

# hi-fi+

Issue 24 - July / August 2003  
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REPRODUCING THE RECORDED ARTS

## Back to the future (Re)mastering Peter Gabriel

### ▶ Vinyl survival

*VPI TNT HRX*

*Brinkmann LaGrange*

*Bluenote Bellavista*

*Michell Technodec*

*Phono Stages*

*Accessories*

*A Host of Pick-Ups*

### ▶ Numbers game

*Resolution Audio*

*Creek CD 50*

*SACD plays CD and LP*

### ▶ Labelling

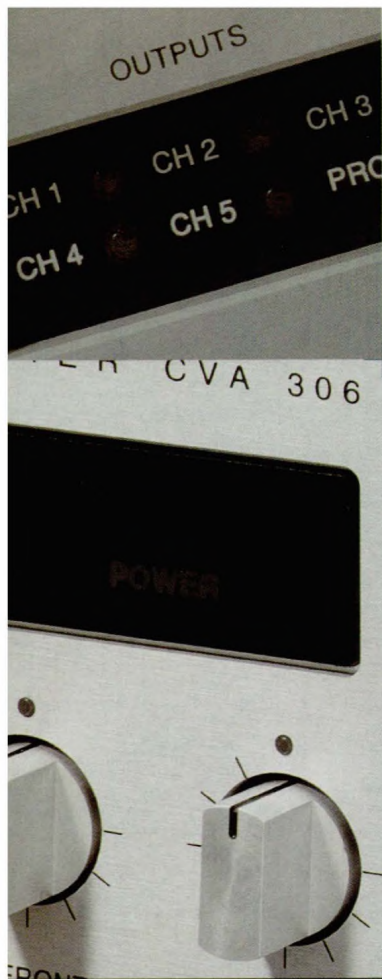
*L'archet d'or*

*Test Records*

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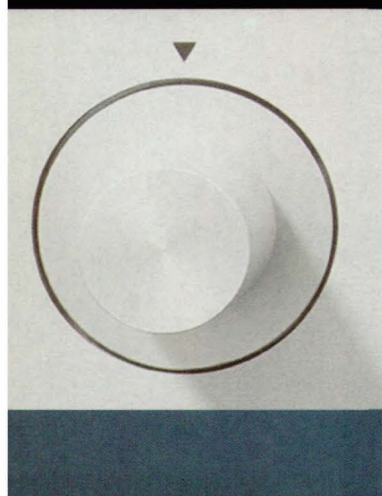
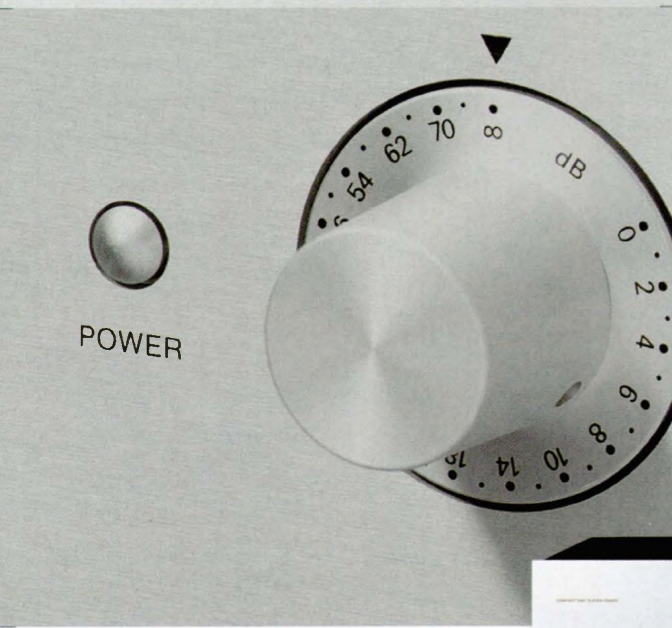
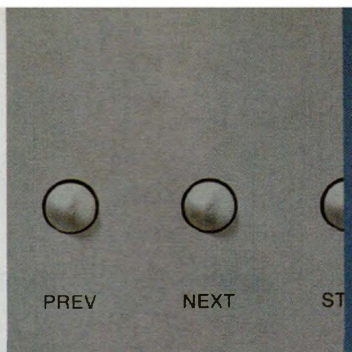






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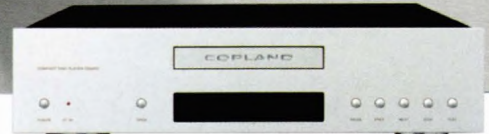
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# Incoming!

