noise (the Subaru suffers from serious tyre rumble), it should get the soundstage up off the floor.

It will also closer approximate what was the most intriguing set-up I heard. This again consisted of a modified Alpine head unit, this time driving a pair of door mounted JXA 125's, and dash mounted 53's. The whole thing was slung into an elderly Citroen BX. Whether it was the front

mounted driver array or the quieter car (probably a combination of the two!), but here was a cheaper set up that got very close to the virtues of the Fiat, sonically if not aesthetically. Bass wasn't as deep, and the soundstage lacked some sophistication, but it was right up where it should be, and the music was definitely intact. It really did serve to demonstrate that the terms car and hi-fi are not mutually exclusive. (The dash tweeter mod had been done by the time Simon returned to photograph the Subaru, and he reports far better results, with a proper sound stage, way out over the bonnet.) Speaking as someone who normally listens to talk shows in the car, this brief exposure to a better world has left me with a strange tendency to eye my door panels and fondle the dashboard. And whilst Huets and Ex-cell are far from the only practitioners of these dark arts, I'll happily admit to being pretty impressed with their efforts. The bottom line with car systems will always be the noise levels associated with pushing half a ton of tin box through the air at 70 mph.

Competition listening is always undertaken with the car stationary, which seems like a bit of a cop out. There again, do I really want a convoy of competitors circling the venue at high speed whilst the drivers discuss dynamic impact and the timbral accuracy of the string tone! But some cars are a lot noisier than others, and not all music has the extreme dynamic contrasts of the Rachmaninoff Symphonic Dances (Analogue Productions APCD 006), the least successful of my chosen tracks. If music matters, and your are prepared to choose a car accordingly (rather than as a four wheel

testosterone reservoir), then you can have real hi-fi on the move. We have the technology, and the expertise. All you need is the curiosity to find out what's possible. ➤

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

So what does it all cost?

The featured systems price out as follows. Bear in mind that installation costs are on top of the hardware, and will depend on what exactly you want.

Citroen BX19 GTi 16 Valve	
1 pr JXA 53 mid-range/tweeters	£299
1 pr JXA92 full-range drivers	£399
Alpine CD receiver CDA7832R (4 x 35w)	£650
Alpine CHS605 EX-CELL competition shuttle	£999
Total	£2347

Subaru Imprezza Turbo	
1 pr JXA92 full-range drivers	£399
1 pr JXA150 bass drivers	£499
Alpine CIA1505R digital commander receiver (4 x 55w)	£499
Alpine CHS605 EX-CELL competition shuttle	£999
4 Falcon Acoustics chokes	£80
2 EX-CELL polypropylene caps	£159
Total	£2636

Fiat Turbo Coupe	
1 pr JXA53 mid-range/tweeters	£299
1 pr JXA125 bass drivers	£449
Alpine 7939 Receiver with Lithos clock	£1048
Alpine CHS605 EX-CELL competition shuttle	£999
KEF (USA) KE2 Active Crossover (EX-CELL modified)	£399
1 pr Phoenix Gold XS2500 stereo amplifiers	£500
EX-CELL RCA cable	£266
Electrofluidics 20/20 speaker cable	£560
5 Weeks Labour @£1000/week approx.	£5000
Total	£9520

Huets Car And Security

Huets are probably the oldest specialist in-car audio installers in the country. They opened for business in the late fifties and now have two shops, one in Worthing, and the one we visited in Hove. They've also been involved in the competition scene right from the start, with an enviable record of success.

Whilst there are no single speaker dem rooms (cars?), there are a wide variety of products on demonstration, and like the better domestic hi-fi dealers, Huets organise technical seminars with their suppliers so that their customers get a chance to hear it from the horses mouth, so to speak. With a little notice they can also arrange for customers to hear one of the seven cars they currently have competing at various levels of competition. The in-car equivalent of a home dem, I guess.

Their level of expertise really needs to be seen to be appreciated, and whilst they are happy to advise on something as simple as replacing your stock speakers with something better, it extends all the way up to the rebuilding and seamless re-trimming of the Fiat's interior, where the standards of finishing involved exceed the original. And it's not just about making it pretty. The main article should give you some idea of how good their systems can sound, but

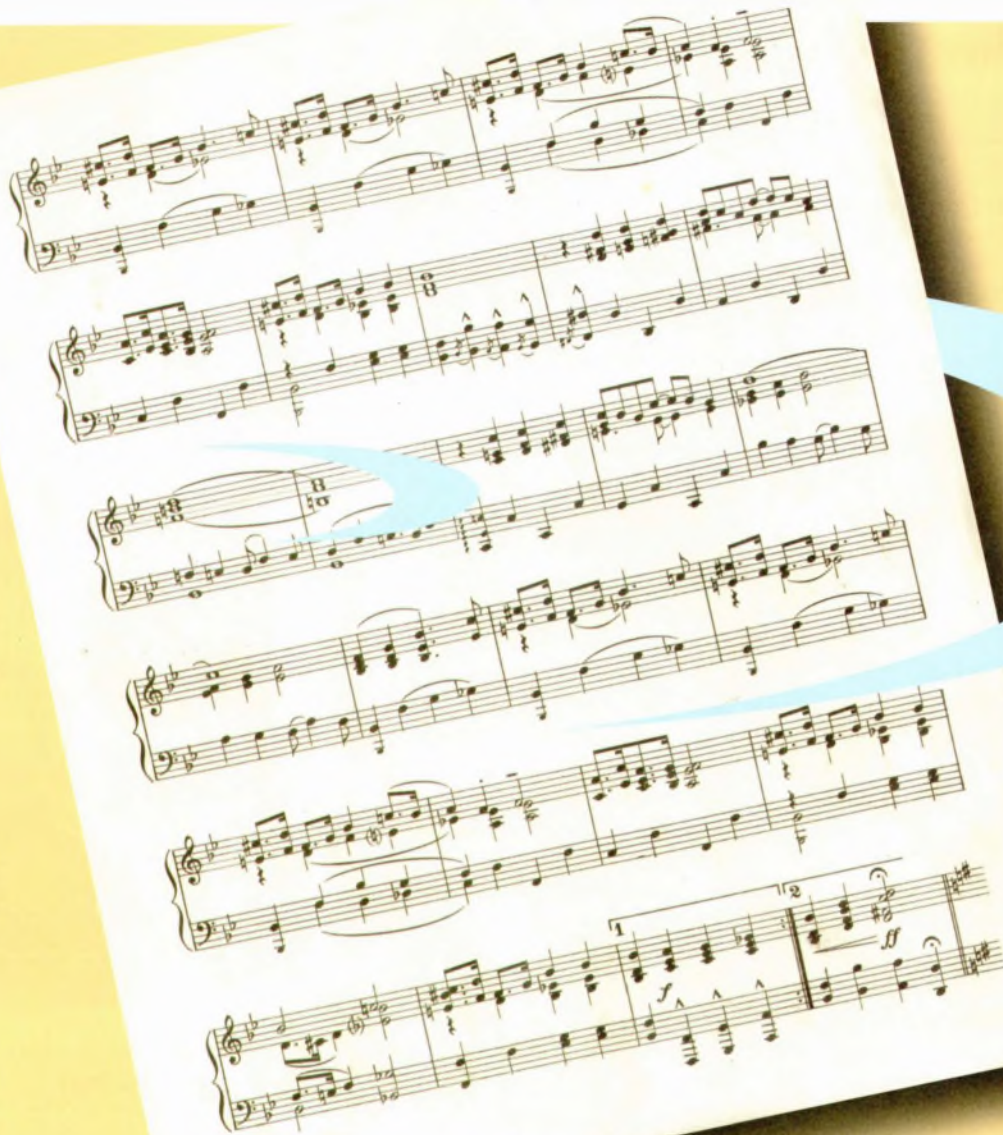
the installation side of the business extends to integrating security and immobiliser equipment with similar attention to detail. Kind of important when you consider what these systems cost!

The installation in the Fiat is the work of Robert Drake and Mark Butcher, and as well as remodelling the windscreen pillars and footwells, involves the creation of all the cosmetic panels which 'finish' the equipment installation in the boot. Then of course there's the signal wiring, and the need to create an electrical supply to support the whole set-up. That the whole job looks like part of the original structure, and leaves the owner with a working boot, seems little short of a miracle, and those don't come cheap. But as I said before, this is an example of the *crème de la crème*. Just like hi-fi, you don't have to start with a full-range tri-amped system, and Huets are just as happy to work on slightly less extravagant projects. They even put up with a couple of complete novices asking stupid questions and getting under their (extremely busy) feet, and there's none of the snootiness that can bedevil specialist hi-fi dealers. They may or may not be the best in the business, but you are going to have to go some to beat them!



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Nick Cave

by Jon Maple

They used to call him The Prince of Darkness and sometimes King Ink. Maybe they still do.

There has always been something of the night about him. I remember Bad Seeds gigs in mid-80's London attracting some of the most scrupulous black-clad lowlife outsiders the city's squats had to offer. If their behaviour in the concert hall was unspeakable, what went on the toilets was nobody's business. Meanwhile up on stage Old Nick writhed in catharsis, vomiting forth an iambic melodrama of death, madness and lost love. "O the same God that abandoned her/Has in turn abandoned me/Deep in the Desert of Despair/I wait at the Well of Misery."

Nowadays the elegant and unobtrusive hi-fi's of Islington hum to his tune. As his recent presence as curator of The Royal Festival Hall's summer Meltdown Festival would indicate, Cave has been elevated to the position of art exemplar and cultural high priest.

In the beginning was the Boys Next Door. Cave, multi-instrumentalist Mick Harvey, drummer Phil Calvert and bassist Tracey Pew formed the band as an adolescent diversion while students at Caulfield Grammar School, Melbourne in the mid-70s. They later



became leading lights of the burgeoning Melbourne punk scene. Guitarist Rowland S. Howard was adopted in '78 as the band continued its development. In 1980 - like many Antipodeans before and since - they upped sticks for London, metamorphosing into The Birthday Party en route.

The England they arrived in was a dismal place filled with post-punk ennui. The pop mainstream was as dire, bland and formulated as ever. Meanwhile, the left-field contained a limited quantity of brooding visionaries - The Fall, The Pop Group, The Gang of Four, Killing Joke, Public Image Limited - and it was into that climate of dismay which The Birthday Party natu-

rally gravitated.

But their live performances were far more extreme than those of their new peer group. There was a full-on self-destructive nihilism at work (the true force of which was immortalised on the live video *Pleasure Heads Must Burn* and the live EP - shared with Lydia Lunch - *Drunk on The Pope's Blood*). This intensity, this extremity of rock-'n'-roll, was by some rare feat translated faithfully to their studio

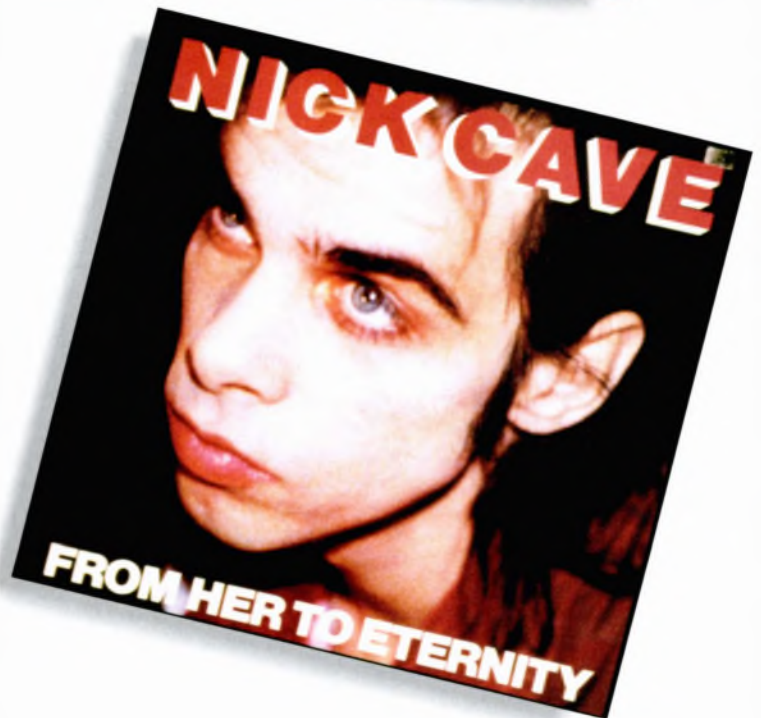
work. A quartet of extraordinary recordings followed on 4AD - the LPs *Prayers on Fire* and *Junkyard*, and the EPs *The Bad Seed* and *Mutiny!*. This is a squalling, turbulent music of jagged rhythms and thundering bass, angular with fractured dissonance. If The Ramones used a chainsaw for their aural assault, The Birthday Party ran you through with a rusty sabre. Cave's feral howls and wracked baritone delivered poetic outbursts whose themes relied (as they do to this day) on apparent obsessions with Hellfire and brimstone Christianity, love, sex and violent death. It was a brutal yet literate reduction of rock'n'roll to its primal essence - righteous, sexual and wild.

The band imploded, riven with rivalries, addled with alcohol and ▶

▶ narcotics, in 1983. They had moved to Berlin at a time when the divided city was a crucible for opiate-fixated rock-'n-roll creativity which had already attracted Iggy Pop (*The Idiot*), David Bowie (*Low*) and Lou Reed (*Berlin*) to record there. Calvert was pre-emptively sacked and Harvey moved to the drums. Despite - or because of - the terminal condition of the band, The Birthday Party's swan song EP *The Bad Seed* was its most disciplined and well realised, showing a collective force for art - art terrorism, if you will - at its most potent.

In the aftermath, remaining in Berlin, Cave assembled a new band, a post-punk supergroup of musical soul mates. Only long-time partner, Mick Harvey remained from The Birthday Party. The ex-Magazine bassist/composer Barry Adamson and Einsturzende Neubauten guitarist/composer Blixa Bargeld were added.

