

# hi-fi+



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### ▷ Boulder, Colorado - Hi-Fi Town USA

*Boulder Amplifiers*  
*Avalon Acoustics Arcus*  
*Ayre Acoustics CX-7 CD Player*

### ▷ Different Strokes

*Morel Octwin Loudspeaker*  
*Audiostatic DCI Wing  
 Loudspeaker*  
*Penaudio Charisma &  
 Charm Sat/Sub*  
*JBL K2 Horn Hybrid  
 Loudspeaker*

### ▷ Different Folks

*Eleanor McEvoy*  
*The Enid*



# 30 YEARS of performance classics

Throughout the history of Mark Levinson there have been many milestone products. Among this illustrious group are the JC-1 phono preamplifier (1972), LNP-2 preamplifier (1975), ML-1 preamplifier (1977), ML-2 mono power amplifier (1977), our first ever "Reference" component, the No.20 monaural power amplifier (1986), and the legendary No.30 Reference Digital Processor (1991) and No.32 Reference Preamplifier (1999). These products, even at the time of their introduction, were obviously destined to become classics. In many cases, these now classic components were considerably more expensive than virtually any other product in their class, and often offered fewer features (or less power) than competing products. Yet, they became classics. These and other now legendary Mark Levinson components shared one extraordinary trait: they outperform everything else in their product category. Performance, above all, is the primary motive for owning a Mark Levinson product – and exceptional performance is the most significant reason for owning a Mark Levinson No.40 Media Console. The No.40 is poised to establish new standards for connoisseurs of multi-channel audio and video.

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PATH Premier  
Dormer Road, Thame Industrial Estate, Thame, Oxfordshire OX9 3UD  
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**mark levinson**  
MADRIGAL AUDIO LABORATORIES  
1972 - 2002

# Editorial

## Editor

Roy Gregory

## Contributors

David Ayers  
Chris Binns  
Mark Childs  
Pete Christie  
Richard Clews  
Dave Davies  
Richard S Foster  
Simon Groome  
Jason Hector  
Andrew Hobbs  
Jimmy Hughes  
Jason Kennedy  
Scot Markwell  
Paul Messenger  
Reuben Parry  
Peter Russell  
Alan Sircom  
Chris Thomas  
Phil Ward

## Photography

Simon Marsh

## Cartoonists

Dave Davies  
Thomas Divita

## Design

Creative Byte  
U12, Albany Business Park  
Cabot Lane, Poole, Dorset  
BH17 7BX

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## The Editorial Office can be contacted at;

Hi-Fi+ Editorial  
Unit 12, Albany Business Park  
Cabot Lane  
Poole, Dorset  
BH17 7BX  
United Kingdom  
Tel. (44)(0)1202-659380  
Fax. (44)(0)1202-659540  
Net. [www.hifiplus.com](http://www.hifiplus.com)

## Advertising;

Rebecca Bird  
Tel/Fax. 0208 763-1277  
Email. [sales@hifiplus.com](mailto:sales@hifiplus.com)

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In a disturbing development that I take no pleasure in having predicted, I recently received information regarding an orchestrated smear campaign based on public access websites. Newform Research, who manufacture a well regarded range of high-end ribbon hybrid loudspeakers in the US were the target, and their experience highlights many of the issues surrounding the unregulated nature of web reviews and content. As a company that sold its products almost exclusively on the Net, they were perhaps particularly vulnerable to this sort of attack, but their experience should act as a salutary lesson to our hobby as a whole.

Whilst any review is open to bias or malice, those that appear in magazines are both moderated by the editorial staff, and open to scrutiny. Those who feel hard-done by have a right of reply and a point of contact. Likewise, the credentials and activities of the reviewers are also open to scrutiny – at least they should be – through the editorial office.

Unfortunately, the same isn't so when we discuss websites that accept public postings. The experience, qualifications, bias and agenda of posters is a complete mystery, not least because it's so easy to conceal one's identity should you choose to. The creation of multiple postings on a single subject and from a single person can easily be concealed from behind a number of shadow addresses. The 'point of view' gains weight and credibility from its widespread 'support'. After all, if all those 'people' share the same opinion then there must be something in it. Right?

Of course, this cuts both ways, and unscrupulous manufacturers or retailers could use the same technique to hype a chosen product. It makes the web a potentially damaged source of information, for what good is data if you can't judge its reliability? It's a major issue confronting the industry as it struggles to come to terms with the commercial and communication implications of the Net. It's a major concern for those who rely on the Net for information or to backstop their opinions. At least, it should be...

For further information you can look at Newform's website: <http://www.newformresearch.com>

It makes interesting reading. They finally identified the perpetrator of the campaign, although not perhaps the guiding hand behind it. It was a long and costly exercise, leaving aside the loss of business and reputation. We should all guard against a repetition.



Roy Gregory



# KRELL

KRELL'S ANGEL'S  
NEW CHAPTER

MORE muscle, MORE musicality - and LESS heat: that's what you get as Krell's angels move into a new chapter.

With their unique CAST circuitry, Krell's legendary FPB amplifiers have already shown the massive musical gains of keeping the signal in the current domain. Now developed into CAST-X, these superb new powerhouses will make your system come alive like never before.

And with Krell's new Sustained Plateau Biasing 3, you get an extra 100Wpc from every amplifier - with the bonus of even cooler running!

The full benefits of CAST-X are best heard through Krell's fabulous range of LAT loudspeakers, from the floor standing LAT-1 reviewed by Martin Colloms as having 'exceptionally low coloration, high resolution and very fine stereo imaging' (HFN April 2002), to the compact stand mounted LAT-2.

There's also hot news for movie buffs on a budget with the new Krell Showcase 7.1 THX processor and Showcase 5,6 and 7 channel amplifiers.

**FEATURED**  
Speaker\_LAT 1

Upper\_Showcase Processor  
Lower\_Showcase Cinema Amplifier

Far right\_Krell FPB 750MCX Amplifier



**KRELL**  
THE LEGEND IN AUDIO REPRODUCTION



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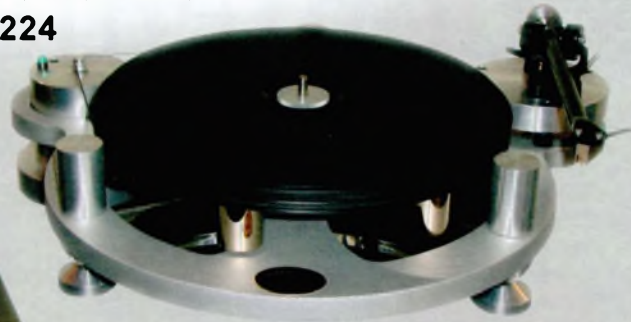


# Walrus Systems

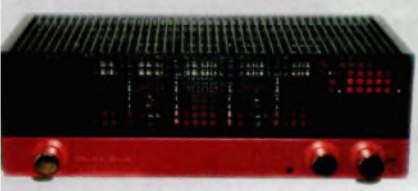
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# Dr. Noboru Tominari

## 1927 – 2002

It is with enormous sadness that we have to report the death, at the age of 75, of Dr. Noboru Tominari, founder and guiding light of Dynavector Systems Ltd. He finally passed away on Sunday the 24th November, after a long illness which had left him hospitalized for 18 months.

Perhaps best known for his groundbreaking range of jewel cantelivered moving-coil cartridges, Dr. Tominari never stopped questioning the presumptions endemic in the hi-fi industry, his questing mind never ceasing to evolve and develop his products. Alongside the cartridges came tonearms and phono-stages, each predictably eclectic in its approach. But Noboru Tominari's greatest coup was also the most dramatic: his development of SuperStereo. And if the products are impressive, it's the thinking and analysis on which they're based that provides a real insight into this tirelessly enquiring mind, an insight into the failure of conventional measurement in its application to hi-fi.

You can read about that thinking and the products it spawned in Issue ??, whilst the earlier inventions are covered in Issue ?. But, the key thing to appreciate is that for a company most often associated with expensive, high-end products, Dr. Tominari's final project was aimed at returning the musical joy to budget, CD based systems. Indeed, he liked nothing better than to demonstrate his SuperStereo processors with a £200 all in one micro system, sat, with its speakers, on the floor.

That spirit of adventure lives on in the hands of his son, Taro, who has run Dynavector Systems Ltd for the last year and a half. We offer our condolences to Taro and everyone else at Dynavector, and look forward to our continued investigation and enjoyment of his father's legacy.

You can contact Dynavector at [info@dynavector.co.jp](mailto:info@dynavector.co.jp) ▶+

## Eleanor McEvoy To Play Live At Bristol Show

Thanks to sponsorship from Nordost, the Bristol Show can boast free, live performances on Saturday and Sunday, from Irish vocalist Eleanor McEvoy. Given our enthusiastic reaction to her latest album, Yola, this should be a real treat. As an added bonus, the planned release of Yola on 180g vinyl to coincide with the show and augment the already popular hybrid SACD and CD issues, will allow listeners to conduct their own live-versus-recorded comparisons in rooms around the show.

On the hi-fi front, the show is once again fully booked with all the usual suspects, while its mid-February timing makes it the first opportunity to see and hear many of the products launched at CES in Las Vegas.



The Bristol Show.  
@ The Marriott Hotel,  
Lower Castle St.  
Bristol

February 21st – 23rd 2003,  
10am – 5pm

Admission £7,  
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Accompanied children free.

For further information:  
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## Bel Canto eVo2/4

The Bel Canto eVo2 represents the true potential of modern digital amplification providing a transparent and musical path to the original performance for stereo and multi-channel systems. The eVos present a naturally sweet and extended sound quality that transcends older amplifier technologies in both efficiency and sonic quality. With the advent of new and emerging digital technologies, this is an amplifier design whose time has truly come. Guided by the musicality of Bel Canto design, the eVos mark a remarkable step forward in digital stereo amplification.

## Verity Audio Tamino II

Building on the worldwide success of its prestigious products, Verity Audio is pleased to introduce a new high-quality loudspeaker — The Tamino. It sets new standards of sonic excellence at a sensible price of £3999.

The Tamino is a unique reduced-size floor-standing loudspeaker that incorporates the same attention to detail, exquisite lacquer and level of execution, which granted the Verity Audio loudspeakers an enviable notoriety.

The Tamino definitely answers a growing need for a system that offers a fine musical experience to more music lovers while being a luxury piece of furniture. Book now to hear this amazing loudspeaker.

## Sonus Faber Cremona Auditor

In the best of Sonus Faber tradition: precise timbre, state-of-the-art components, and a superb finish combine to create the heir to the history of creating compact, versatile speakers. The Auditor meets the most demanding listener's insistence on superior sound. Please book for your demonstration of this fine loudspeaker.

## Krell KPS 28c

The KPS 28c Compact Disc Player reveals the full sonic potential of the compact disc format. The KPS 28c is noted for its ability to resolve the finest musical details many listeners boast of hearing their compact disc collections for the first time upon introducing the player into their systems. CAST, Krell's proprietary current-audio connection is featured along with Current Mode, Class A, and discrete balanced circuitry. The power supply, featuring several stages of regulation, is modelled after the Krell Current Tunnel preamplifier. The beautiful black anodised aluminium is finished to complement the Full Power Balanced X Series Amplifiers, right down to the elegant convex centrepiece. A custom-machined remote control, hand finished and laser engraved, is included.

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# Manchester 2002

by David Ayers

This is the second time that we have sponsored the Chesterfield Communications hi-fi show at the Manchester Airport Hilton, so I was interested to see how the show has progressed from last year. As it turned out, the non-appearance of one of the expected exhibitors left a large conference suite free. This was put to use for most of the stands that would normally inhabit the corridors, improving the flow of people through these areas. It was a shame to lose an exhibitor, but every cloud has a silver lining.

Attendance throughout the two days was steady, although the fact that both Manchester United and Manchester City had home games across both days can't have helped. Sunday certainly seemed busier to me, but it's easy to be deceived. As we will see, this year's show was the big-speaker show and the foundations must have been groaning under the collected mass of wood that had been humped into the various rooms by the exhibitors.

Naim were showing their new SL2 speaker. Although slightly cheaper than their NBL, this much smaller speaker is a model of sophistication by comparison. Having said that the NBL is far more rock and roll, and I would be hard pressed to decide between their differing sets of strengths and weaknesses. With an unusual build, which includes a tweeter that is not

attached to the cabinet in any way, these speakers should rapidly find themselves an audience not only from regular Naim users, but from a wider range of listeners as well.

Anyone wandering into Metropolis' large room would have been taken aback by the absolutely enormous Lampros 1000 loudspeakers. With at least 10 drive units per side, including a mix of ribbons and moving coils, they will certainly impress visitors when installed in your baronial mansion. Mind you, ten is something of a comedown for designer John Jeffries, a man whose used to more

drivers than that: And in greater variety too – there were only four different types on display! Driven by a BAT6200 amp, which can have anything from one to six channels installed, but with a mere two here, and using the Boulder 112 DAC/pre-amp with the Burmester 969 transport, the sound was fast and clear through the midrange and treble, with oodles of bass.

It was nice to see Exposure at the show. Booked into a good sized room, the classic range consisting of the 22 CD player, the 23 remote pre-amp, and the 28 power amp were providing the grunt to drive a pair of huge

Vandersteen 2C signature speakers. This system produced an unusual but very musical presentation. Judged in traditional terms not exactly hi-fi, but in communication terms, I could have stayed listening for an age, but of course I had to press on, a show report to do you know... Wandering into the Real Hi-Fi room was a visual treat. Some of the best looking gear was to be found proudly preening itself on their rack. I particularly fell in love with the \$1,650 Shanling CD-T100, which is a real beauty. Pre-amplification duties were performed by the Bent Audio TAP transformer control unit. First spotted by RG in New York a couple of years ago, the original remote control passive retains its stunning looks and novel operation, but has sprouted matching transformers to help with ►



▶ interfacing. One for JMH perhaps? Providing the power was the Opera Audio Consonance Cyber-845 SET mono-blocks, whilst the boxes connecting the electrics to the air were the Horning Agathon speakers. To be honest I haven't previously heard a system where the Horning speakers have impressed me much, but this time round Real Hi-Fi seemed to have found a synergy that allowed them to sing. As a system it had a distinct sonic signature, but an enjoyable one.

Heading off into the bowels of the hotel and the smaller rooms there were a mixture of old faces, and others new to the show. New this year was JBL, showing another pair of gigantic speakers, the Project K2 S9800. I must admit that I was excited to see these speakers, having heard Paul Messenger sing their praises. These monsters look like the best-finished rock PA speakers you have ever seen, and I could see major domestic objections to them being installed in most homes.

Crammed into a standard sized hotel room was not the best introduction, as I couldn't sit far enough away to allow them to integrate properly. Having said that they showed enough promise in the circumstances to warrant some serious further investigation. I have to admire JBL's brass neck in turning up only with the speakers and then blagging the entire remaining system from various exhibitors. Possibly not the best way to show off your 20 grand babies, guys, but I guess you will know better next year.

Not everyone was in the mood to bring along unknown and newly launched ranges. Focal JMLab took the opportunity to remind us what a fine loudspeaker the Mezzo Utopia is. With a DCS Verdi transport and Elgar DAC feeding Spectral amps via MIT cable, this system had delicacy, poise and transparency aplenty.

A Quad system was on show in the Audio Counsel room, and very interesting it was too. With the CDP99

CD/pre and the 909 power amp feeding the 22L speakers, the system was engaging and ideally suited to the smaller hotel room. What really jumped out at me was the quality of the finish on the \$899 22L speakers: they looked a million dollars. On an initial listen this seems to be a system that potentially offers excellent value for money.

Down the end of the corridor was the 'A' Audio Solutions room, who had smuggled in a few Serbian immigrants in the shape of the Korato phono / pre/ power combination. Used to drive a pair of Dali Skyline 2000 speakers brought in from Denmark by FBI Distribution, and fed by the Opus 3 Continuo turntable the system sounded smooth and clear, with a nice relaxed musicality. This is probably in part due to the double tweeter arrangement, mixing a conventional dome with a ribbon. Expect to hear more of both of these brands in the future.

The Reference Audio room could have been made up from ex hi-fi-review kit, comprising the Axis speaker, the Renaissance power amps, and the Lamm L2 pre with Metronome T1i CD player. I didn't expect the Axis to be a tube friendly speaker, but a few minutes in their room showed how wrong one can be.

Audio Atmosphere had the Shunyata Power Snakes that I was enthusing about in issue 17, and yes I did put my money where my mouth is and purchase the complete set. Also on display were a pair of speaker stands with built in amplification: A novel concept that I haven't come across before. Opinion is mixed as to whether having the power amps close to the speakers, and thus substituting long speaker leads for long interconnects is a good thing, but here is an opportunity to try it out. I want to see how many reviewers have long enough interconnects to actually review these things (not me for sure).

Last year ART brought along their



enormous Impression speakers, but bucking this years trend for really big boxes, this time round they introduced their new Skibo baby speakers (above). As with the Expression monitors, one can buy the basic stand mount speaker, and then add on a bass module, which will then double as a stand, effectively making them floor standing. ART speakers are not everyone's cup of tea, but I find that the more I listen to them at shows around the country the more I am beguiled by their particular strengths. At \$795 a pair, the Skibo is by far the most affordable speaker the company has in its portfolio.

In the box marked 'new to shows' could be found Marton Music / Williams-Hart. Displaying a range of open folded baffle speakers



▶ (i.e. no box) and amplifiers based on the justly famous John Linsley-Hood designs now available ready built. Open baffle speakers are a completely different beast to the average loud-speaker, with their own particular set of strengths and weaknesses. I have to say that I was impressed by the unforced nature of the bass in this system, but then again I was longing for a little more grunt – I guess that's the ageing rocker in me coming out.

The funkiest little speaker award has to go to the Velodyne SPL subwoofer, found hiding against the skirting board in the Red Line room. Normally I don't have a lot of time for tiny subs, but these little babies seemed to be able to punch well above their weight, certainly used as a pair. Red Line also had the latest units from Moon, the £2850 Nova CD player and the \$1550 entry level i-3 integrated amplifier. Certainly the system was shaking its booty all round the room, and there seemed to be more than a few happy looking faces amongst the visitors.

Talking of happy faces, Definitive Audio and Living Voice Lord and master Kevin Scott seemed to be



having a whale of a time demonstrating his Avatar speakers with the Canary amps. What was interesting was that across the hall Border Patrol were also using the Avatars to demonstrate their S20 triode amps. Swapping between rooms showed both systems to have similar strengths, whilst sounding completely different, once again proving that musical enjoyment has little to do with the cosmetics of presentation.

Neat Acoustics were driving their Ultimatum MF7 speakers with the ECS amps. Hi-fi+ has always enjoyed Neat speakers in the past, and driven by the Stealth mono-blocks the sound was clear and powerful, entirely to my taste. The amps have been nearly 3 years in development, and Manchester was their first show. Production models will be on the market in about 2 months, and I would hope that we will have a sample for review very soon (that's a hint guys). Audio Reference, importers of Clearaudio amongst others had a huge selection of equipment on display. I managed to sneak a listen to the Perigee FK1 speakers dangled on the end of the Gamut CD1 player and the Aloia pre / power combination reviewed in issue 19. First impressions were of lots of clear fast bass combined with crystal clear super fast treble from the ribbon tweeters. An exciting and

rhythmic system, I was sorry to have to press on.

My award for the room that most piqued my interest goes to Walrus. Demonstrating the La Grange turntable and Calvin pre-amp from the genial



Herr Brinkmann, and the Klimo Beltane 300B SE mono-blocks (complete with external power supplies) the whole system was connected to the Dueval Bella Luna loudspeakers. These speakers are the ones pictured in Walrus's adverts, with what looks like a giant plywood spinning top on the top. They are of course omni directional speakers, the 'spinning top' squirting the sound in all directions. You can forget the usual comments about omni speakers having little or no image, listen to this system and you will be amazed. I really wish I'd had more time, because I was captivated by both the looks and sound of this system.

The main thing that I gleaned from this year's show is that manufacturers are getting more and more prepared to go out on a design limb. The sheer diversity of design, technological application, and resulting sound was astounding for a regional show. There really was something for everyone there, with super sounding smaller systems to gigantic, house invading systems. At the end of the day, you owe it to yourself to get out to the next regional show in your area and see and hear what is happening.



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## 2. Pathos Logos amplifier

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## 3. Amphon Xenon

Fast and articulate with neutral tonal balance. Accurate imaging and can be positioned close to walls without loss of soundstage. Remarkable value at £2000 (black) or £2400 (beech)



## 4. Kuzma KC-REF cartridge

Very neutral sound with precise imaging. We are impressed with this cartridge giving detail and soundstage to rival the best. £2000



## 5. Benz-Micro LP cartridge

The new flagship cartridge in an ebony body. Sheer transparency, natural tonal balance and a huge soundstage. £2200



## 6. EAR/Yoshino 890 stereo amplifier

A variant on one of our most popular amplifiers but using KT90 valves to produce 70 wpc in triode. Superb sound at £2550



## 7. conrad-johnson MV60SE stereo amplifier

An updated version of the new classic amplifier but using 6550 valves to give a cleaner sound with fast, accurate bass. Reminiscent of the Premier 11, it is very holographic, very musical, with a natural presentation. £3000

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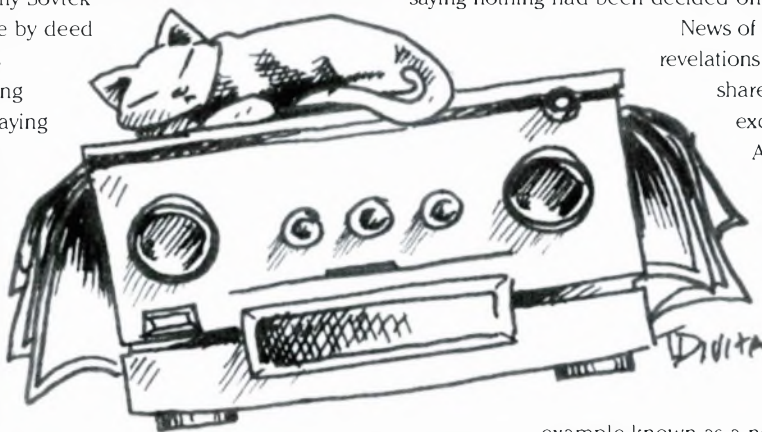
Part exchange welcome. Ex-demonstration and previously owned equipment listed on our website.

# Postcard from Venus



by L. S. Webster

The world of audio was thrown into turmoil the other day with the startling announcement that the valve is female and has been involved in a series of clandestine affairs. Tracked down to his garden shed at a secret location (number 300B) on a cul-de-sac in Milton Keynes, Mr Ivor Diode, dressed only in an anorak said, "I admit to having had the affair. It is the most shameful thing but I just couldn't help it". Luckily, his long-term partner Ms Sally Sovtek (who changed her name by deed poll to please Ivor, years ago) appeared to be taking a philosophical stance, saying that although naturally upset, she would be standing by him. "I began to suspect something funny was going on when Ivor started to spend entire evenings tinkering in his shed. But really, I think it was more an infatuation than an affair."



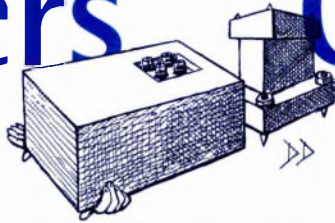
Speaking at a hastily convened conference to discuss the issues raised, valve historian Professor E. L. Aityfor said they all had something to learn from the regrettable incident. But he stressed it would be a mistake to continue letting people believe the valve was just an old phallic relic made from flimsy bits of glass and stuff. Speaking in fluent valve (a complex mixture of letters, numbers and too much saliva) he addressed the sombre members, saying the valve was actually a dangerous and ruthless seductress who could 'get under your skin' and had been surprised to find that even his own collection had grown to thousands. He claims to have privately guessed the valve's true identity after she tried to 'hand bag' the transistor years ago, but said he felt nothing but relief now that it was all out in the open. The Professors

sidekick, Mr Phil Ament, said the conference delegates were planning to meet again soon to debate a possible re-launch in time for the forthcoming 100th year anniversary celebrations. Pundits, meanwhile, were speculating on a new naming ceremony when purists were apparently invited to write in offering suggestions, such as, Queen Dominatrix of Audio. But spokeswoman, Kath O'Dray refused to comment, saying nothing had been decided on as yet.

News of the shocking revelations quickly spread, and share prices on the valve exchange skyrocketed. Amateur valveists and bottleheads the world over were spotted frantically rummaging through dusty old cupboards hoping to find the odd rarity. One

example known as a nos REL/VT98 reached a titanic \$15,000 in America (where the valve is known as a 'toob'), but contrary to some reports, experts say this is not merely a load of hot air and will be most unlikely to blow up soon. On hearing this, the fashion police were quick to make a move. "This is exactly the sort of thing we love, it's just SO this year" said one, "everyone knows rarity is luxury these days and the higher the profile, the bigger the hit. Then, as soon as I heard about her stint on Colossus at Bletchley Park where she famously dried lots of ladies stockings, I knew it would add to her street cred'. I plan to make loadsa dosh outa this" Others agree. Said one "The valve appears to have acquired immediate and cult-like status, though not in a vacuous (huge guffaw at own joke) emblematic sense, more like an A list celeb' who didn't set out to be famous yet arrived all the same. But hey, that's the zeitgeist. She's the new cause celeb'." ▶✚

# Speakers Corner



by Paul Messenger

One of the more interesting demos at the Autumn Heathrow hi-fi show was that mounted by Peter Lyngdorf's TACT Millenium operation, which goes much deeper into the world of DSP (digital signal processing) than anyone else around right now. While I remain sceptical – or at least agnostic – about digital domain amplification, and have no experience of the room equalisation processing, there was no denying the powerful transient impact of the system that was playing. Precious few hi-fi systems can make one physically blink when reproducing a rim-shot.

Peter gave the following intriguing explanation of how this fine transient attack came about. The system was bi-amplified, and consisted of two Dali Euphonia floorstanding speakers mounted well clear of the walls, and operating only above 120Hz. The bass frequencies were handled by two separately powered subwoofers tucked way back into the corners of the room. Digital processing provided the requisite time-delay to the floorstanders so that the subwoofers and satellites were properly time aligned with one another.

The rationale for going to such lengths runs as follows. Midrange reproduction is best handled by speakers mounted clear of walls, because siting close to a wall results in strong and early reflections of the sound from the wall close behind. These reflections will interfere with the direct signal from the speaker, creating cancellation and attendant coloration right in the critical upper midband.

For best bass reproduction, however, the reverse is true. It's better to mount the subwoofer back in the corner, because the early reflection of the much longer wavelength bass frequencies actually reinforce rather than cancel the direct sound wave. Indeed, mounting a subwoofer clear of walls will reduce the transient impact of the bass because the difference between the direct and reflected sound path lengths is substantially increased.

That all makes rather good sense, even if the means of achieving such a transient-accurate sub/sat arrangement are necessarily rather elaborate. Furthermore, a couple of weeks after Heathrow I was down at B&W's Steyning labs listening to a new prototype loudspeaker, which achieved a rather similar end result through much simpler means. Again the transient

integrity was exceptionally impressive, though the speaker concerned was a conventional passive design, with no need for extra amplification or digital time delay.

The reason is that the speaker in question was a wall-mount – a speaker intended to be flush-fitted into a stud-type wall, Custom Install style. In fact it was a full three-way Nautilus wall-mount, with all that that implies in terms of superior quality. It not only delivers bass frequencies with the least possible room reflections, but because the drivers are flush-mounted into a flat surface, the sound is also unencumbered by the mid-range coloration created by the early reflection from a rearward wall. It was a powerful reminder that the wall-mount has its own unique advantages.

Nearly a decade ago I made a couple of holes, roughly 400mm square, in the (solid brick) end wall of my listening room, right behind where I normally site my loudspeakers. The prime purpose was to test a batch of the new in-wall speakers which were just beginning to emerge as first shoots of an embryonic Custom Install scene.

Because I was dealing with a structural 6inch brick wall, the making and proper dressing of these speaker 'hatches' was necessarily elaborate and quite costly. But I never regretted carrying it out because the end result proved so very interesting.

Most of those early wall-speakers were heavily compromised, mechanically speaking, by nasty thin moulded plastic baffles, weakly held in place by even nastier spring clips. One, however – a KEF Uni-Q drive unit codenamed CR160, with a 165mm co-axial driver – was easily bolted straight onto a solid wooden baffle. This already sounded very good with a sealed 15-litre cavity behind; when I left the back off the cavity, so that the driver was unloaded both front and back and operating in a genuine infinite baffle, apart from modest (excursion-limited) power handling, the results were quite astonishing, providing a real ear-opener as to how heavily the performance of a 'normal' speaker was compromised by the need to enclose the bass/mid driver in a box.

I'd guesstimate that, power handling apart, on pure sound quality grounds the little £150/pair (1993 price) CR160 could hold its own against speakers costing ten times the price. ►

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► The deep, clean and weighty bass was perhaps its most impressive feature, measurement showing an in-room far-field response with bass extension registering a surprisingly good -8dB at 20Hz. The only real problem was the temptation to play bass-rich material at a highish level, and overdrive the rather under-damped cone excursion capabilities (much more of a problem with vinyl than CD). However, such an 'open-back' arrangement is obviously often impractical because the noise that comes off the back of the bass/mid cone is likely to be intrusive and unpleasant in the room behind. (In my case the vestibule and loo involved are largely inconsequential.)

The next stage was to fit my wall holes with a pair of 15-inch Tannoy dual-concentric drive units – the old Alcomax magnet type used in the Westminster Royal – which was very successful indeed, giving the abiding and very intriguing impression that the listening room itself had become the loudspeaker enclosure. The midrange is absolutely magnificent; the bass is exceptionally clean and deep, if a little under-damped; but the very directional nature

of the horn tweeter would have benefited from 'over-angling', which is not easily accomplished.

The latest plan, once I can get around to it, is to try using some Nautilus drivers in my holes. The massive magnet of the 800 bass driver should hopefully provide the sort of control and damping needed for true infinite baffle loading, while the mid and treble drivers have an impeccable pedigree. A few practical factors have to be worked out, like the right crossover network and how to fit and space the drivers, but this could be a very interesting project.

If your own accommodation circumstances permit, it's well worth experimenting with flush-mounted speakers, especially if you can do the open-back thing with good mechanical mounting integrity. There are those who claim the approach doesn't properly recreate stereo depth perspectives, and this may be true – I'm honestly not sure. But there's no getting away from the fact that flush-mounting and box-less loudspeakers have their own unique advantages, and can be relatively inexpensive to implement too. ▶+

# Music Matters



by Alan Sircom

OK, here's a toughie: Are stereo and multi-channel sounds compatible? Is it possible to put more than two speakers in a room without destroying the stereo sound? Or, does the pursuit of good two-channel sound automatically render multi-channel performance bankrupt?

On the high-street, stereo is lost in a sea of multi-channel audio, and because there are more than two speakers in the room, all five speakers have now shrunk to Coke can size and the subwoofer box copes with everything from the midband on down. It doesn't matter anymore that this is potentially ruinous to the delicate sensibilities of stereo; the 5.1 channel Cultural Revolution spells death to the reactionary two channel types.

But what happens when you no longer want to buy your home entertainment system in a supermarket? The acme of home cinema points in a very different direction to the best

of hi-fi. The phrase 'high fidelity' implies a strong degree of faithfulness to the original sound and while there may be myriad interpretations of what that original sound may be, it is a common goal among hi-fi designers and enthusiasts alike. Cinema is all about the experience; there is no 'original sound' to begin with (almost everything in a modern film is recorded post-production) so the sound designers go for excitement, tension, passion, and so on. AV equipment is often geared toward likewise; conveying emotion over fidelity.

Even when the manacles of space and price are removed, you will achieve mastery of stereo or home cinema at the expense of the 'lesser' aspect. Perhaps there is only one solution – separate rooms. But this soon becomes unmanageable, especially if you have to pander to the performance potential of stereo, multi-channel music ▶



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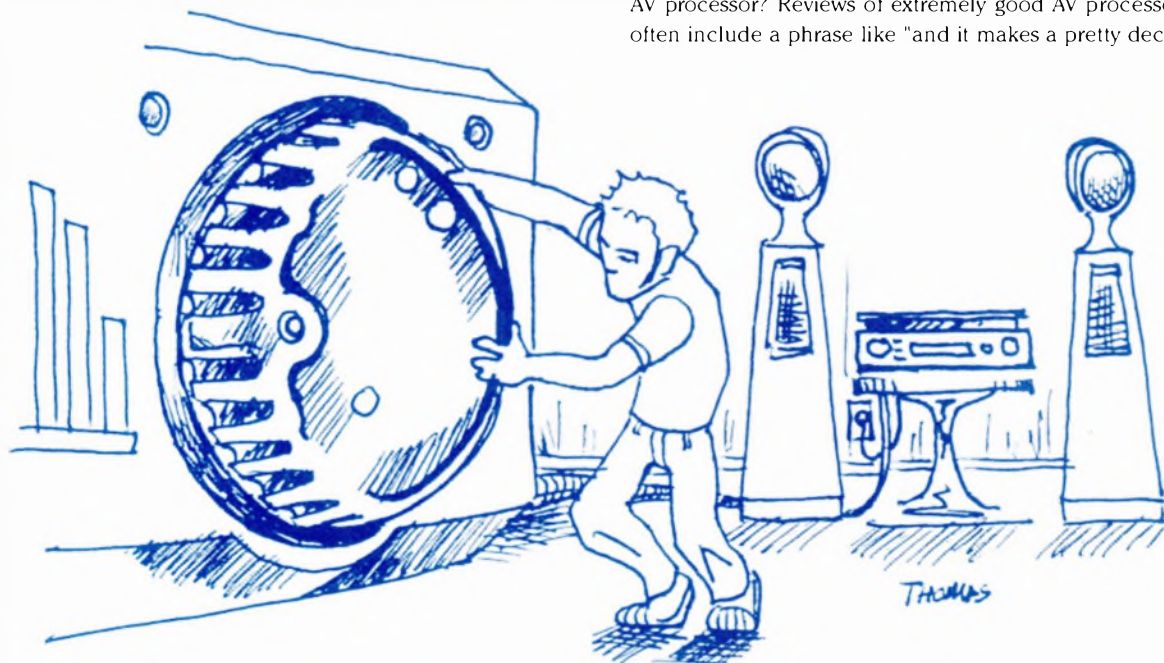
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► and home cinema. The demands of each are so distinctive that they can never be placed in the same room without some form of compromise.

So, if compromise is the only answer, where do you start? Unless you have absolutely no intention of using your system to play anything except DVD, treat multi-channel sound as a subset of stereo and then add on the AV kit as a sort of 'super source' of your existing hi-fi system. This can be approached in stages; when you are comfortable with your stereo system, branch out AV-wards. It even works at the entry level; something like



an Audio Analogue Puccini amplifier sounds better in stereo than any integrated AV amplifier or receiver, and if you want multi-channel sound, just add a Yamaha DSP-E800. Plug the hi-fi sources into the stereo amplifier and the AV sources into the Yamaha and you have the makings of a very decent, low cost system. You simply apply the same fundamental logic to your system, regardless of cost, treating the AV processor as 'super source' for the stereo system.

While such a system is never going to please the THX fans of this world, approaching the project in this way makes you more aware of the shortcomings of some aspects of home cinema. It means that you will use a projector instead of a sonically ruinous CRT, rear-projection or plasma TV between the two main speakers (you may even find yourself putting the centre channel close to the ceiling and firing down for the same reason). It means you will set up and choose a subwoofer carefully instead of making every

footfall into an earthquake. It means you may even choose a DVD player on its performance and ergonomics, instead of price.

Of course, this 'super source' concept means considerably more boxes in the living room, as you need both a DVD and a CD player, a stereo preamp and an AV processor. But, this more complicated route does mean you never lose sight of the stereo sound, but can also have the potential to make a decent fist of home cinema too.

But why do you need a separate pre-amplifier and AV processor? Reviews of extremely good AV processors often include a phrase like "and it makes a pretty decent

line-level stereo pre-amplifier too". Let's unpack this statement a little further – exactly how good a line-level pre-amplifier exists within an AV processor? No matter how well engineered, an AV processor has to handle high-frequency digital audio signals alongside conventional analogue stereo ones; they also contain, on average, more processing power than all of NASA had throughout the 1960s; many also include video switching circuitry within the same case. All these things can undermine those sacrosanct stereo line sources.

After listening to a number of extremely expensive AV processors, I have come to the conclusion that their line-level performance is only equal to a dedicated stereo pre-amplifier costing one-tenth the asking price of the processor. So, if you own a £10,000 AV processor, its line-level hi-fi sound is equivalent to that found on a stereo pre-amplifier of about £1,000 or so. AV pre-amplifiers that wisely do without the video switching (or remove it

to a separate box, a la Roksan and Naim) do considerably better, but even here, don't expect that notional £10,000 AV processor to outperform stereo pre-amplifiers costing in excess of £2,000. There are notable exceptions (such as Meridian), but even here, few have the two-channel magic that a top-flight stereo pre-amp can muster.

Similar reservations hold when dealing with multi-channel power amplifiers, too: how can a big box that has plug-in amplifier cards and a single transformer across all the channels outperform mono-blocks? And likewise, the

CD performance of DVD players is variable: some are excellent, some trash, but once again, like the processor, the CD performance of a DVD player is never as good as an identically-priced dedicated CD player.

All of which is a compromise too far for hi-fi. But as compromises can be effectively removed if you concentrate on hi-fi first and then make the home cinema work around it, we can make hi-fi and home cinema work in the same room. We merely need to teach home cinema to come round to hi-fi's way of thinking!



# Big Boy's Toys

by Scot Markwell

In the last several years there has been, in the USA, a developing fascination with highly sensitive horn-type loudspeakers, both of the classic "straight-up" types and various hybrids too. I suppose that this is a natural sort of progression that dovetails closely with the "underground" re-emergence of single-ended triode amplifiers, something that most hard-core audiophools in this country never thought would happen. After all, the American credo in Hi-Fi has for many years been that bigger and heavier is better, and that consumers need as much power as they can possibly get to drive the increasingly inefficient American speakers that have been the trend for the last 10-15 years. The thing of it is, though, that along with bandwidth, low distortion, flat frequency curves, and "perfect phase response" comes a disturbing trend in many of the electronics and speakers that have been appearing of late on these shores. Ironically, the more designers take away "bad" artifacts of reproduced music, the more they (often) also take away from the innate natural goodness of a given design, assuming that it was there in the first place; some of the earthiness, the organic nature of music itself, is banished along with the doubling, the distortion, and the irregular response. So, while Joe Audiophile may be able to purchase expensive, beautifully-made, large and imposing, hefty, seemingly impressive Hi-Fi gear, he may not be getting all of what he paid for, in the sense that what goes in does not necessarily all come

out. At least not the way that it should in a musical sense.

With the passionate arguments from the SET advocates (called loonies over here) in mind, having read a good bit about the darn things of late, I thought that it would be interesting for a couple of our reviewers to have some fun with this stuff and see if there was anything to it, or if it was all bunk. I had little or no experience up to this point with this little niche of Hi-Fi, but it seemed truly interesting. Figuring the readers would, as well, I obtained permission from HP, the Editor, and about three years ago began, for *The Absolute Sound*, an exploration into high-efficiency speakers and low-powered tube amplifiers. For personal reasons, the senior reviewer I had assigned to the project bailed out on me almost immediately, and I did not want the various pieces of equipment that I had lined up to lie fallow. Plus I figured what the Hell, it might be fun. So I took the expensive stuff and had Stephen Harrell start on the (slightly) less dear kit. I had no idea what kind of door I was going to open for myself...

I imagine that for many folks in the UK it would be difficult to dedicate a space in one's home to a set of loudspeakers much larger than, say, the Reference 3A DeCapo or its upscale brother, the Royal Virtuoso, mounted, of course, on a decent set of stands. But America is all about space and the wonton use of it, so I decided to not be deterred by larger offerings, like the first "loud" speakers that I got hold of, a set of Tommy Horning's



▶ Alkibiades Signature Golds (\$20,000/pair, <http://www.horninghybrid.com/loudspeak.htm>): gigantic 2 m tall, 200 pound, 100 db/watt boxes that almost killed me as I uncrated them and ran them up the ramp into the house. The Golds sported a Lowther DX-4 as a midrange/bass driver (with the whizzer tweeter surgically removed), a Peerless poly cone tweeter, and a 12" (30.5 cm) Beyma subwoofer that was, interestingly, mounted at the top of the cabinet. What the Hell is right! Still, the designer knows what he is doing, doesn't he?

I hooked them up to a set of 25 Wpc Viva Aurora 572 SET (around \$22,000/pair/vgfanfare@aol.com) monoblocs that I had at the time and (if memory serves correctly) a Burmester 808 MK V solid state pre-amp. They sounded dreadful. I was depressed. I was mad. I had just spent three hours and several perfectly good spinal discs laboring to get these sleek beasts into play and I now I had to bear this horrid honky squawking? After I calmed I remembered that Lowthers are notorious for sounding bad when new, as well as just about every time you turn the system on after being off overnight; the things require up to 30 minutes of play to get right from a cold start. It truly was the damndest thing that I ever heard from a set of loudspeakers. Over time, my tendency to think that something was broken when I first turned on the system, backed off a bit, but I was always aware that the speaker sounded shouty and labored for about a half hour. But what they did once they woke up!

Through several pre-amps and sets of valve amplifiers I never heard dynamics, air, dimensionality, orchestral weight, tonal correctness or just plain emotional pull from a set of loudspeakers like I heard from the Hornings. It took a full three months for the obnoxious hooty colorations to go away, and then one day the system simply disappeared and I was in the Sofiensaal listening to Leontyne Price singing and the Vienna Philharmonic playing just for me. It was uncanny and unlike anything I had ever heard in home music reproduction. The sense of an effortless and seemingly unlimited ability to swell and move with the music dynamically, never becoming overloaded at anything approaching even insane levels, was almost overwhelming.

The Alkibiades' three drivers are loaded in the large box by a complex internal structure that Horning refers to as the H.A.Q.C.S (Horning Asymmetric Quarterwave Cabinet System). It is basically an original hybrid folded corner horn-style affair, and I am happy to report that it works like gangbusters. From the bottom octave through the midbass, these things have authority in spades and speak with a gorgeous tonal palette that is just lean enough to avoid going all syrupy. I will spare you the full review but I think that the Alkibiades are absolutely tops. One of the best things about these speakers is that one can use all manner of small SET amplifiers with them to stunning effect. Since

the Hornings are so easily driven and have a benign 6 ohm impedance, just about all SETs with more than a 3-4 watts of power are pretty much on equal footing; this is a great reviewer's tool and musical transducer rolled into one. The best I can sum it up is that the Alkibiades sound like really excellent "normal" speakers; they just happen to play very loudly with tiny amps. (By the way, I did try my solid-state behemoth Plinius SA250, and though huge overkill, the system sounded excellent. But valves are surely better here...).

I then dallied with two more conventional designs from Israel Blume of Canada. Blume's Coincident Speaker Technology

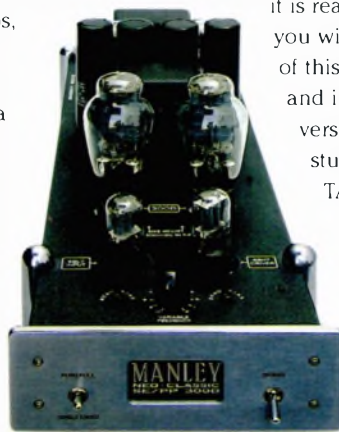
(<http://www.coincidentspeaker.com/>) has been putting out some excellent products in the last 2-3 years, all sounding very different from many of his earliest efforts, some of which did not thrill me at all. Seems that somewhere along the way he became convinced of the sonic glory of triode valve amps, both of OTL and conventional design, and gravitated to medium-powered SETs as a reference. He then voiced all of his loudspeakers to sound their best with this kind of amplification, and made them quite sensitive as well, with a highish 10-14 ohm impedance, so as to not challenge SETs' load-driving capabilities.



His 94 db/watt Total Eclipse (\$8000/pair) and the 97d/watt Victory (\$4599/pair, along with its big brother, the \$11,500/pair, 97 db/watt Total Victory, the same speaker but with the addition of 4 x Scanspeak 8" woofers per side in a larger cabinet for extra punch) proved to me that you do not have to use exotic drivers and handmade oil caps and graphite resistors (like Horning does) to get great, high-efficiency, musical performance. I have not yet heard the Living Voice Avatars that RG likes so much, but to read his review of a few issues ago I imagine that there are more than a few sonic similarities between the marques. The Coincident TE uses a soft-dome Scanspeak Revelator tweeter and two Scanspeak midrange units and has the smoothest, sweetest, most grain-less and extended treble one could ask for, along with a slightly laid-back, gorgeous midband and gut-wrenching bass capability from its 4 x 10" Scanspeak woofers. Big and bold and juicy, the TEs sounded their very best with a ballsy, tight, and extended SET like the Wyetech Labs Topaz 572 stereo amplifier. (\$8900, <http://www.wytechlabs.com>). This combination proved almost as excellent as the Hornings in tonal balance and emotional factor, but even more capable in the deep bass, and with a tunable port for use with transistor amps, as well. The Victories and Total Victories are slightly leaner in the midbass and more transparent sounding than the

▶ TVs, but with 3 db greater sensitivity and a Kapton film ribbon-type tweeter. These last two thus sounded their best to my ears with 300B-based amps, which lent a bit more sweetness and warmth to the proceedings.