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,

Watch out! - the Naim 5th columnists are taking over your previously excellent magazine!

The steady and insidious drip, drip, drip of Naim-style "quality is what I happen to like" acid is eating away at your foundations. The May/June 2003 issue is about the limit really - reporting on the criteria that the presumably well thought of dealer Grahams Hi-fi uses to select the equipment it sells, a list of five criteria were presented. Even the seemingly trying-to-be-polite reviewer, Alan Sircom, was taken aback at their choice in noting the absence of "soundstaging and detail" as criteria for, presumably, a good hi-fi component. Hey guys! - what about "transparency" (- so you can hear what is going on as clearly as the recording allows), "focus" (- so you can hear where it is going on and the properties of the acoustic space in which it is happening) and, for goodness sake, "lack of colouration" and "tonal neutrality" (- so the music making actually sounds like the instruments that were recorded)?!

The Grahams Hi-fi/Naim approach, as defined by both what it emphasises and what it ignores, seems to substantially disregard the concept of trying to recreate the original performance, as recorded. What we seem to have instead is a carefully crafted manipulation of recording playback so that it is "tuneful" and "coherent" and gets those feet a'tapping. Yup, we need to get the dynamics and the timing right, but there's a lot more to accurate music reproduction than that.

Hi-fi for these folks seems to have become a tool to impose their own subjective listening preferences on recordings, rather than let the music (and hence the original artist's and recording teams' intentions and, sometimes, hopefully, genius) speak for itself.

In a way, fair enough. It's a free hifi-country now (although it didn't seem that way 25 years or so ago, when the Linn/Naim Thought-Police were in control in the UK). I guess I am concerned that this aberrant approach to hi-fi gets too much unchallenged press time, at the expense of a more honest (and in my opinion, worthy) approach which attempts to recreate the original artistic event, for better or worse.

The esteemed Editor has been known, on occasion, in previous issues to explicitly put the non-Naim point of view. But I get the feeling that he is starting to succumb to

the Naim-style brainwashing which is being put forward by so many of his reviewers these days, of recording playback manipulation " 'cos it sounds better to me that way". Don't let them get away with it!

Yours in concern,

**Jerry Jacobs**

Via e-mail

*Don't panic just yet. Despite having lived within spitting distance of Salisbury for most of my life, I've never yet owned a Naim product, and it's me that decides what gets reviewed in this magazine. More specifically and in response to your very valid points I think it's important to note the following.*

*The Grahams article was one of an ongoing series that is designed specifically to throw a spotlight on the views and approach espoused by some of our leading dealers (and in future, some of those abrooa). As such, it seems to have done its job admirably. I think it's safe to assume that you'll be looking for your advice elsewhere, but there are of course those whose very cockles will be warmed by the Grahams route to audio nirvana. To each his own.*

