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Editorial

One of the great problems with reviews is that they are, by their very nature, short-term affairs. As a bi-monthly title, our reviewers get to spend far more time than the average with each product, but if you want to frighten yourself work out how much time some of our more prolific scribes get to spend with the products they review. The end result is that reviews in general tend to under value the benefits of reliability, service and longevity in both a product and the company that manufactures it.

The problem is compounded by the fact that it's an awful lot easier to create a great sounding product that's running within an inch of its life, than a great sounding product that is reliable, stable and repeatable. Indeed, the history of hi-fi is littered with products that either sounded great but proved to be horrendously unreliable, or where the production units never seemed to match the brilliance of the review samples. In the former case, the unreliability often proved terminal for both the product and the company, leaving owners with broken product and no warranty. In the latter, the result was a general frustration that undermined the credibility of both the magazines and industry as a whole.

Now, none of us have a crystal ball, and when a new product from a new company arrives it's impossible (and unfair) to try and predict that company's future well being. However, just as history is littered with products that serve as salutary examples, it's also littered with notorious serial offenders in both categories. These manufacturers do untold damage to the industry as a whole, and everybody knows who they are. Which makes me wonder why I see them being lionised in major features in the pages of the hi-fi press.

If we aren't prepared to look after our own house, who is going to do it for us? The answer is the public, and eventually they'll vote the only way they can - with their feet!



Roy Gregory

A lot of changes - and still rather a lot of money.



Speakers as universally revered as our Reference Series are a tough act to follow. After all, what can you do to improve on excellence?

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Like all the best things in life, they still don't come cheap - but to anyone who really appreciates sound, they're better value than ever.



REFERENCE SERIES



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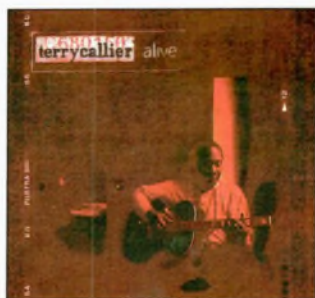
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Dynavector Developments

Recent conversations with an ebullient Dr Tominari revealed that Dynavector are placing the DV507 tonearm (featured in Issue 8) back in production. Having exhausted existing stocks, and given the arm's popularity in Germany and the USA, the company has embarked on a limited production run to meet the continuing demand. Price in the UK is likely to be in the region of £2500, but this could well represent your last opportunity to own this outrageous device, so if you've always fancied one and you've got the turntable and wallet to accommodate it, now's your chance.

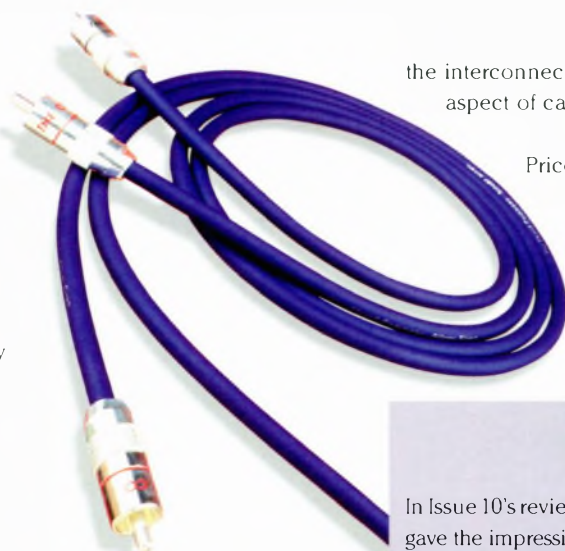
And just to prove that there's more to modern analogue than re-cycling the old classics, there were veiled threats of a new cartridge model that will represent a further refinement on his most recent work. Watch this space, but don't expect it to be cheap.

Further information from Pear Audio
Tel. (44)(0)1665-830862 E-mail john@pearaudio.com



Chord Revise Siren Interconnect

The Chord Co. have updated their popular Siren interconnect, a cable which we have particularly enjoyed in the context of Rega systems. The new model incorporates technology and techniques derived from the upmarket Chorus cable. The twin-axial construction now has improved screening as well as employing Chord's single signal path technology. This means that the silver plated OFC conductors are silver soldered to silver plated RCA plugs, maintaining a single contact material throughout



the interconnect, a critical and often overlooked aspect of cable performance.

Price for the new Silver Siren is £75 for a 1m pair.

Further information from
The Chord Co.
Tel. (44)(0)1722 331674
Net. www.chord.co.uk



Errata

In Issue 10's review of the Kuzma turntable we inadvertently gave the impression that there is no lid for this model. This is not the case, and although JMH didn't receive one with the review turntable (hence the confusion), the lid does indeed exist as a freestanding item that rests on the platter. It is supplied as standard with all Stabi S turntables.

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Sound And Vision 2001 The Bristol Show

by Roy Gregory

The big news in Bristol was the long awaited arrival of DVD-A, with functioning, commercially available players from Pioneer, and a raft of titles from Warners. Okay, so the music is drawn mainly from the back catalogue (apart from new classical recordings), and might lead an alien visitor to the conclusion that DVD-A heralds a prog-rock revival, but at least the DVD camp are aware of the vital importance of getting the software out there.

Meanwhile, not to be outdone, Sony were showing discrete six-channel SACD (starting at as little as £500), a move which whilst it's wholly predictable also risks putting early adopter's noses out of joint. Show sponsors What Hi-Fi tried to bring order out of chaos by offering a multi-channel comparison

between the two formats, but were frustrated by the impossibility of playing the same track on the two systems. The main thing they managed to demonstrate was that the vast majority of studio engineers still haven't got past the gee-whizz stage of multi-channel re-mixing, meaning that the extra channels weren't just present, they absolutely had to be audibly present. If early CD re-issues played havoc with the tonal and information balance of recordings, then it looks like the multi-channel revolution is going to go straight for the jugular by screwing with the actual musical content! Oh happy days. I'll let DA fill you in on the technical developments, but suffice to say, the fog of the format war is in danger of being overshadowed by a cold hard tide of commercial cynicism. Multi-channel music will have little to offer until we emerge from the far side.

Back to two-channel, and like most shows this one quickly developed a theme: speakers. Everywhere I went were interesting speaker designs and developments, none



more so than the Royd room. Long recognised for the excellence of their musical qualities, and their shoe-box aesthetics, Joe Ackroyd has finally seen the light and created a new range of speakers whose beautiful finish matches their musical performance. Hung on the end of a Naim 5 Series set-up, supported by the excellent Isoblu shelving (all lovingly watched over by Derek Whittington from New Audio Frontiers), the sound was lucid, vibrant and full of colour, no doubt helped by the choice of music. In fact, this was the first recipient of my own personal Real Music Award, given to those exhibitors whose choice of demonstration material strayed from the hi-fi

straight and narrow. Whilst the massively improved appearance has had an inevitable effect on the price (the Minstrel equivalent RR1 now costs £799) both the looks and the sound easily justify the increase. (Royd. (44)(0)1952-290700)

Cyrus were playing production samples of their slim, floorstanding, NXT based Icon speaker. A hybrid design, using an 8" moving-coil bass unit crossing over to the NXT panel at 400Hz, the speakers' bandwidth belie their slim dimensions. Priced at £2500 a pair they are pitched straight into a highly competitive sector of the market, and only time will tell whether their distinctive technology and looks are enough to enable them to hold their own. For now though, it's looking good. (Cyrus. (44)(0)1480-435577 www.cyrusaudio.com)



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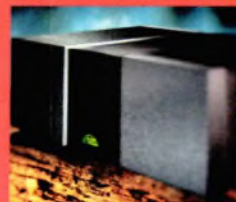
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Jason Hector

Another interesting and entertaining Bristol show, a fair number of new exhibitors alongside the usual suspects, along with a few industry newcomers: in fact, just what I've come to expect from this bustling and well organised West-country event. Even the sound quality was pretty good, although I was slightly disappointed that the number of AV dems seems to be on the increase, and that most of these seemed to think that the best sound was the most "impressive", and that demanded ludicrous amounts of bass, which in several cases distorted other peoples systems, which was a shame. On a more positive note there was a fair number of turntables in evidence, and almost all were making good music, so full marks to the redundant but curiously resilient medium and its purveyors.

What follows is just an overview, and there were several fine sounding rooms besides the ones I've selected: step forward Sim Audio, Creek and Epos, Chord and Wilson Benesch (with a vinyl front end), Michell (vinyl again), Beahorn (vinyl yet again) and Path premier (with Bow and Revel).

So starting with the award for best sound per pound at the show, the Royd room sounded simply excellent with their new range of loudspeakers. The baby RR1's, diminutive in physical size, build on the Royd reputation for small floorstanders started by the Minstrel 8 years ago. The RR1 is approximately Minstrel sized with a sloping baffle and side mounted ports. They are now triangular from the side, I guess to minimise internal standing waves. At about £800 they were superbly finished, extremely musical and capable of really impressing beyond their price and size. They were being fed with either a Naim 5 series CD player and pre-power or a Well Tempered turntable through Densen amplification all supported on the Isobluue tables, and in both cases the results put some of the far more expensive competition to shame. Watch this space for a review very soon.

(Royd Tel. (44)(0)1952 290700)



Along with the well-known and impressive DNM amplifiers, the Resolution Audio CD55 and Living Voice Avatar speakers (whose external passive crossovers were in a bigger box than the power amps) were making very good music.

The naturalness of a pair of high efficiency speakers coupled to a pure and fast amplifier like the DNM's was beguiling, while the CD55 was really showing its quality in this exalted company. Definitely one to watch, and like an increasing number of the Naim equipped Hi-Fi+ writers I'm wondering just how good it might sound at home.

(Tel. (44)(0)1277 227355 www.dnm.co.uk)

Dynamics and lots of them were the order of the day in the Focal/JM Lab room. Driven from a Naim system (CDS 11, a NAC52 and a pair of NAP135's treated to Musicworks cables and Quadra Spire supports) the amount of slam available from the diminutive Micro Utopias was astonishing, making you blink with some demo tracks. But don't get the impression that this system was only capable of impact and sonic fireworks. All the other important ingredients were also present, and the final result kept me listening to song after song (even when I should have been looking at the next room!).

(www.jmlab.focal.tm.fr)

Naim themselves were again present in force, with three rooms and a stand on the terrace. They also provided some very necessary real music in the entertaining shape of Foo Foo and the Boy. If their new disc proves as good as their live performance then it should be good indeed (It is! Ed.). Meanwhile, up on the 10th floor the big active DBL system was again demonstrating how powerful and fast a big active system could sound - and at the same time summing up how bad show dems can be, especially for big systems. There were moments when the sound was superb, but others where coherence was lost. That said, everybody seemed to be impressed. The other two rooms featured the 5 series and a pair of



▶ Linn broke with tradition by actually using an LP12, a facility we promptly availed ourselves of, playing one of the superb new Analogue Productions direct cuts, clearing the room in the process (Linn (44)(0)141-307-7777 www.linn.co.uk). Unfortunately, the big (and vastly expensive) active system was ill-served by the bedroom it was sitting in, a fact brought home in resounding fashion by the system in the room immediately below it. Here, B&W were giving their new budget model, the DM303 its public debut. Used



with basic Creek electronics this little £180 two-way was producing one of the best sounds at the show. Enjoyable and engaging, this system put many far more expensive set-ups to shame, and it looks like the guys from Steyning have followed up the venerable 601 with yet another budget benchmark. (B&W (44)(0)1903-750750 www.bwspeakers.com) Incidentally, this excellent performance was echoed in Creek's own room, where they were using a pre-power combination to ▶



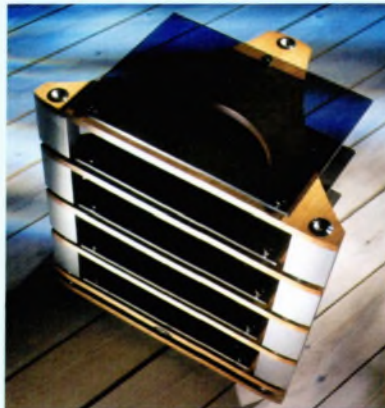
new speakers respectively. The new boys in the speaker range are expected to cost somewhere around £2000 and are called the Vivo. There were styling hints from the NBL, with curved top and a narrowing cabinet, while the driver compliment remains based on the perennial favourites found in the Intro, Credo and SBL. Most surprising of all (judging by the internet response anyway) was the Naim equipment stand. A modular system it features multiple decoupling systems. Styling is, well, interesting, and the quality

of fit and finish promise much, using a mixture of wood, glass and aluminium. Price? Expect to pay £1500 for 4 shelves, so I can't see many 5 series purchasers using these tables, but what better support for your NAP500's? (Tel. (44)(0)1722 332266 www.naim-audio.com)

KEF was living up to expectations by surprising me with a dem of their new entry level 5.1 channel system. At £700 for 5 speakers and a sub it offers excellent value, and the sound from the 5 small uni-Q drive units integrated well, making it the perfect solution for stereo lovers who don't want to compromise their main systems with surround sound and a big screen.

(Tel. (44)(0)1622 672261 www.kef.com)

Being as I was moaning about the number and general quality of the AV dems, it was a pleasure to find the Myriad and Elac room producing a compelling sound from a range of discs including the ubiquitous live performances. Early on Saturday, before the crowds got too big, I managed to get into the hot seat and was treated to a very good



Musicworks and Quadraspire joined Nordost in managing to do real and successful comparative dems of their products in the less than ideal show environment. Musicworks were showing their mains distribution solutions and the modified Quadraspire tables, which provide some further isolation. This demonstration worked well, and expect a comparative review of the pre and post modified Quadraspire tables in the near future. Nordost were again demonstrating the benefits of their excellent cables, and proving that there is at least one cable range that doesn't suffer from the law of diminishing returns.

Roll on Bristol 2002 if London doesn't put me off shows for good!

► drive Epos speakers. The budget electronics market is undergoing something of a sea-change, with strong challenges from the likes of Creek, Myriad and Roksan taking on the established market leaders. (Creek Audio Ltd. (44)(0)208-361-4133 www.creekaudio.co.uk)

Back to B&W, their other big news was their distribution of the highly regarded Classé Audio electronics from Canada. B&W will be responsible for Classé throughout Europe and the Far East, which should provide their distributors with the necessary muscle to drive the notoriously power hungry Nautilus



floorstanders with ease, especially given that at least one of their more traditional partners when it comes to electronics has started to market their own speakers, extremely aggressively, or so the rumours have it. In Bristol, the Classé electronics were making short work of a pair of CDM9-NTs, which suggests that once again, B&W have got their sums right. Beauhorn were achieving their normal excellent results, the compliantly mounted (à la Townshend Seismic Stand) horn speakers being driven from a Nottingham ►

▶ Analogue front-end via the bespoke Pure Music amplifiers. PM reviewed the speakers a few issues back, but having heard this system a few times I'm leaning more and more towards the notion of reviewing it en masse. If they can do this in a hotel bedroom then I'd love to see (hear) what they can do in my front room. Mr Thomas, you have been warned. And while we're about it, please accept the second of my Real Music Awards. (Thomas Transducers.

www.beauhorn.u-net.com)

Elsewhere, those other arch traditionalists (in an aesthetic sense at least) Ruark, were playing their New Classic range of speakers. A definite break with the 'cabinetwork' style of previous models, the new range



consists of a stand mounter and two floorstanders, the larger CL30 being a three-way with a 9" bass driver. The new speakers feature post modern flying baffles and sculpted side cheeks whose graphite finish

provides a sharp contrast with the veneered cabinets. Sensitivity still rests around the high eighties, so it's nice to see that not everything has changed. (Ruark.

(44)(0)1702-601410)

Show debutants Rega (they haven't done a national show in living memory) surprised everyone with an extraordinarily stylish little sub-woofer as well as showing the rare but wonderful silver finish on their heavily revamped electronics range. (Rega: Tel. (44)(0)1702 333071) UKD also sprang a surprise with a massively engineered integrated amp from Audio Analogue. Looking more like a German or American product with its muscular build and angular styling, the Maestro is rated



at 150 Watts into 8 Ohms, includes both phono (mm/mc) and line inputs and is set to cost \$2500, at which price it certainly looks like something of a bargain. Hopefully we'll see how it sounds soon. (UKD.

www.ukd.co.uk)

The DNM/Living Voice combination that was so impressive in Chester was again making great sounds at Bristol (DNM. (44)(0)1277 227355 Living Voice (44)(0)1159 733222). Driven from the truly excellent but largely unsung Resolution Audio

CD55 (reviewed in Issue 10) this was one room where you could really forget about the system and thoroughly enjoy Kevin's Real Music Award winning collection of eclectic Scandinavian jazz (and I use the term loosely). DD was frantically scribbling catalogue numbers as each new disc was played. The Primus pre-amp was used to drive a pair of PA3S power amps, biamping the Avatar OBXs, so this wasn't a cheap system. It was



however, one of the few that sounded worth the money, and gets my vote for the best sound at the show. Meanwhile, the straight Avatars were also doing well with the impressive Sim Audio Moon electronics, now coming through new distributor Redline, which means that these excellent products should be more widely available across the UK in future. (Redline. (44)(0)131 226 1981 www.red-line.co.uk)

I tried to get into the Nordost dem room several times, but the doorway was jammed. News of Lars' entertaining prowess is clearly spreading, and the idea of seeing someone trying to justify the price of the latest Valhalla cables clearly added a touch of spice. I obviously never got to hear that dem, but then I got treated to my own personal sitting some months back. In fact, one of our subscribers, an SPM owner on his way up to see Lars do his ▶

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▶ stuff asked if the Valhalla was really that good? "Don't listen if you're not prepared to buy" was my advice. I bumped into him again, looking rather shame faced, a couple of hours later. "I'm buying" was all he said. From that I take it that Lars has lost none of his charm (It's the way he grins so innocently as he does you in that gets me every time!). The only bad news? Nordost have seriously underestimated demand for the Valhalla, so even after you hand over the cash (mentally at least), you'll still have to wait for your cables. (Nordost. (44)(0)1352 730251 www.nordost.com)

Path Premier were showing the baby Revel M20 two-way, driven with Bow electronics. Relatively compact, this is one stand mounted speaker that's capable of delivering serious scale. Too much? That remains to be seen, but the taut, dry Bow amps seemed an appropriate match. Given the quality of the Gem and Revel's other speakers I feel that it's about time we looked at their more affordable offerings with a view to gauging how well they'll translate to a European listening environment with its generally smaller rooms. (Path Premier. (44)(0)1844 219000)

Analogue was thin on the ground, and whilst some exhibitors used an occasional analogue source, there were few actually promoting the technology. Cherished



Records had brought the VPI TNT 'Hot-Rod' to the show, but only showed it passively, along with the cleaning machines. (Cherished record Co. (44)(0)1579 363603 www.cherished-record-company.co.uk) They also brought mountains of quality vinyl, along with Vivante, who played both sides of the fence by offering a comprehensive selection of DVD-A and SACD titles. (Vivante. (44)(0)208-977-6600 www.vivante.co.uk)

Meanwhile, Ortofon distributor Henley Designs quietly

announced a pair of new cartridges based on the Jubilee bodywork. They're reviewed in this issue so I won't spend any more time on them here. (Henley Designs. (44)(0)1491 834700).

Michell Engineering and Trichord have long been Bristol Show supporters, and over the years a whole slew of new developments have first seen the light of day at the Marriott. This time round it was the new £300 Dino phono stage (enthusiastically reviewed in Issue 10), and a DC motor assembly for the Gyro/Orbe, complete with QV power



supply. Both products were excellent themselves, and despite the comparatively modest price of the Dino, this was the best sound I've heard from the Michell/Trichord system in many a year. I'm sure that the excellent

Pro-Ac Futures were playing their part, but this system sounded better than it had any right to. (Michell. (44)(0)208 953 0771. Trichord. (44)(0)1684 573524)

Now that Exposure's new range of electronics is finally available, they seemed to be everywhere, offering excellent sound for the money. But ironically, they weren't the most interesting story in the Exposure room. That was the Vandersteen speakers. These superb and cost effective US designs have been sporadically available in the UK, developing something of a cult following. However, no one has ever really put the effort into establishing them. The latest company to try is of course Exposure, but recognising their limited rather than mass market appeal they have decided to take the unusual path of offering them direct to the public. That pitches the floorstanding three-way 2Ce at around £1800, and that looks like a steal - as long as you are confident that you can get the best out of them without dealer support. (Exposure. (44)(0)1273 423877)

PMC were again present, this year playing their AML1 stand-mounted, active monitor. Compact and surprisingly svelte for a professional product, the real surprise is round the back with a beautifully constructed and

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DVD-A At Bristol

As RG has already mentioned, this show marked the UK debut for DVD-A, and, like many others I was keen to hear this particular version of the future. The two companies with functioning machines, Pioneer and Meridian, opted for radically different approaches to their demonstrations. While Pioneer held an open house playing 'fun' surround sound mixes of prog rockers ELP, Meridian opted for a sober closed-door session utilising 'serious' artists. What the two demonstrations had in common, however, was their emphasis on the surround sound capabilities of the system, virtually ignoring the supposed benefit of DVD-A over CD for stereo reproduction. I can understand this, as it's notoriously difficult to get a really good sound at any hi-fi show, let alone one that would allow the audience to consistently hear the difference between good CD sound and DVD-A. Surround sound makes an impression, whether you like it or not.

Unfortunately there's not too much I can say about the Pioneer demonstration, as the open door policy gave me little chance to really listen to the system. That was a shame as I know the ELP material very well, but I enjoyed the playful 70's surround mix anyway. If you're going to play something as artificial as a Moog, then why not have it sailing round all four corners of the room.

The Meridian demonstration was a different kettle of fish. They see DVD-A as the future of hi-fi, and Bristol 2001 was the launching pad for their new DVD-A player, the 596. Meridian are inextricably linked to the DVD-A camp, of course, having devised the lossless packing system (MLP) that allows the required amount of data to be stored on the DVD-A disc. In order to get their message across they utilised a seriously expensive system, comprising the DSP8000 digital speakers for left front, right front, and centre, and DSP6000 speakers for the rears. The Meridian sub-woofer was also in use for the .1 channel.

Curiously there was also a pair of DSP33 speakers mounted almost at ceiling height in front left/right positions – more about these later.

So what about the sound? In a word: confusing. I love home cinema, and have a fairly modest Dolby Digital set up at home, separate from my main music system. Blockbuster movies throw the foley track around the room to great effect, but it's much like the ELP mix – done for fun and impact, not for realism. Some movies try a more realistic approach using the rears for ambience; to immerse the viewer in the night sounds of a forest or to enhance the effect of the actors being in a cavern; but your mind is still squarely focused in front of you by the presence of the screen. Without that visual keystone, I found the 5.1 sound slightly disorientating. I asked Bob Stuart about this, and his opinion is that we have to 'unlearn' the stereo experience before we can fully appreciate what 5.1 sound can give us. I think he has a point, but it didn't help me in the short time available for the demonstration.

I managed to reach two conclusions, such as they are. Firstly that whilst DVD-A is clearly superior to CD, it is also a sonic extension of it, embodying much the same character and aural fingerprint (and in stark contrast to SACD in my , admittedly limited, experience). Secondly, the system suffered from a smoothness and lack of leading edge bite, although whether this is a function of DVD-A remains to be seen.

The other thing that Meridian were keen to demonstrate was the fact that DVD-A's six channels can be used in a variety of ways, over and above 5.1 configuration. Thus they can be employed to add height and space to recordings, although this requires moving the speakers, not that practical given the resistance offered in most houses to a five speaker set-up to start with. So whilst I'm looking forward to hearing what DVD-A can do in stereo, in the home environment, and with material with which I am familiar, at the moment it's difficult to escape the conclusion that we've yet to decide just how to best utilise DVD's fabled versatility.

► finished amplifier module built, of course, by Bryston. For some reason, a lot of pro-audio companies skimp on the electronics so it's nice to see someone taking it seriously. We're still waiting the arrival of the passive FBI floorstander for review (promised at the last Bristol show!) but I'm assured that that is now imminent, so hopefully we'll give you a slightly more in depth view of the PMC speakers and Bryston amps soon. (PMC. (44)(0)870-444-1044 www.pmc-speakers.com)

Which brings us to supports, and the inimitable Mr Townshend. Max



had a new version of the Seismic Stand, and, praise the Lord, by repositioning the air cells he has managed to do away with the counterweight you used to need for levelling. Now, whilst the Seismic Stands of old were undeniably effective, having to rebalance them every time a piece of equipment moved by as much as a hair's breadth was a monumental pain in the ass. From the point of view of a reviewer it made the stand a complete non-starter, despite its performance, so I await the arrival

▶ of the new design with interest. (Townshend Audio. (44)(0)2089 792155)

Elsewhere, those loveable lunatics from The Audio Counsel were at it again. Having sorted out the mains to their satisfaction, they've turned their now idle hands to the question of supporting shelves, and their favourite Quadraspire tables. They decided long ago that the Cherry shelves were the best sounding (I know, I know!) and so they set out to find out why. Their conclusions fastened on the veneer, so they started experimenting with rebating the shelves so that it never contacted the uprights. Pleased with the results they moved on to the uprights themselves, and started to incorporate additional decoupling between the layers, reminiscent of the Avik ZX4 rack. This is what they were

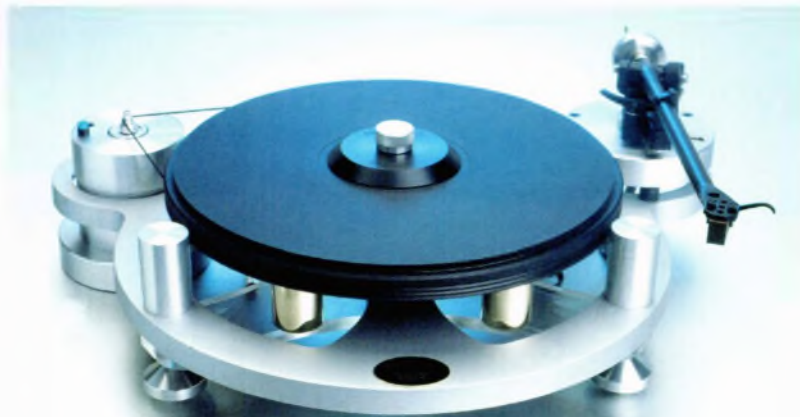


demonstrating at the show, in conjunction with their mains leads, and the results were distinct enough to give anybody who doubts the importance of mains cabling or equipment supports considerable pause.

However, that wasn't the most remarkable thing. The age old Linn toe-tapping tactic (you know the one, where the salesman's right foot suddenly leaps into life every time he plays the 'preferred' product) took on an entirely new lease of life. Each upgrade brought a total body reaction from Larry and his cohorts, until, by the final step they'd all flung themselves into some kind of weird St Vitus' dance. Hmm. Now boys, we all know about musical involvement, but even teenagers at raves don't get this excited (and they've got drugs to help out!). Do calm down a bit, for gawds sake. ▶+

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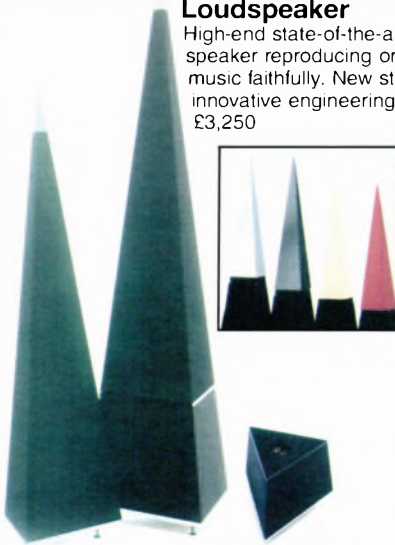


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Incoming!

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or via the web-site at www.hifiplus.com

Dear Sir,

Having read with interest your comments on the lack of originality shown by so many hi-fi companies these days, I can only marvel at your self restraint. As you are not prepared to say it, I'll say it for you. You can add magazines to the list of offenders! When Hi-Fi Plus appeared it was a breath of fresh air because of what it said and the way it looked. Recent "redesigns" by certain of the UK competition (and we all know who we're on about here) have tried to save their sorry asses by grafting some of the more obvious aspects of that visual identity onto their own publications. Unfortunately it's not quite that simple and the end results are an inconsistent and poorly executed mess. A bit like all those "me too" products they keep reviewing.

Someone needs to point out that you can't put a new pair of trousers onto a corpse and expect it to spring to life. Come on people, how about responding to the challenge with a little originality. I know it's in short supply at present but I'm sure you've got some somewhere. Root around a bit and you might even find some backbone too.

Louise Ford

Via e-mail

You might think that, I couldn't possibly comment. Ed

Dear Sir,

Your SME arm tweak is superb! It vastly improved the synergy between my SME 4, Roksan TMS table and my Lyra cartridge. The resulting sound was even better than you described it in your article. This led to my entering a subscription to Hi-Fi Plus. Thanks, and please review the new Roksan TMS table.

Sincerely,

Paul Friedman

Via e-mail

The new TMS design mentioned in the 2000 Novotel Show report is indeed high on our list of desirable review product. However, given the economic realities of the hi-fi industry (which place budget CD players ahead of flagship

turntables) I'm not exactly holding my breath. Rest assured that we are on the case, and we'll cover the new deck as soon as possible. Ed

Dear Sir,

I'm writing to Roy Gregory about his article "Calling all SME owners..." in issue 8-Nov/Dec 2000. I own an SME5 tonearm mounted on a Michell Gyrodeck and the cartridge is a Clearaudio Insider.

Now I have two questions:

- 1 - Would it have the same positive effect if I remove the bridge as it does with the 309 ?
- 2 - I've got a screwdriver with adjustable torque settings. Can you give me the figures for the correct torque should I wish to replace the bridge?

Yours sincerely

Haluk Ozumerzifon

Istanbul/Turkey, via e-mail

The answer to your first question is yes. In fact, if anything you !! get an even better result from the arms without the 309's detachable headshell (see the comments of Paul Friedman above). As regards the torque settings used on the bridge, if I understand SME correctly, then these are actually set individually, so there is no standard value. If however, you use your torque driver to loosen the bolts, starting at its lowest setting and slowly increasing the torque, noting the value at which each side releases, then if you want to replace the bridge doing so with the driver set one notch below the release tension for each bolt should protect against over-tightening. This will of course depend on the degree of adjustment available on your driver, and if in doubt, consult SME for further guidance. (Tel. 44(C)1903-814321)

Dear Sir,

I spoke with you some time ago at the Dublin Hi-Fi Show (I was the chap that had the Audio Synthesis equipment!) and really enjoyed talking about Hi-Fi kit. Your magazine ►

▶ is totally excellent, great reading, lovely photography (I also spoke to you at the show about this matter as well), great reviews.

What about running an article on high-end tuners, or even information as to outdoor aerials to improve FM reception. It's very rare to read about Fanfare, Day Secquarra, or Magnum Dynalab Radio Tuners. I would love to read a review of any of these mentioned tuners. Have you any-thing lined up in this area for your magazine this year ?

Keep up the excellent work !!

Best wishes from Ireland.

Peter McCullough

Your point is well made, and you'll note that PM has reviewed the Naim NAT 05 in this issue. This is the start (the benchmark if you like) for a whole series of tuner reviews, looking at some of the more exotic models as well as those that are readily available. As Paul points out, FM is a source of free music, but it goes beyond just that. The beauty of the radio is that it introduces you to music and ideas that you wouldn't otherwise come across, stretching your tastes and appreciation. And after that there's Test Match Special! Outdoor aerials are difficult to cover because their performance is so environmentally specific. Great results for one application in one situation don't necessarily translate to another. Whilst the same applies to indoor aerials, they at least are a little easier to try, and not everyone wants or can have a forty foot mast on their roof. Those we will be reviewing, so watch this space. Ed.

Dear Sir,

Further to our discussion at the Kempton show, please find enclosed my solution to the problem of bouncy floors. As you can see it is essentially simple. My aim was to minimise floor movement transmission by a sort of reversed seesaw effect. The tension in the restraining tie, apart from the speaker's weight, depends on the fulcrum of the seesaw i.e. the location of the bottom two cones. Up to a point the lower the tension the better since movement close to the speaker drivers must also be taken into account. I suppose that with stops fore and after to prevent the speaker toppling, the speaker could almost be floating! I haven't tried this nearly balancing act.

As a child, or since, have you ever played telephones? The equipment being two tins and a goodly length of thin string. Each end of the string threads through a small hole in the bottom of each tin and is knotted. Tension the string and speak and listen with the tins. A kiddie's introduction to the ways of vibration. I still

find it all baffling. Sorry if this is coals to Newcastle.

A small practical point, which may be pertinent. If this works for others, but understandably they don't want the ties permanently fitted, then it is no great shakes to make them easily removable. In my messing around I found that the thing to avoid is holding the speaker by hand like a dog on a lead.

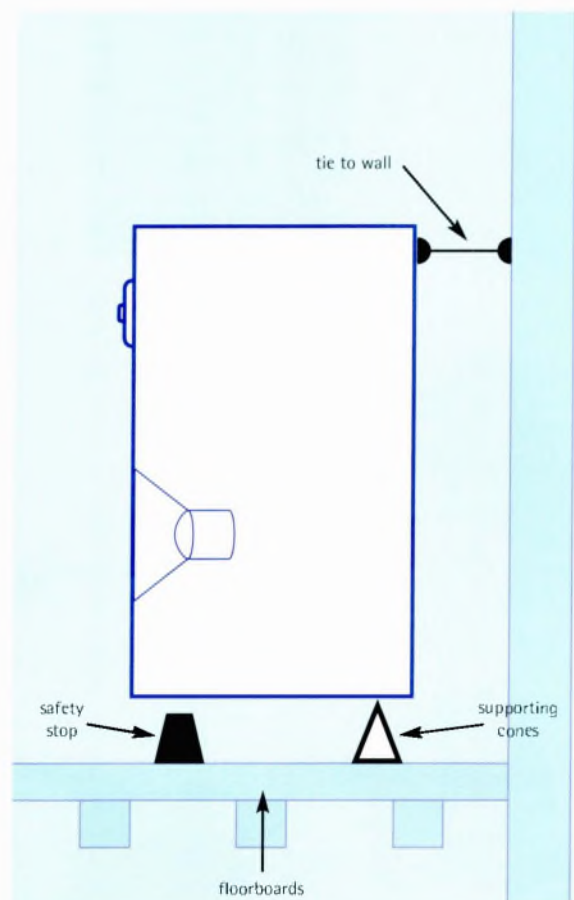
In spite of providing stops it's not good for the nervous system - mine anyway.

All the Best

Regards

R H Waring

Epsom



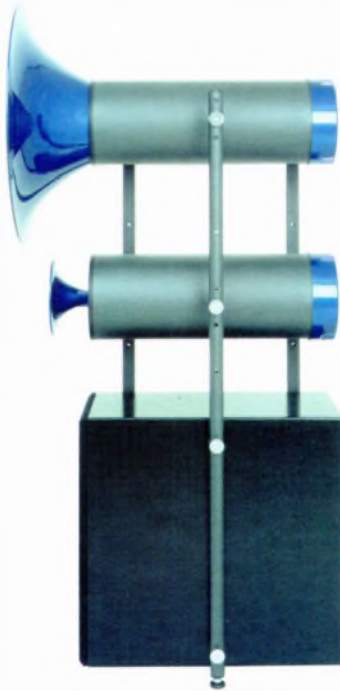
If you need to raise the speaker off of the floor then a suitably heavy support or frame could be introduced between cone and floorboards. My own Kef 104 A/B's are mass loaded with 50lb steel plates, with similar plates between the stand and cones.



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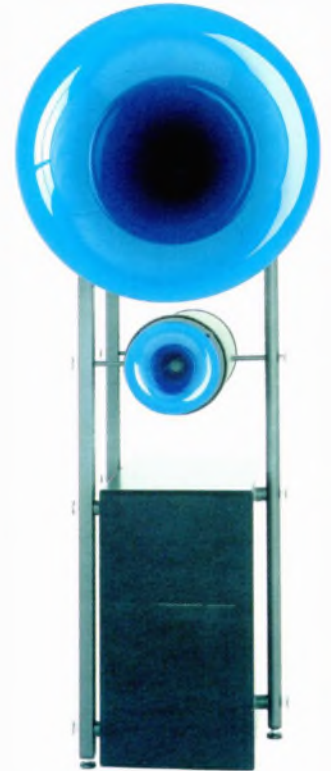


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Playing The System

by Roy Gregory



Not so long ago (three issues in fact) I discussed RP's recent purchase of a second, full-suspension mountain bike. Not without some, as it turns out well placed, envy. I just had to get me a ride on the all singing, all dancing, carbon fibre rig. The opportunity came the weekend before the Bristol Show. I was stopping over with Roob while press passing Issue 10, which presented the opportunity for a ride in the peaks. Too good to miss, and rather than taking my own bike I accepted his kind offer of a loan.

The morning dawned crisp and bright with a heavy frost - perfect - and we were soon wending our way up toward Rushup Edge, by which time a distinct imbalance was becoming apparent. Mounted on the Raven, I was climbing at something approaching twice the rate of Roob on his trusty Santa Cruz. Now, I might be a bit fitter than him, but not a lot (come on guys, we're talking the middle of February), and besides, I'm carrying a serious dollop of extra weight. But as the day wore on the difference got wider and wider. The Raven just seems to demand that you ride it fast - up, down, even along the road. Its light weight and rigidity convert each and ever ounce of effort into forward motion, pushing you up long climbs at a rate you'd never have previously contemplated. On the hard, frosted surfaces, the benefits were simply exaggerated, leaving me with long waits at the top of each climb, and the opportunity to observe Roob's painful, wallowing progress as he wrestled with what is becoming more and more of a downhill lead sled.

The conclusion was inescapable, the choice of bike was making a very real difference. Although on paper the bikes are very similar (four inches of full suspension, disc brakes and plenty of nice bits) their style and modus operandi are totally different. The Raven is an all-out racing snake; the Cruz, with its ultra plush travel is starting to live up to its name, requiring gravitational assistance to get much above walking pace.

Fine, but what's that got to do with hi-fi? Well, the Raven was clearly the superior machine on the day, and on that terrain. So much so that its benefits were hard to miss. But, and this is the point, even if Roob had been going out on his own, giving him his choice of machinery, he still would have taken the Santa Cruz, and no, not for its 'training effect'. Which could be

described as dumb, but which also serves as a perfect example of the power of the familiar. He knows the trails, he knows the bikes. Intellectually he knows that the Raven is the better choice, but he still goes with the Cruz "because he feels more comfortable with it" (which has nothing to do with the sofa-like rear suspension). It has everything to do with familiarity, just like a child with its blanket. And we're all the same - especially when it comes to hi-fi.

A few years back, Linn produced a notorious speaker called the Kann. This pint-sized 3/5a lookalike was their cheapest model, and to describe it as bandwidth limited is barely adequate. It was also extremely coloured and could, if provoked, cut like a knife. And yet, the number of people who ended up with their Kanns hung on the end of active NAP250s and the full-on LP12 was shocking. Even in the days of 'front-end first and devil take the speakers' this was taking things to extremes. And yet for those listeners the Kann had a quality, a dynamic coherence in the mid-band, that they were loath to surrender. Oh sure, they'd listen to alternatives, but despite their many and obvious benefits, none of them could match the Kann in that one, vital aspect. The little Linn might have been bass shy and tonally bereft, but that only made the one thing it did do stand out like a sore thumb, harder to miss, and harder to do without.

We see the same thing time and again. Fashions built on particular aspects of performance rather than sober consideration of the whole. And of course, as soon as something becomes fashionable, there's no shortage of manufacturers only too happy to haul themselves onto the bandwagon, whether they've got anything to contribute or not. The result is a dumbing down of technology, and even simpler, more exaggerated "cartoon" products, redolent with "triode warmth" or "upsampling".

The lessons for the reviewer are serious indeed. It's no good simply running a "reference" system and plugging visiting products in for audition. Sure, that will tell you how well that product performs in that particular set-up, but it tells you little else of more general value. Given the

► current trend towards tabloid style audio journalism with its “good, better, best” judgements, there is a real risk of extrapolating overall conclusions from a specific scenario. The end results are misleading at best, destructive at worst, and this is an industry that can ill afford to alienate its customer base. However, given the publishers’ reluctance to clean up their act in the face of our bottom-line culture and the intellectual nihilism of lad-ism, the only protection for those customers lies in self-help.

I’ve talked about the limitations of reviews before, and they’re still the same. At the end of the day, it’s still the who and the how that’s most important. What’s less obvious are the implications of flawed methodology, most obviously the suggestion that this kind of behaviour is acceptable. Pretty soon it percolates through dealers to the buying public and we’re all making the same mistakes.

So, let’s look at a scenario. You fancy a pair of those Drug Driven Audio Ultimate High loudspeakers. We’ll assume that your local dealer is a stockist and that he’s only too happy to set up the dem. You arrive to find coffee and a facsimile of your system set-up in the dem room, whereupon you embark on an in depth comparison of speakers, old and new. Pretty simple stuff, huh? After all, you only have to decide which one sounds best. It’s your system, your ears and your money, therefore that’s all you have to worry about.

Well, up to a point. You’d be absolutely right in assuming that you’re operating within the confines of a limited context.

The one that sounds best is the best - unless you actually consider the wider situation. You see, best in this instance is measured against an internal ‘reference’, new against old and vice versa, and that’s no reference at all. In fact, the comparison needs to be against an external reference, and there is only one - live and preferably acoustic music. Of course, we all pay lip service to the concept, and even make a play at the specifics. But let’s just return to our purchasing decision for a second. What we actually rely on are the straight A/B comparisons. Now, just for a moment compare the two sounds not to each other but against the experience of the live event. Introduce a consciously external consideration and it totally alters the perspective - away from the specific (“more bass, oh you can hear the drummer kicking a cymbal stand...”) to the general (“Wow, these guys can really play!”). It doesn’t take a genius to recognise which is more important.

The problem with internal references is that they tend to reinforce the status quo, which is exactly how so many people ended up with active Kanns. It’s all to do with the safe, warm comfort of the familiar - more of the same please. The problem with that is that if you’re not careful, each successive upgrade doesn’t move your system forward, it just digs you a deeper hole. Remember, things are so much more obvious from the outside, to the extent that I’ve managed to kidnap Roob’s Raven and he didn’t even raise a whimper!



Home Truths



by Jimmy Hughes

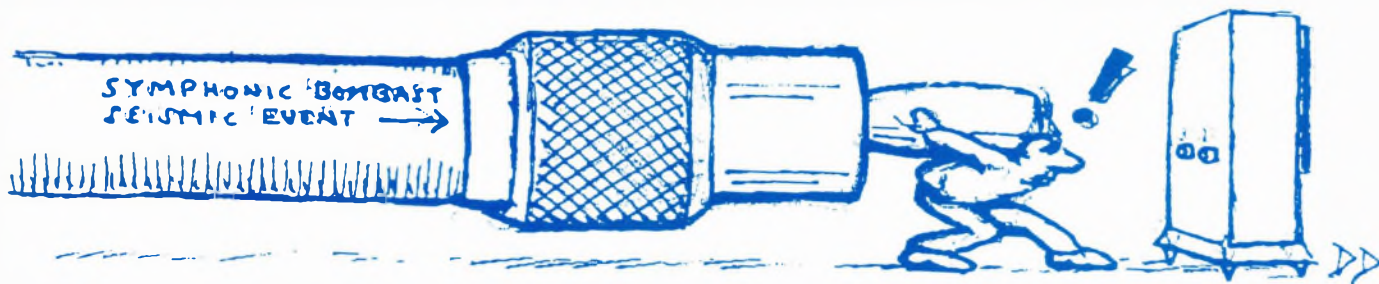
Avoiding excessive complication is a fundamental tenet of hi-fi. Keeping things simple rather than indulging in complexity for its own sake is seen as a great virtue. To this end we attempt to take everything superfluous out of the signal path, maintaining the utmost purity by avoiding unnecessary ‘extras’ like switches, tone controls, excessive plug-socket interfaces, transformers, and so on.