Cave first experienced the metal-banging, angle-grinder-wielding industrial experimentalism of Einsturzende Neubauten on Dutch TV in '82. Of the guitarist's performance he wrote, "He was the most beautiful man in the world. He stood there in black leotard and black rubber pants, black rubber boots. Around his neck hung a thoroughly fucked guitar. His skin cleared to his bones, his skull was an utter disaster, scabbed and hacked, his eyes bulged out of their orbits like a blind man's.. And yet, the eyes stared at us as if to herald some divine visitation. Here stood a man on the trashhold (sic) of greatness - here stood a Napoleon victorious amongst his spoils, a conquering Caesar parading his troops, a Christ akimbo on Calvary. Blixa Bargeld. For sixty seconds, this man stood as if paralysed, hexed by his own madness. Then he opened his mouth and let out a scream that sounded like somebody was pulling a thistle from his soul." This was some build-up and the influence - frenetically rhythmic, dynamic, clanking, anti-melodic - of Einsturzende



Neubauten was keenly felt on The Bad Seeds debut LP, *From Her to Eternity* (Mute 1984).

A version of Leonard Cohen's 'Avalanche' that is, if anything, even more intensely depressed than the original acts as a kind of spiritual overture to what follows. As a statement of

intent, the opening lines "I walked into an avalanche/It covered up my soul..." could hardly be bettered for the bleak musical and lyrical vista of the album. Although typically uncompromising, *From Her To Eternity* is slightly calmer and more musically coherent than The ▶

▶ Birthday Party's dervish rock'n'roll. Rumbling bass lines and Bargeld's Teutonic rhythms and Krautrock avant-garde repetitions carry songs which are becoming more literary and allusive. 'Cabin Fever', for instance - "...The Captain's free hand is a cleaver/With which he fashions his beard and rations his jerky/And carves his peg outta the finest mahogany!...He tallies up his loneliness notch by notch., Winter by winter...Now his leg is whittled right down to a splinter" is Moby Dick starring Nick as Ahab. The 'Saint Huck' character, meanwhile, is Huckleberry Finn cast as a doomed boy-prostitute who, once murdered, finds redemption in the arms of a dead and newly sanctified Elvis.

The image of Elvis as Saviour - or at least an influential representative of the godhead - is one which recurs in the song 'Tupelo' on the second Bad Seeds album *The Firstborn is Dead*. If there is such a thing as an archetypal Nick Cave song from this period then 'Tupelo' may be it. In the midst of a mighty Old Testament tumult visited upon the town, and presaging God know's what horrors of retribution, "The King is born in Tupelo!". Over a ticking, clattering beat from bass and drums the epic storm/birth is conjured up with characteristic musical vividness. Tupelo's nameless shame has caused its downfall, then, "In a clapboard shack with a roof of tin/Where the rain came down and leaked within/A young mother frozen on a concrete floor./With a bottle and a box and a cradle of straw...Well Saturday gives what Sunday steals/And a child is born on his brothers heels/Come Sunday morn the first born's dead/In a shoebox tied with a ribbon of red...". The birth of Elvis, (and his stillborn twin), in a Tupelo farm shack, is here mythologised, theologised even, in a parallel to the birth of Christ. Later we learn that "The King will walk on Tupelo....And Carry the burden of Tupelo...You will reap just what you

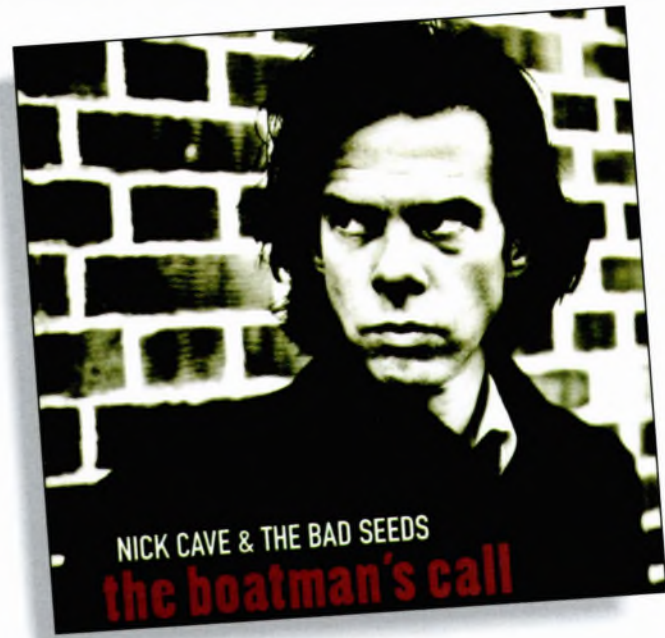
sow." So Elvis becomes the Redeemer of Sin.

Taking a break from composition, Cave next embarked on an album of cover versions *Kicking Against The Pricks* (Mute 1986). The material interpreted here is eclectic - Jimmy Webb and The Velvet Underground rub shoulders with The Sensational Alex Harvey Band, among many others - but the themes fit perfectly. There's John Lee Hooker's self-explanatory 'Im Gonna Kill That Woman', the Tim Rose murder ballad 'Hey Joe', 'Sleeping Annaleah' (featuring violent death), 'Long Black Veil' (fratricide plus ghostly manifestations) and the trad gospel song 'Jesus Met The Woman At The Well', the Alabama Singers arrangement of which is given a queasily rollicking lilt. The Johnny Cash song 'The Singer' (aka The Folksinger) was released as a single, hit the top of the indie charts and Cave was hailed an interpreter and stylist of note. Because the next album was the first to be composed - at least partly - of traditional melody and harmony, *Kicking Against The Pricks* can be seen as a kind of musical watershed.

In *Your Funeral My Trial* (Mute 86) there's a strong country-blues influence

on songs like 'Sad Waters' and the title-track, while the freakshow that is 'The Carny' features a warped waltz time clanking amid a menacing, slowly-swirling circus overture. 'Jack's Shadow' and 'Hard On For Love' meanwhile combine blues changes with florid piano riffing and old-school banging Bad Seeds repetition.

Cave took a two-year sabbatical, partly to appear in the Wim Wenders film *Wings Of Desire*, and reappeared in 1987 with a new album. Featuring former Cramps and Gun Club guitarist Kid Congo Powers, a highly regarded vocal performance and some of his most powerful songs to date, *Tender Prey* (Mute 87) was a class act. It opens with the extraordinary epic 'The Mercy Seat' - a nightmare vision of lawful retribution played out in condemned cell and electric chair - "And the Mercy Seat is waiting /And I think my head is burning/And in a way Im yearning/ To be done with all this measuring of truth/An eye for and eye and a tooth for a tooth/And anyway there was no proof / Nor a motive why". There are lyrical echoes of the Phil Ochs death-chamber ballad *The Iron Lady* here as the fearful, near-demented rant pro- ▶



► gresses over giddy, vertigo-inducing strings. 'Up Jumped The Devil' is a flailing piano-led polka of exorcism while 'Deanna' has the keening Hammond chords and structure of a Northern soul dance number. Elsewhere there is the pery voyeurism of the softly mournful piano ballad 'Watching Alice', and the Blind-Willie Johnson-inspired blues-rock 'City of Refuge'.

ing. The title track is a reworking of the story of Cain & Abel - though tellingly, without the original's redemptive outcome. Nor is there redemption to be found in such lushly lugubrious outpourings as 'The Weeping Song', 'The Hammer Song', 'Lament' and 'Sorrow's Child'. As an album of self-conscious, high quality miserabilism, *The Good*

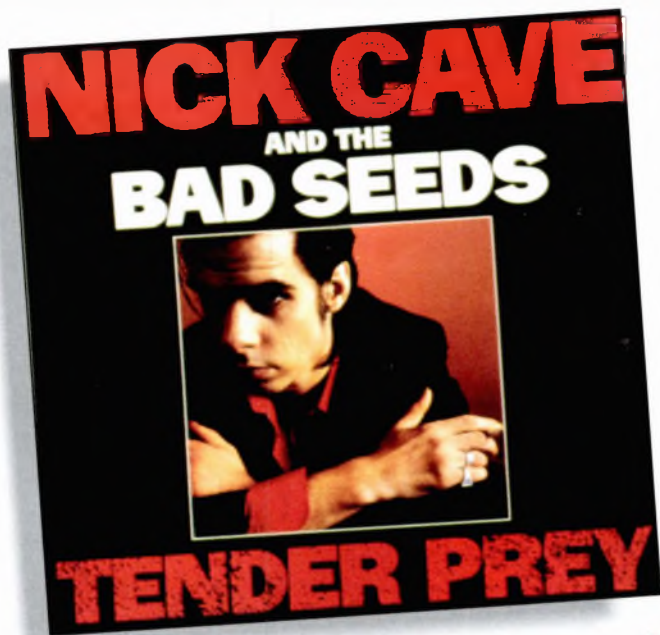
Son is up there with Lou Reed's *Berlin* and the works of Leonard Cohen or Jacques Brel.

Three more albums were released (*Henry's Dream* (92), *Live Seeds* (93) and *Let Love In* (94)), before the next identifiable watershed occurred. *Murder Ballads* (a collection of old and new songs solely concerned with brutal murders) is generally assumed to be the final exorcism of Cave's dark

obsessions. The blood-drenched tales included two duets with female artists, PJ Harvey and Kylie Minogue. As well as their voices, the songs - 'Henry Lee' and 'Where The Wild Roses Grow', respectively - seem to use the opposing but equally potent symbolic luggage of the chanteuses (one - hitherto - frivolous and pop-fluffy, the other dark and blues-drenched) as dramatic props. Perhaps the most heinous confessional here, however, is the mighty 'Stagger Lee', a rewriting of an old, much-used text (see 'London Calling' by The Clash, for example). This dastardly tale has a lyric of such vivid obscenity that the trade paper *Music Week* was impressed enough to publish the dirtiest bits in advance of the album's release.

While recording the *Murder Ballads* album, Cave was simultaneously writing songs whose content was the polar opposite of such extreme fictions. The songs ended up on the next album, *The Boatman's Call* (Mute 97) and it was this album which found a home on the aforementioned hi-fi's of Islington.

Never shy of the grand opening statement, the first line sung by Cave on this collection is "I don't believe in an interventionist God...". ►



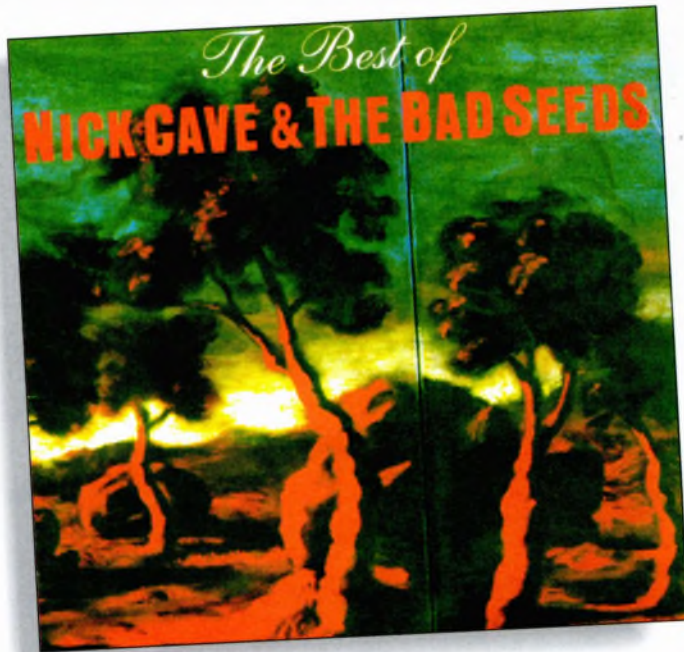
Cave then managed to kick his heroin habit and this new freedom saw an increase in productivity. A collection of lyrics and writings, *King Ink* (Black Spring Press) and the vividly realised Faulkneresque novel *And The Ass Saw The Angel* were published. He also featured in and, with Harvey and Bargeld, recorded the soundtrack to the Australian prison movie *Ghosts...Of The Civil Dead*.

It would be convenient to think that there was a relationship between his newly opiate-free muse and the gentle quality - and swooning strings - of *The Good Son* (Mute 90). Recorded in Sao Paulo with an expertly arranged Brazilian string section, the album's main lyrical motif is that of mourn-



► That may be the case, but it is clear that for the first time in his career Cave is exploring the concept of redemption through love. It's not as if he hadn't written love songs before. Most of the Birthday Party's output was to do with love. A fetid, unrequited and obsessively vengeful kind of love, certainly, but love all the same. However, the love songs of *The Boatman's Call* are nakedly, almost embarrassingly personal and touching. Set to sparse, gentle arrangements - sometimes no more than pale colourings of piano and bass - the songs are from the heart. This is no bespoke Tin Pan Alley "Moon in June" effort, but an intimate glimpse into a - newly healed? - songwriters soul.

speak/And everything I know/There is a hand that protects me/And I do love her so..." Cave seems to mix the romantic and the devotional. 'Brompton Oratory', similarly, contains such lines as "A beauty impossible to endure/The blood imparted in little sips/The smell of you still on my hands/ As I bring the cup up to my lips" in



that here was a bid for mainstream commercial success while Christians might have been comforted by the cliché of Cave's apparent Damascene conversion, as they were by Bob Dylan's. But it seems to me that Cave (not to mention Dylan) is a far more complex figure than such reactions give him credit for. There remains a 'Heart of Darkness' lurking within the Cave muse and it will be interesting to see in what direction his future work takes him. In the meantime, last year's release of *The Best of Nick Cave & The Bad Seeds* (Mute) gives an overview and a very solid introduction to an extraordinary talent. ►+

'West Country Girl' has a lyric generally thought to concern Polly Harvey, "Her lovely lidded eyes I've sipped/Her fingernails all pink and chipped/Her accent which I'm told is 'broad'..." and this is crooned over a scant arrangement of treated piano, violin, and acoustic guitar. In songs like 'Lime Tree Arbour', "Through every word that I












which the carnal melds into the sacramental. Elsewhere, we find the purely devotional 'There Is A Kingdom', a latterday gospel song in which, revealingly, The King is no longer Elvis, but the rather more traditional Jesus Christ. *The Boatman's Call* is an album of great depths explored with an almost studied musical tastefulness. Cynics might have suggested



How To Read The Record Reviews

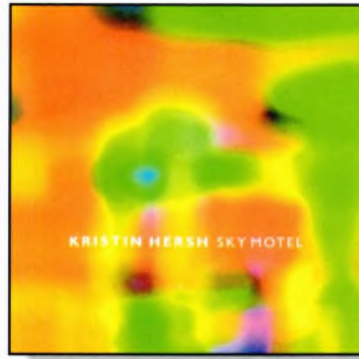
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Kristen Hersh

Sky Motel

CAD9008CD



Bands and performers are a bit like drugs; for any given subject some are uppers and some are downers. You can rank songwriters by the depth of the rose tinting on their glasses. Kristen Hersh is definitely one of music's downers, with a penchant for telling it just exactly how it is, warts and all.