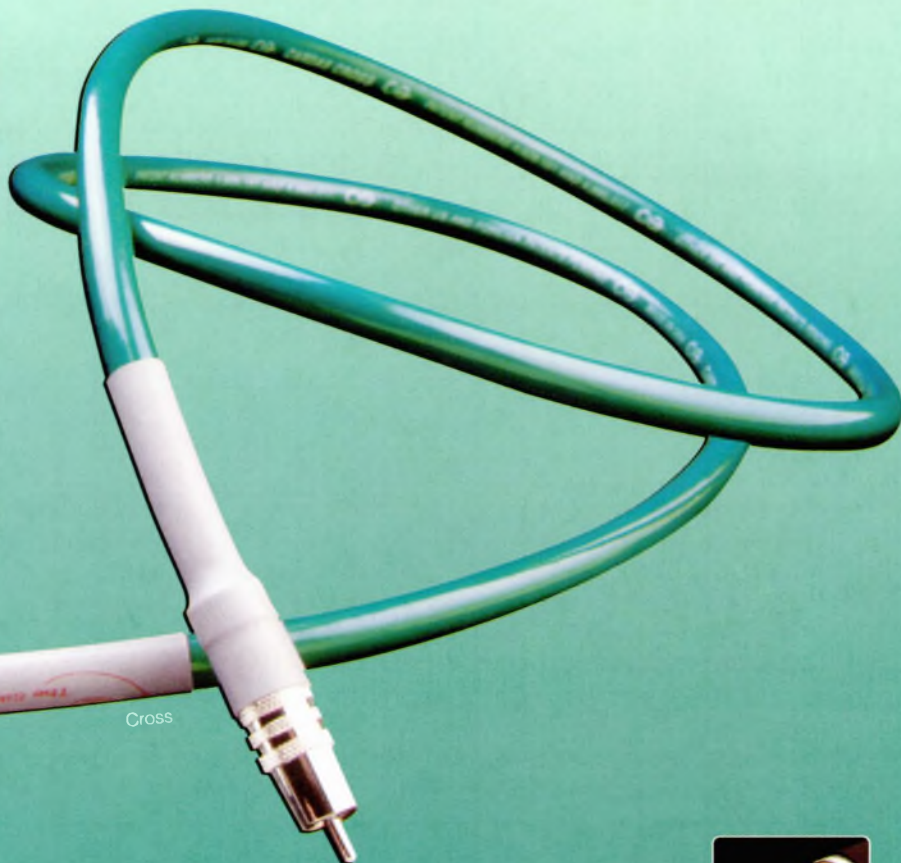
*This leads immediately on to a second point. There are many different approaches to hi-fi reproduction, none of which is universally correct and all of which can learn from each other. This is a magazine about hi-fi in general, and as such I will not favour one approach over another, or exclude one that has anything to offer.*

*Interestingly, the staff profile has changed somewhat since Issue 1. At that point both FM and JH could both be described as Naim devotees, with CT also enjoying a solidly 'flat earth' background. Since then, JH has moved onto pastures new, whilst none of the new writers subscribe to the Naim perspective. However, in the same timeframe, Naim have relaunched their entire range, starting with the NAP 500 and moving on through the 5 Series, NAC 552 and now the Reference Series. These products mark a significant departure from the Naim sound of old, grafting many of the attributes you mention onto their traditional strengths. Whether one likes the Naim approach or not, it's impossible to deny its popularity in the UK as a whole. This shift in the company's position, combined with the avalanche of new products makes an increased*



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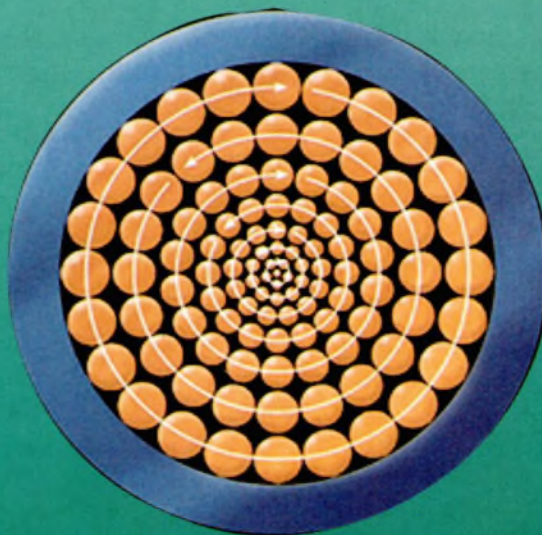
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► *level of exposure both inevitable and desirable. However, each review should explain what a product does and doesn't do, and in the case of a product like the NAC 552 we even go so far as to include three separate writers' views, ensuring that the product is assessed both on its own terms and in a wider context.*

*Rest assured that neither Naim nor any other company dictates the policy and thinking of this magazine. That's partly because we embrace a wide range of differing views – and long may that continue! Ed.*

Dear Sir

First of all thank you for a magazine without peer in the Hi-Fi world. It is unique and I have been an "avid" reader from issue 1!

I write to comment on the question of copy protection on CDs. It's a subject which I have never had cause to become involved with until a recent purchase by mail order of *Ether Songs* by Turin Brakes. This disc duly arrived and was put into the trusty Wadia 861... disappointment! Where were the artists, the Music? I had a flat, undynamic "sound" coming from the ATC's!

Ah well, just one of those duff recordings that happen from time to time, I thought. But on examining the CD and case I noted that it had "Copy Protection" encoded and the alarm bells rang. To cut the story short, I looked in my local record store and found that some copies of this album were encoded and some were not... so I bought a straight copy with no protection!