One of the main reasons transistors eclipsed valves in the late ‘60s was that the former made it possible

(at last) for designers to dispense with the dreaded output transformer. The aim was to eliminate a component between output device and loudspeaker that imposed restrictions on bandwidth, damping, and phase shift. That the result would be better sound should have been a forgone conclusion. Alas, it wasn’t...

Don’t get me wrong; there’s much to be said for the simple approach. Yet, if I look at my own hi-fi system, there are a great many ‘unnecessary’ extras in the signal path. Between CD player and amplifier, for





▶ example, I have no less than five analogue signal processing devices. The purist would say it's madness, but musically I feel it's justified by the end result.

Currently I'm using a Rotel RCD-991 CD player via its balanced analogue outputs into a Luxman line-level transformer. This feeds a Musical Fidelity X10-D valve line stage which is connected to another valve line stage - the Z Man Audio Signal Enhancer. Next comes a Marantz DL-T1 line level transformer connected via a Russ Andrews attenuated Kimber interconnect. Lastly, there's a Musical Fidelity X-Tone tone control box, used with a small amount of bass and treble cut.

Inevitably, such a weird concoction has evolved and developed over the years - I didn't just sit down one night and plan it all out. It's the net result of trial and error; even the order in which the boxes are wired is crucial - for example, the tone control stage coming right at the end of the chain. body, and tonal colour that's present in most recordings, qualities that seem to end up being suffocated by most systems. I'm aiming for a state of affairs where most recordings sound enjoyable, without technical faults being thrust in your face. I want to hear what's right with my CDs, not what's wrong with them.

The 'simple' approach seeks to maintain the pristine quality of the original source by avoiding anything in the signal path that might cause degradation. It presupposes that most recordings will satisfy the listener on a technical level, providing the equipment doesn't add its own faults and limitations. Keeping signal paths short and eliminating unnecessary switches can significantly improve sound quality.

My approach is less purist, and invites the charge that the extra boxes add various colourations that some ears (mine!) find pleasant and attractive. It's not easy to refute such accusations - indeed, there's probably some truth in them. But, rather than being a source of additive colourations, I feel my boxes act as a means of conditioning the audio signal, removing various nasties in the process.

For example, using the balanced output on the Rotel means that common mode noise is almost totally

rejected when the signal is unbalanced by the transformer. Also, the transformer acts as an excellent supersonic filter, greatly reducing out of band glitches and noise from the CD player's analogue output. Ditto the valve line stages. Then there's the benefit of improved impedance matching.

Subjectively, I especially like the effect produced by transformers in the signal path. They seem to create a firmness, weight, and sense of tonal body that makes voices and instruments sound solid and three-dimensional. You get improved clarity too, with excellent separation of individual strands. Yet at the same time there's improved cohesion - paradoxical, I know, but there you are.

Many of the best Pop and Jazz recordings from the 1950s and 1960s have this sound; a lovely rounded full-bodied tonal quality, plus superb spatial separation that has everything distinctly focussed yet (that word again) cohesive. When you direct-couple everything there's an improvement in sharpness, but all too easily the sound grows busy as the ear is assaulted with a welter of fast leading edges.

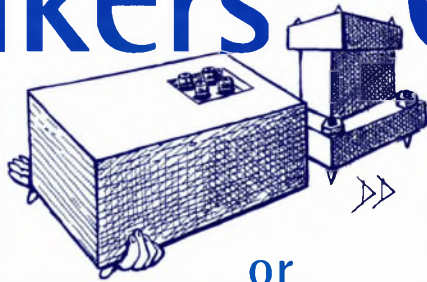
In this context, one of the key components in my set-up is the attenuated Kimber interconnect from Russ Andrews. This has the effect of damping the top-end slightly, and improving the balance between high and low frequencies. Using a non-attenuated cable gives a sharper more immediate sound that's more impressive in terms of brilliance and transient attack.

Agreed, the attenuated cable sacrifices some of this attack, but the sound improves in terms of smoothness and integration. For example, massed violins often sound thin and edgy on hi-fi systems, lacking the rich warmth and woody mellowness apparent live. The attenuated cable seems to control upper frequency edginess, without losing bite or detail.

Which approach works best is ultimately for each individual listener to decide. There's merit in both, and each has something to offer. For myself, I find the subjective improvements created by devices like valve line stages and line transformers highly addictive; once you've heard the benefits it's hard to listen without!



Speakers Corner



or 'Surround Sound' (For stereo buffs only!)

by Paul Messenger

Loudspeaker design doesn't change as much as the manufacturers and their PR agents would like to have us believe. We get new ranges from established brands on a regular basis, but the changes are as often largely cosmetic, and as like or not reflect a new source of OEM supply in our increasingly globalised economy. People moan that all modern cars are tending to look the same, and one could reasonably apply the same complaint to loudspeakers, through the mass market sector at any rate.

The stereotypes for domestic stereo hi-fi speakers were set long ago, and although there are some variations in shape, size, surface finish, cone materials and prices, the equivalent models from rival ranges often seem to have rather more similarities than differences.

Of course there are significant distinctions between brands, because loudspeakers are sonically sensitive little flowers, and each designer has his/her own preferences on crucial issues like voicing. Compromise lies at the heart, and B&W speakers, for example, tend to be a little laid back for my personal taste. This I suspect might have something to do with the fact that the guys down at Steining like to play things REALLY LOUD, and if you voice a speaker to sound right at high levels, it will probably sound a little 'shut in' when playing whisper-quietly.

Take almost any range of speakers from any leading brand, and it'll probably consist of four or five 'stereo' models, plus a centre speaker and subwoofer to make up 5.1 movie sound systems. At the bottom of the price ladder there'll be a 'miniature', combining a 5.25-inch frame main driver with a 7-litre port-loaded box. These have a lot going for them: they're small, inexpensive, and work pretty well in smallish rooms, or as surround speakers, though you

can forget about the bottom octave, and attaining serious loudness levels.

Next up comes that great long term mainstay, the 15-litre stand-mount - what used to be called a 'bookshelf' prior to the 1970s realisation that a proper stand brought a truly dramatic improvement over the typical bookshelf. Double the cabinet volume and fitted with a 6.5-inch frame main driver, this remains probably the most practical allrounder for typical British lounges, at any rate for those not interested in exploring the higher end of hi-fi reproduction.

The two-way floorstander is a much more recent development. Although there are exceptions, in many cases these tend to be merely stand-mounts with integral wooden stands. They could therefore only start to evolve once the stand itself had become established, and the stimulus behind their development was that many found steel stands ugly, and preferred the 'integrated' look. Although they're normally somewhat larger than equivalent stand-mounts, only half or two-thirds of the internal volume may be acoustically active, so there's sometimes the option to add mass in a lower chamber and improve stability (and it irritates me that this is rarely applied or supplied by the manufacturer).

Decades back, 'bookshelf' two-way stand-mounts with 8-inch, 10-inch or even larger bass/mid drivers were not uncommon, but today they've virtually disappeared, apart from the odd bass only driver in subwoofers and three-way systems. Instead, primarily because people want speakers with a slim front view, but also because the real cost of drive units has fallen, we often find that taller floorstanders feature twin or multiple arrays of



▶ 6.5-inch or 5.25-inch units.

The fourth model up a range will probably therefore be a 'two-and-a-half-way' floorstander - essentially a two-way but with an extra main driver that just operates through the bass region. It's a pretty good way to fill a decent size room, provided the bass alignment has been carefully tuned, though it does give the amplifier a tougher load to drive than a simple two-way. An interesting variation on this theme is the d'Appolito two-way, with twin main drivers mounted above and below the tweeter, though it's tricky to get good crossover integration. That said, favourite examples of both these types (B&W's LCR6 and Meridian's active M33) are unsterotypical stand-mounts, and the floorstander's extra woodwork is nearly always something of a handicap.

Finally there are three-ways, which invariably give the best bass extension and power handling, and the most even tonal balance - but they also need complex crossover networks which bring their own unwelcome contributions to the party.

The brief run through the stereotypes shows just what a tricky task loudspeaker designers face. All is compromise, and the 'right answer' simply doesn't exist, though I have to add that I feel there's also rather too much tendency to 'play it safe' and carry on treading these very well worn paths, and a reluctance to experiment with the less orthodox.

We're quite used to the various brands touting their latest and greatest cone materials, though I for one reckon that good ol'fashioned paper still has plenty going for it. Polypropylene and metal both have their fans, as do woven-matrix materials like Kevlar, carbon-fibre and glassfibre.

Cone design is undoubtedly a complex business, involving the juggling of variables like weight, stiffness and self-damping. But in my view its importance is often overstated, while the influence of the cone surround, which links the cone edge to the driver frame, is largely ignored and taken for granted.

The surround has several roles to play. Primarily it has to keep the cone centred and allow it to undergo considerable fore-and-aft excursion over the long haul, and without wearing out. It usually needs to form a gas-tight seal, and should avoid distorting under excursion or the internal box pressures. These purely mechanical functions can be accomplished by a variety of means, but, crucially, it's also important to consider the way the vibrating cone and surround interact.

The long established assumption - which might or might not be correct - is that the surround should damp out the vibrations at the cone edge. It's a philosophy that reaches its apotheosis in the midrange driver used

in B&W's Nautilus 800 series models. Midrange-only drivers don't have to consider cone excursion, so this design actually has a 'free edge' cone, sitting within a synthetic rubber ring or sleeve whose characteristics are particularly tailored towards absorbing and damping cone-edge vibration.

Regular main drivers have to do the excursion thing too, so they tend to be more of a compromise on the damping side. The overwhelming majority of hi-fi drive units today use a roll surround made of artificial rubber, less I suspect because of the material's contribution to sound quality than its tried and tested long term stability and reliability. Rubbers tend to suffer from a degree of hysteresis (a form of damping with reactive as well as resistive elements), which is sonically less desirable than the more resistive plastic foams widely used back in the 1960s and 1970s. The foams went out of fashion because they had a tendency to fall apart after a few years, as they (like the PVC windows of the era) deteriorate when exposed to ultraviolet light. UV-stable foams have been developed, and are sometimes found in today's drivers, but the majority seem to prefer to play it safe by using rubber.

Prior to foams, fabrics were one popular choice, while others simply treated and pleated the outside edge of a paper cone to add the necessary flexibility. Varnishes would be used to add strength and a light damping. These techniques are still widely used by FA drivers today, but are very rare on the hi-fi scene. My own interest was kindled by the Rehdekos I bought back in the mid-1990s, simply because they were the fastest speakers I'd heard. Again because of their speed and dynamic expression, I was also wowed by another French loudspeaker using retro surround technology, the Triangle Zephyr II, which I reviewed for Hi-Fi Choice in 1999.

I was therefore well interested to discover that Tannoy had reverted to using traditional paper cones with fabric surrounds in the big dual-concentric and bass drivers fitted to its two 'prestige' ranges - the Kingdoms (popular in the Far East), and the stylish new Dimension models. Tannoy's Paul Mills told me it was: "because they sound faster".

I'm scheduled to review the Dimension TD12 in the next issue of Hi-Fi+, so I ordered up a pair early, out of curiosity. It's a fascinating speaker indeed, smoother and more laid back than the French examples I quoted. It also has much of the dynamic qualities and delicate textural subtleties I'm starting to associate with the avoidance of synthetic rubber surrounds, alongside what one might describe as rigorous BBC-style standards of neutrality. But I'm not going to pre-empt the next issue of your favourite hi-fi magazine.





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Mark Levinson No 32 Reference Pre-amplifier

by Roy Gregory

How did I ever get into this? Mr Non-Conformist Small-Amp And Efficient Speakers spending my time with exactly the sort of high power wide bandwidth system that I normally shy away from. I mean, generally speaking, all that power and the extra octave at the bottom of the speakers introduce far more problems than they solve. But then, that's generally speaking...

I remember how it started. Path Premier invited me to their launch of the Mark Levinson No 32 Reference pre-amp. It's difficult not to be impressed with something as comprehensively engineered as this, and when you add in a user adjustable phono stage that can be configured entirely from the remote control then I was hooked. The problem is that you can't really review the No 32 on its own. As the first Levinson pre-amp to ever carry the Reference moniker, it's very much a part (in fact the final part) of the Mark Levinson Reference system, and it's impossible to fully appreciate much of the thinking and facilities it offers outside of that system environment. Which is how I ended up removing one of the sofas from my front room in order to accommodate a CD player and amplifier combination that you can count in boxes (seven), pounds

(tens of thousands) or Kilos (hundreds). Whichever way you look at it, it adds up to a lot.

"Reference" to what?

Now "Reference" is one of the most over used terms in hi-fi, jostling for that honour with "High-End" when it comes to marketing abuse. When you see it applied to a £200 integrated amp then it certainly dulls the impact and undermines its credibility. But when it is used by Mark Levinson you'd do well to take it rather more seriously.

Mark Levinson, the man, was one of the founding fathers of the American high-end. Indeed he was instrumental in defining the high-end as it has come to be recognised, and his is still a name that attracts enormous attention and respect. He might have moved on from the company that bears his name, first to Cello and latterly to Red Rose Music, but the Mark Levinson brand, under the wing of the Madrigal group since 1984, has maintained its position at the fore front of American solid-state design. It has resisted the temptation to dilute or popularise the brand by badging down market product, but have remained true to their own image of high-end audio. Their

product portfolio and range has grown over the years, embracing first digital and then multi-channel electronics, but the launch of a new Reference product is still a rare occurrence. So much so that the arrival of the No 32 pre-amp completes a process that started 10 years ago with the No 30 DAC.

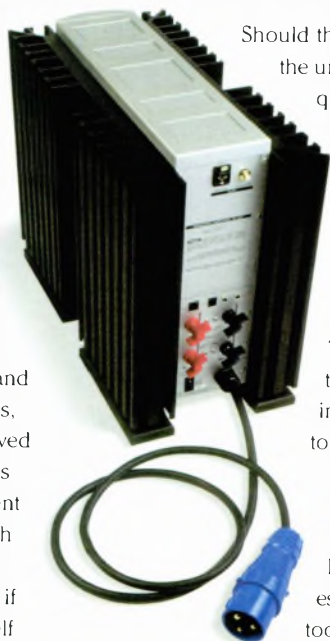
The Levinson Reference system occupies a very particular place in the company's operations. Far from simply being a marketing label, interchangeable with other terms, like flagship, which have been appropriated and emasculated by the advertising industry, Madrigal are using the term in its proper sense. The difference here is that, whereas most manufacturers use a word like "Reference" to impress the outside world, for ML the implications are actually focussed inwards. These products aren't intended as a general reference for the entire industry. What they are is an internal Reference for the company that builds them.

Each Reference product represents both a major step forward and, therefore, the ultimate expression of the ML approach to each part of the audio chain. They only appear when the time and technology allow such a large forward step to be made, which helps explain why it has taken 10 years to complete the system, and why it contains no surround sound processor. But once such a design appears it genuinely represents the Levinson state of the art (another over used expression). This is the best product the company can make, ▶



▶ and as such it becomes a benchmark for the design and development of all its other products. And not just a sonic benchmark either. The Reference products also represent the physical manifestation of the designers' thinking. As such they act as technology demonstrators or technical text books for the circuitry and components employed. Thus, the voltage gain circuit evolved for the No 33 power amp has appeared in every subsequent Madrigal amplifier, from both Levinson and Proceed.

Of course, there are few if any hi-fi products with a shelf life of ten-years, so each of the Reference components is best understood in terms of its internal architecture, which provides the fundamental elements (such as power supplies, although, as we shall see, even those aren't sacrosanct) to support more volatile technology such as chipsets and evolving digital standards. The end result is a system architecture that can be updated and improved, an essential element if it is to retain its relevance and *raison d'être*. To this end, the No 30 DAC has been through two revisions, and the No 31 transport through one, in each case retrofitable. In fact it goes a bit beyond retrofitable, each update arriving complete with a new fascia (now a name plate to keep costs reasonable), an additional serial number (to maintain a complete product history) and a renewed guarantee (although that may vary in different countries). What this means is that the person who bought a No 30 in the UK back in 1991 enjoyed the benefits of a five year guarantee. If he or she bought the 30.5 update in 1994 then their five years started over, and again in 1998 with the 30.6! So that DAC, purchased in 1991 will still be covered by its warranty in 2003.



Should they ever want to sell the unit, the importer can quickly provide a complete run-down on the product's history and current status, which has to be reassuring to a potential purchaser. The precise warranty terms vary with individual distributors, but it's the overall longevity of the product that really counts. In providing an essential development tool, the Reference system enjoys a peculiar

pedigree and stability. Because it exists for such a particular purpose its sole consideration is performance, and it represents an essential element in Madrigal's product development strategy. It isn't built to a price-point (high or low); it's driven by no marketing imperative; it simply contains everything that it needs and no more. As Madrigal are quick to point out, the Reference components aren't developed as products. The fact that they make and sell so many is actually a bonus considering that the designs are something they'd have to create anyway.

Because they represent the ML "how to" guide to product design, they also embody every aspect of product performance, which means that they aren't just great audio, they also offer the most advanced system operation and control technology. In order to fulfill their purpose, the Reference system components are, by definition, virtually future proof, and if it doesn't represent a one-time purchase, at least you'll not have to throw it away and start again from scratch for a very long, long time.

So what's in a name?

By now it should be apparent that these are far from run of the mill products. Indeed, there's so much packed into each one that an in depth description of the various components that comprise the Reference system en masse is way beyond the scope of this or any other review. Indeed, Madrigal/Mark Levinson have produced a beautiful ring bound folder (book is nearer the mark) which covers their entire product line. It'll cost you a tenner, but for that it is couriered straight to your door and I have to say, that for all you audio junkies out there, it beats the hell out of any glossy coffee table publication. It's packed with information, pictures and specs, but even this only chips the surface. In fact, for the first time in the magazine's history we have actually lifted a few shots from its pages to help illustrate this article. And you know how fastidious we are about our photography.

To give you some idea, let's



concentrate on the No 32 pre-amp, which is after all, supposed to be the subject of this review.

The first thing you need to know is that the 32 is a two-box design, but there any similarity with other products ends. As befits its role in Madrigal's overall scheme of things, this is a genuine clean sheet design, started from scratch and questioning the accepted wisdom that has produced existing products. With that in mind, you'll not be surprised to learn that all is not as it seems. Despite ▶

▶ appearances, the external power supply is housed in the box with the knobs on, while the featureless slab that goes with it is the pre-amp proper. This allows a total separation of the audio circuits from not only the power supplies, but the potentially noisy control circuitry as well. This is vital as it allows the designers to incorporate an unprecedented level of automated and integrated controllability without compromising sound quality.

So having established which box actually does what, lets look at their insides in a little more detail. The controller is a slim, elegant unit, looking almost dinky against the rest of the system. That is until you try to pick it up. At first you'll think that some joker has screwed it to the table, but in fact this slimline unit, the smallest in the system, weighs in at 60 lbs, an



incomprehensible weight given its modest dimensions. That's more than a lot of serious power-amps! The reasons why become apparent once you look inside. And that's easier said than done, as it involves defeating the hidden fixings that are used so that no unsightly screws should deface the beautifully machined casework. In fact, the fit and finish of these units is as good as anything I've seen. Even non-audio visitors failed to question the absolute quality of these products, even when they'd got their heads round the price. They have that unmistakable solidity

and feel that goes with really expensive cars and jewellery.

The three elements that make up the lid are all solid machinings, as are the one-piece chassis and the separate front panel. The chassis itself is a work of CNC art, sculpted to accept circuitry and transformers whilst leaving substantial aluminium walls between different elements. The centre section contains two completely separate power supplies, each with its own transformer. The smaller one is used to power the displays, housekeeping and control circuitry. The micro-processors for the latter are housed within their own separate enclosure, even though they are in a physically separate chassis to the audio circuits.

The audio power supplies are a work of art. Like all the Reference components, the No32 is a totally dual mono, balanced design, and that includes the power supplies.

The 32 uses a single large transformer with multiple secondaries to feed an AC regeneration supply similar to the types available as stand alone units from PS Audio and Accuphase. These use DC to produce an extremely accurate AC 400Hz waveform. One advantage that 400Hz offers over 50Hz is that transformers are more efficient (they produce less heat) at the higher frequency. Another advantage is that filter capacitors are refilled more quickly, leading to a smoother supply of DC from the filter capacitors. Equivalent filtering from a 50Hz supply would

require much larger capacitors (with higher effective series resistance, Each channel employs a 40 watt power amp as a current gain stage before feeding a further isolation transformer in each

power supply tower. The 400Hz AC is then rectified and used to drive a discrete three-stage DC amp that generates the DC voltage for its channel of the pre-amp. In addition to the substantial filtering, rectification and regulation carried out in the controller, the audio circuits in the pre-amplifier also employ significant amounts of local regulation.

Of course, the pre-amp circuits have to be told what to do and this is where things get really clever. The DC for the audio circuits is fed down a pair of cables fitted with multi-pin, locking FCI connectors. The control circuitry uses a DC line at exactly the same level and run in parallel to the power feeds. When you adjust something on the controller, the microprocessors first send a wake-up call to the unlocked logic circuit that controls switching within the pre-amp. Each channel's low-voltage microprocessor is active only while receiving control signals – its sleep mode keeps it dormant and totally silent at all other times. A low voltage, differential-drive control signal, buffered by opto-isolators in the preamplifier chassis, issues commands. Except for the fractions of a second when the microprocessor is transmitting a command, there is nothing in the DC cables connecting the controller and preamplifier chassis other than pure DC. As a result, the N°32 offers full microprocessor control



while introducing absolutely no noise inside the pre-amp chassis when music is playing.

The two large rotary controls on the front panel allow source

▶ selection and volume setting. Both have independent read-outs on the large alphanumeric display. The small row of push buttons allow the user to enable any of three tape outputs, select balance (in 0.1dB steps), mute, set the display intensity (for the whole system) or enter the unit's set-up mode. Once in set-up mode, each input can be individually labelled, so that, for instance, you can identify your CD input as the No 30.6, as well as adjusting it for balance and sensitivity. The level of muting can also be adjusted, while buttons on the excellent remote control also allow you to select mono or reverse absolute polarity from your listening seat.



Round the back you'll find a relative paucity of connections. Aside from an IEC input and the left and right channel power supply outputs, there's a dedicated power supply connection for those who want to continue to use the No25S outboard phono stage. I admire the completeness of the conception, and Levinson's loyalty to their existing customers, but is anybody dropping fifteen grand on a pre-amp going to begrudge an extra two and a half for the dedicated phono stage, especially when you look at what it offers? But more of that later. The other connectors are to allow the unit's integration into the rest of a Madrigal or multi-room system. There's also an RS-232 port that allows updating of the onboard software via a portable computer.

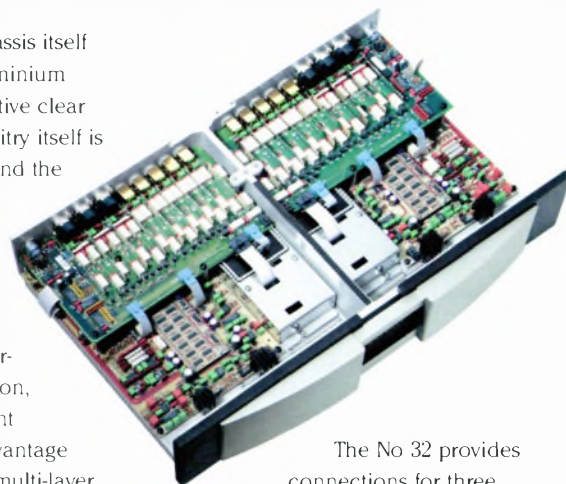
All of which adds weight to Levinson's claim that their products consist of very simple circuits surrounded by a lot of power-supply and house-keeping. In fact, in comparison, the pre-amp is a model of simplicity, albeit one that still manages to tip the scales at over 40 lbs without a single

transformer in sight! The chassis itself is a complex machined aluminium sand-casting, with a conductive clear chromate coating. The circuitry itself is fully symmetrical, and this and the sheer number of inputs and outputs dictate the unit's relative bulk. The boards themselves employ a costly but superior material, Arlon 25N, whose dielectric properties equivalent to that of Teflon,

with the significant advantage of multi-layer construction and greater thermal stability. Interestingly enough, Arlon is only used for the audio circuits, not the

power-supply and switching circuitry where it would make no difference, underlining Levinson's commitment to combining performance and value. It would be all too easy to simply throw Arlon at everything and use that fact to justify a price hike.

The heart of any pre-amplifier is its volume control, and the one in the 32 is a masterpiece. The microprocessor in the controller is used to control two ladders of discrete, 0.1% surface mount, metal film resistors in the pre-amp. Whilst this can obviously be done from the remote, it's almost a crime not to use the beautifully sculpted, weighted and speed sensitive knob on the controller. Gentle motion gives you adjustment in 0.1 dB steps (1 dB at low levels), a sudden swift spin will kill the volume completely, whilst the display lets you keep track of exactly what you're doing. In a world increasingly dominated by remote control, this is a tactile connection that should be cherished.



The No 32 provides connections for three balanced and five single-ended inputs. There is a balanced and two single-ended tape outputs, and two pairs of both balanced and single-ended main outputs, each circuit separately buffered so that they can be used simultaneously if so desired. Which brings us to the phono option. This two and a half grand upgrade consists of a pair of separately shielded boards that slip straight into the back of the pre-amp. They allow the connection of two different cart-ridges simultaneously, and are available with a choice of balanced or single-ended connections. Furthermore, each input



can be individually named (by cartridge if you so wish) as well as individually configured; for gain, impedance, balance (0.1 dB increments again) and capacitance. And like everything else on the 32, this can be done from the clean, clear and easy to use remote. There are also thumb-screw terminals for ▶

▶ dedicated resistors if you don't fancy one of the pre-set loading values, or want the absolute last ounce of performance. How could I resist.

Generally speaking this level of automation comes at a heavy price in terms of complex and time-consuming set-up. I had cause to adjust the input menu (the selector automatically removes any unused inputs) and armed only with the manual and a healthy dose of scepticism, I was astonished how easy it was to achieve. Five minutes later, a new selection of renamed inputs. If I was an ice cream I would have licked myself. So no need for techno-phobes to panic, and the benefits are considerable. Connected to the rest of the Levinson components this is one intelligent system. Hit any control on the CD transport and the entire system will come out of standby. Do the same on the pre-amp and only the pre and power amps will light up, because the system assumes you are going to play a record. Put an HDCD in the transport and the DAC will automatically adjust the volume in the pre-amp to compensate for any changes introduced by the HDCD encoding. Some HDCD recordings are mastered at a level which is noticeably lower (6 dB) than conventional recordings, to allow for greater dynamic peaks (a good thing). To avoid unexpected changes in average volume when going from one disc to another, all HDCD playback system are required to automatically match the playback volume of all discs – be they conventional or



HDCD. This is usually accomplished digitally within the HDCD filter using what is essentially a digital volume control (a bad thing). Madrigal choose the sonically superior route of using the pre-amp's sophisticated volume control to make the adjustment, and whilst this is a small thing it's indicative of the attention to detail and operational capabilities of the system as a whole.

The large displays look garish at first, until you realise that they can be read from across a fair sized room, making complex remote options a doddle. Besides you can dim them (all simultaneously) or even switch them off. And whilst these things don't directly affect the sound quality, they don't half make the system a joy to use.

And now for something completely different...

Now you can appreciate why it's simply impractical to discuss each and every element in this system in even this limited degree of detail. It'd need pretty much a whole issue! So here's a brief introduction to the other players, and some of their obvious highlights.

Starting at the front we have the No 31.5 CD transport. First introduced in 1992, it evolved into the 31.5 in 1996, with improved clocking and mechanical isolation. The transport mechanism is an industrial CD-ROM drive compliantly mounted within the massive chassis. The transport well is sealed in operation by the use of an airtight motorised lid, the most obvious 'wow' element in the whole



system, and the disc itself is further protected from mechanical vibration by a specially designed puck and damper which achieve an airtight bond to the disc itself. In fact, this damper, whilst sonically essential, is the source of my only



operational complaint with the system as a whole. It is held in place by extremely strong magnets, and its intimate contact with the disc means that when you remove the damper, which requires quite a jerk, the disc normally comes too - but not every time, and not completely clear of the machine. The interior of the transport well is lined with rubber, to help prevent damage to discs that become inadvertently airborne, but what is really required is for the user to remember to tilt the damper in the course of removing it, thus breaking the seal with the disc.

The 31.5 employs a sophisticated re-clocking circuit and provides digital output in the form of AES/EBU (the preferred option), co-axial via an



either end of the chassis.

The DAC modules both use a pair of 24bit multi-bit devices matched with hand trimmed resistors to ensure complete symmetry of the balanced circuit. Great care is taken to reduce the operating temperature thus reducing thermal noise. Of all the products in the system, this is the most complex and I haven't even scratched the surface here. Inputs

amount to three balanced XLR, two RCA phono, two Toslink and one ST optical, while the outputs consist of a balanced digital tape loop, a Toslink, two pairs of balanced analogue and a pair of single-ended analogue. The combined weight of the DAC and its power supply amounts to nearly 90 lbs.

And one last thing. The current confusion caused by the clever marketing of up-sampling as opposed to oversampling has led some people to use up-samplers with the 30.6.

Disappointed by the resulting sound, they've contacted Madrigal, who, as a result have incorporated a modification into the software. Hold in the selector button for the digital input in use and the display will flash up the conversion rate. In the case of the disc currently playing it's 24bit/ 342kHz! Which is, I guess, Madrigal's way of telling the up-samplers to stick it in a pipe and smoke it!

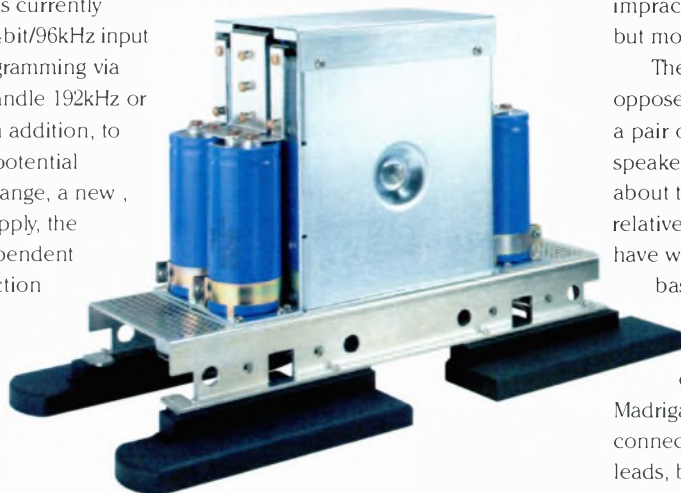
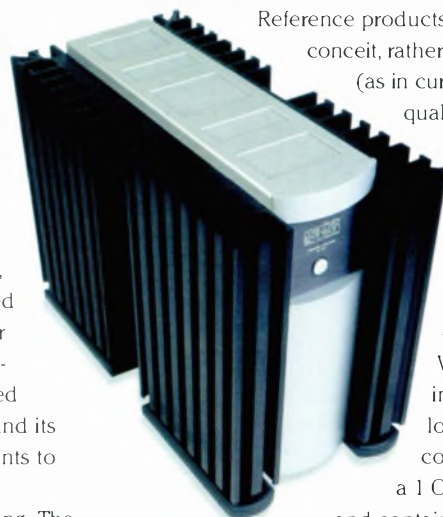
And finally, the power amps. I actually received the No 33H mono-blocks, which aren't technically

Reference products. In a nice conceit, rather than 'High' (as in current, power or quality) the H in this

instance stands for half, as in half the size of the 33! Each 33H weighs more than me, delivers 150 Watts continuous into an 8 Ohm load, 1200 Watts continuous into a 1 Ohm load,

and contains its own regenerative power supply. The 33 easily doubles those figures(!) and requires re-plumbing your electrical supply. That and the fact that each one is a four man lift make them an impractical proposition for review, but more about them later.

The final part of the review (as opposed to Reference) system was a pair of the impressive Revel Studio speakers. I was initially concerned about their performance in my relatively narrow room, but I needn't have worried. Their well damped bass and the fact that the 33Hs had them by the short and curlyes more than took care of that. Path Premier supplied Madrigal's cost effective CZ-Gel interconnects and a pair of MIT speaker leads, but I arranged the loan of



▶ RCA phono socket, and ST and Toslink optical sockets. It weighs a substantial 63 lbs.

The No30 DAC was the first piece of the Reference system to appear, back in 1991. Three years later, in 1994, it became the 30.5, with the introduction of an intelligent FIFO and sophisticated re-clocking circuit. But the major change came in 1998. The increased word lengths promised by emerging hi-bit formats necessitated higher sampling rates and a much lower noise floor to accommodate their increased dynamic range. The result was a brand new, software driven decoding topology, allowing the 30.6 to adapt to the changing digital environment. Its Digital Input Receiver is currently capable of accepting 24bit/96kHz input signals, and with reprogramming via its RS-232 port, it will handle 192kHz or DSD derived signals. In addition, to take advantage of the potential increases in dynamic range, a new, off-board DC power supply, the PLS-330, supplies independent feeds for the digital section and the two massive analogue supplies and balanced, buffered outputs, separately housed in the towers at

▶ a systems worth of balanced Nordost Valhallas along with a set of shorter Valhalla speaker leads with the required spades. In my opinion, having heard the results, anybody with a Reference system should do the same, as soon as possible!

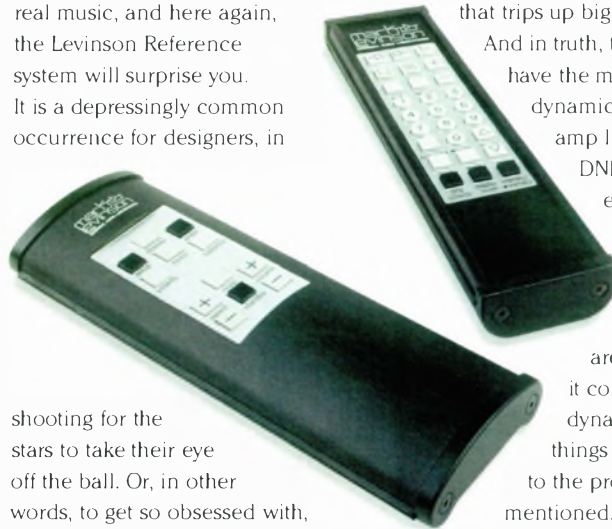
Oh, and one final point as regards operational integrity: you can pull leads out willy-nilly, short the outputs, basically abuse the system in the most basic fashion, without provoking so much as a pop from the speakers. The worst you'll do is trip it into standby, which means you don't have to tip-toe around it. Pretty impressive for equipment with this amount of latent energy. In fact, it's easier and more failsafe to operate than a Japanese mini system, and that's saying something.

Music, sweet music...

It doesn't seem to matter who you are, as soon as you see a system like this, the same question leaps fully formed straight to the front of your mind. It was asked by every visitor (and as the news got round it's surprising how many of those suddenly turned up out of the blue), and I'll admit, it occurred to me. Ever driven a serious sports car? Find yourself wondering how fast it'll go? People take one look at a system like this and the first thing they ask is "How loud will it go?". It's one of those things you just have to find out. And I did. Mind you, it took a serious work out with the *Gladiator OST* to reach the limits, and by that time I was at well above cinema levels, with just the one pair of speakers you remember. Indeed, it was the speakers that gave up the ghost, an ominous crack from one of the bass units indicating that it was time to cage the beast and back off the volume. Right up to that point there wasn't a hint of

distress (apart from the cats who'd long dived for cover). For once, it's entirely accurate to describe these amps as unburstable. Further investigation, purely in the interests of truth and light you understand, and involving such cruel loads as the NHT 2.9 merely served to underline the fact. I inevitably gave up before the system did.

So now that we've got that out of the way we can get down to listening to real music, and here again, the Levinson Reference system will surprise you. It is a depressingly common occurrence for designers, in



shooting for the stars to take their eye off the ball. Or, in other words, to get so obsessed with, for instance, bass power or image specificity that they lose sight of the musical performance as a whole. That is definitely not the case here. In fact, the Reference System is that rarest of beasts, a system that can provide both musical analysis and musical pleasure. It lets you hear right into a recording, every element that makes up the fabric,

but it never leaves you in any doubt as to how they all work together to create the whole. Nor does it punish poor recordings. It lets you know exactly what you're listening to, but always manages to put the music first.

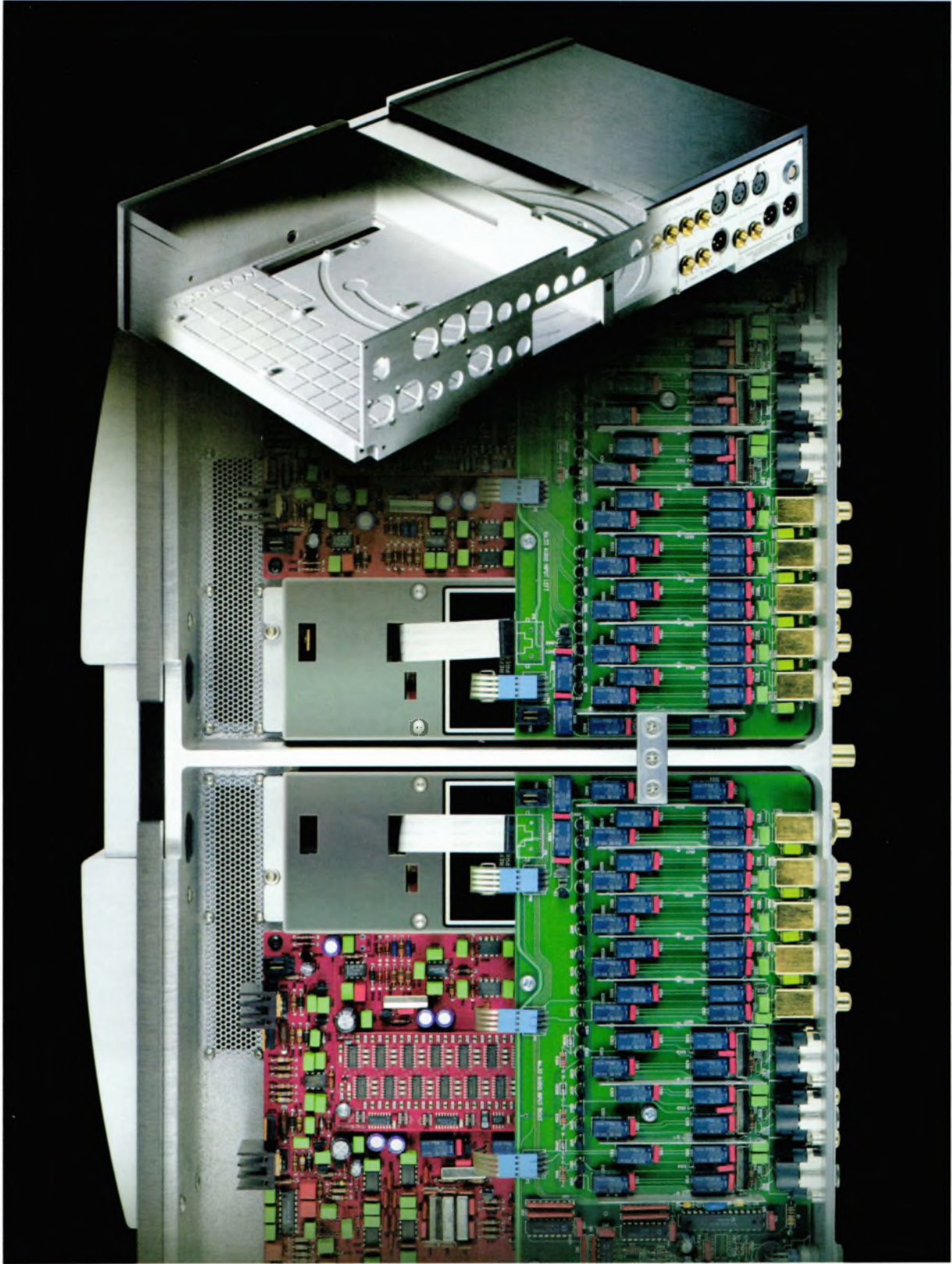
Dynamic range is central to the system's performance. It's abilities with wide range dynamics are extraordinarily impressive, as they should be. But all too often it's the other end of the scale that trips up big systems like this.

And in truth, the Levinson doesn't have the mid-range micro dynamic immediacy of an amp like the JA30 or the DNM PA3S driving an efficient speaker. No, it has something else instead. Bandwidth! The Levinsons

are no slouch when it comes to micro dynamics, but they do things a little differently to the products I just mentioned. What they lack in absolute immediacy (a quality helped enormously by the Valhalla cables) they more than make up for in terms of breadth. This system not only offers equal insight from the lowest to the highest frequencies, bringing unprecedented texture to bass instruments, a stunning natural shimmer to cymbals, but it scales dynamics across that entire range as well. It's dynamic discrimination is

superb, its ability to shift from quiet to really, really loud impressive to say the least. If in doubt just listen to Jq Jackson fading out the chorus of 'Summer In The City', down to a silence which is suddenly and shockingly filled by an absolute cannonade of drum patterns (*Summer In The City* Sony SK 89237). The Levinsons track Jackson's ▶





▶ deliberate decline in level, catch the pause just right and then explode into Gary Burke's cascade of heavy beats.

The timing is spot on, driving tracks along, each with its own appropriate momentum: the uncanny sense of musical organisation reveals patterns and counterpoint with unerring ease. The rhythmic subtleties of music are laid bare, making their contribution to proceedings all the more engaging, whether they occur at the shallow end (Kieran Kane and Kevin Welch *11/12/13, Live in Melbourne* Dead Reckoning DEAR 0019) or the deep end (Bill Maloney and the Vigilantes of Love *Audible Sigh* Compass Records 7 4295 2) of the dynamic pool.