This winter I plan to review the Brentworth Sound Labs Type I (<http://www.brentworth.com/>), a 100 db/watt single-driver speaker with a high-tech polymer cabinet that hails from upstate Groton, NY. I have not yet heard these but they should prove quite interesting, to judge by word-of-mouth. I do have in-house right now a good assortment of SET and other valve amps, including the 8 Wpc Viva 300B integrated (super-gorgeous Ferrari red and \$8500), a set of NAT Se-1 mono-blocs from Yugoslavia (\$6000/pair, <http://www.nataudio.com/>), The Cary Audio Rocket 88 (\$2500, <http://www.caryaudio.com/>), a set of Manley Labs Manley Neo-Classic SE / PP 300B monoblocks, little 11 watt in SE and 24 watt in push-pull honeys that make a pair of 300Bs seem like they could rule the world (\$7200/pair/ <http://www.manleylabs.com/>), and of course my reference stand-by



“big” amp, a stereo VAC FA-100/100, an amp that I use with EL-34s, 6550s, or KT-90s just to keep an even head about things (\$4000/ <http://www.vac-amps.com/page0008.html>).

Oh, and I have come full circle in speakers. I was, for several years, the happy owner of a set of Reference 3A Royal Masters, running them with a Jadis Dely 7. I am now listening to the current model, the Master Virtuoso (\$3500/pair/ <http://www.divertech.com/>), and it is really a great performer. RG raved a bit, you will recall, about the less expensive version of this speaker, the DeCapo, a few issues back, and if you can just imagine a more refined version of that transducer, this is it. Good stuff and a full review forthcoming on TAS's website. I am looking forward to a warm winter with a lot of glowing beauties, and with any luck I may yet land a set of Avantgarde Duos (<http://www.avantgarde-usa.com/>) and maybe even a set of Acapella Arts Violins (<http://www.tricell-ent.com/Acapella.htm>). Cheers! ➤

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# Incoming!

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

Dear Sir

First, thanks for a great Magazine. Having been with you since the first issue I still greet this piece of post with delight!

However (saying this always makes it feel like there is a criticism coming next - there isn't, more a question or request) I have a feeling that to get the best out of yours or any high-end audio magazine you need a degree in physics / electronics etc. Am I the only one whose not 100% sure what induction is (wherever it appears), push-pull or, as a vinyl fan a whole range of measurements for cartridges mean?

Like the current trend on the television (cooking, gardening etc) could someone produce a series of 'back to basics' articles i.e. 'Audio for Beginners'? Or is there an assumption that if you like high-end or even middle-end (which is probably what the majority of people can afford) then you are totally familiar with these terms and concepts?

Let me give you a very practical example. For a number of years I have been trying to discover if there is a minimum length for interconnects. I have a range of Musical Fidelity X series components and therefore could get away with extremely short runs. But each dealer or supplier that I ask seems to have a different view. They quote science about induction, resistance, interference and others, but in the end I am still not sure of the answer.

I somehow feel that if I understood these terms better then I could make a choice for myself, especially if it's a pay-off between two factors, which it often is!

I would be grateful for any comments

Many thanks

**John Wilkinson**

*An excellent suggestion, but then I would say that as just such a series is already in preparation. The question as always is just how basic to get? Don't expect all the answers though. We really do know a lot less about this than we think we do: Hence your confusion regarding cables. On that subject, each cable has its own optimum length dictated by its electrical characteristics. Manufacturers should be able to advise.*

*Ed*

Dear Sir

I am writing to firstly renew my subscription and secondly to express my appreciation of your publication. Like many of your readers I can't even begin to think about affording most of the equipment reviewed in your magazine, but I find much of interest in all of them. I especially applaud your commitment to two-channel music: live music is played in front of you and you have two ears, stereo fits the bill perfectly. Any decent system will be able to convey a sense of atmosphere and give an impression of the shape and scale of recording venue without audio pyro-techniques and trickery for three or more extra speakers. In addition I would like to add my voice to those championing your music reviews. As your magazine never tires of pointing out, Hi-Fi is about reproducing music and a small section of quality music to dip into every now and then is one of the things that makes your magazine so worth buying.

Many Thanks

**Robin Sheerman**

P.S.

Any chance of a review of the new KEF Reference 201's and some equivalently priced pre-power combos that might be used with them. Thanks

*The Kefs are already slated for an early appearance, in this case both the 205s and the 201s.*

*Ed.*

Dear Sir

I have been inspired to write my first letter to an Audio Magazine, after twenty years, following recent letters to your magazine concerning the pros and cons of music reviews. The purpose of my letter is to support and convince you to continue with this policy I have had the pleasure of acquiring small, medium and alas now, not so inexpensive systems, both here in the UK and more recently in the US. I had the pleasure of sampling the very earliest Croft amplifiers (when Glen and I were completing our PhD's) and met people like Stephen Harper, who all have

▶ a passion for music, and a complementary interest in finding equipment and manufactures who can communicate the essence of music.

I have become very disillusioned with the almost complete dependence of the music industry on delivering pre-fabricated mediocrity. This has, and in my view always is, a short term commercial strategy which does great damage to consumer satisfaction. In this respect, along with The Absolute Sound (which also provides a high quality insight into the spectrum of US music) I strongly urge you to continue your policy of delivering high quality musical insights and recommendations to your readers. In fact I recommend you expand it further, particularly in the Jazz field (possibly with US input). As a consumer I would be happy to pay a higher cover price. From a commercial perspective, delivering high quality services, which your customer wants, is still the key to growing a successful business. On this basis I will be taking out a subscription to HiFi+, not for the equipment, but for the music.

Sincerely

**Rod Bowers**

Dear Sir

I recently wrote to you asking which power amp would be a good match for the Vibe. This was because your review in issue 19, didn't mention the power amps used. The obvious follow up was to ask the company what they thought. I had a rapid and pleasant reply from the technical manager, to the effect, "what a good question and why didn't I ask you, as you had had an inconclusive talk on this subject two months ago" I'm confused. If you make a pre-amp you must try it with something. You too must have used it with something. Are no power amps a good enough match?

Tired and emotional in Oxfordshire.

Best wishes

**David Wise**

PS. I heartily agree with this issue's correspondents about contemporary music reviews. I have discovered Robbie Robertson, Heather Nova, Shawn Colvin and others and thank you very much. I also heartily agree that there are too few good reviews of contemporary music from a Hi-Fi listeners point of view, especially for a group of readers probably not in the first flush of youth!

*Sorry for the oversight. We normally list associated equipment in all our reviews. In this case I ran the Vibe with the Hovland Sapphire, Jadis JA30s, Lamm ML2s and tantalisingly briefly with Tom's own upcoming valve hybrid*

*design. From this you might conclude that valves are the way to go, however, CT also experienced excellent results with his Spectral DMA 100. Indeed, I've yet to discover an amplifier that doesn't benefit from being fed by the Vibe, so the world's your cyster. Generally speaking we refrain from making specific recommendations because it's impossible to do so in the absence of complete information regarding system, set-up and listening tastes and biases. You wouldn't let me order your food for you. You shouldn't let me choose your hi-fi either. Reviews are there to guide – not dictate.*

*Ed.*

Dear Sir,

In his review of the Revel Ultima Salon loudspeaker Chris Binns states "I can think of no other loudspeaker that offers this level of all round engineering, finish and above all performance at this kind of price, or even near it". Might I suggest he takes a look at the Sonus Faber Amati!

Yours sincerely,

**Ron Kirkpatrick**

*Dear Mr Kirkpatrick*

*Thank you for your communication regarding my review of the Revel Salon.*

*Although I have not had the pleasure of reviewing the Sonus Faber Amati, it is a loudspeaker that I have seen and heard on several occasions, and am in no doubt that it is an exceptional product.*

*It is also completely different from the Salon. While they are similar in price and both considered 'full range' (although I suspect the Salon would have the edge in terms of lower end scale, weight and overall loudness) the approach is completely different. My point in making the admittedly rather sweeping statement that you refer to, is that there are relatively few loudspeaker manufacturers whose engineering expertise encompass design and manufacture in its entirety, from drivers down to the last nut and bolt. The facilities made available to Revel mean they can do just that: the simultaneous design process of drive units and cabinet has produced a product where it seems to me that the whole is much greater than the sum of the parts. Regardless of the undoubted brilliance of the Amati, this depth of control over the engineering is simply not available where OEM drive units are used. Now if you'd said B&W Nautilus 800 Signature ...*

*CB*



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# The Boulder 20 Series Amplification

by Roy Gregory

I've said it before and I'll doubtless say it again: there's no such thing as the best in the World. That decision is too dependent on circumstance, context and personal preference to ever achieve such universal status. But, for every ten or even twenty manufacturers who make the claim, you come across, just occasionally, one who's prepared to make a serious attempt. Andy Payor did it with the Rockport Sirius turntables (the alliteration is no accident), and whether you agree with his approach or not, you have to accept that he's carried it to its furthest possible, and way beyond the logical, extreme. And Jeff Nelson of Boulder Amplifiers has done it too, although whether or not you'd ultimately choose to live with his 20 Series electronics is just as personal a choice as the selection of a Rockport table.

But there's one other thing that these two monsters of audio have in common, besides that is, their size, weight and engineering excess: price. And if the cost of the Rockport made you blanche, don't even think about the Boulders. At around \$30000 a box (and \$49000 for a pair of mono power amps), factor in a DAC, phono stage and line stage and that adds up to a mind boggling \$133000. Which is getting on for twice the price of the already ruinous Mark Levinson Audio Systems Reference set-up, and that includes

a "free" CD transport. There's no getting away from it - the Boulders redefine that old chestnut, "if you have to ask..."

So where, you might well ask, is the relevance? Well, there's the stock response that it informs us about



what's possible. And then there's a certain fascination inherent in any such prospect. There's me wanting to get my grubby hands on some seriously tasty kit, and there's you guys out there who'd like to read about it, dream about it, and fantasize about one day owning it. But actually, there are two far better reasons than any of the above.

Firstly, when I visited the factory they were busy building a five-pack of mono-blocks for a customer in the Far East with a desire to hear surround that satisfies. Next door they were busy machining the casework for 2008 phono-

stages: 50 sets of casework that is. You see, people actually buy this stuff.

Secondly, the best reason of all: anybody who actually makes the attempt (and produces a credible product) deserves to be taken seriously. And the Boulders are nothing if not credible.

I'll get to the individual components in a while, but before I do, it's important to recognise that together they constitute a system, one linked by a shared ethos and set of design values. Each of these products is instantly recognisable as a Boulder design, and much of that is down to the casework.

The pale grey anodised aluminium front-panels and flush fitted circular knobs have a classy and timeless appearance that gets more impressive the closer you get. Boulder are unique (as far as I know) in producing all their own casework in an advanced CNC shop, next door to the assembly plant. And the quality is more than skin deep. Those shiny buttons are polished stainless steel and all the legends on the front-panels are deeply machined into the surface. The heat-sinks on the power amps are a three-dimensional work of art, while the fit and finish extends to the tough, crackle coated housings that shield the circuitry. The Boulder products look fantastic, and they'll go on looking fantastic across their considerable

▶ life span.

The other thing it's hard to miss with these units is the huge alpha-numeric displays, beautifully clear and legible from across the listening room. Super sensible, they also hint at the level of control sophistication built into these products. As you might expect, these can be user set for brightness, as well as custom configured to identify sources. They are the last element in an appearance that simply serves to underline the straightforward engineering excellence on which Boulder pride themselves. There's no fancy sales pitch here, or claims for groundbreaking technology: Just solid engineering done as well as possible. Of course, you still get the odd luxury touch like the leather bound instruction manuals (clear and comprehensive) but they are the exception rather than the rule in what is a refreshingly BS free presentation.

In fact, my only substantive complaint concerns the labeling of the input and output socketry on the rear panel of the line-stage. For some reason which I simply cannot fathom, and which flies totally in the face of the clear, logical, common sense approach that dictates every other aspect of the design and execution of these products, Boulder have chosen to label the myriad, identical connections with black lettering on the charcoal gray background. This is barely legible with the unit sat on the table in front of you. Start trying to grope around the back of the rack, hooking this stuff up and you are reduced to Braille. Given the weight of the individual products, shifting the rack after installation isn't a practical option, so be prepared for significant frustration. Aesthetically speaking I don't go much on the feet either, but that's just a personal thing.

Once you get inside you'll discover a few other things. Much of the low-level circuitry is built round Boulder's

proprietary 993 potted modules, evolved from the legendary Jensen 990s and which march like black housing blocks across the circuit boards. Look a little closer and you'll realise that the circuit layouts are not complementary, which is quite a surprise given the cost of these products and balanced only nature of their connections. Jeff Nelson points out that using complementary circuitry throughout would actually negate one of what he sees as the biggest advantages of balanced connection. Namely, by converting from balanced to single-ended operation at each input, you gain the benefit of common-mode rejection and thus the quietest input signal to each gain stage. This is key to achieving the stellar noise performance of the Boulder Electronics. Nor is there the expected roll-call of high profile audiophile components. Every single part used is carefully selected by listening, the ones used being the best sounding rather than the best known. What they are is incredibly tightly toleranced, with both value and supplier specified. Of course, you still get the odd luxury touch like the leather bound instruction manuals (clear and comprehensive) but they are the exception

rather than the rule in what is a refreshingly BS free presentation.

So much for the generalities, what about a few specifics? This review is centred on the 2010 Line-Stage and the

matching 2008 Phono-Stage. However, for the sake of completeness, the importer also supplied the 2020 DAC and both the 1060 and 2060 power amps, so that I could experience the pre-amp stages in the context of the complete Boulder system.

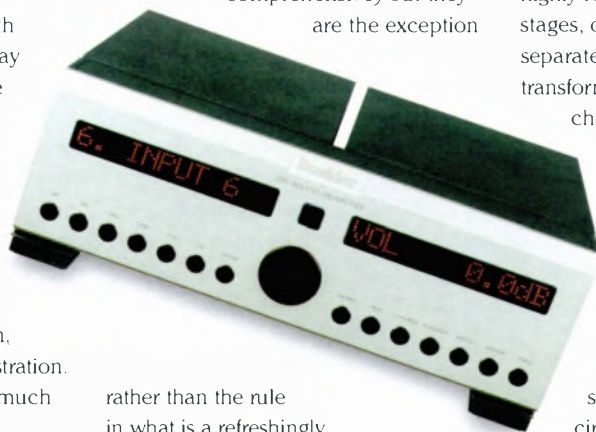
### The 2010 Line Stage

The 2010 is a substantial two-box, dual mono design. The slimmer box is the 2000 Power Supply, common to both the Phono Stage and the DAC, and joined to the parent units in each case by three XLR terminated leads. Two of these, fitted with four-pin connectors supply the left and right analogue stages, whilst the



third, fitted with five-pin plugs, supplies the digital and control circuitry. The 2000 feeds highly regulated DC to the active stages, derived from three totally separate supplies, each with its own transformer. Once inside the main chassis, this is further regulated adjacent to each stage.

The 2010 chassis itself is a modular device, with two independent boxes, one for each channel, mounted on a single, common chassis and face-plate. The two piggy-back boxes each contain a single channel's worth of audio circuitry, identical to the extent that they are not even mirror imaged. Undo two large knurled knobs on the underside of the main chassis and you can lift a circuit box clear,



▶

▶ electrically linked as it is to the main chassis solely by a substantial row of studs that deliver DC and logic commands. From which it should be clear that the control circuitry and displays are confined to the electrically and physically separate base element. Undo four captive screws on the back of each audio circuit box and the PCB, loaded with components, can be slid into view. This modular approach means that in the unlikely event of a problem, the owner can simply swap out the offend element and replace it with a stand-in from the distributor, rather than having to ship the entire, extremely heavy unit.

The 2010 provides inputs for six balanced sources, two main outputs and a pair of record outputs. Pure vanilla: but the connection count is only part of the story. At this level, it's what you get to do with those inputs that counts.

The front panel carries two horizontal rows of seven push buttons, flanking the centrally positioned, flush-mounted volume control. Press those buttons and you are rewarded with a weighty, solid feel and a satisfyingly positive action (the volume control is also beautifully weighted and free moving). Those on the left control the six inputs and the record outputs, the display above them informing you of current status. The right hand half of the fascia allows you to adjust the output configuration and programme the unit. Starting from the left they allow you to set balance, mute the unit, reverse left and right signal polarity (individually or together) and set the brightness level of the display (eight discrete levels or off). Then comes the mute button and the power button that switches the unit in

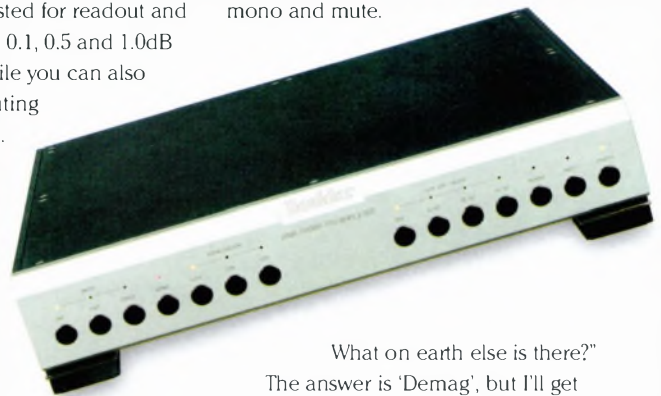
and out of standby. The right hand display normally gives a volume read-out, but used in conjunction with the program mode, it enables you to configure the 2010 for your own particular situation. Specifically, you can adjust the individual input sensitivities in order to match source levels, and each one can also be labeled with up to a ten letter name. You can set individual input polarity and designate whether or not it's a valid recording source. The volume control can be adjusted for readout and also resolution, with 0.1, 0.5 and 1.0dB steps as options, while you can also set the degree of muting applied by the mute. The balance and polarity of the main outputs is also user selectable, as is the polarity of the record outs. All of which can be done from the remote handset, of which more later.

All in all, it's a comprehensive package that comes close to matching the Levinson Reference system, my personal benchmark when it comes to operational flexibility. And the programming process itself is every bit as good as the Levinson's which is praise indeed.

## The 2008 Phono Stage

The hardest part of designing the Boulder phono stage must have been coming up with fourteen buttons to spread across the fascia so that it would match the other units. I can just see the meeting:

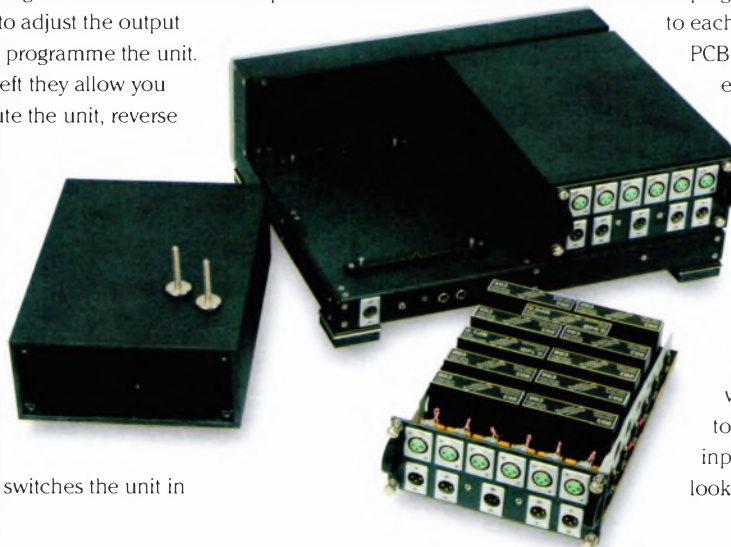
"So, that's three inputs, three equalisation options, three subsonic filters and a defeat, which makes ten. Then there's power, mono and mute.

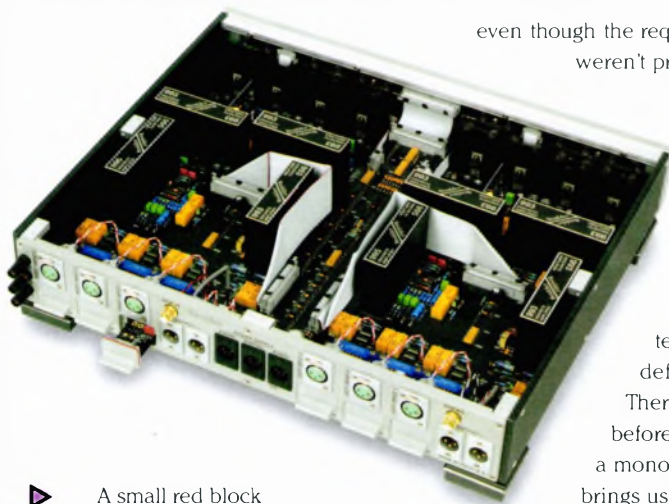


What on earth else is there?"

The answer is 'Demag', but I'll get to that in a bit.

The 2008 uses the same 2000 power supply as the line-stage, and the unit itself is built into the same slim-line casework. It offers balanced inputs for three separate cartridges and two pairs of balanced main outputs, so that it can be linked directly to a recorder as well as your main system. But the heart of the 2008 is the system of plug-in 'Personality Cards' dedicated to each input. These consist of a small PCB with an edge connector at one end and an extruded aluminium faceplate and handle at the other. They simply push into ports located below each input socket, sliding in slots provided. Rubber O-ring grommets around the faceplates ensure a snug fit, protecting the subassembly from mechanical and airborne vibration. Each card enables you to define the parameters for its input. You can see what they look like on page 35. ▶





▶ A small red block provides three dip switches which allow you to select between MM and MC, low or high gain (+10dB) and whether or not the 'Demag' switch is enabled for this input. There are also solder pads provided so that you can adjust the default load impedance (1000 Ohms for MC, 47 K for MM) and capacitance of the input. It's an extremely neat solution to the issue of building versatility into a phono-stage, and is so simple to use that additional cards could easily be held and substituted as required for users wanting to run more than three cartridges. Let's face it, anybody with a \$25000 phono stage is going to be a certified vinyl loony, so it's not exactly an unlikely scenario.

As well as the three inputs you also get the option of customised equalisation. RIAA is fitted as standard, but internal PCBs can be installed that activate the other two EQ switches. These can be chosen from FFRR, EMI, Columbia and NARTB. There's no CCIR option (DG amongst others) as yet. As anybody who has played with replay equalisation will tell you, correct replay curves have a profound effect on the tonal balance of recordings. To simply assume that all records after a certain date were produced to the RIAA curve is a dangerously misplaced act of faith, so this is a welcome facility indeed,

even though the requisite cards weren't provided with the review unit.

Besides that, the 2008 provides switchable subsonic filtering that can be set at five, ten or 20 Hz, or defeated altogether. There's also, as listed before, a mute and a mono switch. Which brings us to the 'Demag' switch. Cartridge demagnetisation for moving-coils offers



well known benefits.

Stand alone units such as the Gryphon and Aesthetix are essential accessories for anybody running a serious moving-coil. The Boulder doesn't incorporate a demag circuit, but it does offer a permanent connection for your stand alone unit, via a pair of phono sockets on the rear panel. Hence the demag defeat on the personality cards. You wouldn't want to inadvertently connect your demagnetiser to a moving-magnet cartridge!

One final comment regarding the 2008 concerns its adoption of a pale gray back panel, making

all the labeling an awful lot easier to read. The phono-stage was the last of the 2000 series to appear, so maybe Boulder learnt something along the way.

### The 2020 D/A Converter

The 2020 DAC shares the 2000 series powersupply with the 2010 Line-Stage, as well as the latter's structural architecture. Connections are provided for four balanced AES/EBU inputs (a special adapter to correctly terminate a 75 Ohm single ended input is also supplied), one ST glass optical input and one Toslink. Balanced analogue outputs are provided, along with record outs and a pair of balanced digital outputs. The front panel offers the normal source select options as well as a sophisticated time delay feature which can be used to compensate for

speaker positioning by digitally moving one speaker relative to the other. Once again, inputs can be individually labeled and the display intensity manipulated. The DAC itself employs multiple Burr Brown 1702 chips (five per channel) to achieve 20 bits with 8x oversampling. The 2020 will also accept 96 kHz signals.





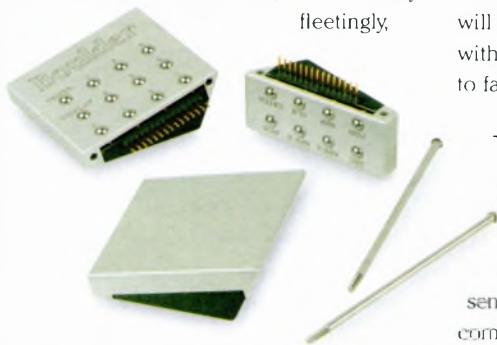
## ► The Boulder Remote Control

Both the 2010 and 2020 arrive with slab-like, solid aluminium remote control units. However, for those who own both units, these remotes are actually modular, clipping together like a stack of Lego bricks. Thus the battery pack and numerical section can be combined with the specific control panels from other units to create a single

remote. It's a simple and effective set-up which goes some way



towards reducing the absurd proliferation of handsets in the average household. Chez Gregory is of course different, an environment in which the only remotes tolerated, and then only fleetingly,



are those that are necessary because their parent set is being reviewed. But then I don't have a mobile phone either...

## The Power Amps

The Boulder power amps are mighty big and mighty impressive. Even the baby 1060 is a serious lift and delivers 200 Watts per channel. The 2060 stereo



amp is way heavier than I'm prepared to carry (330 lbs!), and it's massive with it, being far deeper than it is wide. Both amps share the same impressively sculpted heat-sinks, which at least give you something to get hold of, and the same understated front-panel. The principle difference is that the 20 series amps run far hotter, with a higher proportion of Class A operation. At a price! Whereas the 1060 will set you back a wallet wringing £16000 or thereabouts, the similarly specified 2060 will stand you around £30000. Something else they share is their balanced only inputs and the doubled-up wing-nut binding-posts that will accept spades and little else. Those with expensive speaker cables need to factor in re-termination.

## The Rest Of The System

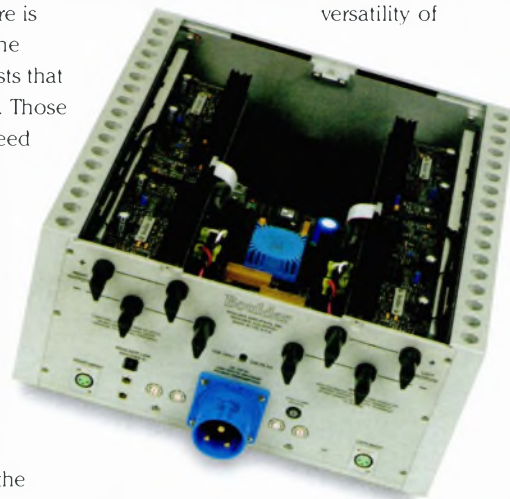
Whilst the Boulder electronics constitute a system in the fullest sense of the word, the company as yet provides no source components or speakers (although a digital transport is in the works). For the review I used the Clearaudio Master Reference turntable, supported on an Acapella base, and the Metronome T1-I as a digital transport. Speakers were the Revel Salons and the Avalon Arcus. The system was wired with Nordost Valhalla signal and speaker cables, with Russ Andrews mains cabling. Racks were the Clearlight Aspects, which did sterling service once

the various associated equipment came into play (see side bar). Only the power amps couldn't be accommodated, so these were placed on a dedicated marble and sand sandwich construction stand (which weighed nearly as much as they did). The whole system was allowed to cook for a couple of weeks before serious listening started, and the effects of the extended warm-up were far from subtle. But then if you can afford this sort of kit you can afford the electricity bills that go with it, and this is one set-up you need have no fears about leaving on. Every item performed flawlessly throughout the review period, and each was a pleasure to use.

## And so, to work...

The solid feel and functionality of the units themselves extends to the sound of the Boulder electronics.

The set-up options and versatility of



the products make it extremely easy to tailor their operational performance to your precise requirements, making the interface between listener and music as straight forward and unobtrusive as possible. In exactly the same way, the system's unflustered, no frills presentation delivers the music with the absolute minimum of fuss. ►

▶ It's hard to explain, but the innate balance of these electronics, their freedom from strain or level related compression means that they simply serve up whatever you feed them, free of fear or favour.

How would I characterise their sound? The first thing you notice is the absolute evenness of the frequency range. The Boulders are devoid of any exaggeration or artistic license. There's none of the velvety darkness that I hear with the big Levinsons, and none of their subtle mid-bass lift. You know, that little bit of extra energy and projection that lends a system extra impact and really gets bass lines rolling. Instead, the Boulders deliver a front as universally even and free of undulation as the average pre-teen school



girl. Their virtue is as unsullied as well.

Once warmed up, there's a refreshing lack of grain or general contamination to the soundstage, which is just as well given its copious dimensions.

What you get from the big, grey boxes is a big and incredibly stable sound. Stage width is exceptional, with

instruments spread well beyond the outer edges of the speakers, yet these images still retain the substance and absolutely rock solid positioning more normally enjoyed by centre images. It makes you realise just how insubstantial most amps are in this regard. Along with that width comes beautifully proportioned depth, height and superb overall dimensional coherence.

You are never in doubt as to where instruments are positioned, and if they move, regardless of level, you can be pretty sure it's down to the recording. That's the sort of confidence that the Boulders inspire.

Within that soundstage, there's an incredible degree of inner detail and definition. Instruments are held in proportion and despite the size of the power-amps it's the recording that sets the agenda as far as scale and weight are concerned.

The Boulders never sound big until they have to – then they do it with grace and a total lack of concern, irrespective of the demands you place on them. In fact, this is where the 2060 scores over its cheaper (but still not cheap) smaller brother. The 1060 is impressive in this regard until you hook-up the bigger alternative. The 2060 just brings an ease to musical expansions, an almost organic swelling that instills a sense of natural wonder, in the same way as a full orchestra building to a crescendo. There's a lack of limits, a sense of endless possibility that's rare from any hi-fi system. Bass lines a la Boulder are deep, pitch perfect and mobile. The bowed bass on 'You look Good To Me' (Oscar Peterson Trio, *We Get Requests*) has height and scale just as it should, the steps between notes perfectly spaced, and equally perfectly balanced by the beautifully defined cymbal work at the other end of the musical spectrum. It's this solid bass,

together with the exceptional noise performance that provide the key to the Boulders' character. It's a character that's consistent across all their products, although having listened a lot to the DAC while the system was warming-up, I wasn't prepared for the leap in quality that would arrive along with the introduction of the phono-stage.

But before we get to that, and the inevitable comparisons that go with it, we need to look at what the Boulder doesn't do. We know it doesn't add to the signal, does it subtract? Well, compared to the better valve systems it lacks colour although which is more accurate is certainly open to question. Of greater concern are the side-effects of its chosen perspective. The Boulders offer a mid-hall balance which is both warm and effectively deals with any accusation of sterility. However, at the same time it robs the sound of immediacy and low-level dynamic impact. They simply don't jump as quickly or as far as small amps do when they drive efficient speakers. It's the price of doing business with really big amps and balanced connections, and whether that dynamic frisson is the result of over-shoot or not there are always going to be those who prefer it to the advantages of weight, scale and stability that arrive with the monster packing crate that contains a Boulder 2060. That's an individual choice and not one that concerns the designers at Boulder. They are pursuing unadulterated accuracy the best way they know how. Questions of preference don't come into it, at least as far as the design stage goes. Purchasing of course is a different matter.

### Going Head To Head...

When someone sets out to create the best then people inevitably ask the question: Have they succeeded? I started this review by dismissing the notion of any such thing as a single best product, however, under the ▶

► circumstances it would be remiss of me not to assess how the Boulder components stack up against their peers. So, to that end I assembled what seemed like a cast of thousands and embarked on the logistical nightmare of arranging them all so that I could undertake comparative listening. Source was the Clearaudio Master Reference, with its own arm and Insider Reference cartridge. Power amp and speakers were the Hovland Sapphire and Living Voice Avatar OBXs, while cabling throughout was Nordost Valhalla.

The assembled cast of line and phono-stages ran to the Boulder units, the Connoisseur Definitions 4.0 pairing, and representing a strange form of sanity, the Tom Evans Audio Design Groove and Vibe, a pairing present on merit and regardless of price. I chose the Hovland on the basis that I had no known power amp with both balanced and single-ended inputs and felt that the Boulders driving a single-ended input was a lesser evil than the opposite scenario. It also introduced a power amp from an independent source. Although these arrangements were far from ideal, they do serve to under-line the problems of any such attempt to make direct comparisons between components of this quality and complexity. Nevertheless extensive listening actually served to confirm the conclusion garnered from listening to these units independently.

It's also important to appreciate just how different these units are in conception. Tom Evans sets out to provide the biggest possible bang for your buck, and succeeds spectacularly. His designs are stripped down and race

ready and can truly be considered budget esoterica. The Boulders on the other hand, sit at the top of a substantial range and are a true attempt on the state of the art. They are complex, versatile and superbly engineered. The Connoisseurs represent something of a half way house between these two extremes.



Despite their \$26000 price tag, the pairing actually represents the Companies' entry level offering, and are stripped down and compromised to achieve that. It makes the whole debate a bit like discussing who's the best pound for pound fighter: diverting, interesting but ultimately inconclusive. There is no simple answer.

Initially at least I kept the various pairings distinct, knowing from past experience that both the Connoisseur and Tom Evans units produce rather more than the sum of their parts when used together. Individual characters quickly emerged. The Groove and

Vibe were their normal quick, lucid and transparent selves, effortlessly transporting the listener to the same acoustic space as the musicians. The drama, dynamic range and impact of their performance was impressive indeed, providing a valuable and challenging benchmark for the more expensive offerings.

In comparison the Boulders lack the obvious transparency and dynamic zip of Tom's babies, lacking too their impressive immediacy. However, their presentation was far more sophisticated, delicate, controlled and refined. Their soundstage was the most stable and coherent of the group, with a truly impressive sense of the overall acoustic space in which a recording was made. The delicacy and definition of their presentation was breathtaking at times, underpinned by their ghostly silent background, far quieter than either of the others.

The Connoisseurs lie far closer to the Groove and Vibe in character, but they too are more sophisticated: this time in terms of dynamic tracking, tonal colour and rhythmic agility. They can track tiny changes in the density and levels of musical energy with an uncannily convincing naturalness that seduces the listener with the directness and impact of its musical communication. Playing 'Way Out Basie' from the Count's *Farmers Market Barbeque*, they capture the elusive lobe of the upright bass, the deft promptings of the Count's

▶ stabbed chords. The rhythm guitar is rich, vibrant, solid and inviolate, never swamped by the band around it. And when the brass enters the equation you simply marvel at the easy delineation of each level on the steps upward to crescendo, never for a moment worrying that the

wide, deep soundstage that characterises the recording. Likewise they position each instrument in the orchestra as the piece slowly builds into a smooth, sumptuous swell, full of grace and power. It's a steady presentation, and somehow luxurious, a bit like Axminster unrolling in front of you. The depth and grace of the presentation, coupled with its absolute stability provide a facsimile redolent

The sound stage is more immediate and transparent but also shallower. The performance is dramatic, but lacks the control, tonal sophistication and measured pacing of the big American units emphasising energy and vitality at the expense of hi-fi manners.

Wheeling in the Connoisseurs restores the sense of tonal sophistication and naturalness, building on the Groove and Vibe's dynamic range and underpinning it with real power. Lacking the positional precision of the Boulder the violin's contribution is far more lyrical, the placement of the harp's notes far more dramatic and effective. Indeed as the piece develops you can discern the underlying chemistry in the performance. You can sense Reiner's iron control over tempo as he oh so slowly allows the piece to accelerate. The 4.0s' ability to let music breathe and proceed at its own pace is unparalleled. Never on a recording have I heard so plainly the sense of the orchestra as an extension of the conductor's baton, or so clearly his absolute control over the performance and its

translation into his artistic vision. Never have I heard a system communicate so clearly the core of the musical construct. The difference in spatial presentation is fascinating, the Boulders' superb overall coherence in dramatic contrast to the Connoisseurs, which certainly resolve the space around instruments as they play, but without ever offering that impression of a consistent over arching acoustic. The Groove and Vibe capture the acoustic, or at least the position of instruments within it, but they never develop the depth or mid-hall perspective that offers such smooth warmth and dimensional imagery ▶

system might run out of steam. It's a joyously open-ended outpouring in contrast to the Boulders' contained, total control. But it's also one that's full of subtlety and musical direction, revealing the superb poise and balance in the arrangement, so full of impact so economical with the forces available. The 4.0s make Tom's offerings sound pared away and hurried. Instead they have the ability to deliver music with a true sense of weight and at absolutely perfect pace, allowing the performance to dictate the tempo rather than the system. They never sound fast, they never sound slow, and when they jump you wonder just how high they could go if they really tried. It's a combination of virtues that makes for a dramatic and tremendously insightful performance.

What does all this mean for music? Well, let's use a single example: Reiner's recording of *Scheherazade* with the Chicago Symphony (RCA Living Stereo LSC-2446), *The Story Of The Calendar Prince*. The Boulders capture the overall acoustic beautifully, positioning both the solo violin and harp precisely in the

with the finest detail. (The delicacy and definition of the cymbal work on 'Coleen' (from Martin Stephenson's *Boat To Bolivia*) is astonishing, underlining just how poorly most record replay systems handle this instrument.)

Switching to the Groove/Vibe combination immediately places you closer to the orchestra, both in terms of distance and the directness of communication. The violin lacks the smoothness of the Boulder but there's a greater sense of bow on strings, while the harp's individual notes have far more attack.



► in the case of the Boulders. Instead it's an altogether starker and more minimalist picture, accentuating the units' immediacy and transparency.

Under the circumstances it's tempting to try and mix and match the various units to achieve the best of both worlds. But cross pairing any of these



set-ups proved

a frustrating experience, only the Vibe serving as a willing partner for the other phono-stages. However, even here, the line-stage's sheer transparency simply exposed the character of its chosen partner, strengths, weaknesses, warts and all. Reverting to the natural pairings always seemed to build on the strengths while minimising the weaknesses. Put a Connoisseur or Boulder phono stage into a lesser, even a basic system and it will transform it. But you won't have heard the whole story. Not by a long chalk.

So, you pay your money and takes your choice. Or rather you don't. Most of us will never be able to afford the likes of a Connoisseur or Boulder. For us the Tom Evans designs are far from disgraced, even if they don't quite scale the dizzy heights of the very, very best. They still provide a degree of musical insight and communication that can only be bettered at many times their price (and in my experience, only by the competition assembled here). For the lucky few, the price difference between the more expensive options is likely to be irrelevant. If you must have the best and you can afford it then you'll find the necessary. As to which you choose, that will be down to personal preference: the delicacy,

control and rock stable imaging, the sheer beauty of the Boulder, or the presence, energy, drama and insight of the Connoisseur. On the one hand the fact and overview of the performance as a whole, on the other it's internal sense and life.

One's a Canaletto, the other's a Van Gogh (which makes the Groove/Vibe a Gauguin). I'll take the Connoisseurs, but one thing's for certain: for each of you who would agree with me, there'll be another who'd choose the Boulders. You can't please all the people all of the time. ►+

The Boulder electronics offer exemplary hi-fi performance that they translate into a musically faithful presentation, coupled with an authentic mid-hall balance and perspective. It's this viewpoint that will decide whether you put them at the top of your personal listening tree or not. For those who value expansive scale and coherent stereo, combined with exceptional detail and definition then the Boulders have it all. Those who demand greater intimacy and immediacy, colour and vibrance will admire the Boulders (it's hard not to) but ultimately look elsewhere. These are electronics that do nothing to curry favour. They don't bathe music in a soft focus glow or deliver the starkly over-etched "high-definition" transparency that has become fashionable in some quarters. They are about the accurate delivery of what's on a recording, and in that respect they are certainly exceptional (and wonderfully unflappable). The 2010 line-stage and 2008 phono-stage are the cream of this crop, offering you the option of matching them to a more forgiving amplifier if you so choose. Once installed in your chosen system they are designed to provide a lifetime's service. For the well-healed vinyl lover with an extensive collection and the desire to optimise replay for each and every disc, they will do exactly that.

#### TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

##### 2010 Line-Stage

|                         |  |
|-------------------------|--|
| Inputs:                 | 6x Balanced Line                       |
| Outputs:                | 2x Balanced Main<br>2x Balanced Record |
| Input Impedance:        | 333 kOhms                              |
| Output Impedance:       | 100 Ohms                               |
| Voltage Gain:           | 20 dB                                  |
| Record Gain:            | 12 dB                                  |
| Maximum Output Voltage: | 28 V                                   |
| Volume Range:           | 100 dB                                 |
| Volume Resolution:      | 0.1 dB, 0.5 dB, 1.0dB steps            |
| Dimensions (WxHxD):     |  |
| Line-Stage              | 18.0 x 6.875 x 16.25                   |
| Power Supply            | 18.0 x 4.25 x 15.5                     |
| Finishes:               | Pale gray                              |
| Price:                  | £30000                                 |

##### 2008 Phono-Stage

|                  |  |
|------------------|--|
| Inputs:          | 3x Balanced                              |
| Input Impedance: | 47 kOhms (mm)<br>1000 Ohms (mc, default) |

Both resistive and capacitive loading is user adjustable via hard solder pads.

|                         |                                      |
|-------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| 1 kHz Gain:             | 34 or 44 dB (mm)<br>54 or 64 dB (mc) |
| Outputs:                | 2x Balanced                          |
| Maximum Output Voltage: | 28 V                                 |
| Output Impedance:       | 100 Ohms                             |
| Dimensions (WxHxD):     | 18 x 4.25 x 15.5 inches              |

##### Phono-Stage

|              |           |
|--------------|-----------|
| Power Supply |           |
| Finishes:    | Pale gray |
| Price:       | £25000    |

##### UK Distributor:

Metropolis Music  
Tel. (44)(0)1892 539245  
Fax. (44)(0)1892 616383  
Net. [www.metropolis-music.co.uk](http://www.metropolis-music.co.uk)

##### Manufacturer:

Boulder Amplifiers, Inc.  
Net. [www.boulderamp.com](http://www.boulderamp.com)

# The Road to Avalon

by Roy Gregory

Boulder, Colorado, forty minutes North of its larger neighbour, Denver, is a Mecca for US cyclists. Nestling against the Front Range of the Rockies the geographical attractions are obvious: a mile high and with twenty mile climbs on quiet roads within spitting (well, cycling) distance, you don't have to be Einstein to work that one out. But there's more to it than that. The town's economy is based firmly around high technology and its student population, a young audience ideally suited to cycling as a pastime, and equally well suited to hi-fi. For, as well as the super expensive Boulder electronics reviewed elsewhere in this issue, the town is also home to Avalon Acoustic loudspeakers, amongst others.

Founded in 1989 by Charles Hansen, Avalon created an immediate stir with their exquisitely crafted, compact yet expensive Eclipse. A floorstanding two-way it was almost European in its dimensions, which combined with a box that seemed to consist of as much cabinet as it did enclosed volume resulted in rather less low-frequency wallop than its home market was used to given the five figure price tag. That early commitment to quality over quantity is just one of the early principles that the company has stuck to.

The quality of the finish and overall package is another, as is the instantly recognisable sloping and faceted cabinet shape, designed to time align the drivers and minimise defraction.

But, at the same time, things haven't stood still and the evolution of the companies' products can be directly linked to its own development. It wasn't long before Charles Hansen moved on to pursue his original

Couple that to highly developed audiophile sensibilities and it's a powerful combination.

Whilst production wasn't exactly based in a shed, the move to the current industrial unit was definitely a step up in the world which might have seemed ambitious at the time but which subsequent events have more than justified. The other big change, and again one that's hardly

obvious from the outside, was the move from the previous infinite baffle boxes to ported designs. Far from obvious because the ports are located on the base of the cabinets, along with the terminals, leaving beautifully clean surfaces that make the most of the superb veneers. Visiting Avalon, I was greeted by the typically modern



interest in electronics, subsequently to emerge as Ayre Acoustics (also present in this issue). Jeff Rowland stepped in to bridge the gap, partly out of interest in a product line with which his own amplification was increasingly being demonstrated, but that was always a temporary involvement. In 1991 Avalon passed into the hands of one of its most devoted customers, Neil Patel, who owns it today. With his arrival came a far more developed business sense and a clearer long-term view.

façade of a surprisingly large industrial unit and Lucien Pichette, the companies' Vice President, a man who is no mean cyclist himself. It's probably just as well that I didn't have my bike with me, as humiliation isn't a good basis for manufacturer/ magazine relations. Lucien had arrived fully equipped, and what with the altitude, a gaping chasm of sweating, heavy breathing and premature collapse beckoned. Next time I visit it'll be after some serious training.