Wow, what a difference! The band was in front of me as per normal and I was listening to the real thing... full range dynamics and all!

I was not aware of how different copy protected CDs can be and can only pass on a warning that Music fans should look out for them and AVOID! With CD players of the current generation we are at last getting a reproduction which compares favourably with analogue (with careful system matching/attention) but if this is what the record industry is going to give us to listen to then all is lost... Or are they trying to drive us into the arms of SACD or DVD Audio?

**Eric O'Brien**

Via e-mail

Dear Sir,

My letter concerns your review of the Apple iPod. I have little to gripe about except that this nice little gadget doesn't function properly when it is used for storage and reproduction of AIFF files. The storing is no problem, however playing back the music is another matter.

After some playing time music drops out (i.e. Silence!) then picks up a little later. In time this dropping out increase in frequency (i.e. Number of times to drop out) resulting in

a total crash of the iPod. The first version of the software has the problem to a lesser degree compared to the latest release of software. The problem doesn't occur when either MP3 or AAC is used. This makes the iPod useless as a source for the home system or in the car.

Incidentally I don't like MP3 at all and AAC is acceptable. Too bad for such a nice product.

**Anthony F. Melein**

Via e-mail

*Phil Ward who reviewed the iPod reports no such problems in his experience, however he was using version 1.2.6 software. Apparently the bug reported is confined to version 1.3. Incidentally, the unit reviewed has since been replaced with an even sleeker and more powerful version that has dropped MP3 in favour of AAC, so perhaps there is hope after all. Ed.*

Dear Sir,

I just read Issue 22 and found the sidebar on Opus MM cables fascinating and puzzling. Disregarding that the cables cost 50% more than a very costly speaker system, the awesomely precise matching, 1 picofarad/0.025 ohms, mystifies me. Besides the fact that these measurements are probably almost beyond measurement error, even if you can do it, the production tolerances on any amp connected to them would negate the precision, and just physically moving the cables would vary their values more than their production tolerances.

**Allen Edelstein**

Via e-mail

*Alan Sircom responds:*

*Dear Allen,*

*Yes, the performance specifications of the Opus MM cables do seem almost 'enthusiastically' precise. Sadly, we had no chance to put them to the meter to determine whether such claims were accurate, especially as this would require at least two sets of cables to correctly ascertain cable tolerance. In addition, how Transparent manages to get such performance remains a closely guarded secret and the network shells are not designed for opening.*

*Ultimately, although components within a no-compromise system do not exist in a vacuum, true high-end components are designed to perform their function as best as possible, often with only a nod to the other parts in that audio chain. This is how high-end hi-fi continues to improve; if someone tomorrow designs a power amplifier – for example – that is so good it shows up the limitations in source, pre-amplifier, cables and loudspeakers, the high-end community will react by designing better sources, pre-amplifiers, cables and loudspeakers. It's early days yet, but the Opus MM may be the cable that raises the high-end audio bar, whether the measurements are 'enthusiastic' or not.*



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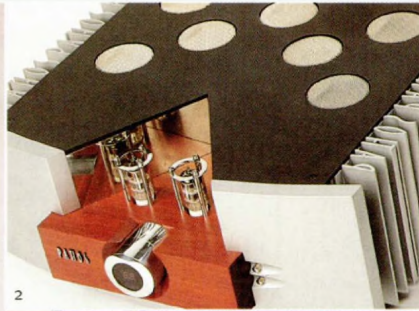
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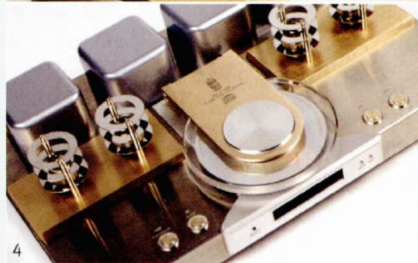
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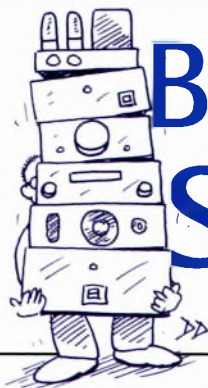
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# Big Boys Toys... Surrounded!