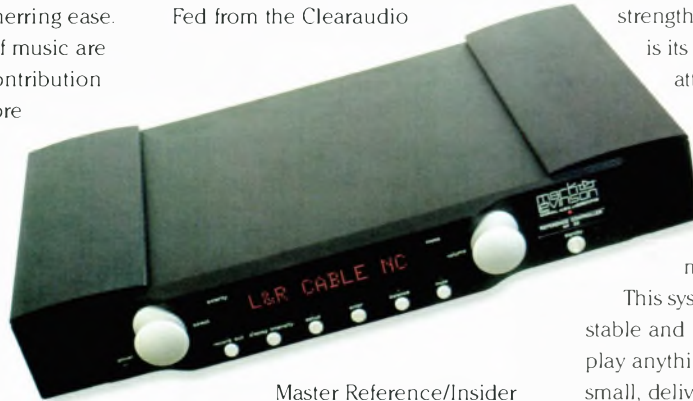
I've already said that this system will play loud. It's just as well, because those unfettered dynamics encourage you to play music at realistic levels. Its dynamic discrimination lets you hear all too clearly if you've shrunk the overall dynamic range, and getting the level right becomes critical, a situation in which that wonderful volume control really delivers the goods. The 0.1 dB steps allow you to home in on the exact level required, a bit like focussing a camera.

Spatial coherence is also exceptional, with the Levinson system providing real, three dimensional images with a precision that constantly surprises. Whether it's the microscopic details of position and movement on *11/12/13* or the movement of Ray Brown's left hand up and down the neck of his double bass (*This One's For Blanton* Analogue Productions CAPJ 015) its remarkable how these tiny clues add to the sense of presence and realism.

The other factor in play is the complete stability of the picture. Instruments are locked in space, without any wander or tendency to step forward with volume. For

a system with such enormous scale and control, the Levinsons allow the music to find its own size and shape, never crushing the life or intimacy from a performance.

The phono stage matches the character of the system perfectly. Fed from the Clearaudio



Master Reference/Insider Reference combination it bettered the CD player in every respect short of absolute power. Otherwise it simply built on the transparency, focus and rhythmic integrity that I'd already got used to. It's also ghostly quiet, accepting signals from even the ruinously low output Ortofon 7500 with aplomb. The set-up options are a joy to use, making cartridge optimisation a cinch, and the option to run two different cartridges simultaneously and without compromising either would have had me setting up the Clearlight Recovery in a shot, if only there'd been room. Playing Dave Davies *Chairman Of The Board* (Count Basie, Roulette SRCP 3008) left him in a state of shock. A record he owns but seldom plays was revealed as a masterpiece before his disbelieving ears. Basie's easy, rolling piano, the walking bass lines (this is one system which actually gets acoustic bass right), the punchy blat of the brass was all there. The band was really swinging, the absolute stability of the soundstage adding to the 'you are there' impact of the performance. Exit one very disgruntled reviewer, facing life with the system he runs at home.

And that really is the point. You can criticise this system in detail: there's

that lack of immediacy, and some lack of tonal colour (in the almost words of the ad. "Nothing added, perhaps just a shade taken away...") which robs it of the vivid vibrance that you get with a really good valve system. But the shortcomings are swamped by its strengths, and chief amongst them is its ability to focus the listener's attention squarely on the musical performance.

To obsess about the minutiae is to commit exactly the same sin of which I accused too many designers earlier.

This system represents a fantastically stable and constant reference. It will play anything you throw at it, big or small, delivering full musical value in the process. As such it also represents a fantastic tool for transporting you into the very presence of the musical performance. Given the chance, would I have one? With its ability to musically communicate and convince, its totally fuss free operation (it really is easier to use than a Japanese mini system) and absolute reliability - you bet! But not for my listening room or for reviewing, but for the lounge (if I could afford the system I could certainly afford the two rooms). There it would be used purely for pleasure, oh, and as an undisturbed and stable reference for what went on in the review system, which is where I guess we came in.

There are products that you can appreciate without liking, products you can admire without loving, and then there are those you just want. Before its arrival I was worried about writing 6000 words about an admirable system that didn't really do it for me. I needn't have been. The Reference system duly arrived and rearranged my sensibilities. Having it to stay has been both an honour and a pleasure - and I really don't want it to go. Which is, believe me, as big a surprise to me as it is to those who know me well. Impressive - in the best possible way. ▶

So Now You Want To Buy One...

▶ Normally, when you read the reviews of seriously expensive equipment your enthusiasm is tempered by the knowledge that the unit in the photographs is likely to be the only one in the country. The chances of ever seeing it, let alone hearing it in something approaching your own system are slim indeed. Let's face it, even if your local dealer can lay his hands on it, he's not actually going to know any more about it than you do! Hardly a confidence inspiring situation when it comes to a purchase which could easily run to five figures. For most of us, such products occupy a kind of dream world where their physical presence is about as substantial as our chances of owning them. We read about them, we know about them, but the chances of ever meeting one are slim indeed. A bit like dragons really...

But, once again, the Levinson Reference System is the exception to the rule. Okay, so Path Premier are fast establishing their show demonstrations as the ones to see (and hear), but it goes a lot further than that. There are actually three Levinson Reference dealers in the UK, each with a system on permanent demonstration. Opal Designs in London and The Audio Salon in Edinburgh both run systems equivalent to the one reviewed, whilst Heatherdale Audio, just outside Worthing on the South coast, has the even bigger No 33 power amps in residence (and believe me when I say that I can't see anybody moving them! And these systems aren't just there for show. They are

bought and paid for, which in turn means that they have to earn their keep. These systems are demonstrated on a regular basis, and units are sold with surprising regularity. They are installed by the dealers, who have

an ever growing stock of experience with them. Despite their price, these components very definitely inhabit the real world.

As part of the review process, I made the hour and a bit journey along the coast to Heatherdale, to see and hear the full on Reference System in action. Having lived with the 33H, I couldn't resist finding out what the 33 adds to the equation. Dave Ruffell, the man behind Heatherdale, has the system set up in his front room (it's a hard job, but someone has to do it), and ▶



▶ customers generally cut their teeth on the 360,380,335 combination in the shop before moving up to the full Reference set-up. Besides, if you'd invested your money to this extent, wouldn't you want the maximum return, in a personal as well as a business sense. Mind you, the commitment required is enormous.

Having got used to the considerable size of the system at home, to the point where I consider it normal, the move up to a pair of 33s and the Revel Salons comes as a shock. The bigger amps aren't just large, they're huge! Half again as big in every dimension as the H, they weigh in at a massive 200 Kilos each, and are capable of delivering 2.4 kW of continuous power into a 1 Ohm load. They also each require a dedicated 35 Amp feed. Stood side on to the wall they look for all the world like a pair of giant space heaters, and do a fairly good job in that respect too.


The rest of the system is identical to the one under review as far as the CD player and pre-amp goes, but as mentioned earlier, Dave uses the larger Salon speakers. The electronics are sat on Townshend seismic stands, and the whole system is wired with MIT cable, although Dave was happy to discuss the virtues of alternatives. Vinyl front end is a heavily modified Stratosphere turntable, loaded with a Graham arm and the Ortofon 7500 cartridge. The arm is wired balanced to the phono stage, where the dedicated solder posts have been used to optimise its loading. Also present are a limited edition gold plated Nakamichi ZX1000 and a Studer quarter inch tape machine for replaying Dave's collection of master tapes, garnered from his days as a recording engineer.

With the best part of a day to play with, we got to work through a whole host of CDs and records. Mainly it must be said, for fun, as the differences between the two

systems were immediately apparent. What the 33/Salon combination adds to the mix is an even greater sense of scale and stability. The music is absolutely rooted in a rock solid foundation. Whereas the Studios produce clean bass down to their limit and then tuck under, the Salons, driven by the 33s just seem to keep going, giving acoustic recordings an incredible transparent and stable soundstage, complete with boundaries. Even on studio recordings it's no exaggeration to say that you could hear the floor. Coupled with the effortless power delivery, the result was an almost physical sense of presence, and not just on big stuff either. Simple 'girl and guitar' pop music was just as impressive.

But two recordings stick in my memory. The Dvorak *String Quintet in G Major, Op. 77* (AAA Phoenix Edition EPH 02) was as near to being there as I've ever experienced from a hi-fi system. The location and scale of each instrument, its tone and harmonic structure were so close to real that the willing suspension of disbelief wasn't even an issue. It wasn't that you'd mistake it for the real thing, just that it got you close enough that the performance simply overwhelmed other, more mundane considerations.

Of course, a string quintet is on a scale that hi-fi systems can match. Grand Opera is another matter. The notion of having Covent Garden in your front room is disconcerting to say the least. The RCA Soria *Carmen* (Price, Corelli, Merrill, Freni; Von Karajan and the VPO) is as near to a live performance as a structured recording is ever likely to get, with long takes and a real chemistry between the performers. On the Levinson system, the huge dynamic swings of the opening act were handled effortlessly, the massed voices of the street urchins and girls from the

cigarette factory never congealing into a single mass, the orchestra never leaping from its pit up on to the stage, no matter how big the crescendo. But it was the absolute stability of the overall picture that was so impressive. With the orchestra under control, the singers movements were clear upon the stage, bringing a real sense of menace to Carmen's stately advance on the hapless Don Jose during the *Habanera*. The combination of threat and scorn as she throws the acacia flower at his feet is perfectly captured, hanging for an instant before the moment is exploded by the laughter of the girls and soldiers. Perfect. Forget the hi-fi altogether, which is exactly what this system is all about. 

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

A conventional technical panel for these products would take several pages (again, I refer you to the *Mark Levinson No 2001 Playlist*) so I've confined it to prices and contact details.

No 30.6 DAC	£16495-00
No 31.5 CD Transport	£9295-00
No 32 Pre-amplifier	£14495-00
No 32 Phono Option	£2495-00
No 33 Power Amplifiers (pair)	£29995-00
No 33H Power Amplifiers (pair)	£19395-00

Distributor:

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Fax. (44)(0)1844 461209

Manufacturer:

Mark Levinson
Net. www.madrigal.com/madrigal/marklev.

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- Da-Lite Screens
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Higher than what?

Having established the concept of the "High-End" isn't it time we developed it beyond its narrow limits and embraced a wider approach to audio enlightenment

by Roy Gregory

High-end audio is one of this industry's most enduring (and attractive) concepts. The whole notion of an upgrade path only works if it leads somewhere, and the notion of the high-end, supported by the very visible products that go with the title, provide a powerful aspirational goal to those enthusiasts setting out on what promises to be a long and winding road. Of course, the power of that image is dependent to a large extent on its ability to convey to potential customers the notion of a single coherent solution: this is how we do it and your options come down to interesting variations on this theme. But increasingly, the accepted model of high-end audio is coming under fire. Cracks are appearing in the edifice, questions are being asked. Is it time to reassess our notions and understanding of the high-end, and the implications it holds for the future development of music recording and, more importantly, reproduction?

Perhaps we should start with where it originated from. The term high-end probably first appeared, at least in print, in either *Stereophile* or *The Absolute Sound*. It's a term from the American idiom, and its origins are important. Whoever coined the phrase, it was the serious American audio press who popularised it, and it wasn't long before it began to colonise other English language magazines. It entered the British market through the pages of *Hi-Fi News* in the early eighties, rapidly gaining currency and a certain transatlantic chic. And with it came the American products that

defined it. This is the important point. Because it originated in America, the concept was defined in terms of American product, not least because at that time those products were so obviously different to ours. Different in looks, different in price and different in ambition. There's no forgetting the impact made by the Krell KSA50. Here was a 50 Watt amp the size of a milk crate, capable of driving almost any speaker known to man, and needing handles to lift it with and fans to keep it cool. And this was the smallest model in the range! It was a genuine culture shock, and the Krell amps, more than any other single product, established and legitimised the concept and terminology of high-end. But if it was Krell who kicked in the door, other companies were quick to follow: Audio Research, Magneplanar, Apogee, Martin Logan, Conrad-Johnson all rapidly made their presence

felt in a UK marketplace entering a period of financial boom, and the pages of magazines clamouring for sexy new products. And they were sexy. Huge amps full of fans or valves, flat speakers with exotic drivers (it's incredible how quickly we forget!), expensive American imports did for UK hi-fi magazines what *Loaded* did for lads' mags. They reinvented them. Pretty soon, the whole concept of high-end audio, defined and embodied by those products was dominating the pages of English language magazines all over the globe. What started as a transatlantic love fest rapidly spread world wide, carried by



▶ the disproportionate influence of English as the international audio language. But it was an Americanocentric concept, which meant that acceptance into its hallowed halls depended entirely on your presence in the US market, and the magazines that feed it. The "World Series" of audio if you like, just like the "World Series" in baseball. They even created a high-end hall of fame.

Now don't get me wrong. This isn't some xenophobic conspiracy theory that's out to get the Americans. It's simply recognising the combination of structural effects and historical accidents that got us to where we are now. The impressive engineering and ambitious design of so many American products, combined with the emergence of a group of talented and insightful American audio writers (J. Gordon Holt and Harry Pearson amongst others), simply added momentum to a situation that was already developing. One that was given a further shove when John Atkinson left the helm of Hi-Fi News to take over at Stereophile. What developed was a consensus, and the trouble with consensus is that it creates its own inertia. An inertia that tends to undermine alternative views and approaches.

American style high-end became synonymous with high performance, and suddenly it was the only game in town, spawning huge numbers of imitators from all over the globe. You only had to look at the numbers of Krell wannabees appearing throughout Europe to see the spread of that influence. Consider then, the humble single ended triode. The Japanese audiophile community was already well into its love affair with single-ended designs when Krell burst onto the scene. Be Yamamura and Jean Hiraga where responsible for bringing that thinking to Europe, especially France. Peter Qvortrup was the man mainly responsible for its emergence as a force in Britain, from whence it spread, eventually, to the USA. Consider how long that process has taken. That's the effect of swimming against the tide.

And even when alternative technologies penetrate the American market, more often than not they are translated by

that market's imperatives. Nowhere else are low powered triode amps built into such vast chassis. Indeed, it wasn't until Mr Qvortrup elevated the price of Audio Note products well beyond what they justified sonically to a point where they competed head on with the incumbent denizens of the high-end that anybody took them seriously. Of course, the

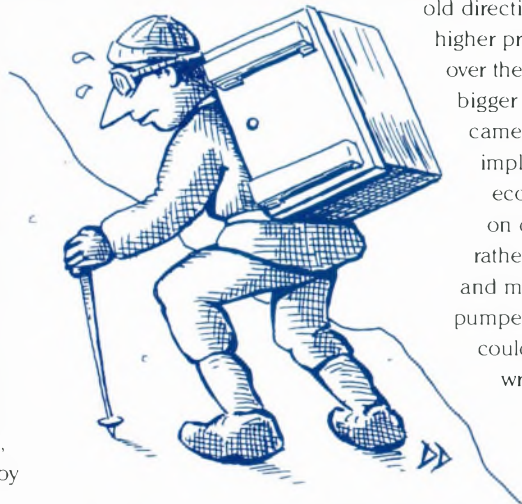


same applies to all markets. Just ask a British manufacturer about trying to sell into Germany, and the standards of fit and finish that that demands. The problem is that each translation of a technology risks its dilution. Many of the triode based products that have emerged onto western markets are pale shadows of the designs that so inspire the Japanese.

By now, hopefully, you've read the review of the Mark Levinson system that precedes this piece. In many respects these products represent the archetypical US, solid-state, high-end approach. Beautifully engineered, they combine massive capability with inventive technological solutions. The end result

is impressive indeed, albeit at a price. It's use of fully symmetrical balanced circuitry and regenerative power supplies are indicative of a company taking its chosen approach to the logical extreme. Even something as prosaic as turning the power amps on their sides, making their footprint smaller and their heatsinks more efficient, displays the capacity to question the status quo. Unfortunately, it's a quality that is all too rare amongst the herd of high-end fellow travellers, content as they are to

simply plough on regardless in the same old direction. The attempt to justify ever higher price tags with butch styling, over the top casework and bigger and bigger numbers on the spec. sheets came horribly unstuck with the implosion of the Pacific rim economy. Forced to fall back on demonstrable performance rather than established market and marketing presence, these pumped-up behemoths simply couldn't compete, just like a WWF wrestler confronted with a genuine Shaolin master and no choreographed script. The resulting ▶



► cull was not a pretty sight.

It's no coincidence that the following pages cover a review of the 47 Labs. System, an approach that contrasts so wildly with the Levinsons' that it's hard to believe they are pursuing the same goal. But that's exactly what they are doing. Indeed, there are even certain similarities of



approach: the totally dual mono construction, the emphasis on the power supplies, the rejection of a conventional CD drawer loading transport in favour of a clamped top-loader. But whereas Levinson adopt an ultra high-tech, cost no object approach, 47 Labs. pursue the ultimate in minimalist simplicity. Both represent highly developed theoretical approaches and both offer superb, although very different, solutions to the problem of reproducing music in the home. In fact, if you take material content into account, then the cost of ownership is also broadly equivalent.

The point here is that there's more than one way to achieve a musically valid performance. More importantly, we ignore the alternatives at our peril. Even in the narrow field of solid-state amplification there are a number of products that offer important insights into possible routes for progress. The low mass, plastic boxed DNMs and battery powered Final amplifiers are obvious examples. These products challenge the very basis of entrenched high-end thinking, yet they have been marginalised and ignored by the vast majority of high-end manufacturers and English

language magazines. The higher you build your tower, the harder it is to even consider pulling it all down.

Look a little further and you find more and more evidence of technological xenophobia. Visit the Frankfurt show and you'll find at least a dozen manufacturers showing omni-directional speaker designs, and we're not talking life-style products here. These represent a serious approach to reproducing music in the home. The materials, drivers and technology are all well up to scratch, the results are impressive but you'll never see them in the UK or US market because we all know that omnis don't work. Right? Wrong - and who's the fool? The Germans for making something that can't possibly work (only it does), or us for ignoring the possibility that we might conceivably be wrong.

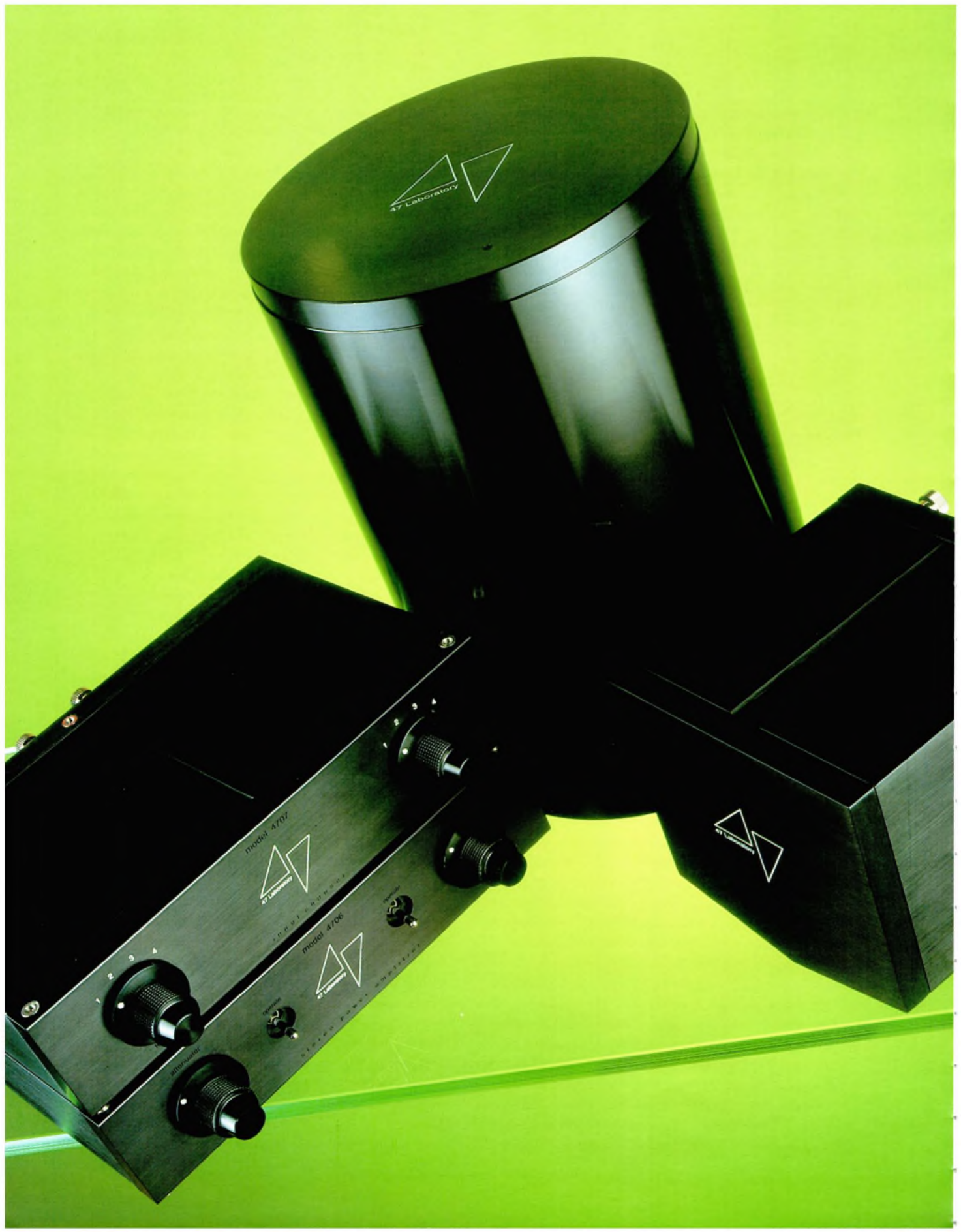
The same is true of turntables, where the Germans have long held contrary views. But so entrenched was the three-point suspended deck, especially in Britain, that we only recently began to realise that alternative approaches actually offered very real advantages. We were so convinced that we were right that it never even occurred to us to discover what other people might be doing.

This acceptance of dubious technological hegemonies is potentially fatal to the long term future of high quality music in the home. Sooner rather than later hi-fi is going to have to justify its existence in terms of performance benefits over the mass mediocrity of the digital pipeline. Indeed, in many cases it's already been found wanting. If we want high quality music sources to continue to be available we'd damned well better be able to demonstrate the reasons why. Under the circumstances can we really afford the kind of philosophical inertia and stagnation that is currently all too prevalent.

The high-end is a limited and limiting concept in its present form, emasculated by the marketing imperative of providing a single easily digestible truth. The industry is cowering, en masse, transfixed by the headlights of the on-rushing digital multi-media revolution, clutching at the familiar without realising that all they're doing is competing to be the last to get mown down.

I don't know about you, but the spirit of the unknown, the inquisitive nagging that comes with each unexplained or unexplainable effect, was one of the things that drew me to hi-fi in the first place. Here was a world in which we clearly knew much less than we thought we did. Yet now, all we seem interested in is simple answers to pre-programmed questions. Faced with, on the one hand the Mark Levinson Reference system, and on the other the 47 Labs, which is high-end? The answer should be both of them. Or the Yamamura-Churchill system; or the Final Music system; or the new Red Rose system. The whole point about high performance audio is that it's a broad church, and we'd do well, magazines above all, to remember it.





47 Laboratory – The Minimalist Alternative

by Peter Russell

Just think of the X files. Somewhere buried deep in a bunker along a non-descript corridor there is a door with the label 47 Laboratory. Yet another anonymous research lab. searching for the fourth encounter? You could be right, but not this time. In this instance the search is one for musical purity. (There are many paths to musical nirvana and most of us spend our lives mixing and matching in our attempts to get there. How does the saying go, better to have travelled...) 47 Laboratory is a small Japanese company whose mission in life is to confound the audio world by creating cradle to the grave audio equipment; every component in the audio chain and therefore a complete system and listening experience, but to do so with the minimum number of components and the greatest possible simplicity. At the moment their efforts extend only as far as electronics, but I understand a speaker has been under development for some time.

In looking at this equipment it's essential to understand that it's the embodiment of a single, over-arching philosophy built on the three pillars of simplicity, short signal paths and



mechanical integrity. All this is embraced in carefully executed jewel-like casework. It's a philosophy that is pursued without compromise, to the extent that the end results are almost unrecognisable as a "high-end" hi-fi system, and elevate user frustration (the opposite of user friendliness) to new and undreamt of levels. Why bother? I hear you ask. Because the ends more than justify the means. At over \$14,000 for the system under review there has to be

considerable justification.

I suppose the words that come to mind when first viewing the 47 Labs. are 'small, compact and where's the rest of it?' This last comment was made by a visiting friend and also by my wife, who continually expects the arrival of a series of large and heavy cardboard boxes to complete the system.

As someone who has spent a good deal of his audio life (and income) as a committed member of the Big Is Beautiful Club, a firm believer that the crock of gold at the end of the audio rainbow is too large to get through your average door, my acceptance of the 47 Lab. System could prove interesting to the psychiatrists out there, and this coming from a psychologist! I prefer to see it as confirmation that I no longer have anything to prove. Perhaps it is called maturity.

At the heart of it all has to be the amplifier or Gaincard (you know, a straight wire with gain). To get it all into perspective, imagine two packets of playing cards joined together at their ends by a face-plate, two

▶ knobs and two miniature toggle switches, two umbilical cords terminated with computer connection blocks going into a large biscuit



barrel. This is the amplifier. Oh yes and before I forget, the (heavy and incredibly solid) biscuit barrel is the power supply and is called the Humpty. The object here is to create the shortest signal path possible with the least number of components and the maximum rigidity. The literature, states that there are only nine components in the signal path, excluding the attenuators, and that the signal path is only 32mm long including those parts! The design is, unsurprisingly, completely dual mono, each channel getting an on/mute toggle switch and a volume knob. This has twelve, rather coarse and inadequate increments. The whole construction sits on integral spikes, one at each corner, which in turn sit in matching cups. Power

output is rated at 25 watts per channel, with a 50w version available for those who feel the need for more testosterone.

The Gaincard has provision for only one line input, but you can run two outputs. Each mono channel has its own grounding post. Fortunately if you need more than one source and most of us do, you can add an Input

Chooser, which is the same size as the amplifier on which it can be placed. It too has three spiked feet, which fit into the integral cups on top of the Gaincard. Very neat. The Input Chooser accommodates four line inputs and two outputs.

If the amplifier is distinctly off-beat then so too are the source components. The digital solution is eclectic to say the least. At a time when everyone else seems to be gradually moving towards single box CD players, 47 Labs have created a three-box approach. We have the transport, DAC

and a shared power supply (another biscuit barrel, but this time called the Dumpty).

The transport is more than odd. It is weird. The size of an average hardback novel, it sits on three free standing pillars that at times want to walk in different directions! With its high mass and rigid construction the player seeks to control the storage of mechanical energy and internal vibration.

All the manual controls are on the top, consisting of more small toggle switches, recessed into dimples machined into the main slab. They control the backlight for the status window, play, stop, track forward/back and pause. Placing a CD on the transport can only be described as a ritual. It involves securing the disc with a plastic puck which screws into the transport hub. 47 Labs seem to have taken the care needed to place a vinyl record on a turntable and transposed it directly to playing a CD. All that is missing is a laser arm to locate the first pit on the disc! This is no plug and play experience.

The transport can be used as a stand alone two-box player (including the Dumpty) as it has a 1-bit, 4x oversampling on-board DAC. Alternatively, you can use it with an external converter, but once again things are far from straight

forward. There are two digital outputs, ▶



► the second of which is for use with conventional designs. The number one output is reserved for 47 Lab's own Progression DAC, itself another embodiment of the company's apparent obsession with simplicity. Like some of the Audio Note DACs there is no attempt to confuse the



of using CD's as a convenience has gone right out of the window here. A steady hand, good eyesight and the use of two hands to stabilise the transport are



called, rather descriptively, the Pi-tracer. It's the company's flagship model, but that's all I can tell you.

The final box in the system is the Phono Cube that, as its name suggests, is an active MC stage. In keeping with the design philosophy, it is small, dual mono with two grounding posts, and at first sight looks rather like a huge cartridge. It comes attached to another Dumpty power supply, and surprise, surprise, its operating principle is far from straight forward.

The Phono Cube is a current amplification device with a zero Ohm impedance, an approach first employed by Dr Tominari of Dyna-vector. This approach allows all of the current generated by the cartridge to be amplified, the output level being determined by the output amperage of the cartridge; output voltage divided by the internal impedance.

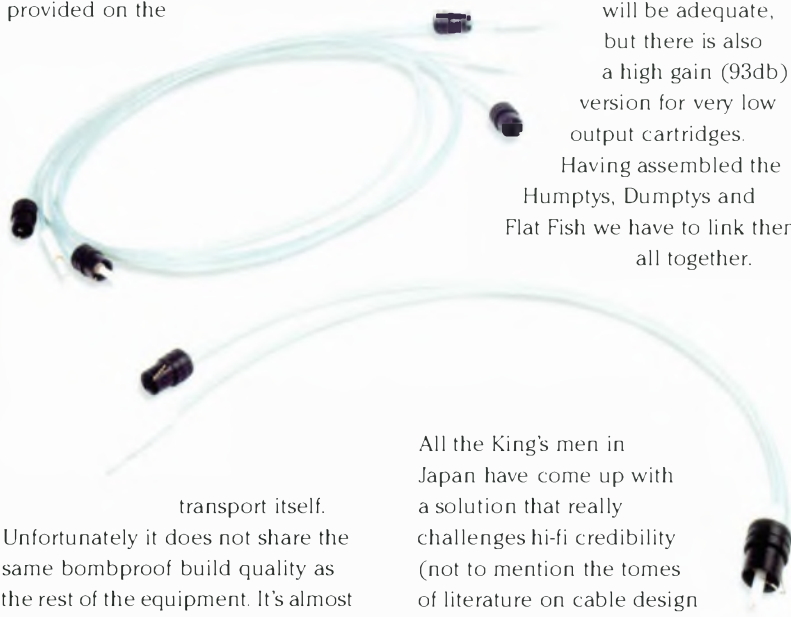
For most cartridges the standard version (75db gain) will be adequate, but there is also a high gain (93db) version for very low output cartridges.

Having assembled the Humptys, Dumptys and Flat Fish we have to link them all together.

owner with upsampling, over-sampling, or filters; there simply aren't any. The argument is that throwing more and more complex technological solutions at digital retrieval is missing the point. By adhering to the principle of simplicity and short signal paths, whilst at the same time minimising mechanical vibration, the problems so often associated with digital reproduction can be avoided. 47 Labs. see filtering and over-sampling as a classic case of the cure being worse than the disease. Listening to their system I'm forced to concede the point.

Given the configuration of the CD player, its owner is forced into exactly the sort of ritualistic behaviour that normally goes with expensive record players, and it goes way beyond the disc clamping arrangements. Get even a little bit careless and the whole contraption will collapse on its none too steady legs, doing a perfect mechanical impression of a 'Flat Fish' which, with true Japanese whimsy, is exactly what it is called. Any notion

a must. Fortunately there is a remote control with a range of functions in addition to those provided on the



transport itself. Unfortunately it does not share the same bombproof build quality as the rest of the equipment. It's almost as if someone simply ran out of time and rummaged in a box of discarded mid-fi remotes. Incidentally, I understand that there is also another, more expensive (!) CD player available

All the King's men in Japan have come up with a solution that really challenges hi-fi credibility (not to mention the tomes of literature on cable design often used to support the high prices demanded by certain manufacturers). Here we have what can best be described as hi-fi spaghetti; it looks like it, feels

▶ like it, and I haven't tried the rest. It is 0.4mm solid OFC copper wire sheathed in plastic with each conductor run as a separate wire. The story does not end there; the plugs are plastic with not a solder joint or crimp in sight. Not in my wildest imagination did I ever foresee this, or the hours of endless 'amusement' that went with it, but I'm getting ahead of myself. In the kit you get 50m of spaghetti and packs of plastic phono plugs and bananas for speakers. You are supposed to use a pair of tweezers to help you to assemble the interconnects. Fortuitously, 47 Labs advise you not to use the cable as power cords!

The idea is that you make your leads up yourself, so there I was sitting on the floor with a pair of cable strippers and tweezers trying to make the cables. It is not easy. For one thing the copper wire is brittle and if you are not careful you will end up surrounded by 3-inch lengths of cable as you inadvertently sever the wire. Get it right and you will achieve equal lengths of conductor, get it wrong...

It is best to allow an extra nine inches or so for over enthusiastic use of the strippers.

The bare copper is inserted into the plastic pin and out through the end, bent back down its length, threaded through a small hole at the base of the pin and wrapped round the shank to secure it. The other conductor is threaded through the wall of the collar, bent down the inside and reinserted into the inside of the collar to be gripped by the

incoming cable. Repeat three times and you now have a set of interconnects. The interconnects are connected by inserting the pin through the collar and into the female RCA socket. Then the collar is pushed into place. The speaker



cable is exactly the same but without the collar, the pin being the same size as a standard banana (no attempt at Japanese humour here). The cable is terminated at the Gaincard by four small Philips headed screws which certainly limit the range of speaker cable you could use with the system, but then, I really can't see anybody buying the amp and not buying the philosophy as a whole.

The complete system was wired with the cable; interconnects, digital link and speaker cables. Only the phono cable was my old standby from FM Acoustic. The whole system was set on BCD stands, and a VPI brick was placed on top of the Input

Chooser/Gaincard stack to ensure that I did not have to chase it round the shelf every time I changed an input. The analogue front end was a Well Tempered Signature with either a Grasshopper III or a Miyabi cartridge (there is a 47Labs/Miyabi cartridge, but this was not available for review), while speakers were either rebuilt Quad ELS57's or the rare but wonderful Ensemble Profysias.

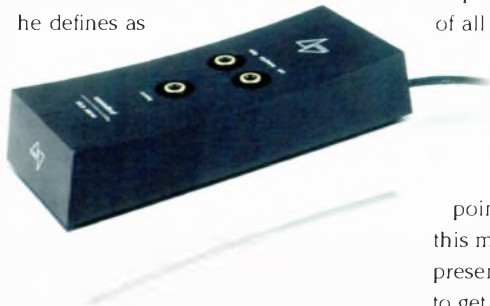
So there you have it; a complete system, ready to (rock and) roll. But before we get into the musical performance it's worth pointing out, once again, that the finished article is the product of a single, coherent philosophy. As such, adopting anything other than the complete system will dilute that philosophy, and therefore the potential benefits. I'm not saying that you couldn't pick and mix these components, or that you couldn't build the system over time, spreading the pain of the considerable financial outlay. But once you taste the benefits, I'm confident you'll hunger for more.

Taking on the entire system requires a leap of faith. The listener is drawn into the equipment as an active participant, with all the incumbent obligations and frustrations that implies. 47 Labs is very much an enthusiasts' preoccupation, a step into the audio unknown. With its minimalist pretensions, purist circuitry and demanding ceremony, the production of music becomes a conscious ▶



▶ and somewhat ritualistic event. Its saving grace is that it's definitely worth the effort. Now read on.

Junji Kimura, the creator of the 47 Labs system has set as his musical objective; to recreate the 'heart of the sound' which he defines as



"living in the point of contact where musician and instrument meet". This statement reminds us that when we listen to live music we experience a performance. It is the recreation of the performance and our involvement in it that lies at the heart of the 47 Labs system. The nature of musical experience is different for each of us, dependant as it is on our predispositions, experience and emotional sophistication. Our sensitivity to our emotional response to what we experience is central to being able to participate in the performance and engage in the point where musician and instruments meet. In the sense that that meeting point is ineffable, lies the heart of any attempt to 'explain', 'analyse', and ultimately communicate the nature of one medium through another. A description of a painting by Turner, no matter how sensitive, cannot replace experiencing it. It may help you see and experience the painting differently however.

The extent to which the 47 Laboratory system can create that meeting point and the resulting suspension of disbelief that transforms a recording into a performance is what we are exploring here. It was Aaron Copeland who said

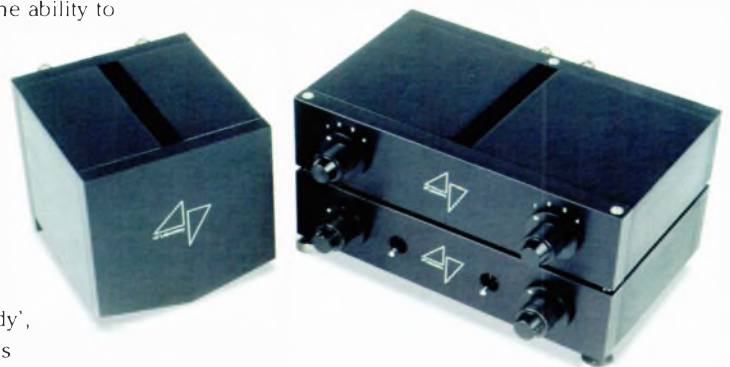
that music has four ingredients; rhythm, melody, harmony and tone colour (timbre). Every time we listen to music we experience them although we may not distinguish them. The ability to present these as part of a performance is the goal of all audio reproduction.

It is no accident that most of the musical examples I'm going to discuss are the product of acoustic instruments. For the musical point of contact to be recognisable this must be so. The challenge presented by the 47 Labs system is to get beyond the idiosyncratic and particularist nature of the equipment to assess the extent to which its design and build philosophy achieve that suspension of disbelief. Let's start at the deep end. The Flatfish, with its adherence to simplicity, minimalism and awkwardness creates an expectation of curiosity and confused anticipation. How will it perform given that it crosses so firmly against the 'convenient' grain of most other CD players? In one word, faithfully. Rye Cooder's *Jazz* is a superb medley of blues, jazz and Cajun rhythms, and it's superbly recorded. The ability to render the human voice with all its tone colours is a core test of any reproducing system. The track 'Nobody', apart from its changes in tempo, captures all the richness and timbre of the voice as it articulates its message. Here Ry Cooder is suspended in front of the listener and becomes another instrument contributing to the melody. Those of you who are familiar with Jennifer Warnes and *Famous Blue*

Raincoat should try to get hold of *The Hunter*. Apart from being well produced, not one of the tracks disappoints. However 'Some-where, Somebody' is a discrete blend of lead singer, male accompaniment, chorus and simple musical phrasing. The bass line provides a backcloth against which the melody is developed. For the tune to 'work' it has to be presented with all its parts clearly articulated whilst at the same time ensuring that the lead voice maintains its position relative to the musical parts; sometimes dominant, sometimes as another instrument with equal weight. Here the 47 Labs system achieves this with a delicate balance, just as it portrays the tonal colour of Jennifer Warne's close-miked voice in 'Lights of Louisiana'.

This ability to present the tonal colour of the human voice with tangible expression is a hallmark of the 47 Labs system which it carries over to the analogue source, more of which later.

There is certain music which relies for its dramatic impact on the spatial imaging of instruments and voices, particularly in early



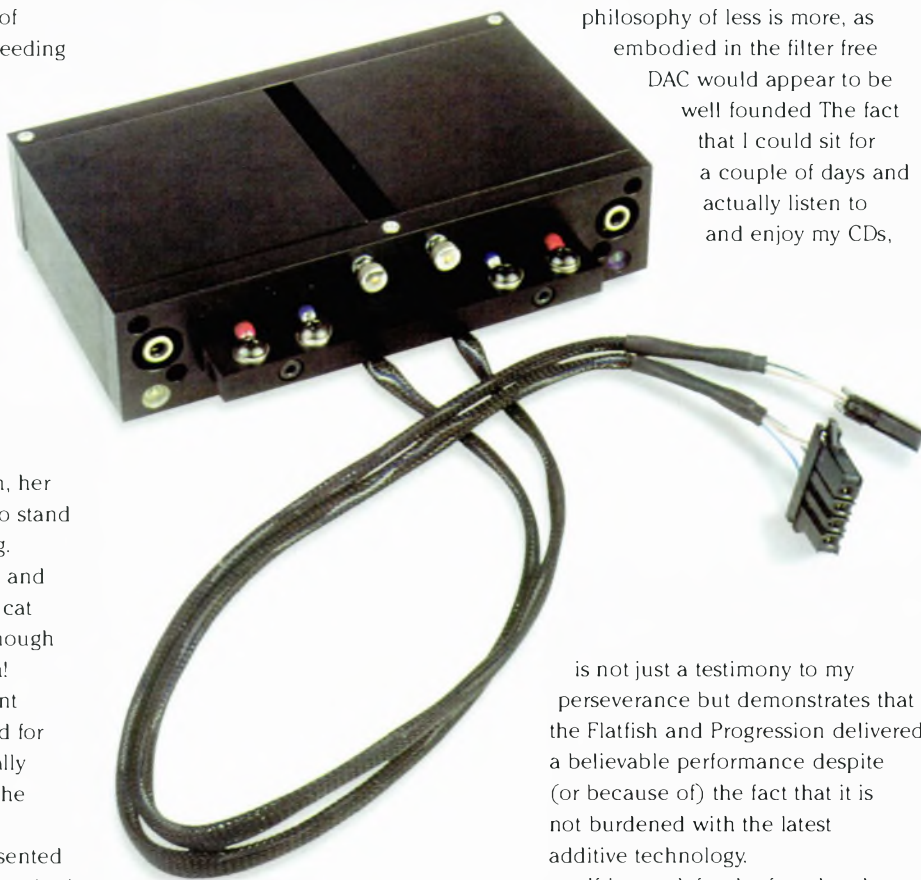
music consorts and chamber music, always assuming that the recording is able to capture the scale of the instruments and acoustic accurately. We have all heard the 20ft piano! 10ft will do. ▶

► One particular recording that demonstrates the importance of capturing the spatial cues and that is Fone's *Daniel and the Lions*, a liturgical piece which historically predates the separation of instrumental and drama into liturgy and the medieval passion plays which ultimately became Opera, and then popular musicals. In this piece the opening has the procession of instruments and singers proceeding from the back of the church towards the front, and then crossing to centre stage where the king Balthezar takes his throne. While I was listening to this, my Abyssinian cat (who is spatially far more acute than me) was sitting in a chair between, and in their plane of, the speakers, looked up and followed the procession round the church, her head moving as they came to stand behind where she was sitting. At that point there is a sharp and loud strike of the drum. The cat decided that she had had enough and scuttled out of the room! My only slight disappointment was that I would have wished for a little more gain to have really experienced the majesty of the *Tè Deum*.

A well-recorded and presented example of Paganini is always both fun and instructive to listen to. Clarity Recording's *Witches Brew* is a compilation of virtuoso violin pieces. The violinist is Eugene Fodor who captures the energy and verve whilst at the same time the accurate phrasing need to show Paganini off to his best. In 'Le Stregth' (the Witches) the violinist is required to play it one half stop higher in E flat major and the need for additional pressure on the strings produces increased attack and

brilliance. Just occasionally some the leading edges of the notes are lost, whether due to the recording or the CD player I am not sure, but given the quality of Pope recordings I am tempted to blame the CD player. One point worth mentioning is that the Quads captured the dramatic attack more vividly than the Ensembles. The sonority and

alone, one bit player the presentation of music lost a lot of its presence. Almost inevitably, some of the inner detail and micro dynamics were absent, whilst at the same time the music became one dimensional with a flattened soundstage. As a performance it was nowhere near as believable compared to the Progression DAC. The 47 Labs. philosophy of less is more, as embodied in the filter free DAC would appear to be well founded. The fact that I could sit for a couple of days and actually listen to and enjoy my CDs,



detail in Rossini's *Meses* is portrayed with authority and focus, especially in the changes in timbre as the notes decay on the single string tuned to G flat.

All of the above is from the Flatfish and the Progression DAC together, but the Flatfish can be used as a stand-alone CD player. It is here that one can really appreciate what the Progression DAC does in the system. As a stand

is not just a testimony to my perseverance but demonstrates that the Flatfish and Progression delivered a believable performance despite (or because of) the fact that it is not burdened with the latest additive technology.