Sky Motel is her third solo album, and fuses new sounds to the familiar acoustic backbone of her music. The sparse sound emphasises her melancholic vocal which is chock full of emotion and contrasts vividly with brief flurries of aggressive electric guitar. Her strong voice can handle the exposure, and travels the range from breathy seduction to raw disdain. And despite the small cast of supporting instruments, clever production weaves complex songs, full of rhythmic and dynamic contrast. And what songs. Full of opposites; innocence and sexuality, soft and hard, delicacy and brute force. All helped by an unobtrusive recording that lets the music breathe.

As a fan of the Throwing Muses, I guess it was on the cards that I'd enjoy la Hersh's solo efforts. If you haven't tried them, don't delay. I've a feeling you'll enjoy them too.

JH



Geoff Muldaur

the secret handshake

Hightone HCD 8097



Drawn to this CD by a glowing endorsement from Richard Thompson, I had high hopes. Before I got a quarter of the way through the first track 'Wild Ox Moan' I was kicking myself for not catching on quicker. The album is subtitled 'American Music: Blues and Gospel' and that's just what you get. A guided tour through different genres from '40's gospel numbers, Leadbelly's 'Alberta', through to a New Orleans funeral marching tune. It's a pretty rich mix, but Muldaur carries it off with ease. He has a very expressive voice that he moulds beautifully to the demands of the different numbers. Accompanying himself on guitar, penny whistle or banjo and backed by a band that's really tight, there's not a weak track. The recording is good, favouring the largely acoustic instruments well. A favourite track this week is 'Chevrolet/ Big Alice' featuring fifes and drums and drawing on African dance music influences. Next week it'll be another. The album has 10 tracks, so that's a track a week for the next 10 weeks, then its back to the start. I've found me an all time favourite. Now what else has he released?

DD





Scott4

Works Project LP

V2 Records VVR1008011



Scott4 have now produced two albums that are full of dichotomy. Using a mixture of purely analogue renditions alongside samples and slightly distorted synthesizers they range from "unplugged" to Kraftwerk-esque. Add tempi that see-saw from upbeat to downright dismal and there should be enough variety for anyone.

The band has three members (vocals, drummer and guitarist), and draw on a number of influences, rock, country and a smattering of "dance", making the songs hard to pigeon hole. The use of unusual sounds and percussion in songs, particularly in instrumental sections, has been retained from their equally fine first album, *Recorded in State LP*. Lyrically complex and emotive, the final sound is definitely their own, new and eclectic.

The album has fine sound quality and production and is simply recorded preserving the complex rhythms present. *Works Project LP* can perhaps best be described with analogy to an old city; sections are modern and sparkling, but just around a corner lurk deprivation and poverty, and this is reflected both in the music and the lyrics.

Anybody lacking originality in their musical diet need look no further.

JH

RECORDING
MUSIC



Trisha Yearwood

Thinking Of You

MCA MCD 11226



The music business can be a tough nut to crack, so a helping hand is welcome. In Trisha Yearwood's case it came when Garth Brooks asked her to contribute vocals to 'No Fences'. Fortunately their styles have little else in common!

She is a fantastic interpreter of other people's compositions and on this album she gives full measure to songs from the likes of Gretchen Peters, Melissa Etheridge, Matraca Berg and Kimm Richey.

First up is 'Thinking 'Bout You'. It's a great opener, lustful and full of longing. Gretchen Peters' 'On A Bus To St Cloud' is such a sad song, and Trisha pours out the hurt in the lyrics with pure emotion. She does an even better job on Kimm Richey's 'Those words We Said', one of those classic leaving songs that the Americans do so well, the heartbreak in her voice perfectly matching the forlorn lyrics.

There are some heavyweight guests playing on Thinking Of You. Marty Stuart, Pam Tillis, George Jones and Mary Chapin Carpenter all lend their talents, and Trisha's longtime producer Garth Fundis does a fine job. The sound is big and spacious, with Yearwood's voice well to the fore - exactly where it deserves to be.

AH

RECORDING
MUSIC



The Gentle Waves

The Green Fields of Foreverland.

Jepster Recordings JPRLP006.



This is a haunting album which revolves around an amazing and unusual female voice. The vocal delivery is very difficult to describe, being soft with a breathy quality and almost childlike. The album feels like a series of lullabies or fairytales sounding natural, folkly and elemental, right in step with the current eco / druidical axis. The lyrics themselves reinforce this, seeming a bit dreamy and naive, but listen deeper and they have hidden strengths.

The album is almost entirely acoustic, using strings (guitar, violin and cello), piano, bongos and others. Featuring the musicians from Belle and Sebastien, this is much less melancholy than their output; sure it has its moments, but nowhere near as intense.

One track is completely out of character and really lets fly! Almost punk in intensity, especially compared to the rest of the album it feels abrupt, with the sudden use of electric instruments.

Very melodic, there are hooks throughout the album, and I find myself humming snatches all the next day. The very simple LoFi recording and production helps to create a very good album, but one that is very hard to grab hold of. It sort of drifts by, changing your mood as it goes. Not to be missed, This is music of rare beauty.

JH

RECORDING
MUSIC





Kula:Shaker

Peasants Pigs and Astronauts.

SHAKER 2 LP



It's the 70's again and prog-rock rules. Well it is and it does for this band. Kula:Shaker have received plenty of criticism for their unashamedly retro sound, but I love it. A mix of prog-rock and ethnic Indian influences has enabled this band to create a really interesting and original album.

Peasants Pigs and Astronauts is the band's second album, and the better of the two, being a little more diverse and inventive. The Indian influence is present on almost all of the tracks, produced on what sounds like authentic instruments, and several songs also feature Indian lyrics. The tempo across the album, and across some songs, varies, which helps further expand the diversity of density texture.

The major riffs are largely built on electric instruments (guitars being dominant while synthesizers play their part), but the band keep things as analogue as possible, including the indispensable Hammond Organ. Layered and interleaving melodies are combined along with loops to create detailed soundscapes which present a swirling background to the lyrics. I can forgive the pretentious attempts at cosmic lyrics because the music is so very catchy.

Break out the flares and buy this album.

JH

RECORDING
MUSIC



Hal Willner

Whoops, I'm An Indian

Pussyfoot CD/LP012



Having produced some marvellous left field works - *Weird Nightmare* - *Meditations On Mingus*, *William Burroughs' Spare Ass Annie* and the Kurt Weill tribute, *September Songs* to name but three - Willner now immerses himself in samples and beats. Here we have a dance album - on Howie B's dance label, no less - which really doesn't sound like one. It's a surrealist collage of sounds, the only real live instruments being Ralph Carney's various woodwinds.

Willner's original suggestion to Howie, "uh, lets have, uh, soup flowing upstairs with ducks" might give some indication of the spirit of the enterprise. Obscure recordings by, among others, *The Golden Gate Quartet*, *Spike Jones*, *Jimmy Durante*, *Sun Ra*, *Lucky Millander*, *The Collegiate Negro Choir*, *The Russian Cossack Choir* and *Ernest Tubbs* are sampled and mashed up, gated, compressed, tweaked, and faded in and out. 'In Do You Hear Me?' a rhythmic chant of "You'll eat no bread, no corn, no pie, cake, dessert of any kind....Hit the spot, Baby" is sequenced over clattering drum'n'bass and Mariachi brass. Later, a native American chant segues into a the 'Star Spangled Banner', then 'Give Me A Home Where The Buffalo Roam'. The album ends with 'What A Friend We Have In Jesus' slowed to funereal pace. All this and more. A strange, intriguing work.

JM

RECORDING
MUSIC



Skunk Anansie

Post Orgasmic Chill



In last month's issue I chose this album as one of my desert island discs for those days when I just want to shout along to a big chorus song or wig out to some hefty riffs. 'Hefty riffs?' you might well ask, if all you've heard are the singles, and this question reveals the secret of the band - schizophrenia. On all their albums, for every radio-friendly torch song, you will also find a shouty rocker and an addictive riff-fest, so those of a sensitive disposition are duly warned. This time out Skunk have mixed together the straight rock of the first album with the experimental aspects of the second and added a sprinkling of strings to produce their best album to date.

Both live and on record, Skunk are tighter than a lock-nut that's been screwed down with a yard-long torque wrench, but whereas on stage the power of the band comes mostly from sheer volume, on record it is achieved via a dense and flat production style and vast dynamics. These factors make the CD a good test for a system's timing and dynamic capabilities, turn it up and revel in a 'truly glorious racket'.

DA

RECORDING
MUSIC





Luna

The Days of our Nights

Beggars Banquet BBQLP209 

This is just a great rock album. Luna are a four piece band with a guitar based sound, around which they weave synths, vocals, strings, and even a trumpet. The songs on this, the bands fifth album, never stray from the standard rock format of verse and chorus, and why not?

Lyrics focus on a character or person, sometimes observed and sometimes from their perspective, but the subject s are eclectic to say the least: a stalker, an alcoholic dreamer, even a child prodigy.

Vocal delivery is languorous and Lou Reed like, and along with the music (especially the guitar) is vaguely reminiscent of the Velvet, although the album as a whole has a more melodic sound which makes it more accessible (and mainstream?). Talking of which, there is a bizarre cover of 'Sweet Child of Mine'.

Production is average, with a degree of muddling on some tracks, although it allows the performance through pretty much intact. The overall recording quality is nothing to get excited about. This is a workmanlike effort which runs the band through its paces without ever really stretching them. Challenging it's not. Damn good fun? Absolutely.

JH



Jonny Lang

Lie To Me



From the opening bars of the lead and title track, you know that you are listening to an accomplished and highly professional talent. Tasty guitar, tight backing band, and a voice that reeks of everything that rock'n'roll could throw at it. Except that when he recorded this album Lang was only 15 years old!

He started his musical career as a saxophonist, but had a calling for the guitar, so he took some lessons, practised long and hard, and within a year was leading his guitar teacher's band on the club circuit. Lie To Me is an absolute belter of an album. Hear Jonny breath new life into 'Good Morning Little School Girl', marvel at the dexterity of his fingering on 'Matchbox', and feel the yearning in his wonderful voice on the gorgeous 'Missing Your Love', one of two beautiful ballads that this precocious talent penned himself.

Some people might struggle to believe in the authenticity of Jonny Lang's world of broken hearts, pool halls and torn relationships. After all, what can a 15 year old possibly know about life? Well, there are exceptions to every rule and believe me, Jonny Lang is most definitely the 'Real Deal'. I'll leave you with a quote from seasoned blues veteran Jimmy Thackery - "He plays so good I want to break his fingers." 'Nuff said.

AH



Homelife

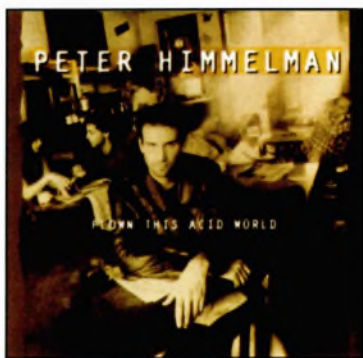
Cho Cho

Madwartz HL 501 

Well chilled, Doctor, well chilled. Homelife is what might be called an ambient/jazz/funk collective but you shouldn't allow such nomenclature to put you off. At least sixteen musicians are involved - as far as can be ascertained - including past or present members of outfits like 808 State, The Other Two, Yargo and Lionrock. The Homelife approach is to combine "proper" instruments with techno gizmos. So we find violin, cellos, guitars, alto, B-flat, and bass clarinets, alto sax, trombone, glockenspiel, melodica, harmonium, banjo, bowed saw, Jews harp, Indian oboe, double bass, bass guitar, an acme duck whistle (no less), stylophone (!) and more, parping, plinking and warbling away. (Indeed, if Homelife could find a way of making a satisfactory noise with a kitchen sink then I've no doubt that would be utilised too.) Then there's the four vocalists and a number of drummer / percussionists. This lot are aided and abetted by decks, programming and sampling to produce a surprisingly subtle series of meandering, lilting tunes. With all that instrumentation at hand this could well have been a dreadfully self-indulgent load of old muso bollocks. Instead it is understated, funky, tasteful, and with titles like 'Petrol Laces Out Among The Stars' and 'Haddow's Gizz', disarmingly playful.

JM





Peter Himmelman

Flown This Acid World

EPIC - EK52588

OK, hands up who's heard of this guy? Well, until a few months ago I'd never heard of him either, but if you like singer/songwriters with plenty to say then Peter's your man. When his father died Himmelman became an orthodox Jew, married Bob Dylan's daughter and started writing thought provoking songs of an emotional and spiritual nature that demanded attention.

Gently strummed guitars and mandolins Himmelman's beautifully warm vocals drench the songs with pure emotion. There are songs about breaking up ('Things To Say'), growing up ('Child Into A Man'), a truly beautiful song for his daughter ('Raina') and an autobiographical song called 'Untitled' which documents in harrowing twelve minute detail a taxi ride he took in Minnesota where the driver turned out to be a neo-nazi!

Himmelman is a big fan of Elvis Costello and just occasionally similarities emerge but he is very much his own man, with a wacky, spontaneous humour sadly lacking in so many of today's manufactured stars.

'Flown This Acid World' is only available on import and might necessitate a trip to your local independent record store to track it down, but ultimately you'll find it a very worthwhile and moving experience if you do.