Once inside, initial impressions are pretty much as expected. At the front are the standard collection of offices and a listening and stock rooms, but it's out the back that the real surprises start. The company cuts, laminates and constructs all its



cabinets in house, a far from simple proposition given the complex external shapes and internal construction. The faceted baffle is only possible because of the depth of the baffle itself. Constructed from laminated sheets of MDF these start at around 75mm thick on the cheapest models, and just get thicker as you go up the range. It's a technique that requires specially constructed presses and considerable patience in order to ensure perfectly flat and evenly tensioned slabs. Once the baffle is attached to the rest of the cabinet it has to be veneered. That too is done in-house with Avalon's own team hand cutting and matching selected veneers of the highest quality, and then using purpose built steam presses to attach them to the cabinets. The end results really do have to be seen to be appreciated. I have never, and I mean never, received a better finished product than this, and most

of the competition have the benefit of non-organic materials. The Avalons match the cabinetry of the Connoisseur Definitions 4.0, and that's a first.

Of course, no small manufacturer can produce their own drivers for

got a fairly standard recipe for a high-end speaker. But what the raw list of elements doesn't convey is the sheer care and attention to detail that goes into these speakers. Every single aspect of the design is considered and weighed. It's a perfectionist approach that is perhaps best summed up by the special presses and jigs of which the company is so justifiably proud, and the beautiful veneer stocks that go with them. The company is not afraid of driver technology either, the Opus and flagship Eidolon (if we ignore the \$89000 Sentinel that is) employing ceramic diaphragms and even the option of a diamond tweeter – at a price. In between the top of the range and the base model Avatar lie the Arcus, Eclipse Classic and Opus, the latter in both Ceramique and standard versions. It's an impressive line-up, but one in which none of the models is exactly cheap.



an entire range of speakers. Like most of the other specialists, Avalon rely on close ties with their chosen suppliers. They work closely enough to warrant their own driver baskets. Add in hard-wired cross-overs and selected components and you've

At the end of the day the Arcus is a two-way floorstander with a price tag that nudges eight grand in its standard finish. But then, as Lucien Pichette is fond of saying, "just because something's expensive it doesn't mean it can't be good value!"







# The Avalon Acoustics Arcus Loudspeaker

by Roy Gregory

Many moons ago, I came across the first example of what has now become a familiar format, the slim, two-way floorstander. The Audioplan Kontrast II arrived at around the same time as Celestion's celebrated SL700, and at around three times the price of that already expensive standmounter. Nevertheless, I was surprisingly successful in selling the unknown Audioplan. Asked to justify the elevated price I settled on a simple explanation: it may only be a two-way, but it's a two-way done properly. The Audioplan's attention to detail was demonstrably superior to the competition, and so too was its sound, which is why I still possess a pair of the current incarnation, the Illi. Quality will out and the Kontrast still out performs the vast majority of its imitators, as long as you value its musical coherence over the simply hi-fi spectacular. Now, some fifteen years later, another small but perfectly formed floorstanding two-way design presents me with a similar conundrum – and a similar conclusion.

Avalon's Arcus is indeed perfectly formed. Its veneers are beautiful to hand and eye, indicative of the care that has gone into their selection, hand-cutting and application. But beauty is, in this case, far more than simply skin deep. Look a little closer and you'll begin to appreciate the depth of thought that's gone into the Arcus.

Ostensibly a straight-forward two-way design, the Avalon either flies in the face of fashion or is just plain old fashioned, depending on your point of view. You see, it dares to combine an eight-inch bass unit with a one-inch tweeter,

a recipe that whilst once common has passed from view in the move towards ever smaller bass-mid drivers, a tendency that has seen the average size shrink first to around six and a half inches and now nearer to five. The justification for this was the



superior mid-band of the smaller drivers, making for a smoother transition to the tweeter.

You could always hear, or so the argument went, the eight-inch cone struggling to produce clean output up to the 3K crossover point that was also something of an industry standard. The problem was that we were throwing out the baby with the bath water. We might have got a smoother transition at the crossover, but what about low frequency extension? The move to smaller cones meant that a realistic impression of weight depended on mass-loading the bass driver or a cripplingly low efficiency, either route leading to a beast of an amplifier load.

But that's the problem with common practice – it gets stuck in a rut. Meanwhile, driver technology has moved on a bit, and high-tech cone materials have opened up the reality of eight inch drivers capable of working comfortably up into the midrange. It's exactly this development that Avalon have been exploiting, almost

since their inception. The driver in the Arcus is specially developed for the company by Eton in Germany and uses a composite Nomex/Kevlar cone, crossing over to the familiar Focal inverted titanium oxide tweeter.

Of course, using an eight-inch driver makes for a somewhat squatter cabinet than we've become used to, but the heavy bevels carved into the massive, 75mm thick front baffle slim things visually as well as physically, helping to achieve the superbly even dispersion that is one of the companies' key design aims.

The cabinet itself is a work of art. A gentle slope ensures correct time alignment for the drive units while heavy internal bracing makes for a seriously rigid structure. One of these braces also supports the heavily hard wired cross-over constructed from hand matched components. The bass is reflex loaded by a vertically mounted port set in the speaker's base. This is surrounded by a sculpted plinth that acts as a wave guide leading to the speaker's rear. Mounted in that vent are a single pair of heavy screw terminals, rather like the ones that used to appear on Audio Research power amps. These will accept large spades, although at a pinch, 4mm plugs can be clamped beneath them too. The speaker stands on three sharp cones, whose concave profile easily penetrates even the most stubborn carpet. Avalon firmly recommend that you listen with the beautifully constructed grilles in place, so that is exactly what I did.

Despite the weight, the Arcus is ▶

▶ a surprisingly manageable speaker, and set-up was extremely straightforward. I settled with them around 18 inches out from the rear wall, and toed in very slightly. The three spike support made leveling unnecessary (or impossible, once again depending on your point of view). Partnering equipment was drawn from a combination of the Clearaudio Master Reference record player with Insider Reference cartridge, feeding Boulder, Connoisseur or Tom Evans phono and line stages. CD player was the Metronome whilst power amps were the Boulder, Hovland and c-j MV60-SE. Cables were the Nordost Valhallas, with the speaker cables running doubled up to the Arcus' single terminals.

The manufacturer claims a -3dB point of below 35 Hz for what is a fairly compact speaker and doesn't publish an efficiency figure. But listening to the Arcus suggests that the stated bandwidth is indeed representative, while the efficiency is less problematic than the combination of volume and extension might suggest. It's a performance that indicates the energy transfer benefits of a really solid front baffle and a carefully considered crossover. The Hovland Sapphire had no problem driving them on its 4 Ohm tap, despite a mere 40 Watts of available power. Even more surprisingly, the Arcus followed the enormous Revel Salons into the listening room, and whilst they couldn't match the sheer scale of those monsters, the bass weight remained remarkably satisfying. Which really brings us to the key to the Avalons' performance.

What the Arcus major on is overall

musical coherence. Playing the Reiner Scheherazade (RCA LSC-2446) delivered a huge and wonderfully dimensional sense of Chicago's Orchestra Hall, within which individual images were beautifully spaced and focused, whether the gap between the solo violin and the harp or the serried



ranks of violins contributing to the climactic moments.

Interestingly too, the mid hall balance favoured by RCA can sound a little flat and distant if the system is guilty of robbing the music of energy. Despite the correctness of the perspective, totally devoid of any artificial forward-ness, the individual instruments never lacked attack or bite. The cellos' drone that underpins the opening bars of the second movement is vibrant and typically woody, as the players slowly draw their bows across the strings. Nor is there any confusion between the cellos and basses,

separated as they are both tonally and spatially. The latter's notes float convincingly adding breath and volume to the soundstage, in stark contrast to the leaden, earth-bound lumps that so often pass for bass notes in hi-fi systems. I'd love to hear these on the end of Lamm's under-powered (or should that be under-rated) ML2s.

There 22 Watts should do nicely, whilst their tonal discrimination would fit like a hand in the Avalons' glove.

Familiar vocalists are just that, which is how it should be. Shawn Colvin's distinctive, dulcet tones are unmistakable playing *Steady On* (CBS 466412 1). 'Shotgun Down The Avalanche' delivers up that beautifully focussed voice, wrapped in reverb. But impressive as the vocal is, it's the easy lope of the bass line that captures attention, easy but also somehow urgent. There's an enforced insistence that propels the track without ever making an intrusive nuisance of itself. It speaks volumes about the speakers' performance in the time domain, proving again that if you really do get the spatial presentation correct (rather than exaggerated) then the timing will be correct too. Or, in other words, spatial coherence goes hand in hand with temporal coherence.

Playing the superb Diverse Records 180g pressing of *Forget About It*, Alison Krauss' voice is full of the sweet, delicate detail that makes it so special. This is a beautiful recording of beautiful songs and the Avalons rise to the challenge, retaining the fragility and delicacy without ever sounding soft or insipid. Backing tracks have welcome weight and presence without ever clogging the sparsely tactile playing that picks out the main melody. It's an engaging ▶

▶ performance that's hard to fault, and one that begs the question as to why one would want to. Sure, you could look for even greater bandwidth, maybe a little more air and certainly greater transparency, but then what are Avalon's larger models like the Opus and Eidolon all about? You can have those things, but at a price, which is ironic given that many people would consider the Arcus to offer poor value at first glance. They couldn't be more wrong. Sure, for the same money you can have bigger cabinets with sexy shiny finishes, or more obvious technology. But can you get greater musical insight, combined with natural tonality and perfect coherence and poise? I think not. Nor will you get the benefits of Neil Patel's obsessive insistence on the elimination of distortion, the common thread that gives all the Avalon speakers their relaxed but informative sound.

I didn't have the Arcus for as long as I'd have ideally liked, which made for some pretty concentrated listening, yet never once did I succumb to fatigue. The lack of exaggeration or tonal liberties makes for an unfailingly natural sound that never draws attention to itself. Long listening sessions never pall because the speaker never imposes its character on the music. There's no sense of sameness, with each track effortlessly locking onto a composition's particular tempo and adopting the appropriate scale and acoustic. This ability to pass the musical signal free of the artificial constraints imposed by most speakers is something of a double-edged sword. On a quick listen the

speakers lack the obvious edge or zipp that make the competition superficially so attractive. But take your time and the appeal will creep up on you. The bass may not pound, but actually listen to it and you'll find it taut, textured and tactile. The treble might not draw attention to itself, but just listen to how clean the sleigh bells are on '...Avalanche': listen and you'll realise just how natural and dimensional they are, and how focussed in space. That these speakers do all this without it being obvious is exactly what they're about. Their evenness across the spectrum is remarkable, never drawing attention to anything in particular, but delivering stellar performance irrespective of frequency.

I was surprised by the performance of the Avalons with the Boulder electronics. I thought that in combination, two such self-effacing products might be altogether too much of a good thing. It was a mistaken concern. Genuine neutrality feeds on itself, and far from sounding gray or washed out, the sound was alive with delicate detail and musically natural definition. Nonetheless, I'd still tend towards a reasonably powerful valve amp as the ideal partner. But one thing's for sure - the Avalon Arcus will deliver full value from whatever you feed into it. Constructively revealing, they offer insight rather than dissection. Like the man said, just because something's expensive it doesn't mean it can't be good value. A two-way done properly? That just about sums it up. I'd love to hear the Opus! ▶+



#### TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

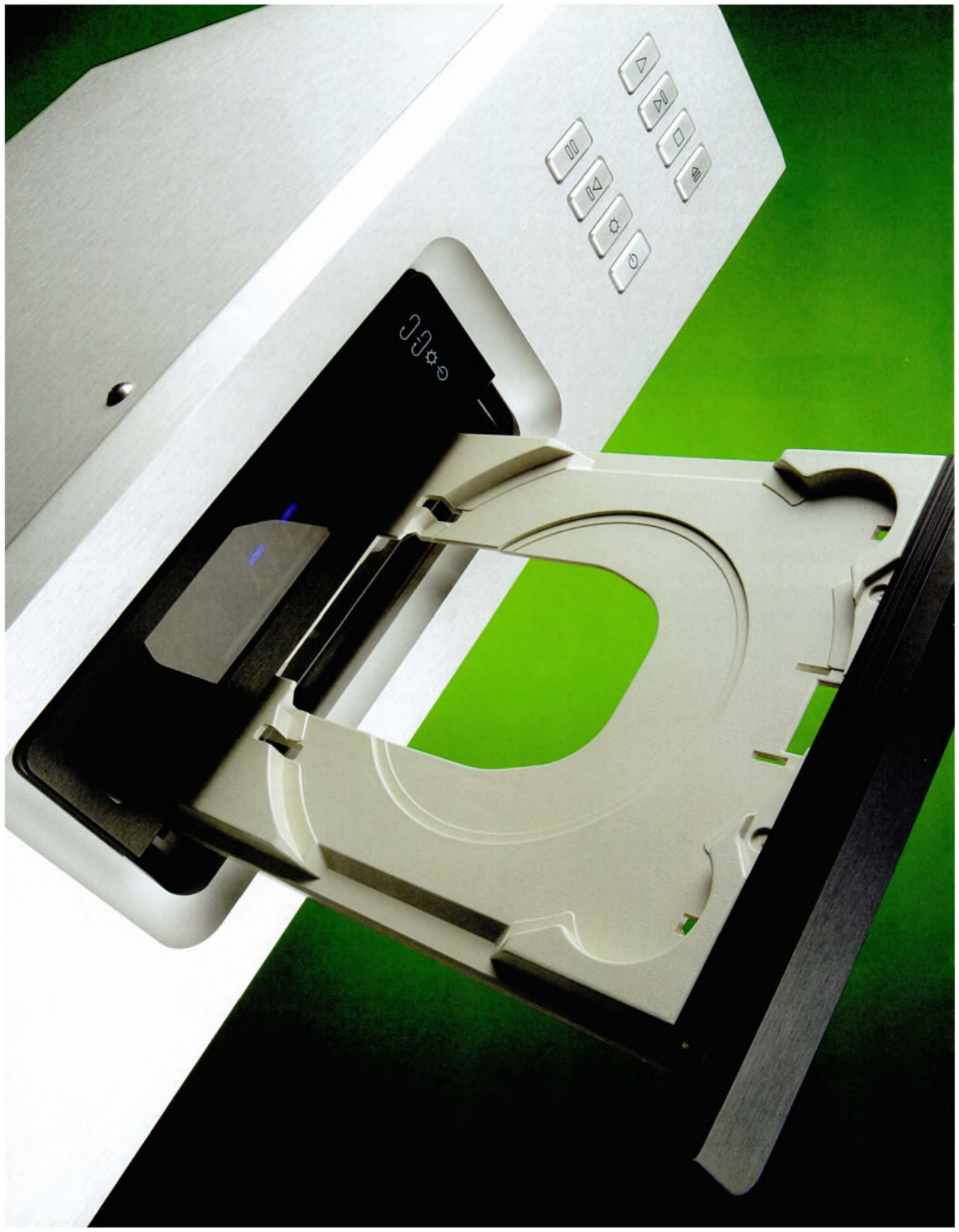
|                    |  |
|--------------------|--|
| Type:              | Two-way reflex loaded  |
| Drive Units:       |  |
| Tweeter            | 25mm Ti-oxide inverted dome  |
| Bass-Mid           | 200mm Nomex/Kevlar cone  |
| Impedance:         | 5 Ohms nominal<br>4.5 Ohms minimum   |
| Sensitivity:       | 87 dB/W  |
| Bandwidth:         | 45Hz-24kHz ±1.5dB<br>35Hz @ -3dB   |
| Recommended Power: | 30-200 Watts   |
| Dimensions (WxD):  | 9.5 x 37 x 13 inches   |
| Weight:            | 32kg   |
| Finishes:          | Standard Quilted Cherry, Figured Walnut, Curly Maple<br>Premium Myrtle Cluster Burl, Walnut Cluster Burl |
| Prices:            | Standard £7800<br>Premium £9700  |

#### UK Distributor:

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E-mail. [info1@audiofreaks.co.uk](mailto:info1@audiofreaks.co.uk)  
Net. [www.audiofreaks.co.uk](http://www.audiofreaks.co.uk)

#### Manufacturer:

Avalon Acoustics  
Net. [www.avalonacoustics.com](http://www.avalonacoustics.com)



# Ayre CX-7 Compact Disc Player

by Chris Thomas

If I was eighteen years old I doubt whether I would have much time for Ayre's CX-7 compact disc player. From what I can remember, my tastes in most things were geared more to instant gratification. I was looking for broad, colourful experiences delivered straight between the eyes and had little appreciation or time for subtleties and the shading between. And I am not just talking about music here. It's rather like auditioning Hi-Fi in a dealer's showroom, where the equipment that speaks to you in the loudest and most forthright fashion always seems the most tempting. The Ayre bought this home in resounding fashion to me several weeks ago when I first plugged it in and sat back, waiting to be impressed. The problem was that I wasn't. It was an interesting dilemma as, the more I thought about it, the Ayre seemed to have all the attributes to be a great player. It delivered the raw individual elements to make it happen, but while I could appreciate its resolution, bandwidth control and all the other things that a serious piece of audio needs in its armoury I found myself listening at it rather than through it.

For me, one the most enjoyable aspects of having a lot of seriously expensive gear pass through your hands is to wring the potential out of each piece by incorporating it into a system and a situation where it can sing. There is a lot of really decent audio out there being strangled by the unsuitability of installation.

And so it turned out with the CX-7. But more of that later.

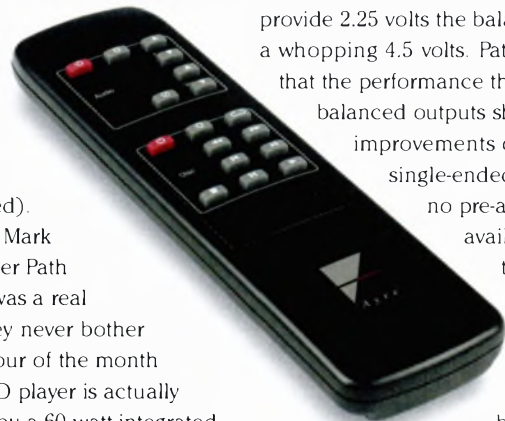
This was my first exposure to any Ayre product though I had seen them over the years in American magazines where they always seemed to get excellent reviews and a lot of respect (though this, I have learned, is not particularly significant as just about everything gets a rave review in the States, as you may have noticed). But the fact that Mark Levinson importer Path are handling it was a real plus point as they never bother with quirky, flavour of the month products. The CD player is actually complemented by a 60 watt integrated amplifier, the AX-7 that shares looks and remote operation with the CX-7.

This is a solid, well-built, single-box of vaguely industrial-type design. Clean lines, logical layout and, at long last a splendidly suitable display that is actually readable from more than a couple of feet. And it can be turned off altogether, appearing only during commands. The draw is slightly rattly but shuts firmly enough while the controls are a model of obvious simplicity. I would have liked to have seen a numeric remote handset though, instead of the one provided which means you have to scroll through the tracks. The rear panel

too is uncluttered and provides two sets of analog outputs in the shape of single-ended RCA phonos and a properly designed balanced section and not just the same output through XLR plugs which we often see masquerading as balanced. There is the expected difference in the levels from these. While the unbalanced will provide 2.25 volts the balanced gives a whopping 4.5 volts. Path tell me that the performance through the balanced outputs show tangible improvements over the single-ended but I had no pre-amplifiers available with true balanced inputs to verify this, but they could well be right. There is also a balanced

AES/EBU digital output.

The one other control on the rear panel is unusual. It is a small two-position switch marked Listen or Measure and allows you to select the digital filter algorithm of your choice. These two positions represent time or frequency optimised settings. The idea seems to be that if you are acutely sensitive to rhythmic aberrations you should select the Measure settings and if tonality is your thing then use Listen. I had a bit of fun for a while switching between them, but, as someone who is sensitive to both I found Listen a preferable choice under all



► circumstances, as did everybody else who heard the difference. The music seems to have much better a flow to me, albeit with slightly less bandwidth but the fact that Ayre offer a choice is slightly confusing as it seems like they are hedging their bets a little and slightly undermines the generally confident feel of the rest of the machine.

The Ayre uses a multi-stage digital filter and a segmented DAC. In other words it splits the signal and deals with the separate portions in different ways. The first filter upsamples to 176.4 kHz at 24 bits while the second over-samples to 1.4112 MHz at 24 bits. The DAC converts the upper 6 bits with a PCM architecture while the lower 18 bits utilise 5-level Sigma-Delta architecture operating at 11.2896 MHz. Sounds complex doesn't it? And the source of the flow of digital information is a drive that sounds as if it is of the computer DVD ROM variety. I say this because the drive is both noisy and extremely fast. Push Next on the remote control and the opening bars of that track instantly appear with no reading delay whatsoever. But there is a noise penalty with this particular drive. Ayre know this and have gone to great lengths to minimise the chance of the motor whirr from reaching the outside world. But it is there and in the interests of balance and fairness I have to discuss it. I sit about 12 to 14

feet from the player and, during the day I can only just hear the motor noise in ultra quiet passages of music. I can hear it if I listen for it, but I have never felt it was intrusive. At night I am more aware of it, but again I don't find it a problem. But, if you listen exclusively late



at night or the early hours at lowish levels AND you sit within a couple of feet of the machine then I think it could be irritating. I don't want to make too much or too little of it but I believe it is an issue and another reason why you must try this player at home.



As I mentioned, I had early problems with getting the expected performance from the Ayre. The music was in there alright but there was little projection or dynamic presence and this, it transpired, stemmed from two things. This is the first piece of kit I have tried

that does not enjoy sitting on the Naim Fraim as supplied with the decoupled glass shelves. In fact it doesn't seem to like glass at all and after much experimentation I found that substituting the Fraim's glass for a substantial piece of Medite was such a remarkable improvement I could hardly believe it. It was

probably just about the biggest change I have heard come from a support change since I relocated my Linn LP 12 from a Sound Organisation table to a Mana Reference many years ago. If I owned a CX-7 I would devote some time to trying other shelf types such as Perspex, aluminium or solid timber but I would avoid glass altogether. In fact Ayre manufacture small rectangular support blocks made from Myrtle wood and Path kindly supplied me with three of these to try under the player. With two on the left hand side, under the transformer and one on the right they bought about really worthwhile improvements, especially in the sheer depth and ambience of the music and further underlined the machines sensitivity to its support.

The other thing was that, although the player was run-in when I received it, it benefits enormously from use. Even though it is left permanently powered the transport does seem to get better and better the more you use it. And today, some 6 or 7 weeks after first plugging it in it is still getting faster, sharper and more focussed by the day. Perhaps the Ayre takes ►

▶ an age to really bed-in or perhaps it will always take a few discs before it gets into its stride.

This is a smooth and open sounding player that is so different in the way it goes about its business to my Naim CDS 11 that I practically had to re-learn how to listen before I could really understand what it was all about. Where the Naim imposes itself on you with both its instrumental projection and rhythmic focus the Ayre is, perspective-wise, more restrained and within itself. It took a week or so before I really felt at home with it but once I did, I realised that it has no real weaknesses. The bandwidth is good. Not as extended, particularly at the top, as some, but without a trace of harshness. Similarly, the bass has reasonable

extension and control though the Ayre never sounds as if the music is being over-processed. Instead there is a natural sense of "ring" to instruments and vocals and a notable lack of what I would term digital compression. This is a very common trait among CD players where the music sounds as though it is being squeezed through the system. You can hear it on some surprisingly expensive units too. After an explosively well defined leading edge, the sustain and decay of each note is curtailed by the subsequent attack of those following and the result is often a rather chilly and fatiguing experience. The Ayre seems a bit slow at first, but its ability to allow notes room and time to flourish also gives them more room to develop harmonically and this means that tonal richness and colour are both developed and you can appreciate instrumental nuance and flavour with remarkable ease.

This is all very nice of course and

the CX-7 backs this up by having one of the most stable soundstages that you will hear this side of a Mark Levinson 390S. Again it feels quite natural and unforced. There is little real projection of the music into the room in front of the speakers but great depth behind so, again, the player never feels like it



is force-feeding you the music. But running, literally like a river through all of these undoubted plus points is the Ayre's trump card of midband liquidity and its engaging ability to highlight musical progression and transition. Listen to and instrumental soloist. Hear the way that one note follows the other, the nature of the spaces between the notes, the sense of the mechanical and physical aspect of actually dealing with an instrument and fashioning a sound from it. The CX-7 makes a fair old stab at it. As good as many more expensive players and as well as anything in its own price range. Add the fact that it manages this on all music, regardless of type or scale and you are talking about a player that is rewarding to listen to over long periods without stress.

Though not cheap, this is still a budget player from Ayre Acoustics in that it has obviously been built down to a price. The casing, CD tray and remote tell you that. For this

money I doubt that Mark Levinson could actually produce a machine and if they did it would not really be an ML product as it just would not have that unsinkable build quality that is so much a part of their identity. But Ayre have done a good job trimming the costs in the right places and have ended up with a very interesting CD player. I wish it was quieter and that it had a numeric remote control but, apart from that, it offers good value for money. Somehow I doubt it will do that well in A/B comparisons in dealers listening rooms and this, for me, makes a home demonstration for a few days absolutely imperative. It just doesn't project enough to really grab the attention, but away from the stress of comparative listening it constantly surprises and deserves serious consideration. ➤

#### TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

|                     |                   |
|---------------------|-------------------|
| Transport:          | TEAC CD ROM Drive |
| Output::            |                   |
| Single ended :      | 2.25 volts        |
| Balanced:           | 4.5 volts         |
| Digital Output:     | Balanced AES/EBU  |
| Dimensions (HxWxD): | 12x44x35cm        |
| Weight:             | 25lbs (11kg)      |
| Finish:             | Silver            |
| Price:              | £2950             |

**UK Distributor:**  
 Path Premier  
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**Manufacturer:**  
 Ayre Acoustics Inc.  
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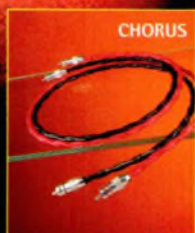
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# The Morel Octave and Octwin Loudspeaker

by Chris Binns

Some products grab you immediately with their looks, others require a bit of time to appreciate the aesthetics. Two months down the line I still can't make my mind up about the Morel Octave; sometimes I look at them and think they are a fine piece of modern design, with their beautifully finished piano black lacquer and elegant stands. On other occasions they seem to miss the mark, and look proportionally wrong and, well, a bit ugly. But it's not quite as simple as that. The Octave is a small, almost miniature loudspeaker comprising two unusual drive units in a cabinet of expensive and sophisticated material – like many others. What makes it a little different is the modular concept, whereby a second pair of Octaves can be purchased together with a small coupling stand which places them upside down on the top of your original pair to form the Octwin, offering an interesting upgrade path. Or, of course you may purchase the Octwin straightaway, with some saving on cost. While both of these alternatives are offered as a serious loudspeaker for conventional stereo, Morel sensibly have one eye on the audio-visual market, and this modular approach offers a degree of flexibility, particularly when it comes to upgrading. Either way, the performance of the basic module is the important factor.

The advantages of small loudspeakers have been well documented in previous issues of the magazine, while there are enough miniatures out there with a hefty price tag to suggest that there is considerable demand for

them. However, small and expensive means that there has to be something rather special about a design in order for it to succeed; the Octave has its fair share of interesting features that on paper at least should justify its existence in a rarefied market.

Based in Israel, Morel have been busy developing a substantial profile with their unusual and distinctive drive units, which share many features with Dynaudio products. There are now a number of manufacturers using the drivers, but their loudspeaker designs have seen little exposure in this country to date.

Not obvious until you pick one up – they are heavy little buggers – is the sheer solidity of the cabinet: rapping the surface you realise that they are also very dense. Fabricated from Corian, a material favoured by other loudspeaker manufacturers such as Wilson, this expensive material offers considerable benefits over more conventional materials such as MDF. This mineral loaded polymer is highly rigid, and thus minimises vibration that would ultimately colour reproduction. In the case of the Octaves, the enclosure is fabricated from 'slabs' that are glued together, rather than moulded to form a

monocoque shell. Internally there is no bracing, while the two small rear-firing ports are formed at the bottom corner of the cabinet by an interior partition. Both the drive units used in the Octave are unusual. The 130mm bass unit is distinctive in that it has an extremely large voice coil for such a small unit, this is wound with hexagonal cross section wire that allows a greater density of windings within the magnetic gap. The composite ferrite and

neodymium magnet sits within this, and incorporates a large vent that in conjunction with the dome provides effective cooling of the motor assembly, aiding power handling. Which is one of the main benefits of having such a large coil; compression due to heating effects should be minimised under heavy drive conditions. The other advantage is that the cone, which is made from damped polymer composite is driven at a point that should allow better control of break up modes, and is no doubt contributes to the substantial excursion that this unit is capable of.

The tweeter follows a similar construction in that the double neodymium magnet is again



▶ inside the (hexagonally wound) voice coil: dome material is a coated soft fabric. What is most unusual is the very low crossover point of 1400 Hertz: most tweeters would be in serious trouble at this frequency, and it follows that high power handling is a necessity. This unit has the luxury of its own separate enclosure, but as far as I can see there is no decoupling from the main box, while being set back from the front presumably to time align it with the bass unit means that there is a substantial lip that could introduce unwanted diffraction effects. Incidentally, both units are magnetically shielded as one would expect of a unit suitable for AV use.

The crossover is specified as 1st order, which would imply a fairly simple network, however there are a considerable number of components that I would guess are there for impedance compensation and frequency tailoring. The decent quality components are hard wired onto a plate inside the back panel, while only single wiring is available via gold plated five way binding posts. The (optional) stands are a lightweight, elegant design with adjustable spiked feet, while coupling to the loudspeaker is via small rubber pads on the top plate.

Tempted as I was to jump in at the deep end and wire all four speakers up, I did the sensible thing and started off with

a single pair of Octaves, substituting them into my normal system and positioning them in the favoured place.

Bearing in mind that they are a not exactly a large loudspeaker, I was surprised at how big they sounded – bass extension was surprisingly good, while they seemed to be capable of

impressively high levels. Although the bass unit was obviously working hard – resulting in some quite alarming cone excursions – there was never any audible signs of stress. But they need power, and lots of it. In practice, they seemed even less efficient than their paper specification, and they would happily soak up a couple of hundred Watts without flinching, the only give away being that the domes of the bass units would be warm to the touch.

Basic character of the sound was warm and dare I say it, a little old fashioned – I was reminded of Spendor BC1's and KEF 104ab's, in a time when bextrene drivers were the order of the day.

This 'full bodied' sound was never less than pleasant to listen to, and although quite 'rich' no part of the frequency spectrum seemed to be emphasised. But other aspects of performance were disappointing. Imaging and the creation of a sound stage were certainly not bad, but the Octaves lacked the ability to disappear in the way that small precision loudspeakers can often accomplish, as if the music was never entirely free of the cabinets. The top end, although smooth, seemed to lack ultimate extension, causing female voices to sound a bit thick. The other area where I found the Morels to be frustrating was in presentation of detail. The leading edge of more percussive instruments was slightly muted, for example acoustic guitar had a lack of bite with plucked strings, this was hidden to a degree under the rather rich tonal balance. Polite and well mannered, not all noises produced by people and instruments are nice, but the Octaves censored anything that might be offensive to the ear, and sometimes music relies upon this for impact which made them very comfortable, but sometimes exasperating to listen to.

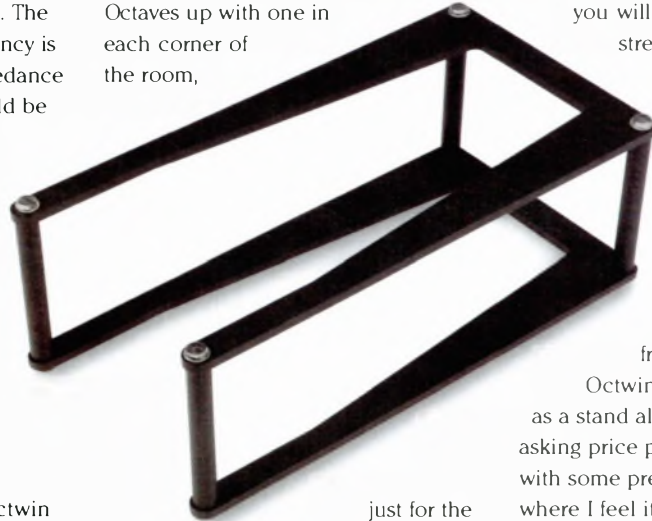
Adding the second pair of Octaves was an interesting experience. On paper, there are a number of problems that could occur with just adding an extra box, one of which is the cancellation and



► reinforcement that takes place with multiple tweeters close together - in practice I could not hear much that was detrimental to performance. The obvious benefit of greater efficiency is offset by a reduction of the impedance to four Ohms, not that this should be a problem with most amplifiers these days. In the guise of the Octwin, there was less of the slightly earthbound quality that had haunted the single pair, while music had a greater sense of scale and impact, though whether this was due to a tendency to play recordings a little bit louder, I'm not entirely sure. Further benefits were evident with the quality of bass, and while the Octwin does not offer greater extension, timing and pace and authority were much improved. On the downside, there was a slight inclination toward 'blooming' with complex piano or dense choral music, this was not evident with a single pair.



While I do not have the facilities for, or frankly the slightest interest in home cinema, I set the four Octaves up with one in each corner of the room,



just for the sheer hell of it.

There was also a bit of nostalgia involved – as a teenager I used to listen to music through four loudspeakers in my room, with occasional forays into Hafler type arrangements. OK, its not home cinema, nor is it stereo, but boy was it fun. I played a recording of Cesar Franc organ music recorded at Liverpool cathedral, and sat in the middle of it. The Morels easily handled the swathes of pedal bass that swam around the large reverberant space, and created an enormous amount of sound that did full justice to the majesty of the music. I don't think Morel make a sub woofer to go with the Octaves – now I can see why.

Expensive 'compact' loudspeakers face something of a challenge when it comes to marketing, as they must compensate for their diminutive size (and therefore limited bass and loudness capabilities) by bringing something else to the party. Where they can score is with aspects of clarity, lack of coloration, spatial qualities and musical dynamics, to name a few. The Octave does not

break any new ground with these parameters, and if retrieval of the last bit of detail is important to you then you will be disappointed. Its

strengths lie in producing a full, very comfortable sound from a small box, and plenty of it, providing you have large amounts of power to hand. While the idea of being able to upgrade on a modular basis from the Octave to the

Octwin is an attractive one, as a stand alone loudspeaker the asking price puts it into a territory with some pretty serious competition, where I feel it will have some difficulty holding its own. However, if you are looking for a flexible system to cover AV as well as conventional stereo, the Morel speakers might well present a more than attractive proposition. ➤+

#### TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

|                                  |                                |
|----------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Drive units:                     | 130mm bass and 28mm treble     |
| Frequency response:              | 42 - 18000 Hz +/- 1.5 dB       |
| Sensitivity:                     | Octave 83dB<br>Octwin 86dB     |
| Impedance:                       | Octave 8 Ohms<br>Octwin 4 Ohms |
| Power handling:                  | Octave 200 W /<br>Octwin 400 W |
| Crossover:                       | 1st Order @ 1400 Hz            |
| Dimensions (WxHxD):              | 175 x 310 x 325mm              |
| Weight:                          | 11.5 Kg each                   |
| Finishes:                        | Black, White                   |
| Price: (All prices are in Euros) |                                |
|                                  | Octave €6799                   |
|                                  | Octave stand €899              |
|                                  | Octwin €11399                  |

#### Manufacturer:

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# The Penaudio Charisma AG and Charm Satellite and Sub-Woofer System

by Roy Gregory

I've spent quite a lot of time looking at sub-woofers and sat-sub set-ups recently. The quality of the results has come as something of a surprise, with recent entries from Gallo and Cabasse pitching straight into the ultra competitive thousand pound plus market sector, and more than holding their own. Faced with conventional floorstanding boxes, the satellites offer better imaging, lower colouration and superior timing integrity. Take the trouble to adjust the sub properly and they offer wider bandwidth and better bass integration too. Which begs the question, just how far can you take this approach and still have a speaker system remain competitive?

I first saw the diminutive Penaudio system from Finland at this year's Frankfurt show. It was a toss-up as to what was more impressive: the appearance or the performance. Of course, half the point of any sub-sat system is to keep things discrete, but it's remarkable how many designers still manage to get the aesthetics all wrong: But not Penaudio. The Charisma satellites are little works of art, sporting a front baffle that's as small as it can be and still accommodate a diminutive mid-range driver with a 90mm effective diameter, and a 20mm fabric dome tweeter. The cabinets are narrow and deep, offering classically attractive proportions, enhanced by what I can only describe as the plywood veneer. They are heavy and feel remarkably solid, the tiny midrange driver being held in place by no fewer than six allen bolts, despite the minute dimensions of its cast basket. Rounding off the luxury feel, are a rear mounted and nicely contoured aluminium reflex port and a single pair of WBT binding posts.

They come with dedicated stands, silver painted columns with a matching plywood trim on the base. Oh, and four cute, gold-plated, threaded cones to level them with. The end result is svelte and compact in a clean and unmistakably



Scandinavian way. It may lack the sumptuous curves of a Sonus Faber, but there's no mistaking the quality. These are as far from Ikea as it's possible to be, whilst still retaining the same dominant aesthetic.

Electrically they're quite surprising too, balancing a lowish 85dB sensitivity with a claimed  $-3\text{dB}$  point at 80 Hz. You'd expect to get a little more in room, although the companies' expectation of 50 Hz seems a tad optimistic. Impedance is a fairly straightforward 8 Ohms and despite its limited diameter, the mid-range driver employs a full 26mm voice coil. The AG model supplied for review features optional silver internal wiring and inductors, whilst the solid copper phase plug on the midrange unit is silver plated to denote the upgrade. There's a lot of care gone into these little boxes,

which goes a long way towards justifying their extravagant price tag.

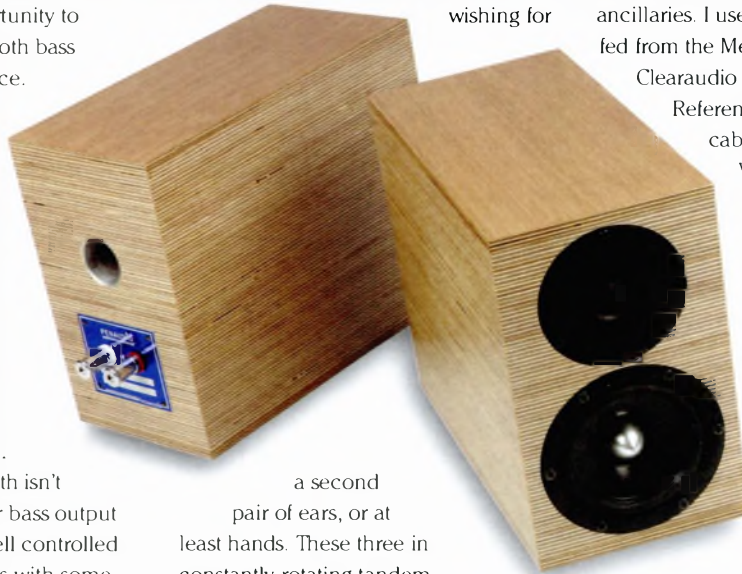
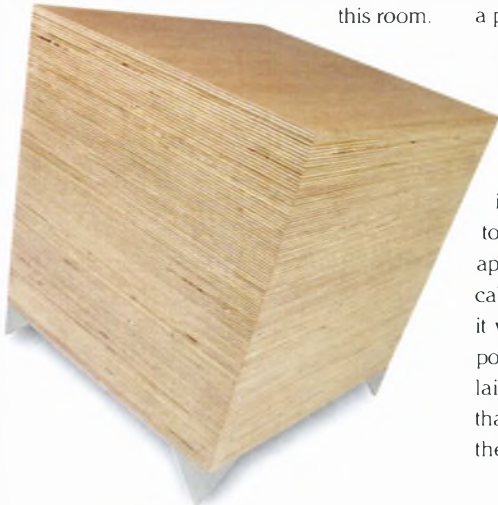
The Charm sub-woofer is equally stylish. A 14" cube finished in the same plywood veneer as the satellites, its downward firing 215mm aluminium coned driver is spaced from the floor by pyramidal sections of aluminium angle. There's a second, identical driver mounted behind the first, driven in an isobaric arrangement by the two channels of 75 Watt amplification. Continuing the heavy duty theme, the bass drivers use 39mm, four layer voice coils. Controls consist of the usual gain and low pass filters, with a constantly variable phase control (0-180 degrees). You also get a subsonic filter, adjustable below 40 Hz, and a variable high pass filter that feeds the line level output. Inputs consist of line level and speaker level options, the latter via XLR, although as usual, I preferred the line level input.

All in all it's a carefully considered package, the addition of a few well chosen additional features contributing to the overall results. For instance, the high pass filter means that you can avoid a driving integrated amp having to find current for bass notes that the satellites couldn't possibly produce, whilst the subsonic filter means that you can avoid the worst excesses of standing waves, especially if you're using a turntable. With a  $-3\text{dB}$  point at 30 Hz, and useable output down to 16, it's a wise precaution.

In a world where size (and cost) is too often equated with quality, the Penaudio's diminutive dimensions will all too often be held against it. But that would be a mistake. Don't underestimate the capabilities of those

▶ little speakers, or the bandwidth and power available from the surprisingly discrete sub-woofer, because lack of domestic impact is only one side of the coin. On the other, you have the clear sonic benefits of smaller cabinets with their greater rigidity and reduced frontal area, as well as the opportunity to optimise placement for both bass and midrange performance.

If Penaudio have exploited the aesthetic benefits of the sub-sat route to the full, then they've maximized the sonic advantages too. Indeed, it's easy to overcook the sub-woofer settings, only to be taken by surprise when some subterranean eruption unexpectedly spews forth. Despite its small size, depth isn't a problem, and the upper bass output is sufficiently tight and well controlled that having adjusted levels with something suitably natural and sparse, you'll probably find yourself ambushed by some bloated, electronic, deep bass excess. Perhaps it's the bandwidth on offer at both ends of its range, perhaps it's the overall quality of the system, most likely a combination of the two, but this is the most critical sub-woofer set-up I've ever undertaken. And that's with the benefit of considerable recent experience with other units in this room.



I ultimately resorted to using not just *Blanton* (Analogue Productions CAPJ 015) but an excellent new hybrid SACD recording of *Concertos For Double Bass And Orchestra* (Opus 3 CD 8522) and that old warhorse, the *Gladiator OST*. I also found myself wishing for a second pair of ears, or at least hands. These three in constantly rotating tandem finally allowed me to get things zeroed in, backstopped with occasional forays into other music just to check progress. Having spent the last few issues lecturing everybody about how important set-up is to sub-woofer performance, the Charm surprised even me with its make or break reaction to tiny movements or adjustments. Thank God for the nice crisp detentes on the rotary controls, making repeatable steps a practical reality.

But the good news is that all the effort was well worthwhile. With the sub doing its job (and nothing more) the sound moves completely free of the speakers. You might imagine that it would be disconcerting to hear deep, fluid, tactile acoustic bass apparently emanating from such tiny cabinets, but in practice that's not how it works. With the satellites toed in to point straight at you, the sound field is laid out well beyond them, so separate that you simply don't include them in the equation. It's not just that the bass

isn't coming from them, more that none of the music seems to be. Visually and musically unobtrusive, the speakers simply pass unnoticed. Of course, this will depend on what you hook them up to – this is a seriously expensive speaker system and it demands appropriate ancillaries. I used the Hovland amplifiers fed from the Metronome CD T1i and Clearaudio Master

Reference/Groove record player, cabled with the Nordost Valhalla throughout. Demanding equipment, the Penaudio speakers proved to be well up to the task, thriving on the sheer quality of the signal they were being fed. Feeding off their rigid cabinets and small, fast drivers, the Penaudios offer a sound that's lucid, agile and seriously

transparent. They thrive on acoustic recordings and the space they offer. But whilst the separation, agility and intra-instrumental space brings a recording like the Tacet *Die Rohre* (Tacet 74) ▶

#### A little Charisma goes a long way...

I've reviewed the Charisma and Charm as a system, because it's the combination that offers the best overall value. However, for those on a limited budget or listening to predominantly small scale works, you can purchase the Charismas on their own. Superbly detailed and transparent they are a viable alternative to other high quality miniatures, although they major on clarity rather than bass weight. They are much livelier than their 85dB sensitivity suggests, probably due to their extremely solid construction. The bass they do have goes surprisingly deep, but there's no escaping the fact that it favours information and texture over weight. If musical insight is top of your list of priorities and space is limited then the Charismas offer an attractive albeit expensive solution.



► to vivid, vivacious life, full of presence and energy, the thing that underpins the convincing presentation is the precision that defines the relationship between all the parts. It's all about that old chestnut, timing. Or, more specifically, making sure that everything happens at the right time relative to each other. Given a highly stylized and structured piece like the *Corelli Concerto Grosso op. 6 Nr. 7*, that organisational ability raises the reproduced performance way above the ordinary, laying bare the intricate inner workings of the piece, the way the strands are woven together. It's not just a cosmetic effect, it's what this music is all about.