If it wasn't for the fact that there is just some music I want and can only get on CD, I would have been more than content to just listen to vinyl played through the Phono cube. This diminutive piece of technology is the piece de resistance of the System. At just under £3,200 including power supply, the Phonocube is a serious commitment to analogue. At this price it has to stand up to some fierce competition as well as needing to push the performance envelope out to

► overcome a number of excellent phono-stages at significantly lower price points.

Most of the listening was done with my trusty Grasshopper III GLA, which I know well and have become used to; perhaps too much so. The Phonocube acts as a transparent bridge between the cartridge and the amplification stage. Nowhere has the character of the Grasshopper been revealed so ruthlessly as with the 47 Labs. There's a series of records produced in the mid to late late eighties by MCA on virgin vinyl with such artists as Albert Lee, Larry Carlton, Jerry Douglas etc. All are instrumental, cover a broad range of instruments and genre and are superbly produced. They are all characterised by enormous musical energy whether from a blues slide guitar, xylophone or snare drum. Listening to all six albums for about four hours was a delight and it was easy to forget that the music was generated by only 25 watts; the large sound stage, attack and decay of the riffs, the positioning of the percussive interludes all combined to make for a memorable afternoon.

For me the reproduction of the human voice at low volumes is a real challenge for any audio system. To produce the micro dynamics and tonal shifts through an extended note whilst at the same time portraying the dynamic contrasts creates the feeling of actually being there. I will avoid identifying the third bearing binding on the right of the stage in the opening track of Cowboy Junkies' *Trinity Sessions*. Rather I will comment on the raw projection of Margo Timin's voice as it traces the melody line and how she creates that haunting effect in 'I'm So Lonesome I Could Cry' with its ponderous bass



and haunting bottleneck slide guitar. The Phonocube captured her ability to shade her voice even at low volumes. One ought to mention 'Nobody' the evocative track on *Jazz* by Ry Cooder, here the analogue version lifted his voice to another level, revealing how it was miked and projected into the space in front of the listener. Likewise



Muddy Waters' *Folk Singer* demonstrates the Phonocube's consistent ability to capture the tonal character of well-recorded vocal tracks. Muddy Water's

expressive vocal ability was portrayed with an uncanny realism and without the exaggeration that can disturb the correct balance of voice and instruments.

I haven't really talked about the quality of the bass. I've never really seen the point of discussing disconnected aspects of the audio spectrum, on their own and in isolation from either a particular performance or piece of music. The 47 Labs. System has further confirmed that view, so let's look quickly at some orchestral pieces that demand the ability to portray appropriate soundstage with believable instrumental positioning. The underlying bass tones underpinning the second movement in *The Pines of Rome* created just the right brooding menace in the


catacombs, whilst the lyrical energy of Mussorgsky's *Night on a Bald Mountain* was a vivid example of the system's ability to present dynamic detail with aplomb. I think that the only limitation ►

► here was that there was a hint of strain on the most demanding of passages, where either the 50w version of the Gaincard or a more sensitive speaker might have pushed the performance envelope out that little bit further.

Most of the listening was done with the Grasshopper III GLA, but towards the end of the session I had the opportunity to introduce the Miyabi which is the subject of its own review. Sufficient to say that that cartridge's coherence and smoothness was captured in spades and, significantly, the control and quality of the bass lines in orchestral passages was exemplary. Because of the way the Phonocube works there was more than sufficient gain to drive the Profysias to appropriate levels without strain, despite its lower output than the Grasshopper (See the Miyabi review on page 86 for more on this). Careful matching of cartridge output and internal impedance is going to be just as critical as loudspeaker sensitivity if you want to get the best out of the 47 Labs.

This review has been, in many ways, a journey of personal exploration into what is for me, the new world of low powered solid state amplification. The 47 Labs designs present a complete and no compromise gestalt of stark simplicity and purity, refusing to include operational irrelevancies at any cost - apart from money that is. The demands made on the prospective purchaser are conflicting. Certainly the 25w Gaincard can drive medium sensitivity speakers (90+dB) and with careful cartridge matching superb results will be obtained. For some, especially those using a lot of CD, the 50w Gaincard will offer a larger choice of loudspeakers, but for me there is something musically right about the smaller Gaincard that my previous owner-

ship of huge (and hugely expensive) electronics has all too often failed to deliver. I feel at last that I've reached a spiritual watershed, and that means that the search for that elusive perfect speaker has got to be worth the effort. (You can't expect me to give up my acquisitive tendencies overnight!) You might

have to work up to it but the 47 Labs is well worth the effort. So live dangerously: Ignore the bigger and more complex kit on the dealer's floor; try not to be seduced by the latest audio technobabble, and most difficult of all; leave your audio baggage at home. It's a liberating experience I can tell you. 

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Gaincard amplifier (4706)

Power output: 25W/80hms
 Input Impedance: 22K ohms
 (unbalanced)
 Dimensions(WxHxD): 170 x 40 x 100 mm
 Price: £1,495

Power Humpty (4700)

Dimensions (WxD): 130 x 195 mm
 Price: £1,495

Phono Cube (4712)

Input Impedance: 0 ohm
 Output impedance: 47 ohm
 Gain: 75 db
 Dimensions(WxHxD): 90 x 100 x 90 mm
 Price: £1,695

Power Humpty (4700)

Dimensions: As Dumpty
 Price: £1,495

Flatfish CD Player/ transport(4713)

Digital outputs: 2 Coaxial (RCA)
 outputs
 Analog output: 1 Unbalanced (RCA)
 output
 Dimensions (WxHxD) 170 x 60 x 245 mm
 Price: £2,995

Progression DAC (4705)

Sampling Frequency: 32kHz, 44kHz, 48kHz
 Output Voltage: 2.1v
 Digital input: 1x Coaxial
 Analog output: 1 pr Unbalanced
 Dimensions (WxHxD) 60 x 70 x 162 mm
 Price: £2,195

Power Dumpty (4799)

Price: £1,495

Cable System OTA Kit(4708)

Cable 50m 0.4mm OFC copper
 Stratos wire
 Plugs 12 pairs machined soft
 plastic RCA plugs
 Price: £495

Input Chooser(4707)

Inputs: 4 Unbalanced
 Outputs: 2 Unbalanced
 Dimensions (WxHxD): 170 x 40 x 100 mm
 Price: £695

System Price: £14,055

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Reviewed March 2001

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Conrad-Johnson PV10B Vacuum-Tube Pre-Amplifier

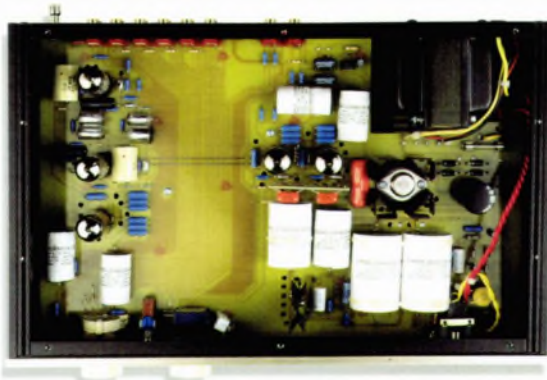
by Roy Gregory

Most of the companies that have made their name producing cost-no-object designs have, sooner or later, turned their hand to the production of more affordable products. After all, it makes sense. Not that many people can afford the products that they admire from a financial distance. But offer them the same name badge on something a bit more attainable and they'll be queuing round the block, or so the logic goes. Unfortunately it seldom seems to work out that way, and all too often a designer's cheaper offerings lack the sparkle as well as the price of his flagship products. Generally speaking it's not to long before those companies depart, tail between their legs, for the rarefied atmosphere to which they're more accustomed.

But Conrad-Johnson are an entirely different kettle of fish. Not only has there been a PV10 in their product line-up for as long as I can recall, it's also been a permanent part of the budget esoterica and recommended component landscape for all that time, one of the surer stepping stones on the route to audio nirvana. And now, finally, this venerable performer has reached its third incarnation, providing the perfect excuse to revisit, rediscover and celebrate again its considerable musical appeal.

Not that there's anything on the outside to suggest to the uninitiated the quality that lurks within. Indeed, the PV10B is so resolutely plain in appearance that informing non-audio visitors that it cost £1500 (including the optional phono stage) invariably

produced the startled response, "Why?". To the cognoscenti of course, it's a different matter. One glance at that front panel and they know that they are in the presence of a c-j, testament to one of the most enduring (or should that be straight stubborn) corporate fascias in the industry. In truth, today's PV10B is stylistically virtually indistinguishable from the company's first pre-amp, all those years ago.



That visual continuity is actually a reassuring metaphor for the product's sonic character. In the same way that the neat extrusions and the simple but beautifully finished faceplate provide the same uncluttered structural integrity that they do for the more expensive products in the range, the equally neatly executed internal circuitry delivers similar sonic integrity. The PV10B is designed for musical appreciation, rather than to impress your friends. Controls are limited to the sensible minimum: volume and source select for six inputs. There's a full tape loop with monitor switch, and one of the inputs can accommodate the optional phono

circuitry. Externally there's little else to say, except that the pre-amp inverts absolute phase, so if you are using it with a non-inverting power amp you'll need to reverse your speaker wires.

Once you lift the lid you'll discover a conventional enough circuit, neatly laid out on a single, large PCB. The line stage employs a pair of ECC82s in a cathode follower arrangement, the phono stage (if fitted) adds a pair of ECC83s and an ECC81, also cathode follower. Both stages avoid global feedback. Not so long ago, cathode followers were seen as "a good thing" and pretty soon the vast majority of valve pre-amps made a point of using them, despite the haze and veiling that they tend to introduce. c-j avoided that particular audio cul-de-sac, going to enormous lengths in the flagship ART to do so. Which makes their adoption of this configuration for the PV10 all the more interesting.

Elsewhere, the B's power supply benefits from updated and improved stabilisation and rectification. The HT and LT arrangements have also been refined. All non-film capacitors have been bypassed with CJDesign polystyrene types and the valve biasing is now based on the circuit developed for the ART. Both the power supply and audio circuitry have received a major facelift, quality of passive components being significantly improved, in some cases to Vishay standards. Finally, the minimal internal wiring has been replaced with a selected OFC wire. ►

► These improvements can be retrofitted to existing PV10As by Audiofreaks at a cost of £300.

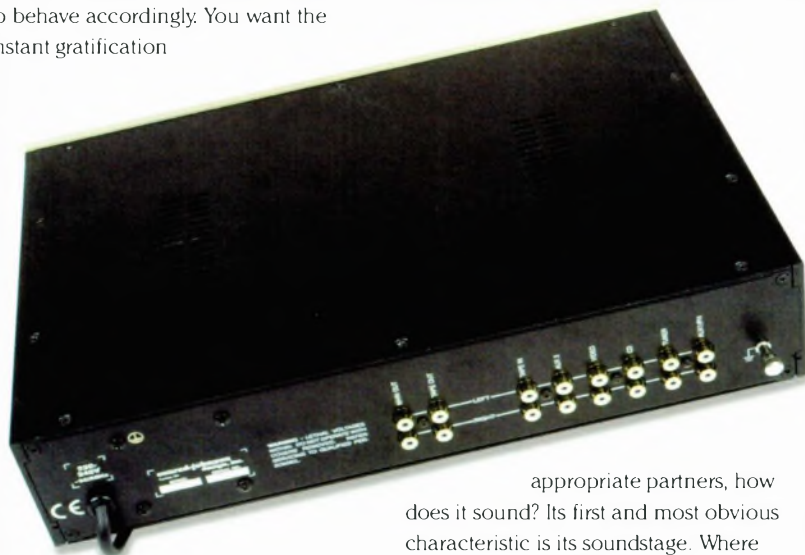
As a line only unit, the PV10BL will cost you £1195, the optional phono circuit also an additional £300. It's money well spent. This is no token moving-magnet stage, limiting the owner to a claustrophobically narrow choice of decent cartridges. Nor is it one of those "medium gain" stages which tries to be all things to all men, but ends up causing more problems than it solves. This is a bona fide moving-coil compatible valve phono stage. Capable of working with cartridges down to about 0.35mV, it proved perfectly comfortable with my Insider Reference, even more so, in fact, almost ideal with the Lyra Helikon (0.6mV). In both cases it didn't just sound good, it was quiet too, which given the trend toward higher outputs from today's moving-coils makes the PV10B a very cost effective way of getting a quality vinyl front-end up and running.

One final word of warning regarding first contact with the PV10B. Along with the phase inversion, before you listen you'll need to give it time to warm up. The importer recommends a couple of hours: I reckon that's minimum. For most people, switching it on when you get in from work should suffice, leaving it on for the weekend of course. You'll know if it's cold because

it will sound bleached and pinched in the mid-band, rolled at the top and its surprisingly deep and firm bass response will be plodding and earthbound, slowing the music rather than adding to it. Fear not. All will come right in time. If you want high-end performance on the cheap then you have to be prepared to behave accordingly. You want the instant gratification

32, but it got enough of the right things in the right place not to embarrass itself, the music or me. That's some trick, and translate it back to a more realistic environment of the sort that the PV10 will actually inhabit and it promises a real slice of the high-end.

So, once its warm and working with



that comes with E-numbers and flavour enhancers? Get an A/V system.

Although the PV10B's visit was rather shorter than some products that come for review, I got to use it with a decent range of partnering equipment. The JA30s were an obvious (and extremely successful) match and even I was

surprised by the results achieved with the excellent little Monarchy

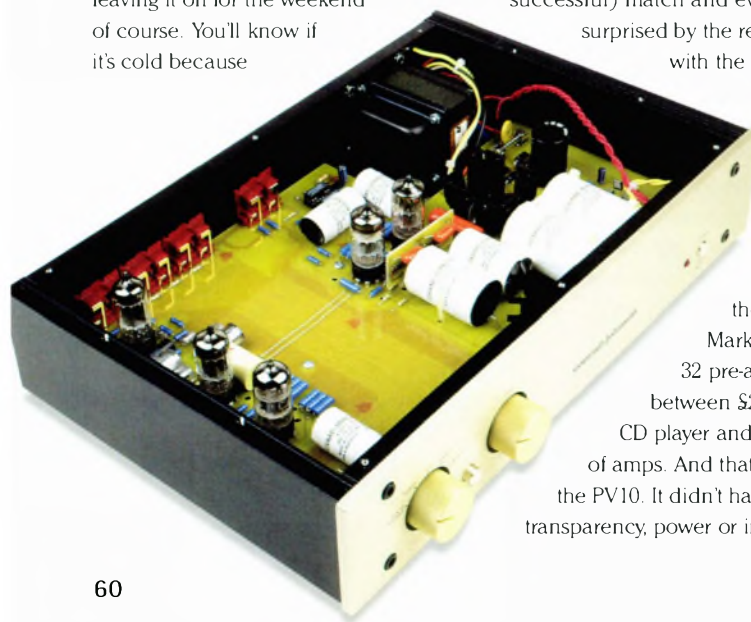
Audio SM70.

But not as surprised as I was at how well the basic c-j could fill the boots of the Mark Levinson No 32 pre-amp, sitting

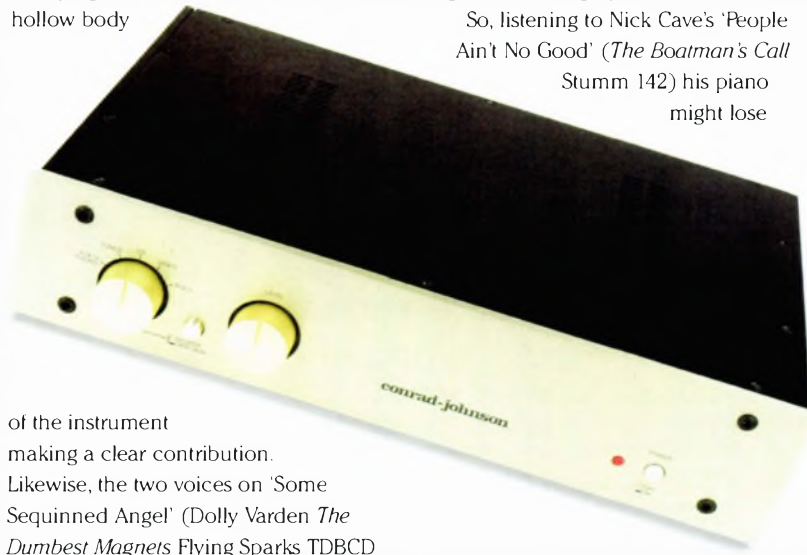
between £26000 worth of CD player and £20000 worth of amps. And that's the key to the PV10. It didn't have the scale, transparency, power or insight of the

appropriate partners, how does it sound? Its first and most obvious characteristic is its soundstage. Where appropriate the PV10 delivers a wide, open and entirely credible view of proceedings, with depth in particular that few products can match at this price. 'True Love Ways' (Buddy Holly *Legend* MCA MCMD 7003) enjoys the full spread of the studio, the control room speaker positioned correctly, above, behind and outside the left hand speaker. Spatial separation of the voice and sax is also spot on, with the differences in height between Holly, the reed and the bell mouth all present and correct. Individual images are well localised and separated, even at the back of the stage, and the upright bass, which is thuddy on the recording and can easily become a ploddy afterthought, is kept surprisingly tight and fluid. Whilst this is evidence of the work that's gone into the 10's power supply, I suspect a degree of careful tailoring, further evidence of c-j's considerable experience.

The tonal palette is also extremely natural, blossoming from the



▶ washed out presentation when cold. Individual instruments are easily separated, their characters' immediately identifiable. Each player in the Dvorak *String Quintet* (AAA Edition Phoenix EPH02) is located both in space and by the colour of their instrument. The deep growl of the bass opening is especially satisfying, the hollow body



of the instrument making a clear contribution. Likewise, the two voices on 'Some Sequined Angel' (Dolly Varden *The Dumbest Magnets* Flying Sparks TDBCD 052) although superimposed in the studio are never congested or confused. Each voice is held distinct, solid in its own space, clear in its own character. The superb harmonies are key to this excellent album: the PV10 delivers them clear and intact, separating the voices whilst preserving their relationship. This is the key to the c-j's performance. It delivers the individual elements in the recording without pulling them apart.


Of course, it isn't perfect. Compared to its more expensive brethren it suffers in the areas of transparency, low level resolution and dynamic range. Unfortunately, if you want the best you are still going to have to pay for it! The PV10B's trick is in the careful selection of its trade-offs. The veiling and grain that limit the absolute transparency of the soundstage are accepted shortcomings with a cathode follower. They prevent you, for instance, hearing the rear and side walls on the Holly recording. The flip side however, is the

budget that can be allocated to the power supply, giving the sound its tactile, mobile bass performance and rooted stability. Which is musically more important? There's no contest. Add to that the unit's ability to match less than ideal electrical loads (an all too likely scenario at this price point) and the logic of the design path is undeniable.

So, listening to Nick Cave's 'People Ain't No Good' (*The Boatman's Call* Stumm 142) his piano might lose

some of its complex sonority and texture, but its authority is intact as is its close relationship with the bass guitar, the two remaining clearly separate throughout when its all too easy to simply brush them together. As a result, the track's foundation, and more importantly its pace, remain exactly as they should be. Likewise, Martzy's playing (Beethoven *Kreutzer Sonata* Coup d'Archet Coup 003) might lack the last ounce of bite and rasp to her bowing, the piano a little stab and attack, but their relationship remains correct. The innate understanding of this long time musical pairing is clear to hear: Martzy's brilliance is just as apparent, Antonietti's sensitivity and control just as delicately traced.

The devil might be in the details, but the PV10B's triumph is in its presentation of the musical whole. That's what it brings from the high-end, and whilst we have a tendency to fixate

on the parts, it is undeniably the whole that actually matters. It delivers a coherent and expressive musical picture with a pace and rhythmic integrity which will surprise many listeners. Its staging and range of tonal colour is hard to fault. It confidently fulfils the need for a competently designed, versatile, well built and above all, affordable, valve pre-amp. It's easy to overlook the PV10 simply because it's been around for so long. To do so would be a real mistake. Anybody in the market for a quality valve pre-amp that won't break the bank should seek out the B. You won't be disappointed. 

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Valve Pre-amplifier
Valve Complement:	2x ECC82 (Line) 2x ECC83, 1x ECC81 (Phono)
Inputs:	Line (1 as Optional MC Phono)
Outputs:	1x Main, 1x Tape
Phono Sensitivity:	0.35mV
Phono Gain:	48.5 dB
Line Stage Gain:	17 dB
Dimensions (WxHxD):	406x96x280 mm
Weight:	5.5 Kg
Prices:	
Line Only	£1195
Incl. Phono	£1495
Upgrade From PV10A:	£300

Distributor:

Audiofreaks
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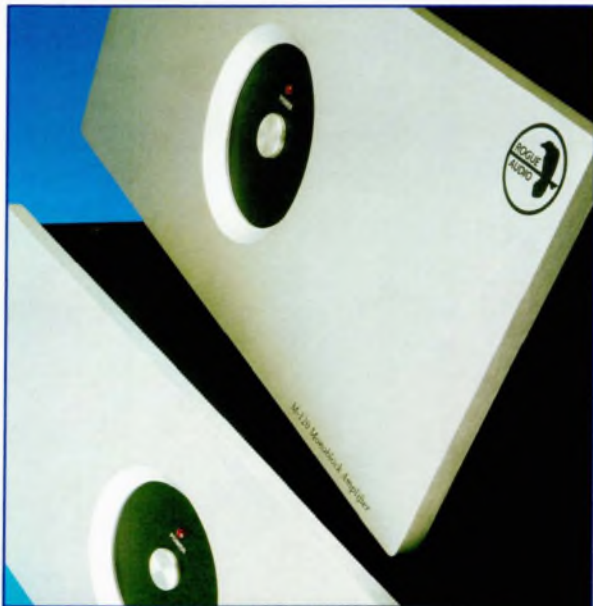
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The Crimson 640 Mono Power Amplifiers

by Chris Binns

Bad timing. I can say with some degree of conviction that my academic career did not get off to the best possible start, due in no small part to the school I was attending becoming co-educational. Am I shifting blame? I don't think so. The sudden appearance of a hundred or so girls (where previously there had been none to speak of) somewhat dented my enthusiasm for academic pursuits, particularly as it happened to coincide with the hormonal frenzy that was adolescence. Thus studying for O levels was knocked even further down the chart of teenage pursuits to a highly irresponsible number four, with music occupying the number three spot. At number two, there was a struggle between strategic planning to maximise on number one, (chasing girls) and, wait for it, hi fi. But the almost continual fascination of imagining (and of course trying to find out) what might be under Tracey Lee-Can's skirt was occasionally usurped with thoughts about amplifiers or loudspeakers, and, repeatedly, I distinctly recall, by a small add in Wireless World for a company called Krimson Electric.

Before I am accused of being the teenage nerd, may I just say that having the best (and certainly the loudest) hi fi system around did actually

afford me an advantage in befriending girls, and lets face it - I needed all the help I could get. Listening to music became something of a religious experience in my bedroom, due in no small part to the collection of home-made amplifiers and loudspeakers sounding considerably more



impressive than the average schoolboys hi fi system. Of course, having a long suffering father who was also keen on hi fi helped considerably*, as there was always the possibility that when he got a new piece of equipment I might be in line for an

upgrade. And there were also numerous DIY projects on the go at any given time – a lot of my hi fi was home grown. There was also the power thing. I think that both my father and I hankered after a powerful solid state amplifier, so the Crimson advertisement got us both thinking. The company was producing amplifier modules which offered a cost effective method of achieving one hundred Watts of audio power, something of a holy grail to an unenlightened teenager, and besides,

I wanted to build something a little more elegant than the collection of valve amps that I was using. I had already tried my hand at building a high power solid state amplifier from scratch, with spectacularly disastrous results. For my father, the attraction lay in having an amplifier with enough power to play 'full on' organ ▶

* Long suffering - I worked out that I could afford to 'buy' his old Revox G 36 at twenty five pence a month over about ten years. Quite rightly he had little faith in this argument, but I think it persuaded him that it was a good idea to keep it in the family household. I've still got it. Not to mention the various amplifiers and loudspeakers that he helped me to build....

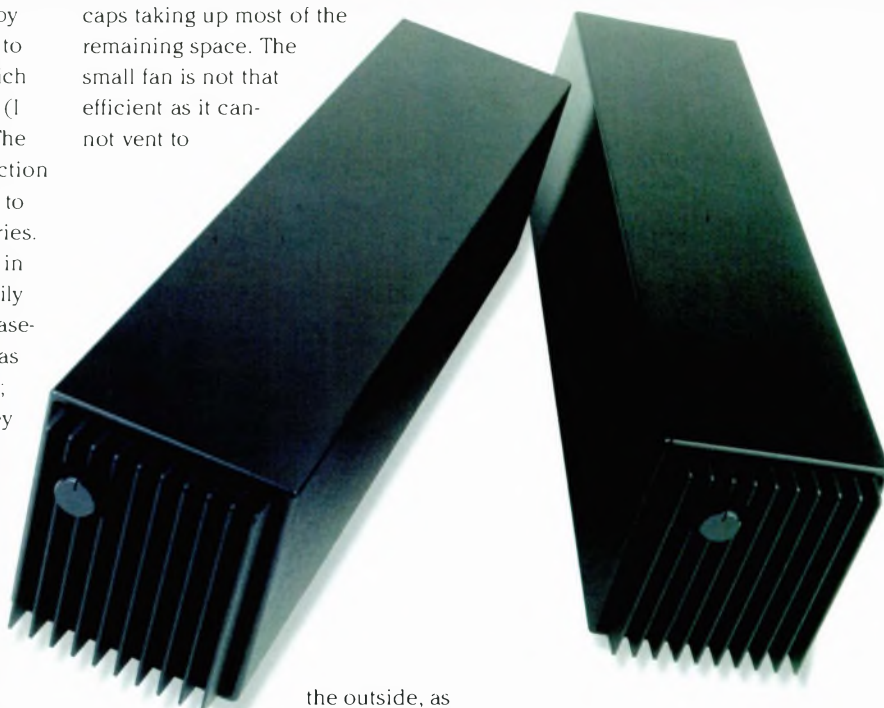
▶ music at realistic levels, through a pair of inefficient IMF transmission line loudspeakers - the resident Quad 303 was struggling. Sadly, neither of us ventured down this route, and it was to be twenty five ears before I finally came face to face with Crimson amplification. Still, there at the start, and still there now!

Krimson Elektrik was started by Brian Powell in the mid seventies to produce power amplifier kits, which proved popular for both hi fi and (I believe) industrial applications. The end of the decade saw the production of the first fully built (as opposed to kit) amplification with the 500 series. They also sensibly dropped the K in favour of the correct spelling. Easily distinguished by their long thin casework, the other notable feature was the battery powered pre-amplifier; together with the power amps they offered real value for money performance.

The 600 series continues this trend, while distribution and marketing is now handled by Virtual Reality systems who are also responsible for, amongst others, DNM products, so it is no coincidence to find slit foil capacitors and solid core cable within the 640 monoblocks reviewed here. Rated at 200 Watts into 8 Ohms with considerably more available into lower impedances, they do not look like a heavy weight contender. Aesthetically, the Crimsons are discrete and well finished, perhaps a little bit utilitarian, but have a certain degree of charm due to their compact dimensions. Retaining the long thin tube construction from the 500 series they are fronted by a finned heatsink into which the power switch is recessed, along with a status indicator. Normally green when powered up, a change of colour to orange indicates that the internal fan is running, while red means that the amplifier has shut itself down to

prevent overheating. There is also further protection in the form of current and DC offset sensing rendering the units pretty much bomb proof.

Internal construction is neat and well laid out, with the main amplifier board bolted to the front, the twin toroidal transformers and reservoir caps taking up most of the remaining space. The small fan is not that efficient as it cannot vent to



the outside, as to allow this would involve changing the whole casework. From what I gather, circuitry has been refined over the years but is similar to the original design from the seventies, a policy that has served, amongst others, Naim Audio well through the years. The output stage utilises two pairs of high current complementary bi-polar devices that run quite cool under quiescent conditions; no claims are made for class A operation. Back panel connections are straight forward enough with parallel phono inputs to facilitate daisy chaining, while two pairs of 4mm sockets allow bi-wiring. Mains input is via a standard IEC connection.

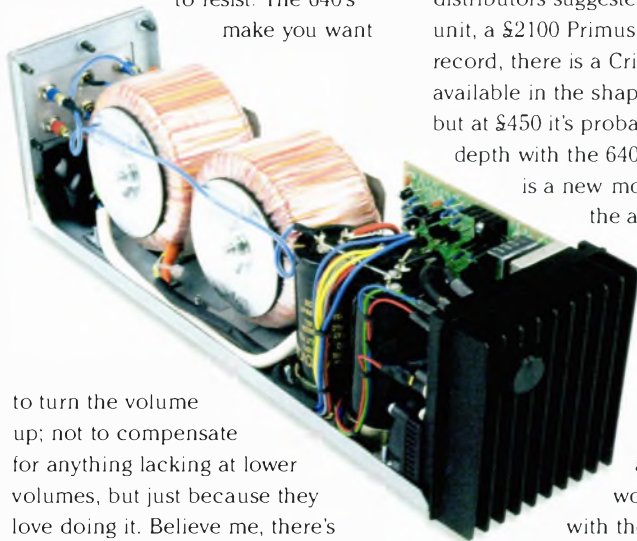
What with equipment coming and going for photography, I was

without power amplification when the Crimsons arrived, so they were thrown in at the deep end and literally shoved into my system. Small enough to carry one in each hand, this was a blessedly simple operation that was conducted without the usual grunts and stabbing back pains that normally accompany the shifting of power amps.

Running from a valve pre-amp that does not favour the low input impedance of solid state power amps, and driving a pair of nasty 3 ohm loudspeakers (with a heavy dose of inductance thrown in for good measure) I was not expecting earth shattering results. I was also unusually cautious with the volume control, a little out of character I know, but the 640's did not look beefy enough for a 'Saturday night' session.

Well, appearances can be deceptive. The Crimsons confounded my expectations by sounding impressive from the start, and after a couple of days of running began to take control of the system. The first thing I noticed was that they seem to relish working hard, ▶

▶ and blossomed when driving difficult loudspeakers, sounding confident and authoritative under such conditions. Possessing an almost Naim like confidence at the bottom end, they suffered little of the bloated sluggishness that powerful amps sometimes bring to the party. Rock and pop music was conveyed with good rhythmic drive and an agility that made listening exciting, particularly so with vinyl. It was a combination that I found hard to resist. The 640's make you want



to turn the volume up; not to compensate for anything lacking at lower volumes, but just because they love doing it. Believe me, there's absolutely no hint of reticence here.

Normally this kind of performance does not work so well with more gentle music like string quartets, but the Crimsons have enough subtlety to make those just as enjoyable. Mid and top performance is open and sweet with good spatial presentation, and while not possessing the tactile qualities that some expensive amplifiers are capable of (the Lavardin amps spring to mind) they cover their tracks well enough, and above all avoid strangling the musical performance. There is a new Naxos disc of *English String Miniatures* which I bought at about the same time that the 640's arrived, and playing this proved a real pleasure. String tone was good, with plenty of the detail and vibrancy so essential

for this music to work, and although the sound didn't project from the loudspeakers quite as well as it does with some of the valve amplifiers I have used, it was very satisfying to listen to. In other words, they manage to convey the spirit of the music well enough for you to forget about any minor shortcomings.

I was not in any hurry to alter anything in the system, but felt that I ought to try a more representative pre-amplifier. At this stage the distributors suggested I try a DNM unit, a £2100 Primus 3c. For the record, there is a Crimson pre-amp available in the shape of the 610c, but at £450 it's probably out of its depth with the 640's. I gather there is a new model on its way in the autumn. The basic DNM option would be the 3A Start at £1300 including phono stage, which is worth bearing in mind as the Primus worked wonderfully with the Crimsons, particularly with vinyl.

I spent the best part of a day playing records varying between material that really should grace the editors 'to die from' list (*Supertramp – Crime Of The Century*) through to Elgar string quartets. It was all very enjoyable, and I admit that I did at times get the 640's hot enough to cut out. The addition of a fan heater blowing cold air in front of them, whilst not recommended, soon sorted that particular problem out. Bear in mind though, that I was playing music at highly antisocial levels into a bastard of a load – not an every day occurrence for most people. Let's be frank – the 640's could easily hide behind thick aluminium panels with an impressive logo on the front and miles of heat-sinking, never thermally

trip, and probably sound worse to boot. They could probably double the selling price as well, and still be competitive.

But that's missing the point. The 640's are great sounding amplifiers. They are adaptable enough to work well with a wide range of equipment, (just think of the possibilities in an AV system....) and just happen to be able to drive almost anything, with enthusiasm. For me, however, their biggest attraction lies with the fact that using them was just so enjoyable. Listening was never reduced to an academic procedure to be endured in the pursuit of review copy. There are amplifiers (at a price) that can outperform the Crimsons in specific areas, but there are not many designs that can achieve the right balancing act to make listening to such a wide variety of music such fun. The fact that the 640's do it for thirteen hundred pounds a pair makes them a very attractive proposition, and something of a bargain. ▶+

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Power output:	200 Watts into 8 Ohms
Input sensitivity:	0.775V for full output
Frequency response:	10Hz – 40KHz +/- 1dB
Dimensions (HxWxD):	116x95x364 mm
Weight:	7Kg each.
Price:	£650 each.

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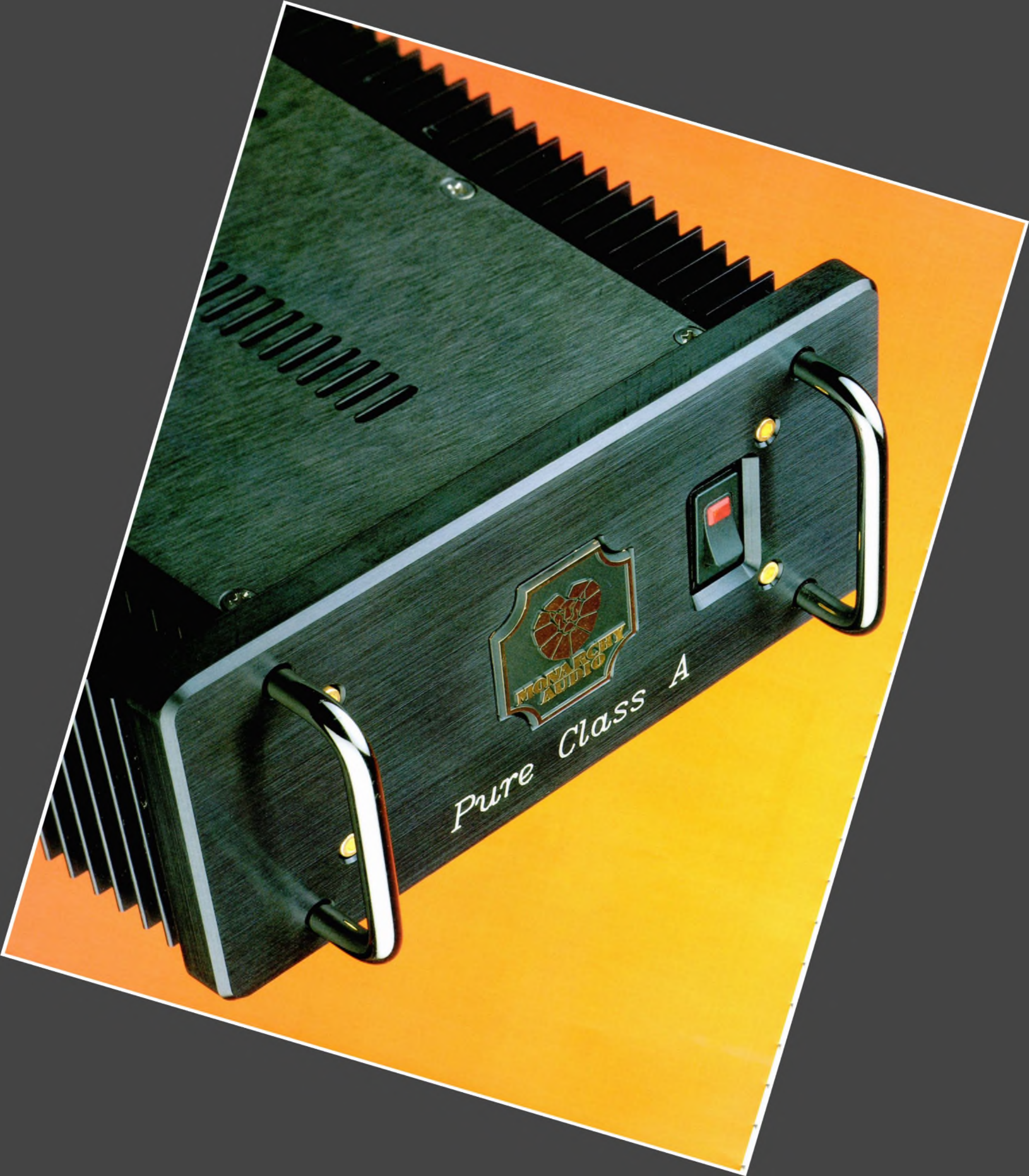
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Pure Class A



Monarchy Audio SM70 Power-Amp

by Roy Gregory

The history of high-fidelity sound reproduction features a small but persistent number of products that have, according to legend, performed at well beyond their asking price. Products like Pioneer's A400, Kef's Coda 11 and the Michell Iso. Products that all have several things in common: of course, they're all bargains; for every fan they have an equally vociferous detractor; and most interestingly of all, they've all arrived from what can only be described as unlikely sources. After all, who would have predicted a minor Japanese major (if you follow my drift) suddenly producing a chopped down hot-rod of a budget amp? These are the same guys who are currently wrapped up to their armpits in DVD-A and inter-corporate bloodletting. Before the Coda 11 rearranged the budget speaker market Kef were generally regarded as somewhere between "stuffy"

and "stodgy" in the days when rap stars weren't even a glimmer in the musical firmament. Likewise, before the Iso arrived, people only knew Tom Evans as the designer of the Finestra pre-amp, and that used transformers for its moving-coil stage!

And there's one other thing they have in common; try and cut corners with them and it is easy to get it wrong. Which explains about half of the detractors mentioned above. Another quarter of them are people with an axe to grind, whose own product range or ego is under assault because one man's bargain is another man's lost sale, one magazine's scoop another's

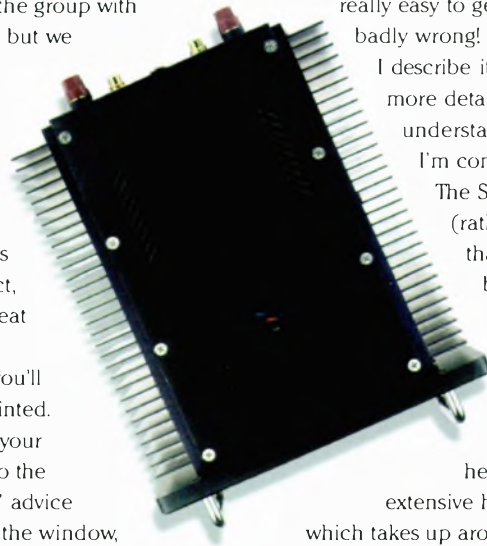
lost opportunity or the basis for a conspiracy theory. (The final quarter are those who just genuinely didn't like the product, but then you can't please all the people all of the time.) We can ignore the deaf or the group with their own agendas, but we should learn from those who simply got it wrong. What should we learn? Well, mainly that if you have a £300 product that sounds like a £1000 product, then you'd better treat (and feed) it like a £1000 product, or you'll be awfully disappointed. The old "divide up your budget according to the following equation" advice goes straight out of the window, except that the British have always been uncomfortable with precocious talents. The "is he ready?" school of sporting caution has long been the bane of our national teams, when the old maxim "if he's good enough he's old enough" should apply (take a bow Mr Balshaw). We might not be able to do anything about the FA or TCCB, but at least we get to choose our own hi-fi.

So, on that note, let me introduce you to the Monarchy Audio SM70, an unassuming little power-amp that seems set to join that legendary list of audio giant killers. After all, it has all the right credentials. Monarchy Audio, if not totally unknown on these shores,

are best known for their DACs and the DIP re-clocking device. We can hardly hold it's lack of detractors against it (they've never even heard of it ...yet). It's definitely a bargain, and yes, it's

really easy to get it wrong - badly wrong! Perhaps if I describe it in a little more detail than you'll understand where I'm coming from.

The SM70 is small (rather smaller than a shoe-box in fact) and is specified as a 25 Watt Class A design, hence the extensive heat-sinking



which takes up around a quarter of its total footprint. It also claims to be free of global feedback, which gives it a certain currency if nothing else. Its plain, almost brutish casework is decorated by a scattering of gold plated allen bolts and a large badge. And yes, I laughed at the handles too, until I realised how sharp the heat-sinks are. In fact, there's nothing in its appearance to suggest the magic that lurks within, and on the face of it £600 doesn't seem especially cheap.

Pause for a moment and consider those specs. 25 Watts Class A and feedback free. Definitely an exotic recipe. In fact, I've had a well



▶ documented soft spot for 20 or so Watts of Class A power for some years, and still hanker after a pair of the monstrous Mark Levinson ML2s. And therein lies a tale, because the huge chassis of a single ML2 was designed to dissipate the heat from one channel running at 25 Watts Class A, and if you've ever seen ML2s you'll know that they discolour from the temperature generated in the process. The Monarchy amp, with two channels, runs warm, but not even close to really hot. Not even as hot as the Musical Fidelity A1 with its absurdly inefficient horizontal heat-sink. So I think we can probably assume that its 25 Watts are fairly heavily salted. Which is why it's possible to get things so horrendously wrong with this amp.

Try and drive your average speaker with the SM70 and the results will be soft, bloated and flaccid; as musically loose as the band of the Royal Marines by midnight on Trafalgar day. But used with something a little more efficient (and here you need to be careful as speaker sensitivity has become the audio equivalent of bicycle weight - manufacturers lie!) the little Monarchy really blossoms. Most of my listening was done with the Living Voice Avatars or the Kochel K200, both genuinely, well on the right side of 90dB. There is a bridging option, operated by a switch on the back panel, but you don't want to go there. Firstly, it's not going to help you with low impedance loads anyway; secondly, bridge the SM70 and it sounds distinctly ordinary, losing the magic that makes it such a steal in the first place. Bi-amping is a better option, but even here I'd stick with reasonably efficient speakers - 90dB as a sensible minimum.

All of which puts the little Monarchy in the same ballpark as the vast majority of single-ended triodes.

The difference is that the SM70 is totally fuss free in operation (they even provide spare fuses), it costs a lot less, and sounds a darn sight better than most of them. Oh yeah, I hear the SET set say Yeah, you'd better believe it.

Of course, the SM70 enjoys certain natural advantages. It has the dynamic integrity that comes from a single pair of output devices for each channel. Having strictly limited ambitions in terms of driving



awkward loads, it isn't overburdened (in terms of price or performance) by an unnecessarily large and sluggish power supply. These things I'd expect. However, the SM70 adds a vibrant tonal palette to the equation, along with a quality I can only describe as temporal fluency. Notes occur where they should, when they should and last the correct duration, lending music a natural sense of pace and flow. Even a brief listen to the Monarchy amp will suggest how many, especially solid-state amps, get this essential aspect of musical structure sadly askew. Whether the SM70's abilities are

down to the absence of global feedback or not I'm in no position to say, and it's irrelevant anyway. As I've said many, many times before, there are no magic ingredients in hi-fi - just magic systems. So the SM70 is the sum of its various virtues, their specific execution, and the equipment you use it with. But get it right and the results are

spectacularly engaging and downright enjoyable.