AH



DJ Spooky That Subliminal Kid

Riddim Warfare

Outpost Recordings OPD-30031/030 031-2

"A lot of Djs speak with their hands/Now I think its time to expand..." is a couplet a third of the way through this 21 track epic which explains a lot. If the world needs intellectual hiphop, Paul D. Miller, Afro-futurist, author, columnist, DJ, installation artist and high end cultural theorist is clearly the man for the job. A far cry from the Glock-toting and crack dealing of conventional myth - Spooky takes hiphop to the Manhattan art loft and gives it something to think about.

Consequently amid the beats we find utterances like "tape to me is an electromagnetic canvas...its like painting with fragments of memory" and "Individuality? The air molecules that my breath is vibrating - is that my representation? Its like the physics of presence...but with rhythm". Furthermore, there are tracks called things of the order of "Dialectical Transformation II (Du Nouveau Monde)" and "Post-Human Sophistry". Whether you find this intriguing or merely pretentious, the presence of guests such as Killah Priest, Kool Keith and Sir Menelik has the effect of occasionally anchoring it to the street. There's straight hiphop, high quality jungle (some of it utilising the sampled clatter of martial side drums) jazz instrumentals and urban poetry. This art swings.

JM



A.J.Croce

Fit To Serve

RUF 1023

A.J. was only two years old when his father Jim died in a 'plane crash. At four he developed a brain tumour that left him blind. It was only after four operations that the sight was restored to his left eye. He learned piano at the age of six, and started collecting 78's. His tastes broadened to encompass blues, jazz, swing and soul, and Fit To Serve contains a fair measure of all of these.

His voice is suitably husky and blends perfectly with his sterling piano style. A perfect example is 'I Don't Mind', all funky guitar and swirling horns mingled with A.J.'s rolling piano and girly backing singers. The Wurlitzer makes an appearance on 'Lover's Serenade' (such a great instrument). 'Trouble In Mind' kicks off all smoky jazz before erupting into bar-room boogie-woogie, while 'Texas Ruby' tells the story of a stripper who climbs onto our man's car and "Wriggles outta her jeans" on the street in St Charles, Texas. "So In Love" marks the return of that rock solid horn section and Jack Holder's funky guitar. A.J. may have a famous surname but he's not leaning on it - he doesn't have to. The man's got plenty of class, just like his dad. Check it out.

AH





Shawn Colvin

A few small repairs

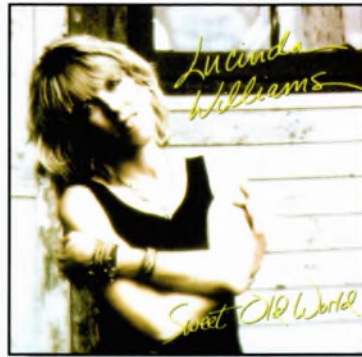
CBS 484327-2



First we had the covers album, now we have the divorce. One of life's hard lives, Shawn Colvin brings a depth of experience to her songs, songs that catch the bitterness of betrayal and the frailty of loneliness. There's a quiet desperation to the lyrics that is echoed perfectly by the thoughtful acoustic arrangements. But bubbling beneath the surface there's always that power and anger, and it strikes with a righteous and merciless fist: 'If I see you again it will be in my head at the end of a cloud / If you see me again it will be in your head telling you to get out / You act like a baby, you talk like a fool / Get out of this house.'

Production is by John Leventhal, who also plays guitars and Mandolin, while the disc was mixed by Bob Clearmountain and mastered by Bob Ludwig. With such a stellar cast you should expect good sound as long as the egos are kept under wraps. With Colvin's acid tongue about, they were probably afraid to come out!

RG

RECORDING
MUSIC

Lucinda Williams

Sweet Old World



Although Lucinda Williams is one of America's greatest singer/songwriters, her recorded output is very low. In the last 20 years she's only made 5 albums, but who cares they're as good as this?

Sweet Old World is not an easy listening experience. The title track tells of all the good things you stand to lose by taking your own life ('The from your own lips / A sweet and tender kiss'), and 'Pineola' continues the suicide theme with the sad tale of Sonny who "Shot himself with a .44".

However, it's not all doom and gloom as the jaunty country rock of 'Lines Around Your Eyes' testifies. Lucinda's longtime guitarist, the unfortunately named Gurf Morlix, lays down some wonderful lines, especially on the plaintive 'Something About What Happens When We Talk', and the aforementioned 'Lines Around Your Eyes'; and also proves to be more than capable on the Dobro ('Prove My Love'). 'Hot Blood' is a sweaty, lusty blues song featuring some wicked slide from Mr Morlix, but the real highlight for me is the cover of Nick Drake's 'Which Will'. Just Lucinda and her guitar, recorded live in a club called 'Mad Dog' at 2.00am in the morning. Stark, beautiful and very moving, a fitting way to close a truly memorable album. Sweet Old World is a classic example of a great songwriter at the top of her craft. Essential.

AH

RECORDING
MUSIC

One Lady Owner

There's Only We

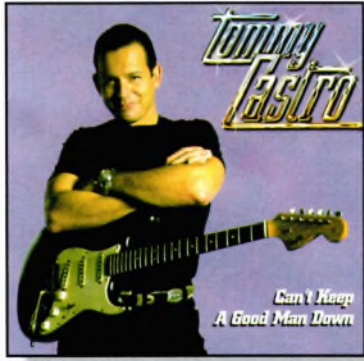
Creation CRECD245



The most interesting rock album to come out of Manchester in recent years, One Lady Owner's debut dances merrily upon the Britpop grave. Not that it isn't retro and ironic and all, it's just that here the references are abstruse enough for them to get away with it. Out with your chiming guitars and Merseybeat harmonies. In with a strange mixture of the garage punk of The Standells and the Shadows of Knight and the avant-glam of early Roxy Music. A dense, soupy production - like a lo-fi Phil Spector having a psychotic episode - fairly oozes from the speakers. The action takes place in a San Francisco of the mind which only ever existed in the scripts of cheesy 70s cop shows (and the lyrics of The Cramps). Ruminations of the order of "She's stuck to the leather seat/Oooh, what's next?/She's stuck to the leather seat/Oooh, Police Car Sex." are delivered in a melodramatic, Bat-Cave croon. The music supporting such effusions comprises the keening upper register of a Hammond at one end and gravid, distorted bass at the other. In between somewhere the guitars scavenge and scrap in the recycling bin marked 'salvageable blues riffs', and a seedy sort of cool is achieved.

JM

RECORDING
MUSIC



Tommy Castro

Can't Keep A Good Man Down

Blind Pig BPCD 5041



Hey, wanna party? Then invite your friends over, stick this in your CD player and crank on the volume. Castro and his superb band are one of the hottest and hardest working properties in the States right now, ripping it up and sending crowds into delirium wherever they care to play. They don't use a conventional rhythm section, preferring to blend Castro's fine guitar with Steve Crossan's sexy sax. It's such an infectious sound - guaranteed to keep those toes tapping.

Highlights are many, but particularly fine are the slow blues number 'my Time After Awhile', featuring blistering guitar and an a cappella break showcasing Castro's soulful vocals, and the footstompin' boogie of 'You Only Go Around Once', where the twin attack of Castro's guitar and Crossan's sax are right to the fore. Another standout is the moody instrumental 'Hycodan' both the leading protagonists taking it in turns to solo their hearts out.

Producer Jim Gaines has given the album a really live feel, which does the band full justice without sacrificing studio quality. You'll never keep this man down for long, he's just too damn good! Great fun and highly recommended.

AH



Holly Palmer

Holly Palmer

Reprise Records Time Warner Co. WEA 9362-46281-2



Holly Palmer is a vocalist much in the mould of Michelle Shocked and, with this album of attractively arranged ballads, she draws upon those perennial experiences which have inspired generations of female singer/songwriters.

Distant childhood memories, the usual catalogue of fractured relationships and even abuse: all provide material for these intelligent, closely woven compositions. Her gentle delivery of the most hard-hitting lyric contrasts greatly with, say, that self-indulgent, adolescent-like anger of Alanis Morissette's pop persona; where a residual bitterness always seems to taint and undermine the battle with her personal demons. Whereas Holly Palmer's prettier voice, through its wit and use of subtle inflection, never dilutes either the impact or importance of a song by mistakenly disappearing into this fathomless trench of aggressive restatement. In 'The Three of Us' (which deals with the issue of adoption) she deftly handles the necessary emotional release yet, significantly, at the end of the track there is a sense of progress and healing coming to the fore. Confronting your demons is one thing, but overcoming them is something else. Palmer achieves this, and more, because you care about her and what she has to say.

RP



The Mavericks

Trampoline

MCA Nashville UMD 80456



I find 'Later with Jools Holland' a great way of widening my musical arena, and when the Cuban/Country hybrid band the Mavericks played three songs from this album, my attention was well and truly grabbed. The opening track 'Dance the Night Away' will be familiar to regular radio listeners, and is a fair meter for what follows. The CD is a tad more country than I'd been expecting after the BBC2 session, but the combination of great songs, spirited musicianship, shimmering strings, and breezy brass really carries it off. This is the sort of album that raises a silly smile and makes you sing along as you bop round the room. This is definitely one for those sunny summer afternoons.

On the production side the sound is rich and full, and the bass fairly loose. On my system it works well, but if yours tends towards the classic BBC sound, it may be a bit much. The band use strings, brass and additional instruments as necessary, which creates a real carnival atmosphere. It's a bit like sitting among the palms in the local Mecca, albeit transplanted to Florida. Barman, fetch me another Tequila!

DA





Joni Mitchell

Blue

DCC re-issue GZS-1132



I'm always sceptical about re-mastered classics. This album has always been a favourite of mine since the first hearing, back in the seventies. However, I am glad to report that differences between this version, and the CD copy I am used to hearing, are all for the good.

Lyrical and melodically sublime, the quality of the original recording was never A:1, but with the song content and performance being as good as it was - who cares?

Now, with the overall soundstage and presence having been noticeably improved, the songs re-emerge as fresh and new as they were back in the days of flares and fuzzy hair.

In fact, Steve Hoffman has worked a few wonders in giving the acoustic instruments a far more "live" feel. As I intimated earlier, I am not generally a fan of digitally re-mastering for CD. In my experience, this can lead to a cold "clinical" result. Not in this case though. This might have something to do with the fact that the work was carried out on an all-valve system. It's certainly not a typical "number-crunch"!

If you need persuading, listen to track 4, 'Carey'. It's worth buying the CD for this song alone!

PC

Supplier: Vivante

RECORDING
MUSIC



The Lilac Time

Looking For a Day In The Night.

Cooking Vinyl Cook CD 176



This album doesn't start well, but improves suddenly. The first two tracks are formulaic and inoffensively shallow, but once track 3 is reached things really improve. Suddenly the band can play instruments and hold a tune, they can sing songs and write lyrics. It is quite a startling change.

The Lilac Time consist of five people playing the usual suspects of guitar, synthesizers and percussion, although it is nice to hear a pedal guitar every now and then. Never aggressive, the album is very tuneful and gets you moving around. Reminiscent of sixties American output with a folk feel, *Looking For a Day In The Night* contains two instrumental tracks which have sufficient substance to stand on their own two feet, when too many are poor and added, it seems, as an after thought. The lyrics, written and delivered by Stephen Duffy with female backing, express sentiment without being overblown and fit comfortably with the times. There's the seemingly obligatory mix of sound effects adding spice to the aural picture

The album is upbeat throughout, and both well produced and recorded, which certainly helps you get into the songs. Well crafted, *Looking For a day in The Night* is an excellent listen

JH

RECORDING
MUSIC



Stereophonics

Performance and Cocktails

V2 Records VVR1004499



The Welsh are coming! Following the recent success of Catatonia and the Manic Street Preachers, the Stereophonics have released *Performance and Cocktails* to much critical acclaim and a Mercury Prize nomination. Is this album worthy, or have people just jumped on the Welsh bandwagon? I'll plump for worthy.

Another electric guitar driven band, they manage to carve their own sound. The vocal delivery is obviously unusual, a throaty 'cigarettes and whisky' fuelled voice which is a bit like a harder Bryan Adams (in every sense of the word). Lyrically they are observationalists, but since touring America they have lost some of their sincerity. Unfortunately small-town lads writing songs in New York hotels dilutes the experience.

Plenty of hooks and riffs to get you humming, and a couple of anthems have led to some chart success. The songs aren't all thrashy and fast, the tempo changes yielding space for a few ballads. The Manics are the obvious comparison, and ultimately the reasons for their greater success are clear in their greater craft. The Stereophonics are rougher sounding, and slightly less consistent, with one or two tracks on this album sounding like fillers.

This second album is better than the first, it will be great if the third is even better.

JH

RECORDING
MUSIC



Ploughing The Populist Groove - Simply Vinyl -

by Fawzy Issa



People have been re-issuing records for years, but it took Classic Records and Analogue Productions to establish a new de facto standard for vinyl with 180gram pressings. Feeding off of the high priced collectors market, their pristine records looked like bargains, and sold in droves. And following that lead, a great many people have jumped on the 'Audiophile Vinyl' bandwagon, with results that vary from the excellent (DCC) to the disappointing (WEA). The trouble is, that simply pressing on 180gram vinyl isn't enough. In fact, it's getting harder and harder to press on anything else. The

key issue is the quality of the available master tapes, and that includes the quality of the original recording. Of course, if you are going to limit your releases to collectable audiophile faves, then this isn't an issue. But if you want to embrace wider sources of musical inspiration you are going to have to accept huge variations in recording quality.

Among the re-issue houses, Simply Vinyl stand apart, both because of the sheer quantity of their releases (over 100 titles), and because they are unashamedly artist/repertoire led. Despite the nice, flat 180gram

pressings and heavy duty polythene outers, these are not 'audiophile' records in the same sense as the Classic Records' Living Stereos. Instead, they are high quality pressings of successful pop albums, so the original tapes vary enormously in both recording and technical quality. Being repertoire driven, it's the performance that matters, so Simply Vinyl will cut from a digital tape, or even a CD if that is all that is available. As a result, their catalogue is a bit of a minefield if you are expecting sonic consistency. Should you ignore it? No, you just need to tread carefully.