But it also reveals the Charisma's one real weakness. All that transparency comes at the expense of some leanness, robbing the Stuttgarter Kammerorchesters' instruments of some warmth, making this all tube recording sound almost like an original instruments version. It's not so much a lack of body, more like a smoothing of leading edges, a loss of harmonic development that introduces a lightness of touch, a slightly ethereal delicacy. It's a subtle overall cast, more a quality than a colouration, and it's tempting to point a finger at the silver wiring, although without comparison to the copper wired versions it would also be rash.

However, the good news is that one man's weakness is another's strength. I'm being hard on the little Penaudios partly because they do everything else so well. Partly that and partly

because I value proper harmonic development so highly. But then I like timing and organisation and clean high frequency extension and dynamic coherence, all of which the Charismas have in spades, probably due to the high crossover point, and especially when they're backed up by the Charm. Play something that is less tonally demanding than the Tacet (a recording that sets standards in that regard) and all of a sudden those considerable strengths seem mighty enticing. They make the most of *Tea for The Tillerman's* attack and sudden dynamic shifts, the clarity and carefully considered textures of Pete Christie's (yes, that Pete Christie, [www.petechristie.co.uk](http://www.petechristie.co.uk)) latest album, *Miles Away*. A beautifully recorded selection of acoustic guitar based tracks,

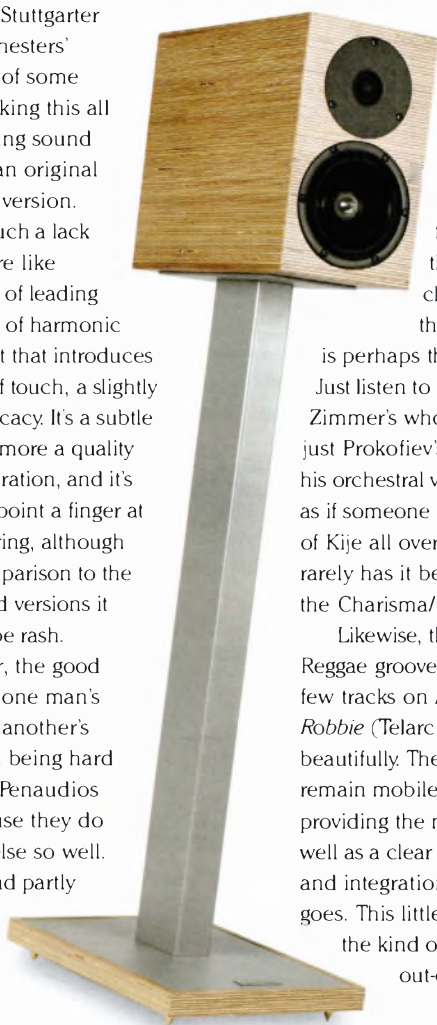
influences are varied, rhythms complex and multifarious, but the Penaudios make the roots of each individual track explicitly clear, taking on a new colour for each song. In fact, the way they change, chameleon like to take on the character of the music

is perhaps their greatest strength.

Just listen to the way they reveal Hans Zimmer's wholesale adoption of not just Prokofiev's orchestration but also his orchestral voice and tone. It's almost as if someone has dropped great slices of Kije all over the *Gladiator OST*, and rarely has it been as obvious as it is on the Charisma/Charm set-up.

Likewise, the gentle descent into the Reggae groove that characterises the last few tracks on *Monty Meets Sly And Robbie* (Telarc SACD-63494) is captured beautifully. The deep, deep bass lines remain mobile and tactile, effortlessly providing the necessary momentum as well as a clear testament to the quality and integration of the sub. And so it goes. This little speaker system offers the kind of astonishing clarity and out-of-the-box imaging that

brings delicate, acoustic recordings to life. But it also possesses the dynamic grunt and control to remain unflustered by even the most over the top orchestral works, simply taking them in its stride and sorting them out with equal clarity and aplomb. If you're in the market for a \$5000 speaker system then don't think of the Penaudio as a compromise, just consider it as an alternative approach. The companies' tag line is 'Auditional Wellbeing' and having lived with their products I can certainly go along with that. I'll be sorry to see them go, if only for the astonishment caused by sound of such quality and scale emerging from such cute boxes. ➤



#### TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

|                                  |  |
|----------------------------------|--|
| Type:                            | Satellite and active sub-woofer system.          |
| Drivers                          |  |
| - Charisma:                      | 20mm fabric dome HF<br>120mm doped paper cone MF |
| - Charm:                         | 2x 215mm aluminium cone LF                       |
| Crossover                        |  |
| - Charisma:                      | 3rd order, 5500 Hz                               |
| Bandwidth                        |  |
| - Charisma:                      | 80-22000 Hz, ±3dB                                |
| - Charm:                         | 16-120 Hz  |
| Sensitivity                      |  |
| - Charisma:                      | 85dB   |
| Impedance                        |  |
| - Charisma:                      | 8 Ohms nominal                                   |
| Dimensions (WxHxD)               |  |
| - Charisma:                      | 140 x 240 x 285mm                                |
| - Charm:                         | 350 x 410 x 350mm                                |
| Weight:                          |  |
| - Charisma:                      | 7 kg ea.   |
| - Charm:                         | 20 kg  |
| Finish:                          | Finnish birch ply veneer                         |
| Price (All prices are in Euro's) |  |
| - Charisma:                      | €3000  |
| - Charisma AG:                   | €6000  |
| - Charm:                         | €2000  |

#### Manufacturer:

Penaudio Ltd.  
Tel. (358)14 618012  
E-mail. [info@penaudio.fi](mailto:info@penaudio.fi)  
Net. [www.penaudio.fi](http://www.penaudio.fi)

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| Mass Filled (Black High Glos.) Fits almost all Centre Speakers - Call to Check            |              |        |        |
| <b>MOND AL:</b> # MAGIC BOX Improves your Picture! <u>NEW/Sealed</u>                      |              | £ 99   | £ 49   |
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| <b>A250:</b> 250W Stereo Amplifier (Black)  | Ex.Demo/Mint | £1400  | £ 850  |
| <b>A200X3:</b> 3-Channel (3x200w) Power Amp. (Black)                                      | Ex.Demo/Mint | £1600  | £ 975  |
| <b>AERIAL ACOUSTICS</b> (see pictures below for some of the models)                       |              |        |        |
| <b>Model 5:</b> Bookshelf Monitors-Pair (Maple)   | Ex.Demo/Mint | £2900  | £1495  |
| Including Special Stands  |              |        |        |
| <b>Model 7B:</b> Floorstanding Speakers-Pair (Cherry)                                     | Ex.Demo/Mint | £5000  | £2500  |
| Plus Special Pinths   |              |        |        |
| <b>Model 10T:</b> Reference Loudspeakers-Pair   | Ex.Demo/Mint | £8700  | £4350  |
| (Santos Rosewood) including Special Pinths (Stereophile Reference listed)                 |              |        |        |
| <b>CC3B:</b> Centre Speaker (Natural Cherry)  | Ex.Demo/Mint | £1800  | £ 900  |
| <b>SW12:</b> 400W Active Remote Control Subwoofer with Parametric Equalizer (Rose Walnut) | Ex.Demo/Mint | £4800  | £2400  |



## AVM

|  |              | RETAIL | SALE    |
|--|--------------|--------|---------|
| <b>V2:</b> Remote PreAmplifier (Black)   | Ex.Demo/Mint | £1175  | £ 595   |
| <b>M2:</b> Mono Power Amplifiers - Pair (Black)  | Ex.Demo/Mint | £1975  | £ 995pr |
| <b>CAIRN / EZO</b>   |              |        |         |
| <b>NANDA Face Nord:</b> Pre-amplifier, 2 Analog Chan. Dual Mono, 3 Transformers, Bal In/Outputs (Silver) | Ex.Demo/Mint | £1000  | £ 499   |
| <b>ARIA:</b> Integrated Amplifier - Remote (Silver)  | Ex.Demo/Mint | £ 450  | £ 225   |
| <b>CHORD</b> (see pictures below)  |              |        |         |
| <b>CPA3200E:</b> Pre-amplifier + Legs (Silver/Gold Badge)  | Ex.Demo/Mint | £4887  | £190A   |
| <b>DAU64:</b> D to A Converter (Silver/Gold Badge)   | Ex.Demo/Mint | £1900  | £1350   |



# Email for picture of unit

## ENLIGHTENED AUDIO DESIGNS

|  |              | RETAIL | SALE  |
|--|--------------|--------|-------|
| <b>RF DEMODULATOR:</b> # (Black)                                 | Ex.Demo/Mint | £ 600  | £ 199 |
| <b>PIEGA (P Series</b> - see picture top right of advertisement) |              |        |       |
| <b>S3:</b> Satellites with Wall Brackets, Pair (Aluminium)       | Ex.Demo/Mint | £ 499  | £ 250 |
| <b>S4:</b> Floorstanding Speakers - Pair (Aluminium)             | Ex.Demo/Mint | £1095  | £ 550 |
| <b>S4C:</b> Centre Speaker (Aluminium)                           | Ex.Demo/Mint | £ 440  | £ 220 |
| <b>P4L:</b> Floorstanding Speakers - Pair (Aluminium)            | Ex.Demo/Mint | £1695  | £ 850 |
| <b>P4C:</b> Centre Speaker (Aluminium)                           | Ex.Demo/Mint | £ 840  | £ 430 |
| <b>P4XL:</b> Floorstanding Speakers-Pair (Aluminium)             | Ex.Demo/Mint | £2210  | £1105 |

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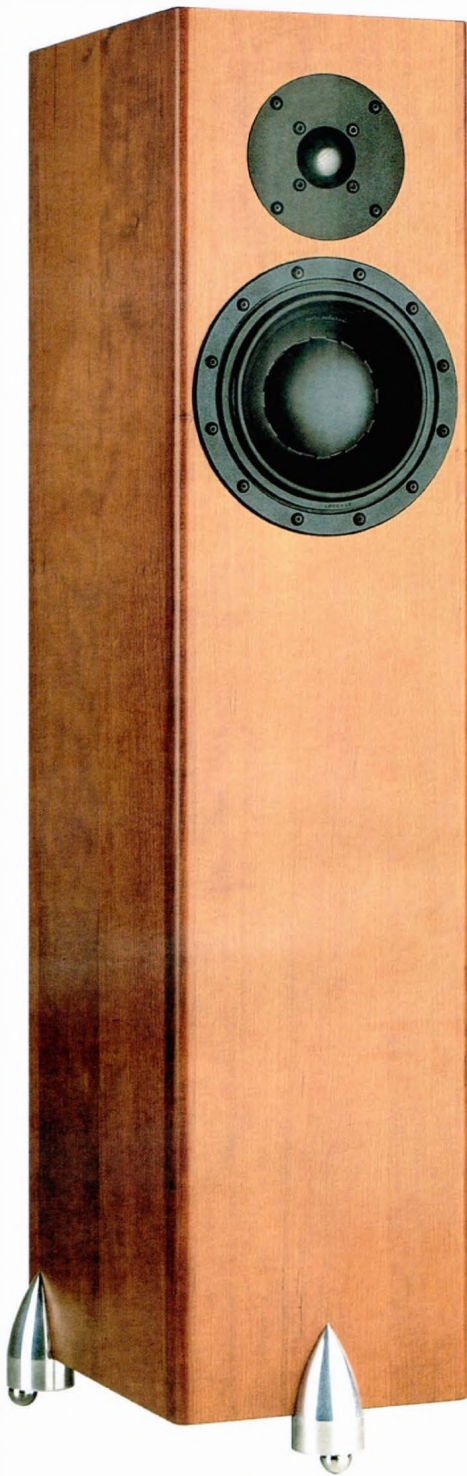
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# Forest

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Totem has spared no expense in making the Forest one of the best speakers available at any price... It's a two-way floor standing model that is surprisingly affordable, considering that it is a true super-speaker. The woofer and its aluminium dome tweeter, allow it to cover the full auditory range. Those aren't mere paper specs, either! The response is down only 6 dB at 28 Hz, a frequency most speakers can't reach. Its lock-mitred monocoque chassis, its slanted rear baffle, and its fine hand-crafted construction place it above lesser speakers of its size and price. Much of this is invisible, though by no means inaudible. As usual with Totem speakers, the fine wood veneer is also placed inside the cabinet, to equalise forces on the two sides of the walls. Why it's called the Forest? Well, where would you expect to find a totem? Well, a forest would be a good place to begin your search. However, a forest also imbues mystery, quietness and unpredictable, unexplainable power. In a real forest you are surrounded with sound, which can suddenly appear, surprise and then disappear. It can happen anywhere around you. Let the Totem Forest surprise you in the same way...

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| South East  | Rayleigh Hi Fi, RAYLEIGH, Essex, Tel: 01268 779762<br>Rayleigh Hi Fi, CHELMSFORD, Essex, Tel: 01245 265245<br>Audio-T, TUNBRIDGE WELLS, Kent, Tel: 01892 525666<br>Rayleigh Hi Fi, SOUTHEND, Essex, Tel: 01702 435255<br>Visions, WESTERHAM, Kent, Tel: 01959 569977 |
| The North   | Audio Republic, Headingley, LEEDS, Tel: 07932 682440<br>Romers Hi Fi Great Harwood, Lancs Tel: 01254 887799<br>The Audio Room, Hedon, Hull Tel: 01482 891375   |
| Scotland    | Loud & Clear, EDINBURGH, Tel: 0131 5553963<br>Loud & Clear, GLASGOW, Tel: 0141 2210221   |



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AUDIO  
STATIC

# The Audiostatic DCI Wing Loudspeaker

by Chris Binns

It's a frightening thought, but in another five years one of the most successful icons of loudspeaker design will be celebrating its fiftieth anniversary. I am of course referring to the Quad ESL 57 – which although no longer being made (production stopped in 1982 or thereabouts) is still considered by many to represent a standard by which other loudspeakers are judged. At the time of its introduction, it caused something of a stir, while at least one journalist of the time went in to print saying that 'the radical approach of the Quad electrostatic could render conventional loudspeaker technology obsolete in the next few years...'

But it didn't. As the first, and probably most successful full range electrostatic loudspeaker to grace the market, it possessed many qualities that were, and maybe still are out of the reach of moving coil designs, but there were definitely areas where its performance left a certain amount to be desired. I suspect one of the key elements that held it back from world domination was the changing fashion of music; with rock and roll fast becoming more popular, the need for higher volumes and more bass highlighted two areas where the electrostatic had difficulty in competing with dynamic loudspeakers. But that didn't prevent it from enjoying enormous success, and for many people it was, and still is, the only loudspeaker for serious musical reproduction, particularly if you wore slippers and smoked a pipe. (And regarded rock and roll as a cacophonous din...)

But despite Quad cracking the formula for

successful production of electrostatic loudspeakers with the original '57 and later '63, few other manufacturers have followed suit. In the last three decades there has been a mere handful of electrostatic designs, and even fewer have had much success. Martin-Logan continue to have a high profile with their various models, (although I have yet to be convinced by the hybrid approach) but they are the exception that proves the rule.

Perhaps the biggest factor that has precluded electrostatics from wider acceptance is size. To achieve anything like full range performance, they have to be big. A lightweight, non rigid diaphragm could not be used in a cabinet, so a considerable baffle area is required to prevent cancellation by the rear wave at low frequencies, while a large membrane is required to move sufficient air as excursion is limited compared to moving coil types. If all the above would seem to make the electrostatic approach a non – starter, consider the benefits or better still for the uninitiated, ask someone who uses them if they would consider going back to a box type loudspeaker. If the technology might not be what is required for



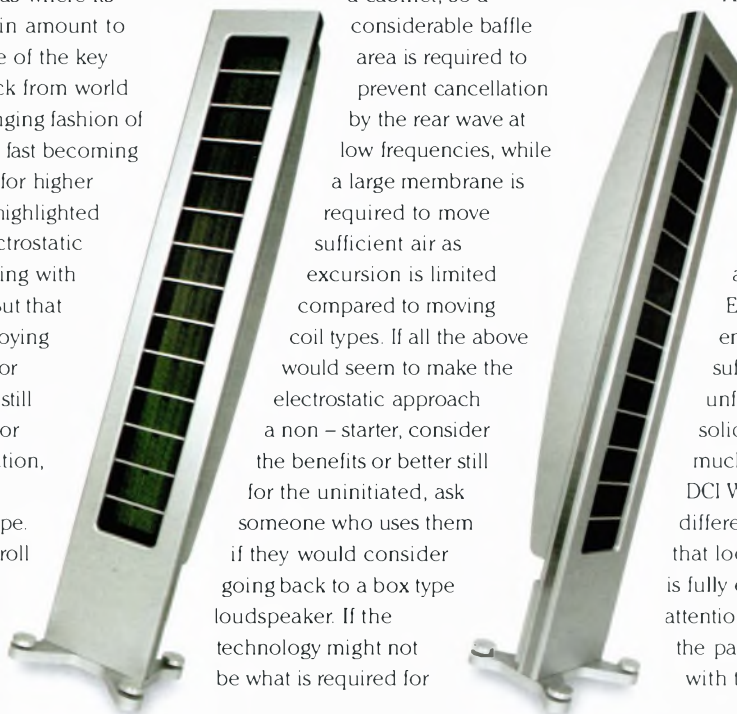
seismic bass at high volumes, the ultra light diaphragm driven over its entire surface and without cabinet colouration offers a realism that the most box loudspeakers can only dream of.

And so to the Audiostatics, which for a full range transducer are not really that big. Tall, at nearly six feet high, but only a foot wide and a couple of inches deep. And very elegant...

Originating from Holland, they are the brainchild of Ben Peters, who has been producing electrostatic designs since the sixties. The DCI represents the culmination of those efforts. While they have been around for some time,

Audiostatic have had a rather sporadic presence in this country with a number of different distributors over the years a situation that has helped place a question mark over their reliability and back up service.

Earlier models that I have encountered seemed to suffer from a rather flimsy, unfinished quality that lacked solidity and did not inspire much confidence. But the DCI Wing could not be more different. Here is a product that looks, and feels as if it is fully evolved, the evident attention to detail starting with the packaging and ending with the paint finish. ▶



▶ Aesthetically, the clean lines give the DCI a bit of an industrial hi-tech look, which might be unappealing for those who like a bit of veneer; personally I think they look tremendous.

The loudspeaker is built around a rigid non-resonant aluminium frame shrouded in MDF; that serves to hold the diaphragm assembly securely in place. This in turn bolts on to the base where the four adjustable feet can be raised to allow easy movement, while screwing them down stabilises the whole structure very effectively. Sensibly thought out, this system makes moving the loudspeaker a painless process, which, as I would later discover is an important factor. The 'wing' referred to in the

title is just that; consisting of a pair of fins that clip on to the rear of the loudspeaker, these beautifully contoured additions have the effect of enhancing the coupling between the diaphragm and the room by increasing the baffle area and modifying polar response to the rear.

The rear panel sees a pair of high quality five way binding posts for signal connection, together with an IEC socket for power. Standard finishes are black, silver and white; the use of an automotive lacquer means that virtually any colour is available to special order. The well thought out construction allows quick and efficient servicing with easily replaceable modules in the event of a failure.

An LED on the front panel indicates the status of the loudspeaker: once power is applied this glows red for a short time, turning to green to indicate

that the unit is in standby. Once a signal arrives it then becomes brighter, and polarising voltage is applied to the membrane; when no music is playing it will revert to standby after a few minutes. The significance of this is that due to the high voltages involved, an electrostatic loudspeaker attracts dust with a vengeance. This will build up over a period of time and adversely affect performance. So the less time the panel is active the better. (Incidentally, the Quad designs side step this issue by incorporating a dust cover, which could have a significant effect on performance.) Audiostatic claim that

there is no 'warm up' time from standby. The diaphragm is electronically protected from abuse – sustained overpowering results in the volume being attenuated while the LED turns red - until the input level is reduced.

While only utilising a single membrane, frequency division occurs by both electronic and mechanical means. Upper mid and high frequencies are handled by a narrow vertical strip toward the centre of the diaphragm, which is flexibly anchored and thus divided into fourteen equal sections.

The clever bit is that the step up transformers and the membrane itself form the necessary blocks to electronically filter the signal to the appropriate area, thus negating the need for a crossover, with all the appropriate benefits.

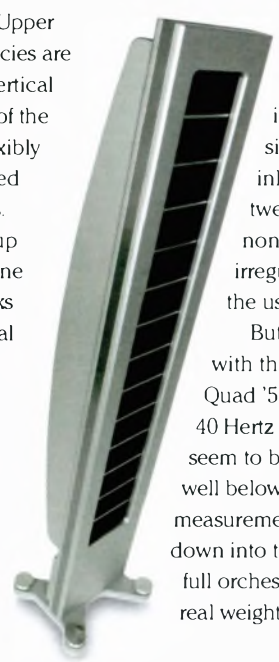
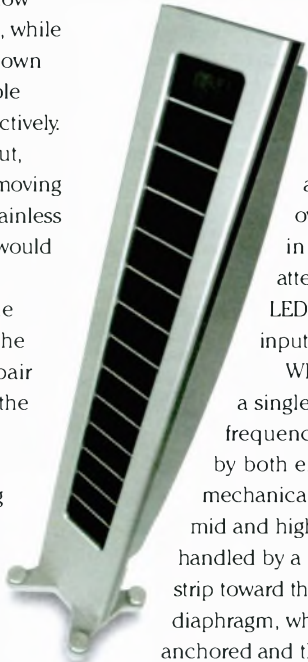
Firing them up with my system in what I hoped would be an optimum position was a curious experience. Bearing in mind that there

is a gestation period for any new bit of equipment while you get used to it, electrostatics compound this by doing things so differently to box loudspeakers; dipole radiation, the absence of a cabinet and large diaphragm all add up to create a totally different listening experience which takes a bit of getting used to. I am not unfamiliar with this, as I own a pair of Quads that I have managed to hang on to through the years, as they form a useful reference for the multitude of audio equipment that passes through the house. But the Audiostatics are not Quads.

"Midrange was almost electrostatic in character..." It's a comment often used in reviews to praise the performance of a moving coil loudspeaker, my first listen to the Audiostatics showed why. The coherence, lack of colouration and sheer realism shows up and frankly embarrasses most dynamic designs, highlighting if not the drive units themselves then the crossover that tries to integrate them usually in the most sensitive area of the audio spectrum. This seamlessness was particularly apparent with voices and strings, and once experienced is a difficult act to follow. The treble at first seemed

a little forward and not particularly extended, until you realise that it does not suffer the sibilance or edginess inherent in most dome tweeters, and there are none of the phase irregularities that come with the use of multiple drive units.

But things were not right with the bass. Whereas the Quad '57's start to dry up below 40 Hertz or so, the Audiostatics seem to be able to sustain output well below this, while some quick measurements showed an extension down into the twenties. Subjectively, full orchestra seemed to lack any real weight while one had the



► impression of a lot of low frequency rubbish swimming around with little or no definition, and to compound the issue, the addition of the wings altered the problem rather than help solve it. Running a sweep showed massive amounts of reinforcement and cancellation occurring, and thus began a long and arduous process of positioning the speakers to try and counteract this. After several days on my hands and knees I arrived at what I felt to be the best compromise where I had succeeded in evening things out, although there was still an apparent hole that robbed kick drum of much of its impact. After a radical rethink, I ended up turning the system around in my room with much improved results, the bass now integrated with the rest of the audio spectrum and was able to operate with the speed and articulation which had been lacking before.

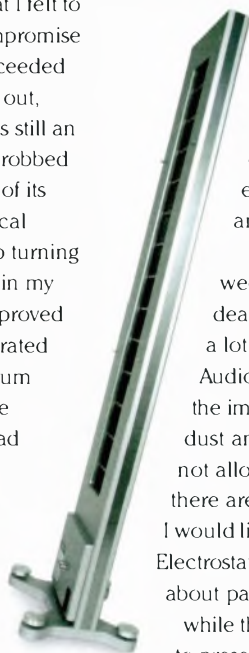
With the bass more or less under control, I spent several nights staying up far too late listening to music. The Audiostatics have the ability to allow music to communicate in a way that is quite addictive, and in conjunction with a bottle of good wine ended up with me pulling out and playing recordings way beyond my bedtime. The soundstage is big and wide, and the only aspect that compromises total realism is a tendency with some recordings for solo instruments to be too high – lateral precision is excellent, but I noticed that the piano on the Keith Jarrett Paris concert sounded like it was eerily suspended in mid air rather than sat

on a stage. Using the wings did have the effect of providing a bit more kick in the bass, but I sometimes felt it compromised the mid range by closing it up a bit. Comfortable listening levels were easily obtainable, and due to the radiation pattern these were often louder than it would seem, and although I never activated the protection circuitry I did induce some distortion when being a little excessive with the volume control. But after a few hours listening, you realise that this is not the type of loudspeaker that you have to wind up to generate excitement: if it is there in the music you will hear it. The important thing is that musical dynamics were conveyed brilliantly, allowing a greater depth of expression with music, tension, excitement and emotion could have you on the edge of your seat with anticipation.

Despite the several weeks that I had, I would dearly have loved to spend a lot more time with the Audiostatics. Unfortunately the imminent arrival of builders, dust and copy deadlines did not allow this, but in particular there are other amplifiers that I would like to try with the DCI's. Electrostatics are notoriously choosy about partnering equipment, and while these would not appear to present a particularly difficult load, I have a feeling that something with a little more kick in the bass than the Primary power amps I was using might be of benefit. And of course there is the whole business of OTL amplification, traditionally bed partners with electrostatics, to consider. ◀

One of the key elements for me in judging any hi-fi equipment is whether it leads you into listening to any one particular type of music over another – the better the system the less this is so. I used enough of a variation in material

with the Audiostatics to realise that they are considerably more real world than other electrostatic designs I have tried, where you find that you are subconsciously steering away from unsuitable music. For most people, the suitability of their room and positioning is going to be the biggest governing factor, but bear in mind that time and patience when it comes to setting up will pay real dividends. At the end of the day, if subterranean bass and high levels is a priority, look elsewhere. If not, I would encourage anyone who can contemplate the use of panel loudspeakers to try the Audiostatics, while those not conversant with what electrostatics can do really should get to hear them. All loudspeakers are flawed, and the Audiostatics are no exception. But their shortcomings are far less obvious than others of the breed, while they excel at what electrostatics are traditionally good at. But be warned, it might change your feelings about box loudspeakers forever. ▶+



#### TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

|                     |   |
|---------------------|---|
| Type:               | Single box CD processor                             |
| Frequency range:    | 28 Hz – 22KHz                                       |
| Nominal impedance:  | 8 Ohms  |
| Sensitivity:        | 84 – 86 dB  |
| Power requirements: | 115/230 Volts AC                                    |
| Dimensions (HxWxD): | 1880x305x64   |
| Weight:             | 28Kg  |
| Finishes:           | Silver, black or white:<br>others to special order. |
| Price:              |   |
| Loudspeakers -      | £5000   |
| Wings -             | £925  |

#### UK Distributor:

Audiography Ltd  
Tel. (44)(0)1444 870400  
E-mail. dale@audiography.co.uk  
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Net. www.geschka-hifi.de





# The Art Of Compromise or, The JBL K2 And Other Animals

by Paul Messenger

Loudspeakers represent a complex mix of compromises between a large number of variables, and come in all different shapes and sizes. They can't all be right, so let's start off with a look at some of the options, and see if that helps in figuring out the ideal configuration for a hi-fi loudspeaker.

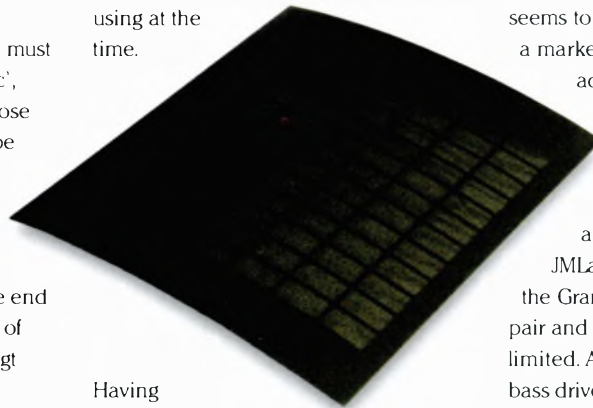
The ultimate test of any design is to remain in demand, and hence production, for a long period. That must be the prime definition of a 'classic', though one should also include those models that established a stereotype which successors and rivals subsequently choose to follow.

Sadly, my personal experience of serious loudspeakers only goes back to the end of the 1960s. I therefore know little of classics from the mono era like Voigt Corner Horns, Quad Ribbons or Wharfedale SFBs (sand-filled baffles), although I'm indebted to the eminent and enthusiastic Geoffrey Horn and his remarkable memory, for helping me out on a number of points.

When I first started looking for a pair of 'real' hi-fi speakers I remember 'shortlisting' various models for possible secondhand purchase: the Tannoy Lancaster, Lowther Acousta, KEF Concord and Leak Sandwich. After much umming and aaarrhing I actually ended up with a pair of the very earliest Spondor BC1s, because a mate of mine was working alongside Derek Hughes in the BBC at the time. I still wonder how my hi-fi taste might have developed had I gone for one or other of the

alternatives.

The Lowther was a single driver, twin-cone, horn-loaded design, its very high sensitivity making it very easy to drive, and hence arguably better suited to the low powered valve amps of an earlier era than the solid state Quad 33/303 pre/power combo I was using at the time.



Having subsequently tried several Lowther-based systems (from Beauhorn, Carfrae and Veritas), I've come to appreciate the very real virtues of these crossoverless systems, despite their limitations in bandwidth, smoothness and distribution. In more modern times one can cite Jordan, Bandor and Rehdeko, in addition to Lowther, as brands that have pursued the single-driver route.

The avoidance of a crossover network and the simplicity of reproducing the entire musical signal through a single voice coil undoubtedly have their own rewards, and this was reflected in the widespread, long-term popularity

throughout the valve era of the twin-cone approach – originally invented by Voigt, I understand – as an attempt to extend the high frequency response of the single driver.

At the opposite extreme are multi-way designs, which in truth have never really hit the jackpot commercially. More commonly, adding extra drive units seems to have more to do with gaining a marketing than a performance

advantage. Which is not to say

they can't be made to work very well: in

France recently, I spent a thoroughly enjoyable

afternoon with a four-way Focal-JMLab design. But the market for the Grande Utopia Be, at \$45,000 per pair and 220kg each, is necessarily very limited. And to be fair, the GUBE's big bass driver used here is really just a subwoofer, operating only below 80Hz.

Three-ways do have a certain constituency, and some can be made to work very well – I'd cite B&W's Nautilus 800 as a fine example of the breed to come my way recently, and JMLab's Mezzo Utopia from a few years ago. However, these are both very costly speakers with a large and elaborate crossover networks, and to some extent represent exceptions that prove the rule. There are plenty of inexpensive three-ways around, but in my experience they tend to be much less satisfactory in sheer sound quality terms.

The two obvious advantages of three-ways are that they maintain a more consistent sound dispersion across

▶ the band, because the diameters of the sound sources are progressively reduced with rising frequency. And they protect the midrange from excessive bass frequency excursion, so power handling is very generous (which may be of more interest to movie than music fans).

Pinning down why they usually don't work too well is altogether harder, though as ever the ears provide final arbitration. It's my theory that the role and importance of crossover network components is usually dramatically underestimated. It's also true that the three-way provides a much tougher and more complex load for the amplifier to drive: each extra 'way' involves a band-pass filter that includes a resonance at each end of its pass-band.

But however you look at it, the most popular speaker format is the two-way (followed in this slimline floorstanding era by its two-and-a-half-way near relative). Give or take the odd supertweeter (which is better ignored, as it makes only around half an octave's contribution to the 10-octave range of human hearing), the two-way is the king of the heap, and has actually been so for quite some time. The above mentioned Spondor BC1, Tannoy Lancaster, KEF Concord and Leak Sandwich are all two-ways, albeit with as many differences as similarities. So too are other genuine classics like the original Quad Electrostatic (aka ESL57) and the BBC LS3/5A.

When we talk airily enough about loudspeakers today, we are referring to complete speaker systems with drive units and crossover networks all assembled into some sort of box. I daresay many readers will be unaware that this is actually a relatively recent concept. Prior to 1960 or thereabouts, the complete system tended to be the exception rather than the rule, and the hi-fi buyer would just as likely select his drive units from one brand, a generic crossover network from the same or another brand, and an enclosure from someone else.

For example, Tannoy's famous dual-concentric driver first appeared as a 'hi-fi FA' speaker in the late 1940s, but was as often as not mounted in a Lockwood as a Tannoy enclosure, especially when used for studio monitoring. Similarly, my 1959 Hi-Fi Year Book lists a Rogers Junior Corner Horn loudspeaker, which is available with a choice of three alternative drive units, from Goodmans, Lowther or Wharfedale.



The results of this 'component' approach inevitably tended to be rather haphazard, and designs like the Quad Electrostatic pointed the way towards and demonstrated the advantages of 'total system engineering'. This was given added credibility by Dudley Harwood, of the BBC Research Department at Kingswood Warren, who wrote an influential series of articles for *Wireless World* in the mid-1960s entitled "Towards a Monitoring Approach to Loudspeaker Design", which further stressed the

importance of total system engineering.

Companies like Wharfedale, Goodmans, Celestion and KEF took note. Transistor amplification and stereophony turned hi-fi from an enthusiast to much more of a consumer pastime. And sales of inexpensive bookshelf speakers started booming.

Although I've got a reasonable idea of what was happening here in the UK, it's pretty clear that similar trends were happening around the world, each country with its own roster of brands. Britain was an important player on the international scene, as indeed it is today, though the US market was also very active and the top American brands received widespread global recognition too. Interestingly, the only speakers of US origin listed in my 1964 (British) Hi-Fi Year Book were Westrex raw drivers, the AR3, and the Vitavox-built Klipschorn.

Credit where it's due, and I suspect that the corner-horn-loaded Klipschorn, which goes all the way back to 1949, was one of the very first complete speaker systems to be built specifically for the domestic hi-fi enthusiast. Whether it's a two-way or a three-way I'm not exactly sure: it had certainly evolved into a three-way by the time I got to try a US pair in 1994, but Vitavox was building it under license as a two-way here in Britain during the 1960s.

The Klipschorn was enormously influential, and trying out a pair provided a fascinating glimpse back in time. The speaker was probably rather better suited to the mono than the stereo era, but is still a rather wonderful design even by today's standards, and is surprisingly reasonably priced too. It might lack the smoothness of more modern designs, but still offers an unbeatable combination of wide bandwidth and high sensitivity, though it must be used in a large room, and its very high sensitivity can be a mild embarrassment with today's transistor amplifiers. ▶

Other crucial US designs include Edgar Villchur's AR3, from Massachusetts on the East Coast, plus various JBLs, Altecs and Electrovoices from California on the West Coast. There were definitely two distinct US 'schools' in those days, and it's also true that East Coast design was rather closer to the UK approach than those companies operating on the West Coast.

Though less well known here in Britain, the Lansing heritage is particularly interesting. It was kick-started by the invention of the 'talkies' way back in 1928, and while Western Electric (aka Westrex) was the initial prime mover in cinema sound systems, the Lansing operation was well placed to take advantage of a government enforced breakup of the WE monopoly.

As far back as 1937, Lansing Manufacturing 'down-sized' its successful horn-loaded cinema sound speaker system and created a 'compact' speaker system called the Iconic. This was arguably the first ever studio monitor, intended originally for film studios but also used by musicians like Les Paul, for example. The configuration, rather presciently as it turns out, combined a 15-inch direct-radiator bass driver in a reflex enclosure, supporting a multi-cell compression horn treble unit, crossing over at 800Hz. In those days, of course, the magnetic stator was provided by electromagnetic field coils.

Alnico magnets replaced electromagnets, and Lansing Manufacturing separately begat Altec Lansing and JBL. Post WWII, Paul Klipsch's Klipschorn revolutionised the US domestic hi-fi scene, and other manufacturers came out with rival designs. JBL's contender, the Hartfield corner horn, arrived in 1954 and was hugely successful over the next decade. Once again we find the two-way combination of a 15-inch bass driver, this time corner-horn-loaded and crossing over at 500Hz to a lens-type

compression horn treble unit.

Corner horns faded as stereo replaced mono, but a decade later JBL came up with another great success. The 4320 Studio Monitor (and a more domestically oriented L300 equivalent) used a similar driver configuration to the Hartfield, but with its 15-inch bass driver now in a much more compact reflex ported enclosure, again alongside a lens-type compression horn treble unit.



It could even be described as a 'bookshelf' speaker – provided

you've got a very solid and substantial bookshelf indeed.

In the world of today's hi-fi speakers, the idea of combining a 15-inch bass/mid driver with a horn-loaded mid/treble in a gigantic two-way seems unusual to the point of outrageous. However, the two-way per se still clearly has a great deal going for it, and there's something to be said, in terms of efficiency, lack of strain and headroom, for making a two-way that's rather larger than the competition.

Indeed, besides being interesting for its own sake, the basic purpose behind this history lesson introduction is to emphasise that a giant two-way really isn't such a crazy idea after all, and that an extremely illustrious heritage in fact lies behind a new speaker that JBL has recently launched.

The £20,000/pair K2 S9800 is a new 'high end' flagship from JBL that's very different from the market norm. It flies determinedly and unashamedly in the face of the fashion trends that dictate today's speakers should be slim and discreet, taking a truly 'classic' format as the starting point, but adding technological tweaks that bring it bang up to date. The result, to these ears at least, is one of the most exciting speakers I've ever heard – not in a wham-bang 'inyerface' kind of way, but rather in its sublimely subtle and refined delicacy.

This is not JBL's first K2. Earlier and rather different incarnations were introduced in 1989, and these in turn built on a 1985 Everest. All these models and variations were primarily aimed at the Japanese audiophile market, which had developed enormous respect for JBL through the Hartfield and 4320 eras, and this brand new S9800 model was primarily conceived to follow the same tradition. However, the decision was also made to launch in Europe in the summer of 2002, and it will also be made available in the USA by the end of the year.

Essentially a giant two-way, albeit with a 10kHz+ supertweeter mounted on the top, the basic shape here is determined by the size of the drive units, and the need to mount them well off the ground in a floorstanding configuration. The whole speaker stands 130cm off the ground and is no less than 51cm wide. It's therefore unavoidably intrusive, even though construction and finish is impeccable. The enclosure is quite shallow front-to-back, irregularly shaped (to 'spread' internal reflections and

▶ standing waves), and built from a mixture of 25mm MDF and Sonoglass resin. Our samples were a very classy if rather gloomy lacquer-finish dark charcoal grey with black highlights (light metallic grey is an option).

All three drive units are unique in the modern world. The bass and lower mid, right up to 800Hz (that's nearly two octaves above middle C) is handled by a rear-port-loaded 15-inch, type 1500AL, that uses traditional (and relatively costly) materials like paper pulp cone, foam rubber surround and Alnico (aluminium/nickel/cobalt alloy) magnet. The materials might be nostalgic, but the very advanced motor design is anything but, since modern computer modelling techniques have greatly increased the ability to manipulate and linearise magnetic fields, ensuring superior symmetry.

A very special horn driver then takes over for the crucial three and a half upper-mid/presence/treble octaves from 800Hz up to 10kHz. This has 90 x 50 degree moulded bi-radial flares, and is driven from a 3-inch (76mm) 435Be compression driver with a solid 40µm beryllium dome diaphragm. Perched on the top, the type 045Be supertweeter has a 1-inch (25.4mm) beryllium diaphragm, again horn-loaded by a tiny 30 x 60 degree bi-radial horn. Both have powerful, 2 Tesla neodymium magnets.

Beryllium is an incredibly difficult metal to work (and nasty poisonous stuff to boot), but because it has the highest stiffness-to-density ratio on the planet (much higher than aluminium or titanium), it's ideal for tweeter diaphragms. JBL's diaphragms might have twice the thickness (and hence mass) of those which Focal has just announced, but the UHF 045Be's dome weighs just 0.1g and takes the response comfortably up to 50kHz.

Mounted in its own isolating cavity in the base, the unusual crossover uniquely (and very cleverly) uses a 9V PP9 battery to pre-bias the twinned capacitors, improving their linearity and

avoiding 'crossover' distortions. It has high power air-cored inductors, and pre-sets allow very subtle adjustments to the overall spectral balance.

In-room far-field measurement showed a very smooth and flat averaged



trace that looks close to ideal. There's a touch too much output around 500Hz perhaps, and some unevenness above 7kHz, but still the promise of very impressive neutrality, while the fact that the main horn runs from 800Hz right up to 10kHz avoids the usual crossover discontinuities in the ultra-sensitive 2-4kHz presence zone. Sensitivity is



a high 94dB, alongside a load that stays above 6 Ohms throughout, plus in-room bass extension down to -3dB at 20Hz – all totally impressive stuff, and well suited to any kind of amplification.

Right from the off I was conscious that this speaker was something very

special indeed, and as time progressed I found myself confronting the realisation that I didn't want to go back to any of the other models I regularly use.

I've long had a soft spot for high sensitivity speakers, and the K2 does this bit admirably – well above average, though not extreme enough to highlight amplifier noise floors. As Goldilocks might have put it: "this one's just right". Furthermore, unlike most high sensitivity designs I've tried, the K2 is beautifully neutral with an exceptionally wide bandwidth too.

I regularly describe a speaker as a collection of compromises, before going on to pick apart its various inadequacies. On this occasion, I have to say I'm pretty well stumped to find anything serious to criticise, and have to say it's just about the best all round compromise I've yet encountered. I've enjoyed my hi-fi more than ever before since the K2s arrived, the only problem being working how to hang onto them for as long as possible!

The one point I should stress is that, because of the size of the bass driver and controlled directivity of the horns, these speakers have a relatively low 'room signature'. To that extent the K2 behaves much more like a panel/dipole, such as the Quad Electrostatic, or indeed the part-horn Tannoy TD12 I reviewed back in HiFi+ No12, than the B&W Nautilus 800 In HiFi+ No20. By the same token, it's very much at the opposite end of the scale from a true omnidirectional design like the larger Shahinians.

There's no right or wrong in this, merely a matter of personal preference, and in truth I would probably prefer a speaker that interacts a little more strongly with my room. But in every other respect this is such a delightful speaker, I'll forego that particular peccadillo.

What surprises me, even after some months in use, is just how transparent this speaker sounds. It does, in truth, remind me of an electrostatic to a surprising degree, and my better ▶

► half has also commented that it reminds her of the original Quad ELS57. I do wonder to what degree this is because both designs are two-ways with 800Hz crossovers, but at the same time it's a testament to the high quality of the JBL enclosure.

Where it's dramatically superior to the old Quad is in bandwidth and loudness capability, and the bottom end of the K2 is something very special indeed. Never too forceful or overbearing, it's delightfully warm and rich without ever sounding thick or chesty. I'd have expected to hear some colorations through the lower registers, but haven't reliably identified any yet. Rather it manages to combine impressive weight, power and considerable authority with a fine sense of purpose and considerable agility.

I've long believed in the virtues of Alnico magnets, even though it's hard to pin down just why they sound so good, and the K2 has only served to strengthen my prejudices. The bass here doesn't seem inordinately dramatic or slamingly powerful, but it is, unquestionably, intensely musical. It delivers quite wonderful subtlety of tonality and expression, without ever seeming to draw undue attention to itself.

That it sounds delightful with acoustic music goes without saying, but what came as a surprise was how well it handled the nasty stuff too. They don't come much tougher than 'Private Psychedelic Reel' on The Chemical Brothers' *Dig Your Own Hole*, yet the K2 not only stayed totally unflustered, it revealed subtle tonal details the the bass region that came as a complete surprise. That it's also thoroughly self-effacing is just a further worthwhile bonus.

Horns have something of a reputation for adding 'character' and coloration, but I suspect that such prejudices might be due for revision. Certainly there's no noticeable distortion or 'quack' here, though the decidedly

'open' balance can become just a tad aggressive when it's being worked hard. However, the dynamic range and expression are both thoroughly impressive, and the rendition of low-level micro-dynamics – the sort of fine detail that brings realistic textures to the sections of an orchestra, and conveys the clues about the size and composition of a choir – is quite magnificent.

The K2 is not only exceptional at resolving low level detail, it also gives the firm impression of an almost inexhaustible headroom. There's a lovely freedom from stress and strain, and the speaker never seems to be



working hard – in this sense it's a bit like driving a car with a large high-torque engine. Imaging is very precise, with fine phase coherence, and convincing depth perspectives, and this speaker has a rare ability to 'suck in' the listener whatever kind of program is playing, and create involvement even with unfamiliar material.

This speaker is both neutral and revealing, and as such takes no prisoners with the inadequacies of some modern digital sources, for example. But I'd much rather its ruthlessness than any attempt to over-romanticise things, and I love the way it stays clear, detailed, expressive and informative, even when playing at whisper-quiet, late night levels.