Sandwich it between the Living Voice Avatars and the Klimo Merlin pre-amp, a position in which the Monarchy was right at home, sit back and enjoy the ride. The opening track of Joe Jackson's live set *Summer In The City* is a perfect example. The anticipation of the crowd is palpable, the stabbed opening chords of the title track both surprising and immediately identifiable - but not as surprising as the cascade of drums that tumble into the silence as vocal and piano ebb away. They're big, solid, real drums, and despite the crashing cannonade of their entrance, the pattern and power of the playing makes perfect sense. It's a first hint ▶

▶ of the SM70's extraordinary low frequency performance.

Listen to Graham Maby's bass; its notes have the rounded thrum of the real thing, perfectly placed and weighted, each with its pitch perfectly centred, the step to the next note perfectly clear. I have never heard this kind of bass communication from any amp/speaker combination at this, or close to this price. We're not talking the kind of carved from solid, over damped definition that passes for bass in too many big systems, but living, breathing, mobile "get you on your feet and moving" bass that comes with the live event. It's a shade rounded, and you don't get the deepest harmonic insight; it doesn't have the leading edge clarity of a Lavardin or the substance of a Mark Levinson. But it doesn't have their price tag either, and it does have texture, a tactile, sinuous grace, and in Mr Finn's inimitable words, "it grooves like a bastard"!

That sense of musical flow, the effortless sense of shape, traces the evolutions of a track. As JJ dips in and out of 'In With The In Crowd' and 'Down To London' the shifts in key, the patchwork insertions of a phrase here, a shaped motif there are laid bare, not as an obvious or distracting showpiece, but simply as the natural expression of the musicians and the song(s). There is a wonderful sense of pace and purpose to the playing, and as a result, to the performance as a whole - just the way the enthusiastic crowd heard it live.

In the same way that the leading edge of bass notes is slightly softened and rounded, so too are the high frequencies. Emmylou Harris's vocal on 'Love Hurts' (*Spyboy Grapevine* GRACD 241) soars crystal clear, but its occasional clashes with the dueting vocal are muted and more comfortable on the ear than with many systems,

increasing the fragile beauty of the track. Indeed, it's no surprise that both this and the Joe Jackson album were recorded live as the Monarchy excels in communicating the immediacy and pulse of the live performance. It's no slouch on studio albums,



extracting real poise and purpose from *Audible Sigh*, power and passion from the Telarc *Symphonic Dances* or the *Gladiator OST*, but its ability to portray life and energy revels in the opportunities offered by live recordings.

It isn't the most accurate amplifier at frequency extremes, as I've already suggested, at least not to the fact of the music. The distinctive astringence of Ricci's tone is muted and sweetened on the Menotti/Barber disc he recorded for Reference Recordings (RR-45). To the purist, this is no longer Ricci (be that good or bad), but the music survives, some would argue enhanced, and the results remain powerful readings of these two modern Concerti. The Monarchy owes its allegiance not to the fact of the playing, but to its spirit, to the emotional content of a piece rather than its technical aspects. Some will discard it out of hand, but for me it's a welcome reaffirmation of what listening to music at home should be all about. Most of us started out with records and music centres. The music was the

thing, the equipment simply secondary. The Monarchy SM70 re-establishes the primacy of the performance in no uncertain terms, and I welcome it with open arms.

Carefully used with the right speakers, this is an amp that performs way, way beyond its modest price tag. Those speakers will, almost by definition, be expensive: the cheapest I'd suggest would be the Living Voice Auditorium at two and half times the price of the amp. From there they just go up (and up) in price, but don't be shy - I suspect the Monarchy will scale the dizzy heights of partnering equipment with aplomb. For those upset by its utilitarian, sufficient to the task minimalism then there's a fancied version that I'll get to shortly. For those who have the speakers and want the music, look no further than the SM70. This little monster could be all the amp you will ever need. ▶+

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Class A Stereo Power Amp With Bridging Option
Inputs:	1 pair Single Ended RCA 1 pair Balanced XLR
Input Sensitivity:	1.35V
Power Output:	25 Watts/8 Ohms 75w as bridged monoblock
Dimensions (WxHxD):	230x110x320mm
Weight:	6.5Kg
Price:	£595

Distributor:

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Naim NAT 05 Tuner

by Paul Messenger

I like Radio. I listen to it a lot, partly, it must be admitted, because it keeps me company while working from home, and is a lot less distracting than the telly. And at its best, thanks to the sterling efforts of the BBC, Radio can be really good, as a top sound quality source irrespective of the programming. I spend most of the time with Radios 3 and 4, both of which maintain pretty high standards, though sadly most of the stations out there are much more of a sonic mess today, as the commercial operations (and Radio 1) use serious compression to sound as 'loud' as possible against the competition. But it's still the best medium around for getting acquainted with all sorts of new music - and free music too, once you've bought the tuner.

Just how much you should spend on a tuner, or for that matter on the aerial which feeds it, is debatable. It'll probably depend on how much time you spend with the radio on, how good the rest of the system is, and how important it is to you to get a close cosmetic and ergonomic match with the rest of the system. Some buyers opt for just a cheap tuner, like the unobtrusively evergreen little Denon, and these work capably enough, no question. But they're by no means the last word in radio reproduction either.

Some fifteen years ago I invested in a Naim NAT 01, partly because I was (and still am) using Naim amplification, but also because it's one heck of a good tuner. I've never regretted the investment, though I have become more and more conscious of its omission of any form of pre-set tuning, never mind remote control. No, I don't mind getting up, going over

and re-tuning the beast, any more than I mind changing vinyl discs, but we've come so far down the remote control road since the mid-1980s that it is mildly irksome, and also a distinct disincentive to 'channel hop' and explore the wavebands. That fact alone has had me seriously contemplating something like a Linn Kremlin instead.



I therefore got quite excited when I heard that Naim had brought out a new tuner to match the latest 5-series electronics, and that this new tuner was fully pre-settable and remote controllable, from the same NARCOM 2 handset that operates Naim's pre-amps and CD players. Had the time finally come to retire my trusty old NAT 01 in favour of the sleek new NAT 05?

With a pricetag of £725, this tuner is not cheap, and actually costs something like the NAT 01 did some fifteen years back. However, the NAT 01 is still available and now has a price tag approaching £2,000, which is a reminder that inflation continues to march on, whether you notice it or not.

The core difference is that the NAT 05 is a simpler, single-box device based on a 'bought-in' front end

which Naim sources from Philips. Everything else about the tuner is thoroughly Naim, including casework, power supplies, filtering and control software, but the bit that grabs the radio signal and turns it into an audio signal takes advantage of modern digital synthesis chips and mass production economies of scale, rather than using an analogue front end that must be painstakingly assembled and aligned from individual components.

The NAT05 package arrived with everything a Naim user needs to get up and running bar an aerial. Alongside the instruction manual was a leaflet extolling the virtues of antenna specialist Ron Smith, whose good work I can endorse from personal experience. Naim is keen to stress the importance of the aerial from a GIGO (garbage in, garbage out) perspective, and the rationale behind this is explained in more detail in the aerial boxout.

I lost my 23-element Ron Smith Galaxie to a succession of gales about seven years back, and am currently using something a little more modest put up by a very competent local contractor. But the whole question of what aerial to fit is a complex one, depending on where you live and what stations you want to receive. My current 7-element device suits my current situation very well, and isn't as vulnerable to high winds on a hill top site.

The NAT 05 is an FM-only device, which is a bit of a limitation, and something of a shame in my opinion, though I appreciate the hi-fi purist arguments that AM isn't really worth the effort ▶

▶ from a quality viewpoint. One might argue that introducing an FM-only design is taking something of a chance with the all-digital DAB services starting to proliferate. But Naim has always had a purist streak, and I'm sure this includes a profoundly negative attitude towards the compressed MPEG-2 audio that DAB carries,

THE DAB FACTOR

There's an obvious argument that £725 could buy you a DAB tuner instead of an FM one, and that would probably (depending on where you live) supply significantly more stations in "crystal clear digital sound" (Or none if you live in the New Forest! Ed.)

Both the BBC and the government would like to have us believe that the FM band is on the way out, and that we all ought to be embracing the new digital technology. And the implied threat to switch off FM transmitters in ten years time is certainly not much of an encouragement to spend serious money on an FM tuner in 2001. But I'm very sceptical that such a switch-off will ever become politically possible, for any government that wants to have the slightest chance of getting itself re-elected.

There are at least six FM radios of different types scattered around my house, never mind the car and Walkman. All get fairly regular use, and I've neither the desire - nor the slightest intention - to replace them all with DAB receivers, now or in the future.

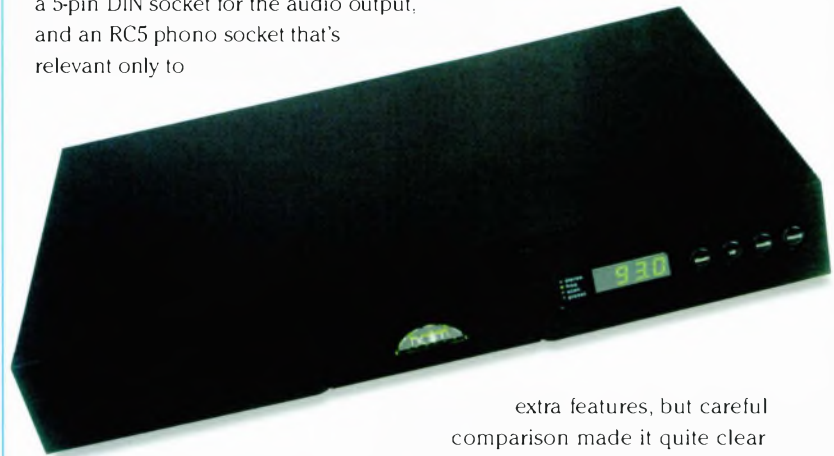
Taking a cool look here in 2001, it's impossible to predict the future of radio. Officialdom might favour DAB, but the consumer take-up is the ultimate determinant, and that has hitherto been very slow. Technical progress could make DAB tuners more mass market affordable, and more practical for portable users, but I wouldn't back its long term future down at Ladbrokes right now. And if you're looking for the best possible quality from an admittedly limited range of stations, and are in the position to extract a good quality signal from the ether, FM remains the way to go for the foreseeable future, at least in my opinion.

at bit rates which would make a Dolby Pro-Logic decoder blush.

The features and facilities consist of the basic collection that accompanies most digital synthesis tuners. Up to 99(!) pre-sets are available; tuning can be carried out in pre-set, scan or direct frequency entry modes, while the display is small but quite informative. Four buttons on both tuner and hand-set select mode, up, down and mono. Socketry is limited to an aerial input on a male 75-ohm co-axial socket, a 5-pin DIN socket for the audio output, and an RC5 phono socket that's relevant only to

uneven and harmonic distortion components (mostly odd) were somewhat higher than expected.

Sonically the NAT 05 is very easy on the ears, and basically pretty informative too. It doesn't get in the way of the music and delivers a good measure of expression and coherence with both music and speech. A little bit of me was hoping it would give my ageing NAT 01 a good run for its money, so that I could retire the latter and enjoy all the



multi-room installations. A good quality female 75-ohm plug is supplied to attach to your aerial downlead, and a DIN-to-DIN lead to connect to a Naim pre-amplifier

A tuner has two distinct areas of performance. Its RF performance is all about the way it copes with the ether - factors such as sensitivity and selectivity. Then there's the hi-fi sound quality side of things - how well does it communicate the music and the emotion, and so on - which is the prime focus of this review.

Using the NAT 01 as a reference point, the 05 delivered a pretty decent all round technical performance, showing some similarity in its very well tailored filtering, but otherwise clearly coming from a rather different mould. It's notably more sensitive though not quite as good at rejecting interference. Selectivity is a trifle

extra features, but careful comparison made it quite clear that 05 still falls some way short of providing the sort of reality transplant and overall delicacy of its bigger two-box brother. (It also says some very positive things about the NAT 01, which has never received any service attention.)

This didn't come as a particular surprise. I've moaned at Naim in the past about the lack of simple convenience features on its number one tuner, and the company has always said that it couldn't match the performance of its in-house analogue front end with a collection of digital synthesis chips. It doesn't claim to be able to do so with this plate of chips either, but does reckon that the new baby tuner does a pretty good job, all things considered, and I think that's a very fair assessment.

My 'reference' system for the direct comparison consisted of the company's top-of-the-line ▶

AERIALS/ANTENNAE

Why go to all the trouble and expense of putting up a damn great FM roof aerial, when your portable and personal radios function perfectly well using cheap indoor telescopics and head-phone leads?

Contrary to popular misconception, the prime purpose of a high gain roof aerial is not to get lots of signal strength, though that's a nice bonus. The really important factor is its ability to pick up a top quality clean signal that's as free as possible from mucky reflections. So get it as high up as possible, pointed in the right direction and with a clear view of the transmitter you most want to receive.

Conventional FM aerials are all roughly the same width, but come in dramatically different lengths according to the number of rods (or elements) in the array. These act a little like a zoom lens in photography: the more elements an antenna has, the greater its gain, but the narrower the angle over which it is effective.

A tight and narrow beam is a positive advantage in cutting down on unwanted reflections and the multi-path distortion that results, and the high gain, multi-element aerial was the obvious solution in the far off days when the BBC was the only game in town, and distributed its (then) three national networks from specific transmitters designed to service specific

geographic areas.

Today's scenario is rather different, with all manner of local and commercial stations (and Radio 1) broadcasting from transmitters separated geographically from the original BBC sites. Nowadays, if you go for an aerial with very high gain, you may find it struggling to pull in stations whose transmitters are outside the narrow cone along the direction in which it's pointing.

The best of all worlds is to combine a high-gain multi-element antenna with a remotely driven rotator. The majority of us settle for something a little simpler and less costly, chosen as a good overall match to site and listening requirements.

▶ NAC 52/NAP 500 pre-/power amp combo driving a pair of Tannoy Dimension TD12s, and the NAT01 showed audibly less top-to-bottom timesmear, a subtly sweeter, tauter and more transparent top end, and a subjectively enhanced dynamic range. Reducing the analytical quality of the system by substituting a NAIT 5 amp and Rega Ara speakers somewhat narrows the satisfaction gap between the two tuners, though the distinctions are still quite audible - as is usually the case, the source is the core factor.

But that isn't the whole story. The remote facility on the NAT 05 is rather more than just a convenience feature. In actuality, it makes the radio medium significantly more accessible, and that's a very worthwhile bonus indeed. If I'm listening to the radio and the programme ends, or a piece of music comes on that I don't like (there's far too much opera on Radio 3 for my personal taste), with the



hands-on NAT 01 I'll either hit the pre-amp's mute button or go over to CD. With NAT 05 it's a simple matter to see what Radio 4 is doing, and if that fails to grab me I'll probably check out Mark and Lard over on Radio 1. I've even assigned pre-set 2 to Radio 2, which people say is much improved, so I might give that a try one day (though old prejudices die hard).

In overall character the NAT 05 sounds rather closer to a typical Japanese budget tuner than its 01 brother, probably reflecting their common usage of digital synthesis tuning, though in audio, communication and fatigue terms the Naim tuner

is altogether less strident and more mellifluous and coherent, and does a significantly better job of focusing one's attention on the music. In the final analysis the NAT 05 might not match its elder two-box brother, but take the price and features into account and you've still got a very impressive FM radio with a fine all round performance. ➤

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	FM Tuner
Tuning:	Digital Synthesis
Pre-sets:	99
Output Connector:	5pin DIN
Dimensions (WxHxD):	432x58.4x301mm
Price:	£725-00

Manufacturer:

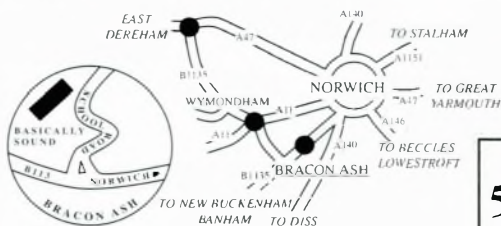
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The NHT Model 1.5 Loudspeaker

by Roy Gregory

Back in Issue 5, I got to play with the NHT 2.9, a serious stab at a wide bandwidth speaker for under £2000. With a -3dB point at 26Hz the slab-like NHT offers something all too audibly different from its slim but deep dimensions - a performance which does much to justify NHT's claim to offer their customers outstanding value for money. But if the 2.9 can lean heavily on its extended bottom end to seduce potential purchasers, what about the cheaper (and smaller) products in the range? Enter NHT's Model 1.5, a compact, two-way stand mounter that shares the distinctive angled baffle and shiny finish of its larger brethren, without the benefits of their obvious material value for money. The 2.9 is clearly a lot of speaker at the price; the 1.5 equally obviously isn't. Which begs the question, who is going to buy it? At \$600 plus stands it's up against some serious competition: the benchmark B&W CDM1, recent recipient of a serious dose of Nautilus technology, if you are looking at stand mounted designs; or any number of floorstanders if that's your wont.

In fact, quality stand mounted speakers are increasingly becoming the hardest sell in hi-fi. Not only do they have to justify the extra cost and aesthetic encumbrance of a stand, but all those slim floorstanders seem to promise so much more (especially bass) for the money. With more and more speakers having to double up as surround sound front channels, floorstanders seem the obvious choice.

However, as is so often the case, in hi-fi as in life, what's obvious isn't necessarily what's best. Slim floor-standing cabinets offer large internal volumes which translate into higher efficiency or wider bandwidth, at the expense of larger panels in the cabinet. Bracing those panels is a difficult as well as costly exercise, which means that although sub thousand pound floorstanders are big on quantity, quality all too often suffers. That extra bass comes at a heavy price, paid in terms of pitch definition and muddled and congested midrange.



Which brings us back to stand mounted designs, the quality option when music (rather than the odd explosion) matters. So, assuming that our potential purchaser is, almost by definition, a discerning type, what are they going to see when they take a closer look at the NHT 1.5? Well, it's a smallish box, with a fashionably (and sensibly) narrow front baffle. As I've already mentioned, that baffle is angled, pointing the drivers in towards the listener, and providing an irregular internal enclosure which should help prevent standing waves. Less obviously, it also means that the cabinet is built from six panels where the only two the same size are the top and bottom, and they are irregular in shape. This arrangement will act to spread the resonant signature of the cabinet, preventing dominant modes muddying the aural waters. Does it make a difference? Producing cabinets in this shape is an expensive option, so NHT clearly believe it's worthwhile when quality counts. Tellingly, they don't bother to do it on their AV orientated products.

The cabinet is finished in a gloss laminate which is available in black or mahogany. It's tough and provides a degree of additional stiffness to the panels, however, it does preclude the use of curved edges. NHT have recognised the danger of diffractive interference at high frequencies by off-setting the tweeter and placing a foam strip between it and the sharp, outer edge of the baffle. The drive units

▶ themselves are built entirely to NHT's specifications by established suppliers such as SEAS, and are engineered to minimise crossover requirements. The 5" plastic coned bass-mid unit is positioned above the 1" aluminium dome tweeter, again off-setting it in the baffle as well as providing a degree of time alignment for the drivers when viewed from the listening seat. There is a grille which is surprisingly inaudible, but it's built on a bent wire frame whose curved edges are so wildly at odds with the rest of the 1.5 that it's an aesthetic embarrassment best discarded at the earliest opportunity.

Round the back you'll find a few more surprises. For a start, the speaker is single wired, but don't let that put you off. Bi-wiring is far from the universally desirable thing that many companies would have you believe. Single wiring cuts down the variables and means that the listener is actually more likely to hear the product as the designer intended. It cuts out the bi-amping option, but with the 1.5's easy load and reasonable sensitivity that should be unnecessary anyway. The other surprise is the absence of a reflex port. Most small speakers these days choose the reflex route, allowing the designer to 'voice' the product to seem much bigger than it is. "My! What a lot of bass from such a tiny box!" The problem is that all that 'bass' is the result of tipping up the output just before it dies, neatly negating the benefits of the stand mounted format. Not all reflex designs take that route, and what might be considered acceptable at budget prices clearly isn't once you reach the £600 mark,

but it's one to watch out for. The NHT's infinite baffle adds extension at the expense of weight (and efficiency), but more importantly it doesn't compromise the clarity and articulation of the speaker as a whole.

In fact, which ever way you look at the NHT 1.5s they are about as far removed from the simple box stuffed with



a couple of drivers approach as it's possible to get. Their rationale and attention to detail is just as highly developed as the 2.9's, which goes a long way towards explaining why I've achieved such consistently good and musically enjoyable results from them, with such a wide range of partnering equipment. In fact, the 1.5s have done sterling service with the Naim 5 Series, the Densen Beat and the Roksan Kandy electronics to name but a few. But to get the best from them requires a bit of care over set-up, extending to the choice of ancillaries.

Like all stand mounted speakers, the choice of support is critical to getting the best out of the 1.5s. UK distributors Recoton recommend an

open frame stand and supplied a pair of four post Apollos. I used these with great success, placing the speakers about eight inches out from the rear wall and the recommended two thirds of the listening distance apart. This places them unnaturally close together,

but it works, giving the sound an unusual combination of substance and a wide and open soundstage. Later experiments using the Yamamura Churchill roller platforms on top of the Garrick stone stands proved to be even better (albeit at a price!) with deeper, cleaner low frequencies and a more natural tonal palette, but we're getting ahead of ourselves.

Cable wise, I opted for NAC A5 as often as not, its smooth

and rounded top end suiting the NHT's metal dome tweeter, while the speaker's lean and controlled bass could handle the extra padding down below. Chord's Rumour also worked well, offering a lighter touch, but Nordost's Flatline Gold is definitely to be avoided with the 1.5s! As mentioned earlier, the little NHTs got hung on the end of a whole host of electronics, but throughout the listening (once they'd run in), their character and contribution proved to be remarkably consistent.

The Model 1.5's are all about clarity and the dynamic/rhythmic energy in the music. They tell you when and how the notes happen, laying out the music's form and structure. Listening to 'Cloth of Life' (Bill Malonee and the Vigilantes of Love *Audible Sigh* Compass 7 4295 2) the whole song is propelled by the drumming of Kevin Heuer, the way he puts extra ▶

▶ weight and attack into chosen bars, picking up and emphasising the otherwise steady tempo beneath the multiple guitars. The whole mass underpins and supports the clear and telling vocal, working to create a whole that's much greater than the sum of the parts.



Let the disc run and the speakers effortlessly upshift to the far faster 'She Walks on Roses'. There's no rhythmic slurring or any sense that the speaker is storing energy for release at a time of its own choosing (which is exactly what happens when a designer hypes the bass output of a small cabinet). Again, the drumming is surprisingly solid, providing the essential foundation that prevents the clashing guitars, mandolin, voice and backing vocals from collapsing into a noisy mess. The bass might lack the weight and visceral impact of much bigger and extended speakers (like NHT's own 2.9) but it is surprisingly satisfying and musically correct, clearing the way for that wonderfully communicative mid-band. The top to bottom sense of organisation and coherence suggest good phase coherence, underlined by the perfect timing of the cymbal

count out at the end of the track, and the 1.5s unusual sensitivity to absolute phase.

The result is the ability to convey the music's sense of purpose; its tendency if you like. Songs are delivered with emotional impact (assuming it's there to be had), performances with their drive and chemistry intact. And if that sounds like a recipe for a rock and pop speaker, then let's not forget the importance of structure and intent in classical and jazz. The beauty of the Tacet's recording of Corelli's *Concerto Grosso op.6 no.7* (The Tube Tacet 74) is that you get all five movements in a eight and a half minutes, the whole form laid out almost like a model. The NHT's get the space around and above, and the interrelationship between the instruments just right, building line upon line and theme after theme so that the beautiful symmetry of the piece is made completely comprehensible - even to those who normally eschew classical music.

However, the Tacet disc does hint at the NHT's shortcomings, and they are reinforced by listening to *11, 12, 13 Live in Melbourne* (Dead Reckoning DEAR 0019). The sound is incredibly immediate and direct, but it carries a subtle but consistent tang. Keiran Kane's impromptu rhythm accompaniment on 'While I Was Loving You' displays the by-now expected perfect timing, and an almost ghostly element of detail as his hand moves in a rotary motion (this on the end of the Levinsons - I'm sorry but it had to be done!). But it also shows a slight chopping of the note's tail, a harmonic crispness in effect. It's subtle, and clearly the speakers centre notes just fine, but the harmonic decay and instrumental identity that comes from a speaker like the B&W CDM1NT is missing. It's an effect that is exacerbated by poor set-up, and the height of the speakers is critical.

You need to listen level to the bass-mid driver. Any lower and the sound gets forward and forced. Also, stand choice matters, and this is where the Garricks came into their own, making the most of what the NHTs had to give without slurring their timing.

If you want to know what these speakers are all about listen no further than Joe Jackson's *Summer In The City* (Sony SK89237). The piano stabs with poise and purpose, the cannonade of drums are spot on in their timing and patterns. The music is crisp and direct, the bass firm and supportive rather than overweight. These are speakers for people who value musical access, communication and clarity over absolute tonal correctness; drama and the performance over the last ounce of harmonic decay. If that sounds like you then don't worry, if this was live you'd be applauding before the notes have a chance to die away. ➤

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

System Type	2-way Infinite Baffle
Drive Units	1" Aluminium Domed Tweeter 5" Polypropylene Mid- Bass
Bandwidth	26Hz-26KHz ±3dB
Sensitivity	87dB/W
Impedance	8ohms nominal
Power Handling	150 Watts
Dimensions (HxWxD)	420 x 180 x 260mm
Weight	4.5 kilos each
Finishes	High Gloss laminate, Black or Mahogany.
Price	£600

Distributor:

Recoton
Tel. (44)(0)1367 252605
Fax. (44)(0)1367 252614

Manufacturer:

Now Hear This (NHT)
Fax. (00)1-707-747-1252
Net. www.nhthifi.com

You might well ask whether we really need yet another expensive high-end cartridge. The answer has to be yes if it comes from Miyabi. At first sight, for those of you with long memories, the cartridge might recall the Krell and Cello cartridges of the late 80s; and you'd be right, as the same man, Haruo Takeda, was responsible for both. It shares the same aluminium body and short cantilever, and is of a similar high mass, 13.5 grams. All this points to it being happy mated to a high mass tone arm. It embraces alnico magnets, which helps explain its weight, and has an aluminium cantilever fitted with a line contact stylus. It comes mounted in a small cylindrical oak box, sans instructions or any technical information. Because it is completely enclosed by its aluminium body one cannot indulge in cartridge voyeurism; nudity is not an option.

There are obvious concerns over alignment when confronted with a cylindrical cartridge, especially when it's also got a short cantilever. In fact, they turned out to be the least of my problems. The cartridge comes with two pairs of different length mounting hardware. What both sets have in common is their slot head bolts and circular, slotless nuts. Given the deep recesses into which these nuts go, you end up performing a delicate balancing act involving the cartridge resting on a nut supported on the flat of an appropriately sized allen key, while at the same time you attempt to align it with a headshell slot, and do up the bolt with a screwdriver. Exactly! Once it was safely mounted in my Well Tempered Signature tonearm, complete with a full complement of counterweights to accommodate its considerable mass, the cartridge body's flat front allowed both a decent approximation for alignment, and an easier view of the cantilever for the fine tuning. With the tracking set at 1.9 grams I was ready to play. One word of caution, the cartridge is very sensitive to azimuth alignment but not to tracking weight.

The Miyabi Moving-Coil Cartridge A Lesson In Japanese Elegance

by Peter Russell



It seems to have an envelope of between 1.9 to 2.2gms I settled eventually on 2 grams, as recommended by the manufacturer. By the way, it comes with the neatest stylus guard you could ever wish to see. The guard is really an extension of the body seen in plan. With two lugs that fit into the underside mounting holes of the cartridge it clips into position providing total protection for the stylus. Other cartridge manufacturers should take note.

So why should you go out and spend \$2,500 on this cartridge? Because it is so musical! Most of the time it was partnered by the Phonocube in the 47

Labs. system, which was a match made in heaven. With the added gain through the 'cube, the Ensemble speakers were able to present music as a rounded and complete performance, lifting the system as a whole onto another level. The reason why the Miyabi is so at home with the Phonocube and 90db sensitive speakers is because the 'cube is a current amplification device which means that the Miyabi, with an output of 0.25mv and internal impedance of 4 ohms has much more gain than the Grasshopper despite its higher output.

More conventional options were available in the shape of a Mark ▶

▶ Levinson 25S, as well as the Counterpoint Claritas tube phono stage. In both cases the cartridge retained its essential character. With the Levinson it lost some of its energy and leading edge attack but retained its detail and emotional honesty, whilst with the Claritas it was able to present remarkable micro dynamics, preserving the leading edge of notes and their tonal signature, whilst at the same time creating a great soundstage. With the Phono Cube loading was irrelevant, whilst with the Mark Levinson it seemed to be happy with 100ohms and 300ohms in the Claritas. Whatever phono stage was used, the Miyabi had a naturalness and ease of presentation I have rarely heard. It was only too easy to forget the equipment. With the lights down low and Billy Holiday on the turntable, I was there!

With the Miyabi there was no particular characteristic that captured your attention. Being used to the Grasshopper, the Miyabi came as a bit of a surprise; it was so smooth, to the point that initially one thought that there was a loss of detail and high end attack, only to realise that it was presenting a beautifully balanced frequency range. There was none of the high-end lift and pseudo musical sparkle associated with so many high end moving coil cartridges. Nor did it present that mid range smear so often described as 'musical'.

Instead it relied on being able to recreate the full harmonic envelope to give recordings body and warmth. 60's opera recordings took on a new lease of life, the voices gaining much needed body and timbral complexity.

Forced to position it in the panoply of high-end cartridges one would have to say that it embraces the lyrical smoothness of the Transfiguration with the micro dynamics and detail of some of the Clearaudio's. Not that I am trying to make comparisons, just positioning

some of its most obvious characteristics. If you are looking for audio pyrotechnics, needle like instrumental positioning or a scalpel that pares away the music then don't look to the Miyabi.

The word Miyabi translates as elegance, and at its most obvious level it



is an adequate description of the product's sound. With its overtones of naturalness, balance and restraint it captures the core of the cartridge's qualities. However, like so many Japanese concepts there is no direct or simple English translation. To understand what the cartridge does it is useful to explore the cultural meaning of the word in more depth. Here we are talking about the perfection, in Japanese art, of both form and colour. Applied to music this expresses the cartridge's ability to present both the form of the performance with all its structure, rhythms and melody, together with the timbre and complex tonal colours of the instruments in a unified balance. The word refinement springs to mind as it unravels the more complex orchestral passages. There is a more profound cultural meaning here to do with an awareness of the transitory nature of perfection and the ephemeral quality of experience, so often found in the best Japanese woodblock prints by the early Hiroshige.

Listening to the Miyabi made one forget about the equipment or the system. It made so few demands on the listener that one was able to concentrate on the performance. I had to force myself to engage the Left brain, to consciously stop enjoying myself and analyse what I was hearing. It seemed a shame to have to dissect the experience, as if the very act of analysis removed some of the musical qualities and detracted from the wholeness of the performance.

The Miyabi is not for everyone. There are those listeners who will want more insight into the individual elements, the parts that create the musical whole. There are those who will want more authority, or a more vivid viewpoint. Cartridges are, after all, transducers, the most characterful of all audio components. But if you fall for its particular and considerable virtues, then the Miyabi is the best I've heard. Ultimately it really depends on whether you want a cartridge to grab you by the musical balls or tempt you into submission with its charms. If you know of one that does both you can get my telephone number from the editor!



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Low Output Moving-Coil
Stylus Tip:	PA Ogura 'line contact'
Magnetic Structure:	Alnico
Coil Material:	6n Copper
Cantilever:	Aluminium Tube
Output:	0.25mv (3.5cm/sec, 1kHz)
Tracking force:	2g
Compliance:	11cu
Internal Impedance:	4 Ohms
Mass:	13g
Price:	£2495

Distributor:

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Swedish Audio Technology CD-Fix CD Player

by Chris Binns

Believe me when I say that I thought long and hard before printing this review.

Once the copy was in it became apparent that our findings are seriously at odds with the general consensus. That doesn't worry me. We call it the way we hear it. However, what does concern me is the possibility that this machine is faulty. Normally that's a problem that we'd overcome by ordering a replacement, but in this instance the protracted burn-in period left us with insufficient time to do so.

We sat back, waiting for it to get better, but it didn't. In fact, we waited so long that we arrived at the point where we couldn't even delay the review without leaving blank pages in the magazine. Thankfully, importer Sounds Of Music are sufficiently confident in the machine to trust its ability to change our minds. So for now, consider this a first instalment, to be continued once we lay our hands on another sample. Until then, the jury is out! Ed.

Every product that arrives for review is usually chosen for a reason. Maybe it uses some weird and wonderful technology, or maybe it's the latest in a line of successful products, basking in the reflected glow of its extended family. Or maybe you just like the look of it.... They normally arrive with a surge of expectation, which either builds or starts to dribble away as soon as you release the unit from its packaging. There is also another angle to the selection process. Having recently revitalised my turntable set up, the gulf between analogue and digital replay in my system seems to have widened

considerably as a result, sparking off interest in replacing my CD player.

Having enjoyed my time with the extremely capable and unflappable Advantage amplifiers, I was seriously looking forward to the arrival of other, more affordable product from the pen of designer Mike Bladelius, particularly if it was a CD player.

Swedish Audio Technology is the manufacturing arm of the Bladelius Design Group.



an electronics design consultancy who have done impressive work for a number of companies, including Advantage. On that basis, the SAT products (there's also an Amplifix integrated amp) should prove interesting, coming as they do straight from the horse's mouth so to speak, and at a more affordable price.

But first things first. The Advantage product will go down in history as one of the most awkward and demanding amplifiers that I have ever reviewed, for one reason – it took weeks to warm up / burn in. More frustratingly, disconnect the power and you were back to square one, with a performance that was frankly, pants. So believe me, I took every precaution possible with the SAT, particularly as the instruction book

made a point of saying that the machine would not sound its best for eight weeks. So that's what it got, prior to the first listening session.

Which unfortunately, despite my expectations, was sadly disappointing. The CD-Fix failed to deliver on its promise, and in fact, the more I listened, the less it delivered. One of the hardest tasks confronting a reviewer is when it finally dawns on you that you are dealing with a product that you don't actually get on with. You work at it, tweak it, sit it on a selection of supports, anything to ward off the final acceptance of the inevitable - but there's no escape. Sooner or later you have to face the reality of trying to decide whether this is a product which simply doesn't suit you, or one which is genuinely flawed. Removing your personal prejudices from the equation is never easy, but to a certain extent that comes with the territory of being a reviewer.

Outwardly, there's nothing at all to suggest the conundrum that lurks within the SAT's confident exterior. Although physically large, the CD-Fix stops just short of imposing. Its substantial dimensions are echoed in its considerable weight and solid feel. No clanky casework here; the smooth lines and simple fascia radiate graceful elegance. In a world full of overdressed products that spend a lot to look that cheap, the SAT is a refreshing example of the strength of classic simplicity. At £1500 it looks like a class act, an impression that's

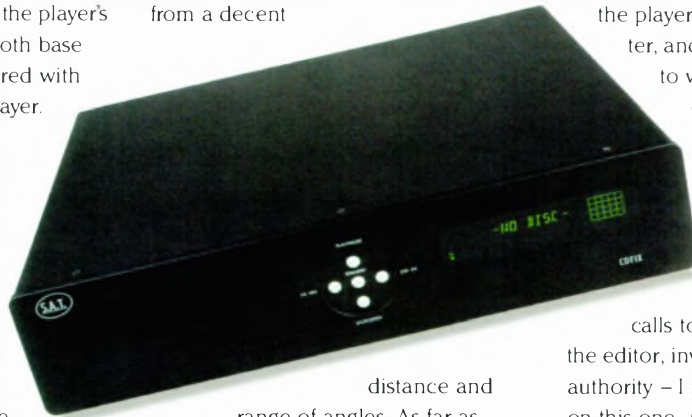
► reinforced by the rear panel with its full complement of balanced and single-ended digital and analogue outputs. Controls and functions are pretty slick, and the CD loading mechanism feels reassuringly solid and smooth in operation.

Twelve machine screws hold the heavy casework in place, remove them and some of the reasons for the player's weight become apparent. Both base and lid are extensively covered with a thick bitumous damping layer. The apparently sparsely populated interior creates a false impression, as the circuit boards make extensive use of quite densely packed surface mount technology. There would seem to be considerable attention paid to the power supply, as there are two outwardly identical mains transformers that might suggest separate supplies for the digital and analogue sections. The transport is sourced from Sony.

The SAT's other claim to fame is its inclusion of the latest technological buzz, up-sampling, which theoretical converts the 16bit data stream derived from CD to 24bit resolution. The differences between this and over-sampling are actually smaller than its advocates would have you believe, but this is not the time or place to have that debate, and frankly, I don't really care. If it sounds good so be it; if it doesn't then all the up-sampling in the world is no reason to buy it. Suffice to say, the CD-Fix operates with up-sampling as standard, although it can be deactivated if you so choose. One word of warning, the up-sampler will also effect the digital outputs, as I discovered when trying to record a CD, and ended up with white noise, so make sure you disable it if you wish to use an external DAC or recorder without 24bit capability.

The CD-Fix arrives with a superbly

crafted remote control, hewn from solid aluminium, not too big and heavy, but suggestive of machinery with a far higher price-tag. Its crisply tactile buttons echo the discrete controls on the player's front panel, and allow you to drive both the CD and matching amplifier. And, good news for all us lounge lizards - for once it will work from a decent



distance and range of angles. As far as the finer points of the circuitry are concerned, prior experience with the Advantage amplifiers had prepared me for the complete lack of additional information. Mr Bladelius clearly likes to play his cards close to his chest.

Back to its performance – so far, not what I was hoping for at all. Still, no need to panic, we all know there are plenty of products that demand an almost religious devotion to detail in order to unlock their true potential. All I needed to do was find the right combination of cables/mains lead/support and partnering equipment for all to become sweetness and light.

And I tried. Really, I did - there had to be some key to unlock this player's potential. I eventually settled on a Clearlight platform and cables as offering the best arrangement, but the differences were hardly night and day. Regardless of partnering amplification (and there was a cast of thousands, including my Primary mono-blocks, the Crimson

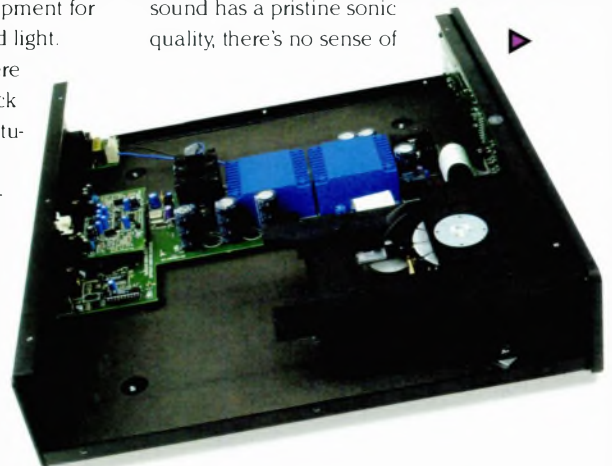
640s, DNM, the SAT Ampliflex and the Chord CPM3300) the resulting sound was consistently limp and disappointing. My recent experiences with both the Primary amps and the Crimson 640s had shown that neither were lacking in the dynamic wallop department, so something was clearly amiss. Nothing I tried was able to rid

the player of its underlying character, and at this point I started to worry. Self-doubt is an essential element in the reviewer's psyche, a key part of the mind-set.

In a situation like this it can easily take over, and did. What was I doing wrong? Cue calls to the distributor, calls to the editor, invocations to a higher authority – I needed a second opinion on this one. A visit from RG served to confirm that my judgement was essentially correct, and he also indulged in a fair amount of tweaking with a similar lack of success, so here goes.

On the positive side, the SAT is a refined, detailed and full-bodied performer. Its sound is unusually solid and stable; a characteristic reminiscent of high-end machines costing considerably more. The bass is extended and weighty, and the overall cleanliness of the sound is at least one thing that it has in common with the Advantage amps.

But, and here's the rub, although the sound has a pristine sonic quality, there's no sense of



► musical coherence and communication. All that detail is a waste of time if you can't make sense of the message it's supposed to convey. Playing the Vaughan-Williams *Fantasia on a theme of Thomas Tallis* (the EMI/Barbirolli recording) was a strangely disjointed experience. There was a complete lack of suspense to the opening, with none of the building tension that precedes the sustained, hanging violin part, leading to the release of the first theme. As a result, the music lost the emotional intensity that so sets this performance apart.

What I'm talking about here is musical structure, the critical element that separates music from noise. It's the fundamental structure of a piece that both holds it together and allows the performers emotional and expressive freedom. Without it, the performance literally loses its sense of purpose. The SAT introduces a dry, mechanical quality to proceedings that strangles any sense of musical flow. Ironically, the formal nature of classical music allows you to subconsciously fill in some of the gaps, but it can't replace the missing humanity. You might think that the processed, mechanical effect might be less apparent on synthetic music, but the reverse is actually true. With no predictable structure to fall back on, the musical patchwork of so many modern recordings loses all sense, becoming a disorganised and pointless jumble.

Prime example of this phenomenon is the first album from Moloko - *Do You Like My Tight Sweater*. This disc should demonstrate just what modern music technology can achieve in the hands of people with some degree of intelligence and musical ability, rather than the usual collection of invertebrates that use it, misguidedly thinking they are making music. Moloko engage, shock, and surprise with effortlessly inventive samples and mixes, to produce music

that is both entertaining and provocative - unless you play it on the SAT. The CD-Fix reduces it to a dynamically barren collection of unrelated noises with a bit of singing on the top.

Disabling the up-sampler (using the front panel control pad) re-introduces a degree of musical organisation, but it does so at the expense of the detail and



refinement that are, otherwise, the player's greatest strengths. And the differences aren't really that big anyway.

Running comparisons with other machines quickly reveal the SAT's shortcomings. I never thought my Meridian 508.24 would sound like the soul of rhythmic sophistication - timing and bottom end dynamics have never been its strong point. But in terms of overall musical coherence, it sounded positively flamboyant compared to the CD Fix. Good job I didn't have a Naim CD player hanging about.

This limp and disorganised performance seems all the more surprising given the player's robust chassis and clean good looks. In fact, in this respect it rather reminds me of the early TEAC "shoe-box" transports, with their dry, robotic and uninvolved sound. In many ways they summed up exactly what I always felt was wrong with CD. Now, over a decade later, we are seeing machines with a degree of musical and rhythmic capability that seemed impossible to imagine back then. While Rega can create the thoroughly enjoyable Planet, a machine that gets the basics right even if it is a little bit rough round the edges, and sell it for £500 or so, the SAT misses the

point. All that refinement is wasted.