I have been listening to the first batch of their vinyl, and although the quality is variable for the reasons I've described, on the whole, there is a lot to recommend. And although one can criticize some of these re-issues on sonic grounds, I am very pleased to see this huge number of titles available on record again. With that in mind, I have selected the best of the bunch. These are the titles which I would strongly recommend: ▶



► **Fleetwood Mac (Peter Green's)**
Catalogue no. 13.

Fleetwood Mac – Pious Bird of Good Omen
Catalogue no. 40.

Fleetwood Mac – Mr Wonderful
Catalogue no. 67.

All these re-issues are highly recommended and they sound better than my Dutch and English copies bought in the early 80's. I also have an early Fleetwood Mac record box (five records), re-issued by Essential, I believe at the end of the 80's, and I can assure you that the sound quality of the Simply Vinyl re-issues are also much better than these. The difference is not subtle. More importantly, the music has a beautifully melodic and understated quality, especially the guitar sound which is quite superb. I cannot recommend these records enough.



Van Morrison – Blowin' Your Mind
Catalogue no. 49

This is an excellent album and one of my favorites. The sound quality is better than one might have expected from a tape that was recorded in 1968, and the music itself is never less than exhilarating. There's not a bad track on this album. Highly recommended.



Pulp Fiction soundtrack
Catalogue no. 27.

This soundtrack was available on vinyl for a short period immediately after the release of the movie in 1994. It was a normal pressing and I quite enjoyed the music which easily stands alone without the movie (watching the film is another experience altogether). I regularly listen to this soundtrack, especially Side 2, which is particularly excellent. The Simply Vinyl re-issue is, on the whole, preferable to my American pressing, and highly recommended, especially if you don't already have a copy. Being a soundtrack, it is refreshingly dynamic, and some of the recordings are excellent. Essential listening.

Steely Dan – Aja
Catalogue no. 30

Steely Dan – The Royal Scam
Catalogue no. 46

This New York duo (Donald Fagen keyboard/vocalist and Walter Becker bass/guitar) has been one of my favorite rock groups since the 70's. Their musicianship is always exceptional and the production shows exemplary slickness on almost every record they've made. Different people will always like one album more than another, but my favorites are the two above and *Pretzel Logic*. They use first class musicians and always have one eye on up and coming talent. They

used Jeff Porcaro and David Paich on *Pretzel Logic*, who later formed Toto, and Michael McDonald on *Katy Lied*, who went on to form the Dobbie Brothers. Larry Carlton appears on *The Royal Scam*.

Simply Vinyl have done an excellent job here, with sound quality far better than my early 80's re-issues (bought to replace my well-used original copies). A welcome opportunity to renew acquaintances with a couple of old friends.

Eagles – Hell Freezes Over
Catalogue no. 50

If you've been to a hi-fi show since 1994 when this record first appeared, then you'll be familiar with it, or at least the version of 'Hotel California'. demo-ed to death, this Dutch pressed double live album is still available, but on balance, I'd recommend the slightly more expensive Simply Vinyl version. It has a more powerful, deeper bass, and better soundstaging. The Dutch offer a marginally sweeter top end, but when it comes to pressing quality there's no comparison. The pan-flat 180gram record is a stark contrast to the rolling vales of my original copy.



▶ **Bob Dylan – John Wesley Hardin**
Catalogue no. 56.

Bob Dylan – Blonde on Blonde
Catalogue no. 63.

Bob Dylan – Self Titled
Catalogue no.

Not bad for a Dylan selection, although I'd like to see *Highway 61* in there too! Great albums from Dylan's golden years, these are essential recordings for any record collection, and the Simply Vinyl versions easily out-class my European pressings. Unfortunately, I don't have original US issues, but the comparison is largely irrelevant anyway. These are the best vinyl versions that are readily available, and that makes them highly recommendable.

The Godfather soundtrack
Catalogue no. 54.

This is my favorite movie of all time, and I enjoy revisiting the soundtrack album every time I watch the movie on TV or video. So, I am a fan, and I like this soundtrack anyway, but here Simply Vinyl has not only produced an excellent re-issue, the gatefold sleeve is fabulous, with its heavy, leathery feel. I love it!

Leonard Cohen – Songs from a Room
Catalogue no. 8

Leonard Cohen – Songs of Love and Hate
Catalogue no. 9

These two re-issues offer a subtle but definite improvement over later pressings from the original label. Being a Leonard Cohen fan, I strongly recommend them. You may disagree!

Neil Young – After the Gold Rush
Catalogue no. 23



Again, an excellent classic rock album, with the Simply Vinyl re-issue offering subtle benefits over my original German pressing.

These are the best of Simply Vinyl's first batch of re-issues, and whilst the company has attracted vociferous criticism from the established audiophile labels, you have to understand where they're coming from. Although they have not attained the high standards established by DCC or Classic Records in the USA, some of their re-issues are extremely good, and standards are set to improve, with moves to concentrate all the re-mastering at Abbey Road. What Simply Vinyl have achieved is to make a wide range of genuinely popular music readily available good quality pressings. They may not challenge the results achieved by the audiophile specialists, but then they have less to work with, and surprisingly few of their records are truly bad. The quality

control of their pressings is excellent, with absolutely no warps or noisy surfaces (and I bought the review samples from normal record shops). Compromised mainly by the variable quality of their source tapes, it would be a huge mistake to discard the Simply Vinyl catalogue en masse. It already contains plenty of worthwhile records, and things are due to get better. ➤



Is It Magic? The ability of these cables to recreate a sense of depth and space is exceeded by none that I evaluated. Roman Zajcew.

The Absolute Sound, July 1998.

Quiet, full-bodied, apparent dc to light extension, extreme high resolution, wonderful spatial qualities, these cables let the Jadis amplifiers be all they might.

Jonathan Scull, Stereophile, March 1996.

Why play with firecrackers when somebody hands you dynamite?... The sound knocked me out. These Goertz speaker cables and interconnects just totally surpassed the quality of the cables I was using earlier.

Clement Perry, The Audiophile Voice, Volume 3, Issue 2.

Goertz Interconnect and speaker cable

"The ability of these cables... is exceeded by none... I don't see how this cable can be bested"

The Absolute Sound - August 1998.

(cited values of GOERTZ AG2)

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Is It Magic?

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(cited values of Goertz AG2)

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Nine Lives

by Reuben Parry

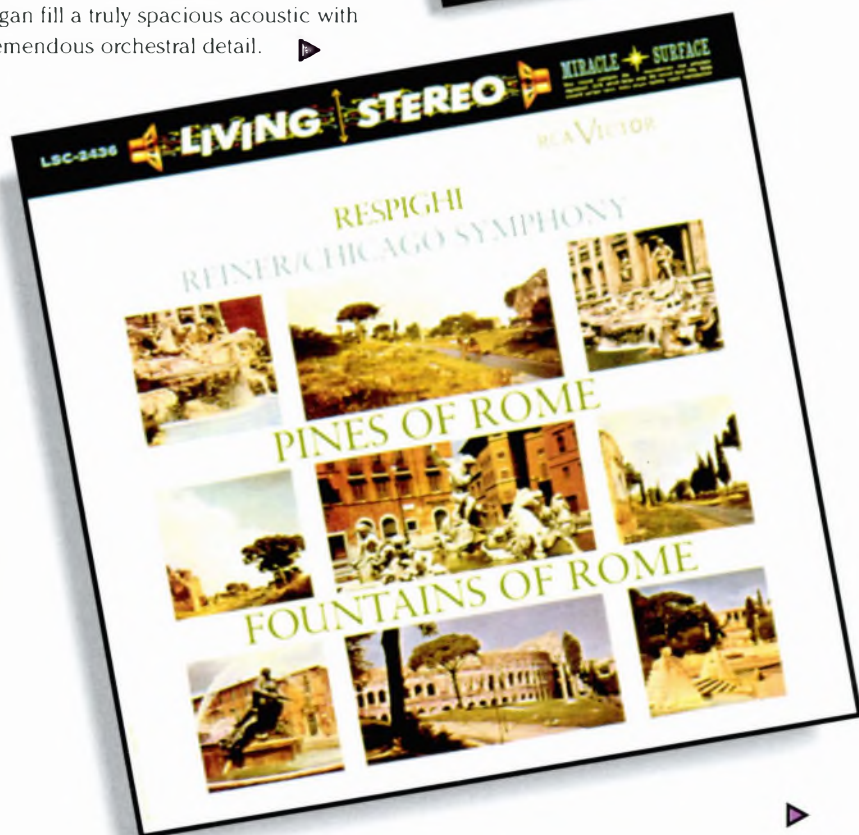
As the deluge of audiophile classical LPs evaporates into barely a trickle of decent monthly releases I've returned, again and again, to the reservoir of back catalogue titles to flesh out my record collection.

At the moment genuine bargains are available as distributors (both here and abroad) move to reduce their stockpiles of 180gr vinyl which, once upon a time, commanded prices of between £25 and £30 a record. In the vanguard are the Living Stereos, with Classic's seminal replica discs selling for as little as £10 each, or sometimes even less. Even the most desirable albums like *Venice* LSC-2313 and *Scheherazade* LSC-2446 are being discounted over the Net. Clearly this raises a number of thought provoking questions, like "has the market reached saturation point?" and "will low prices broaden the analogue customer base or simply cheapen the product?" for which I have opinions but no definitive answers. Certainly the convergence of LP and CD prices is a long-held dream of mine.

However, rather than philosophise upon the health of the Industry I'd prefer to recommend RCAs which you may have overlooked or missed first time around. Get 'em while you can, especially at these prices.

Respighi. Pines and Fountains of Rome LSC-2436

A definitive performance by Dr Reiner and the CSO which is arguably the finest recording of these atmospheric and musically varied Roman tone poems. The strings (violins, violas and cellos) are wonderfully delicate, rich and diaphanous; while the dominant power, dynamics and deep bass drawn from wave after wave of trumpets, trombones, horns, double basses and organ fill a truly spacious acoustic with tremendous orchestral detail.



▶ **Khachaturian/Kabalevsky.
Masquerade Suite/The Comedians
LSC-2398**

Another exceptional Mohr/Layton recording, this time from the Hall of New York's Manhattan Centre, where the soundstage is as big as a parade ground garrisoned by RCA Victor musicians who stride through an idiomatic, boisterous and impassioned Kondrashin reading with unbridled enthusiasm. Their swagger is understandable. This record has translucency and accuracy of timbre to die for.

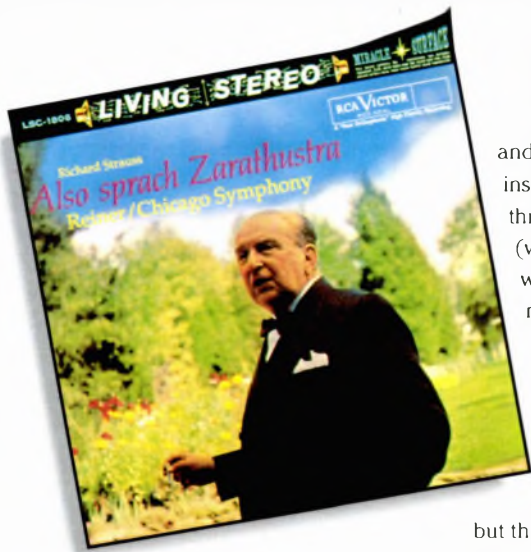
**Strauss. Waltzes
LSC-2500**

The "Windy City" team deliver one of the best performances heard outside of Vienna. Highlights include superb horn and clarinet playing, wonderful transparency (as every layer, texture and nuance of these swirling dances is revealed) and then there's that bass drum which rocks Chicago hall to its foundations with those thunderous through-the-floor dynamics.

**Berlioz. Symphonie Fantastique
LSC-1900**

A "must own" LP for any die-hard collector simply because (reputedly) no one actually has an original, despite its official listing as a stereo within RCA's 1960 catalogue. Seriously good interpretation by Munch, with the BSO producing a typically gorgeous, diaphanous string tone. ▶





► **Strauss. Also Sprach Zarathustra**
LSC-1806

This was the very first Living Stereo - a two track recording by Leslie Chase from 1954 which was not actually released until 1960. Reiner and Richard Strauss are a heady combination, no more so than in the powerful climaxes where the CSO's superlative technique is unsurpassed.

Lalo. Symphonic Espagnole
LSC-2456

Lovely music with the close miking (a la Mercury) spotlighting the tonal richness of Szeryng's solo violin in this vivid, deeply moving



Gounod/Bizet. Faust. Carmen Suite LSC-2449

Belinda Carlisle sang it and this disc proves it, "Heaven" really "is a place on Earth" with this RCA Holy Trinity: divinely accessible music, Wilkinson's omnipotent Kingsway recording, and an inspirational evocation from Gibson and the ROHO players.

and virtuoso account. Orchestral instruments are totally convincing throughout because their images (which remain securely located within the soundstage) share that natural, unforced ambient warmth of a live concert.

Liszt/Enesco/Smetana. Rhapsodies LSC-2471

The staging is artificial, but this is a sonic blockbuster, so who cares if the recording is wildly unrealistic. Stokowski's instinctive handling of those capricious, free-flowing rhythms and smart dynamic shifts in tempo present within the *Hungarian and Romanian Rhapsodies* is intoxicating.



The Reiner Sound.
LSC-2183

This too is a quasi-religious experience. Ravel's *Rapsodie Espagnole* and *Pavan for a Dead Princess* have an ethereal quality. While an equally well-engineered Rachmaninov's *Isle of the Dead* has those three-dimensional, tactile characteristics only present in those discs that possess the finest transparency, imaging and energy. Brilliant, charismatic interpretation and execution from Reiner and the CSO.