If there's a better speaker out there, I've yet to hear it. In a sense the K2 S9800 takes something like Tannoy's fine TD12 as a starting point, and then significantly ups the ante in technology, performance and price. Whatever the contributions of beryllium or Alnico, this ultimate two-way (plus supertweeter) makes a powerful argument for 'keeping it simple and building it big'. That it has an illustrious heritage that goes all the way back to 1937 only serves to emphasise the point! ➤+

#### TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

|                     |   |
|---------------------|---|
| Type:               | Full range two-way-plus-supertweeter, part horn-loaded, ported loudspeaker  |
| Driver complement:  | 1x 25mm beryllium dome horn loaded compression UHF driver; 1x 75mm beryllium dome horn loaded compression HF driver; 1x 380mm paper cone, Alnico magnet bass driver |
| Sensitivity :       | 94dB  |
| Impedance:          | 8 ohms nominal<br>(6 ohms minimum)  |
| Power Handling:     | 400W RMS  |
| Frequency range:    | -6dB at 45Hz and 50kHz;<br>-10dB at 35Hz; -3dB at 20Hz in-room, far field   |
| Dimensions (HxWxD): | 130x51x38cm   |
| Weight:             | 90kg each   |
| Finishes:           | Dark Grey Lacquer<br>Light Metallic Grey Lacquer  |
| Price:              | £20,000/pair  |

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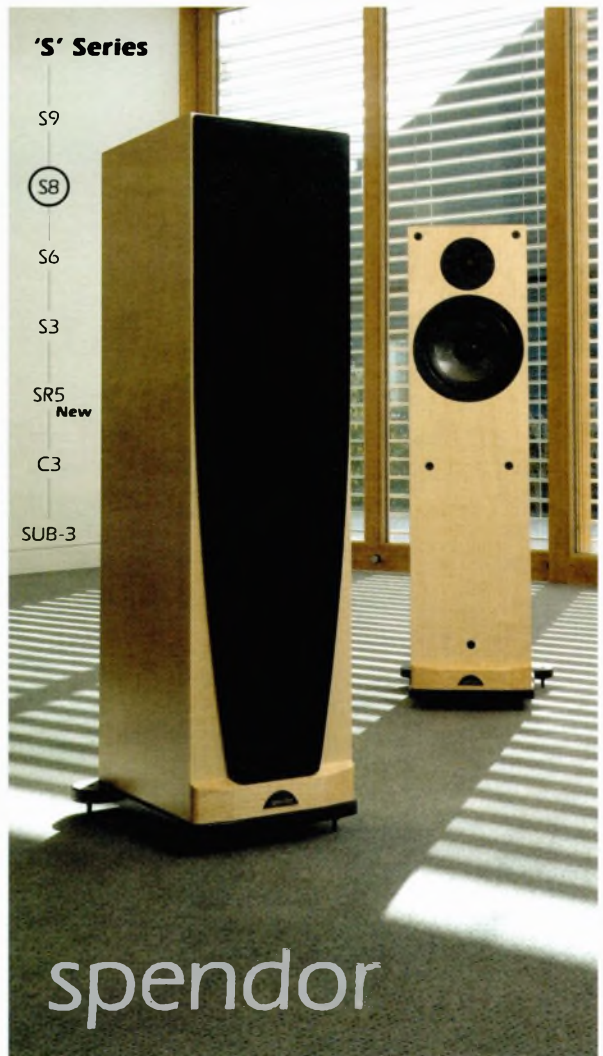
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# Lamm LP2 Deluxe Phono-Stage

by Roy Gregory

In this day and age, stand alone phono-stages are the rule rather than the exception, but few are as large (or as heavy) as this one, and even fewer use valves. The long history of valves mixing with moving-coil cartridges is not a happy one. It's never been a marriage made in heaven, more of a shotgun wedding. So, back in the early eighties when the moving-coil first began to really establish its current dominance, we saw an uncomfortable alliance beginning to develop between the healthy output of the Koetsu cartridges and the medium gain phono-stages on the likes of ARC pre-amps. Of course, medium gain is just a euphemism for a moving magnet stage with its accelerator floored, and flawed is the word. Marginal with the Koetsus, this arrangement was next to useless with true, low-output cartridges, the signal being swamped in noise. It also failed to provide proper loading to the cartridge, simply relying on the standard moving-magnet value of 47k. Finally, just to cap it off, the gain structure was all wrong for use with a real moving-magnet, offering too much way too soon, leaving you groping around at the bottom of the volume control.

Since then things have hardly improved. There have been exceptions to the rule, most notably the Counterpoint SA9/Claritas, and the CAT SL1, but both suffered from noise problems when used with the lowest output cartridges, and were unreasonably critical of valve quality. With a trend

towards lower outputs, culminating in the Ortofon MC7500 that barely topped the 0.1mV mark, using tubes to amplify these signals became less and less practical. Rather like asking a valve to drive a complex loudspeaker load directly, you're asking the device to operate outside of its design parameters. Sure, it can be done, but you're increasing the problems and chance of failure exponentially.

But now the pendulum is swinging back, and cartridge outputs are rising again, back towards a mean value of around 0.4mV (uncannily close to what the old Koetsus used to throw out). You can just see the valve designers starting to twitch again, as the whole scenario appears once more on their product development radars. Indeed, there's been a rash of valve phono stages appearing recently. Top of the list are models from Audio Research, the enormous and impressive Aesthetix Io (long time favourite of HP) and the latest addition, the Manley Steelhead. Now, both the ARC and the Manley use transformers to match low-output cartridges (I'm not sure but I believe that the Io is all active) which comes as a relief. Not because I'm a great fan of transformers, but because at least they offer a viable noise performance and the alternative of running straight into the moving-magnet input if you have the cartridge or the inclination to do so.

So, opening a crate containing the latest creation of valve maven Vladimir

Lamm, I'll admit to fearing the worst. Vladimir has a healthy disregard for accepted practice and the proven ability to get a result where others have failed: Look no further than the Lamm ML2, a single-ended amp with bandwidth, transparency and dynamic authority! But would the Holy Grail of an active moving-coil stage prove a challenge too far?

I should have known better.



As I said, his disregard is healthy, which means that he recognises when he's on a hiding to nothing. The LP2 uses valves, but it uses transformers too. Vladimir seems to have settled for the slightly more manageable feat of designing a step-up transformer that actually works. Whether he's succeeded you'll have to wait and see.

The LP2 is dressed in Lamm's standard, almost ostentatiously drab casework. It's also, as I hinted

earlier, unreasonably heavy for what is quite a compact box. Getting on for 20 kilos in fact. The Deluxe suffix doesn't apply to the outsides, but instead refers to a beefed up power supply, the liberal application of bypass capacitors and the inclusion of a massive damping plate in the bottom of the box. Not having heard the standard version I can't comment on the benefits, but it certainly makes a physical

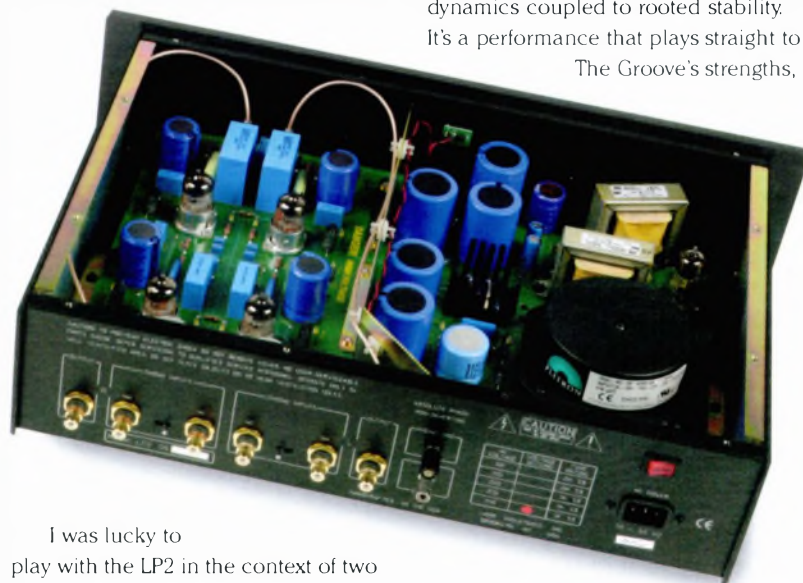


impression! The circuit is, like all things Lamm, totally dual mono. It relies on four 417A/5842 Western Electric valves, running in a class A, global feedback free arrangement. The RIAA compensation is applied passively and there are discrete inputs offered for MM and MC cartridges, meaning that you can connect two arms simultaneously if you so wish (although the switching for each channel is on the back plate, between the sockets). The power supply is massive and choke filtered, with valve rectification (via a single 6X4/6202) and solid-state regulation.

Rear panel connections are limited to a mirror imaged array of six phono sockets offering MM and MC inputs and line outputs. There are also separate earth posts for the phono cable and chassis. Sensitivity for the two inputs is quoted at 0.167mV for MC and 1.66mV for MM making the unit suitable for all but the very lowest output cartridges via its transformers, while the MM stage is definitely medium gain, making direct connection of the more energetic MCs a viable proposition. That of course undermines the position of

true moving-magnets, but who's going to use a moving-magnet with a \$5000 phono-stage anyway? There are cheaper and more sensible ways to go. Input impedances are 40 Ohms and 47k respectively, with no loading or gain options. Colour is anything you like as long as it's black,

although the heavily brushed finish has a habit of holding grime, making regular cleaning an additional chore if you want to keep things looking pristine.



I was lucky to play with the LP2 in the context of two stellar but very different systems. On the one hand I had the full on Lamm set-up with the L2 Reference line-stage driving the ML2 mono-blocks. On the other, and for a tantalisingly short period, I was able to use my normal Groove phono-stage along with The Vibe line-stage and for the first time, the matching M15 stereo power-amp,

a hybrid design based around a pair of triode coupled KT88 output tubes. I don't want to jump the gun on this one but the new amp is an absolute peach that shares (or extends) the performance of the pre-amp components, as well as their manageable pricing (£7500 is a lot of money, but it pales into insignificance when compared to the price-tags on the opposition).

The comparison between the two phono-stages was a fascinating exercise. The speed, clarity, transparency and dynamic discrimination of The Groove is a hard act for any phono-stage to follow, and sure enough, the Lamm, sounded smoothed off, rounded and murky in comparison. It also offered less gain, although it was almost as quiet. I started out with the Clearaudio Accurate mounted in the Tri-planar/Stogi Reference combination, an analogue marriage made in heaven, characterised by its incredible life and dynamics coupled to rooted stability. It's a performance that plays straight to

The Groove's strengths,

with crisp dynamics and tremendous focus bringing real life to recordings. 'Hard Headed Woman' was impressively dynamic and dramatic, the acoustic instrumentation providing incredible purpose and attack. The LP2 offered a narrower but deeper soundstage, and once you got over the impressive

immediacy of *The Groove*, an equal sense of separation and musical organisation. But it didn't get close in terms of transparency, a pale grey mist filling the spaces in the sound-stage, or micro-dynamic definition. And here lies the conundrum.

When I reviewed the L2 Reference line-stage I described the way in which it separates instruments tonally rather than spatially. The LP2 performs the same trick. The Groove isolates the various acoustic guitars on the Cat Stevens track, holding each in space. The Lamm identifies each through its tonal colour and texture. It's not as obvious as *The Groove*, but it is wonderfully natural. Redress the dynamic balance a bit with something less demanding than *Tea For The Tillerman* (which means pretty much anything) and the pecking order changes too. Play the Analogue Audio Association Dvorak *String Quintet* and suddenly the LP2 starts to punch its weight. The deeper soundstage and instrumental solidity are immediately appealing, but it's the sense of texture that really scores. Suddenly you get a real sense of instrumental weight and power, the effort that goes into the musician's bowing. If only you could tease out a little more dynamic discrimination and rhythmic subtlety, you'd really be going places. Which is when I started thinking about those transformers and running the cartridge straight into the moving-magnet input.

Sure enough, hooking the Accurate up to the active element in the LP2 delivered exactly what I'd been hoping for: Greater transparency, quicker off the mark and rhythmically much, much more fluid. The relationship between the Frankfurt players became immediately more expressive, intimate and arresting. Unfortunately, the switch to direct drive (so to speak) also brought an unwelcome degree of noise, with volume pots running wide open to deliver any sort of decent level. Still, it proved a point. Time to

switch cartridges.

More output means reaching for the Lyra Helikon, which offers around twice what you'll get from the Accurate. Sure enough, it offered sufficient poke to get noise levels down into the realms of the acceptable, and profited from the increased agility and rhythmic sophistication that came from bypassing the transformers. The Count's masterful promptings on 'Way Out Basie' (*Farmers Market Barbeque*) were more incisive and better placed, the building brass tutti the product of a dozen individual instruments rather than a couple of big ones: Definitely better off feeding the Lyra direct. However, running the Kuzma KC-REF with its 0.5mV output (0.1mV less than the Lyra) the situation was far more equivocal.

Fed directly into the MM input there were clear benefits to be heard from this most tonally correct of MCs. Not just the weight and complexity of Basie's piano, but the separation and harmonic identity of the oh so easily submerged rhythm guitar. But noise levels had crept up to the point of intrusive, which didn't help the transparency at all. Running via the transformers gave a very different balance of virtues, the music gaining power and drive, but losing that lovely sense of intimacy and rhythmic expression.

So where does that leave us? The Lamm LP2 is one of the most natural and tonally sophisticated phono-stages I've ever used. It's musically and spatially coherent and convincing, throwing remarkably solid stereo images. If you value those attributes over and above transparency and dynamic range then you'll be bowled over by its performance. However, it also possesses no matching adjustments and therein lies its Achilles Heal. It falls into the same trap that afflicted those original valve phono-stages: Too much gain for moving-magnets, not enough for most MCs unless you accept the compromise of using the transformers (which are,

admittedly, much better than the majority of their breed). Don't misunderstand this conclusion. The Lamm is an excellent phono-stage, as it should be at the price, doing at least one thing better than any other, with or without its transformers in circuit. But as it stands it's a phono-stage looking for a cartridge. In the absence of any internal adjustments your tailoring comes down to your choice of transducer. If you want to go straight in then you'll be looking at around 0.6mV as a sensible minimum output and even then you'll need to examine the noise levels. But make the right marriage and you could be looking at heaven indeed.

#### TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

|                     |   |
|---------------------|---|
| Type:               | Stand alone valve phono-stage                   |
| Valve Complement:   | 4x 417A/5842,<br>1x 6X4/6202                    |
| Inputs:             | 1x MC (transformer)<br>1x MM                    |
| Input Impedance:    | 40 Ohms (MC)<br>47 kOhms (MM)                   |
| Outputs             | 1x Line   |
| Output Impedance:   | 3.5 kOhms                                       |
| Output Level:       | <0.125 Volts                                    |
| Dimensions (WxHxD): | 19 x 4.5 x 13.875                               |
| Weight:             | 10 kg (Regular)<br>18.84 kg (Deluxe)            |
| Operating Voltage:  | User adjustable for all international standards |
| Finish:             | Black   |
| Price:              | £5000 (Deluxe)                                  |

#### UK Distributor:

Integrated Engineering Solutions  
Tel. (44)(0)2380 905020  
Net. [www.highendaudio.co.uk](http://www.highendaudio.co.uk)

#### Manufacturer:

Lamm Industries Inc  
Net. [www.lammindustries.com](http://www.lammindustries.com)



# Pro-Ject Debut 11 Phono SB turntable

by Jimmy Hughes

You don't get much for £160 these days. Certainly, not if you're buying a record player. And while it's true that quality vinyl can often be acquired cheaply (with a bit of luck) from Charity shops and car boot sales, the hardware to play it remains obstinately expensive. Or does it? If you're looking at a high-end Audiophile turntable, then prices are undoubtedly high - for £160 you might get a set of cartridge wires! Record player costs have not really reflected the price erosion that's seen CD player prices tumble. The simple truth is, precision engineering can never be cheap...

But then along comes a product like the Pro-Ject Debut 11 Phono SB that kind of turns things on its head a bit. And while I'm not for one moment claiming this turntable challenges the performance of vinyl players in the £1,000+ category, it certainly invites comparisons. Inevitably, the ultimate subtlety, refinement, and finesse that marks out vinyl at its best is missing. But you're still presented with a sound that's strongly profiled, cleanly presented, and solidly portrayed. It's a nice 'no-frills' sort of product that gives you the music on your records without fuss or pretence.

Wisely, in view of the large number of modern amplifiers that no longer have inputs for LP players, Pro-Ject offer the option of a built-in phono

stage. So you can plug the Debut 11 Phono SB straight into your amp just as you would a CD player or tuner. Those who have an amplifier with built-in phono stage, can buy the turntable without, saving £40 or thereabouts. The built-in phono stage is for MM (magnetic) pickups



only, and in view of the Debut's steel turntable platter it probably wouldn't be wise to fit a MC pickup for fear that the powerful cartridge magnets would 'pull' towards the platter.

In this context, I see the Pro-Ject Debut 11 Phono SB as a product for those who listen mainly to CD, but still have a vinyl collection that they sometimes want to listen to. It's not really a record player to invest in if you're fanatical about vinyl and have an eye on possible future upgrades and improvements. Replacing the supplied felt mat with a QR Developments Ringmat might be worthwhile sonically - though it's comparatively expensive

given the cost of the turntable itself. You could also look into replacing the cartridge at some point.

Otherwise it's probably best to accept the Pro-Ject Debut for what it is; living with and enjoying the results, rather than worrying about making it better. The review sample was finished in matt black, but there's a silver version available too. The complete unit is a nice size, with plenty of space to leave bits and bobs like stylus cleaning brushes and the stylus guard. And it's nice to have a separate motor on/off switch, so you don't have to unplug the mains power supply. You even get a proper hinged lid! Now there's something - you can pay thousands for a turn-

table and not get that...

I got off to a slightly shaky start with the turntable, not realising the motor is fitted with two transit bolts. Leaving these in means that noise from the motor is transmitted to the stylus - so do take the transit bolts out before you listen seriously! The Pro-Ject Debut is easy to set-up and install, and once up and running should need little if any maintenance beyond cleaning the stylus. First impressions were of a clear and well-balanced sound that was detailed and articulate. Surface noise seemed low, as was background hum and rumble. ▶

► Indeed, with the power supply for the motor and phono stage housed in an outboard plug-top, the deck should be completely hum-free. I sometimes felt that pitch stability wasn't quite 100%, but that's partly down to listening to too much CD! On those occasions when slight pitch waver was apparent, a glance at the tonearm usually revealed discernible side-to-side movement. In other words, the problem was down to a less than perfectly-centred LP pressing, rather than speed fluctuations deriving from the turntable platter.

Being made from steel, the platter itself is moderately heavy despite its lack of bulk. The 5mm dia centre bearing is quite thin, but that isn't a wholly a bad thing since the reduced linear velocity means lower bearing noise - something Roksan exploited in their outstanding Xerxes turntable. Start-up time is fast, with 33/45 speeds at the touch of a button, though fine speed adjustment is not offered. The centre bearing has low wobble, indicating accurate engineering, and the bearing shaft is well finished. Being that the platter is not massively heavy, I'd anticipate little bearing wear over time.

The tonearm uses gimbal bearings and seems well-made with little free-play. The headshell is made from plastic, and hasn't the mechanical rigidity of a metal shell. But that too is no bad thing for an arm of this specification; having a slightly 'lossy' interface at this point means energy from the cartridge is less forcibly transmitted to the arm bearings. Bias compensation (anti-skating force) is by means of a weight and thread - a tried and tested system

over many years. The clear hinged lid is simple but effective - how nice to have a lid to protect from dust and prying fingers!

The turntable comes complete with an Ortofon OMB-5E magnetic cartridge.



Output is just a shade on the low side of average. Certainly, the output level as delivered via the built-in phono stage is less than that of a typical CD player. But no matter; just increase the



volume a notch or two. Hiss levels from the built-in phono stage are vanishingly low. The supplied pickup performs very adequately and seems to track reliably and cleanly. It's gentle with your LPs too - Pro-Ject haven't fitted a groove-masher!

Although my analogue escapades

have almost exclusively involved moving-coil cartridges for over twenty-five years, I did go through a period of using magnetic pickups a decade or so back. I did so not because the ultimate sonic performance was better, but because (having accepted a slightly lower standard of fine detail and resolution) I felt the sound was more consistent from record to record. I mention this because the Pro-Ject combination struck me as very consistent.

In other words, it makes a pretty good fist of playing whatever you happen to put on the platter. be it old/new, analogue/digital, classical or rock.

Is that a nice way of saying it had a levelling effect on the music and different recordings? To an extent, yes. But I mean it in a positive way. You might not hear every subtle nuance and fine shade of tonal colour, but neither are faults and limitations exaggerated as they can sometimes be with certain MC pickups.

Being built on the suspended-chassis principle, whereby the turntable and arm are fixed to a common board that sits on decoupled feet, the whole assembly is reasonably well isolated from acoustic feedback. Nevertheless, the lid and chassis will resonate if excited - a light tap on the lid or base board as a record plays will demonstrate what I'm talking about - so ideally you'll achieve the most from a turntable like this by placing it on a purpose-designed support stand.

Going to the Pro-Ject



► combination from an upmarket CD player graced with Chord's superb DAC-64 did not produce the jaw-dropping difference in sound quality that higher technology and huge price differentials might lead you to expect. One of the first discs I tried came from a 3LP boxed set on DG's Archiv label entitled *The Early Viennese School*. Released in 1983, it was one of Archiv's first digital recordings, and the tonal balance is perhaps a shade bright and forward. I'd not played the set for perhaps a decade or more, and was intrigued by how it would sound via the Pro-Ject.

The answer? Very good indeed! The sound was clean and focussed, with inaudibly low surface noise, and a smooth natural tonal balance. No doubt, playing the same LPs on a more exotic record player and phono stage would have elicited greater fine detail and a subtler more beguiling musical presentation. However, results from the Pro-Ject were wholly enjoyable, and of a standard that needed no excuses made. Had I not known it was LP, I could easily have been convinced the CD player was still in use.

The Debut's sins are mainly those of omission. It's a bit lacking at frequency extremes, and hasn't quite got the dynamic power and presence of LP at its best. Yet the overall results are extremely listenable and enjoyable. The tonal balance is smooth, sweet, and open, and the sound has an appealing naturalness that is pleasant and engaging. Those who have only ever listened to music via digital sources like CD may find the experience quite an ear-opener!

Playing *The Greatest Love of All* from George Benson's live double album *Weekend in LA* was captivating. What makes Benson's relaxed jazzy performance so magical is his timing, coupled with beautifully supportive

expressive playing from the band. The way the music ebbs and flows is wonderful, as though Benson - tired but elated at the end of the concert - was singing for himself. Sonically it's hardly a great recording; the sound is boxy and lacking in extremes at



both ends. But

somehow it doesn't matter.

The result is greater than the sum of the parts - mainly because analogue retains the integrity of the original timing in ways digital still finds difficult. What I'm saying here is that, on the right material, this simple inexpensive record player can equal (or better) even an outstanding CD player in musical terms. It might not have comparable pitch security, or those inky-black silent backgrounds. And there may be a slight coarsening towards LP side ends that (of course) CD avoids completely.

But, with music that depends on timing to make its full effect, analogue LP can still set standards that act as a benchmark for CD and other digital sources. I'm sure George Benson's concert was a wonderful experience that everyone privileged to attend will probably remember for the rest of their lives. If you get a sense of that when you listen to the records, the equipment's done its job. The Pro-Ject delivered the goods, recreating the magic of the original concert.

As I said at the beginning of this review, £160 doesn't get you much these days. But spending it on a Pro-Ject Debut 11 Phono SB presents you with an inexpensive entrance to the world of vinyl, allowing you to play an existing LP collection, or even perhaps (for those who never had vinyl) start a collection from scratch. There's still quite a lot of music recorded during the LP era that's yet to reach CD - and possibly never will. So there's all sorts of justifications for getting into records. Apart from anything else, it's great fun. And cheap! Nothing delivers as much music for your money. ▶+

#### TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

|                     |   |
|---------------------|---|
| Type:               | Manual Record Player with electronic speed control and built in phono stage |
| Speeds:             | 33/45   |
| Tonearm Length:     | 218.5mm   |
| Effective Mass:     | 7.5g  |
| Output Level:       | Line  |
| Dimensions (WxHxD): | 415 x 133 x 325mm   |
| Finishes:           | Matt Black or Silver  |
| Weight:             | 7Kg   |
| Price:              | £160  |

#### UK Distributor:

Henley Designs Ltd.  
Tel. (44)(0)1235 511166  
E-mail. sales@henleydesigns.co.uk  
Net.. www.henleydesigns.co.uk

#### Manufacturer:

Pro-Ject Audio  
Net.. www.project-audio.net

**Chesterfield Communications Ltd**

Events House, 1 Chester Road.  
Tattenhall, Chester  
CH3 9AE

Exhibition Organisers Tel: 01829 770884  
Fax: 01829 771258 Mobile: 07810 697123  
email: roy@chestergrp.fsnet.co.uk  
www.chestergroup.org



Dear Readers.

Following the launch of the **'Heathrow High Fidelity Show'** last April we have been inundated with emails encouraging us to announce a commitment & dates for next year.

Well we are delighted to do so and many thanks to all those visitors who wrote in such glowing terms - it's very much appreciated

The dates for 2003 are the 29/30 March - same venue, we have added a few more select exhibitors but there's still the great eclectic mix of products, space and general calm ( apart from the wonderful sounds )

It should be a great show and we look forward to seeing you their

**FREE TICKETS?**

Yes as this year we have a few to give away and they are available from now until the end of January, remember it's just one per household but if you bring a friend they will only pay the advance ticket price

If you attended our show in April we will mail you with the details - if not log onto our website any time after the 1.1.03.

Just send us a email, fax or letter and we will put you on the list

If you are new to this show see the May/June issue of Hifi+ for the show report!

Yours sincerely

For CCL

Roy Bird  
Organiser

*The N Ireland Hi-fi & Home Cinema Show.  
8-9 March 2003.. Stormont Hotel - Glasgow  
The Heathrow High Fidelity Show.  
29-30 March 2003.. Renaissance - Heathrow  
The Scottish Hi-fi & Home Cinema Show.  
18/19 October 2003.. Thistle Hotel - Glasgow  
The Manchester Hi-fi & Home Cinema Show.  
15/16 November 2003.. Hilton - Manchester Airport*



# A HORN ANTHOLOGY

**G**ENIUS IS DISCOVERING SOMETHING THAT HAS ALWAYS BEEN THERE. The simplest ideas are the best but it takes a genius to think of them. I have often thought these phrases applied to loudspeaker design.

Over the last eighty years or so there have been literally thousands of different concepts, philosophies and inventions in loudspeaker design, but which comes closest to the ideal? Many believe horn loading comes closest.

My own experience with horns started back in 1971 with Tannoys 15" Monitor Golds. These were dual concentric units with horn-loaded tweeters. This was my first real taste of High Fidelity loudspeakers. They had a natural sound but were midrange prominent. Over the next decade I acquired loudspeakers including Leak 2075, Yamaha NS1000, Acoustic Research 9Ls, then almost by accident or destiny Impulses H3 came into my life.

The H3's were a three-way loudspeaker using a flared horn for the midrange which appeared as a slot in the front. At the time they had the most devastating dynamics I have ever heard. They were flawed but otherwise incomparable.

In 1986 I formed the 'Sound Room'. The philosophy was simple; to provide a service that was not available when I was a paying customer. The Sound Room formed an alliance with Impulse and was granted sole dealership.



The Impulse H4 evolved from the H3. The H4 had better balance and although an excellent speaker, had lost the H3's Signature.

It soon became apparent there was a market for something bigger and better. With customers waiting the plans were laid down for the impulse H1.

The H1 was a massively constructed full range horn. The mid range was flared and extremely detailed. The bass was folded moving ten feet of air through a large opening at the base of the cabinet. The bass response was simply staggering. The overall performance was awesome and superior to anything that has gone before, but its footprint and price tag was too large for most enthusiasts.

Over the next few years the Sound Room played its part in the Valve Horn Renaissance of the late eighties. Another decade passed by which brings us to the present and my new company Nemesis. Saving the best till last a truly remarkable loudspeaker; Audio Notes AZ Three. The AZ Three is a two way folded parabolic rear loaded quarter wave Quasi Horn. On first hearing the AZ Threes I was stunned at their high level of sound quality, far better than I expected. Here was a horn that performed far greater than the sum of its parts. The AZ Three's overall performance and balance is the best I've heard.

Audio Note's AZ Three has made quite a statement, but its simplicity is its genius.

**Gary Burley, Nemesis.**  
Tel: 0208 6869331

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# Antique Sound Labs MG-Si15 Integrated Amplifier

by Jimmy Hughes

Low powered amplifiers and sensitive speakers; a magical pairing! At least that's the promise. Alas, there are no guarantees in hi-fi. But, given a simple high-quality low power amplifier and speakers that are sensitive and easy to drive, you can look forward to a lively detailed sound; smooth, refined, with crisp effortless dynamics. And then there's the cost savings that come hand in hand with lower outputs. Add the savings to be had from manufacturing in the Far East and you have the potential for a real bargain. But how low dare you go in terms of power output? At what point do the drawbacks of a low-powered amplifier outweigh the benefits?

In terms of output power, the Antique Sound Labs' MG-Si15's 15W is hardly massive - indeed, by transistor amplifier standards it's pretty low. But it looks positively huge when you realise that the second of the MG-Si15's two operating modes offers a miniscule 5W! That's the choice offered by the P and T switches - P standing for Pentode, T standing for Triode. It offers the user two options, whereby a further reduction in power can be traded for improved sound quality.

To get the most from an amplifier offering just 5W you really need speakers of exceptionally high efficiency - that probably means around 100dB/1W, or greater. Any of the Lowther-based designs should be fine, but few others offer comparable efficiency. My own horn-loaded Impulse H-1s are around 96dB/1W: sensitive by normal standards, but on the borderline if we're talking

about being able to comfortably reproduce all kinds of music at realistic volume levels without distress.

With its simple yet eye-catching appearance, the MG-Si15 certainly creates a positive first impression. It looks modern yet pleasantly Retro at the same time.



I tried it in P and T modes, and felt the sound was slightly more transparent and detailed set to T. However, to avoid clipping distortion in loud passages, it was necessary to pick and choose music and volume settings very carefully. With only 5W output and 96dB/W sensitivity speakers, you've precious little headroom... And don't think you can simply flick the switch for more power. The manufacturer is very clear on the need to power the unit down completely before changing its operating mode.

Using this amplifier in T mode is quite an education. You'll discover the difference between recordings that give the impression of dynamics (but are

actually very compressed and in reality not very dynamic) and those that really do call for large reserves of power, despite seeming fairly benign. Careful use of compression by the sound engineer during recording can create a sound that seems forceful and 'dynamic' without having the large swings between loud and soft that call for big power reserves.

Classical vocal music - either solo voice or choral - proved the most demanding. A large orchestra in full cry might seem more taxing, but actually a single unamplified voice recorded without compression or limiting is far more revealing of power reserves. Playing Olaf Bar's EMI recording of Schumann's Dichterliebe with the amp in T mode, the more strenuous passages were prone to breakup and heavy clipping. Massed choral forces provoked intermodulation distortion.

As a result, I tended to reserve the T setting for music that was not too demanding in terms of dynamics and frequency extremes - Mozart string quartets for example. The MG-Si15 has a truly beautiful quality of sound in its T mode - clean, relaxed, smooth, yet detailed and transparent, with an alluring naturalness that was very beguiling. By comparison, P mode sounded a shade less subtle and intimate. The sound was good by any standards, albeit not quite as delicate as T mode.

Nevertheless, I probably spent the vast bulk of my listening time with the amplifier set to P. Being so



▶ close to the MG-Si15's power limits in T mode, there was sometimes a nasty sting in the tail during loud passages. As dynamic levels rose, the sound could either breakup or grow very congested. Had my speakers offered an extra 6dB to 10db greater sensitivity all would've been well. Nevertheless, satisfactory results were possible in T mode providing volume levels were set carefully.

Of course, comparisons between P and T are interesting. But ultimately what's important is whether or

not an amplifier convinces on its own terms. The MG-Si15 was very clean and controlled, far from the warm rosy romantic valve amp caricature. It's lucid and articulate, with a lean bottom end and smooth focused treble. It offers excellent control and superb cleanness. Indeed, the sound is so clean, so tidy and controlled, you'll doubtless want to turn the volume up and up!

I certainly did. When something sound good, you want more of it. Pushed too hard in P mode, the MG-Si15 tends towards intermodulation distortion rather than out and out hard clipping or heavy break-up distortion. On massed voices you sometimes hear a rumbling effect as strange harmonics are generated

- a sort of beating noise at middle and low frequencies. Of course this is very much a worst-case scenario, but if it occurs the only solution is to reduce volume levels immediately.

In this respect the MG-Si15 doesn't cover its back quite as sneakily as the EAR-869. The latter clips so softly and gracefully, you're hardly aware it's reached its power limit. Only a hint of dynamic compression warns you you're at the boundary. Neither amplifier

is for headbangers or loudness freaks. But the EAR-869 is

better at disguising its power limitations.

Subjectively, you're less aware you're listening to a low-power amplifier.

Also, the EAR seems to make a 'bigger' sound at any given volume level.

It creates a more voluminous impression,

partly because it's sharper and livelier and the lower frequencies have slightly greater fullness and breadth. The MG-Si15 sounds leaner and tighter - better controlled perhaps? - and certainly a shade more circumspect in terms of delineation. There's no sense of voices or instruments spreading themselves; everything remains keen and purposeful - sharp and lucid.

There were times when I wished the MG-Si15 sounded a shade more lively and energetic. Then I remembered I was using a Russ Andrews' attenuated Kimber interconnect cable between DAC and amplifier. This reduces the volume by about 11dB and adds a (usually) welcome degree of control to the top-end - albeit at the expense of liveliness. With either the EAR or Papworth amplifiers I very much prefer the extra smoothness and

control imparted by the attenuated Kimber cable.

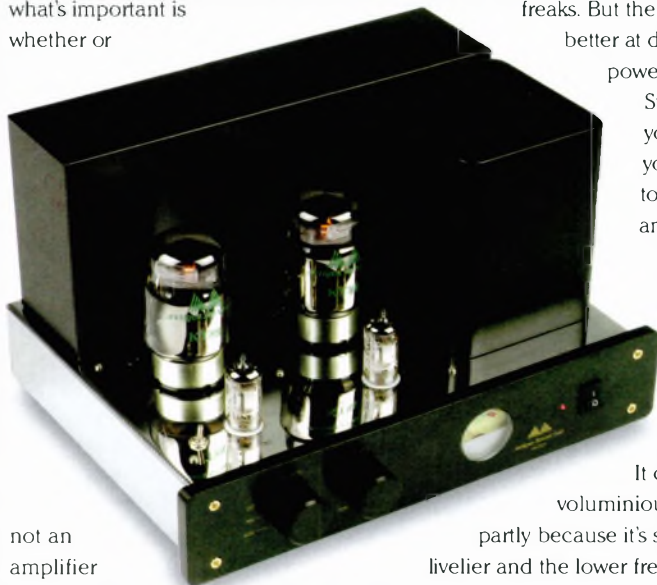
However, it was a different story with the Antique Sound Labs. Replacing the attenuated Kimber with an Eichmann interconnect (not attenuated) resulted in a sharper slightly more energetic musical presentation. Subjectively, the music was more forwardly balanced, giving the impression of increased dynamics and crisper attack. Agreed, the top-end wasn't quite as silky-smooth as it had been. But - hey, you can't have everything!

At any given volume setting the music sounded more immediate and articulate. It sounded louder too. Of course, the amplifier's available power output was unaffected. But, because the music sounded a shade more forward and lively, you could play things at a slightly reduced volume level without the sound seeming recessed. In other words, subjectively it felt like you had more power available. This made the power limitations of the T setting far less apparent - even with my speakers.

I think this is the key to using a low powered amplifier successfully; sonically, the partnering equipment has to create the impression of dynamics and attack by sheer quality of sound - not brute force. In this context, having Chord's DAC 64 in the system helped immensely. Its high resolution gives a big three-dimensional soundstage that recreates the space and depth of the original recording far better than your typical CD player or DAC.

Subjectively, the more vivid and projected the music sounds, the less you'll feel the need to use high volume levels to impart a sense of presence and impact. Because of the non-linear relationship between amplifier power and perceived loudness, a small change in volume level can make the difference between a clean undistorted sound, and heavy clipping. Remember that a volume change of just 3dB translates to a halving or doubling of power!

The MG-Si15's 15W Pentode ▶



▶ mode is only about 4.5dB louder than the 5W Triode alternative. That's why a barely perceptible 1dB subjective change in volume level could nonetheless be the difference between clean and distorted climaxes. To the ear, a 3dB difference in speaker sensitivity is noticeable but not massively significant. Yet, as mentioned earlier, it represents a doubling or halving of power. If you're close to your amplifier's maximum output, such a difference could be significant.

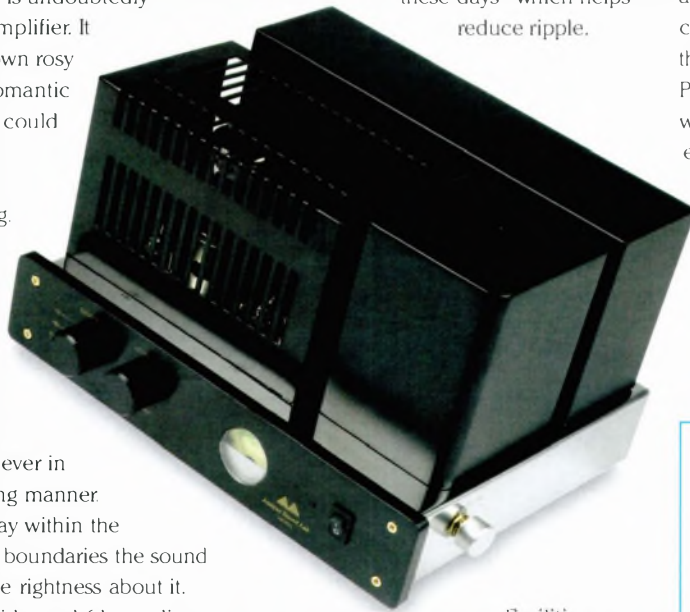
The MG-Si15 is undoubtedly a very truthful amplifier. It doesn't add its own rosy glow, or warm romantic mist. Yet neither could it be described as stark or uncompromising. Its innate smoothness and lack of exaggeration produce a sound that's smooth, natural, and clean. But never in a cold unforgiving manner. Providing you stay within the MG-Si15's power boundaries the sound has an impressive rightness about it.

Venture outside, and (depending on the music) you may detect a degree of coarsening and (in T mode) possible break-up and heavy distortion. So the choice of loudspeakers in terms of efficiency/sensitivity is fairly critical. Unless you listen at low volume levels in a small room, I'd say that conventional low-to-medium efficiency speakers are a questionable choice. Anything from about 96dB/W upwards effectively increases headroom, getting you further away from the danger zone.

In use the amp runs fairly warm - indeed quite hot - but there seems to be fairly minimal warming-up time in terms of sound quality changes. Given regular use, you're about 95% of the way there within five or so minutes of

switching on - though this warm-up time may increase if the amplifier is not used for several weeks. Mechanical noise is pretty low, with only a faint mains transformer buzz apparent when sat right close by.

Build quality internally is solid and workmanlike, rather than stunningly neat, with all components mounted on a single pcb. KT88 output tubes are used, driven by a pair of 12AX7s. The power supply features a smoothing choke - something not seen too often these days - which helps reduce ripple.



Facilities are pretty limited, making the amplifier best suited to purist users with perhaps one or two main music sources.

Only three line inputs are offered, plus volume control and a switch that allows valve bias voltage to be set via a couple of pre-set pots and a built-in front-panel meter - though whether by design or an oversight, the amp's instructions do not tell you how to go about doing this. There's just one set of speaker outlets, and an output for tape feed that could be used as a direct line input.

Indeed, if you've only one source of music, I'd suggest avoiding the three main input sockets, and connecting

via the tape output socket. Although labelled as an 'output', Tape Out can function as an input because it connects more or less directly to the volume control, side-stepping the selector switch. As a result, you get a cleaner slightly firmer sound. The tape output is resistively attenuated, but the drop in level seems fairly minimal.

So - did I like the Antique Sound Labs MG-Si15? Definitely. And, when you stop and consider the astonishingly low selling price, it becomes even more attractive. You see, the little ASL only costs £795! It's a fascinating design that delivers excellent sound quality. Providing you take care to partner it with sensitive speakers and a good front end (whether CD or LP), I can't see many people being anything other than thoroughly delighted with the results. ➤+

#### TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

|                     |   |
|---------------------|---|
| Type:               | Parallel single-ended line-integrated amplifier |
| Valve Complement:   | 2 x 12AX7, 2 x KT88                             |
| Inputs:             | 3 x Line level<br>500mV                         |
| Outputs:            | 1 x Line + speaker                              |
| Rated Output:       |   |
| Triode:             | 5w - 8 Ohms                                     |
| Pentode:            | 115w - 8 Ohms                                   |
| Dimensions (WxHxD): | 320 x 185 x 300mm                               |
| Weight:             | 11kg  |
| Price:              | £795  |

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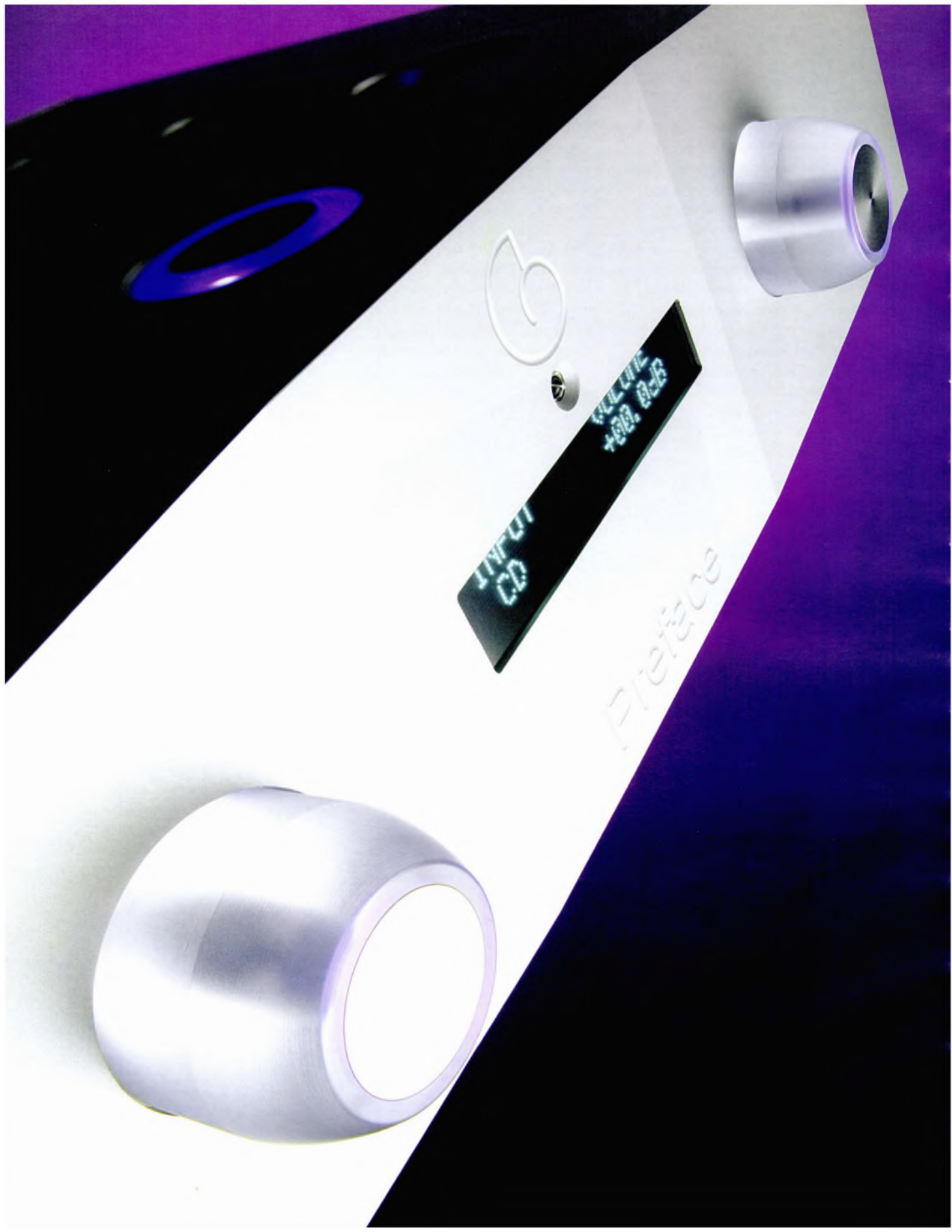
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# Chapter Preface Line-Stage

by Jason Kennedy

Look long and hard at this pre-amp and see if it reminds you of anything. Check out the beautiful matt aluminium finish, the elaborate machining and you won't have missed the glowing blue LEDs. Does the name Chord spring to mind? If it does you won't be surprised to learn that Chapter Audio is the creation of Mike Gregory who used to work for the Kent based company. I guess it was inevitable that the design of those OTT chassis would have an influence on Mike's own creations but to be fair the Chapter kit is a lot more restrained and it's only really the gratuitous use of blue LEDs that inspires the association.