It could be that I just haven't found the magic formula, it could be that this machine is faulty (although there's no evidence to suggest that this is the case). On the other hand, the designer might have simply become so obsessed with the details that he lost sight of

the music as a whole. Whatever the reason, I found the SAT disappointing. What

I was hoping for was a player that advanced the music making capabilities of CD at a reasonable price.

What I got was something of a backward step. Hey - I'm only one listener, complete with all my prejudices and preconceptions, but I do enjoy my music. Unfortunately the CD-Fix wouldn't let me do that. ►+

So, that is what we heard. It remains to be seen whether our views will change. Watch this space! Ed.

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	CD player with built-in up-sampling
Conversion:	Burr Brown PCM 1704K DAC's
Transport:	Sony
Outputs:	1pr Analogue - balanced XLR 1pr Analogue - Single ended RCA 1x Digital - balanced AES/EBU 1x Digital - co-axial phono
Dimensions (WxHxD):	430x10 x380mm
Weight:	10Kg
Price:	£1500

Distributor:

Sounds of Music
Tel. (44)(0) 1892 539245
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Net. www.sounds-of-music.co.uk



B&W CDM1NT

by Pete Christie

It's funny how some things just seem to have been around for ever; Eric Clapton, the LS3/5a, skateboards, the B&W CDM1. The CDM1? Well, okay, I know it's not as long in the tooth as the others, especially Eric, but despite its youth it's already heading for classic status, which makes all the difference. Ever since my return to hi-fi retail, it seems to have been a constant companion, along with its shorter, squatter brother, the CDM2, one of those reliable products that you reach for when the going gets tough. Which is kind of odd, all things considered.

The CDMs appeared just when the current fashion for slim floor-standing speakers was really taking hold. I mean, look at it from the customer's perspective: those floorstanders just offer so much more. More bass, more speaker, more WAF (due to the absence of associated scaffolding), it's obvious that they've got to be better, right? Wrong! If that was so, then the CDM1s would never have sold, never have become the classics they are, and I wouldn't be writing this review. The fact that they've survived, and prospered, against all the odds certainly says something about them. Hopefully, I'll explain what.

The original CDM1 was a small, and let's be honest, weird looking speaker. It's dumpy dimensions weren't helped by the seriously radiused edges, and the tweeter 'wart' stuck on the sloped top baffle looked plain odd. They weren't cheap, either, and add to that the cost of some decent stands and you're looking at a hard sell. In fact, it was the squarer, cheaper

and more conventional CDM2s that started the ball rolling, but once I'd got people interested in those, then it wasn't hard to convince them of the benefits of the 1. Here was a speaker with all the forthright fun and honesty of the baby 601, but with a healthy dose of added refinement and some useful extra wallop.



The SE versions added a metal dome tweeter in place of the originals' soft plastic unit, which caused a bit of a hiccup until we realised that the new model needed a lot more running in. Whether or not it got it depended on the shop doing the demonstrating, and for a while it seemed like the CDMs might be entering that natural decline in sales that leads to the introduction of a new model. After all, all the attention (and most of the marketing budget) was focussed on the wow factor of the

new Nautilus 800 series. For a while you couldn't open a mag without seeing acres of curved cabinet and strangely aquatic tweeters. Meanwhile, I was happily continuing to sell the CDM1, holding my breath and waiting for the axe to fall. Only it didn't. What turned up instead was a revised and developed version of the speaker called the CDM1NT. Nautilus Technology that stands for, and one look tells you where it's gone.

It's a CDM1, Captain Nemo, but not as we know it! The CDM1NT is only the tip of the iceberg. The CDM series has developed into a complete range, including centre channel and surround options. Along the way they've shed the CDM2 (shame) but sorted out the floorstanding CDM7, as well as adding the top of the range CDM9 reviewed by CB a couple of issues ago. Oh, and they've redeployed a bit of the advertising budget to support the new range, so expect to see them around, not that they're easy to miss. The previously dumpy CDM1 has grown one of those fancy, fishy tweeter modules, all sleek and tapered. Fitting it has meant altering the slope of the cabinet top, making it much more streamlined, and boy does it make a difference. Maybe I've just got used to it, but the tweeter finally looks like it's supposed to be there, not just an afterthought. It makes the whole speaker much more attractive and finished looking, and that's never a bad thing.

In fact, the CDM1NT could almost be used as a "how-to" guide for building a high-tech mini-monitor. ►

► It's got a good, solid cabinet built out of nice thick MDF, with those rounded off edges to help stop diffraction. It's reflex ported, for reasonable efficiency and dynamics from such a small box, and the port itself has received a dose of the 'Flowport' dimples developed on the Nautilus speakers. It's got a fancy mid/bass driver, which is built from Kevlar, and it's bright yellow so that everybody knows about it. And let's not forget the fancy time-aligned and mechanically de-coupled tweeter with its sensibly minimal frontal area and clever rear chamber. Did I forget anything? Oh yes, the bi-wiring terminals and the obligatory WAF pale wood finish ("Oh darling, they're so Scandinavian, so chic..."). They're also available in 'Red' and 'Black' wood finishes for those who don't shop at IKEA. And to take a pair home sir? That'll cost you £750.

Then of course, there's stands. These should be of the heavy, filled variety, and around 23", which is taller than you expect. B&W do make an elegant, twin column affair with streamlined aerofoil section uprights (continuing the fishy theme, I guess), but at £200 they aren't cheap, and there are plenty of more cost effective alternatives from the various architectural iron-mongers out there. Otherwise, you could do what I did and opt for a pair of the superb Garrick stone stands, which work out even more expensive but are worth every penny. Go on, you know your new speakers deserve it.

For once, set-up was simply a case of doing what we always do, the CDM1 being so familiar. No nasty surprises here. I expected them to take an age to run in (they did!), and I expected them to need a good foot of air behind them to sound at their best (that tool). In fact, how near or far they go from

the back wall will depend on room, system and bass balance. That is, the trade off between weight and clarity. The CDM1NT will actually survive surprisingly well if you shove it back against the wall, but if you're doing it for extra bass rather than space reasons, you're probably playing with the wrong speaker. Try the 7NT instead, sir: probably more your cup of tea.

Partnering equipment was basically the usual suspects, but also included a pair of French fancies, the Helios Stargate and the Lavardin IS (which isn't leaving my grasp until the importer turns up with bolt croppers

One of my favourite test tracks is 'Penguins' from the Lyle Lovett album *I Love Everybody*. Clear as a bell, it can begin to shout at you, especially at high volumes. At least it does on the SEs. The NTs are altogether better behaved when the going gets tough.

Now, some of this is to do with the amplifier doing the driving. The CDM1NT might look cuddly (in a fishy sort of way), but appearances can jolly well be deceptive. A quick squint at the old specifications reveals an efficiency of 88dB and an impedance that drops to 4.6 Ohms. Ohh errr, missus. Not the kind of thing that today's cost



and a couple of very large friends). And being that it's not every day that you get access to a complete Mark Levinson system, I couldn't resist carting the little CDM1NTs round to the Editor's, just to see how much you can really get out of them. Because I could, alright? And let's face it, you would too!

The first and most obvious thing about the new NTs compared to the old SEs is a cleaner, more detailed treble. This is most obvious when you hit them hard with a lot of voice.

conscious amplification likes at all - oh dear me no! B&W reckon a 50 Watt minimum when it comes to driving the CDM1NTs, and I think on balance that they need to be a fairly stiff 50 Watts at that. The wonderful Lavardin IS with its wonderfully healthy 30 odd Watts, was up to the job, but only just, and whilst the quality was also wonderful, I did find myself ►

▶ keeping an eye on the volume control. Whether the NTs are slightly easier to drive, or whether this is just down to the superior tweeter I can't say, but whatever the reason, I like the results.

If you want to lay your hands on a nice, varied selection of



superb recordings then look no further than the *Fi/Analogue Productions Sampler*. Nearly 80 minutes of the best. The Lavardin/CDMINT combination took to them like a duck to water. Janis Ian's track 'Breaking Silence' is spare but intense, with really focussed vocals right at the centre of proceedings. Listening with the INTs I could hear all the Janis Ians doing the singing. She starts on her own, but the producer lays overdubs on, one after another, until you've got a whole chorus of singers, all Janis Ians. Mind you, the harmonies are spot on! The space around the vocal and the sharp intrusions of the rest of the band are central to the song's impact. Driven by the IS, the speakers spread instruments far and wide, way outside the speakers themselves. The dynamic clout was all present and correct too, which brings me to another thing. The bass on the CDMINT goes a bit deeper,

a bit cleaner than it used to. We're only talking a shade here, but its interesting how the improvements at one end of the scale are mirrored at the other.

Feed them with some real quality power, and you can drive them as hard as you like without things taking a turn for the nasty. The big Mark Levinson amps generated fantastic levels of detail and

openness, and impressive dynamics from such small boxes, but so they bloody well should. What the experience did reveal however, was the even tempered nature and huge potential in the CDMINT's design. On the one hand, you've got to make sure that you drive them with something that's up to the job. On the other, upgrade your amps and the little B&Ws will happily keep pace - for a surprising distance.

If you want to be picky about things, then there are other products that can better the B&Ws in certain areas. They don't have the fantastic speed and transparency of the Elacs

fitted with the Jet tweeter. They don't have the rude honesty of the little Indigo Model 1s. And of course, they don't have the thunderous, rumbling, belching, window throbbing bass of most of the equivalently priced floor-standers, the result of their AV/Hi-Fi split personality crisis. The CDMINTs are cultured and a shade polite, but like the gentlemen they are, they do everything tolerably well. Which is exactly why we sell so many of them. Other products might better them at one thing, but the CDMIs have always offered the edge overall. With their freshly scrubbed good looks and nice manners, this is exactly the sort of speaker you can take home to mum (or any other female for that matter...) Like I said, we've sold a fair few CDMIs. I reckon we'll be selling quite a few more.



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Two-way reflex loaded speaker
Drivers:	25mm alloy dome HF 165mm woven Kevlar L/MF
Bandwidth:	-3dB at 60Hz -6dB at 48Hz
Efficiency:	88dB
Impedance:	8 Ohms nominal 4.6 Ohms minimum
Rec. Amplifier:	50-120 Watts
Dimensions (WxHxD):	220x393x290mm
Weight:	9.5 kg/pr
Rec. Stand Height:	590mm (23")
Finishes:	Black Ash Cherry Red Cherry Stain
Price:	£750

Manufacturer:

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 REGA Jupiter and lo CD transport and DAC. £750. S/H.
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ONKYO CD/MD RECEIVER FR-435

CD No Disc

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COMPACT disc DIGITAL AUDIO

CORDS

CD

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PUSH OPEN

Onkyo FR-435

CD player, Mini-Disc recorder and receiver in a single box

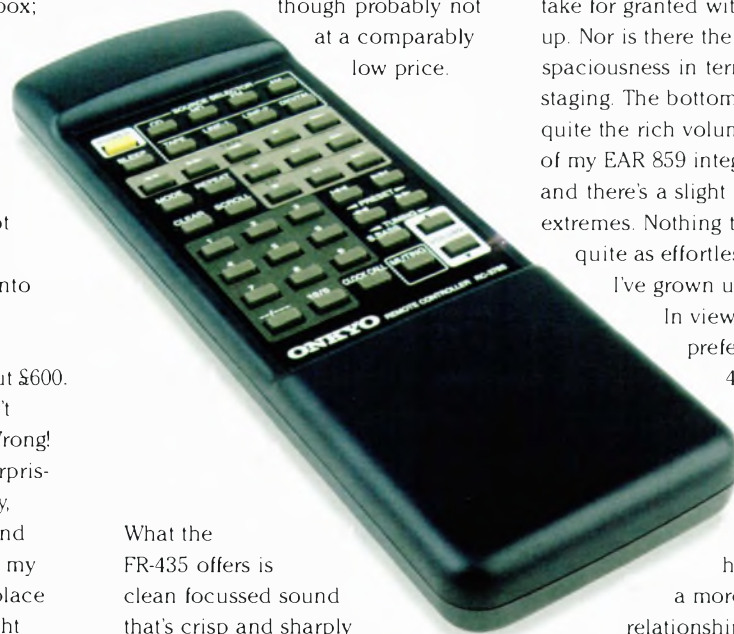
by Jimmy Hughes

There are times when life throws you a curve. There I was writing my regular comment page, manfully seeking to justify the flagrant complexity of my hi-fi system, when Onkyo's FR-435 arrived. One box; neat, compact, concentrated. And versatile. Whereas I have seven boxes lavishly spread over three equipment stands, taking up half the living room wall just to play CD, the Onkyo has the lot in one package. And adds an RDS FM tuner and Mini-disc into the bargain.

Speaking of bargains, the whole shebang retails for about £600. Which naturally means it can't possibly be any good, right? Wrong! The FR-435 turns out to be surprisingly, remarkably, frighteningly, disturbingly accomplished. And while I'm not planning to sell my current system in order to replace it with one, the briefest thought did flit through my mind. I mean, why not sell while the market's still reasonably bouyant? The Onkyo FR-435 could herald the death of enthusiast hi-fi as we know it.

Actually, before I get too carried away with my own rhetoric, it has to be said that the FR-435 doesn't quite make quality separates obsolete. Keen enthusiasts who cherry-pick

each individual component to create a system that's exactly right for their taste and living space may well be able to come up with a combination that beats the FR-435 - though probably not at a comparably low price.



What the FR-435 offers is clean focussed sound that's crisp and sharply defined, plus enough power (Onkyo quote 43W into 4 ohms) to cater for most people's needs. The tonal balance is bright and open, yielding a lucid, transparent, honest sonic presentation. It's a hugely enjoyable sound, partly because there's no pretence involved - musically it lays all its cards on the table and never bites

off more than it can chew.

Finesse and subtlety aren't absent. But being hyper-critical I didn't quite experience the delicacy and fine shades of tone colour I routinely take for granted with my home set up. Nor is there the same depth and spaciousness in terms of sound-staging. The bottom end hasn't quite the rich voluminous weight of my EAR 859 integrated valve amp, and there's a slight thinness at treble extremes. Nothing terrible - but not quite as effortless and refined as I've grown used to.

In view of this, I found I preferred to use the FR-435 with a degree of treble cut (yes it's got tone controls as well) - say -2dB to -4dB - which helped create a more balanced relationship between high and low frequencies. Onkyo claim the FR-435's amplifier is capable of high current delivery, and the sound certainly had plenty of drive on demanding material.

That said, there wasn't quite the effortless presence and 3D projection I experience with my regular set-up. At lowish volume levels the FR-435 sounded a tad 'flat' dynamically. ▶

► tending to come into its own when the music was played more loudly. Again, nothing terrible, but not quite equalling better quality separates.

Actually, I've just done something I hate when I see others doing it; making comparisons between products of wildly differing cost, then banging on about how the cheaper item doesn't quite cut it against the more expensive one. Time for a reality check; the FR-435 retails for approximately a quarter of what the EAR-859 costs - and comes with 'free' CD, mini-disc, and FM radio. 'Nuff said!

Relating sonic differences to price, and taking into account the added space and complexity of a typical separates system, comparisons start to look more and more shaky. Yes, you could well do better with carefully chosen separates. But it takes an almost disproportionate degree of cost and effort to achieve that final increase in performance. After sampling the FR-435, I wasn't sure whether to laugh or cry...

In the end I decided to laugh because products like the FR-435 put excellent quality sound within the reach of virtually everyone. Not only that, the simplicity of the unit makes installation a doddle; Just hook up a set of loudspeakers and you're in business. There's even a set of patch points at the back allowing you to wire-in devices of your choice between pre and power amp. Think; I could buy an FR-435 and still use all my extra signal processing boxes!

Most of my listening was undertaken using CD, and the remarks made about sonic performance relate to silver disc. Minidisc lost some of the brilliance and immediacy of CD, but still sounded very creditable with only a slight lack of range to grumble about. FM reception is very difficult where I live - at ground

where there were so many separate boxes, it took the best part of ten minutes to get everything powered up. Not only that, you had to remember the correct order in which to switch the different bits on - otherwise nasty booms and bangs would result.



level facing West (Wrotham is South East) surrounded by tall buildings. And broadcast quality varies considerably. But even with a simple indoor aerial the FR-435's RDS tuner worked well.

For a machine that offers such a wide range of options and facilities, it's remarkable how simple and straightforward the FR-435 is to operate. The basic controls are on the front panel, with some lesser-used ones hidden beneath a hinged flap. More involved operations are carried out using the remote handset, and a comprehensive illuminated display keeps you informed as to what's happening.

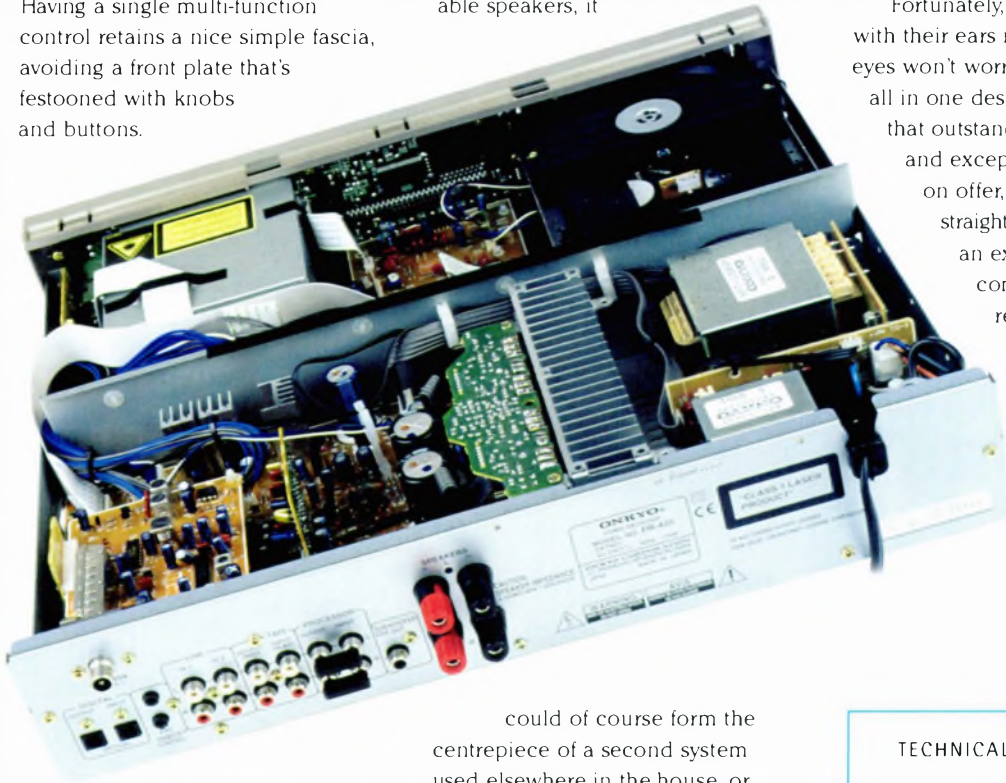
It's so nice to press just a single button to switch the whole system on. In the past I've owned systems

The FR-435 not only sells at a very reasonable price. It also saves you a small fortune on interconnects - like, you don't need any! For the purist who believes in short signal paths, what could be better than an all-in-one unit like this? You couldn't get things any closer. But isn't there a danger that the different parts will interact and create an adverse state of affairs?

Sure it's a possibility. Fortunately, Onkyo have provided adequate screening between sections, and employ separate transformers for analogue and digital circuits. To ensure long life and stable operation, the heat-producing power transistors are screened from low level components - though used at average volume levels with efficient speakers the FR-435 produced very little surplus heat.

Operationally, the FR-435 is

▶ very user-friendly. I really liked the Multi Jog knob that fulfils multiple functions, including track selection (CD or MD) at a frighteningly fast pace. You also use this knob to adjust bass and treble tone controls, and select the station on the tuner. Having a single multi-function control retains a nice simple fascia, avoiding a front plate that's festooned with knobs and buttons.



The selling price may be low, but build quality is very good - you only have to lift the FR-435 to know; it's reassuringly heavy. A solid chunky piece of kit, the chassis is all metal and feels substantial. The silver finish gives the unit a slightly retro look, and the build likewise harks back to an earlier period in time when products were made to last.

The FR-435's excellent sonics are perhaps no accident. Onkyo claim the CD section is derived from the company's higher-end players using audiophile-standard components. Likewise, the amplifier is based on technology found in Onkyo's leading edge components. The result is

a versatile component offering superb performance in a neat convenient package.

In the course of this review I've treated the FR-435 as an alternative to the usual scenario of separate hi-fi. But, teamed up with suitable speakers, it

could of course form the centrepiece of a second system used elsewhere in the house, or the perfect student set-up. However, don't start blaming me if the Onkyo package outperforms your main system - I'm only the messenger (and I don't mean Paul or Melinda).

Because of what it is, the FR-435 will never be regarded as a true audiophile component by equipment snobs. But Onkyo is a brand with a distinguished history, as anyone who remembers their 733 amplifier from 1972 will no doubt acknowledge. To keep signal paths short, this amplifier had its input and output terminals in a recessed panel on the top of the case. And it had a built-in MC cartridge input; not bad for the early '70s!

For those on a tight budget,

Onkyo produced a slightly less powerful model, without the Mini-disc for a shade over £300. However, given that its musical substance is a major part of the FR-435's appeal I'd listen carefully before plumping for the cheaper option.

Fortunately, those who listen with their ears rather than their eyes won't worry about the FR-435's all in one design. They'll recognise that outstanding performance and exceptional value are on offer, and flash the Plastic straightaway. Anyone wanting an excellent convenient combination that's reasonably compact and very keenly priced could do a lot worse than buy an FR-435. I know I could happily live with one. But, for God's sake, don't tell my wife... ▶+

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Combined CD player, MD recorder and receiver
Inputs:	4 x line 1 x optical digital
Outputs:	1 line 1 x optical digital
Power:	43w - 4 ohms
Dimension (WxHxD):	485x90x420mm
Weight:	8.4Kg
Price:	£550

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Further thoughts on the Ringmat Support System, tracking force and VTA.

by Dave Ayers

Back in Issue 9 I reviewed, and was mightily impressed by the Ringmat Support System (RSS). Part of the process of that review included a completely different approach to tonearm set-up, which I duly applied, but didn't have the space to explain in detail. What with RG's observations on VTA in his VPI review, it seemed like the perfect opportunity to revisit the whole subject and dig a little deeper, with thanks to John Rogers of Ringmat for allowing me to paraphrase his text. I should point out that the following applies to arms that have some form of VTA adjustment, but that the RSS also gives owners of Rega arms and others that cannot have their VTA adjusted, the opportunity to obtain the correct VTA, it's just that the method is slightly different. This is explained in the booklet supplied with the RSS.

So back to the matter in hand. How to set up the tracking weight and VTA the Ringmat way. According to conventional wisdom you'd normally do it in the following manner: First set the tracking weight,



probably somewhere around the manufacturers maximum recommended weight, then set the cartridge body to be parallel to the record's surface. Now play a record and set the bias and fine tune the VTA by adjusting the height of the arm pillar up and down. If the music sounds leaden, then reduce the tracking weight slightly and readjust all the other parameters.

Not much wrong with that you might think, long term hi-fi

enthusiasts have been doing it this way for years, and with fine results. However, I have personally found problems with this approach.

In particular very few arms have a really good VTA adjustment method.

I use the otherwise excellent SME V, and although adjusting the VTA is easier than with most arms, it is still fiddly, requiring clamping nuts to be loosened,

and what's more it's non-repeatable. In truth, with the SME, it would be a practical impossibility to alter the VTA for every record once set, yet both my own experiences with the RSS, and RG's with the VPI JMW Memorial tonearm suggest that that's exactly what we should be aiming for. Indeed, in the USA, where VTA adjustment is taken much more seriously than in the UK, there are several arms (the VPI, Tri-planar and Eminent Technology for starters) that have VTA adjustment methods that are both simple and repeatable. If however, you reject the lack of rigidity introduced by such an approach, the RSS allows you to move the record rather than the arm pillar, thus bringing the

▶ mountain to Mohammed.

But, even having introduced the notion of adjustable VTA, there are still problems with the traditional approach. Manufacturers often increase the VTA in a cartridge design in order to achieve more space between the body and record warps. This is why cartridge reviews frequently suggest that the arm pillar be lowered from the horizontal. In John Rogers' article, he posits that there are other problems. Firstly, cartridge manufacturers typically measure their devices in a controlled environment, where the temperature is regulated to 20° C (68° F). Now I don't know about you, but I keep my house at around 22° C and the effect of

the warmer temperature is to make the suspension more complaint. This effects the cartridge in two ways, firstly it will be able to track securely at a lower playing weight, and secondly the cantilever will sink further into the body for any given playing weight. There is an optimum range of cantilever deflection that will place the coils firmly in the centre of the flux created by the cartridge's magnetic poles. If the playing weight is too light or too heavy, then the position of the coils will be outside this range. What makes this even more complicated is that a change of playing weight also affects the VTA, a lower weight increases it whilst a higher weight decreases it. So what we have now is a larger

number of factors to think about whilst setting up our tonearm, and if you're lost by now, perhaps you can see why I had to read the booklet several times.

Secondly, records are of varying thickness. Compare a mid-1970 ultra-lightweight

optimum playback.

So after all that, how do we go about setting up the tonearm, Ringmat style. To start with you should set the arm pillar 2.25mm below the headshell. This, according to John, should compensate for the warmer temperatures found in domestic listening rooms, and allows for



a lighter tracking weight. The next step is to fine tune the VTA by adjusting the playing weight. Starting from below the lowest recommended weight, increase until there is a point where the music seems to

snap into focus (I'll come back to that in the next Issue). I found it takes a few attempts to recognise the point, and I had to go past and back a couple

of times to pinpoint it exactly, and when I say pinpoint, I mean within 0.01 gm. Now it's time for the big question, "Is the current tracking weight within the manufacturers recommended range, preferably at the lower end?" If the answer is yes, then the set up is nearly complete, if the answer is no, then the arm height must be adjusted up or down and the process repeated. The final step is to fine tune the bias, and in my experience, once you get to this

pressing to a Mobile Fidelity 200gm slab and you'll see what I mean.

The latter is nearly twice as thick as the former and even if both have been cut at an identical angle, the height of the arm would have to be changed considerably for the VTA to be correct in both cases.

The third problem that Russ Andrews and others have identified is that the standard for cutting angle has changed throughout the years. This means that even records of the same weight and thickness may not require the same VTA for

▶ stage you will find that you need much less than you would think. With my SME / Clearaudio combination, the tracking weight is now set to 2.25gm, but the bias is only set to the 1.6gm marker. Using John's method, you will end up with a lighter tracking weight and lower arm pillar height than with the 'normal' method. In theory this should place the coils in

the optimum position within the cartridge body. Speaking as someone who has been setting up tonearms for nearly 30 years, I found that once I understood the technique it was actually much easier to apply. What's more I have achieved the best tracking from a moving coil that I have ever had, removing that disconcerting feeling that the stylus is only just hanging in there.

Unfortunately I don't know how much of that is due to this technique, and how much is due to the RSS itself.

Next time, I'll explain the sonic fingerprint of the sweet-spot and how to recognise it (at least in my system), as well as looking at the very real sonic benefits of accurate VTA when it comes to record replay. In the meantime, steel yourself. It could be time to reach for those Allen keys. ▶+

When Fixed Is Actually Variable: The Semantics Of Valve Bias

by Chris Binns

Due to the misleading terminology, the way we bias the output stage of a valve amp has always been the subject of considerable confusion. This is hardly surprising - as far as the customer goes, fixed bias is usually adjustable, and cathode bias isn't! You have to see it from the output valves point of view.....

There are two distinctly different methods of applying bias, or controlling the amount of current that passes through a valve under quiescent conditions, i.e. when there is no signal being passed.

Cathode bias involves putting a fixed resistor in line with the output valves to limit the current flow through the output stage - this is not adjustable therefore matched valves are a necessity for correct operation. The great advantage of this method is that there is no setting up involved, always one of the more tiresome procedures of

using a valve amp.

With fixed bias the cathode is connected directly to ground and the current passed through the output stage is determined by the application of a negative voltage to the control grid of the output valves, which is often adjustable to accommodate variation in samples. This of course also means that the voltage can be adjusted periodically to compensate for the valves ageing (as cathode emission drops off) which, depending on how user friendly your amplifier is, can be something of a tedious ritual.

Both topologies have distinct advantages - and (I think) a characteristic sound quality, particularly when an amplifier is pushed toward its power limitations. With cathode bias, once the current draw begins to increase outside the envelope of class A operation, for example with heavy transients such

as bass drums, the voltage across the valve will drop due to the resistor connected in line with it. The effect can sometimes be heard as a slight softening as the amplifier approaches its power threshold.

By contrast, with fixed bias the output valves are connected rigidly between earth and the power supply, and the voltage across them will remain more or less constant regardless of current draw - hence the term 'fixed'. As a result, if the amplifier is pushed beyond its class A envelope, voltage sagging is less likely to occur, giving a harder sound when pushed.

Bear in mind though that these characteristics tend to become apparent only when pushing the amplifier hard. And under most conditions, the Rouge 120's (which sparked off this piece) manage to confound these observations quite effectively. ▶+

Kind of Blue

- The Making of The Miles Davis Masterpiece

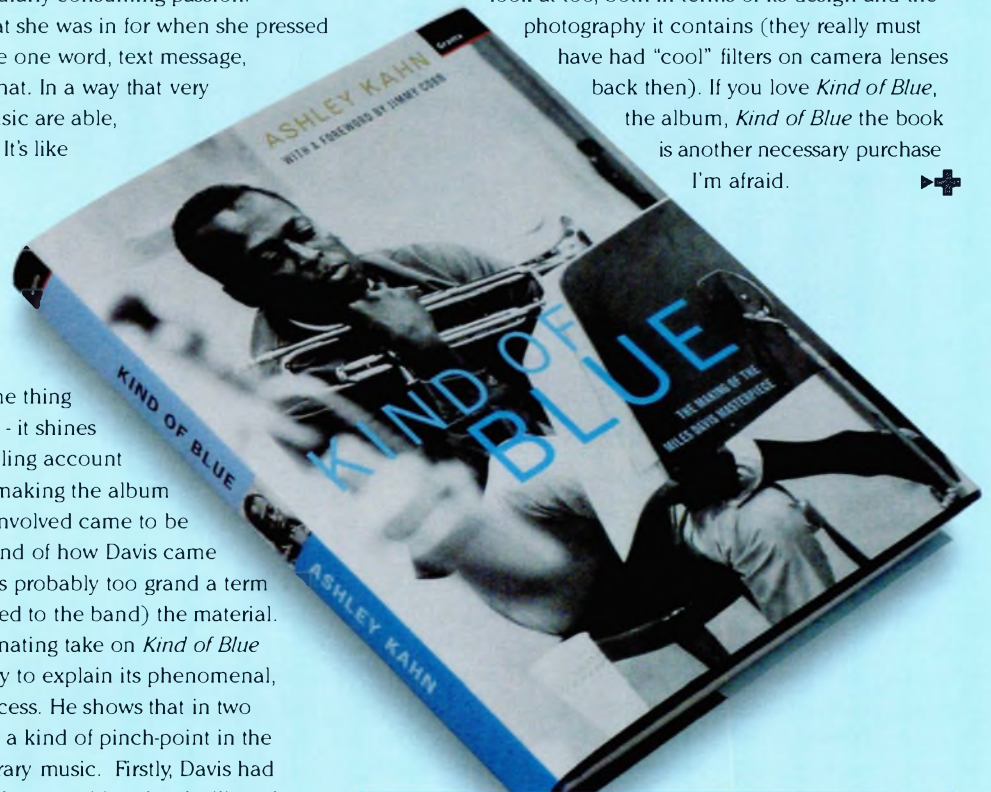
by Phi Ward

If I were to speculate about the most widely owned recording among Hi-Fi Plus readers it wouldn't take me long to decide on *Kind of Blue*. It's not just an old jazz album, it's a phenomenon. I bought a copy for a friend the other day. I'd shown her Ashley Kahn's book and enthused about the album (a bit High Fidelity I know, but hey, this is important), but she'd never heard it, only vaguely knew that Miles Davis was a jazz musician and is not somebody for whom recorded music is a particularly consuming passion. She didn't have a clue what she was in for when she pressed play. "Spectacular!" was the one word, text message, review. *Kind of Blue* does that. In a way that very few pieces of recorded music are able, it stops folk in their tracks. It's like turning on a light switch - suddenly jazz opens up before you.

But having used the light switch metaphor I'm now a little stuck, because *Kind of Blue*, the book, does exactly the same thing for *Kind of Blue* the album - it shines a light. The book is a revealing account not only of the process of making the album but of how the musicians involved came to be playing the way they did, and of how Davis came to write (although "write" is probably too grand a term for the sketches he presented to the band) the material. But more, Kahn has a fascinating take on *Kind of Blue* that perhaps goes some way to explain its phenomenal, and even accelerating, success. He shows that in two respects the album marked a kind of pinch-point in the development of contemporary music. Firstly, Davis had arrived at a "modal" style of composition that facilitated considerable melodic and developmental freedom for the soloists. Freedom to accommodate elements and influences from almost any musical style. And secondly, he had assembled a group of probably the finest players of their time, each with a thorough education through swing, blues, be-bop, hard bop and cool, and each of whom went on after *Kind of Blue* to infect so many other groups and

recordings with its spirit. *Kind of Blue* was a distillation of all that went before, yet at the same time, through its modal nature, opened new possibilities for the future.

Kind of Blue, the book, also reveals the album to have been made by a bunch of beings from this Earth rather than from the planet Cool as I'd always suspected. It paints a picture of surprisingly modest men full of wit and human frailty doing the thing they loved best. And it's a treat to look at too, both in terms of its design and the photography it contains (they really must have had "cool" filters on camera lenses back then). If you love *Kind of Blue*, the album, *Kind of Blue* the book is another necessary purchase I'm afraid. ➤



Kind of Blue
 - The Making of The Miles Davis Masterpiece
 By Ashley Kahn
 Granta Books
 ISBN 1 86207 424 0

The VPI HW-17F Professional Record Cleaning Machine

by Simon Groome

As an avid collector of vinyl, I am convinced that the regular use of any of the vacuum-cleaning machines on the market is essential, for both the longevity of your records, and in the pursuit of ultimate sound quality. But, with a number of such machines available, it can be a daunting task to select just one.

I have been happily using my Loricraft PRC2, for a few years, but

directly compare both my own machine and the subject of this review, the VPI HW-17F

VPI manufacture three models of vacuum-cleaning machine, from the HW-16.5 (see RP's review in issue 1), up to the HW-17

machine, and filled the reservoir from the supplied 8oz of Record Cleaning Machine Fluid, just secure the record to the turntable, before flicking the "Table" switch upwards, for clockwise movement of the disc. The machine is not as silent as the Loricraft, omitting "gear noise". Swing the applicator over the record and press the "Pump" button briefly, to dispense the fluid – this is the only area of operation

that needs a little care, as pressing for too long can release too much fluid. After three revolutions, the turntable should be reversed, before returning the applicator head to its rest position. It is then ready to vacuum the disc. The

direction of revolution should be returned to clockwise, before swinging the pickup tube across the record and switching the "Vacuum" on. This produces a noise rather like a vacuum cleaner, and the tube is sucked onto the surface of the disc. Again the Loricraft is much quieter, but if memory serves me, the HW-16.5 is even noisier. Two revolutions later switch off the "Vacuum" and return the tube to its rest position, before removing the record and repeating on the other side. And believe me, it really is easier than it sounds.

As with all these cleaners, it is vital that the cleaned disc is now "zapped" with a Milty Zerostat, and given a new anti-static inner sleeve. The waste fluid is transferred to a "catch basin", which is easy to empty via a drain hose, although



at £1595 it is out of the equation for all but the most dedicated collector.

In the past, when asked which machine any prospective buyer should purchase, I have simply worked on the assumption that they should work out some kind of "cost per clean" philosophy, to ascertain a relative figure to spend on such a device. While a basically sound theory, this is an oversimplified way of contemplating the predicament, and works on the assumption that you pay for what you get. It was therefore very interesting to have the chance to

(not imported to the UK) and 17F – the F model includes a fan for continuous use. At \$895, it is not the cheapest cleaner on the market, but should be within the reach of many collectors. All components are heavy duty and, although not displaying the same build quality as the Loricraft, it should be dependable throughout many years of use.

This has got to be one of the most uncomplicated vacuum-cleaning machines to operate – with a comprehensive, yet straightforward, instruction manual. Having set up the

► evaporation handles the product of all but continuous use.

While perfectly happy with the ease of operation, I was initially less delighted with the audible results, but only because I had the Loricraft with which to make direct comparisons. Using the 12" single of *Perfect*, by Fairground Attraction (RCA PT 41846), the VPI made the sound slightly clearer, as if a veil had been lifted, and there was now a larger soundstage. But,

once cleaned on the Loricraft machine, this recording revealed more detail, an even deeper soundstage, and far more body and presence. Overall, images seemed fuller and more coherent, and the whole recording became more alive and easier to follow. Through careful tests, on a number of recordings, from new pressings, which require the removal of mould release agents, to old, fairly worn vinyl, I was able to discover that there were two major reasons for this. Firstly, the cleaning fluids involved in the two processes, and secondly, the operation of brushing the record's surface.

VPI advise that you should only use their own cleaning fluid, as "others...may contain chemicals that can damage... the machine", but also go on to say that "adding 25% isopropyl alcohol to VPI fluid will give better cleaning of dirty records". Loricraft recommend fluid comprising one-third isopropyl to two-thirds distilled water. The adding of isopropyl to VPI fluid results in quieter backgrounds, more detail, and a more three-dimensional soundstage, and I now regard this mixture as a necessity for getting the

best out of any VPI machine. However, the use of isopropyl is frowned upon in certain quarters, where critics claim that it can lead to the leaching of stabilisers from the vinyl surface and subsequent long term damage. Whilst this isn't my experience, for those concerned by the possibility Disc Doctor fluid, a 'two-pot' treat and rinse solution, offers an alcohol free alternative which delivers excellent

results at the expense of some additional fuss. The second variation in performance comes with fluid application.



The VPI HW-17F's applicator head has a brush on its underside which spreads the fluid across the surface of the disc, while the Loricraft is manual in operation, like the HW-16.5, and requires a separate, hand-held brush to do the job. If using an independent brush on the HW-17F, I have discovered, much of the variances in audible results are redressed. This can only be a result of a lack of pressure from the HW-17F's applicator brush, and I would therefore advise the use of a separate brush when using this

machine. The brush from the HW-16.5 is readily available as a separate item.

Having worked out how to get the best results from the 17F, lifting its performance to the same level as the Loricraft, there remains one other thing to watch out for. With the Loricraft machine, the vacuum pickup tube rests on a small length of cotton thread, during operation. This is then moved approximately 5mm, onto a clean area for the next record side. But, in the case of the VPI, and the majority of vacuum-cleaning machines, the tube is isolated from the disc's surface by the same two velvet pads for every cleaning. If you have ever seen what is in the waste fluid produced by these types of machines, you will understand my concern. All cleaning fluids start as clear liquids, but when expelled after use, they usually resemble murky soup, with grease and grime floating in them. After regular employment, this filth and debris could be smeared over your records. Therefore these pads need cleaning on a regular basis, and although VPI recommend that they should be "gently wiped... with a slightly damp cloth each time you finish using the HW-17F", I feel that this is not enough. A good scrub with clean record cleaning fluid is nearer the mark. Luckily, the tube and its turret simply lift out of the machine (mainly to allow them to be swapped for an alternative tube with a shorter slot should you want to clean 7" or 10" records) making thorough cleaning an easy proposition. It's also an essential one if you want to maintain the cleaning performance of the machine.

Having had an opportunity to reflect on my experiences, I'm now in a position to offer rather more robust recommendations when it comes to cleaning records, and I'll start with technique. Some form of vacuum

▶ machine is essential, but to get the best from it you are going to have to take care when it comes to choice of cleaning fluid and its method of application. You also need to ensure that the mating surfaces of the machine (record mat and vacuum nozzle) are kept scrupulously clean. Bearing this in mind my recommendations are as follows:

For most people the HW16.5 offers a fast and effective way of cleaning records, and at \$425 is all the machine they'll need. It offers much of the robust quality of the 17F without the latter's automation or fan cooling.

I would however recommend replacing its foam mat with the cork version from the 17F, allowing easier cleaning. Even better, use two separate mats, one for clean record sides, one for dirty.

The 17F is larger but quieter than the 16, although not as quiet as the Loricraft. Unless you see yourself using it on a continuous basis (about ten minutes of record cleaning is about as much as I can take!) its real advantage lies in its use with 'two-pot' cleaners where the active agent can be applied by hand and the distilled water used for rinsing held in the reservoir. If you

go for a 17F then make sure that you use a separate applicator brush and follow the advice regarding mats outlined for the 16.5 above.

As for myself, I will stick to my trusty PRC2, but with Loricraft now producing a scaled-down PRC3, for \$950, this may become my recommendation for the future. As they say, "watch this space".

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Record Reviews

How To Read Them





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

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

The reviewers are identified by their initials.

They are:- Chris Binns, Pete Christie, Dave Davies, Roy Gregory, Jason Hector, James Michael Hughes, Jon Maple, Reuben Parry, Dave Ayers, Andrew Hobbs, Chris Thomas.


Key to Icons

-  CD
-  Gold CD
-  HDCD
-  XRCD
-  Double Disc
-  SACD
-  120g LP
-  150g LP
-  180g LP
-  Availability As S/H LP
-  Vinyl Double Album



Morgan

Organized

Source 7243 5 26303 18  

Here's a band with a decent record collection, and they've pillaged it liberally when it's come to constructing their own album, which makes for a bewildering variety if nothing else. But, if one thing ties all the songs together it seems to be the judicious application of Hammond organ. And no ordinary Hammond at that. This example, if you'll allow a short antiques roadshow moment, apparently once belonged to, and survived, Pete Townsend. Besides, Hammonds are a damn site heavier than guitars, and if it's good enough for Pete. So, apart from the famous organ what else can Morgan deliver? The album starts with a lovely old sounding track which has obviously grabbed the currently popular Beach Boys / West coast influence, and follows this with a road trip through some James Brown style soul and out and out funk (!), along with Ska from the 80's, all driven in some miraculous way by baggy beats mixed with a Lo-Fi twist. Predictable this is not. Morgan are not afraid to mix their sounds either, with ambient effects, massed strings, samples and megaphone distortion all making an appearance in a triumphantly irreverent fusion of sound that celebrates its influences rather than simply milking them.

JH

RECORDING
MUSIC





Stephen Malkmus

Eponymous

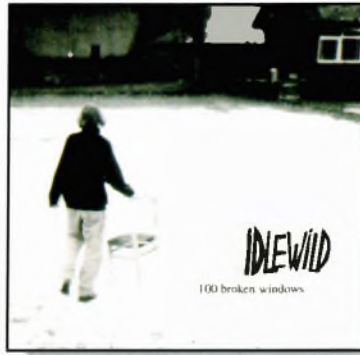
WIGLP90 CD

This album has been eagerly awaited by yours truly. It is the first solo album from the Pavement front man and being a big Pavement fan I was hoping for the best.