by Scot Markwell

There is so much controversy these days over surround sound versus "regular" stereo playback that it is almost impossible not to get drawn into the fray at some point or another. I have been particularly quiet on this topic. Though I constantly listen to music at home using an older technology type of surround sound, I have not, with a couple of glaring and wonderful exceptions, really heard much truly high-quality SACD or DVD-A surround playback in the last couple of years. A couple of Stereophile Shows ago I had an opportunity to hear a surround-SACD demo at Lyric Hi-Fi in Manhattan sponsored by Classe and Magneplanar. They played cuts from Telarc's then-new re-recording of the *1812 Overture*, and I have to say to that point I had never heard a more convincing surround demonstration for music only. The five identical MG-20.1s projected huge wavefronts from all around the listeners, and the height channel really was convincing for giving the illusion of space and vertical dimensionality.

Although Telarc maintains that it does not make use of the subwoofer channel per se, there was plenty of bass from the several Classe subs, doubtless fed a parallel output from the Classe controller's full-range SACD channels. This was simply a stupendous demonstration, despite the fact that I imagine that few listeners would actually set up five of these gigantic panels in their home. Nevertheless, the sound was the thing and it was superb.

Then things were really boring for many, many moons. HP wanted me to get a great surround system going in the big Room 1 in Sea Cliff, a system that would do double-duty for music and movies. We had a Philips SACD 1000 player and a Denon DVM 4800 DVD-A player on hand, as well as the latest Sunfire 6-ch-input surround controller (a really

nice unit, by the way, that has an excellent remote control and an extremely flexible fine-tuning capability that makes it really useful when having to go between different formats and different mixes within those formats), several surround amplifiers, including Plinius, Bel Canto, Sunfire, Atma-Sphere, and Joule Electra, and a couple of surround-speaker systems

from Alon and Coincident Speaker Technology to work with. We hooked and unhooked and played and mused and played some more and came to the conclusion that the weakest link in the chain, as it was when digital CDs first appeared on the scene, was the player itself, specifically the analog output sections.

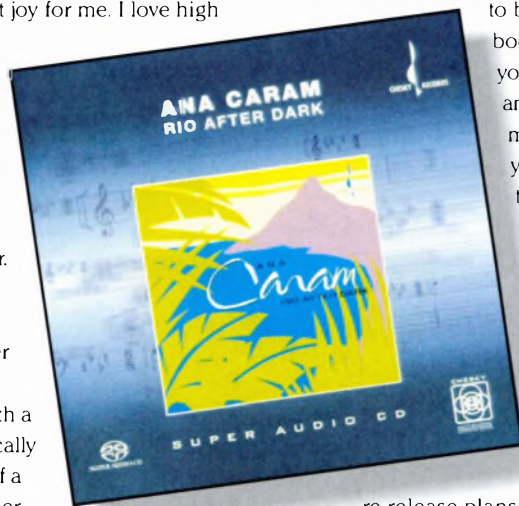
The technology behind the conversion chips proper seems to be rather firmly in hand, in that today's digital technology is fully capable of handling the increasingly complex tasks that it is being asked to do. No, the problem is that too many companies

just plain cheap out on the analog reconstruction/output sections that come with most of the players. Many of them are a technological tour-de-force in the math department but simply fail to pass muster when it comes to actually making music from a carefully-reconstructed waveform. And then we have to deal with the various flavors of the different players. You can go from the Sony sound, a slightly darker-tinted animal with great bass to the more open and rather wonderful-sounding but still flawed big Accuphase separates to the original Philips SACD 1000, the first player that I heard that I thought actually resembled the sound of real music; it certainly did high treble better than the others. Frankly, the thing that I found most interesting about the new higher-sampling-rate digital systems was the prospect of being able to extend the upper-octave response of the medium so that we would be able to finally have real



► “air” in digital. This is something that good LP reproduction has always had over all CDs: the ability of a great system to let the listener literally feel, hear, and almost taste the air of the original venue, be it a jazz club, a concert hall, or a recording studio isolation booth. I always play records, despite whatever other shortcomings they may have, when I want to get the full effect of extended high-frequency response. One of the greatest joys for me in audio is being able to hear really high frequencies. I can still easily make out, when using test tones, frequencies to 18 kHz. I used to do 20 easily, but hey, we all age at some point. At 44, however, I feel that I have managed to preserve my hearing acuity quite well and it is a source of great joy for me. I love high frequencies cleanly reproduced. I have always been dissatisfied with CD's top end, not so much from a quality standpoint, but from one of pure extension. Just not the same as good analog. And so far, SACD and DVD-A have not shown me that modern is necessarily better. But standard players were all that I had been able to lay my hands on. Then we took delivery of the Meitner (EMM Labs) DAC-6 SACD and CD outboard DAC. Meitner came up with a mod to access the DSD stream optically from the Philips SACD 1000, so all of a sudden we had a drive and a decoder, High-End style!