For a start the new Preface pre-amp uses a linear rather than switch mode power supply, so there's no high frequency, high efficiency oscillator onboard, just twin 50VA fully regulated supplies that are designed to be as quiet as is physically possible. This despite the fact that much of the design input in the Pre-face comes from another ex Chord man Duncan Shrimpton who is spending most of his working hours in the real world of industrial electronics but devoting his spare time to projects like this.

And quite a project it is too. This is a no holds barred design, all the stops have been pulled out and what you end up with is the very best that these guys can come up with. Fortunately they seem to know what they're doing as the result is pretty damn stunning.

Some insight into what went into the Preface can be gleaned from the extensive manual that details the key

components used and some of the lengths stretched to. Parts selection has received genuine care and attention, with Burr Brown and Linear Technology op-amps, ultra low ESR Panasonic Gold electrolytic capacitors and Linear Technology regulators. The mains transformers, of which there are two, are custom made and the PCB is a full



immersion gold type incorporating surface mount precision resistors.

Probably the most notable variation from the norm is the inclusion of a custom designed volume pot that operates in a distinctly unusual fashion. As it drives processor style electronics within rather than an array of resistors it is infinitely rotating and the rate that it raises or lowers volume is defined by the speed at which you turn it. Turn it slowly and volume steps are reduced to 0.1dB, but spin it with enthusiasm and you can have the sort of change rate associated with logarithmic devices. This takes a bit of getting used to, especially if you can't locate the chunky remote control. But it's rare to have this degree of finesse in a remote pot, especially one that seems so devoid

of character.

The hewn from solid fascia has only one thing inscribed upon it, its name, all the relevant information for the end user is to be found on the small dot matrix display. This will let you adjust a number of parameters. The usual ones: volume, input selection and balance, and some unusual ones: balanced or single ended output, phase inversion and something called sleep mode which shuts down the display and its micro-controller after a selected amount of time (choose from time spans between five and 60 seconds). Despite the fact that the display is shielded this facility ensures that the pre-amp's electrical environment is kept as quiet as possible.

Noise suppression seems to be the key to this unit's success, the designers concentrating on keeping noise down all the way out to 700MHz. This might seem a little excessive but it allows the gain to go up nearly as high before it's gently rolled off and the result is said to be a flatter phase response. I'm not generally a specs enthusiast but the claimed 0.0006% THD (22Hz-22KHz) and lower than -115dB intermodulation figures certainly look impressive.

In use its software based logic occasionally makes itself known in ways other than the designer intended, but as with all computerised kit a quick reboot by way of the mains switch on the rear panel will sort things out. I suspect that such glitches are related to the very early nature of this particular sample. More concrete is the selection of in and outputs on the back ▶

▶ panel, these include more balanced XLRs than usual with both the most popular named inputs available in this way alone. By which I mean that the input names CD and phono can only be accessed if your CD player or phono stage have balanced outputs. Those of us with SE outputs can pick from a number of unrelated input names like Sat, DVD and Video. An approach such as you find on other high end components where each input has a number would be easier to associate than attempting to remember that the CD player is connected to the Video input.

And given the flexibility of software would it really blow the budget to incorporate input mapping whereby you can associate any input name with any pair of sockets a la Naim 552 and Lexicon MC12? Actually looking at the retail prices on those components maybe it would!

It would certainly have been educational to have had a 552 on hand to see whether it's any more transparent than this superb pre-amp. I'm prepared to forgive this sample all its minor foibles for the extra veils it removes from the essential interface between source and power amp, making both of those elements sound more impressive than usual in the process. It followed a very good passive pre into the system, a prototype borrowed from Audio Synthesis that is no stranger to dynamics or transparency but which was no match for the Preface. The latter revealing surface noise, guitar amp buzz and vivacity of performance previously only hinted at. Image depth seemed to multiply dramatically, pushing the sound back through the rear wall and into the street, momentarily alarming a passing

fox as it did so.

It took a while to get a handle on the Preface's full range of capabilities, a process which involved a spin with a sample of Chapter's first creation the Chapter Two power amplifier as well as extensive listening through my usual Gamut D200. Loudspeakers included the JMLab Electra 926 from the last issue and the preferred reference in



these parts, Living Voice Avatar OBX-Rs. Sources were my trusty SME Model 20A/vdH Grasshopper/Groove record player and Acoustic Precision Eikos and Sony 555ES disc spinners. Cable and support is courtesy of Townshend Audio for the most part and Living Voice in the interconnect dept.

Before I began to full appreciate the Preface's positive qualities I went through a phase of somewhat restricted enthusiasm because it kept showing up the degree of compression present in many of my records - a term used in its full sense to indicate recordings rather than slabs of long playing vinyl. I started to yearn for the Border Patrol pre-amp that had returned to its home, cursing transistors and their inability to open up whatever is presented to them in the way tubes can. But then something happened, probably me selecting records that were not dynamically compromised, and it became clear that transparency on this occasion related to all aspects of fidelity not merely detail resolution

as initially seemed the case. Dynamic transparency is as important as any other form and even I couldn't blame the Preface for revealing the compromises inherent in commercially oriented recordings.

Something else happened shortly after I mentioned this aspect of performance to Chapter. They discovered a difference in the earthing between this production sample and their veroboard prototype which had an effect on dynamics. When this

(third) sample was assessed it did indeed seem to be dynamically stronger, extracting more energy from anything played through it, so that criticism was dashed.

The degree of transparency on offer from the Preface is an order of magnitude above that normally available from high quality pre-amps. The absence of RF noise in the system allows such an incredibly low noise floor that the resulting resolution takes a while to come to terms with. This became more clear with every familiar piece of music I played, favourites old and new offered up previously unheard subtleties and occasionally sounds that must have been completely masked or muddled in some way, so novel was their appearance. One graphic example being the oddly phased rhythms on 'Marakesh' from the fabulous *Peace Orchestra* CD. I've played this many times since its appearance in 1999 and yet never noticed this musical element sitting to the left of the left channel, out of place yet in tune.

Presumably excellent phase linearity has something to do with it. As imaging is as strong or vague as each recording allows. Reverb both natural and synthesised creating space behind, above and either side of ▶



▶ the speakers. It's a pity that the B&W Signature 805s left before this arrived as I suspect the pairing would be absolutely stunning in the imaging department, not to mention in many other respects as well.

Timing is a key element with any audio component and on this occasion we get back to the central issue of what is on the record. You don't get a sense of enhanced speed with the Preface but leading edges are very well defined, and with

guitar and the way this stretched the speaker's capabilities, revealing subtle colorations that rarely show themselves. The spoken word pieces with Mark Levinson noodling away in the back-ground were particularly well served, voices imaging with uncanny solidity and realism. The system stripping bare the recording process, venue acoustic and the limits of the

enhanced dynamic performance to the extent that few records sounded flat and restricted, suggesting that in their haste to get a sample out for review Chapter hadn't really had time to get it fully finished. But the end result is worth the grief and now I don't want to give it back.

The arrival of some substantial PMC IB2 speakers late in the day served to reveal the quality of deep bass being excavated by the Preface. It is not only low and tight but also remarkably articulate, the sound of different instruments and effects being reproduced with the sort of transparency normally found in the midrange.

The Chapter Preface represents a new bench mark in high end pre-amplifiers, I'd challenge any manufacturer to show me an alternative with this degree of resolution in all aspects of performance at anywhere near the price. Don't let the pretty lights mislead you this is a killer component. ▶+



some material there's a perceptibly less hurried sound. It allows more time for you to appreciate all the notes and the artistic inclinations behind them. It's not an actual slowing of pace, upbeat music with complex rhythmic structure has the vivacity and energy that it deserves but there's less blurring of notes and a more explicit rendering of the musical whole.

Individual instruments are allowed to express their character with greater subtlety than usual, the brushed drum playing on EST's *Somewhere Else Before* having the sort of low level resolution that reminds one of seeing individual hair strands on film. While a more aggressive outing such as Frank Zappa's *While You Were Out* is presented with its attack and speed in full effect.

I played a few tracks off the Red Rose SACD sampler to assess the preamp's finer qualities and was duly impressed by the presence of acoustic

format. You get a strong impression of what's missing from the picture, which means you are imagining those elements, a process that not many audio components encourage.

A second sample of the pre-amp was produced when I mentioned the functional idiosyncrasies of the first and this not only behaved perfectly but also seemed to address the only sonic reservation I had. Which relates to the degree to which compression on the recording affects the end result. The new unit still revealed compression in all its tediousness but you didn't have to turn the wick up so far to extract energy from such recordings. Decent cuts meanwhile continued to shine, I found an old Decca LP of Jacques Loussier which sounds stunning in its realism and naturalness. It's not just the SXLs which sound great this SLK disc from the early sixties is as dynamic as you can ask and incredibly spacious.

The aforementioned third sample (apparently a moving target makes for more interesting reviewing!) further

#### TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

|                     |   |
|---------------------|---|
| Inputs:             | 2 x XLR balanced<br>5 x RCA phono single ended  |
| Outputs:            | XLR balanced & RCA phono single ended   |
| Options:            | Gain adjust<br>Absolute phase inversion<br>Sleep mode display switching<br>Remote control |
| Dimensions (WxHxD): | 437x100x300mm   |
| Weight:             | 11kg  |
| Price:              | £4300   |

#### Manufacturer

Chapter Electronics Ltd  
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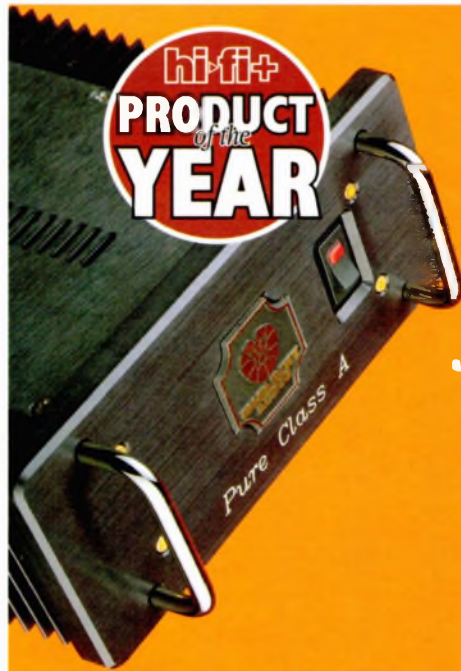
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# The Real Deal

## Rotel RA-02 Integrated Amplifier

by Jimmy Hughes

Having had good words to say about Rotel's likeable RCD-02 CD player a couple of issues back, it's the turn of the RA-02 integrated amplifier to sit in the hot seat. Retailing at £349.95, the RA-02 offers a conservatively-rated 40W per channel output (over 20Hz to 20kHz for less than 0.03% thd) plus full remote control. It obviously forms the centre-piece of Rotel's 02 budget esoterica system, there being a matching RDS tuner to complete the line up. But of course the RA-02 could just as easily be used with other non-Rotel components.

Actually, things got off to a somewhat uncertain start when the review sample failed after five or ten minutes. It seemed to be in distress right from the off, as though on the edge of instability. It was getting warm too. Very warm. Then suddenly there was a loud hum and the protection circuit cut in - all the signs of an amplifier that had gone DC. Luckily my speakers weren't damaged, and a replacement RA-02 was hastily requested. It duly arrived, and - would you believe it? - exactly the same symptoms manifested themselves.

Now what was it Oscar Wilde said about losing one Rotel amplifier being a misfortune, but losing two being down to carelessness? Rotel kit has an excellent reputation for reliability. To be honest I was more than a little surprised when the first

amp failed; for a second to exhibit similar distress was unbelievable. It had to be something else. And to my chagrin it was. To be specific; my 7m Goertz speaker cables. These comprise two wide flat insulated conductors pressed close together to create an 8 Ohm impedance-matched cable.



Alas, such an arrangement creates high capacitance. Not all amplifiers are happy with that. It's well-known, for example, that Naim amplifiers can't be used with such cables. The reason is that Naim dispense with the small series output choke many amplifier manufacturers add to improve stability. A little inductance in the output means the amplifier doesn't 'see' the cable, making it more or less bomb-proof. It's all boils down to whether or not you want to

compromise sound quality in order to protect the amplifier against every eventuality.

Unfortunately, having a small choke in the output impairs sound quality. That's why manufacturers like Naim avoid it. Whilst Rotel don't appear to have done the same, the RA-02 clearly wasn't happy with the Goertz. In all but a handful of instances the RA-02 will function perfectly well. But, faced with a longish run of high-capacitance speaker cable, it turned turtle. My guess is it would do the same if used with plaited Litz type speaker cables. Going through the instruction booklet, there's no warning about unsuitable speaker cables.

So perhaps I shouldn't feel quite so bad about blowing up the first sample...

Luckily, in the case of the second RA-02, I intervened before the amplifier committed hari-kari, and took the necessary steps to ameliorate the cable problem by employing a line transformer between amplifier and speakers. First impressions were good - very good. Judging by the slightly soiled state of the box the replacement amplifier arrived in, and the fact that there were one or two slight marks on the front panel, I'd say my second RA-02 had already had some use. It certainly sounded smooth, clean, open, and well balanced, as though more or less fully run-in. ►

▶ The first thing that impressed about the RA-02 was its outstanding cleanness. Pitch definition and timing seemed excellent too. By chance I tried Leonard Bernstein's live Christmas Day 1989 recording of Beethoven's *Ninth symphony* on DG, recorded in Berlin just after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Although documenting an event of immense significance, the recording always struck me as recessed, grainy, and lacking in clarity

contend with, and a slight thinness of tone, especially in massed strings. In its day the recording was good, sounding sonorous and weighty via a good magnetic pickup cartridge. But even by the standards of thirty years ago, the sound wasn't exactly state of the art. CD (as so often happens) did it few favours, thinning-out the sound and brightening the upper treble.

In the process, middle and lower frequencies were robbed of their richness and bloom. Tape hiss seemed emphasised too.

listenable! Recordings that can easily sound glassy, hard, and unpleasantly resonant were reproduced cleanly and naturally. The RA-02 didn't disguise the essential character of such recordings, yet somehow succeeded in keeping the music focussed and lucid, without allowing the treble to become edgy and aggressive.

In this context the RA-02's success seems to be the way in which it doesn't impose its own limitations and foibles on the music. I'd say the basic circuit's an extremely good one. But more to the point Rotel's designers have ensured you can hear what it's able to do by eliminating



and separation. But played through the RA-02, it sounded surprisingly clean and focussed, with excellent separation and a wide dynamic range.

Other discs swiftly confirmed these early impressions. For example, Brahms' *Second piano concerto* with Claudio Arrau and Bernard Haitink on Philips. This 1970 recording served as my introduction to this marvellous work over thirty years ago, and perhaps as a consequence the performance has always held a special place in my heart. Hearing it again via the RA-02 confirmed its outstanding musical qualities. Indeed, I don't think Arrau ever made a better record; his interpretation is absolutely masterly in every respect.

Yet I know from bitter experience that Arrau's Philips *Brahms 2* can disappoint sonically - especially on CD. There's some tape hiss to

Being a moderately-priced transistor amplifier, I expected the RA-02 not to suit older recordings like this - emphasising brilliance over warmth, making the faults outlined even more apparent. But surprise surprise, the RA-02 turned out to be extremely cohesive and well-balanced. It has none of the 'impressive' but (ultimately) slightly tiring edgy brilliance and false in-your-face immediacy one sometimes finds with amplifiers of this type and price.

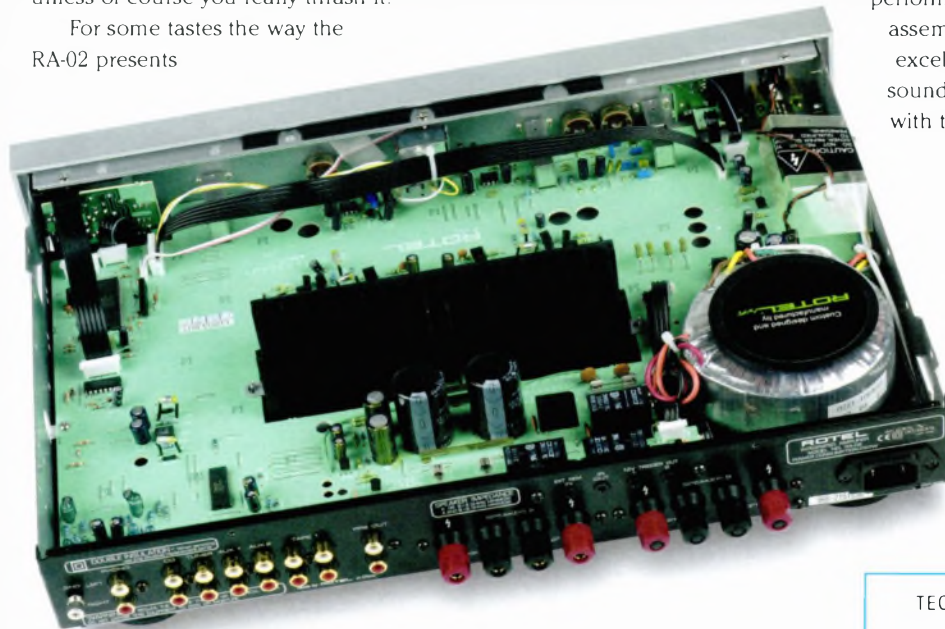
Instead, it's clean and solid, with a beautifully crisp smooth top-end, yet no lack of power or punch at the bottom end. It's refined without being boring or contained, sounding lucid and very detailed in a coherent controlled sense. All in all, very

most of the things that might get in the way. For example, carefully laying out the circuit to minimise signal paths; using high quality capacitors and resistors. They've also made sure that the signal paths for both left and right channels are virtually identical.

Facilities are comprehensive, including tone controls ( $\pm 6\text{dB}$  at 100Hz and 10kHz), balance control, four line level inputs, plus tape monitor, two sets of speaker outputs (switchable), and an input for phono cartridge - magnetic sensitivity only. The supplied remote control handset allows volume to be raised and ▶

lowered, different inputs to be selected, and power to be switched on or off. It also has buttons to control the matching RCD-02 CD player and RT-02 RDS tuner. Given average use the amplifier barely gets warm - unless of course you really thrash it.

For some tastes the way the RA-02 presents



components in the 02 series, if only because of the remote control functions offered. But the RA-02 could just as easily be partnered with other (non Rotel) components, forming the centrepiece of a high performance low cost system assembled with an eye for excellent value and superb sound. I'd be very happy to live with the RA-02 - it's that good! ➤

music might lack a little mystery. It's not perhaps an especially beguiling amplifier, caressing the ear with airy lightness and grace. Rather, the sound is solid and unpretentious. It's commanding rather than gentle or flattering. The wonderfully subtle nuances of tone colour and dynamics that you get from something vastly more expensive like EAR's 869 aren't as evident. But in their place there's a brisk no-nonsense focus and clarity which ensures the music has presence and impact.

Solo piano shows this well. The RA-02 makes sure the notes have crisp attack and plenty of weight. Yet there's warmth in the sound, as well as lucidity. I tried Andrei Gavrilov's notorious 1985 EMI recording of Chopin's *Ballades* and *Second Sonata* - a very bold in-your-face piano sound that can easily

become tiring to listen to. Again, the basic nature of the recording was not disguised; it just sounded as though you were sat close to the instrument. It was focused and very immediate, but by no means unpleasant.

Also, you could tell that at least some of the technical 'problems' with this CD are down to the way the piano is being played - Gavrilov employs a wide range of dynamics and huge variations in tone colour, ranging from warmly-phrased quiet passages to thunderingly brilliant climaxes. It's hard for a hi-fi system to cope with such extremes, however good it is. It's as though the pianist does not appreciate the limitations of recording and reproduction equipment, playing as though he were in a massive hall rather than playing to the microphone. But that's another story!

Although I thought the matching RCD-02 CD player an extremely good and highly able performer, I rate the RA-02 even higher, feeling it offers exceptional performance for the money. It obviously makes sense to partner the RA-02 with the other

#### TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

|                     |   |
|---------------------|---|
| Type:               | Full facilities integrated amp                    |
| Inputs:             | MM phono<br>5 x line-level                        |
| Input Sensitivity:  | Phono - 2.5mV/47k Ohms<br>Line - 180mV            |
| Outputs:            | 1 x pre-out<br>1 x tape-out<br>2 sets of speakers |
| Output Power:       | 40W   |
| Remote control:     | Fully remote                                      |
| Dimensions (WxDxH): | 435 x 72 x 342mm                                  |
| Weight:             | 4.3Kg   |
| Finishes:           | Silver or Black                                   |
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#### UK Distributor:

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Roy Gregory HI-FI+ Issue 19 Sept-Oct 2002

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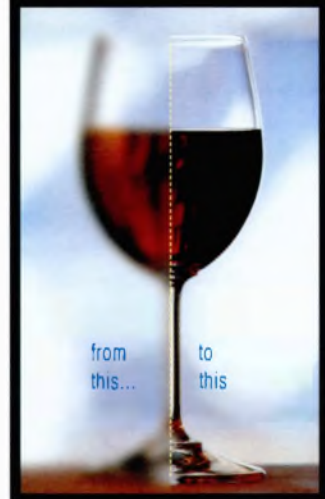
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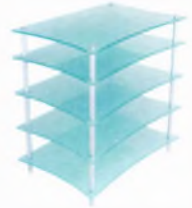


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# The finite elemente Pagode Signature and Quadraspire Reference equipment supports

by Roy Gregory

The lowly rack has come a long way in the last few years, following in the slipstream of cabling as the hi-fi buying public have come to realise just how vital these apparently peripheral components really are. Simple welded steel space frames simply no longer cut the mustard, and both construction and materials have moved on considerably. Short of really exotic materials or air isolation systems, the benchmark for performance has settled on the non-ferrous combination of mixed aluminium and wood structures. Even within this grouping there exists a wide range of different approaches, from the simple strut and shelf construction of the original Quadraspire tables, to the complex constructions of finite elemente.

What we have here are two of the more interesting offerings on the market,

visually very different, and adopting equally different approaches to the same design concerns.

The Pagode Signature from finite elemente has the same basic structure first encountered when I reviewed the earlier incarnation of this rack as part of a complete system back in Issue 12. This relies on heavy duty, T-shaped aluminium uprights bolted to a maple frame at the base and a cross piece at the top. The extremely robust base is coupled to the floor with four substantial M8 spikes.

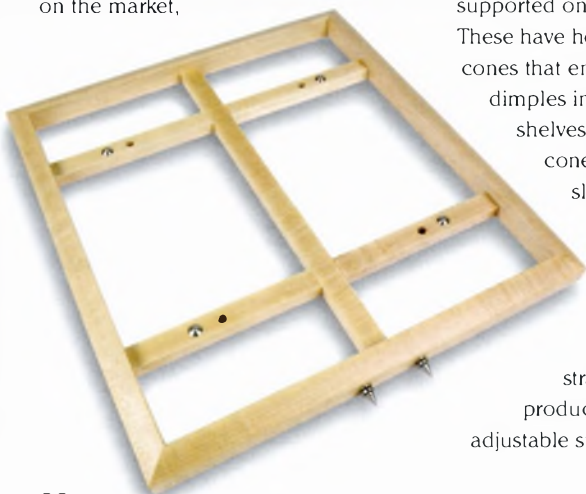
The shelves proper are also supported on solid maple frames. These have horizontal stainless steel cones that engage rows of small

dimples in the uprights. To fix the shelves you simply screw the cones out until they bite slightly into the dimples at the selected height, and then lock them off with their collars.

Whilst I'd never describe this process as straight-forward, it does produce an admirably rigid yet adjustable structure. The shelves



themselves are also solid maple, supported on spikes sunk into the frames' braces. They are held in place by loose retaining bolts, whose foam rubber caskets provide a degree of damping. The entire construction is carefully tuned to dissipate dominant structural modes. There is also a more expensive version, the HD Master Reference, which incorporates parasitic resonators similar to the ones employed by Naim in their loudspeaker





▶ cabinets. These make this dissipation even more effective.

The Pagode Signature is offered in two basic heights, 600mm (with either two or three shelves) and 850mm (with either four or five shelves): Taller versions can be created by simply substituting the optional 930mm or 1400mm uprights, which are available to special order. The rack is easily reconfigured to accommodate future upgrades or system changes by simply re-spacing its shelves. The complete package is an elegant one, in both aesthetic and mechanical terms, its blond wood shelves offering clean, modern looks and a genuine, furniture quality finish. For those who insist, the woodwork is also available in a high-quality black stain, one that actually lets you enjoy the wood's natural grain.

The sound of the finite element rack is big, smooth and coherent. It delivers music with a stable deep foundation and real presence and substance. It allows melodic lines to flow and easily tracks shifts in level. It's a presentation that is especially effective on piano music with its emphasis on the precise weight and placement of notes. Large scale orchestral crescendos build convincingly, with no sense of a glass ceiling limiting the scale and power available. Dynamic range is wide, and dynamic discrimination excellent, easily differentiating subtle shifts in

energy levels and instrumental densities. At the same time, the smooth top and natural, warm balance helps to curb digital glare and exaggerated sibilance. The rack's combination of virtues makes it a powerful tool when it comes to enjoyable long term listening. If natural tonality and a real sense of musical sweep and scale are important to you, then the Pagode Signature should be high on your list of possible supports.



Taking a rather different approach, the Quadraspire Reference table is a development of the original so comprehensive that it effectively constitutes a new product. It still uses veneered MDF shelves and screw together aluminium uprights, but there all similarities end. In the Reference table the uprights are carefully waisted to help prevent ringing, and only the bottom, unused shelf is securely clamped. This provides

the table with its structural integrity, keeping those uprights vertical. Further up the legs, the threaded sections are held apart by spacing collars so that the shelves simply rest loosely on the lower shoulders. The top shelf is further decoupled. Four spikes similar to the ones that anchor the table to the floor are loosely connected to the shelf, using the same spacer system. These then locate in the sockets at the tops of each upright. The whole assembly is disconcertingly wobbly compared to the rigid structures we're all more used to, and the top layer simply lifts off if you forget and try to pick the whole thing up

by it. You soon get used to it though.

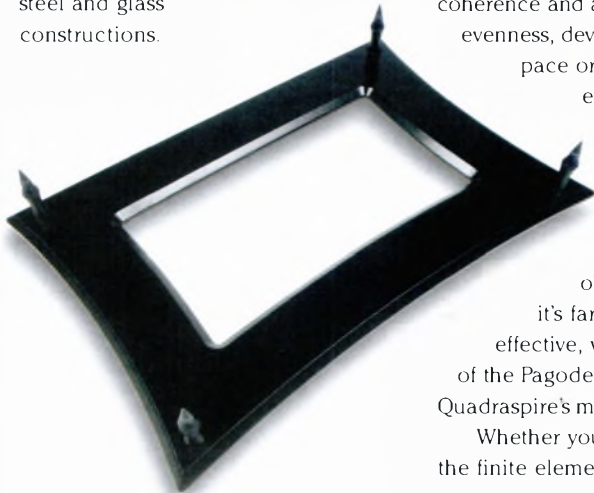
The shelves themselves are the familiar, beveled Quadraspire size and shape, but with a large rectangular cut-out in each one, designed to prevent standing waves. The combination of the waisted uprights and the loose fit around the shelves gives the entire structure a rather skeletal (in the collection of bones sense) appearance, whilst the shelves are available in all the standard Quadraspire veneers.

The sound of the Quadraspire ▶



▶ Reference provides a stark contrast to the sumptuous solidity and presence of the finite elemente. Its presentation is starker, quicker and more transparent, but without the scale and weight of the Pagode Signature. Its more rhythmically explicit and no where near as forgiving at the top, but for those who value immediacy and micro dynamic snap to their sound, it has the necessary excitement and drive. Bass lines are agile and fleet of foot, delivering the natural pace and momentum from tracks. It's a more explicit, arguably more obvious presentation, but it could be just the thing for systems that tend to the relaxed and smooth. It's more about energy, less about weight, jumping further but arriving with less impact.

So much for the differences between these two tables. Just as interesting are the similarities. Both of them possess an essentially neutral tonal balance, free of the energy spikes and exaggeration that characterize the more typical steel and glass constructions.



Those spikes make for a superficially more exciting sound, but one that is actually far less accurate. They also distort the energy spectrum and rhythmic coherence of the piece, altering its timing and pace



by chopping or hurrying notes. What the finite elemente and Quadraspire designs deliver is top to bottom rhythmic coherence and an unforced musical evenness, devoid of bands of false pace or drive. The drama, energy and life in the performance comes at the right time and in the right place. It might be less obvious, but ultimately it's far more musically effective, whether in the shape of the Pagode's macro view, or the Quadraspire's more micro standpoint. Whether you prefer the sound of the finite elemente or Quadraspire

will be down to system balance and your own listening priorities (and your preferences regarding their appearance). However, what's clear is that both these racks offer significant benefits when it comes to detail, dynamic range, instrumental colour and separation when compared to more basic alternatives.

What they do is enable your system to present its music in a far more organised and believable form. The results are easier to listen to and a lot more believable. They underline the essential importance of proper equipment support in the best possible way: By simply sounding better. ➤

**finite elemente Pagode Signature**

Model E14 (850mm, 4 Level): £995  
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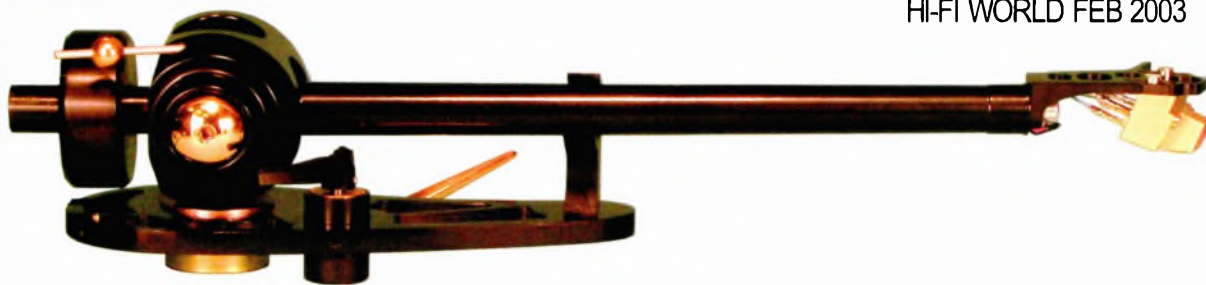
Q4 Reference (4 usable shelves): £670  
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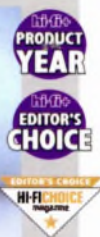


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# Cable Options on the Hadcock GH 242

by Roy Gregory

When I originally reviewed the Hadcock GH 242 I concluded that it was a sonic bargain with a few rough edges in the constructional and presentational departments. The most obvious of these were quickly dealt with and I duly received a second, far tidier sample that included upgraded silver wiring. However, this came at some cost and what I really wanted to see was the basic arm supplied with a better standard cable option and something a lot better than the nasty RB250-style cartridge tags. Well, I got my wish when an Incognito wired GH242 subsequently arrived, giving me no less than three variations to play with.

This latest arm shares the superior finish of the second sample, but the Incognito cabling offers several further practical advantages. First up are the cartridge tags, self gripping designs that simply expand to accept any size of cartridge pins without fuss or bother. The lead out cables are also nicely flexible making cable routing far simpler, especially on suspended decks, although that's not the Hadcock's natural home. The four-pin mini-plug that connects the arm-wand to the bearing housing remains, trading interchangeability of complete arm tops for an extra

break in the signal path between cartridge and phono-stage. Whilst any break in cables carrying such tiny signals should be avoided, the option to run more than one cartridge is enticing, particularly given the reemerging interest in mono

the latest evolution of the Cartridge Man Music Maker. This uses an even finer stylus profile than before, along with a superior suspension medium and better shielding. The result is more detail, better definition and more air. The increase in low



recordings, and the dedicated cartridges to get the best from them. It's also a consideration in choosing your cartridge, and there's no doubt that the healthy output of the Music Maker overcomes this hurdle with greater ease than the 0.5mV of the Helikon, in part accounting for the strong synergy between the rejuvenated Grado and its equally aged yet spry partner.

I compared the arms mounted, as before, on the Clearlight Recovery turntable, carrying as mentioned above, both the Lyra Helikon and

level resolution and dynamics is at least partly due to the blacker background generated by the better shielding, edging this venerable variable reluctance design ever closer to serious moving-coil territory. Nevertheless, there was no getting away from the fact that the whole process involved the swapping of no fewer than six discrete combinations.

Listening to the basic copper wired version, it delivered excellent separation and instrumental body. The solo violin and its supporting harp on the Reiner/Chicago Symphony recording of *Scheherazade* (RCA LSC-2446) possessed

▶ excellent body and presence, held stable in a voluminous soundstage. Colour is good and so is weight. But at the same time, there's a clumsy and slightly disjointed quality to melodic lines, robbing Sidney Harth's violin of its deft lyricism. The plucked bass notes are soft and rounded, without any real sense of float and attack, an effect exacerbated with the Helikon. Adding damping to the arm would certainly help to control this, although at the cost of diminishing the overall life and energy that are the arm's most appealing qualities, making for an entertaining and engaging presentation.

Moving up to the silver wired arm, running with the standard copper lead-out cable, changed things significantly. There were immediately obvious gains in terms of overall delicacy, transparency and air, accompanied by better focus and spatial location. The whole sound became crisper, quicker and cleaner. But most importantly of all, the sound became more articulate, with far defter melodic lines and playing. The cascading guitar riffs that characterise the opening bars of Shawn Colvin's 'Shotgun' Down 'The Avalanche' regain their proper shape and attack. But the gains don't come free of charge in sonic or monetary terms.

The sound of the silver wired arm is lighter as well as more agile. Bass lacks the pleasing weight of the copper wired version, and whilst the plucked bass notes on *Scheherazade* have greater attack and shape (more of a pulse but still not a pluck) they lose some of the weight that roots the music properly.

At the same time, the upper-mid takes on a sheen that glosses over the texture of Shawn Colvin's vocals. It's smooth and it's spot lit, but it sure as hell isn't real. The more silver cables I hear the more this character becomes apparent. It isn't a foregone conclusion: the Kimber KCAG doesn't suffer from it for instance, but there's plenty of silver wire that does. The end result in this instance is an arm that's different as well as better, and for all its strengths it also has some pretty apparent weaknesses. Aware of this, Hadcock have upgraded the wiring in their latest Silver arms, running the pricey metal all the way from the cartridge tags to the phono plugs. There's one on the way to me so I can let you know how it sounds, but the price of the upgrade is a cost increase to £975, which rather undermines the GH 242's bargain status.



Which brings us to the Incognito wired arm. Now I'm an acknowledged fan of the Incognito kit (as fitted to Rega and other arms (Ittoks, Syrinxs and Zetas to name but a few) so I was fascinated to see what it would do for the Hadcock. I wasn't disappointed. As soon as the stylus hit the groove you could hear the increased range of colours and improved weight and presence on show. It was almost as if the Incognito wiring offered the best of both worlds and then some. The guitar riffs on 'Shotgun...' tumble convincingly, underpinned by solid, tactile bass lines. Colvin's voice regains its instantly recognisable character, while her phrasing and

vocal expression is wonderfully natural. But it's the sleigh bells that mark the first pause in proceedings that really bring home the set-up's superiority. They have a distinct yet uncannily convincing spectral balance: a tone all their own, part of which is that you can hear the air not just inside them but around them as well. They are unmistakably multiple, hollow, metallic spheres. It's one of those moments of musical truth, meaningless in isolation but vital because of what they tell you about the sound as a whole.

Suddenly you stop questioning, you relax, and you really start to enjoy.

The Incognito doesn't turn the Hadcock into a super arm. The bass is much better, gaining a tactile quality that was sadly absent before. The droning cellos that underpin the opening passage of the second movement of *Scheherazade* have a convincing texture and far more body while the pizzicato bass notes have far more attack and distinct centres. But the GH 242 still lacks the extension, power, tonal shading and floated weight of the best arms. Nor does it possess the micro dynamic discrimination and absolute transparency that arrive alongside the hefty purchase price of a Triplanar. But there again, in the Incognito wired form it will only set you back £689.

This latest version of George Hadcock's long-lived tonearm is the best I've heard by quite a margin. It retains the principle attributes of the original whilst significantly





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**Roy Gregory.**  
**Editor**  
**Hi-fi+**  
**Unit 12, Albany Business Park Cabot Lane**  
**Poole, Dorset.**  
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2.12.02

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▶ diminishing its failings. What that means in practice is that you are still looking at setting up a classic uni-pivot, and one that allows you to adjust everything from overhang and azimuth to damping if the latter takes your fancy. It works better on a solid deck than a suspended one, and it repays a patient approach. It also allows you to optimize record replay with more than one

cartridge (which with Len Gregory threatening to produce a true mono version of the Music Maker is an enticing proposition). Play to its strengths and whilst it might not transform itself into a super arm it will certainly be a giant killer. Pair it with the Music Maker and a separate motor/solid plinth turn-table like VPI's HW 19 Junior or Clearaudio's Champion and

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# Chord Company Signature Interconnects

by Roy Gregory

One of the best kept secrets in audio. For a little under a year and a half, The Chord Company has been gradually refining their top of the line Signature interconnects. It's been a long wait for review samples, but the results are well worth it. Of course, we could have jumped straight in when they first launched the product, but that wouldn't have been in keeping with Chord's low-key promotional profile, would it.


The cable itself comprises a pair of coaxial micro-wave conductors, terminated in stripped down, silver plated phono plugs, a low mass approach with proven sonic benefits. As does matching the plugs' conducting surface to the silver plating on the conductors themselves. The whole lot is sheathed in nylon net and heat-shrink, for a neat but not overly manageable package. It's not that it's not flexible, just that it's rather resilient, making it a pretty springy handful.

The shields are connected at the receive end to a tiny 1mm banana socket sticking out from under the heat-shrink. Flying leads are supplied, terminated with crocodile clips so that you can connect them to a ground point if you so desire.

This general configuration is of course familiar from the Clearlight Audio leads that I rate so highly, whilst the Lavardin leads use a single co-axial micro-wave conductor married to similarly pared away plugs. As reported before, these cables collectively offer the promise of top-flight performance at rather more approachable prices. The final emergence of the Chord Signatures now represents the most developed and available of those options, and it's one that's well worth checking out.

The sound of the Signatures is quick, clear and dynamic. They manage to separate even the densest mixes with ease, picking out quiet

instruments amongst the loud ones. The rhythm guitar on 'Way Out Basie' (*Farmers Market Barbeque* APJ 023) is unerringly picked out of the background, but not just its strings. You hear the body of the instrument too, which is where its weight lies and where its momentum is rooted. This is a rhythm guitar, remember? With the Signatures in the system you'll never forget that. Likewise the easy, loping bass line that can sound meandering and purposeless on some set-ups never loses pitch or purpose. It, and consequently the track as a whole, is constantly moving forward, while you are never in any doubt as to which direction that is.

Of course, the strengths of these cables mean that the Count's deft stabs and little pushes are right where they should be and the brass is impressive, punchy and brassy, as it ramps up through the opening tutti. But the reason that I've 

► concentrated on the backing instruments is that it's them that brings out the Signatures' innate sense of balance, the way they treat instruments even handedly and without fear or favour. Ask yourself, honestly, how many systems you've heard that deliver acoustic bass clearly and cleanly even when a full-on big band is letting rip?

your foot off the throat of the vocalist. Overly dramatic? Try it and see.

Indeed, the Signatures are so good that they are pushing up towards the performance of the Nordost Valhallas that serve as a reference for cable quality around these parts. They don't quite match the Nordosts' range or subtlety of tonal shading and they're not quite as agile

Valhalla in my listening, which both offered excellent matches, due in part to the similarity in overall character and performance between the Signature and the Nordost interconnects. I also used Chord's own speaker cable, the Odyssey, which whilst it's far more cost effective than the flat leads also dilutes some of the magic. This is one instance in which mixing and matching leads would be justified. Odyssey is much more than just a starting point but I think that

Chord themselves would recognise that it doesn't scale the rarified heights achieved by the Signatures. Presumably there are plans afoot to correct that situation.

In the meantime, the Signatures establish a spectacular new benchmark for cable performance at their price. At \$500 they aren't exactly pocket money, but then you're getting performance that was simply unavailable (at any price) a couple of years ago. The Chord Company built its reputation on solid engineering and value for money. Just because the Signatures cost \$500 a pair don't assume that anything's changed. I recommend exposure at the earliest possible opportunity. ➤+



The answer is going to be a very small number. Add in the dynamic dimension (systems that go loud too) and it shrinks even more. The Chord Signatures don't guarantee that your system will suddenly gain astonishing dynamic range and low-level resolution. However, they do guarantee to deliver it if it's in there to start with, underlining just how much damage cables can do to a signal if you get it wrong. Substitute the Signatures for a loom comprising reasonable quality interconnects costing around £150 to £200 per meter pair and its like taking pads off the drumsticks and

(although that may change with a little more running). They don't quite match their expansive soundstage, but then they don't match their price either, and that's the point. The Signatures are good: Very, very good. Good enough to trouble the Valhallas and disturb their complacency. And they do that at a quarter of the American cables' price. These are the second best cables I've used at home, which might sound like a back-handed compliment until you factor in the price.

The Signatures are not without issues. There is, as yet, no matching speaker cable. I used both SPM and

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# finite elemente Ceraball Isolation Feet

by Roy Gregory

Great name, great product. No sooner had I completed the review of the Pagode Signature rack and returned the review sample than another, in some ways equally interesting product arrived from finite elemente. Or rather, from Audiofreaks, whose fearless leader Branko Bosic is particularly scathing on the subject of anything he sees as unnecessary tweaker-y. For him to endorse such a product is praise indeed.

The Ceraball feet consist of an aluminium base and cap, separated by a ceramic ball. I saw something similar a few years back when the inimitable Lars from Nordost (he of Pulsar points fame) showed me a prototype aluminium cone, tipped with a ceramic ball supporting a hollow, conical cap. That never saw the light of day, but the Ceraball has both much in common with it, and a couple of nice wrinkles all of its own.

The first thing you notice about the finite elemente feet is just how solid they feel. Despite being only an inch high they are surprisingly weighty, while the small top surface makes getting a solid contact with the supported unit dead easy. Larger feet often suffer interference from grilles, screw heads or other fixings, but the Ceraballs are simplicity itself to use. The other thing is that despite consisting of two entirely separate parts, they can be handled as one. That's because there's a rubber O ring around the shaft of the base, damping any wobbles between it and the top-cap, and incidentally, holding the latter in place. They are also beautifully finished and available in sets of four, in black or silver.

Place three or four Ceraball feet under anything from a pre-amp to a turntable power supply and you'll be astonished at the improvement they produce. Designed to provide a ready

route for the efficient removal of unwanted vibrational energy, they seem to suck it out of electronics quicker than a Dyson vacuum cleaner sucks dust. Of course, all that energy has to go somewhere, and a good rack able to dissipate it is an essential part of the equation. I used my Clearlight Aspect racks in the absence of the Pagode Signature and the combination worked spectacularly well.



So what did the Ceraballs achieve? The improvement in low-level resolution was dramatic, with increased focus, transparency and separation. You can hear much further into the soundstage with far less effort. For example, the ability to separate multi-tracked vocals like the echoing chorus that fades out Shawn Colvin's 'Diamond In The Rough' is dramatically improved, the two recordings being separated spatially (laterally and in terms of depth) and tonally. The sound becomes quicker and much more articulate, so that extended melodic lines become far easier to trace, as do subtle pushes and emphases on the part of players. The convoluted meanderings of Coltrane (*Love Supreme* or *Lush Life*) are obvious beneficiaries, but with melody being one of the fundamental musical building blocks, even the simplest arrangements

(Lou Reed's 'Perfect Day') also benefit. Indeed, in some ways, the simpler the structure, the easier it is to hear the effect. Slurred vocals are also far easier to unravel, making it much easier to hear what's being said, and just as importantly, with what emphasis.

As I said at the beginning, the Ceraballs are a fascinating product, not least because they're something that every body can afford.

Which, unfortunately, the superb Pagode signature racks aren't. But, as I also said, a quality rack is a vital part of the Ceraballs' performance and the way their benefits dovetail with those of the Pagode Signature is particularly fascinating. On the one

hand, the racks handle the macro aspects of musical reproduction brilliantly, keeping everything under control and in proper proportion. On the other, the Ceraballs handle the micro-dynamic and low-level arena with aplomb. I'd have loved the opportunity to use the two together. Not surprisingly, I suspect that the combination would be spectacular. In the meantime, the Ceraballs join the Titanium Pulsar Points at the top of my personal support tree, doing for transparency, focus and resolution what the Nordosts do for weight and dynamic range, and just as spectacularly. At a cost of £59 for four that makes them an absolute bargain. Highly recommended. ➤+

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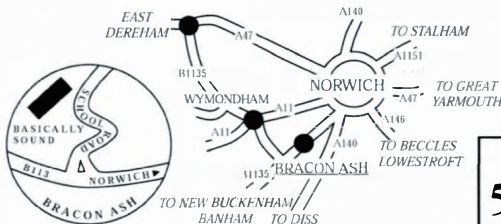
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# The History Man

by Richard S Foster

Richard Foster is a longtime audiophile and serious record collector, widely known for his contributions both in the US high-end press and on the web. An aficionado of British Classical labels, his passion for vinyl seems to be working ever deeper into history. Bring on the Shellac! By way of introduction I asked him to wax lyrical on the subject of mono (no split affiliations here) and some of his treasured recordings.