First thing to strike you, if you know Pavement's recent output, is the complexity. In the last few long-players Pavement seemed to be producing songs which were very simple, not lyrically but in the restricted melodies and instruments; stripped of pretensions. With this album however, Malkmus has returned to older Pavement, reiterating what an influence he has been on Damon Alban.

For this outing Malkmus is supported by a straight out rock band; you know, drum kit type percussion, electric guitars. It has to be said that he uses very strange material on which to construct his songs. Yul Brinner, piracy, Stoke on Trent anybody? But the funny thing is, it seems to work, and it doesn't fall into the trap of over emphasising how very strange it really is. Will Malkmus ever enter the mainstream? On this showing, no way, and perhaps this is for the best for the rest of us, because I would hate for his talent and inventiveness to be blunted by the need to conform. More power to you Mr. Malkmus.

JH



Idlewild

100 Broken Windows

FOOD CD32 CD

100 Broken Windows stood as a landmark on its release last year. In the middle of a pop wasteland four intelligent young men from Scotland broke the top thirty time and again with powerful guitar driven punk anthems. Just two years ago Idlewild could barely play their instruments, resorting to destroying them in interesting ways to distract the audience, but nevertheless possessed a strange spark of excitement in their music. Now, on only their second album, they have exploded into something much, much more. This album is a fully mature piece of punk-fueled rock. The band have not only learned how to use the guitars they once smashed, but have also learned about production and orchestration. As such the album sounds full and sculpted, without once losing the energy of their older material as the music moves seamlessly from white noise hurricanes to bare emotion. Like many truly wonderful discs, the single releases are in fact the lower points of the album, whereas 'Idea track' fuses the soft/loud dynamic with harmonies to die for, and 'Let me sleep next to the window' sees Idlewild become REM. However it is on the last track 'The Bronze Medal', sounding for all intents and purposes like it was recorded in my garage, stripped down and live, that the band sound strongest. Buy it, buy it now; they could be huge.

MC



The Good Sons

Happiness

Pinnacle Records/Floating World FW009 CD

This is the fourth album from alternative country pioneers The Good Sons and after a break of two years, it finds them treading impressive new ground. Having done so much to re-establish the genre, paving the way for a British musical revolution, this time out the country influence is confined to the craft and tender skill that shapes the songs. Just as Rock'n'Roll grew from the roots of country, The Good Sons have crossed over, approaching that great tradition of British pop songwriting from its soft underbelly. The result is a series of (mainly) gentle rock ballads, laced with intelligence and honestly presented emotion. Given the quality of his writing it has always mystified me that Michael Weston King isn't more widely known. Once again he's produced a cycle of songs which are intricate yet apparently simple, powerful without appearing to try. Here we have Costello without the obvious mannerisms, Tilbrook without the relentless cleverness. The results pay homage to his roots while building on them; the band provide exactly the right weight of support, and whilst the recording is merely adequate the music is sublime. The beautiful construction of 'Tim Hardin '65', the simple, perfectly paced progression of 'Both Sides Of The Faith', both reveal the consummate capabilities of a master songsmith. And if they are highlights, then their selection is purely personal, such is the consistent excellence of this album as a whole.

RG





Foo Foo and the Boy

H2C

Naim CD057

"I'm gonna tell you exactly how I'm feeling. Read my lips - I wanna get a fix of you. I'm as guilty as a fallen angel, delirious - danger in the thought of you." So croon the twin female voices of Foo Foo, overlaying their supporting guitars, sparse drums and occasional bass. There's no mistaking the focus of these deceptively simple songs. It's all in the words: Words full of intelligence, and a wry, self deprecating humour. The clear, uncluttered arrangements allow the vocals plenty of space, while adding their own splash of life and humour. Imagine if you will, a strange meeting of latin and traditional rhythms, off-beat vocal harmonies with an almost girlish appeal, yet concealing a sharpened, unmistakably adult point. Kind of like The Raincoats meet The Mavericks, singing songs of love, and want, and loss. Unlikely as it may seem, Naim appear to be cornering the market in homegrown women with attitude. Following hard on the heels of Thea Gilmore comes this wonderful disc from Salisbury's finest. And whilst I haven't always been convinced by Naim's recordings, this one definitely works. Direct and immediate, what it lacks in finesse it more than makes up for in terms of spontaneous enthusiasm, adding mightily to the simple drive(s) of the music. Buy it now, and maybe we can have a second helping soon!

RG



Tony Joe White

One Hot July

TUPELO / MERCURY 558 894-2

Rootsy, gravel textured vocals, where you can feel a depth of emotion around the rough hewn edges of each crease, fold and wrinkle present in Louisiana-born Tony Joe White's assured delivery of a line, is just one of this CD's great strengths. Another, certainly, has to be the songwriting excellence heard through lyrics like, "Me and my shadow on the wall / Radio playing softly somewhere down the hall / And over in the next room / The hollow sound of a cigarette cough / Oh I'm sitting across from midnight / And morning's a long way off" ('Across From Midnight'), which work on lonely and claustrophobic themes with striking images of anonymous hotels in seedy towns, where trash cans burn in alleys and winos sip away their lives. Here, his rich Southern cadences, drawn from those swamp rock days during the 60's and 70's, wash up against this evocative lyrical backdrop. Sharp guitar interplay between White and bass man, Eric Watkins, has a clearly reproduced and sweat-dripping intensity, which suits these songs from the swamps. Juicy tracks include an opening 'Crack The Window Baby', 'The Delta Singer', 'O! Black Crow' and 'Selena'.

RP

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Low

Things we lost in the fire

Tugboat TUGCD027

This latest offering from the Minnesota miserabilists offers no surprises: this is an album for those who like their music depressing. When the Verve decided to sing about how uncaring the world could be, they elected to build layers of strings and deep orchestration to cushion the blow. Low, however, take the opposite view, they have stripped their songs down to the bare minimum to make the message that much clearer. Sometimes the songs drop down to near silence, leaving you straining to catch a murmured word, before swelling back into the foreground, and every time its that much more satisfying. Unfortunately if you are hoping to come away humming the tunes you will almost certainly be disappointed. In fact, if you are hoping to be anything but bored by the album the first few times you hear it, you may well also be disappointed. This is an album for those people willing to work at it. But rest assured, it is worth working for. Low's songs are beautiful, and their beauty is never diluted by the need to purely entertain, to please the masses. For songs of such startling bleakness (and bleak really is the word here) the whole experience is surprisingly uplifting. Every sound on this album is there for a purpose, and every sound is fantastic. Things we lost ... is hard work, but will leave you feeling strangely refreshed.

MC





Eddie Reader

Simple Soul

Rough Trade Rtradedcd011

Did someone mention folk? This latest offering from Eddie Reader sees her depart from her old major label and join Rough Trade Records. Rough Trade have been getting quite a bit of press recently and on any list of their current bands she seems to be the square peg in a round hole. Alongside new guitar sensations Terris and The Strokes a middle aged female folk singer doesn't quite fit.

The album is a departure for Eddie, leaving the rich emotions behind and aiming for a more airy, laid back feel. It is stripped back in sound, loosing that major label gloss and richness and replacing it with acoustic guitars and drums. But Eddie's voice is smoother than ever and Boo Hewerdine is still in residence to hold the thing together. Eddie Reader remains a rare natural talent, and the album is delicate, light and gentle, *Simple Soul* will sound fantastic this summer with a cool drink and plenty of open space. Even the artwork acknowledges this, with soft focus shots of water, sun and fields.

As with her previous albums a few songs feel like filler, but the rest sparkle wonderfully with some indiscernible quality. In truth it simply cannot match the overwhelming emotional weight of her previous albums *Eddie Reader* and *Angels And Electricity*, but then again, it doesn't try to.

MC



Bob Harris Presents...Calexico

Volume 1

Assembly Records ASEMCD001

"Whispering Bob" might have been eased off of the airwaves, but he's not going quietly. This compilation represents his views on Real Music, and is presented as an antidote to the brain-dead mediocrity that dominates the radio and its playlists. There's no Shania, Britney, Ricki or Westlife (and it's no coincidence that my spell check has flagged each and every one of those names!). Instead, you get 15 tracks from a cross section of intelligent, adult performers, and it's difficult to argue with the selection - more than a few have already featured in our review section. Alongside the likes of Emmylou Harris and Judie Tzuke (yes, I raised an eyebrow until I listened to it) you get tracks from the (then unknown) Eva Cassidy and Sinead Lohan. Likewise, Steve Earle and the brilliant Vigilantes Of Love are joined by the unsung blues talent of Walter Trout. There's even space for audiophile favourites Eric Bibb and Alison Krauss. In fact, such is the spread of styles and quality on this musical tour de force that if you can't find at least three tracks that send you straight to the local record shop then it's probably too late: your musical taste buds have already been lobotomised!

RG



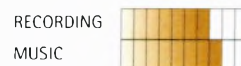
Mike Plume Band

Song And Dance Man

Gigantic Records- MPB40002

The Mike Plume Band are natives of Alberta, Canada who musically have a firm foothold in that most fertile of Rock/Blues/Country territory-Texas. Their sound is a fusion of giants like Steve Earle, Joe Ely, Guy Clark and Townes Van Zandt, and in frontman Plume they have a singer of Great expression who can belt it out one minute, as on the rasping opener 'Rattle The Cage', or come across all tender and emotional the next, as he does on the album's best track, the slow burning 'Silver Lining'. At times I could swear it was Steve Earle at the microphone. Certainly 'Something To Say' wouldn't sound out of place alongside any of the tracks on the classic *Exit O* album. Don't be fooled into thinking this is Mike Plumb with a bunch of session musicians making up the numbers though. The rest of the band are first class, especially guitarist Dave Klym who really rips up a storm on the frantic country honk of 'Rich Man', and adds a lovely bluesy tinge to the laid back rocker 'Oblivion'. The band create terrific energy in these grooves and what comes over quite clearly is just how much fun these guys are having. *Song and Dance Man* is infectious and it bloody well kicks arse - can't wait to see him live.

AH





Sergio Mendes Et Brazil '66

Look Around

Speakers Corner At&M SP 4137 **180g**

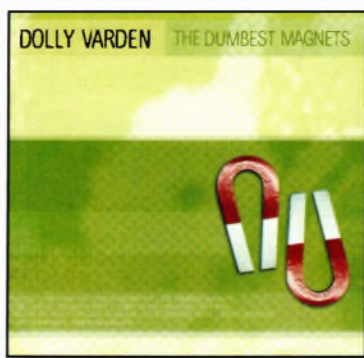
Hmm. The thing is that it's a Sunday morning and we had a bit of a dinner party last night. The wine was great, especially the Viognier and the Errazuriz Cabernet Sauvignon Reserve, but maybe the '78 Ardbeg malt wasn't such a good idea. So here I am nursing a mild hangover, slightly befuddled, wanting some music but in no mood for anything in the least bit challenging. Gentle, soothing, undemanding. What do I reach for? This has proved a bit of a problem in the past but Sergio Mendes seems to have delivered just the remedy with this album.

Totally undemanding and a very pleasant experience throughout – as long as you don't listen to the English lyrics, and there's no need to – it's the overall 'cool bath' of sound I crave. There's enough drive to keep the album from being soporific and the gentle wash of Brazilian sound is better than any Radox bath.

The recording is very good and 30 minutes with this has set me up beautifully for more challenging fare. Now where's that Pixies album?

DD

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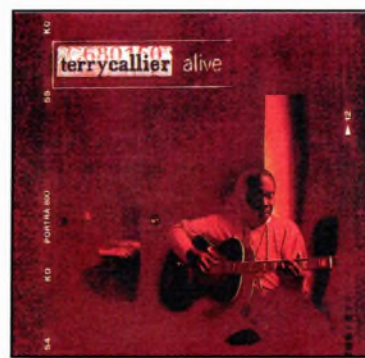
Dolly Varden

The Dumbest Magnets

Vital/Flying Sparks TDBC052 **CD**

One of the most widely praised albums of 2000 in its native USA, *The Dumbest Magnets* finally gets a UK release. Dolly Varden are based around the talents (and voices) of husband and wife team Steve Dawson and Diane Christiansen, producing songs of impeccable poise and great beauty. Built on a straight forward rhythm section and carefully layered guitars the recording is refreshingly under-produced, never cluttering the effective arrangements and melodies, never intruding on the deeply personal space of the perfect vocal harmonies. These are simple songs, yet with a deep intelligence, carried on the intimate relationship of the two voices. The harmonies aren't overdone but weave around each other, dropping in and out at will with an intuitive, almost telepathic sense of what's right. But don't get the idea that all is sweetness and light. There's spark and bite aplenty when required, applied with a deftness of touch that's reminiscent of the brothers Finn at their considerable best. Dolly Varden are America's best kept secret in years, and it's criminal that we've been kept waiting to enjoy their music. Sadly, it's going to stay that way unless we vote with our wallets. But rest assured, this is one statement that you can make without fear of disappointment. If this is an investment in the musical future, then things are looking bright. This is a fantastic album.

RG



Terry Callier

Alive

Mr BongoRecordings MRBCD 19 **CD**

Remember *Fire On Ice* that soulful 1978 album on which Terry Callier traded vocals with a soaring, multi-octave, Minnie Ripperton? Well, listen to those tracks again and you'll quickly realise they're so brimming over with kitsch that a side order of salad and chips should be on the menu. More than most, this is a record which shows its age. Today, a reprise of 'african violet' on his new, live outing recorded in London's Jazz Café, barely exhibits a passing resemblance. Whereas many musicians (in times of anonymity) reclusively turn towards obscure religious doctrines, Terry Callier just kept playing until he was rediscovered by the U.K. acid jazz movement of the early Nineties. There then began a long and productive association between Callier and the London scene – culminating in this recording made during the Café's Tenth anniversary celebrations. *Alive*, has the spontaneity, pace and scats you'd expect from a singer who simply thrives on adulation. His magnificently rich inflexions gee up the audience right from an opening, 'ordinary joe', through to some scorching harmonies which feature the delicious Veronica Cowper on a closing, 'I don't wanna see myself. Jim Mullen has, since the late Sixties, bent wire with the best of them. Dave Trigwell's rhythm and timing proves he's a master drummer. While keyboardist, Chris Kibble, and ivory man, Mark Edwards, both add a modern sparkle from their pop/light jazz backgrounds.

RP





Tom Ovans

Still in the World

Evangeline CDGEL4019 (CD)

Tom Ovans released one of the year 2000's best albums with the sublime *The Beat Trade*, a record of stark, desperate beauty. Now he's gone and done it again with *Still In This World*, an album full of haunting road songs which further enhances his growing reputation as one of America's finest undercover songwriters. Ovans was born in Boston, Massachusetts but left in his early teens and has been a wandering troubadour ever since. His songs have a weary, gritty feel, as you would expect from someone who has spent a lifetime on the road. Living in cheap, seedy motels and walking the dusty and dangerous trails of America's backyard. Ovans has a unique vocal style. Imagine a slightly higher registered Tom Waits infused with a touch of Lou Reed and Bob Dylan and you're getting closer. He favours the singing/talking approach, using this style to great effect on tracks like 'Cool Daddy', a song that breaks the back of the American Dream and hammers home the hypocrisy that exists in the so-called land of the free. The sound is generally stripped back to Ovans acoustic guitar and Harmonica with minimal backing of bass and occasional backing vocals, although electric guitar and drums are added to a few songs, giving them a more urban, menacing feel. Tom Ovans is a lost American treasure. I get the impression that's the way he wants it to stay.

AH



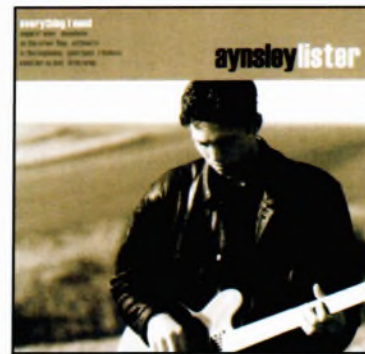
Dark Star

"twenty twenty sound"

Harvest 497 2012 (CD)

20:20 sound was mentioned in passing in Issue 9, however the album deserves a much closer look. Dark Star are the biggest sounding three piece you'll ever hear, playing what is essentially psychedelic progressive rock, relying on huge vistas of sound to take listeners on journeys through dark and seedy places. Layers upon layers of effects turn Bie's (guitarist, Christian Hayes, prefers to be known by the moniker of France's favourite ballpoint) incredibly simple guitar lines into an entire orchestra of noises, whilst David Francolini is possibly the best rock drummer in existence. 'About 3am' and 'Graceadelica' show this off to best effect. Thundering drums, impeccably recorded, are key to Dark Star's sound and give an incredibly hard edge to the album. Francolini remains the only drummer I have ever seen drum with maracas in order to get even more sounds out of four limbs. Although the album relies so heavily on effects it is actually deceptively simple in form. Veteran producer Steve Lillwhite caught the sound of the band playing almost live, and there is no doubt that this comes across. In the three minute blast of 'I am the sun' the band positively bristle with energy. *20:20 sound* is unlikely to ever be re-released, and the longer the band remain silent the slimmer the chances of this become, but it's well worth a listen for a glimpse of something innovative and refreshingly different.

MC



Aynsley Lister

Everthing I need

Ruf Records - RUF1055 (CD)

Aynsley Lister is a 23 year old from Leicester who is going to give Jonny Lang and Kenny Wayne Shepherd a serious run for their money in the blues/rock Stakes. Anyone who has witnessed this remarkable young man live will testify that he's a special kind of talent, a true master of the blues/rock guitar, whose reputation will be further enhanced by this fine album. 'What I need', the opening self-titled track, kicks in hard with a huge, chunky riff. It's catchy, insurgent and exciting and it's definitely rock n' roll! 'Angel O' Mine' follows hard on it's heels, all bluesy and sexy with fine vocals from Lister. 'Soundman' starts off as a Texas shuffle and then cuts back, Lister throwing in some lovely guitar licks over a really gritty vocal. 'As the Crow Flies' finds him in acoustic mode, the song reminiscent of 'Seagull' from the first Bad Company album. However, the real Tour-de Force is the 7 minute slow blues epic 'Need Her So Bad', a song to rival Stevie Ray's 'Tin Pan Alley' for sheer, dripping emotion. Lister's playing and singing throughout this album belies his 23 years, and the production by ex-Hoax guitarist Jesse Davey is truly sparkling. If you're fed up with the manufactured tripe this country has been churning out of late, then go and purchase this -It'll restore your faith in the British Music scene.

AH



Sonic Satori

by Michael Mercer



Counting Crows Recovering The Satellites

Mobile Fidelity UDCD 750 

Before the summer of 1994 the Counting Crows were virtually unknown to the record buying public. The band had completed their first album *August & Everything After* early in 1993, but it was the consistent play of the video for their hit single "Mr. Jones" on MTV that turned them into an overnight success (along with a great deal of radio play of course). Soon the band's lead singer Adam Durvitz found it increasingly difficult to lead his private life (his face dominated the video and was all over the press). The attention caught Durvitz and the band by surprise, leaving them in a pensive state of mind. *Recovering The Satellites*, their second album release in 1996 captivated their distaste for fame and the subject matter was not a surprising

one. *August and Everything After* was, after all, a dark record full of despondent lyrics and eerie vocals. "Mr. Jones" happened to be the only upbeat song on the record, which explains the band's discontent with their over-whelming instant stardom.

Throughout *Satellites* the band contemplates their sudden loss of privacy. The record is full of somber phrases such as 'leave my sister alone', 'I'm not sleeping anymore' and 'Have You Seen Me Lately?' 'Miller's Angels' is a morose ballad, with dreary piano riffs and torn vocals. Durvitz delivers a power-fully expressive performance on 'Good Night Elizabeth' a song that seems to serve as closure for a failed relationship. Though definitely not an up-lifting album, it's certainly a well-crafted collection of folk-rock, soulful lyrics and good tunes.


Well, the folks at Mobile fidelity attempted to extract more painful details from this record than the original Geffen release. They certainly achieved their goal! If that goal means bringing out the nuances in the music that were previously

undetected). After numerous A/B tests with the re-issue and the original, one factor was abundantly clear. There is an airiness to the Mofi CD that is wholly unmatched by it's predecessor. One can actually distinguish space between instruments, and the warmth of Durvitz's lyrics fill the soundstage without losing specificity. The strumming of guitar strings is vibrant and full of texture. Percussion is tight and focused, without overwhelming the piano and other instruments. The conclusion being; if you are a fan of the Crows there is no reason not to drop the extra money on the 24-Karat pressing by Mobile Fidelity if you can find one. Much to this reviewer's dismay the label has folded. This piece may seem an exercise in futility, but you can still find these Mofi albums in catalogues like Acoustic Sounds or Vivante, and others like them. Be resourceful if you're a true fan. This re-issue may be the closest you'll ever get to being in the studio with the band.

SONICS
MUSIC



Dave Ralph Love Parade: Berlin

Kinetic Records 2-54664 

Berlin's *Love Parade* could very well be the biggest gathering of electronic music fans in the world. For an entire day the streets of the German city are transformed into one tremendous dance party. DJs and ravers from all over the globe come to get loose and have a bangin' time. The geographical significance of the event may seem null and void to some, but I feel it stems far beyond just another European street party. Germany has, and still does to a certain degree, instill hate and fear in some people. For the new generation to be able to come together and celebrate through dance in a place where Hitler's beliefs were once embraced is indicative of what we can do when we stuff our inhibitions and fear in the closet, and stand together side by side in peace. Dave Ralph has been quoted saying "This is the biggest party in the world. It's the biggest gathering of people through music that I can think of. It's the single most significant party on the planet." Strong words. When I read about Ralph's passion for this event

I knew his album *Love Parade: Berlin* was going to be a labor of love.

According to the press the tracks for the record were compiled months before the grand party and the set was tested on various crowds prior to the actual event. Dave Ralph spun the chosen selection at the closing of the 2000 *Love Parade*. Once again an artist has attempted to bring fans to an area of the globe they may never see through music. Trying to capture the pure magnitude of this gathering must have been quite an under-taking, and the result is wonderful. The CD is packed with great tracks, including cuts from Moby, Nuclear Ramjet, and Green Velvet ('Flash', a classic from Velvet, was remixed by musical wizard Timo Maas). Ralph is seamless on the decks and the sequencing creates a spectacular flow of energy. Sonically speaking: The upper frequencies are clean. Midrange could be a bit richer and more coherent. This is, however, forgivable as the bottom rocked my living / listening room with tight, poignantly delivered bass lines. The sound on the compact disc is not fantastic but the music certainly is. It left me craving a version on vinyl. The album includes an enhanced video, which is a cool added bonus. An essential disc for any dance fan's collection.

RECORDING
MUSIC



John Digweed Global Underground Los Angeles 019

Boxed GU 019CD

John Digweed's two previous *Global Underground* endeavors, *Hong Kong* and *Sydney*, were true testaments to his turntable craftsmanship and his innate ability to capture the energy of a packed dance floor. The vibe for his *Los Angeles* release was set on a damp night in October at the Mayan Theater. Though the event occurred on a weekday, the Digger managed to sell out the venue weeks before. After experiencing the album a few times over it's clear why those people decided to troop it out on a school night. According to the press Digweed spun for a good six hours, with the owner of the club allowing him an extra 90 minutes for his finale. *Global Underground Los Angeles 019* is a looking glass

into the darker and less conventional side of this world class DJ.

Incremental bass lines blend seamlessly with tweaked out chord progressions and eerie melodies. The first disc sets the pace with an ascending set of driving beats and a serious attitude. Digweed's meticulousness behind the decks is shockingly clear here: The beat matching is aggressive and precise: His record selection is packed with great under-ground producers and artists. With tracks like Photek's atmospheric 'Mine To Give' and Medway's 'My Release' the listener is in for a true journey through the dark heart of electronic music. He also manages to throw in the ethereal 'The Fall' from the *Way Out West* camp, which breaks the intensity with dreamy riffs and emotive vocals. The production on the record does a fine job of articulating the energy behind the music. The grooves are transparent and detailed. Percussive elements are poignant and clear. There is a solid balance between the midrange and the bass, which is uncommon for recordings in this genre. Looking for an LA dance experience and short on cash? Pick up this record and heat up that solid state. You're in for a good time.

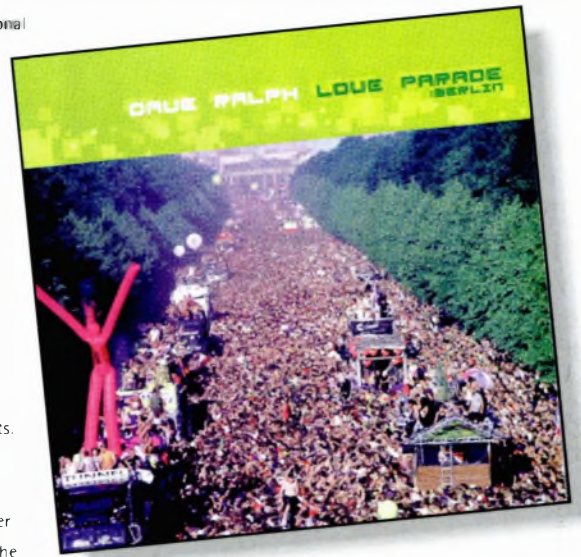
RECORDING
MUSIC



Sigur Ros *Ágætis Byrjun*

Fat Cat Records 946.0001.20

Stunning pop performances are not on Iceland's top export list (excluding Bjork). Low and behold, *Ágætis Byrjun* landed on American shores full of musical treasures. This record is a vast collection of emotional power ballads with arching melodies, ethereal vocals, and airy instrumentation. Led by the gentle moans (I don't pretend to understand the language) of guitarist and lead singer Jon Thor Birgisson this foursome cranks out more sounds than most bands twice their size. The somber energy



that lingers throughout all ten tracks makes for very engaging late night listening, but not recommended for the cured-by-Prozac depressives out there looking for some music to relate to. The album can get downright sad at times, but beautiful nonetheless, and worth the occasional teary eye. Unfortunately the artwork and insert are more aesthetically pleasing than they are informative, and the sparse information that does exist is in Icelandic. The intricate guitar distortion and eerie bass lines create a looming audible landscape that is both exquisite and multi-dimensional. It seems the engineer threw the vocals and bass way up front and over the top of the drums (more so than usual) which creates an interesting oval effect in the soundstage. As twisted as this may seem it works very well. There is continuity to all the songs on *Ágætis Byrjun*. Most are somber ballads with dreamy vocals and eclectic arrangements. Audio buffs should dig this record. The guitar, while distorted, is enveloping and detailed: Bass lines are clear and low, without rumbling over the rest of the instruments. The drum kit can get a little lost in the mix at times, but it's coherent and wonderfully tight. Notice to all Spiritualized fans: Go out and buy this record, you won't be disappointed.

RECORDING
MUSIC



Vinyl Heaven

Analogue Productions Revive Direct Cuts

by Roy Gregory

Anybody who doubts the continuing relevance of the vinyl LP to music reproduction in the home should crawl out from under their rock and have a look around. When a national broad sheet (The Independent, March 3rd 2001, "Let's put the record straight") devotes half a page to the subject of why its readers should be buying their music on secondhand records, then it's time to sit up and take notice. Leaving the whole question of used vinyl and the derivative nature of so much modern music aside, sales of new vinyl were up 40% last year, a fact reflected in the availability of just about the whole Top 20 on record once again. And it's not just the dance craze that's fuelling sales. Having discovered the all too audible benefits of analogue replay, a lot of these kids are choosing to buy their albums on vinyl too.

Of course, the audiophile labels have always been high quality vinyl advocates, collectively establishing a new standard in the shape of the 180g LP. Now, one of the format's most vociferous pioneers, Chad Kassem of Analogue Productions has gone a stage further and revived the direct cut.

Not since the heyday of Sheffield Labs has this difficult and contentious technology been used, and even then the results were mixed to say the least: fine for audiophile

demonstration discs, less impressive with real music. In fact, there are those amongst our younger readers who may even wonder just what a direct cut record is, so perhaps I'd better explain.

In a conventional analogue recording, the music is stored on tapes. These tapes can then be edited down to create a final production master-tape that is, in turn, used to supply the signal to a record cutting lathe. Direct cutting, as the name implies, dispenses with the tape, and feeds the take from the microphones straight to the cutting lathe. Getting rid of the tape reduces the noise floor, increasing the dynamic range and transparency of the recording, whilst the elimination of the additional stages itself helps increase the immediacy. Listen to a direct cut disc and the sound is direct indeed. The problem is that along with the tape, you are throwing away the ability to edit, re-mix or re-press the recording. What they play is what you get, and you only get one go at that, which considering how complex and exacting the use of a cutting lathe is, makes for a pretty high failure rate. It's no surprise that Sheffield's best attempt was Thelma Houston's Pressure Cooker, an album of tight, compact and above all, short pop songs.

Of course, the other thing about direct cuts is that as live recordings

you need a live artist to record, which rules out most of the audiophile labels, who concentrate on re-issues. But not Analogue Productions, who have been busily recording legendary blues men for some years now, in their own Blue Heaven studio. Under the circumstances, direct cutting was a logical progression, especially given that the raw energy of live blues and the sheer presence and immediacy of a direct cut record are simply made for each other.

Of course it's never that simple, and the failure of the first two attempts (they'll appear as conventional LPs) serves to underline that fact. But now, finally, we have the first fruits of the project, and they are well worth the wait. Two albums, one by Lazy Lester, the other by Wild Child Butler, that really deliver the goods, sonically and musically. Both are essential to any self-respecting record collection, which makes our offer all the more attractive.

In order to celebrate these releases, hififorsale.com are offering hi-fi+ readers 15% off not just the two direct cuts, but all the other Analogue Productions Originals (covered in depth by RP in Issue 9) as well. And because not all of you have discovered the joys of analogue, they've extended that to include the CDs, as well as 10% off of their other accessories (excluding Nordost cables). ▶



Lazy Lester
Analogue Productions APO 003

Direct Cut **180g**

Lazy Lester made his name playing harp for Lightnin' Slim, and has gone on to record with some of the finest blues acts in the business, as well as cutting records in his own right. Here we hear him playing straight ahead swamp blues, handling acoustic guitar, vocals and harmonica, supported by Jimmy D Lane (dobro) and Henry Gray (piano). The performance is everything you'd expect, down to the rolling gait of the rhythm and the tortured edge to the voice. This is classic blues, performed by a master – but the real treat, and surprise, comes on side two, where Lazy, in open defiance of that epithet, takes the whole thing on himself, playing with just his acoustic guitar and tambourine foot boards. The result is stunning in its simplicity, masterful in its execution. Sonically, this disc, for whatever reason, isn't a match for the Wild Child Butler, which shades it for both dynamics and transparency. Having said that, it's still pretty spectacular, and musically its right up there. For me, the range and sensitivity of Wild Child, as well as his better voice win the day, but if you like your blues raw and in the mould of Muddy Waters then you'll probably prefer Lester's approach. Of course, you'll have to buy both discs to make an informed judgement, and I can't see you being disappointed with either. Lester's a star, and you've never heard him like this before.

RG



Wild Child Butler
Analogue Productions APO 004

Direct Cut **180g**

George 'Wild Child' Butler isn't what you might expect. His childhood nickname might have stuck, but these are soulful folk/blues in a style that's all his own. His gruff but tuneful voice and sensitive harp are ably supported by Aaron Griggs and Jimmy D Lane (guitars), Julian Grech (bass) and Geoffrey Daye (Drums) and the delicately wrought pace and musical drive of the performance is well served by the immediacy of the sound. If you are somebody who likes live blues but finds the recorded variety disappointing then this is the record for you. Sound is superb, the bass satisfyingly deep and tactile, the guitars soaring effortlessly. These are original and inventive tracks, with the result that you never know quite where those familiar blues trails are going to wind up. The second side, with the band stripped away to acoustic guitar, dobro voice and harmonica is, if anything, sonically even more spectacular, with tangible, lifesize images playing for your pleasure. The freedom and space that comes with the absence of a traditional rhythm section allows the interplay of guitars and harmonica to become even more intimate and complex, providing the perfect foundation for Wild Child's excellent vocals. The superb sound never showboats or distracts from the music, which makes a nice change, especially welcome as this is a stellar lead performance with top drawer support.

RG



Special Offer

In order to receive 15% off of Analogue Productions Original recordings or 10% off of Audiophile Candy Accessories (phone 0870 241 2469 for details), simply clip, fill out and return this coupon to hififorsale.com.

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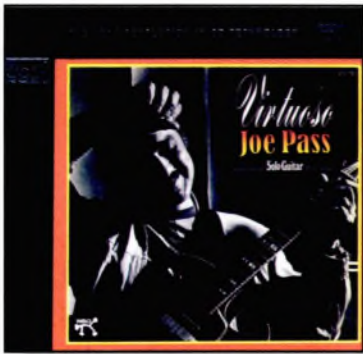
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Joe Pass

Virtuoso

Pablo/ XRCO VICJ 60256

This album recorded in '73 was Joe Pass' debut for Pablo, a label he subsequently went on to record some of his finest work for, including three more 'Virtuoso' titles. This is generally regarded to be his best solo album. Running through a series of standards including 'Stella by Starlight' and "Round Midnight" Pass displays his consummate musicianship throughout. And whilst he might be accused of being a little too slick and unadventurous his ability to hold the essential melody and feeling of the tune, his precision and sheer skill are on display from start to finish. The recording, one of Pablo's best efforts on the original LP is superbly lively and 'in the room' on this XRCO. There's real precision and attack in his playing, every note, every string and the body of the guitar are clearly rendered, and yet there's an entirely natural, mellow feel overall. For once there's not a seven-foot wide guitar between the speakers, just a realistically proportioned and very tangible image. This one is a real winner both sonically and musically.

Supplier: Vivante 0208-977-6600

DD



The Dizzy Gillespie Quintet

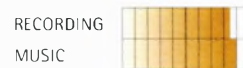
An Electrifying Evening With ...

Speakers Corner/Verve V/V6 8401

Recorded in '61 live in concert at The Museum of Modern Art, New York, this four track set lives up to its title from the very first notes. Fronting a quintet including Leo Wright, Chuck Lampkin, Bob Cunningham (none of these are 'top of mind' names to me) and surprisingly Lalo Shifrin on piano, it's a straight-ahead and storming set from the off. The band charges through 'Kush' 'Salt Peanuts' 'Night in Tunisia' (of course), and Ellington's 'The Mooche', and if I had to use a single word to describe the album it'd be dynamic. The energy levels here are extraordinary and the recording does the music full justice. A touch bright maybe, but who cares, it suits the music. There's tangible presence and real power with a truly deep and wide soundstage. The guts and drive here got my foot tapping from the first bars and the album energises like a litre of red bull. If you can sit still whilst this is playing you're probably clinically dead. At less than 36 minutes, it may seem like poor value but don't you believe it. This is a storming and truly 'live' set.

Supplier: Vivante - www.vivante.co.uk

DD



Tatum, Webster, Callender,
Douglass

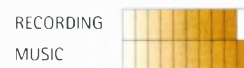
Tatum Group Masterpieces

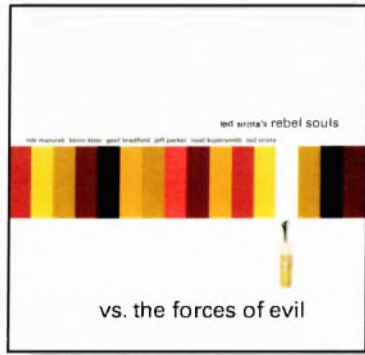
Pablo/ XRCO JVCXR - 0034-2

Some recordings have the capacity, whatever your mood when you cue it up, to bring an instant smile to your face. This long-time favourite of mine is just such an album. It's a true masterpiece and the best of an almost uniformly excellent selection of *Tatum Group Masterpieces*. Although at first glance the combination of the nimble fingered Tatum with the breathy, laid-back tones of Webster might sound like an unlikely pairing, it turns out to be a marriage made in heaven. Each musician perfectly complements the other, with Webster's tenor floating above the fast moving river of Tatum's keyboard. The album takes in ten standards, including 'Night and Day' and two takes of 'Gone With the Wind', but frankly the playing is so superb throughout that these guys could cover 'I'm a Pink Toothbrush' and make it sound magnificent. The (mono) sound is very good, capturing fine nuances of technique without losing the essential analogue warmth and body. A major improvement on the already acceptable sounding standard CD issue. An essential purchase.

Supplier: Vivante 0208-977-6600

DD





Ted Sirota's Rebel Souls

vs. the forces of evil

naim cd051 (CD)

Since their last release, *Propaganda*, Geoff Bradfield has joined the band, filling out the sound with tenor and alto sax, and bass clarinet. One thing that hasn't changed is the propulsive drumming of Sirota powering the sextet through this eight number release. I love the way he works his kit, managing to take in a wide range of percussive effects without indulging in unnecessary soloing, each beat contributing totally to the overall sound. Bradfield, who also contributes three compositions, is a welcome addition, his bass clarinet in particular adding a warmth that was sometimes missing in the earlier band. The whole set is strong, but I particularly like one of the more gentle tunes 'You Know Me' and the reggae influenced 'Tubby' ('King' not 'Hayes' I'm sure).

The sound quality, recorded direct to two track by Ken Christianson is good and captures Sirota's drums well. However, the overall sound does feel very slightly anaemic to me – the bass slightly soft, with some loss of body overall – when compared to better naim recordings, or for example, to Mapleshade recordings. These are fine points though, and the CD, like Sirota's earlier releases, is a hugely enjoyable set.

Supplier: Naim Audio
DD



Sonny Rollins

The Contemporary Leaders

Contemporary XRCD VICJ-60244 (XR)

Originally released in '58, a year after he split with Max Roach to forge his own path, this album is entirely characteristic of the man. Covering a wide selection of tunes from Jerome Kern's 'Every Little Star', to 'How High the Moon', even a daft tune that few others would consider (shades of 'I'm an Old Cowhand' here) 'Rock-a-bye Your Baby with a Dixie Melody'. As ever Rollins gets away with it, stamping his authority and turning in a highly enjoyable performance whilst sharing the joke. He's ably backed throughout by Hampton Hawes, Barney Kessel, Shelly Manne and Leroy Vinnegar, with Kessel shining with some particularly deft playing in 'How High the Moon'. On many tracks Rollins feels a little laid-back, not as fiery as he can be although he does break free occasionally. Victor Feldman joins the band to add some great vibe work on 'You'. Whilst I wouldn't place this in the top rank of Rollins work (it's not up there with *Saxophone Colossus*, *The Bridge* or *Way Out West* for example) it's still a fine album by any standards. The XRCD re-mastering is also fine, delivering plenty of detail, crisp, extended highs without undue brightness, good detail throughout and no obvious loss of analogue warmth.

Supplier: Vivante - www.vivante.co.uk
DD



Bill Bruford's Earthworks

The Sound of Surprise

DGM 0101 (CD)

This CD follows a couple of years of constant playing and touring by the band, and is *Earthworks'* first fully acoustic album. The album's title comes from the New York music critic Whitney Balliett's classic book and was originally coined to describe the essence of jazz.

The move to acoustic hasn't substantially altered the character of the band – why should it – but does result in a more organic feel, with the tunes more naturally flowing into each other. The standard of playing throughout is excellent, I'm a sucker for acoustic bass and particularly enjoyed Mark Hodgson's contributions, but Bruford drives the band forward with his customary energy. It's actually pointless to single out any player since Patrick Gleaher (tenor and soprano sax), and Steve Hamilton (piano) are equally fine, and what makes the whole thing work so well is the seamless integration of them all.

The recording quality is good; dynamic and detailed underpinned with a rich, rounded bottom end. The CD also contains video footage of the band in concert and incidentally the album also has a fine sleeve by Dave McKean at Hourglass, who also designed the outstanding packaging for Iain Ballamy's last two releases.

Supplier: Celebration/ DGM
DD





Weigl
String Quartets Nos. 1 and 5

Artistic Quartett Wien

Nimbus NI 5646 (CD)

Karl Weigl's music has remained neglected for over fifty years, but why is a puzzle. He was a pupil of Zemlinsky, a principal member of Schönberg's inner circle, and a rehearsal conductor for Mahler. He won prestigious music awards, and was championed by many distinguished musicians, before he was forced to flee Austria, in 1938, by the Nazis, spending his final years of compositional isolation in the United States.

These two compelling compositions reveal Weigl's ability to combine the ideas and presentation of the new, with the culture and spirit of the Viennese tradition. The *1st Quartet* is a wonderful work, full of passion and romantic ideals, drawing a noticeable similarity with Schönberg's own *1st Quartet*, but with noticeable homage to Brahms and Mahler. The *5th Quartet* is a more conservative composition that rejects Schönberg's tonal innovations.

These committed performances are of the highest standard, with impeccable playing and the clever use of timing, resulting in totally convincing polyphonic effects. The recording is also very good, with superb tone and good separation, making it easy to follow Weigl's wonderful use of counterpoint and harmony.

An excellent CD, and an excellent introduction to this sadly neglected, yet talented composer.

SG



Haydn
Piano concertos 3, 4 and 11

Norwegian Chamber orchestra
Leif Ove Andsnes, piano/director

EMI CDC 5 56960-2 (CD)

Received wisdom is that Haydn's keyboard concertos are pretty trifles; attractive enough, but unworthy of being mentioned in the same breath as Mozart's series of great masterpieces. Agreed, the three works featured on the present disc hardly scale the heights (or depths) of emotions. But the music is engaging and highly entertaining, with a sure but light touch that charms the senses. No 11 is the most popular of all Haydn's concertos, and deservedly so; the work brims with good humour and a zestful brilliance that few composers could match. Leif Ove Andsnes and the Norwegian chamber orchestra give polished sophisticated performances that emphasise the music's elegance and poise. The slow movements are beautifully phrased, but finales sound spirited and joyful. The sound produced by these players using modern instruments is perhaps more cultured than Haydn would've expected, but only those wanting period instrument authenticity are likely to grumble. The recording is gorgeous: tonally very sweet and clean, yet lucid and articulate with excellent clarity. Everything sounds absolutely clean and natural; detail cuts through clearly with no sense of microphone spotlighting, and there's plenty of space around piano and orchestra despite a crisp immediate balance.

JMH



Suk
Summer Tale/Fantastic Scherzo

Czech Philharmonic/Mackerras

Decca 466 443-2 (CD)

Summer Tale was the follow-up to the *Asrael Symphony* - a profound lament written after the deaths of both Suk's wife, and his father-in-law, Dvorák. It is a magnificent work, showing a determination not to succumb to the bleakness of *Asrael*, and represents the healing powers of time. Despite this it can sound mournful, with malevolent nightmares rising occasionally from the underlying empathy of hope. The earlier *Fantastic Scherzo* abounds with wonderful melodies that bring forth an oddly disjointed dream world, but also combine with rhythmic vitality and Suk's resplendent orchestration, resulting in a work that is somewhat akin to a cheerful *Danse Macabre*.

Mackerras understands this repertory perfectly, directing the music, by using both Suk's framework and his own tempos, to perceive the composer's inventive musical prose and instilling an almost Mahlerian feel for nature. The Czech Philharmonic plays with radiant, tender charm, but can sound energetic and alive when the moment requires it.

The sound is very good, being warm, dynamic and detailed, with good separation.