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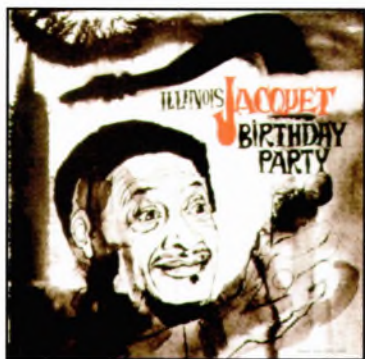
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Illinois Jacquet

Birthday Party

Groove Note GRV 1003-1 **180g**

Recorded in Tokyo in '72 at two in the morning straight after a concert, you wouldn't necessarily expect the best of this album. You'd be wrong. Taped on Jacquet's birthday, with a band that includes Gerry Mulligan, Art Farmer, Jo Newman, Kenny Burrell and James Moody, the sense of fun just oozes from the grooves. These guys are clearly enjoying themselves. Kicking off with a relatively gentle 'Ebb Tide' the real fun begins with 'Birthday Party Blues' which is just what it says. A deep and dirty blues riff. Starting with Mulligan improvising around the unlikely theme of 'Happy Birthday to You', followed by a Newman solo before Jacquet's entry kicking off the first of seven choruses. Over its 11 minutes, the number builds to a riotous close.

Beautifully remastered from the original tapes by Bernie Grundman, this is a stand out album in every respect. Great musicians having a great time and getting it across. What more could you ask for? As a bonus for the first 1000 purchasers of the album a 'free' 45 rpm cut of the title track coupled with 'The Shadow of Your Smile' is included.

The only quibble I have is that my album pressing is very slightly noisy.

DD

Supplier: Vivante



Roy Gaines

I Got The T Bone Walker Blues

Groove Note GRV 1002-1 **180g**

If anyone has earned the right to play the T-Bone Walker classics, it's Roy Gaines. As a 14-year-old in Houston, Gaines had already started to make a name for himself playing numbers by Walker and Gatemouth Brown. Finally at the Whispering Pines nightclub the young Gaines got to go backstage meet his idol. Later that night, during T-Bone's set he called Gaines's on stage with him saying 'I'm going to sing I want you to play'. Dwarfed behind T Bone's enormous Gibson, the boy was pretty unsure of himself until T Bone turned back and said 'do 'Cold Cold Feeling' Gaines still views this moment as the turning point in his career. It was of the first songs he'd learned and he played his heart out. From that moment his career really took off.

Wasn't this supposed to be an album review? Oh yes. It's just what you'd expect from Gaines and Groove Note. Great singing and playing. Very tight backing band. Excellent recording with real presence and attack, and superb pressing quality. All this, and a bonus 45r.p.m. cut featuring an electric and acoustic take of 'Stormy Monday' along with two other numbers.

DD

Supplier: Vivante



Norma Waterson

The Very Thought of You

Hannibal HNCD 1430 **CD**

This follows Norma Waterson's eponymous '96 release and is even more eclectic. Support is from a sterling band featuring her husband Martin Carthy and daughter Eliza, along with Danny Thompson and the god gifted Mr Richard Thompson. With a couple of exceptions, the songs are in linked pairs. 'Love of my Life' (yes the Queen song), is followed by Lal Waterson's 'Reply to Joe Haines' which counters Haines' stupid Mirror article on Freddie Mercury, and is as touching a lament on the subject of Aids as I've heard. There's a particularly lovely rendering of 'Over the Rainbow' (yes that old chestnut) with nice harmonies from Eliza, which is followed by 'Bluebird (Judy G)', and so on.

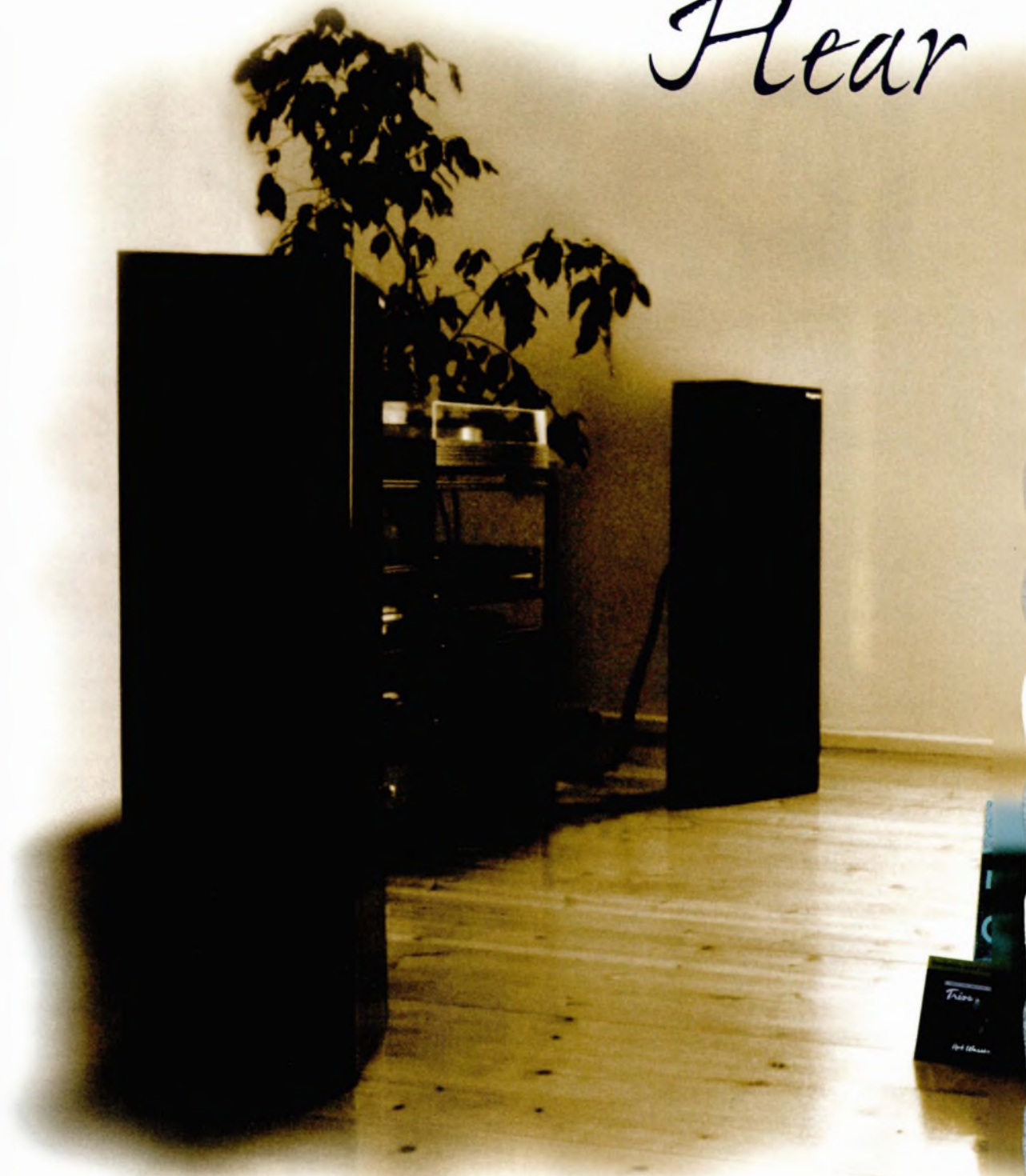
Even John Martyn's 'Solid Air', a song I'd have thought couldn't be handled by anyone else is re-interpreted and lifted with fluid guitar work from Mr T.

The recording's a little lacking in stage depth but is otherwise fine, with Norma's warm expressive voice well captured and correctly proportioned in relation to the band. With the exception of the slightly restricted depth it's a band in the living room experience, and I can't say fairer than that. Another nice one Norma!

DD



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Stravinsky
 Petroushka - complete ballet,
 1947 version. Bartók, Miraculous
 Mandarin - complete ballet.

Kent Nagano, LSO

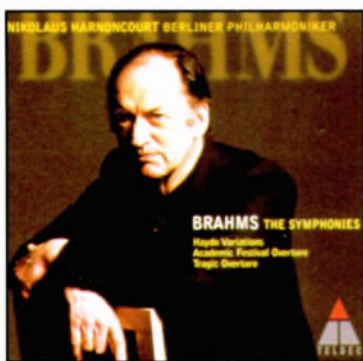
Erato 3984-23142-2



An unusual coupling that brings together two seminal 20th century ballet scores. Nagano gives a bold, brightly coloured performance of *Petroushka* that highlights Stravinsky's brilliant scoring and crisp incisive rhythms. The LSO respond with a virtuoso display of firepower, playing with passion and precision. The whole performance is nothing short of exhilarating. But *Petroushka* is more than just an orchestral showpiece, and I feel that Nagano's extrovert approach robs the music of its pathos - the story is, after all, a sad one with an unhappy ending. Nevertheless, if you're looking for excitement above all, Nagano is your man. Bartók's *Miraculous Mandarin* is likewise played with great attack and ferocity, making the most of this nasty snarling bloodthirsty score. Tempi are fast, and the playing is impressively taut and disciplined without sacrificing excitement. Erato's 20bit recording is good, though the sound hasn't quite got the dynamic separation and effortless naturalness of today's very best discs. Everything's sharp and detailed, but just a shade lacking in focus.

JMH

RECORDING
 MUSIC



Brahms
 The Four Symphonies
 Tragic and Academic Festival
 Overtures. Haydn Variations.
 Tragic Overture.

Niklaus Harnoncourt, BPO

Teldec 0630 13136-2



When Harnoncourt's set of the Brahms symphonies came out in 1997, I was disappointed he'd chosen the Berlin Philharmonic over the Chamber Orchestra of Europe, feeling the latter would've brought a youthful vigour and energy to these scores that the Berliners (for all their virtuosity) couldn't equal. But finally hearing the set, and reading Harnoncourt's fascinating views on recording these works with an orchestra that dates back to the time of Brahms, it's clear the conductor knew what he was doing. Listening, one senses both he and the orchestra have re-thought these works from scratch. Not to be radical for the sake of it, but to more faithfully represent Brahms' intentions. The playing is vigorous and spirited, the orchestral sound rich and sonorous. Yet textures are surprisingly clear and transparent given the weight of tone this orchestra commands. Tempi are often quite measured, yet crisp phrasing keeps the music moving. Teldec's live recordings sound warm and full-bodied, with good detail despite the smooth homogenous balance. A stimulating challenging set!

JMH

RECORDING
 MUSIC



Mahler
 Symphony No 9
Strauss; Metamorphosen
 Wagner; Siegfried Idyll

Otto Klemperer, Philharmonia/NPO

EMI 5 67036-2



Klemperer's Mahler 9 was originally issued in 1967, and it marked the return of the conductor to the recording studio after a lay-off enforced by illness and accident. The reading is tough and sinewy, with a clear-sighted directness rare in performances of this intensely subjective work. Some contemporary reviews spoke of a take-it-or-leave-it quality to Klemperer's direction, but the playing is too sharp - edged and concentrated for accusations of indifference to hold water. This is second time out for this recording, and newly-remastered it sounds firmer and cleaner than the earlier CD transfer. Then the coupling was just Siegfried Idyll (a beautiful glowing account); now EMI have added Klemperer's trenchant powerful account of Strauss' *Metamorphosen*. The recordings were always among the best of their day, and still sound very good - vintage EMI. The tonal brightness that afflicted Mahler 9 has been tamed, and the overall sound is more solidly focussed and finely detailed. If you missed these legendary performances first time around, now's your chance!

JMH

RECORDING
 MUSIC





Mussorgsky-Stokowski
Stravinsky; Firebird suite;
Pastorale.
Scriabin; Poem of Ecstasy
Stokowski/Various orchestras

Decca Phase Four 443 898-2

On LP, you could always tell Stokowski on Phase Four by the beginning-of-side distortion! At the time, it wasn't always clear whether the roughness was caused by cartridge mistracking or analogue tape overload. Alas, it was the latter. And, despite remastering, the Decca engineers have not been able to obtain totally clean results - it sounds as though the 2 track mix-down tapes from which the original LPs were cut have been used, rather than going back to the multi-tracks and remixing. *Pictures*, in Stokowski's own cut, but highly individual authentically-Russian arrangement, is the earliest recording (1966) and has the most variable sound. Some sections sound okay, but there's some tape hiss and overload in climaxes. The performance, with the New Philharmonia, is wilful and idiosyncratic, but always gripping. Likewise the *Firebird* suite, which Stokowski partly re-orchestrates to vulgar effect! Scriabin's *Poem*, recorded live, is passionately played by the Czech Philharmonic, and the sound is slightly better in this work despite some tape squash in climaxes. A mixed bag then, but musically fascinating; Stokowski's personality and individuality shine through every bar.

JMH

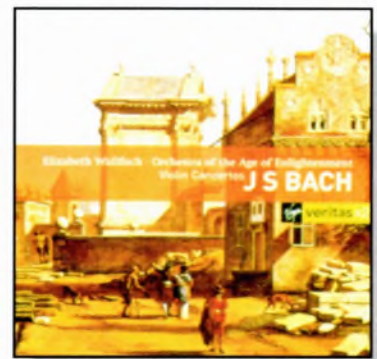
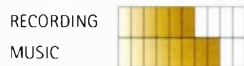


Dvorak
Symphonies 7, 8, and 9 'From the
New World', Carnival Overture.
George Szell, Cleveland orchestra

Sony Classical Heritage MH2K 63151

George Szell was legendary for many things; incredible stick technique, fabulous memory, and exacting discipline. He was also regarded as cold and lacking in humanity; even in an age of autocrats, his authoritarian ways were exceptionally strict. Yet he turned the Cleveland orchestra into one of the best in the world, a reputation that stands to this day. These accounts of Dvorak's last three symphonies offer ample evidence of Szell's outstanding control, and the orchestra's superb discipline. And if at times one might wish for a little more ease and relaxation, the crispness of ensemble and clarity of inner parts is something to marvel at. Nowhere is Szell's control more evident than in the *Carnival Overture* - a potentially rather noisy 'busy' work that emerges here as a model of clarity and scrupulous balance. The rarity here is Szell's 1949 mono recording of his own arrangement of Smetana's autobiographical *String Quartet No 1 - From My Life* - given a thrilling passionate performance in decent mono sound. Sony's remastering is excellent, though some thinness/dryness remains. Excellent artwork/presentation, including pictures of the original Columbia LP sleeves.