I love mono records. I love how natural mono records sound. Give me more!! "discovered" mono records about two years ago; I mean really discovered these records; that's when I got a true mono cartridge. WOW...did my world change. Gone was the noise I heard during playback because the stylus was going too deeply into the groove. Gone were the phase problems. All the nasties associated with trying to play mono records with a stereo cartridge were gone. What was left when incredible! In almost all cases, a beautiful, solid, crystal clear image brought new life and vibrancy to record after record. I was permanently lost in monoville.

My main analog setup is a VPI Aries extended with a JMW 12.5 pickup arm. I have two wands in use: one for stereo (the Helikon SL) and one for mono (the Helikon mono). This feeds a Herron VTPH1MC+ moving coil phono section. I thought that this was a pretty good sounding setup for stereo and mono. However, one of my close friends, Jeurg Schopper in Winterthur, Switzerland kept telling me how wonderful these old records sounded when played back through an older turntable with a fine pickup arm and using a wonderful 'Pierre Clement' moving magnet cartridge. Pierre Clement made turntables and these cartridges in the 1950's and 1960's for the French Radio and Television Network. I visited Jeurg in September, 2002 and heard first hand what he was talking about. I couldn't believe it. I returned to Toronto the owner of a "new"

1957 Thorens 124 turntable (fully refurbished), an Ikeda 407t 12" pickup arm and a NOS Pierre Clement moving magnet cartridge. This now feeds my second Herron VTPH1MM(a moving magnet version). I will be addressing playback equalization in the future, so for now I will live with just the RIAA playback curve. My personal preferences in music run the gamut of large orchestral, classical soloist and chamber groups, some blues and some rock. Whilst I've enjoyed these recordings in the past they've come alive, to me, recently. Let me give you a few examples of what I'm talking about.



**Enrico Mainardi, violoncello;  
Michael Raucheisen and Gunther  
Weissenborn, piano.  
Deutsche Grammophon  
Gesellschaft 19054 LPEM.**

Record contains a recital of works by Schumann, Grazioli, Paradis, Gluck, Schubert and Chopin.  
First published March, 1956.

Enrico Mainardi was born in Milan, Italy in 1897 and studied there at the Verdi Conservatoire. The tone quality produced by his cello -and his 'long-bow' technique-

are unique. From the time he was 16 he made solo appearances and performances throughout Europe. For many years he held a professorship at the Accademia Santa Celia in Rome and took part in summer courses in Lucerne and Salzburg. In the mid 1940's he formed a trio with Edwin Fischer and Georg Kulenkampff. When Kulenkampff died, he was replaced by Wolfgang Schneiderhan. This is my favourite cello recital recording. While I am a big fan of Pierre Fournier, Janos Starker and even Jacqueline DuPre, none, in my opinion, hold a candle to the playing of Mainardi in this type of programme.

Side 1 contains Robert Schumann's *Fünf Stücke im Volkston, Op. 102*. Composed in 1849 and first published in 1851, this five movement work is highly romantic and Mainardi creates a sonorous, rich sound bathing the listener in a highly intimate performance. The piano is delicately played by the great Michael Raucheisen. Side 2 contains six short pieces by the composers previously listed. Each performance contains a highly personal reading and Mainardi's playing is of the highest order. This is a difficult album to find as I believe it wasn't produced for export and thus only available in Germany and possibly Switzerland. Do try and find this and explore the wonders of Enrico Mainardi.

**Nathan Milstein, violin;  
Arthur Fiedler conducting  
the RCA Victor Orchestra.  
RCA Red Seal Recording LM 77.**

Contains: Mendelssohn: On wings of song; Foster: Old Folks at home; Schubert: Ave Maria; Gabriel Fauré: Après un Reve (after a dream); Poldini: Poupée Valsante (dancing doll).  
Recording first published, 1950.

Another favourite...all too brief a programme, ►



▶ but a glimpse into the wondrous talent of Nathan Milstein. This recording is one of the earliest RCA issues I own for the 'new medium' of long playing records. The sound is absolutely glorious. No matter what I'm doing, the second the Mendelssohn piece begins to play, I stop and am totally transfixed. What is also quite amazing is what these engineers were able to capture, not only in sound quality but in balance. While Arthur Fiedler is not exactly the first conductor who comes to mind he nevertheless does a fine, delicate job of not usurping the star of this show, Milstein's violin. This recording is certainly one of the finest I have ever heard and is a must have for ever true violin collector. While I'm talking about Milstein, there is another recording, done approximately fifteen years later that is well worth seeking: Music of Old Russia, EMI 33CX1922. Robert Irving conducting a 'house' orchestra with Milstein playing works by Rachmaninoff, Glazunov, Tchaikovsky and Rimsky-Korsakov. This is one of those delicious records which, in its stereo counterpart, EMI SAX 2563, costs several hundred pounds. I'm fortunate enough to own both and can tell you the mono gives me much more pleasure for less than ten percent of the price.

**Lightnin' Hopkins  
Lightnin' and the blues.  
Herald Records,  
Herald 1012**

Recording first published, 1955.

Born March 15, 1912, Sam Lightnin' Hopkins is one of the blues giants of the 20th century. Considered by some to be the 'most creative-folk poet of our times', Lightnin' is, according to Chris Strachwitz of Arhoolie records, simply "the King of the blues". While the front of this jacket is a little misleading and states that Lightnin' sings a collection of American Folk Lore, all twelve of the gems on this album were written by the man himself. Starting off with 'Nothing but the blues', we're treated to hit after hit on this monumental album. An accomplished guitarist, Lightnin's playing equals the quality of his lyrics. Haunting in voice and precise in playing, Lightnin' Hopkins

is the blues. I'm not familiar with any other records on this label, but I will say this one is astonishing. Listening to 'Lightnin's Boogie' will establish a new milestone for imaging (yes, imaging) and deep bass in a mono record. The immediacy of sound in this recording is just thrilling: Lightnin' Hopkins is in your room.



**Big Bill Broonzy  
An Evening with Big Bill Broonzy  
Danish Storyville SLP 143  
(Storyville Blues Anthology,  
vol 14).**

Recorded May 4, 5, 6, 1956 at Club Montmartre, Copenhagen.

Bill Broonzy died August 14, 1958 (he was born June 26, 1893). What a warm, intimate few evenings these must have been in this club in Copenhagen. Broonzy had a very easygoing, troubadour style of singing and loved to tell stories and anecdote as he led into his repertoire. This 'live' recording is a favourite of mine because it seems to tell a story of what performances in these small clubs must have been like. The audience is very attentive and Broonzy responds by telling stories of what life was like for him when he grew up in Arkansas. All the Storyville albums came first from Denmark and were re-released in the UK and the US under the Storyville label. Seek them out as they are fine records containing some legendary performances.

**Champion Jack Dupree  
Blues from the Gutter  
US Atlantic 8019.**

Recorded in New York City, February 4, 1958.

Born July 4, 1910. In his lifetime, Jack Dupree was an amateur boxer, hence the name 'Champion'. He's definitely a unique character in the annals of the blues. Jack played a wonderful honky-tonk piano style and seemed to always have a cigar in his mouth when he belted out his stories. All the songs on this great Atlantic album were written by Dupree himself, including three favourites, 'Nasty Boogie', 'Frankie Et Johnny' and 'Stack-o-Lee'. Dupree recorded three albums for Atlantic and I think this is his best. Interestingly I also own this in its 'stereo-disc' release and I can tell you the one to have is the black label Atlantic mono. The stereo is shallow and uninvolved when compared to its mono counterpart. There is only one Champion Jack Dupree, and he is captured beautifully by Atlantic engineer Tom Dowd. This is a classic blues album. I also like the information Atlantic provides on the back of the jacket, "This is a high fidelity recording. Atlantic uses Electro-Voice 667, Capps and Telefunken U-47 microphones and Ampex Model 300-8R tape recorder for its recording sessions. Individual microphone equalization is not permitted. The sound created by musicians and singers is reproduced as faithfully as possible, and special care is taken to preserve the frequency range as well as the dynamic range of each performance. Transfer from master tapes to master lacquers is made on Ampex Model 300 Tape Recorder, Scully Variable Pitch Lathe, and Cook Lateral Feedback cutterhead. The variable pitch control of the Scully Lathe widens the grooves for loud passages and narrows them during quieter sections, saving cutting space on the record and forming the light and dark patterns that can be seen on the surface of the pressing. The finest vinylite compound is used, and the records are pressed on the new Boomer-type presses. For best results observe the R.I.A.A. High frequency roll-off characteristic with a 500 cycle crossover." Don't you just love it?



# 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, Mark Childs, Simon Groome.

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Heather Myles

### Sweet Talk and Good Lies

Rounder: RRCD3179 

If you're into Shania Twain, Leanne Rimes, Leann Womack or Shirley Lynne – stop reading now. If you love the traditional country sounds of Hank Williams, Loretta Lynn, Dolly, George Jones etc. then Heather Myles is definitely an artist you should make sure you listen to.

Myles poses a natural country voice full of yearning and heartache, which she bends around 11 originals and two cover versions, the first being Jimmy Webb's 'By the time I get to Phoenix' and the second a splendidly mournful rendition of 'Cry me a river'. Of her own compositions 'Little Chapel' is an excellent duet with country superstar Dwight Yoakam, 'Sweet Talk and Good Lies' and 'If the truth Hurts' bounce along on a honky tonk vibe with plenty of fine twangy guitar from Bob Gothar, and 'Nashville's gone Hollywood' is a stinging lyrical attack on music city's sell out to image over content. Myles feels there's no room for authentic country singers in Nashville anymore and the lyrics get straight to the point; "seven million records/ that must mean you're good/ move over Earnest Tubb/Nashville's gone Hollywood".

Of the 13 tracks only one creeps over the four minutes and seven of them manage to stay under the three minute mark. They're short, sharp, infectious bursts of authentic country honky tonk and they're best enjoyed at considerable volume – so buy it, take it home and crank it up.

AH

RECORDING  
MUSIC





Tony Joe White

The Beginning

Audium Records AUD-CD-8134

The word from the swamps is that a mean-looking and hungry Tony Joe White is back with the kind of album he's been threatening to do for a lifetime. Languid solo blues, just him, his wickedly good guitar, a touch of cryin' harmonica, and some rhythmic foot-tapping. Oh, and a carefully chosen acoustic, which is equally important to the way this music has been crafted. An old high ceiling and wooden floored house, where three microphones were left plugged in from early Fall through to late Winter, (so TJW put down these grooves when the feeling was right), is a nigh on perfect backdrop that suits the raw emotional undercurrents of these songs. This is a case when high marks are given to a recording because it dovetails so naturally with the subject matter. Eleven friction-filled cuts focusing on the difficult choices faced by a modern blues man, (dilemmas that aren't so different to those of a generation of old, grizzled journeymen who went before), include woman trouble, 'Clovis Green'; money, 'Drifter'; and the both of them in an opening, 'Rich Woman Blues'. *The Beginning* is that inspired and long overdue release many of us have been praying for.

RP

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The Jam

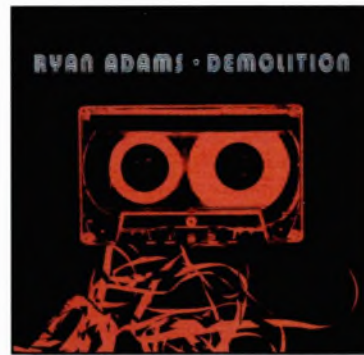
The Sound Of

Polydor 589 781-1

Ah, the festive season was upon us even earlier this year. How do I know? Well, it was August and the "Best Of's" were hitting the racks in force. Amongst them was this 25th anniversary celebration release from Polydor, the label that back in 1977 signed a certain Paul Weller-fronted and mod styled four-piece outfit from Woking. Creditably, the twenty-six tracks here, which are spread thickly across four sides, do not neglect those early sticky songs such as their debut single, 'In The City'. Even though it was another two years before they made it with a first top ten hit, The Jam had by then put together tautly constructed masterpieces like, 'Down In The Tube Station At Midnight' which was a timely reminder that musicians could still take a telling, seriously anti-racist, stance in a post-punk/ pre-Thatcherite era. Satirical social commentaries flowed freely after that, with an instantaneously recognisable slant on class consciousness and post-colonial urban decay, heard in a series of generation defining cuts like 'Going Underground', 'Eaton Rifles', 'Boy About Town', 'That's Entertainment' and 'A Town Called Malice'. All these never-to-be-forgotten anthems are recalled for this album, which, while it captures the raw urgency and inherent dynamism of these songs, does precious little else to further the technical credentials of the day.

RP

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Ryan Adams

Demolition

Lost Highway 088 170 333-1

North Carolina-born Ryan Adams is a young man with plenty to say in hurry. Despite a ravenous appetite for touring, this prolific and prodigious writer continues to show little signs of wear and tear. Yet, incredibly, he still averages a new song every day! *Demolition* began life as a proposed four CD box set solution for many of these outpourings. However, almost inevitably, Lost Highway bottled it and settled instead for a single thirteen-track tumbler of demos and never-before-released songs, which had been cut at studio sessions in Nashville, LA and Stockholm from December 2000 onwards. Stylistically, it is musically diverse, emotionally dislocated and full of that aching honesty one has come to expect from an Adams LP. An opening, 'Nuclear', and the later side one cut, 'Desire', excites distant memories of prime Eighties U2, while the blue-collar, 'Chicago', where he is again joined by ex-Dylan guitarist, Bucky Baxter, is quite simply, "Springsteen-esque". Elsewhere, an under-produced acoustic guitar intimacy suits those heavily auto-biographical themes of longing and loss that permeate songs like, 'She Wants To Play Hearts', 'Cry On Demand' and the delicious, 'Tomorrow', with it's softly underscored and wistful Gillian Welch backing vocals. A surprisingly good, off-the-peg, vinyl release is the appropriate format. Somehow the CD just seems too precise in the delivery of these hard-earned lessons.

RP

Supplier: Cherished Record Co. 01579 363603





Coco Montoya

Can't Look Back

Alligator ALCD 4885

Coco Montoya's last alligator release *Suspicion* was a sparkling blues rock album, but he seems to have run into a rich vein of form because this release is every bit as good. Like all great bluesmen, Montoya has impeccable pedigree. He was a protégé of the late, great Albert Collins and went on to spend 10 years as lead guitarist with John Mayall's Bluesbreakers (his contribution to Mayall's *Sense of Place* Album cannot be underestimated). Montoya's not just a great guitar player though, he's a fine singer and songwriter too. His voice has a subtle rasp but contains plenty of soul, and when he blends it with some high octane playing as he does on Holland Dozier Holland's 'Something About You' the results are very impressive indeed. The band are superb, with second rhythm and slide guitarist Chuck Kirkpatrick slotting in delightfully alongside Montoya, and the various rhythm sections laying down a rock solid backbeat. The real star of the show though is Montoya's playing. Notes cascade from his guitar but he keeps tasteful, resisting the temptation to overplay things. The solos on Albert Collins' 'Same Old Thing' make the hairs stand up on the back of the neck and there's more than a passing nod to his mentor's style of playing throughout the album's 13 tracks. Jim Gaines lends his production skills to *Can't Look Back* and the whole package is an absolute peach for anyone into blues/rock.

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Magic Slim

Blue Magic

Blind Pig BPCD5076

Magic Slim is a giant in the blues world in more ways than one. Standing at 6'6" he creates an imposing sight – and slim he ain't! He's not as large as producer and second guitarist on this album though, the legendary New Yorker Papa Chubby. This is the first time that Chubby has worked with Slim and he talked in reverential terms when asked about the experience. "I've worked on about 25 records" he said, "and this is by far the best record I've made, and its for one reason: Slim. He's the real deal, plain and simple. This guy's been playing music longer than I've been alive." A magic Slim recording is always a gritty, foot tapping experience; tough Chicago Blues with gruff vocals and a very LIVE feel is what you get. Having Chubby around has given Slim's playing a heavier, rocked out sound and when they play off each other as they do on lead track 'I'm a Bluesman' the results are simply devastating. After the initial recordings were made Chubby took the tapes away for mixing and told Slim he was going to add a few samples, a statement that filled the great man with trepidation. "I don't know how he's going to do it" he said, "But I hope he don't make me sound like no punk band". Well he didn't, and together they've made one great blues album.

AH  
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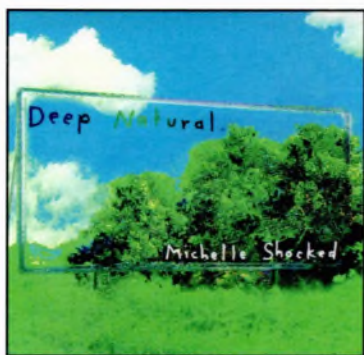
Polyphonic Spree

The Beginning Stages Of...

Good Records 679L011

It's not often that I find myself left open-mouthed in astonishment, but how else would you react to a twenty five piece choral symphonic pop band dressed in white robes and possessed by a joyous, rarely seen, musical fervour not heard of since flower power in the Sixties? Taken at face value, well, they rise up like some hideous visual spectre created from a heinous and most vile mating of "hippie" and "happy clappy" sects. Yet, anyone who recently saw them perform 'Soldier Girl' with such blissful and uninhibited abandon on Later with Jools Holland, could not fail to be inspired by their wonderful musicianship. Amazingly, all this refreshingly extrovert cavorting went on while fiddle, French horn, flute, trumpet or theremin were expertly played. The timing and interplay was spot-on. Whatever these guys are on, I want some! This album is equally animated and good-natured, and while comparisons could be made to the New Age music from the Eighties, they would seem erroneous, simply because there are none of those precious, statuesque and rather self-conscious tendencies which dogged that genre. If the "Spree" have an ideology, frankly, it doesn't matter. Just sit back and enjoy their truly remarkable approach with an ever-broadening grin. Almost, unbelievable.

RP  
RECORDING   
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Michelle Shocked

Deep Natural

Mighty Sound

A double helping from the only artist who owns their entire major label catalogue proves itself to be another one of those unconventional Michelle Shocked releases, which really challenges an audience through its switchback attitude to genre and dogged ideology. Disparate forms including rock, gospel, folk, reggae and pop are welded together, and sometimes the discomfort begins to show. This is more apparent in the case of the second, *Dub Natural*, disc. Here, individual tracks such as Draughts of Dublin mix a chugging and repetitive rock beat, with penny whistle and jazz trumpet notes. However, *Deep Natural* is a slightly more rewarding experience, especially if you share Michelle's evangelical fervour.

'Psalms', 'I Know What You Need', 'Moanin' Dove', 'Good News', and a closing, 'Go In Peace' are deeply personal and spiritual songs whose titles and lyrics will leave you in little doubt as to where their sympathies lie. She's got it big and she's got it bad, but that's old time religion for you. Yet, despite the large spoonfuls of testament, the musician still shines through on occasions. Mostly in acoustic cuts like that of the tender and softly delivered 'If Not Here'.

RP

Supplier: Cherished Record Co. 01579 363603



Creation Records

International Guardians of Rock 'n' Roll 1983-1999

Sony TV94LP

Over a decade and a half, Alan McGee's tiny record label signed some of the most innovative and outlandish British rock bands, and nearly all of them had at least one thing in common: their widely held critical acclaim and absence of chart success. On the roster, at one time or another, were bands like The Jesus And Mary Chain, Primal Scream, Felt, Pastels, Teenage Fanclub, Super Furry Animals and The Boo Radleys. Down the years this carefully nurtured pool of talent cut some classic grooves including, respectively, 'Cracking Up', 'Loaded', 'All The People I Like Are Those That Are Dead', 'Baby Honey', 'The Concept', 'The Man Don't Give A Fuck' and 'Lazarus'. The exception to all this under achievement was, of course, that commercial jewel in a Creation crown, the mighty Oasis. Whatever your opinion of the Gallagher brothers, the Nineties was their decade, but this album is not a homage to those Burnage boys. 'Wonderwall' is all that we hear from them. This leaves plenty of space to reclaim another twenty-four gripping, lyrically acidic, and frequently unsettling songs from a vital alternative scene. Musically uncompromising, the raw stuff feels just about right on this variable vinyl transfer. For a more critical ear, the CD politely buffs up the sound.

RP

Supplier: Cherished Record Co. 01579 363603



Gillian Welch

Hell Among The Yearlings

Acony Records ACNY-0102

If you like your music runnin' barefoot round the stoop in a threadbare, sack cloth dress, then another eleven country folk songs penned and performed by Gillian Welch and David Rawlings will be the ones for you. Most are languidly paced, darkly blue dust bowl depression stories like, 'Miner's Refrain', 'One Morning', and 'The Devil Had A Hold On Me'. Meandering, poverty-filled tales (that are pared back to a couple of acoustic guitars, or an acoustic guitar and banjo) touch a nerve with their exposed, uncomplicated, and straight talking attitudes. There's very little misty-eyed, or sepia coloured melancholia here. The message is clear. When you're poor bad things happen to you, and the testimony to that is, 'Caleb Meyer'. A drunken rapist, who dies at the hands of his neighbour's broken bottle-wielding wife while in the act of raping her. Generally, this is an emotionally destructive place, where love is rarely a satisfying and renewing experience. In fact, more often than not, it's described in pernicious terms. 'My Morphine' and 'Whiskey Girl' being the kind of songs whose titles and lyrics leave you in little doubt as to the addictive, oblivion-filled (and probably fatal) nature of these relationships.

RP





The Coral

The Coral



Take a step back, take two, now listen ... did we just take a 30 year jump? The Coral wear their influences on the front of their shirts using the expected rock band instruments; bass, drums and guitars all played in a new but still familiar way with a good dose of the operatic late 60's song-writing; Doors-like but with a modern twist.

It's all propelled along with plenty of energy and this album flies by but still manages to repay repeated listening. The songs are very variable and I made more notes than for any of the other albums I have reviewed. This whole LP works like only one other that I have heard this year (Orange Can – *Home Burns*). It's a big, rhythmic, melodic and full of hooks sound reminiscent of the great bands from years gone by.

The obvious comparison is to Gomez as they have a similar "swamp-rock" sound, but The Coral are lighter (think Supergrass light) and more open where Gomez are slower paced and introverted. Both bands are obviously strongly influenced by what came before but both still manage to plough their own furrow, often perpendicular to the rest of the industry, which is just what is needed.

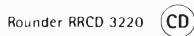
The album is pretty well produced, not a great recording but with this music you don't care; BUY IT NOW!

JH



Nanci Griffith

Winter Marquee



If you haven't been fortunate enough to hear Nanci Griffith perform on stage and don't own that wonderfully intimate 1988 live LP, *One Fair Summer Evening*, then you could do far worse than treat yourself to this CD. Winter Marquee was cut "live" towards the end of the recent "Clock Without Hands" tour. And although there is an understandable degree of tiredness heard on songs where Nanci's voice becomes stretched, these moments tend to amplify that feeling of vulnerability, regret and loss which figure so prominently in many of her reminiscences.

Alongside nine Nanci originals that include old favourites like 'The Flyer', 'Listen To The Radio', and an engaging duet with the robust James Hooker on 'Gulf Coast Highway', there are also five well-chosen covers. The pick of these are Dylan's, 'Boots Of Spanish Leather', the terrific John Prine opener, 'Speed Of The Sound Of Loneliness', and Julie Gold's finely etched take on the Land of Opportunity, 'Good Night, New York', where Emmylou Harris steps up to the microphone to lend her support. A surprisingly good, "under canvas", recording does not let anybody down, be they guests, principals, or that ever-sympathetic band of musicians in her Blue Moon Orchestra.

RP



Robert Lockwood, Jr.

Delta Crossroads



Misty-eyed Delta Blues, the kind that even the hardest heart will become all-sentimental over, courses through the veins of an octogenarian six and twelve-string guitar genius like Robert Lockwood, Jr. Between leaving his evocatively named hometown of Turkey Scratch, Arkansas, and those early 1940s Bluebird recordings, he mastered the secrets of solo guitar, its bass lines, tonal shades and textures, by hanging on the shirt-tails of his friend and mentor, the legendary Robert Johnson. Now, when these rare skills, with their unexpected shifts in emphasis, combine with his nasal, age cracked, and sometimes pinched voice, the poignancy that has for decades been so deeply ingrained within all sixteen of these tracks, is ratcheted up to a new level. Seven of these gems are taken from the Robert Johnson songbook: 'Little Queen of Spades', 'Mr. Downchild', 'Love In Vain Blues' and an opening classic, '30-20 Blues', amongst them. Lockwood also modestly and intuitively revisits five of his own, including 'Run Your Mama' and 'This Little Girl of Mine'. It seems that an ancient bluesman, no matter how fragile, can effortlessly tap back into those roots and mine that rich seam of a musical tradition which has shaped entire lifetimes. A brilliantly conceived and executed session presented on a format that is the equal of these remarkable insights.

RP





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**Rebecca Pidgeon: The Raven**

Superb disc. Folk /rock album boasting some very hauntingly memorable songs, wonderfully produced and very enjoyable stuff indeed. *The Raven* can be safely recommended to any one who enjoys singer/song writers. JD115

**Bucky Pizzarelli: Swing Live**

A great live recording and a Stereophile Magazine album of the month, so what more do you need to know. Well, Bucky Pizzarelli is one of the best swing guitarists on the planet and knows the Benny Goodman vibe like the true veteran he is. Highly entertaining and of course great sonics, *Swing Live* is just the bees knees, Daddy O. JD218

**George Coleman, Mike Stern, Ron Carter and Jimmy Cobb: 4 Generations of Miles**

There have been a fair few tributes to Miles over the years, but this is one of the best. An excellent live album that features ex: Miles sidemen who are all superstars their own right. Their approach to the music is respectful, but there is an attempt to bring something fresh to the music and it works brilliantly. Tracks include *All Blues*, *Blue In Green*, and *My Funny Valentine*. JD238

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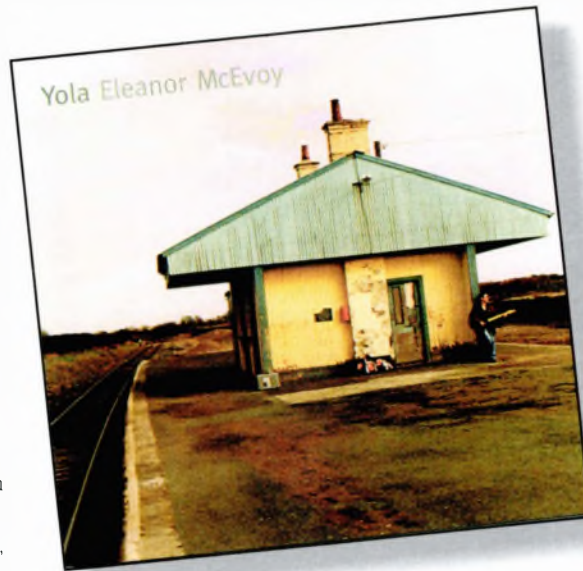
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# Eleanor McEvoy

## An Irish Heartbeat

by Reuben Parry

Lifting the lid on a Southern Irish Pandora's box would recently have set loose some familiar artistic styles. The ethereal singing of Enya; an impassioned and evangelical rocker in Bono; Sinead O'Connor's striking post-feminist imagery, or the traditional songs and contemporary social observations courtesy of Christy Moore and the most listener friendly Mary Black, are all embedded deeply within our collective musical psyches. Fairly predictable stuff, perhaps, but thoroughly enjoyable fare nonetheless. So how is it that many of us have overlooked the remarkable performances of Dubliner, Eleanor McEvoy in a recording career that stretches back very nearly a decade? Well, often it's a matter of, "we know what we like, and we like what we know". There's always that inherent conservatism within our past time, which when we wrap ourselves up in any music, not just that of an Irish tricolour, will find us reluctant to investigate singers, song writers and musicians outside of an acknowledged canon. I can be as guilty as the next man where this is concerned, and admit to travelling to Miss McEvoy's door by a less than virtuous route. Like many, I was first attracted by the latest of her four albums because of its format: the 2001 release, *Yola*, was that rare case of a new recording released as an SACD. A short-lived victory over form, then, for this eye catching new technology, which has at least resulted in the purchase of her three earlier CDs for all the right reasons: the organic, beautifully structured and delivered music.



These albums, taken as a whole, are notable for their tightly framed song craft and this shines through no matter what the source, be it ADD, DDD, SACD, or that keenly awaited 180g cut of *Yola*, which at the time of writing exists only as a test pressing. Generally speaking, the arrangements are uncomplicated and melodic constructs and I believe (rightly or wrongly) that her strengths in this department stem

from a selective way in which she is prepared to either draw upon or react against her musical training. The piano lessons began when she was just four; at six years of age Eleanor took up the violin, and this early passion for classical music led to a spell in the Junior Irish Youth Orchestra and further studies at Dublin's prestigious Trinity College where she earned her honours degree. A four year sojourn as a violinist in the National Symphony Orchestra followed before she finally took that momentous and defining decision to leave those comfortable environs and pursue a song writing career in earnest.

To be fair this was not a sudden or impulsive act. Eleanor had for a while been leading something of a dual life, and it's easy to picture that formally dressed musician plunging headlong from the Concert hall to fill in a slot at some small Dublin club with a set of her most recently penned ballads. So, having "play tested" the waters over a period of time, this was not one of those changes in musical direction that are taken with

► undue haste. All these experiences have and continue to stand her in good stead. Yes, there is that versatility of one who's picked up the mike and taken a few knocks on the small stage of what is often a difficult club circuit. But there is also a flipside in that practised art and disciplined mind of a classically trained musician. The latter brings with it a measured compositional approach that coolly balances vocal and lyrical demands alongside the needs of the accompanying instruments. It's a part of what makes these albums so satisfying and so noteworthy. Especially if we consider how easy it would have been, after spending innumerable hours in an orchestra pit, to stumble and fall into that trap of producing heavily textured music of her own. These moments of misguided compositional indulgence, which when translated into a rock and pop context can seriously detract from the emotional content, simply do not appear in an Eleanor McEvoy song. Pick an album and any track like, for example, 'sleepless', taken from her 1996 outing, *What's Following Me?*, and the impact of lyrics carrying the theme of aching betrayal are enhanced and not diminished by a carefully considered use of piano, drums, bass, electric and acoustic guitars. The undisguised pain and exasperation heard in the delivery of, "It's not what you did that is hurting the most. It's lies that you told, covering up", are then elevated by a fearless, yet delicately handled, harpsichord introduction and chorusing string counter-point. Gutsy and intelligent underscoring of the thematic line.

Of course Eleanor McEvoy's talent, at least within the boundaries of Eire, had at this stage already been recognised and rewarded. Frighteningly, perhaps, she achieved star status as long ago as 1992, with a song that inspired the title for an anthology which was to become the best selling album in Irish Chart history, *A Woman's Heart*. Clearly, I live a lonely and isolated existence because that one somehow passed me by. That year, she was the winner of the Irish Recorded Music Association Award for Best New Artist, and also collected a Hot Press Best Solo Performer gong as well. When you're on a roll these kinds of things are like buses, and in 1993 they



added two further garlands, including the prize for Best Songwriter. All this, with her best work and another three CD albums still ahead of her! While I am loath to criticise these outward trappings of success, I do think it is safe to say that there was something of the proverbial "putting the cart before the horse" going on there.

Yet, hit singles such as 'Only A Woman's Heart' bring with them their own peculiar set of demons and Eleanor, despite the absence of a political agenda at that time, still found herself annoyingly pigeon-holed

as a feminist-folkie because of it. Certainly the artwork for that first CD album, with its' black and white photography of the Celtic jewellery wearing, jean jacketed and acoustic guitar playing McEvoy, did little to dispel that image either. Putting aside the local plaudits for a moment, and passing over the vagaries of anthem-like singles takes me into the body of that eponymous debut disc which appeared on the Geffen label in 1993. Ah, what a headstrong, confident and soul-bearing work it is. 'Headstrong',

because Eleanor was unequivocal about where and how these songs were to be recorded. Geffen wanted a Los Angeles venue, which was quickly "deep-sixed" by the feisty Miss McEvoy, who insisted on cutting its' thirteen tracks at the Windmill Lane Studios in Dublin. 'Confident', simply because she was a performer who could always draw upon the resources of those many hard years spent in formal training. And, of course, there was that profile-raising 1992 anthology success, which meant she was not overawed by the wider prospects of fame. 'Soul-bearing', because this is music clearly taken from a personal perspective, with lyrics that pick through the bloody entrails of relationships past and present in a way that only a woman can.

*Eleanor McEvoy* is another of those thought provoking and tuneful packages that stylistically has a good deal in common with the albums of Suzanne Vega, Aimee Mann and Shawn Colvin. There is a bedrock sound built by the acoustic guitars of McEvoy and Bill Shanley, which plays such a prominent role in most tracks including ►

► the beautifully framed 'Promises We Keep', 'Boundaries Of Your Mind' and a haunting 'Go Now'. But, elsewhere, lurking within the shadows, is Jim Tate's electric bass, or Shanley, returning to lay down some electric chords. They give the likes of 'Apologise' and 'Finding Myself Lost Again' an appropriate degree of steeliness. The writing for these instruments is important. It underpins McEvoy's emotionally charged lyricism, as it freely roams across, through, over and in between all those painful aspects of love and loss in a desperate search for answers. Music, remains a significant part of the healing process for this lady, where fractured relationships are concerned; "I use song writing as therapy. It's very cathartic", she says. However, these songs are not just a selfish outpouring of intense feeling. Within them McEvoy offers us some gun barrel straight solutions to those universally familiar problems of the heart and, as with Yola, this proves to be one of the disc's greatest attributes.

Another similarity between this and her later recordings, is the quality of their string arrangements. McEvoy does them herself; calling upon an enviable expertise that is the by-product of a classical training. Again, though, the inherently rich textures that always present themselves when composing for violins, viola and cello, are never over done. The cello part for 'Breathing Hope' and the poignant scoring for cello, viola and violins on 'Only A Woman's Heart' dovetails so sweetly into their troubled themes that there is never any danger of these songs slipping into an emotional overstatement. Her grip upon this, and just about every other aspect of putting a song together, is an uncompromising one: "When I write a song I just do it from the heart. I do it the way I hear it in my head. Then I write it down and look at the specific chord changes to see if it's structurally okay. That's where my classical training comes in. When I want to use strings, I write the parts out myself, so I don't have to give up any control." Yes indeed, it's an honest statement that illuminates Elenor McEvoy's determined approach to song craft. Her music, and it goes for all four of the albums, is very much a case of the proverbial iron fist within a velvet glove. These steely



"look you straight in the eyes and tell you how it is" qualities, together with the International airplay and a world-wide tour that followed in 1994, unsurprisingly succeeded in establishing a loyal fan base in America, the Far East and throughout Europe.

Yet she seems to have won few friends at the record label with this approach and a three-year hiatus between debut and that second album, which is traditionally such a tough nut to crack, was partly down to her bloody-mindedness. Twenty songs were recorded and in the can, but there was little prospect of a release until she switched to Sony's Columbia arm in 1995. *What's*

*Following Me?* surfaced early the following year. Predictably it contained a track, 'Trapped Inside', whose consciously self-indulgent subtext picks at the open wounds left by the record company executives.

During this long intervening period between albums McEvoy underwent several transformations. She shed the folk image, and that of a leather-clad gay icon. The look, by 1996, was more Gothic. There was also a distinct change of musical direction too.

*What's Following Me?* is a much louder affair. Though her song writing remains steadfast and as tenacious as ever, you feel that this marriage between a more rock based sound and those weightier arrangements for all instruments, and that's not just the string parts, is far less seamless than before. The band's line up had changed too, with drummer Noel Eccles being ousted in favour of Lloyd Byrne's heavier stick work. Kieron McEvoy steps in for Bill Shanley on acoustic and electric guitar, while Eleanor also adds the Telecaster to her list of musical credits. Taken in isolation: the record label wrangle; that focus upon image, band changes and a shift in style, don't add up to much in the life of a musician, but when they converge in this way something has to give. This feels like an album in search of an identity, and while the music powerfully chronicles the pain and frustrations of everyday life, it also unwittingly reflects these upheavals outside of the songs. By the time we've reached out to a closing 'Famine' you know that this

▶ release has traversed a musical cul du sac.

On a positive note Eleanor's singing is as lovely as ever. From a breathy lower register right up to a clear mezzo-soprano, her silky smooth voice, with a slight trace of a brogue, enriches over sixty minutes of music. Picks amongst the thirteen songs here are those resonant discourses on betrayal and broken relationships in, 'All That Surrounds Me', and that beautifully poised ballad 'Sleepless' which was mentioned earlier. To her credit, McEvoy shapes up with a bit of social commentary. 'The Fire Overhead' widens a subject like that of the Californian forest fires into a perspective on those potentially worse fires that burn within people everywhere.

She also wades into turbulent religious waters with 'Precious'. Though again, she is keen to thematically sketch out a safe, general purpose view of hypocrisy within the Church (any Church, in fact) rather than tackle the particular demands of Irish sectarianism head on, which would have been more pertinent at the time. Her broad brushstrokes continue to work best on those universal laws of the human heart, because they do lack a certain precision when she strays beyond love's borders to apply them in the realm of

a socio-political observer. To be fair, Eleanor has in the past defended herself, saying that she was always "...kind of wary of rock musicians coming out and making heavy political statements because I often feel they have a forum that they shouldn't have." Going on to explain that she is "...just trying to take little photographs of things that are going on around me" writing "...from a woman's point of view" because "...that's the way I see the world." While, I can understand, if not fully embrace this point of view, it's worth remembering that sometimes art, literature and music are the only effective expressions of political dissent available.

In retrospect, I've been a touch hard on *What's Following Me?* True, it suffers in comparison to both *Eleanor McEvoy* and *Yola*, which are great albums. But if I could suspend reality for a moment and come to *What's Following Me?* without that burdensome knowledge, I think I'd be pretty impressed. There's classic material, which simply delights in picking a path through

those personal minefields, until songs like 'Don't Ask Me Why?' detonates an emotional release. In this instance an urge to cry for no apparent reason after sleeping with someone. Then we have the beautiful and versatile singing, clever arrangements and accomplished playing that really nourishes this music. The recording, too, has plenty going for it. Clean detailed and open sounding, except when the band goes into their grunge mode. Yes, I think I've just convinced myself that on the whole this is a pretty solid recommendation despite the previous reservations.

There was, however, to be another three-year wait before the release of her third album, *Snapshots* in 1999.

As the title and Eleanor's earlier assertions on the role of a songwriter suggest, this is an eleven-track collection that seeks to honestly capture those fleetingly ironic, peculiar and dysfunctional images which resonate throughout modern life. The songs have that snappy quality of flash photography about them. This is a deliberate and carefully developed ploy. Her "big idea" and it applies equally to all albums, is to contain the arguments within a tightly knit and seemingly uncontrived four-minute time frame instead

of working on a much grander scale. Had she remained the classical musician, then you can almost picture those forlorn attempts to stretch life's vexatious dilemmas out into a series of luscious and unwieldy canvases of symphonic proportion. Here, Eleanor shies away from painting an aural portrait where your subject preens and poses for the camera, because that is an inherently false perspective. If these songs were not so sharply focused, then their messages could be irrevocably compromised and that harrowing image of a damaged individual; the alcoholic in, 'She Had It All', or the corruption which lies at the root of, 'Easy To Lose Hope', would be diluted as a result. The stylistic shifts are noticeable too. In these tracks, and in the opening, 'There's More To This Woman', which assertively examines issues of pride and self-worth, McEvoy calmly and eloquently weaves between country, Celtic or a glittering art pop idiom, all to suit the moment. Elsewhere on this album in, for example, 'All I Have' ▶



▶ and that quirky 'Please Heart You're Killing Me', it works less well. This can be attributed to the presence of producer, Rupert Hine, who had the recording taped at his French chateau studio before further developing a Technicolor mix in the Art Metropolis Studios, London. These overlays, re-mixes and introduced effects sometimes distract from (and even undermine) that pared back and startling monochrome quality of the better McEvoy snapshots. I suppose it goes a fair way to showing what a narrow dividing line exists between art and artifice. Again, when considered in isolation, *Snapshots* functions reasonably well. The problems are to be found outside of the songs. Dressing them up sometimes creates a noticeable tension, because capturing a precise moment when an affair unravels, or peeling away at self-delusion and the lack of probity, needs an unclouded lens. A road to nowhere, then? Well, no, not quite, because this album has led us to the brilliant and compelling *Yola*.

First and foremost *Yola* was a recording project where Eleanor McEvoy took back control. Rupert Hines and Columbia were both jettisoned and instead Eleanor shares the production duties with a like-minded Brian Connor. His classy keyboard skills also grace this atmospheric disc. Extricating herself from under the stifling weight of a major record label and working with a small Independent outfit has given Eleanor the freedom to return to those acoustic roots of that self-titled and much-appreciated debut. In contrast to *Snapshots*, stripping the music down to a three-piece backing group develops a sense of integrity, bringing back a much-needed homely feel to this latest album. Here, McEvoy's guitar, the Liam Bradley drum kit and Eoghan O'Neil's bass playing are held in place by the presence and innate authority of a Steinway piano. The interaction between voice and piano is exquisite too. Connor is a real find: a jazz pianist who was classically trained at Guildhall, he only joined the band in 1999 because Eleanor had a broken hand. Fate has left her to rediscover the intimate pleasure of combining voice with acoustic guitar, while he has brought that last ounce of confidence, versatility and timing to *Yola*, which Eleanor acknowledges, on keyboards she cannot quite match.

This is one of those rare albums that creates and moves through it's own kinetic rhythmic sense as each

of the eleven languidly paced songs lead seamlessly into one another. They (the songs) are as sharply etched as ever, but an underlying melancholia in her music is now just as likely to open out into a celebratory conclusion. Equilibrium. That terrific sense of emotional balance is achieved while running through that now familiar territory of fractured relationships until you come up against, 'Something So Wonderful' and 'I hear You Breathing In', ballads where love is now a salvation rather than merely the stepping stone to heartbreak. They reflect Eleanor's newly found feeling of contentment, one that is built around a stable personal relationship, impending motherhood and a chance to put music together in the way she wants back in Dublin.

For the die hard depressives amongst us there are still those superbly written modernised break-up songs like 'The Rain Falls'. Here, when a callous boyfriend deletes you from his life by email, the backdrop is rain upon a windowpane. It streams downwards in rivulets, mirroring the tears which fall from the woman's cheeks. Such moments of lyrical and poetic beauty are wonderfully frequent, and they prosper because the arrangements are so uncluttered. Moreover, we are drawn in even closer towards these vivid images through a precise way in which instrumental and vocal details are mapped. I'm sure that the knowledgeable Miss McEvoy understood SACD's potential where this was concerned, because the recording of *Yola*, (a production that reveals the slightest inflection, tint, ripple in texture, shift of weight and change in emphasis), perfectly suits her unequivocal song writing philosophy. An intelligent and encompassing vision for this work extends further to include the album's title. It takes us to the windswept landscape of Wexford, and a nearly extinct dialect of Middle English that has mixed with anglicised Irish and is called, "Yola". It metaphorically underscores Eleanor's own dying musical language in a world that is now overrun by puerile line dancing karaoke cover acts.



**Don't miss Eleanor playing live at this year's Bristol Show – on the Saturday and Sunday. For further details see page 5.**

Eleanor McEvoy



What's Following Me?



Snapshots



Yola



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## Count Basie and his Orchestra

### 88 Basie St

Analogue Productions/Pablo 2310-901 **180g**

Another Basie re-issue, this time from his later Pablo recordings, and post dating the fabulous *Farmers Market Barbeque* by a couple of years. The sonic picture here is familiar from that earlier recording, although this is a more relaxed, almost contemplative outing without the transparency and dramatic dynamic punch of the earlier session. It's a mood that's captured by the achingly beautiful 'Katy', which might be short but is very, very sweet.

Basie even winds back the orchestra to a small ensemble for a couple of tracks, drafting in Joe Pass on guitar, and it is these that are the real highlights of this disc, allowing both the Count and Cleveland Eaton on Bass a lot more space. The sudden shift that dominates the opening of 'Sunday At The Savoy' is the precursor to Basie stretching out into long lines that he shares with Pass, a side to his music which many remain unaware of.

The pressing here (from RTI) is simply superb, with ultra quiet surfaces that make the most of the musical subtlety that's captured in the grooves. Bass notes are deep and very clear, the piano crisp and properly percussive while the brass is convincingly breathy. Less of a sonic spectacular than some of Basie's work, it's no less an album for that.