It was with great anticipation that I fired the thing up for the first time. I will spare you a full review, but suffice to say that experience with a number of modern, pure DSD recordings (and some up-sampled old analog ones, too) convinced me that not only does SACD have the frequency response that I crave, but the smoothness, sophistication, and musical textural of the best analog, along with none of the drawbacks. And yes, finally there are real highs with absolutely incredible resolution of air. I am happy. But wait! So the system sounds quite wonderful now, but there is still the even larger issue of the whole surround experience, which is what this column was supposed to be about in the first place. OK, I can assure you that SACD, properly done, is wonderful and has superb potential. I confess that at this point I am withholding any real comment on DVD-A, as I have yet to experience a player that really delivers the goods in the same way that the Philips/Meitner rig does. But the surround thing itself... Is it worth it? I mean, you have to come up with the scratch to get three more speakers, a sub if you are really serious (though you may already have one), and a new controller line stage just be able to try it and see if you like it. Oh, and a new player, as well. Mind you, if



you already have a modern A/V system you may well be able to input the six analog output channels of either a SACD or DVD-A player directly to your controller. And of course this is all wonderful for the cinema, but how do things really fare when you are doing it up in surround mode for just music?

In practice, SACD, especially through the DAC-6, works quite well. It is virtually a necessity to have the easy flexibility of the Sunfire Theater Grand III or similar controller, as you really need to be able to regulate the levels of the mixes among the various labels for the best effect. This is the one thing that makes the modern surround experience, to me at least, much more intimidating that it has to be. If you set up your system “by the book” there will be endless times when you’ll be unhappy with one aspect or another of the mix of your program material. Easy enough to deal with if you have a good controller to tweak the levels. When trimmed out for maximum taste versus maximum spectacularity, surround SACD sounds really excellent, and even more convincing at times if you can manage to find some of the three-track material like the old Bert Whyte recordings on Everest. Too bad Polygram/Mercury seems to have no re-release plans for their catalog on SACD. That is the treasure-trove of all time for three-channel stuff.

Overall, I think this latest flirt with surround is terrific. Hey, I was a quad fan back in the seventies. What killed it then is hurting it now, at least as far as pure music goes: there is no standardization at all for how to deal with the surround channels out there in recording land, and the consumer having to choose between two totally incompatible technologies, either DVD-A or SACD, engenders resentment and confusion in many people. It becomes a daunting task to properly assess the options and then cast your lot and stick with it. But I have found that I really like the sound quality of SACD, enough to get serious about it.

Now comes the part that I have been saving, the part where I tell you that there is yet another option out there, one that takes the best aspects of surround SACD and even goes a step farther towards making the reproduction of the event virtually real. It is an essentially one-off system based on, get this, DVD-Video discs, one that makes use of the 6 available channels of information and tosses the centre and the LFE out in favour of two channels dedicated to L & R height information. This is the Chesky Records 6-channel DVD system that Kevin Halverson of Muse has demonstrated, with mixed success, at the last couple of CESs. In those small



► rooms with limited placement options, I could get an idea that here was something different, but it was hard to get a true sense of scale. A couple weeks ago I went into New York City to have a listen to this system at Chesky's studio, where they have a treated and dedicated room for the system, as well as the key to the whole affair, a library of recordings made using his encoding process. He played various selections first in stereo, then in full surround. I want to say first off that the whole issue I raised earlier about insufficient air on CD-based systems has nothing to do at all with systems, like Chesky's, that are based on the 96 kHz/24 bit DVD video recording standard. I think that well-done 96/24 reproduction is superb and rivals SACD. So we do not have a high-frequency extension issue here to muddy the waters.