JMH

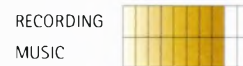


J S Bach
Violin Concertos BWV 1041-3,
1052, and 1056; Double Concertos
1044 and 1064.
Elisabeth Walfisch (violin and
direction), OAE

Virgin Veritas 5 61558-2

It's open to debate as to how many violin concertos JSB actually wrote, given that most of his keyboard concertos are almost certainly arrangements of lost originals for violin. The present set includes the undisputed works, plus a couple arranged for violin from the harpsichord version - including the great D minor concerto *BWV 1052*. In addition, the celebrated Triple concerto for violin, flute, and harpsichord is included, plus an arrangement for three violins of the triple harpsichord concerto *BWV 1064* - a work that still manages to sound gloriously anachronistic despite the use of authentic forces! Elisabeth Walfisch is a stylish player, and her intonation is spot-on despite the absence of vibrato. The playing, using period instruments, is clearly articulated and crisply projected, with excellent ensemble and tuning - though there's little real individuality or personality apparent. The recordings are smooth and well-balanced, with good detail despite a slightly recessed tonal balance. There's also a little ambient noise (valve mics?) audible between tracks. Otherwise the sound is unobtrusively excellent, and exceptional value on this mid-price release.

JMH



VINYLL HOLD-OUT

by Reuben Rarry

Foné - The Self-preservation Society

Scarcely anyone will recognise his name, yet Giulio Cesare Ricci is a man with an unbridled passion, and that passion is the Italian musical heritage. While some of us share strong feelings about the presentation of Classical music few (if any) possess the necessary fervour, determination and self-belief to launch a record company in support of their convictions. Ricci is an exception to that particular rule, and Foné provides a more than useful forum for his ideas.

This independent record label has proved to be a malleable conduit which, like music itself, is something of a living, breathing entity with a dynamic all of its own. In over a decade it has evolved beyond the initial boundaries of the Father-Creator's passion to embrace non-Italians like Chopin, Beethoven, Brahms and Schubert. However, the Italian Baroque (together with Early and Vocal music) is still their speciality. Along the way it has led to a number of extraordinarily bold releases: not least are the World's first recordings of *Vespers* by Viadana CDs 92 F08 and 94 F09, and Gragnani's *Sonatas for Violin and Guitar* CD 93 F18. Foné's desire to preserve their national musical identity and willingness to promote previously unrecorded material is heavily

reminiscent of the BIS label that has, during the past twenty five years, been such a fine advocate for its own Scandinavian composers.

But what really distinguishes Foné from the majority of its rivals is a strict adherence to the purist principles of music making. Studio recordings remain a complete anathema to them. Ricci's aim has always been to recreate the atmosphere of an original musical occasion. To that end, he has found suitable churches, chapels, country houses and theatres in which to record. For him "... the problem is not how to capture the space or the depth of the source of the sound, all this is of course fine and provides emotions, but is not in itself moving. To portray the smell of the concert hall, or the concentration of both performers and listeners, that is what is moving."

In seeking out these underlying 'truths' Ricci has quite literally returned to the places where concertos, sonatas, motets or madrigals would have been created. So when we are presented with a delightful collection of *Concerti Grossi* CD 97 F05 by Torelli, Sammartini, Corelli and Petz, it is perhaps not surprising that this warm and ambient 20 Bit recording of music first conceived for Christmas Masses should



come from the lovely church setting of Palazzo Pignano. He simply believes that all musicians (including these 'La Piccola Sinfonica di Milano' players) "... feel better and closer to the music's spirit when they are surrounded by great paintings and frescoes" and that "Modern studios all too often have a cold atmosphere and lack any feeling."

Perfection is also religiously pursued throughout the technical aspects of their CD and LP production: a Nagra advanced mike preamplifier and paired Neumann U47/U49 microphones with Vdh cables are preferred because they have the ability to faithfully and seamlessly capture the natural translucence of instrumental timbres. Critical monitoring is undertaken using Rowland pre/power

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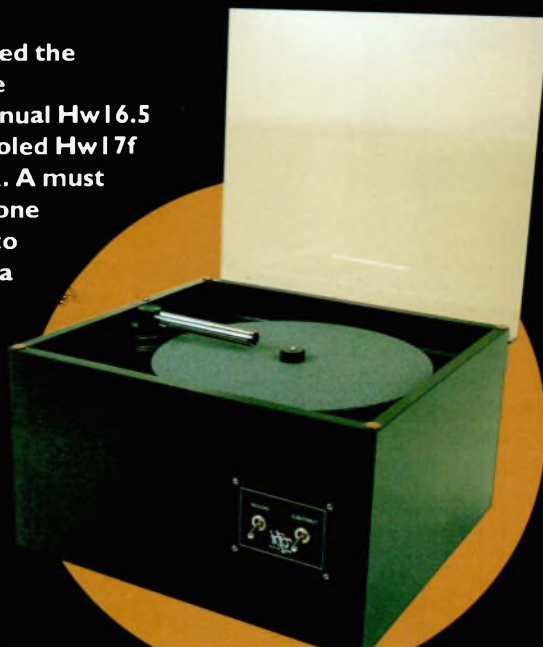
The VPI record cleaning machines have dominated the market for over fifteen years, offering unbeatable performance, ease of use, and reliability. The manual Hw16.5 costs £425, whilst the semi-automatic and fan cooled Hw17f costs £895, both including free delivery in the UK. A must for any serious vinyl collector or hi-fi dealer, buy one before the end of the Millenium and you will get to choose three records worth up to £60 free, from a list of audiophile albums.

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VINYL - CD'S - MUSICAL MEMORABILIA - COLLECTIBLE AUDIO EQUIPMENT



A Vivaldi
The Four Seasons OP.8

A Orizio conducting Orchestra
Gaspara da Salò
del Festival di Brescia a Bergamo

Foné 87 F04



Most recordings of this popular nature cycle are all too familiar: the performances are frequently trite and dispassionate to a point where the very life-blood is drawn from out of Vivaldi's intensely descriptive chamber work, leaving a void big enough to drive the proverbial hackney carriage through.

Agostino Orizio's wildly refreshing 1987 reading at Sala Verdi is a welcome departure from the norm. It is an undeniably emotional experience enhanced by a lively, vibrant acoustic that reveals plenty of instrumental information as well as many of those special inner details, with players knocking music stands, moving, coughing, even breathing more than you would usually expect to hear. Touching artistry which succeeds in creating a virtue from all this human frailty. As Ricci says of engineering "... I must be aware of everything ... the musicians, their state of mind, and remind myself of the flavour of the occasion." And this record certainly leaves a poignant taste.

He does this so successfully that the initial listening was slightly unnerving. Pinch me. Because I believe I was there in Milan enjoying the sublime skill of these Gasparo da Salò players. If a straightforward (and to my mind antiseptic) representation of the notes on the page is required, then this will not be the record for you.

Reservations? Only one. The astonishing dynamic contrast between the chamber orchestra and its principal soloists, like violinist Giuliano Carmignola, is not strictly accurate - but you eventually get accustomed to it.

Alternatives? Personally I rate Marriner and The Academy of St. Martin-in-the-Fields definitive 1970 recording Argo ZRG 654, and the Hogwood/Academy of Ancient Music performance on L'Oiseau-Lyre - both of which are readily available secondhand.

RECORDING 7

PERFORMANCE/MUSIC 8



P A Locatelli
Six Introduttioni Teatrali OP IV
Concerto in A major for violin,
strings and basso continuo.

A Orizio conducting Orchestra da
Camera del. Festival
Internazionale de
Brescia e Bergamo

Foné 91 F07



Born in 1695 to a respected Bergamo family, Locatelli was reputedly a student of the influential composer/violinist Corelli, whose unspoken presence can be heard in both the *Six Teatrali OP IV* (recorded here for the first time in its entirety) and the A major Concerto.

Fittingly, these mature, lyrical works are sympathetically performed by an orchestra from Locatelli's home town that has specialised in the Eighteenth Century chamber repertoire since its inception in 1963. Even the precise, sonorous accompaniment of Marco Rizzi's violin (though requiring little overt virtuosity) is suitably evocative. Pace, timing and musical interaction between the players is magical.

Ricci's engineering pulls off another conjuring trick: a thoroughly convincing and natural sounding CD which blends brilliant digital detail and transparency with the rich, warm tonal colours usually ascribed to vinyl productions. Could this herald the advent of a new Golden Age?

A suitably bright and clear acoustic at the Grand Theatre in Brescia is also roomy enough to ensure that the dominant presence and individual expressive qualities of cellos, violas and violins can still be felt throughout; while the sparkle of the underpinning harpsichord notes is never tarnished.

RECORDING 8

PERFORMANCE/MUSIC 8

► amplification driving B & W 801 Matrix Series III or Sonus Faber speakers. For digital recordings a Teac R1 DAT is utilised; while analogue masters are preserved on a Nagra IV-S tape machine. LP replay/monitoring is an equally serious business: a VPI TNT 2 turntable - Triplanar IV arm - Audioquest AQ 7000 NSX cartridge combination being employed. The equipment is indicative of the extreme care Fonè take at every stage of the process.

Typically, even Giulio Cesare Ricci's thoughts and techniques for the location of mikes within an auditorium exhibit the purposefulness, artistry and zeal of the man. "For me, placing the microphones is

something of a sacred ritual, almost a mystic art. I have to find, and I know it exists and is waiting to be found, that pocket-handkerchief sized space of air where the whole atmosphere can be felt. I measure the dimension with eyes and ears.....and, as an instrument-maker would, I 'tune' a church, a theatre or a music salon."

Fonè's audiophile credentials have been further enhanced through the release of a number of 180gr Pure Analogue LPs and Reference Gold CDs. These co-exist alongside the standard compact discs which comprise some eighty percent of their catalogue. Using 24kt gold delivers a greater uniformity of metal deposition; better laser beam reflectivity; and at

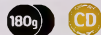
least a four-fold improvement in the block error rate on that of a normal CD, resulting in a sonically superior product. The Limited Edition records, too, exude similar quality and individuality. They are packaged within distinctive plain black boxes, and each release consists of two LPs, no matter what the length of the piece. So a composition like Vivaldi's Four Seasons, with a duration of around forty minutes, is spread over both records. Moreover, you do not pay a premium for the privilege: a box (two LPs) costs £19.95, which is also the price for one Gold CD. Incidentally the standard CDs are equally good value for money at the £9.95 mid-price point. ▶+



F Kreisler

The Violins of Cremona - Homage to Kreisler Volume II

Fonè 95 FO1



I love the whole concept behind this record and its companion set, Fonè 94 FO4. Take five precious instruments from the Cremona Municipal Collection (including two Guarneri, a Stradivari and two Amatis) and perform a series of those truly wonderful Fritz Kreisler compositions and transcriptions for violin and pianoforte.

Salvatore Accardo's virtuosity is unquestionably the focal point for this recording. Ricci spotlights the superb individual tonal characteristic elicited from each of these violins. The acoustic at the Palazzo Cavalcabò in Cremona is very supportive; delivering a silky and well-balanced sound. Nor does he neglect the complimentary and contrasting roles of the pianist, Laura Manzini, who surely on this basis deserves accolades and wider exposure.

The eighteen vignettes on these LPs range

from old favourites like the Dvorak *Slavonic Dance in G*, to *Song Without Words* by Mendelssohn, and Kreisler's own *Tempo di Minuetto* in the style of Pugnani. Musically varied pieces with phenomenally rapid dynamic shifts where the changes in emphasis, tempo, weight and intonation are called for. All issues are delicately handled in a manner which I now know typifies Fonè's pure-minimalist groundwork. A production that blends precision, emotion, pace, timing and authenticity in this manner is near impossible to fault.

Pressing standards are also uniformly high. Surfaces excellent. The noise floor remains imperceptible, while the short side lengths ensure there's no deterioration in sound quality as you near the run out groove.

RECORDING 9
PERFORMANCE/MUSIC 8



Orff: Carmina Burana

Rafael Fruhbeck De Burgos, NPO and Chorus

ALTO/EMI ANGEL SAN 162 **180g** **4**

Carl Orff's famous cantata, inspired by Thirteenth Century Latin texts, has been too frequently recorded since its composition in 1937. This, however, is one of the finer interpretations. Fruhbeck De Burgos gives an imaginative reading by varying the speeds: slower than anticipated in the Swan's Lament and Round Dance, he brings a refreshingly delicate touch to this 1966 recording. The Orchestra, Chorus and Choir of Wandsworth Boy's School, combined, are excellent. Their playing and singing is thoroughly enjoyable, and Alto's terrific transfer vividly reproduces the climaxes with good bass extension, excellent separation and refined instrumental and vocal detail. Undoubtedly, the LP's greatest strength is found amongst its vocalists: the two baritone's Raymond Wolansky and John Noble, together with tenor, Gerhard Unger, are admirable; but the superlatives should really be reserved for the enchanting Lucia Popp. She's not one of those beefy sopranos who rely solely upon lung capacity. Her voice is pure, and achieves its power through projection and clarity. An obvious audiophile alternative would be Jochum's account DGG SLPM 139362 on Speakers Corner. Although the sound is exemplary, the choir and soloists (with the exception of Fischer-Dieskau) are less convincing.

RP
Supplier: Vivante



The Curtis Counce Group, Vol. 2

"You Get More Bounce With Curtis Counce"

ANALOGUE PRODUCTIONS APR 3006 **150g**

Hormone driven, I bought this record for its cover, without ever having heard this smart jazz combo. My preconceptions (no doubt influenced by the exterior bodywork) focused upon the prospect of some steamy sessions. This proved to be more the product of an impoverished psyche. Yes, this is a sexy jazz album, but it ferments, slowly beneath the surface. The line up for these Contemporary recordings, made between October '56 and September '57, is an impressive one: Jack Sheldon's lyrical trumpet, Harold Land's vivacious tenor sax; crisp drumming by debutante, Frank Butler; smouldering ivories at Carl Perkin's fingertips, and top bassist front-man, Counce. A great collective opening track 'Complete' introduces each of the individual jazz personas. They interact, learn and feed from one another. What follows are half a dozen of the coolest numbers ... from Irving Berlin's demure, 'How Deep is the Ocean', to an assertively upbeat, 'Big Foot', in which Land explores a spectrum of emotion that would do Charlie Parker proud. The superb remaster by Bruce Leek and Stan Ricker has a beat that makes total tonal and rhythmic sense. Superior clarity for the piano notes; rounded, reverberant bass lines; bluesy trumpet calls and haunting sax playing that just demands to be heard.