Suk was a profound and talented composer of the early 20th Century, and with the help of Mackerras and the Czech Philharmonic, nowhere is this born out better than on this CD.

SG





Sibelius
En Saga; The Bard; Tapiola;
Spring Song etc.
Gothenburg symphony orchestra.
Neeme Jarvi

DG 457 654-2 (CD)

These recordings represent Jarvi's second thoughts on repertoire he first recorded with this orchestra back in the early '80s for BIS. Always one to favour fastish tempi, his new performances are even quicker than the earlier ones. Jarvi takes a brisk no-nonsense view of the music, and while this creates excitement, it also results in a lack of that dark brooding melancholy that lies at the heart of so much of Sibelius' music. *En Saga*, for example, emerges lean and taut in Jarvi's hands, with a dramatic cogency that has considerable sweep and energy. At the same time there's an almost indecent haste about the performance which robs the music of its spacious epic grandeur. *Tapiola* is much the same: impressively lithe and (at times) almost feverish, yet missing the inexorable power that lies at the heart of Sibelius' remarkable evocation of the vast mysterious northern forests. No, if it's atmosphere you want, Jarvi's not your man. Go to him for bracing freshness and clarity of purpose. Perhaps for this reason the *Kuolema* excerpts are the most successful items of the disc; Jarvi's lack of gravitas is not an impediment here. DG's recordings sound bright lively and open, with good definition and detail.

JMH

RECORDING
 MUSIC



Schubert
Piano Sonatas D850 and D784
Mitsuko Uchida

Philips 464 480-2 (CD)

This is the latest in Uchida's excellent cycle of Schubert's solo piano works, and continues the high standards set by the previous five. The playing is elegant, lively and passionate. Effortless and inspirational the performances bring life to Schubert's grand compositions which are brilliant and extrovert. Uchida is the foremost Schubertian of the modern era, and in *Sonata D850* she exhibits poignancy and subtlety mixed with imperious boldness. She reveals nostalgic playfulness, but this is never allowed to dominate. The earlier sonata is the opposite in character to the first work on this disc, sounding majestic, but more austere, bleak and serious. Despite a weariness in the music, Uchida's playing never reveals this, centring more on the piece's grief and despair. Intense and full of weight, she chooses relatively fast tempi, not allowing the work to sound laboured. The recording is very good, as are many of Philips' piano recordings, if a touch bright at times. If you are either new to Schubert's wonderful piano sonatas, or to Uchida's performances of them, start with her earlier recordings of *Sonatas Nos. 15 and 18* (Philips 454 453-2), otherwise this is a first rate performance that I recommend wholeheartedly.

SG

RECORDING
 MUSIC



Bruckner
Symphony No 8
VPO/Pierre Boulez

DG 459 678-2 (CD)

Boulez conducting Bruckner; now there's a tantalising prospect! One would expect a certain detached objectivity; a cool perhaps rather olympian interpretation; Bruckner intellectualised. Yet the Bruckner that emerges is suprisingly red-blooded and intense. Agreed, Boulez keeps the music on a fairly tight reign. But the Vienna philharmonic are recognisably themselves, playing with passion and fiery commitment. The Haas version of the score is chosen, and that in itself says something about Boulez as a Brucknerian; how many conductors claim sympathy with this composer, yet choose the inferior truncated Nowak edition? One might've predicted fastish tempi from Boulez, but overall he takes about 76 minutes over the work. Only the scherzo feels fast - Boulez takes about thirteen and a half minutes over it compared to Karajan's sixteen and a half. Talking of Karajan, there's a spiritual depth to his performance that's lacking here; his is truly an epic account of great profundity. Boulez' performance is more cerebral, yet curiously the frenchman's objectivity enhances the music's stature. It was recorded live in St Florian, the monastery where Bruckner played the organ and is buried. The sound is detailed and clear, without excessive reverberation, and dynamic range is impressive. If Bruckner was there in spirit during the performance, I wonder what he thought!

JMH

RECORDING
 MUSIC





Telemann
String Concertos and Divertimenti

Musica Antiqua Köln/Goebel

Archiv Production 463 074-2

Having been an advocate of Telemann for over a quarter of a century, Goebel once again turns his attentions to this groundbreaking composer. This CD takes us from some of his folk inspired works, which probably date from his earlier years, to the two *Divertimenti*, dating from his very last period of composition. Although Telemann was then well into his 80s, these works sound as fresh and inventive as his earlier pieces, and are full of youthful fervour. Each work sounds alive, with colourful vivacity, and all are stylistically advanced beyond their time. Goebel reveals the real character of the music, from the buoyant rhythms to the elegant textures that make each such a delight. The *Musica Antiqua Köln* play with gusto and obvious enthusiasm, and all the performances are full of a vitality and vigour which move each piece along with a natural impulse. In the superb *Viola Concerto*, the soloist, Florian Deuter, plays with expressive verve and understanding.

This is one of the best sounding recordings from this source, being warm, vivid and spacious. The tones are natural, with plenty of vibrato and life emanating from the strings. This is an engaging and outstanding recording in every way.

SG



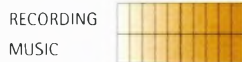
Songs Without Words
Music by Bach/Busoni,
Mendelssohn, Schubert/Liszt

Murray Perahia, piano

Sony SK 66511

Perfection is a tall claim to make for any performance or recording. But listening to this exquisite CD it's hard not to entertain such thoughts. Perahia's playing is beautifully focussed and crisply articulated, yet at the same time warm-toned and naturally shaped. It's almost as though the microphones eavesdropped on him playing for his own private pleasure, there being little or no sense of the music being formally presented to an audience. Rather, the experience is one of personal intimacy, with just a single privileged listener - you - being present. I especially value the chaste spirituality of the Bach/Busoni chorale preludes, while the excerpts from Mendelssohn's *Songs Without Words* offer playing of mercurial brilliance - *Op 67/4* (track 17) is especially impressive, demonstrating a flawless technique at the command of a wholly musical mind. Schubert's beautiful *Standchen* in Liszt's masterly arrangement is something to treasure (though Horowitz - also Sony - created an even more plausible impression of two people playing at once) and the disc ends powerfully with a rousing exciting rendition of the same composer's *Erkonig*. The Sony recording is warm-toned and natural, yet surprisingly articulate and effortlessly dynamic. It presents a close but not overpowering piano sound that is highly believable.

JMH



Schumann
Liederkreis/Romances and Ballades

Bryn Terfel/Malcolm Martineau

DG 447 042-2

In essence this is a CD of love songs, written by Schumann to Clara Wieck, mostly just prior to their marriage in 1840, and set to the words of various poets, such as Goethe, Byron and Burns. They reveal feelings of passion and devotion, mingled with a mysterious ecstasy and rapturous fulfilment, all flowing above an undercurrent of dark and threatening fears. Terfel sings with tenderness, but there is always a sense of his almost limitless power in reserve, waiting for those moments when real passion is required. His diction, as always, is superb, and he performs with intelligence, communicating each song with tremendous judgement. His dark and velvet tones are a thing of beauty, and, metaphorically, take centre stage to Martineau's competent accompaniment. While there are indeed no weak moments, the twelve songs of *Liederkreis* are surely the highlight, showing both performers at their accomplished best, with Terfel in particular revealing an extraordinary expressiveness. His voice almost seems to shimmer. The sound, recorded in Edinburgh and Swansea, is clear if not totally natural, with the performers simply panned left and right of centre. A beautiful disc of sumptuous singing, and one that comes highly recommended.

SG





Ravel
**Bolero, Rhapsodie Espagnole,
 La Valse, Pavane etc.**

BSO/ Seji Ozawa
 DG 469 628-2 **CD** **4**

Although it was some twenty-five years ago, I still remember the thrill of hearing Ozawa's DG set of Ravel's orchestral music on LP for the first time. It remains among the best things he and the Boston symphony did together. And DG's sound still impresses with its crisp attack and sharp, vivid primary colours. Especially in this new budget-priced CD transfer, which enhances the bite and detail of the original recordings - especially *Bolero*, *La Valse*, and *Albarado del Gracioso*, which had not received good CD transfers before now. Ozawa favours fast tempi, and the Boston players respond to his demands with virtuoso playing of the utmost brilliance. Perhaps atmosphere suffers at times - the sultry shimmering opening movement of *Rhapsodie Espagnole* is just a shade too crisply delineated to suggest the heavy-scented half-lights and mysteries of the night - but the more extrovert passages that follow are exhilarating and very exciting. The new remastering gives the sound more presence than it had in previous CD issues, and the transfer is made at a good high level. The added immediacy suits Ozawa's lithe vigorous performances handsomely.

JMH

RECORDING 
 MUSIC



Pergolesi
Stabat Mater/Salve Regina

**Scholl/Bonney/
 Les Talens Lyriques/Rousset**
 Decca 466 134-2 **CD**

Like Mozart's *Requiem*, *Stabat Mater* was written by a young composer who was close to death. The opening movement confirms their similarity, despite Mozart's choir being replaced by just two soloists and a small orchestra. Both soloists possess beautiful voices, with exquisite tones that match the mixture of occasional lively tempos and sombre, reverential moods which the work displays. The opening duet reveals their skills to perfection, where they exchange touching phrases. Bonney's superb range and control match her radiant tones, while Scholl, a committed Baroque performer, reveals the grave beauty of the melody with his striking musicality. While the soloists take the spotlight, Rousset and Les Talens Lyriques perform admirably.

The two *Salve Regina* follow in a similar vein, although the second is slightly lighter in tone, being livelier and less solemn. Here Bonney's voice seems to float above the orchestra in an ethereal way, while Scholl's is pure and focused.

The recording is clear and detailed, if a touch bright at times. But, there is an unnatural soundstage that leaves the performers, and especially the soloists, appearing to occupy the same space.

These are beautiful performances to be enjoyed by all those interested in vocal music.

SG

RECORDING 
 MUSIC



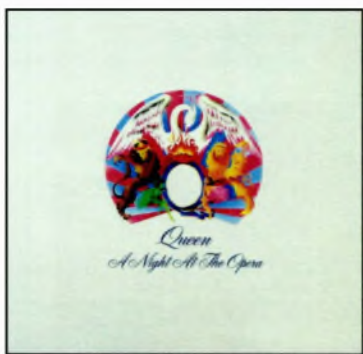
Albeniz
Iberia (orch. Breiner)

**Moscow symphony orchestra
 Golovschin**
 Naxos 8.553023 **CD**

Issac Albeniz originally created his masterpiece *Iberia* for piano. It was published in four books, each 'book' containing three movements. Although idiomatically conceived for keyboard (albeit formidably difficult to play), the music cries out for the colour and power of a full symphony orchestra. Nine of the twelve movements were orchestrated by Albeniz' contemporary Enrique Arbos, but this new version on Naxos features a completely new orchestration of all twelve by Slovak composer Peter Breiner. Not surprisingly, it gives a fresh slant on the music, and for the most part succeeds very well. If there's a criticism, it's that the big moments (the climaxes of *El Corpus en Seville* for example) lack the power and brilliant fiery sweep of the sun-drenched Arbos version. Elsewhere, in the quieter sections especially, Breiner shows an imaginative use of tone colour that sounds fresh and effective - for example, the use of Spanish guitar to create atmosphere. The Russian (!) performance is good without being outstanding; one could imagine playing of greater fire and passion, with rhythms more crisply sprung. Nice sound though - bright, sharp, open. The audiophile wanting the ultimate sonic spectacular would be better off with the sumptuous Telarc version. But those wishing to experience a new angle on this wonderful score should try this Naxos disc. At budget price you can't lose!

JMH

RECORDING 
 MUSIC



Queen

A Night At The Opera

DCC LPZ-2072 **180g**

'Scaramouche, Scaramouche, will you do the Fandango' – what again? Yes, it's the Queen album with THAT TRACK, this time on 180gm vinyl from DCC. I've still got my original pressing from way back when, and despite being played at least 100 times, it still sounds pretty damned good. Comparing the two shows cosmetic differences, the original being quite bright, but little difference that really counts. Where this one will win out is if you have a somewhat naff mid 80's pressing. And the album, well this was the first one where Queen really tried to stretch their wings from the relatively standard rock fare that made up the first two albums. As such, it comes across as a bit of a hotch-potch, mixing rock and ballads with vaudeville and a dire version of the National Anthem. Despite that, the album is mostly great fun, and is certainly more than just 'Bohemian Rhapsody' with a few extra tracks thrown in. The production is typical Roy Thomas Baker, all fat and flabby drums with most other instruments EQed to sound thin. So as recordings go, it's not an audiophile's delight, but for me that's not the point, it's the music that counts and it's nice to see the vinyl re-issuers letting us have musical delights at the best possible quality, whatever the flaws in the source material.

Supplier: Vivante – www.vivante.co.uk
DA



Kari Bremnes

Svarta Bjorn

ARS FXLP 200 **180g** (HD)

Ritual Seppuku? Well... not Quite, but jumping aboard the "hara" Kari Bremnes band wagon will, for the linguistically challenged at least, require a significant leap of faith as Svarta Bjorn is sung solely in Norwegian. I have no problem with this per se. But, had this been *Lieder*, or for that matter *Haiku*, I'd expect to be enlightened by a decent libretto or two when parting with my hard earned Krone. I can fully understand the wish to maximise this female flavour of the month's potential, but here it's been a case of less thought and more haste where those niceties are concerned. If you want to develop a deeper understanding of the folklore surrounding the turn-of-the-Century character and navy cook revered in the album's title, then bone up on Scandanavia because as the Japanese say, "It's all Norwegian to me!" The stories, spun within this 1998 release, clearly, judging from the contemplative style adopted by Bremnes, do deserve serious consideration, which only increases the frustration. However, without doubt, her voice is spectacularly well-recorded and the percussion, bass and guitar that underscore those dulcet tones have a "pinch yourself" immediacy. Should, as seems likely, ARS harvest the rest of the back catalogue, then I hope that either a serviceable translation of these folk songs, or a crash correspondence course will be provided as standard.

Supplier: Vivante 0208-977-6600
RP



Sibelius
Violin Concerto

Ricci/Fjeldstad/LSO

Speakers Corner/Decca SXL 2077 **180g**

Here's one I made earlier, or in Ricci's case, before Decca got fed up with his artistic tantrums. The Sibelius is, for my money, the most difficult of the great violin concertos to carry off convincingly. Many have tried, and most have failed. Ricci's notoriously Latin temperament and astringent tone might easily be predicted to sit awkwardly with this intensely lyrical score. Add Fjeldstad's clumsy lack of dynamic discrimination and a recording that is locationally vague and bedevilled with extraneous thumps and noise and you could be forgiven for asking why I even bothered to review it. The answer lies in a third movement that is absolute mustard. Ricci's jagged precision is spot on and full of drama, and Oivin finally gets to grips with the orchestra, fastening on a tempo which is as correct as his first two movements are wayward. The Tchaikovsky fillers are altogether more comfortable, with Ricci producing a charming *Serenade Melancolique*, but hardly justify the price of this record. That rests on the main event, which is deeply flawed. If you find Heifetz cloying then here is the perfect antidote, or if, like me, the Sibelius holds a special fascination for you then you'll not want to be without that third movement. Otherwise this is one for Ricci completists only, especially with the superb Haendel/Berglund/BSO reading on EMI readily available secondhand.


Supplier: Vivante 0208-977-6600
RG





Genesis

Nursery Cryme

Classic Records CAS 1052 

Once upon a time, in a land called Southern Eng, there toured tribes of troubadours, performing where they could. Most of these tribes were very different, but the one thing they had in common was a desire to push back the boundaries of popular music. The unwritten rules of instrumentation and song length were broken and the people were happy. Unfortunately for our heroes this antisocial behaviour disturbed the powers that be, who only had the attention span of the average butterfly. "Why" they said "should this be allowed to continue?" And so the broadsheets of the time proscribed any song longer than three minutes, or without the legal verse, chorus, verse structure. Such was their power that the people turned against the troubadours. Most of the tribes dispersed and disappeared into 'normal society', but some decided to conform. And so it was with Genesis, possibly the greatest of all the tribes. And most of the people forgot their previous transgressions, but some did not, and in a daring move the famous archaeologist C. Records has unearthed a number of these subversive recordings and made them once again available in their original black vinyl livery. Now you have the chance to upset the butterfly brains again, buy it now and play it to your children as they sleep soundly in their cots.

Supplier: Vivante 0208-977-6600

DA

RECORDING 
MUSIC



The Erik Westberg Vocal Ensemble

Musica Sacra

Opus 3 CD 19506 

This CD, as the title indicates, contains mainly sacred chorale music, dating from the medieval to the romantic periods, but here it is interspersed with jazz and folk. The performers consist of sixteen voices, organ, percussion, and improvisational saxophone that meld together in a surprisingly natural way. The singing is melodic, bringing a sense of inner peace, with *Parce Mihi Domine* providing a particularly spiritual experience. This is matched by the simple and poignant counterpoint produced by the other instruments. The saxophone is especially soulful, which gives *To the Mothers of Brazil/Salve Regina* its wonderful sense of heartfelt swing. The performances are accompanied by a totally appropriate recording. Here *Opus 3* provide one of their largest, and an especially deep, soundstage – the choir sit way back behind the speakers. Closing your eyes can bring a strange sense that you are actually sitting in a room far larger than possible, with physical walls simply disappearing. A single AKG microphone realistically captures the whole performance, and each performer can be heard within their own individual space. There is plenty of atmosphere, and the organ produces some wonderfully deep tones. A beautiful album for anyone wanting to encounter a wonderfully spiritual experience.

Available from – www.hififorsale.com

Tel: 0870 2412469


SG

RECORDING 
MUSIC



Sergio Mendes Et Brazil '66

Look Around

Speakers Corner A&M SP 4137 

Hmm. The thing is that's it's a Sunday morning and we had a bit of a dinner party last night. The wine was great, especially the Vioignier and the Errazuriz Cabernet Sauvignon Reserve, but maybe the '78 Ardbeg malt wasn't such a good idea. So here I am nursing a mild hangover, slightly befuddled, wanting some music but in no mood for anything in the least bit challenging. Gentle, soothing, undemanding. What do I reach for? This has proved a bit of a problem in the past but Sergio Mendes seems to have delivered just the remedy with this album.

Totally undemanding and a very pleasant experience throughout – as long as you don't listen to the English lyrics, and there's no need to – it's the overall 'cool bath' of sound I crave. There's enough drive to keep the album from being soporific and the gentle wash of Brazilian sound is better than any Radox bath.

The recording is very good and 30 minutes with this has set me up beautifully for more challenging fare. Now where's that Pixies album?

DD

Supplier: Vivante – Tel: (44)(0)208 977 6600

RECORDING 
MUSIC



Patricia Barber

Nightclub

Premonition 90749

I've thoroughly enjoyed Barber's other albums, particularly *Companion* but have had a niggling doubt that she's a little too obviously mannered, striving too hard for effect rather than relaxing into a song. With this album Barber's finally cracked it. As she says in the sleeve notes "Something special can happen late at night in a jazz club...as the crowd thins the musician's sense that those who have stayed have stayed for a reason. Reciprocity of need and desire inspires the musicians to dig as deeply into their talent and souls as they are able." That's exactly the sense that comes across in this recording; late night, unhurried and full of feeling. Barber delivers a cracking take on 'Alfie' and delivers quality interpretations of 11 other standards including 'Bye Bye Blackbird' and 'You Don't Know Me' to quote two other standouts. She also does a nicely sexy take of 'A Man and a Woman', in French of course. Barber is sensitively accompanied by acoustic bass, drums and on a few tracks, eight string guitar. The excellent recording is suitably open and warm-hearted realising a convincing three dimensionality to the whole performance.

Supplier: Vivante 0208-977-6600
DD



Stacey Kent

Let Yourself Go

Grooveland GLS 106

Well, I don't know whether her acting or dancing is up to much, but Stacey Kent's musical celebration of Fred Astaire - *Let Yourself Go* - proves that she can sing more than a little. It's comforting to find that those solid pillars of the Great American Songbook: Irving Berlin, the Gershwins, Jerome Kern, Arlen and Mercer, remain in safe hands with this affectionate and uncomplicated interpretation of favourites 'Isn't This A Lovely Day?', 'They Can't Take That Away From Me', 'A Fine Romance' and 'One For My Baby'. The voice, clearly phrased and softly New York accented, has a lightness and delicacy of touch which sits well with those timeless, gracefully swinging, numbers. Unusually, for a modern day diva, Kent is an egalitarian. Remembering that these songs are not just about a lyricist's dream, she happily steps aside to give combo members Jim Tomlinson (sax) Colin Oxley (guitar) and David Newton (piano) a chance to explore their solo credentials. It cements that all important relationship between musicians and vocalist which, together with the rhythm team of Simon Thorpe on bass and drummer Steve Brown, completes a great sense of ensemble. Grooveland's transfer of this Candid master enhances that feeling of a relaxed, almost effortless, breeze through these Astaire standards. Warmth, detail, clarity and separation are good.

RP



Nancy Bryan

Neon Angel

Analogue Productions Original APO 2013

Girls, Girls, Girls... Audiophile fascination for a Siren's song continues with four quite different temptresses who are all capable of raising our collective blood pressure. Three of these - Dinah Washington, Stacey Kent and Kari Bremnes - are remastered recordings but one, a long overdue second album from Nancy Bryan, is yet another of those wholesome and vividly textured live (direct to two track) pure analogue cuts out of Chad Kassem's Blue Heaven Studios. Technically, *Neon Angel* has just about everything going for it. A naturally sweet sounding church acoustic. More than pleasing vocals. Nine sharply penned songs which, because they've been cut at 45 rpm on four short sides, possess a remarkable resonance. Classy musicianship in the shape of a super cool Jimmy D. Lane bending a Dobro guitar alongside John Bryan (guitar), Bob DiChiro (bass, eukalele and accordion) and that weeping harp man, Bill Garrison. Now finding her feet as a contemporary folk singer, Bryan blends that modern take on urban landscapes, loneliness, troubled relationships and violence with those classic observational qualities found in the songwriting of Joni Mitchell. It makes tracks like 'Chicago Skyline' and 'Salvation' particularly effective. It also leaves you in no doubt that Nancy's message is a personal and soul-searching reflection upon the precariousness and vulnerability felt by many in today's society.

Supplier: Vivante 0208-977-6600
RP





Dinah Washington

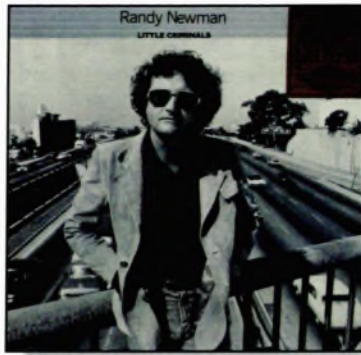
The Queen!

SPEAKERS CORNER / MERCURY SR60111 **180g** **1**

During a lifetime fuelled by the excesses of alcohol, drugs and an insatiable appetite for men, Dinah Washington laid the foundations for a legend. Whilst this unconventional existence, that included countless liaisons as well as seven husbands, was noteworthy in itself, it was her memorable and free-spirited performances of the R & B, jazz, blues and popular standards of the day which live on beyond her premature death from a lethal drugs cocktail in 1963. *The Queen!* (1959) was one in a fine sequence of Mercury recordings going as far back as 1950. Here, her emotional personality, rhythmically and dynamically shaping these songs, gains excellent and sympathetic backing from an uncredited swing band. The vocal dexterity, timing and subtle embellishment of, for example, an old care-worn standard, 'I Thought About You', is terrifically refreshing. So too is the staging. Unusually, for Mercury, their engineers did not force the soloist to front and centre. Instead they place Dinah a little to the left with a soft-brushed and cool-sounding percussive beat played out behind her. To the right its trumpets and trombones picking up that swinging pace. And, whilst this balance won't suit the purists among you, Washington carries all before her in a sparkling and typically unorthodox display.

Supplier: Vivante 0208-977-6600

RP



Randy Newman
Little Criminals

WARNER K56404 NIMBUS SUPERCUT **120g** **4**

Santana
Borboletta

CBS69084 NIMBUS SUPERCUT **120g** **4**

In the previous issue of Hi-Fi+ I happened to mention those wonderful old Supercuts mastered and pressed for Practical Hi-Fi / Hi-Fi Today magazines by Nimbus Records. Now, as coincidence would have it, there exists one of those rare opportunities to hear two of these records. Down in Cornwall the Cherished Record Company has unearthed a quantity of sealed copies of the famous Randy Newman LP, *Little Criminals*, together with *Borboletta* – that lively 1974 release from the pioneers of Afro-Latin rock, Santana. *Borbolettas*, whilst retaining their Nimbus liner notes, were found sleeveless. Consequently, they have been repackaged in black album covers, with a reproduction of the original artwork affixed. As ever, Carlos Santana's sensuous licks, which are here strongly supported by Tom Coster (piano, moog and organ), David Brown (bass) and Michael Shrieve (drums), really whet the appetite on songs like 'Practice What You Preach', 'Give and Take' and 'One with the Sun'. Guest spots by rapid-fire bass man, Stanley Clarke, ('Aspirations', 'Here and Now', 'Flor de Canela' and 'Promise of a Fisherman') showcase that slapping style of his, while Airtó Moreira and Flora Purim buff up these rhythms with, respectively, colourful percussion and steamy vocals. Though not quite as creatively spectacular as his earlier efforts – *Santana*, *Abraxas* and *Santana III* – this distinctive departure into the realm of funky Cubano-rock is never less than

entertaining throughout *Borboletta's* dozen tracks. If humorous, intelligent, pithy and uncomplaining lyric sheets light your fire then look no farther than a God of middle American songwriting – Randy Newman. Also recently re-released as part of a now deleted Warner Bros. 180gr vinyl series, *Little Criminals* is jam-packed with memorable insights. Whether delving into an American psyche, or picking away at society's loose threads, his brilliant and passionate observations, twisted with irony and mocked by those croaky vocals, have produced masterpieces that include the title track, 'Baltimore' and 'Rider in the Rain'. The musicians, too, are no bit-part players. Willie Weeks works bass. Waddy Wachtel and Joe Walsh gee things along – big Joe even getting a slide solo on 'Little Criminals'. Drummers? Perm any one from three. Rick Marotta, Andy Newark and Jim Keltner are great skin men. Nor should contributions by Milt Jackson (percussion and congas) and Ry Cooder's mandolin work on 'Kathleen (Catholicism Made Easier)' go unrecognised.

Nimbus publicity at the time concentrated upon the virtues of precision cutting from original mastertapes; enlarged groove spacings (where weighty more dynamic passages of music required it); virgin vinyl and truly flat (warp-free) pressings. Today, this is the norm for an "audiophile" release, but back then in the good old (bad old) 70s and 80s these qualities were an exception. The Nimbus regime reveals itself through improved clarity, instrumental separation and the delivery and retrieval of musical information. Here, *Little Criminals* has an edge over *Borboletta* mainly because the Warner's mastertape provides a superior template.

Cherished Record Company:

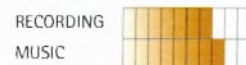
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RP

Little Criminals:



Borboletta:



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Small Beer:

The Classical Alternative/Indie Scene, Part 1

by Reuben Parry

As the Majors fumbled through the Seventies and into the Eighties, content to preside over declining vinyl sales with their absence of quality controls and dreams of a digital age, it was left to bit part players around the World to pick out the grooves and run with them to a fitting conclusion. Famously, among the small U.K. independent classical labels was, of course, Lyrita, but then there were also other notable Companies who kept the faith to continue cutting records that still, today, remain materially significant both in the terms of their musical ambition and production excellence. Of these, there are at least five labels – Altarus, Amon Ra, Meridian, Merlin and Nimbus – that deserve serious recognition.

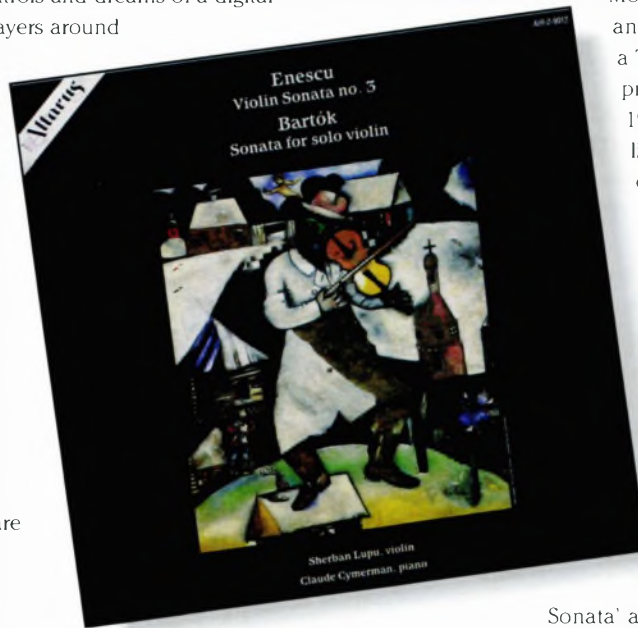
Reflecting their cottage industry status, all five carefully crafted their reputations around chamber pieces, early music, sonatas and the small-scale vocal compositions. So, whilst the respective Altarus, Meridian and Nimbus LP catalogues were collectively more extensive than that of, say, Lyrita, there are proportionally far fewer orchestral works to be found within them. Perhaps it's this general absence of the heavyweight spectacular which explains why they have remained something of well-kept secret.

Altarus provide an interesting starting point. While all around them were beginning to abandon analogue they, in 1983, moved in the opposite direction. LP pressing, though, proved something of a problem. These were manufactured abroad either in West Germany or, later, across the pond in the U.S.A. Consequently, one of their

earliest releases, a study by Peter Jacobs of the Manchester-born composer John Fould's piano pieces – 'Essays In The Modes', 'Variazioni', 'Grandharva' and 'April' (AIR-2-9001) – was a Teldec Direct Metal Mastered production. However, by 1985, most Altarus records like John Ogden's masterfully executed Busoni *Fantasia Contrappuntistica* and 'Fanatasia after J.S. Bach' (AIR-2-9074), were being made in Europe, but now it was the Sound Clinic whose name can be seen etched into the run out grooves. At the death, Messiaen's *Vingt Regards sur L'Enfant – Jesus* (AIR-2-9099 (3)) and the Ronald Center, 'Dona Nobis Pacem', 'Piano Sonata' and 'Three Nativity Carols'

(AIR-2-100) were shipped to the States. Yet, no matter what the source, there can be little criticism of these pressings. They are flat, warp-free accurately centered and stamped out of virgin vinyl. Real strength, on the technical side, is drawn from an impressive partnership forged in the auditorium by Recording Engineer, Werner Horst, and Producer, Wilson Collins. They can be heard at their best when handling those specific miking arrangements, checks and balances needed for a recital disc. Unfortunately, little detailed information is contained within the sleeve notes, so, like me, you will have to trust your ears and let them tell you that a decay of a piano note or plucked string texture is captured spot on. Which leads to my recommendations.....

The first of these is an impeccable rendition of works by Liszt, Chopin, Busoni, Dohnanyi and Balakirev



► (AIR-2- 9073) from a pianist whose precocious talents were recognised early at the International Tchaikovsky Competition of 1962, but who then, due to poor health, was sadly under-recorded. No prizes for knowing that this is one of John Ogden's sparkling keyboard performances. His unequivocal support for a romantic conception underpinning the 'Fantasia quasi Sonata', 'Ballade No. 1', 'All Italia', 'Rhapsody No. 4' and 'Islamey' is authoritatively employed. These pieces all lend themselves to virtuosity and Ogden's touch, here, too, is compelling and totally convincing. Take Dohnanyi's *4th Rhapsody* as a good example. He seamlessly traverses those shifting sands where a sombre haunting mood is beautifully countered by the melodic thread in E flat major.

Strong performances, also, by Sherban Lupu (violin) and Claude Cymerman (piano) on my second choice, the Enescu *Violin Sonata No. 3* and *Bartok Sonata for Solo Violin* (AIR-2-9012). Lupu's Romanian slant on these works is in keeping with an Eastern European folk music tradition whose roots are deeply embedded in both sonatas. His severity, defiance and dexterity, especially during a technically difficult solo sonata, is a revelation on its own. The reproduction of violin and piano for both LPs is equally tenacious. I would describe an Altarus recording as sounding clear, fleet of foot (the instruments never appear sluggish even through the most complex or congested musical passages), accurate and fully defined. Shifts of emphasis in the score, mirrored by dynamic changes in the weight and pitch of violin and piano notes, have the desired shape and impact within a generous soundstage.

Turning, next, to Amon Ra (the classical sister label of Saydisc Records) and it very soon becomes apparent that things have been done just a little differently down at Chipping Manor in Wootton-Under-Edge, Gloucestershire. Saydisc began recording there as far back as 1965 and, over the years, a catalogue of "fascinating and unusual music" evolved. I think it's safe to say that their subject matter (which included theatre organs, steam trains,

wild life, mechanical music, hand bells, jazz, blues and ragtime taken from 78s, as well as recordings of pianola rolls, phonograph cylinders and regional dialects) simply embodies English eccentricity. A generous helping of which can be heard on an intriguing sampler, *Pleasures and Treasures* (SDLC 362), released in 1986. Even their excellent Nimbus cut and pressed LP of Chinese music, *Like Waves Against the Sand* (SDL 325), came out of this left field position. However, what interests me here is an excursion across another field altogether. It started in the early Seventies with The Dartington String Quartet playing Shostakovich *String Quartets Nos. 4 and 9* (SAR-1). There then followed, during 1973, one of those sedate strolls through Frederick Delius' 'Legende'



and *Sonatas Nos. 2 and 3 for Violin* (David Stone) and *Piano* (Allan Schiller) (SAR-2). By 1977, and with a release of Schumann's 'Papillons', the Liszt 'Harmonies Poetiques', Chopin 'Nocturnes' and Schubert *Piano Sonata in A* (SAR-3), Amon Ra was beginning to show its' true colours.

Pianist, Richard Burnett, a central figure in the Amon Ra story, plays these pieces on an 1826 Conrad Graf fortepiano. A significant recording pattern was set to emerge. The star of these proceedings would not be a composer or even the musician(s) but was, instead, to be the keyboards, clarinets, lutes, violins, guitars and flutes that were being played. The challenge was to recreate authentic performances on historic instruments and, to that end, Amon Ra drew extensively upon the collection owned by Richard Burnett and kept at his Georgian manor house home, Finchcocks, in Gourdthurst, Kent. Appropriately enough this idyllic setting was to become the venue for the "Finchcocks" series of recordings.

An urge to experiment further saw the long term production team of Gef Lucena and David Wilkins dabble in more than the usual analogue black arts. Saydisc ►

who were, early converts to the digital cause, encouraged Amon Ra's use of these techniques on their collection of Eighteenth Century music by Avison, Arne, Handel, Abel and Stanley (SAR 14). London Baroque's pleasant reading and polished delivery come as little surprise, but the relative merits of an informative and transparent digital LP was unexpected. Direct Metal Mastering (again courtesy of Teldec) also had a role to play with a successful pressing of the *Music In Miniature*, (SAR-20) release. This recreation of Haydn, Clementi and Beethoven pieces on a tiny (period) Viennese square piano has something of the visionary about it. Though, when you get down to the wire and choices need to be made, there's a brace of (wait for it) Nimbus pressed records from the Finchcocks Series which I could not be without. One, is a marvellously incisive clarinet recording (SAR-10), while the other is a fifteen keyboard showcase (SAR-6).

Burnett's paternal-like pride over his charges is thoroughly understandable. It spills out into every aspect of this keyboard recital - right from a cursory glance through the sleeve notes to an enthusiastic insert leaflet describing salient characteristics of clavichords, chamber organs, harpsichords, square, grand, forte and small cabinet pianos. Great music like Beethoven's 'Bagatelle in C', the Mozart 'Turkish Rondo' and 'German Dance in D' by Schubert are the incidentals - a mere bagatelle if you may. It's one of those rare, fascinating, records not least because of the dramatic tonal and timbral shifts, or the infrequently heard buzzing sounds created by leather-strapped cembalo, the rasping effects of parchment pressed strings (bassoon piano mechanism). When the considerable variations in pitch and volume on these instruments are taken into account, other piano recitals just seem bland and uninventive by comparison. A wide dynamic and volume range between, say, the oomph! of a John Byfield 1766 chamber organ used for, 'Voluntary No.1 in C', composed by John Stanley, and the delicacy in a barely perceptible sound for J.S. Bach's 'Prelude in E' (*Well-tempered Clavier Book 1*) played on the fretted clavichord, is made even more attractive when, as here, the acoustic properties - diaphanous, full of inner detail and resolution - are revealed by an uninhibited recording.

Alan Hacker's clarinet LP, too, which features Burnett

as keyboard accompanist, is an equally stunning release. It's frighteningly natural - so natural, in fact, it's unnatural - if you know what I mean. For example, take the opening traditional Irish tune, 'She Moves Through The Air', which is such an intimate and personal experience that it restores a little faith in the music business as a whole, while at the same time setting a scene for all that follows on this record. Where this is concerned I am not ashamed to slavishly quote from Alan Hacker's sleeve notes because of the simple, yet unexpected insight given to musicians, their communication skills and the instruments they possess. He says, "I am playing the tune on a hollowed out piece of elder about six inches long into which I cut tone holes and fitted a tiny, single reed mouthpiece - in other words a simple keyless Eighteenth century Chalumeau... the chalumeau is played with the lips in

contact with the reed which allows the player to modulate the tone in a vocal-like way."

I don't know about you, but when the latest 180gr LP or audiophile CD comes through the door, it's easy to overlook the breadth and subtlety of a musician's art. Remarkable techniques (honed throughout a lifetime) slip past without comment. But here that isn't the case. Whether you listen to the Telemann 'L'hiver', played with a two-keyed Baroque clarinet, a traditional Macedonian folk song delivered from the modern C clarinet,

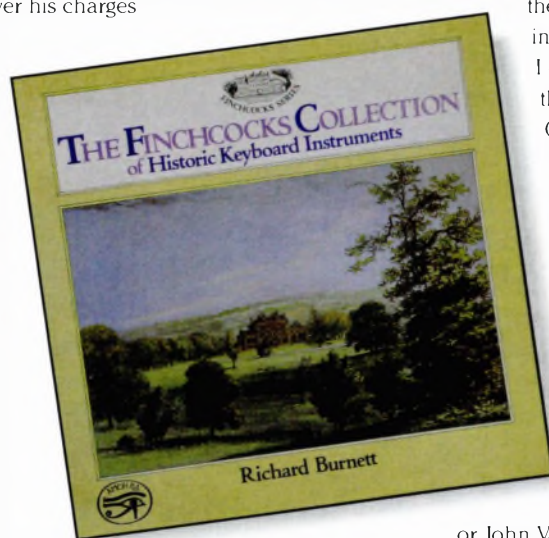
or John Vanhal's 'Adagio Cantabile'

reedily played on a nine-keyed boxwood B6 instrument, the connection is made.

Again, some beautiful images are teased from these historic clarinets. Early instruments, with their much sharper pitch, throw out real surprises. So, on previously familiar works, expect the unexpected. Summing up, Amon Ra's approach to recorded music places tremendous stock in doing the understated things exceptionally well - the rest, happily, looks after itself.

Elbowing its way forward through the crowd, at the death, is the last of the Indie label retrospectives for this issue, Merlin.

My first LP, from a company inauspiciously located at the time in 29 Brickle Road, Norwich, *Tribute to Stradivarius* (MRF 86129), caused the hairs to rise on the back of the neck. Solo violinist, Andrea Cappelletti, with the European Community Chamber Orchestra,



► breeze through these four Albinoni, Nardini, Pergolesi and Torelli concertos. All were taped in the small Honrath Church, Germany by Merlin's engineering stalwart, Tryggvi Tryggvason. Yes, I know that name's quite a mouthful, but keep an eye open for him because his moniker is a guarantee of quality. This is a slick piece of recording where a detailed, sympathetic acoustic is built upon with some added bite in the strings, giving a feeling of momentum and liveliness. Don't allow yourself to be put off by its "digital" (dirty word) tag found in the album small print. Ride with it and you'll be pleasantly surprised by the energy that radiates throughout this 1987 release.

On the strength of this one LP a personal (if relatively unsuccessful) quest began. After all these years I still own far too few Merlins, and, having bought them irrespective of repertoire, there are one or two buttock-clenching misses in my collection like the Robin Davis Orchestra's sickly rendition of standards including 'Send in the Clowns', 'Love Story' and 'Up, Up and Away' (MRF771201). What label hasn't aimlessly wandered into these musical cul de sacs?

However, the grail is to be found within their classical catalogue, especially the late Seventies and early Eighties recordings. Cast your net out far and wide for albums such as *J. S. Bach orchestral suites* (1978) under a cultured George Malcolm's baton, or The Thamesis Trio Of London's compelling recital of G. Telemann *Flute, Oboe and Trio Sonatas* (1982). They're little gems that continue to sparkle alongside the best audiophile releases. Why? Well that's a good question. The answer is, I believe, that they happen to share important basic characteristics.

First of all, there's the use of premium vinyl in the pressing plant. Second up, Merlins of that generation are heavyweight 160gr cuts. A weight universally regarded by old Decca hands as being optimum for record manufacture. Thirdly, with Tryggvi Tryggvasen, producer Graham Whiting forms a strong technical partnership. Lastly, the Merlin recordings were mixed direct to stereo – providing truly quiet backgrounds, fine imaging and exceptionally

dynamic masters to work with.

Picking a couple of representative LPs hasn't been easy. Eventually, bearing in mind the level of expectation any Vivaldi recommendation will receive, I almost convinced myself to take the path of least resistance and turn elsewhere: But the *Flute Concerti* (MRF 78101) is too tempting. Charmingly played by the Philamusa of London musicians, these ornamental pieces (especially in the case of his *C Minor concerto F440*) demand tremendous technical virtuosity from its' flautist, Christopher Taylor. Strong rhythmic discipline is also needed on both *G Major concerti, P118* and *P140*, though, oddly(?) there is a greater degree of melodic freedom. Sonically, this record is pretty special.

Shape, size, position and weight of flute, harps-ichord, and cello – whether they are playing loudly or softly – are ideally fixed and organised within the soundstage. For the nip-and-tuck, cut-and-thrust excitement I've come to associate with a recorded performance that revels in dynamic excellence, I'd look no further than Hindemith's *Sonata for Clarinet and Piano* and two accompanying Poulenc

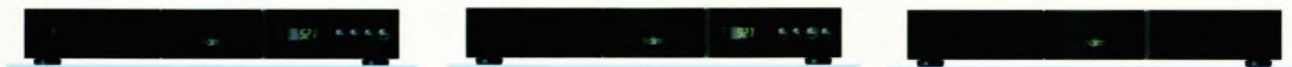
sonatas, one for clarinet and piano, the other featuring clarinet and bassoon (MRF80701). A lively acoustic accentuates a sublime sense of instrumental interaction. Moreover, these recorded timbres of piano, clarinet and bassoon exactly mimic the timbres of their real-life counterparts. They simply sound right in terms of fidelity, tonal accuracy, clarity and timing – beguiling in fact. Beguiling is the appropriate adjective where Merlin are concerned.

In the next issue, the second part of *Small Beer* will focus upon the Meridian and Nimbus labels, including their 45rpm LPs and direct-to-disc cuts.





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