RG

[www.vivante.co.uk](http://www.vivante.co.uk)



## Billie Holiday

### Lady Sings The Blues

Speaker's Corner/Clef MG C-721 **180g**

There have been a handful of unmistakable voices that have graced the great songs of jazz, but perhaps the most inimitable of all belonged to Billie Holiday. And it was never better than when singing the blues, an idiom that came naturally after a life of extraordinary hardship and heart-ache. There's nothing faux or assumed about this performance, just the natural extension of a lifetime's experience, itself etched on her voice. If you're only going to own a single Holiday album then this is the one, both a perfect introduction to her vocal talents and a summary of them. She moves effortlessly through standards like 'Love Me Or Leave Me' (a startling contrast with Ella's seminal rendition) and 'Willow Weep For Me' as well as lighter material like the Johnny Mercer/Richard Whiting 'Too Marvelous For Words'. But with Billie it's always the blues that capture your heart: 'Travelin' Light', 'Good Morning Heartache', 'No Good Man' – just take your pick. They all have a special poignance that only she seems to bring.

The pressing is well up to Speaker's Corner's excellent standards, flat and with quiet surfaces. The mono recording might not be exactly hi-fi, but it has a quality that is wonderfully direct and also strangely appropriate. Absolutely essential.

RG



## Miles Davis Sextet and Quintet

### Walkin'

Acoustic Sounds/Prestige LP 7076 **180g**

Recorded in '54, and featuring great sidemen such as Horace Silver, Kenny Clarke and Jay Jay Johnson, this is one of Davis' landmark albums. It helped to kick-start the hard-bop movement and was a reaction against the then prevalent 'cool school'. The title track, based substantially on a 1950 Gene Ammons number 'Gravy' became one of Davis' signature numbers and with 'Blue n'Boogie' a jazz standard. It's a 12 bar blues that in this first outing really showcases the abilities of each player. After the introductory theme, Miles opens with seven choruses followed by Jay Jay with an equally impressive solo. Horace Silver shines too. Dizzy Gillespie's fast paced 'Blue n'Boogie' comprises the other classic here (the album neatly contains both these numbers on side 1) continuing the blues theme to great effect with more great soloing from all three horn players. The second half of the album, featuring Miles' quintet, is a more laid back affair with Davis utilising his trademark muted horn throughout. 'Solar' features a standout alto solo from Davey Schildkraut that many consider his finest on record. The album of course is in mono and none the worse for that. It just oozes presence in this fine RTI pressing. A superbly realised and highly enjoyable slice of jazz history.

DD

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Ben Webster and Joe Zawinul

Soulmates

Acoustic Sounds/Riverside RLP 9476/OJC 109 **180g**

The seemingly unlikely pairing of Webster in his fifties and Zawinul in his mid twenties, came together as a result of the two sharing an apartment and using their time to practice together. These practice sessions often lasting for as long as 5 hours sometimes involved the pair being joined by the likes of Coleman Hawkins. They proved so enjoyable that this album was the logical outcome. Comprising a mix of standards: 'Too Late Now', 'Like Someone in Love', along with a touch of Ellington's 'Come Sunday' and Webster's tribute to Ellington: 'The Guvnor'. The set also contains Zawinul's 'Frog Legs' (Frog was one of Webster's nicknames). Zawinul provides subtle underscoring for the band throughout the set but it's Webster's distinctive work that predominates here, whether in the raunchy title track or in ballads like 'Come Sunday'. This is not to undermine either Zawinul or the band's contribution. The latter are superb, but then given the personnel how could they be otherwise? Zawinul is a master of understatement but for a flavour of his expertise just listen to his playing on 'Travelin' Light'. This album may not be a jazz classic but it is a highly enjoyable set by an outstanding bunch of musicians who are clearly having a great time and is one I know I'll return to for years to come. Originally produced by Orrin Keepnews this is another fine Acoustic Sounds/RTI job and well worth seeking out.

DD

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Tina May

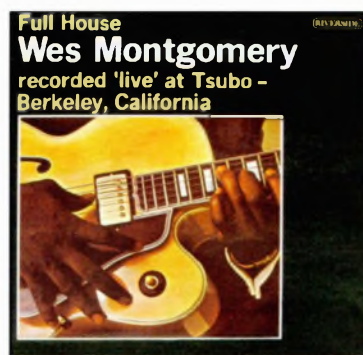
One Fine Day

33 Records 33Jazz050 **CD**

This is Tina May's seventh album for 33 Records. She's also a regular at Ronnie Scott's and I'm ashamed to say that I'd never heard of her before. My loss. This is a superb set comprising a truly eclectic range of material including a particularly oddball choice in the opening 'Pure Imagination' from the Newley/ Bricusse 1971 score for Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory. Much like the hugely talented Iain Ballamy in his handling of the equally unlikely 'White Horses' in his Pepper Street album, Tina May and the band make this their own, from the opening breathy alto lines from Alan Barnes the treatment remains respectful of the wistful melodies of the original but adds a real jazz sensibility. The set goes on to take in numbers as diverse as 'S'wonderful', 'I'll Be Seeing You', and 'Bop People' featuring a particularly dextrous duet between Tina's soprano scatting and Barnes low register clarinet. I should also mention Nicky Iles piano playing: she's in fine form throughout, underpinning May's soaring vocals with melodic, flowing lines. The album even takes in and does real justice to John Ireland's 30's musical setting of AE Houseman's poem 'The Vain Desire'. The cherry in this particularly tasty martini is that the recording quality is also excellent, bringing the very best from a band at the top of their form. Recommended.

DD

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Wes Montgomery

Full House - recorded 'live' at Tsubo - Berkeley, California

Analogue Productions/Riverside OJC-106 **180g**

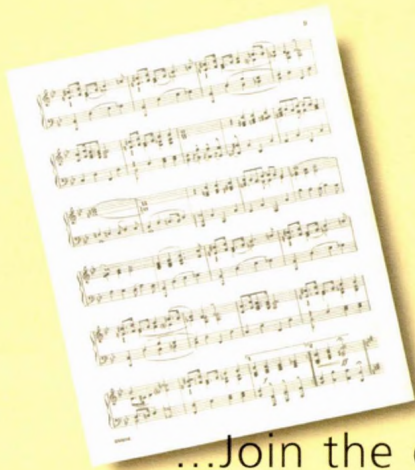
Wes Montgomery, captured live in June '62, leading a stellar quintet consisting of Johnny Griffin on tenor sax with the Miles Davis rhythm section of Wynton Kelly, Paul Chambers and Jimmy Cobb. It's an enticing proposition, which goes some way towards explaining the album's title, and it's not hard to imagine the buzz that must have swept the Bay area jazz community when news of the impending session leaked. But like all such high profile exercises, the question is whether it lives up to its promise. Well, the answer to that has to be a yes. It's a mixed set, with numbers drawn from Dizzy Gillespie, Lerner and Loewe and Mercer and Arlen. But it's the two lengthy compositions from Montgomery's own pen that are the standouts (there's also a five minute 'S.O.S'). His long-line solo in the upbeat title track is a thing of beauty, his jousting with Griffin's tenor setting the scene for the rest of the set. The immaculate support of the Davis rhythm section can be taken for granted, or at least it could if not for the brilliance of their solo interventions: the tastefully understated bass; the piano lifting its skirts to whirl with its higher profile companions; the rock solid drumming. Yet the lyrical smooch of 'I've Grown Accustomed To Her Face' works just as well, the innate understanding of the talented team melding effortlessly.

RG

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**Tchaikovsky**  
Symphony No. 4 Romeo and Juliet Fantasy Overture  
Colorado Symphony Orchestra/Alsop

Naxos 8.555714 

Despite a slight lack of conviction in the *Symphony's* opening movement, this is a release of comprehensive distinction. The opening *Romeo and Juliet* is a magnificent combination of beautiful, romantic strings, allied to enthusiastic thrusts of energy, setting the scene for the rest of the disc. *Symphony No. 4* is also handled with flair. From the opening fanfares there is a sense of correctness about the reading, especially in the more vigorous moments, where Alsop's command is particularly noticeable. She allows the musical themes to develop, but still retains the proper amount of tension, providing a classically passionate yet poetic interpretation, with a particularly enthralling *Scherzo*. The Colorado Symphony Orchestra proves to be of the highest order, with particularly admirable playing throughout.

Marc Steadman's engineering and the superb acoustics of Boettcher Hall contribute to a vivid recording of beautiful tones and some of the deepest bass from this label. With extraordinary dynamics, this CD's sound is close on demonstration quality.

With top-notch sound and an excellent performance, this release approaches the class of those from Monteux and Mravinsky, and I cannot give it much higher praise than that. I look forward to future releases from this combination.

SG



**Shostakovich**  
Symphony No. 11  
(The Year 1905)

LSO/Rostropovich

LSO Live LSO 0030 

With live recordings, such as this, you can feel the tension. The audience sit in stunned silence throughout, as Mstislav Rostropovich leads the LSO through a most deeply considered Barbican performance. He wrings every emotion from both the music and the orchestra, generating a most chilling representation of Russian history. Rostropovich takes his time to establish this intensity, weaving his own creativity into the work's musical structures, but we are rewarded by a vivid interpretation of Shostakovich's reflection on the St. Petersburg massacre; from his depiction of the bleak and desolate Palace Square, to the final climax of rising defiance. You can feel the crunch of the freezing ground beneath your feet, sense the rise in hostility, and picture the ruthless slaughter before the period of reflection. The composer's linking of all four movements only adds to the tension. Only with the final movement's early energy and drive do these feelings of bitterness and despair relent. Tony Faulkner's engineering is up to his usual high standards, and with the help of the Barbican Hall's improved acoustics, creates a vivid picture that only adds to the atmosphere. This is an intensely harrowing listening experience that will leave you spellbound.

SG



**Serge Prokofiev**  
Violin Concertos 1 and 2;  
Romeo and Juliet suite;  
Scythian suite. Symphony Nr 5  
Ricci (vln), Ansermet, OSR

Decca 'Legends' 466 996-2 

Even quite knowledgeable collectors would probably be surprised to learn that Ricci recorded both Prokofiev *violin concertos* in stereo with Ansermet for Decca. The recordings, made in May 1958, were (so far as I can tell) never issued in stereo on LP. The sound is quite good, albeit slightly thin and lacking in weight and tonal body. Ricci sounds taxed by the first concerto, and some of the solo playing in the opening movement is a touch scrappy. The lyrical second concerto fares better, and receives a persuasive performance - albeit, without the rapt intensity and olympian security of Heifetz' famous 1959 RCA account with Munch. For *Romeo and Juliet*, Ansermet selected ten numbers from Prokofiev's suites 1 and 2, re-ordering the music so it roughly follows the action of the complete ballet. Taped in 1961, the sound is richer and more full-bodied than the *concertos*, with excellent detail and clarity. Even better recorded are the *5th Symphony* and *Scythian suite*, from 1964 and 1966 respectively; the sound here is vintage Decca/Ansermet - bright, focussed and crisp, with sharply articulated detail and clean tight bass. Ansermet's performances are lucid and coolly objective rather than highly charged and emotional. Yet the playing is committed and engaging; listening, one feels these are living breathing performances.

JMH



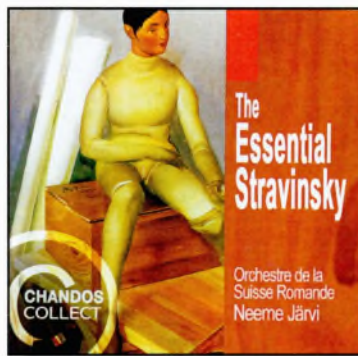


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**Marc-André Hamelin**

Hyperion CDA67320 

Becoming increasingly admired as an uncompromising composer, Leo Ornstein was born in the Ukraine in either 1892 or 1893. He moved to the USA as a young boy, was a child prodigy, and became a leading pianist of contemporary music. While being a contemporary of Bartók, Ives and Stravinsky, his extreme rhythms and discourse eclipse those of his peers. The isolation and portentousness of *Poems of 1917* protested against the folly of the Great War, and was followed by the intensity of *Arabesques*, which established his originality. In the late 1920s he retired from the concert stage and fell into obscurity before a resurgence of productivity in old age brought about a slightly gentler style. *Piano Sonata No. 8* revels some wonderful moments of melody and structural originality. Marc-André Hamelin is spellbinding in his performance, playing with total authority and injecting each work with the directness pertinent to Ornstein's music. Hyperion's engineering, supplied by Tony Faulkner, is also first-rate, with particularly realistic piano tones. This CD is an outstanding example of astonishing music, and should stimulate any listener to uncover more of the imaginative work of a man who died earlier this year; reputedly aged nearly 110!

SG

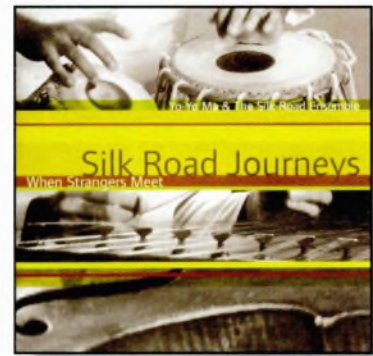


**Igor Stravinsky**  
**Symphonies in E flat; C; Piano concerto; Violin Concerto; Petrouchka (1911)**  
**Neeme Jarvi, OSR**

Chandos CHAN 6654   

Titled *The Essential Stravinsky*, this well-filled set brings together most of Stravinsky's masterpieces - the only really important omission being *Firebird*. For this reissue at budget price, the music has been generously recoupled from the original 6CDs to fit onto 5 discs, creating an excellent inexpensive way of obtaining Stravinsky's key works in good performances and recordings. As usual with Neeme Jarvi, the emphasis is on freshness and spontaneity rather than fastidious care over detail, with fast tempi, lively rhythms, and crisp spirited playing. Apparently, the recordings were taped during rehearsals for live performances. Agreed, the Suisse Romande are not a highly disciplined virtuoso band, and critical listening may highlight passages where ensemble or tuning could perhaps be more accurate. But what the playing sometimes lacks in polish and precision is amply made-up for by feelings of freshness and excitement. It's as though orchestra and conductor had never encountered the music before, and were at once challenged and thrilled by it's spiky brilliance and springy rhythms. The sound is typically Chandos; bright, forward, fairly resonant, with the orchestra set back in a spacious acoustic. I was pleased enough when I bought the original discs at full-price; now it's incomparably better value. So how can you resist?

JMH



**Silk Road Journeys: When Strangers Meet**

**Yo-Yo Ma/Silk Road Ensemble**

Sony SK89782 

While Yo-Yo Ma and Sony have been working on various "cross-over" projects in recent years, this release can accurately be pigeonholed as "world music". It can be neatly divided in two, with the first half representing Eastern and Central Asia, while the second focuses more on the Middle East - particularly Persia. There is also a bonus arrangement of a minute-and-a-half selection from Tan Dun's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* score. The music journeys along the old Silk Route, breaking down the boundaries between the countries, cultures and people, and from the breathtaking *Mongolian Traditional Long Song* that opens, to *Blue as the Turquoise Night of Neyshabur* by Kayhan Kalhor, this is an always-engrossing trip. Most pieces are specially commissioned, with a couple of traditionals and an Italian Renaissance tune thrown in. Micha Mamiya surprisingly avoids his native Japan and concentrates on the Saami traditions of Finland, but ends up with almost French sounding pieces for cello and piano. The atmospheric Silk Road Ensemble always plays with authority and virtuosity, with Wu Man (pipa) and Kalhor (kemencheh and setar) performing to Yo-Yo Ma's own outstanding levels. With excellent engineering, this CD transports the listener on an invigorating, instructive and unforgettable journey.

SG





## Chopin Études, Op. 10 and 25

Murray Perahia

Sony SK61885 

Following a period absorbed in the music of the baroque, Murray Perahia returns to the romantic period and the music for which he is famed. Chopin dedicated the *Études* to Liszt, being a pianist of such technical ability as to master their formidable challenges. While they may be lyrical and sensitive, they always remain allied to that requisite precision, making any successful performance a significant accomplishment. Perahia demonstrates he is an intelligent artist of the highest calibre. From the opening bars the music simply flows, with some audacious and virtuoso playing, capturing each piece's profound zeal. He approaches them as one composition, rather than individual studies, not allowing the unparalleled challenges of technique to stand in the way of a complete emotional experience. There is never a hint of strain and Perahia reveals textural innovations and harmonic adventures that amaze and enthrall. These *Études* flow together better than ever before, and with the help of excellent engineering, never seem the physical marathon that lesser performances often are. With the final, stormy *C minor Étude* there is a wonderful sense of achievement. Perahia's recording of the *Études* has been eagerly anticipated, but the wait has certainly been worth it.

SG



## Benjamin Britten Peter Grimes Peter Pears and Claire Watson, Orch. and Ch. of the Royal Opera House, Benjamin Britten


Decca 'Legends' 467 682-2 

Although most critics and audiophiles would probably cite Soltz's 1958 Decca recording of Wagner's *Das Rheingold* as the opera set that established the importance of stereophonic sound in terms of creating atmosphere and you-are-there realism, my choice would be Decca's contemporary set of *Peter Grimes*. Agreed, *Rheingold* has the clanking Anvils, and the huge sheet of steel being shaken when the Rainbow Bridge is forged. But the pub scene in *Grimes*, just after the *Storm Sea Interlude* (disc 1, track 14) has some of the most realistic believable atmospheric stereo sound ever committed to disc - black or silver! To have heard either (or both!) sets in stereo during the late 1950s or early '60s must've been a mind-blowing experience - a whole new world of sound reproduction opened up. Think; less than a decade earlier people had been listening to mono shellac '78s. Even today, the Britten recording of *Peter Grimes* has the power to impress and astound. The performance is inspired and definitive, with an excellent cast led by Peter Pears. And while I'd quietly agree that Jon Vickers for Colin Davis (Philips) sounds more like the tortured fisherman than Pears, it remains a towering achievement. This new re-mastering improves on previous transfers, sounding beautifully open and sweet, with low tape noise and natural balances and perspectives

JMH



## Bruhns Deutsche Kantaten Cantus Cölln/Junghänel

Harmonia Mundi HMC901752 

Normally associated with works for the organ, Nicholas Bruhns was also one of the 17th Century's greatest composers of sacred cantatas. His compositions were an archetype for the young J.S. Bach and this recording is an exceptional illustration of why, with all six pieces being highly inventive. They are energetic, openly structured and overwhelmingly charming, although just occasionally a little conservative, harmonically. Bruhns kept his vocal scoring varied and the solos interchange between duets, trios and ensembles, avoiding any uniformity. The group of six singers and eight continuo players, with two additional trumpets in *Muß Nicht der Mensch*, is genuinely superb, generating every nuance of the text in vibrant colours and giving the music some real animation. Soprano, Johanna Koslowsky sounds particularly vivacious during her beautiful solo part in *Wohl Dem, Der Den Herren Fürchtet*, but all the voices sound fresh, as is the string playing. The sound is rich, detailed and has just the right amount of atmospheric resonance for a church recording. This highly recommended release, performed with care and refinement, is an enchanting example of some of the greatest cantatas before Bach, and demonstrates the music world's loss at Bruhns' premature death, aged only 32.

SG





**Bortkiewicz  
Symphonies Nos. 1 and 2**

BBC Scottish Symphony  
Orchestra/Brabbins

Hyperion CDA67338

Sergei Bortkiewicz is an enigma, after so much about him was lost during the Second World War. Despite being composed well into the 20th Century, these works are the embodiment of symphonies from the Russian romantic period, complete with passages that could easily have been taken from works by Balakirev, Rachmaninov or Rimsky-Korsakov. Neither contains much originality in regard to form, content or orchestration, but both are still entirely enjoyable pieces.

*Symphony No. 1* is charming – almost Mozart-like at times – with an extensive pizzicato section in the *Scherzo* and a *Finale* that includes a very Tchaikovsky-like, folk-inspired principle theme. But its nucleus is in the *Adagio*, where Bortkiewicz turns to Rachmaninov for a touch of mournful yearning. The *Second* is a darker work, with austere scoring that reflects the composer's views of 1930s Berlin where he was staying during the Nazi's rise to power. The brooding result has a great sense of melancholia.

Martyn Brabbins and the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra supply entertaining performances, with the strings sounding particularly lovely, and Hyperion's recording is very good. These works are a wonderful find and are particularly attractive as their duration allows for both Bortkiewicz's symphonies to come on one disc.

SG

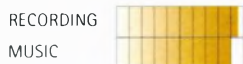


**Beethoven  
Three String Quartets, Op. 59  
"Razumovsky"/String Quartet  
in E flat Major, Op. 74 "Harp"  
Takács Quartet**

Decca 470 847-2

This is a first release in a planned set of complete Beethoven *Quartets* by Decca and the Takács Quartet. If the rest of the series is anywhere near as good as this then we are in for a treat. While the Takács Quartet has always played with outstanding smoothness and tenderness, they have sometimes lacked a little in the way of excitement and vitality. On this set, with their tremendous concentration and remarkable technique, they are superbly well suited to Beethoven's stately compositions. In lesser hands these pieces can lose shape, gaining a sense of vagueness, but with this quartet's grip on the music there is none of this, with each sounding totally assured, yet with each work being allowed to evolve naturally and without sounding forced or overly tense. The Takács Quartet provide each with a certain luminosity, revealing a transparency during the second movement of the first *Razumovsky*, while the *Poco Adagio* at the beginning of the *Harp* is magnificently mysterious, exhibiting the essence of its spirit exquisitely. Decca's sound is up there with their best chamber recordings on CD, revealing every texture of each instrument, within a natural acoustic. This is a great start to a very promising Beethoven cycle.

SG



**Nicolai Rimsky-Korsakov  
Sheherazade**

Kirov orchestra  
Valery Gergiev

Philips 470 840-2

A strong, virile, powerfully-characterised *Sheherazade* from Gergiev and the Kirov orchestra. The rich sonorous brass chords that open the work prepare you for what's to follow; a bold sweeping interpretation of overwhelming passion and drama. Certainly the performance is fantastic; but what about the sound? The Philips recording is very full-bodied and forwardly-balanced – but has compression been used to heighten the power and thrust of Rimsky's surging climaxes? The soundstage is huge, but the music is made to sound gaudy and brash. The terracing of dynamics from loud to soft is unconvincing; every-thing sounds incredibly loud, making balances seem contrived and manipulated. A modern attempt at Phase-Four stereo?! Curiously, although the sound is forward and powerful, there's also quite a bit of reverberation. Yet there's little impression of depth and distance, implying the 'ambience' was added-on afterwards. It's certainly unlike the usual refined natural 'Philips sound' we've grown used to over the years. The fillers – Borodin's haunting *In the Steppes of Central Asia* and Balakirev's virtuoso oriental fantasy *Islamey* – are musically appropriate to the mood of the main work, and superbly played. An interesting 'impressive' issue – but not for the faint-hearted! Hear before you buy if possible. Lovely cover art.

JMH







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Igor Stravinsky  
Le Sacre du Printemps

Chicago Symphony orchestra  
Sir Georg Solti

Decca (Speaker's Corner) SXL 6691 

I still recall the impact Solti's 1974 LP of *Le Sacre* made when first issued; the bruises are still visible! Sonically it captured the huge power and scale of Stravinsky's massive score like no previous recording. Up till then, Zubin Mehta's 1968 Los Angeles LP (also Decca) had the best sonics. But good as it was, Mehta's recording failed to convey the sheer loudness and force of the music. Solti's did, sounding awesome, huge, powerful, massive. Tonmeister Kenneth Wilkinson captured a sound of immense presence and weight that still impresses today. Hearing the recording on CD (or this remastered LP), instrumental balances and dynamics are more obviously manipulated than they would be with a more modern recording. The orchestra has been skilfully multi-miked to ensure every strand remains audible. Despite the sonic impact, dynamics are compressed. There aren't the wide swings between loud and soft we expect today. Solti's performance is fast and aggressively physical. It's exciting too, in a thuggish sort of way. But some may find his almost mindless driving intensity unpleasantly brutal and vicious. For Solti the work is a musical battering ram - to be used to beat you to a pulp. Others may feel his barbaric sadistic in-your-face approach is exactly what's required. The present LP is cut at a slightly lower level than the original Decca, and sounds slightly brighter tonally. Clean quiet pressing.

JMH



Peter Gabriel

One

Classic Records/RealWorld PGLP01  


As a true fan of Genesis since 1971, I was stunned when Gabriel left the band. Whilst Genesis re-grouped and issued the excellent *Trick Of The Tail*, Gabriel kept us waiting. What finally emerged was this album, and horror of horrors this most English of performers had surrounded himself with mainly American musicians (apart from Robert Fripp) who were at the time unknown in the UK. In the end, and overcoming my initial reservations, Peter Gabriel became my most played LP of that year by a country mile, with its unexpected combination of sing-along tunes ('Salisbury Hill'), big production numbers ('Dolce Vita'), stadium pleasers ('Here Comes The Flood'), and the frankly bonkers ('Excuse Me'). From this you probably get the idea that the album is a patchwork quilt, and you would be right, but what we have here is Gabriel-in-progress; the journey necessary to get from Genesis to albums such as Peter Gabriel 3 and Peter Gabriel 4. This remastered Classic Records' re-issue is simply stunning. Where the original LP was a little murky and slightly fluffy in the bass, this new version sparkles with life, and the bottom end has taken on new levels of impact. If you have an original pressing, as I have, this is a worthwhile improvement; if you never bought Gabriel's first then take this opportunity to travel with the maestro along the road to excellence.

DA



Sibelius  
Violin Concerto

Heifetz/Hendl/CSO

JVC XRCD 0223-2 

Many of the most recent Sibelius recordings by the current crop of fashionably chic soloists are unsatisfactory. They demonstrably fail to put some much needed emotional and interpretative meat on the bones of a concerto which, while it makes very few real technical demands, does give every violinist a rare freedom to melodically explore those inner depths and outer boundaries of lyrical romanticism. So why do I name this forty-three year old performance from an acknowledged master of technique as being amongst my favourites? Well, to begin with, Heifetz was a great Sibelius champion. His frequent and beautifully played concerts form an important backdrop to this recording. That familiarity reveals itself with subtle nuances and tiny, but gripping, moments of control. A good example is the richly scored *second movement*, which could quite easily lapse into sentimentality without the presence of a firm guiding hand. Elsewhere, a rhapsodic treatment of the opening movement, and the darkly hued passion that pours through a closing *Allegro*, offer ample opportunities for virtuosity. These are gratefully accepted. Lewis Layton, sometimes criticised for the engineering here, spotlights the great man, and it works. Your listening room isn't a concert hall, and never will be. So why not exaggerate the image of an instrument that remains the musical focal point throughout.

RP

[www.vivante.co.uk](http://www.vivante.co.uk)





Kevin Mahogany  
Pride & Joy

Telarc


SACD-63542  

Another spectacularly good technical performance from the Telarc engineers provides the kind of dynamic resolution and scale that was seldom heard before the introduction of this Rolls Royce format. Undoubtedly, it will receive the plaudits ahead of Kevin Mahogany's powerful, yet sensitive and soul-bearing interpretation of the eleven songs on *Pride & Joy*. Such are the vagaries of an audiophile market that remains overly preoccupied with sonic dogma. However, his rich vocal tone, the presence, depth and joyous sense of celebration he brings to Stevie Wonder's 'The Tears of a Clown', or in an intelligent arrangement of Smokey Robinson's 'The Hunter Gets Captured', is inescapable. Add to these the Marvin Gaye title track, two Edward Holland songs (including Reach Out I'll Be There) and a stunning Lula Mae Hardaway opener, Signed, Sealed, Delivered I'm Yours, and you will begin to appreciate that Mahogany brings an underlying love of Motown to these uniquely scripted jazz harmonies. Captivating playing from James Weidman (piano), Dave Stryker (guitar), Melissa Slocum (bass) and tenors, Gregory Clark and Todd Johnson, provides those essential layers of musical mortar that bed in behind, between and beneath these drama-filled and expressively delivered songs. The SACD recording then chisels out every grain and texture.

RP

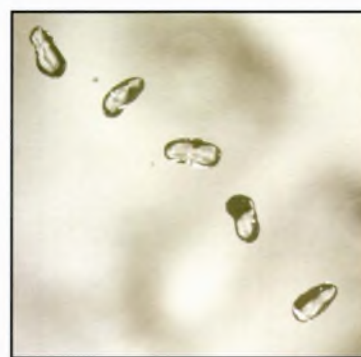


Herold-Lanchberry  
La Fille Mal Gardee  
excerpts Orchestra of the Royal  
Opera House, Covent Garden  
John Lanchbery

Decca (Speaker's Corner) SXL 2313 

For over twenty-five years Decca's 1962 recording of *La Fille Mal Gardee* stayed in the full-price LP catalogue, only disappearing when vinyl was finally phased-out in the late '80s. Why did it have such lasting appeal? Tunesful catchy music that's entertaining and fun to listen to; crisp brilliant orchestral playing; and (last but not least) a vivid Decca recording that seems to have hardly aged despite being made over forty years ago. The sound is sharp and lively, with a superbly holographic soundstage and vivid stereo separation. There have been other recordings of the work since this one was issued, including a 1984 digital complete set from Decca with Lanchbery himself conducting. But none has ever equaled the magic of the original. For this vinyl reissue, Speaker's Corner have extravagantly spread the music (about fifty-two minutes' worth) over four single sided LPs cut at 45rpm. That means four records! Short sides and 45rpm have allowed high cutting levels, and the sound certainly has greater brilliance and presence than my Decca LP original. However, on my set sides three and four have been mixed up - side three is actually the final part. A great set for audiophiles without a doubt - though from a musical standpoint I'd have preferred a straight reissue on 1 LP cut at 33rpm.

JMH



Peter Gabriel

Up

Classic Records/Real World PG D LP II  

It has been some six years since Gabriel released *Us*. In the interim he has continued his fascination with multi-media, produced the music for the Millennium Dome, and collected various musical snippets and performances for this album. I suspect that many people will be expecting an album that is radically different from what came before, but they will be sorely disappointed for in many ways *Up* comes out sounding like *Us Mk II*. As *Us* is one of my all time favourite albums, with its rich textures and deep layering, I'm personally not disappointed to have a further slice of this particular pie. As usual Gabriel has been out and about roping in all manner of disparate musicians to weave into his musical tapestry, including The Blind Boys Of Alabama, Danny Thompson, The Black Dyke Band (brass on 'My Head Sounds Like That'). Although there is little that is up tempo here, the songs still show great range: from the grating 'Darkness' to the aching beauty of 'My Head Sounds Like That'. *Up* also marks a new type of venture, whereby Realworld have co-operated with Classic Records to get a simultaneous CD and audiophile double vinyl release. The copy on review here is the Classic Records version, and the sound quality is well up to their usual very high standards, although it has to be said that source material itself is in parts a bit grainy.

DA






### Alison Krauss and Union Station New Favorite

Diverse Records DIV 001LP 

### Alison Krauss Forget About It

Diverse Records DIV 002LP 

### Dolly Varden Forgiven Now

Diverse Records DIV 003LP 

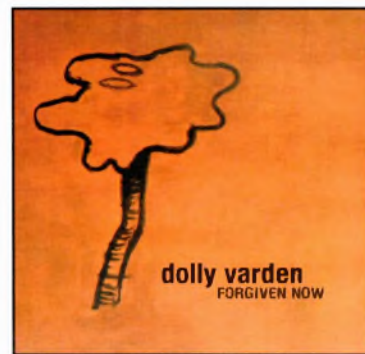
New audiophile re-issue companies continue to appear, clearly unaware that the days of vinyl are surely numbered. Here we have Diverse Records, a new venture from John Richards, founder and former owner of that source for all things 12" and vinyl (well, okay, not all things... ) Diverse Music. But this is an audiophile label with a difference. No TAS listed recordings here and no demonstration darlings either. No fabulous recordings of dodgy jazz ensembles and second-rate but sexy bar singers. This label is repertoire led, which means taking the tapes as they were made and making the best record you can out of them.

Of course, you can choose recordings that offer better than the average quality as commercial issues go: and then there are those that somehow slip through the mangle of mediocrity and emerge as fully formed masterpieces in their own right. Now I hate to say I told you so (well, okay, I love it really... ) but starting at the tail, there third issue comes from none other than Dolly Varden, the



massively underrated Chicago five-piece featured in these very pages and whose discs have been enthusiastically reviewed by yours truly, most recently in Issue 19. On that occasion I rated *Forgiven Now* as a nine for recording quality and a solid ten for the inspired (and inspiring) musical content. John Richards admits to have been torn between *Forgiven Now* and its predecessor, *Dumbest Magnets*, and I can understand his hesitation. Both are fabulous examples of that rarest of things, intelligent, adult and genuinely popular music. Wrapped in the fabulous harmonies of husband and wife Steve Dawson and Diane Christiansen, the hooks and melodies of *Forgiven Now* are the perfect foil for the wry, sardonic insight of the lyrics. Mark Balleto wrings a rainbow palette of different hues from his guitar, giving each song an identity and character of its own. This music has evolved from its country rock roots into something all embracing yet fiercely independent, and comes as a breath of fresh air in a world full of manufactured teen bands and aging retreads. Its good on the CD but the Ray Staff cut 180g LP is clearly superior, with a warmer, more dimensional presentation and far more fluid and expressive rhythm. It makes the most of those wonderful harmonies and communicates much more directly, so I guess that makes it a ten. Buy this disc and enjoy the fruits of your faith. Perhaps it'll encourage John to follow it up with *Dumbest*.

The Alison Krauss discs are better known, riding on the popularity of the *Oh Brother* soundtrack. They are both excellent if rather different. The more recent *New Favorite* is a disc for country purists with its unashamedly bluegrass tinge mixed with more reflective ballads. *Forget About It* is a lush, more mainstream offering, and it's also the better recording of the two.

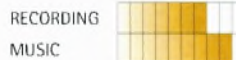


However, in either case it's Krauss's voice that stands centre stage, with its strangely powerful mix of tonal purity and expressive impact. It's an odd juxtaposition of virginal presentation and less than virginal sentiment that contrasts vividly with Dan Tyminski who shares vocal duties on *Favorite*. But both of these LPs offer the same clear sonic benefits over their 12cm alternatives. Add to that the superb original artwork created for the gatefold sleeves and they offer more than enough to justify the increased cost over and above the CD.

These three discs constitute the most promising of starts for this new label. Representing the antithesis of all those musical mediocrities that gave audiophile LPs a bad name, these are all about the music, then the pressing, and the recording trails in a poor third on the list of priorities. John Richards has shown a deft touch in his selections so far. Long may it continue.

RG

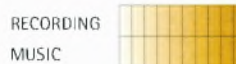
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| KRELL KAV250P Pre                            |       | £1850   |
| KRELL KAV250A Pwr (Choice of two from £2350) |       | £3698   |
| KRELL FPB650 Mono's. 5 available, price each |       | £14,000 |
| LFD L51 Pre-amp                              | £1900 | £500    |
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| MARK LEVINSON 380 *****                                 | £4495  | £2990  |
| McINTOSH MX 132 Pre/Processor Ex-dem                    | £7990  | £4996  |
| McINTOSH MC7108 8 Channel Ex-dem                        | £2549  | £1996  |
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| McINTOSH MC35L EX-DEM AS NEW                            | £5095  | £3998  |
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| McINTOSH MX132 AV contr EX-DEM AS NEWS7990              |        | £5498  |
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| MERIDIAN 563 Ex-dem                                     | £700   | £446   |
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| REGA Cursa (Pre) Ex-demo                                | £1000  | £638   |
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| ARIEL ACOUSTICS Model B's (stands) Ex-dem £5679 |       | <b>£3996</b> |
| AUDIONOTE AN/E (Inc stands)                     | £2900 | <b>£1748</b> |
| B&W DMB01 (Rosewood)                            | £1500 | <b>£749</b>  |
| B&W THX System EX-DEM                           | £4975 | <b>£2498</b> |

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|---|-------|--------------|
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| CASTLE Howard S2                              |       | <b>£848</b>  |
| DALI 400                                      | £800  | <b>£400</b>  |
| DYNAUDIO SDA 2.4                              | £650  | <b>£348</b>  |
| GAMMA ACOUSTICS Epoch 5                       | £3000 | <b>£998</b>  |
| GERSHMAN X1                                   |       | <b>£1298</b> |
| HALES Signature System 2                      | £4000 | <b>£1848</b> |
| HEYBROOK Heystack (Rosewood)                  | £500  | <b>£297</b>  |
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| MARTIN LOGAN CLS (2) Ex-dem                   | £6998 | <b>£4496</b> |
| McINTOSH IS320 Ex-dem                         | £1790 | <b>£1296</b> |
| McINTOSH IS340 EX-DEM AS NEW                  | £4590 | <b>£3598</b> |
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| McINTOSH PS112 Active Sub EX-DEM AS NEW £2290 |       | <b>£1798</b> |
| MEADOWLARK Shearwater                         | £2990 | <b>£1990</b> |
| MERIDIAN AS00                                 |       | <b>£478</b>  |
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| SONUS FABER Concertino (Ex-dem)           | £599   | <b>£529</b>   |
| SONUS FABER Electra Ex-dem                | £1789  | <b>£1349</b>  |
| SOUNDLAB Dynastats                        | £3200  | <b>£1400</b>  |
| TANNOY M1S                                | £175   | <b>£94</b>    |
| TRIANGLE Icare                            | £1500  | <b>£748</b>   |
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# Somebody's Mad Scheme

## The life and interesting times of The Enid

by Richard Clews

Blame *Sgt Pepper*. Until the Beatles' masterpiece, rock groups and orchestras kept a distance, but the Fab Four changed all that. Deep Purple, The Nice and Procul Harum scrambled to book orchestras and nearly made classical music hip. Yet by the mid-Seventies, many bands had lost interest in crossovers and were happy to stick with one market. Emerson and Wakeman continued to dabble with the classics but musical barriers were being rebuilt. However, a band emerged that had more in common with Pre-Raphaelite artists than their fellow musicians. Railing against conservatism and corporate rock, The Enid had cult status from the off.

The band was created in 1973 by Francis Lickerish and Stephen Stewart, together with professional musician Robert John Godfrey. The three met at Finchden Manor, a residential school for boys. During preparations for a grandiose end of year play about King Arthur the idea of a band took shape. Godfrey's skills as a pianist and arranger (for Barclay James Harvest) and music business knowledge made him a natural point of focus. Joined by co-writer/bassist Glen Tollet and drummers Chris North and Dave Storey, The Enid completed *The Voyage of the Acolyte* in 1975. Charisma label boss Tony Stratton-Smith turned it down, but the album's

title re-appeared on an album by one of his artists, Steve Hackett. *Voyage* promptly became *In the Region of the Summer Stars* (ENID001CD) and The

Enid signed their first deal with BUK Records.

In the Region was unlike anything else at the time. Overflowing with lush textures from Godfrey's keyboards, twin guitar attacks from Lickerish and Stewart and thundering percussion, it made Wakeman's pseudo-symphonies appear lightweight by comparison. 'The Lovers', with its dizzying crescendos straight out of Rachmaninov, placed Godfrey in the front rank of keyboard

players. Elsewhere, shades of

King Crimson and Genesis were discernible - 'The Devil' and 'The Falling Tower' would have been perfect for Robert Fripp. Side B's 'Summer Stars' suite demonstrates what The Enid do best - use rock instruments to perform symphonic arrangements. While this sounds pretentious, *In the Region* was never passed off as classical music, and the musicians themselves were happier to collaborate with skinheads than prog rockers.

The follow-up *Aerie Faerie Nonsense* (ENID002CD) ►





► appeared in late 1977. Defying punk logic, the arrangements became even more intricate. The first half of the album contains tongue-in-cheek romps 'Child Rolande' and 'Mayday Galliard', balanced with the stately 'Interlude' and 'Ondine'. The second half is dedicated to 'Fand'. This was The Enid's answer to Genesis' 'Supper's Ready' - an epic tale of doomed love between mortal and faerie queen. Incredibly, the band were able to perform it without being bottled off - quite a feat in the Marquee, one of their regular haunts.

A move to the PYE label in 1979 augured well, with a generous advance offered for *Touch Me* (MNTL CD5). The money was spent on recording equipment, a wise move, as PYE went under shortly after the album's completion. In the short term, the band's career looked in jeopardy, but they had enough equipment to go it alone. As a home recording *Touch Me* suffers from a boxy acoustic, but this does not seriously diminish the most complex Enid album. William Gilmour had been recruited as second keyboard player, and the interplay between him, Lickerish and Godfrey formed the basis of the new compositions. The power was still there - especially on 'Humouresque' and 'Gallivant' - but tempered by a more introspective, cooler outlook. 'Albion Fair', with its chilling atonal opening, was a welcome change after the previous Romanticism.

*Six Pieces* (MNTL CD4) brought the PYE era to a close. Each piece is a musical sketch of a band member: 'The Ring Master' sees the band chipping in to caricature Godfrey, doing a good job of nailing his wayward personality onto tape, while 'The Dreamer' (Lickerish) blends *Touch Me*'s Edwardian grace with the passion of *Aerie Faerie Nonsense*. The standout is 'Once she was', a rearrangement of 'Scarborough Fayre' by

newcomer Martin Russell and Godfrey. Unhappily, the album was given no promotion and decked out in a hideous sleeve (replaced for CD), but by this stage the band were plagued by in-fighting and unable to reverse the situation. The Enid split soon afterward.

Gilmour and Russell recorded the one-off *Craft* LP, while Godfrey and Stewart set up The Lodge recording studio and worked as session musicians, notably for Kim Wilde. It seemed The Enid had come to an end.

However, in 1982 Tommy Vance played 'Fand' on Radio One, naming Godfrey "one of the greatest composers this country has ever had". Godfrey and Stewart found themselves inundated with requests for tapes, and decided to start their own label and record again under the Enid banner. The first fruit was 1983's *Something*

*Wicked This Way Comes* (ENID005CD), a major departure with the use of vocals and a political theme (nuclear war). The album was a major success for the band, and remains their best-selling album to date.

The next few years brought an Enid renaissance: three new albums - *The Spell*, *Salome*

and *The Seed and The Sower* - and the re-release of *In the Region* and *Aerie Faerie Nonsense*. The latter contained re-recorded and re-titled versions of the original tracks, to the great consternation of some fans. The reason for this was that the band no longer had access to the complete, original master tapes. However, this cut no ice with some of the die-hards, who felt Godfrey and Stewart wanted to refashion the Enid's past in their own image. As well as making this controversial revision, ►



▶ Godfrey and Stewart began to expand their musical boundaries and bring in more contemporary influences. *The Spell* (MNTL CD8) had symphonic overtones, especially on 'Autumn', but *Salome* (MNTL CD9) and *The Seed and The Sower* (MNTL CD2) saw a much greater emphasis placed on rhythm.

By the end of this experimental period, Godfrey and Stewart had retained a large part of their fanbase, despite the occasional grumbling. They had also taken The Enid as far as they could go without major label backing. Options were limited, and it was hardly surprising when Stewart left in 1989 to concentrate on production.

The live *Final Noise* appeared to be just that: nothing more was heard of The Enid until 1993. After a false start with teenage outfit 'Enid', Godfrey relaunched the band with new personnel. Fans warmed to the line-up and a successful tour was launched to promote *Tripping the Light Fantastic* (ENID009CD). Written by Godfrey, it benefited from the playing of guitarist Nick May and bassist/programmer Max Read. Musically, the album pushed the Enid further ahead, house beats punctuating the synth and guitar lines. The band

were intent on being heard, and to prove the point, 'Gateway' and 'Tripping the Light Fantastic' rank as their loudest tracks. In response they received their best press notices for years: The Guardian called them, "the absolute masters of their art and their achievements over more than twenty years of creative work set them apart from everything else which calls itself 'progressive'".

Following the normal Enid pattern, the line-up transformed once again. Grant Jamieson came in on guitar, Dave Storey returned on drums, and Max Read assisted Godfrey with sequencing and production. Significantly, Read and Jamieson co-wrote several pieces with Godfrey for 1998's *White Goddess* (ENID010CD). The playing on the album was the best since *Touch Me*, while the compositions explored the theme of man's place in the environment (dealt with to a lesser degree on *Something Wicked* and *The Spell*). 'Prelude' opens with the sound of aircraft and cars, a swirl of chords and chimes rising up to flood the

soundstage. This flows into 'Fantasy', which brings in a Jamieson guitar motif repeated several times throughout the album. Godfrey's keyboard and arranging skills are highlighted on 'Ballade', a brooding piano piece, and 'Nocturne', a heartfelt string melody reminiscent of Italian opera. Overall, *White Goddess* is one of The Enid's most rewarding albums and a good starting point for newcomers.

After a gap of four years a new Enid album is about to see the light. Or make that four - there are several projects in the works. *Farout* is likely to be released first: a return to the vocal experiment of *Something Wicked*.

*Virtuoso* will be an instrumental workout,

designed to push the band to their limits - a challenge to other musicians too scared to expose their playing skills. A complete live anthology will unify recordings from the Enid's *Live at Hammersmith*, *Final Noise* and *Liverpool* albums, together with previously unreleased cuts. Finally, Godfrey's *Legend for Piano and Orchestra*, another work long overdue, will hopefully be finished once the other albums are complete. No doubt The Enid will continue to stick two fingers up at the record business,

confuse radio programmers and confound their fans' expectations. Business as usual.



#### Best albums for beginners:

White Goddess  
 In the Region of the Summer Stars  
 Members One of Another (compilation)

#### Best albums for fans:

Touch Me  
 Aerie Faerie Nonsense  
 Something Wicked This Way Comes

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