RP



Captain Horatio Hornblower, R.N. (Suite)

Robert Farnon, Royal Philharmonic Orchestra

Reference recordings RR-47 **150g** **HD**

Canadian, Robert Farnon, is something of a dramatist. While the cinematic action in this 1951 swashbuckler flounders, sinking almost without trace, his delightfully descriptive symphonic score (augmented with additional brass and French horn sections) delivers images of oceans, a breeze in the sails, and an ebb and flow of musical and metaphorical undercurrents that transcend the flotsam seen up there on the screen. In 'The Wind' the melodic interchange of horns and strings is so atmospheric that one can almost taste the seaspray, even in the final battle scene, where there's only a hint of a recurrent melody. Watford Town Hall is a fine venue, and Prof. Johnson's engineering provides a naturally warm, ambient, presence along with the realistic sense of scale and proportion that so many audiophile discs sacrifice. The midrange is seductive, especially where the strings take up the romantic theme. A repeat of the *Hornblower Suite* can be found on the fourth side of this album, but sides two and three are reserved for a number of quite lovely compositions, including State Occasion, Intermezzo for Harp and Strings, and the Rhapsody for Violin and Orchestra - wonderful Farnon concert pieces that should not be overlooked.

RP
Supplier: Vivante





Canteloube: Songs of the Auvergne

Netania Davrath, Soprano

Analogue Productions APC 002



A deliciously evocative experience. An aroma of freshly baked rustic loaves. Tasty Brie washed down with coarse, full-bodied, Red and bittersweet songs suffused with the pastoral idyll. Netania Davrath's expressive blend of joy and pathos in Canteloube's sensitive arrangement of these folk tunes distills an essence of the Auvergne which I'm certain will remain unsurpassed. Wonderful intonation, captivating phrasing, perfect weight and emphasis, warmth and vocal dexterity make this recital superior to all others. Language alone cannot sufficiently describe a profound beauty present within 'Lo Foilaire' (The Spinner), 'La Delaissdo' (The Abandoned) or the Shepherd's Song, 'Bailero'. Pierre de la Roche handles the orchestra in an appropriately subtle and understated way. Doug Sax and Chad Kassem also maintain the careful balance between soloist and musicians in their finely etched transfer of Omega Record's tapes from 1963. Contrastingly, Victoria de los Angeles adopts a straight-laced approach in Testaments' recut of EMI ASD 2826. She is far too operatic for my taste, and the overall performance is constricted by an obsessive neatness that lacks all semblance of authenticity. Steer well clear of both this and Dame Kiri's recent lamentable foray into the French countryside. Davrath is Queen.

RP



Ella Fitzgerald & Paul Smith

Let No Man Write My Epitaph

Classic Records Verve MG6V-4043



A lousy melodrama about gangsters corrupting a slum-dwelling concert pianist is redeemed by thirteen lovely songs, of which, only three were heard in the film. These beautiful jazz standards including 'Black Coffee', 'September Song' and 'One For My Baby' are all sensitively underscored with a simple piano accompaniment. A perfect balance is struck between Paul Smith's playing and Ella's inimitable ability to hold a note, fashion a phrase, or modulate her voice - the listener is beguiled by their intimate, late night rendition. Warm, richly textured inflexions in numbers like 'Misty' are performed with an unbelievable ease and naturalness that is sympathetically captured by simple mic-ing arrangements. Bernie Grundman's impeccable transfer ensures that there is no loss of focus; and the images cast by Miss Fitzgerald's voice (their distinctive shape, intonation and dynamic shift) possess the precise size, weight and scale intended for them at the original session. *Let No Man Write My Epitaph* is a marvellous collection of ballads that can be comfortably placed at the top of my "Ella" list, where it sits alongside another great Classic Records re-issue, the spine-tingling Clap Hands, Here Comes Charlie.

RP

Supplier: Vivante



Music of Rimsky-Korsakov

Ernest Ansermet, OSR

DECCA SXL 2113



Fairy-tale baubles. Bright, sparkling orchestration. A paint-box of colour. Splashes of bumble bee oranges, yellows and black. The green and blue hue in Sadko's seascape, mixed with the political shades of Dubinuska, and a fresh snow-fall from the Christmas Eve Suite. Each impression whets the appetite for another Ansermet reading. High class performances by the Suisse players even accommodate that favourite of mine: a brassy Russian personality trait which emphasises the flourish of trumpets, trombones and horns, as with the climax of the storm in Sadko. An old-fashioned warmth and richness to the sound compliments these deep orchestral textures and (for that matter) suits the conductor's stately, almost serene, interpretation. His 'Flight' is a languid, nectar-filled one! Speakers Corner have also brought fine detail to these pieces. Glittering stars and crisp flakes are delicately sketched out by the percussion in Christmas Eve. While the soundstage is roomy enough for all these celestial events, it is perhaps not quite as expansive as that found in some DECCA recordings. However, the transfer is a safe recommendation because the overall balance is realistic, and Ansermet's rectitude illustrates the dignity of Rimsky-Korsakov's music.

RP

Supplier: Vivante



"Country of Origin" and what it means..

by Jimmy Hughes

Back in the late '70s, early '80s there seemed to be lots of shops selling cut-price LPs. In some cases, the UK product was being sold. But more often than not the LP was an import. I recall buying American copies of albums like *Out of the Blue* by ELO and Fleetwood Mac's *Rumours*, and being doubly pleased because I was getting a better-sounding disc than the UK equivalent at a lower price.

But you had to be careful. There were quite a lot of dodgy imports from countries like Spain, Portugal, and Greece. Not that LPs pressed in these countries were always bad - as with most generalisations, there were exceptions. But on the whole there seemed to be more bad than good - and I'm not just talking about pressing quality.

One of the worst examples I came across was a Portuguese copy of Elton John's *Captain Fantastic and the Brown Dirt Cowboy*. Hardly audiophile standard to begin with. But the Portuguese copy sounded as though a Dolby A processor had been used



on a non-Dolby'd tape; it sounded as though the treble was being turned down as soon as the music went quiet, giving a strange pumping effect.

Ironically, this album was being used by a hi-fi shop to demonstrate expensive equipment! I went through their stock of demo records, and found quite a few that were sub-standard. It's hard enough to make a good sound in a shop anyway, without shooting yourself in the foot with mediocre demonstration material.

In the same way I've seen manufacturer's of expensive systems using compilation records to dem their wares at hi-fi shows, seemingly

unaware that the same track taken from the original LP would sound ten times better. Not all compilations are bad; but most are taken from tapes that are copies of copies, and quite a few have extremely long sides and are therefore cut at a reduced volume level. When buying LPs, it's worth checking to see where the LP was pressed. Don't trust the sleeve! It may imply that

the LP was pressed in

a certain country, but check the record itself to be sure. It's possible for sleeves and LPs

to get mixed up, especially in shops who master-bag the LP (keeping it behind the counter for security), and put just the sleeve out in the browser.

A friend of mine once paid top dollar for a Japanese copy of a Weather Report album on Sony. Alas, when I looked at his LP, it was the standard CBS copy! The assistant must've looked at the title and picked the wrong version of the album, not realising the difference. Not that there's anything wrong with the UK pressed CBS copy; it's just that my friend paid about three-times too much for it. ▶

► If I was faced with a much wanted album secondhand, and inspection revealed it was pressed somewhere like Greece or Spain, I wouldn't reject it out of hand. I'd look at the matrix number and try to ascertain if the disc had been stamped from kosher metalwork. For example, if a cutting lab was credited on the album sleeve - 'Mastered at Sterling Sound' - I'd try and find Sterling's trademark - a tiny 'Sterling' imprint in the plastic near the leadout grooves.

If it was a classical LP, I'd look to see how the matrix number was written, and whether or not it looked the same as a 'proper' copy. For example, I've got quite a few Italian Decca pressings - and they're excellent; the surfaces are extremely quiet and clean. I know they're okay sound wise because the matrix numbers are the same as those used in the UK.

Other times you have to use your eyes and judge the 'look' of the grooves. A few years back I was browsing through some secondhand LPs when I came upon a copy of Bernstein conducting *West Side Story* on Deutsche Grammophon. Normally I'd go straight past this double LP, having already got it on vinyl and CD. But something about the sleeve made me pause and go back.

Sure enough it was a foreign copy - pressed in Hungary by Hungaraton! Now I was always disappointed with the sound of my DG original, feeling it was badly cut with shallow grooves. The Hungaraton copy was not pressed from DG metalwork, but had been recut - the grooves looked deep and shiny, with lots of squiggle. So I bought

it, and sure enough it sounded much cleaner and firmer than my German DG copy.

But be careful. Sometimes a very 'heavy' cut, with lots of deep grooves, simply means the record has been cut with quite a bit of deep bass boost. I once bought a French copy of Falla's *Three Cornered Hat* conducted by Ernest Ansermet because it looked fantastic - almost like a Telarc.

Alas, I should've known better - especially given the 'thin' nature of the original recording.

The French mastering engineer, perhaps feeling the original recording needed help, cut it with lots of bass boost. The result was awful - a boomy, soggy, mess. I have an original Decca copy from 1961 (SXL 2296), and like many Decca LPs of that period the grooves look deceptively shallow. Deep bass isn't lacking as such, but the bright tonal balance can make the sound seem rather thin. If, however, you boost the bass, the low frequencies suddenly become overpowering.

On a related subject, it's not impossible to find reissues that sound better than expensive originals. For example, Ernest Ansermet's 1961 Decca recording of Rimsky-Korsakov's *Scheherazade* (SXL 2268) was

acclaimed a sonic triumph in its day. I bought it in the early '70s, by which time it had been recut several times. Then I got lucky and found an original copy.

Judged visually, the original looks better than my '70s copy; the grooves are deeper and more squiggly. The sound is good too, but there's a tonal hardness present that gives the strings a slightly forward 'cuppy' quality. The '70s copy sounds sweeter and more open, albeit less focussed and immediate than the original.

By the early '80s this recording was long deleted, so Decca licenced it to a budget label called Pickwick, who eliminated the filler (Borodin's *Polovtsian Dances*) and spread the work over two sides - CC 7501. To a label snob, the Pickwick copy would be worth little or nothing. But in my opinion it's easily the best sounding LP version of this recording. The same company reissued Ansermet's *Three Cornered Hat*, again with excellent results - though here I'd say the original reigns supreme, having a brilliance and three-dimensionality never

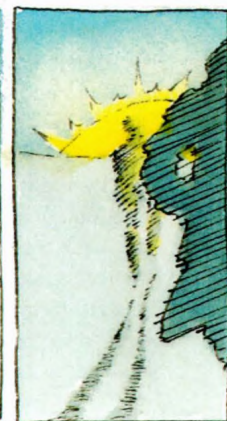
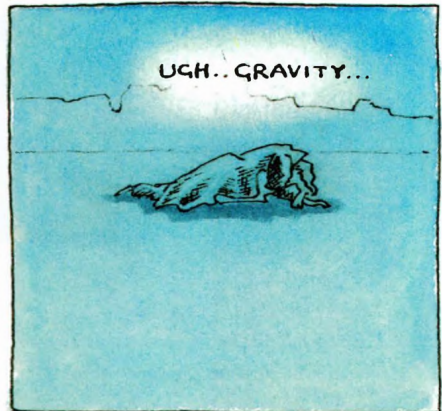
equalled by any subsequent pressing. The moral of all this is - be careful and discriminating, but try to keep an open mind. Looking at an LP, prior to listening to it, can only take you so far.

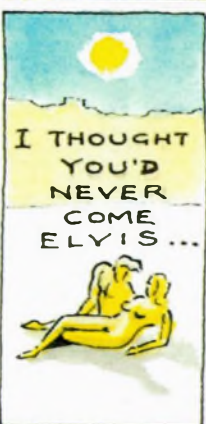
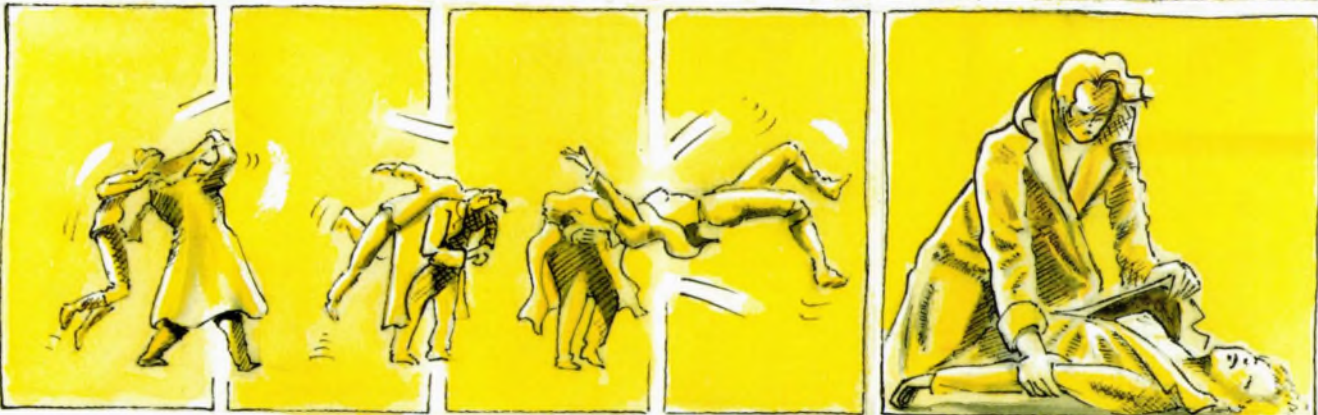
You won't know what it sounds like until you actually play it. It takes time to know what to look for, and experience to interpret it correctly. But, with bit a bit of both it should be possible to separate the wheat from the chaff.

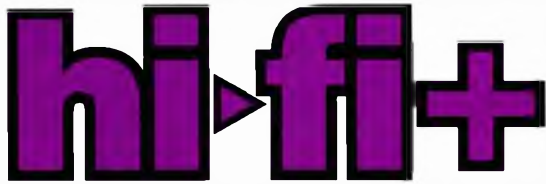


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