I will be blunt: the Chesky system sounds closer to real music, in the most important ways, than anything that I have ever heard. Forget frequency response, coloration of speakers and components, and all such nonsense. In this system that stuff was all just fine. What was different here was the spatial presentation. When the recording was in a live jazz club, you would swear you were sitting in the audience. People would be talking over my shoulder, and I found myself constantly looking around for them, so real was the dimensional recreation. But the music came from a stage up front, with only natural-sounding room reflections coming from any surround channels. Mesmerizing. Then on a large choral work, I felt as though, with eyes closed, I was in the church in which the recording was made. Full dynamic contrasts and a total lack of audible distortion contribute to the great illusion of actual music taking place there in front of you. I became crazed and started thinking how to score this thing for a review. This is where the problem comes in. The Chesky system does not exist except in the brain and listening studio of David Chesky. Sure, he could duplicate it for a rich client, who to get the right effect would have to have a full catalog of Chesky recordings, and he could not play other recordings to correct effect on the system because they would have to have been recorded the same way that Chesky does it. And on and on. But I am here to tell you that I was floored by how darn real the thing sounded. I just wish that it was more practical, and that it had even the faintest of prayers of ever being commercially produced. Truly top-flight sound, but essentially unobtainable.

So where does this leave me, the frustrated surround junkie who wants music and not hype? Well, I will be sticking with my Hafler Dynaquad/Chase Technology ambience



decoder, thank you very much. This is simply a modern (sadly, it is no longer manufactured) version of the old Dynaco unit that uses L-R phase information pumped through surround speakers (there is no centre channel except the "ghost" channel effect that comes from superior stereo) to create a mild illusion of space and ambience with any recording. Some are more successful than others, but with the majority of pop/rock and especially symphonic recordings that I play, the effect is generally predictable and quite pleasing. A simple passive parasitic add-on box, the Chase Technology decoder is run by the main stereo amplifier, through an impedance-friendly buffer network. It comes with an theater/front selector knob and a level control. Used sparingly, I can get the soundstage of

my system to become almost holographic and well-removed from the speakers themselves, as well as a wonderful effect of height (though not to the degree of the Chesky system). Listeners who visit my room are, almost to a man (or woman), quite taken with the effect, which, when properly phased, allows most recordings to take on a convincing sense of body and dimensionality that was only hinted at before. Good live recordings sound much more spacious; some of Colin Davis' older *Last Night at the Proms* records on Philips can be positively

bewitching in the illusion that you are up in the risers with all of the revelers in Royal Albert Hall, watching and listening to the stage performers down below. The original pressings of *Woodstock* take on a gigantic and realistic outdoor sound that, despite the crummy 8-track recording, virtually allows you to be there. Overused, the effect becomes tiresome and artificial-sounding, but with just a whiff of level in the rear channels the system is seductively transformed and listening becomes a more intimate and involving affair than it had been before.

It is tough sometimes to make choices. Many stereo listeners I know say they will never do anything but purely that. If they do have a surround system, it is for video of some kind, not music. Then there are some like a doctor friend of mine who, after hearing it at my house, embraced the Chase Technology surround decoder and never looked back. His tuned system now sounds so good that when I go over there for an evening of music and wine it is never less than a three-bottle affair. In the end, all I can do is give you some impressions. But for me, surround sound for music has come full-circle, from the 70s Hafler circuit through today's fanciest SACD and DVD-A kit and back again. And I think that is where I may stay.



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# Music Matters



by Alan Sircom

OK, admission of guilt time. I need to take a break from discovering the secrets of making good multi-channel systems sit comfortably with stereo. In other words, I still haven't made stereo and multi-channel music work together in the same system properly, yet. I'm still hopeful that there is a solution without compromising one or other music format, however, but until then, there is an important issue that needs addressing.

Is this the year digital radio finally comes of age? Prices of products are dropping and the format is being marketed, sort of. But, despite these positive indicators, there is substantial inertia from both the promoters of the format and the general public alike. Despite some awareness-raising campaigns, digital radio is still a long way from the kind of market penetration anticipated. Right now, one person in a thousand has a digital radio receiver. Clearly, the marketing has not worked, yet.

I have become a convert to the Digital Radio cause. And, like most converts, I feel the zealot in me rising up to proselytise to anyone who happens to be passing. We collectors of music on LP and CD can often forget the power of radio, but the strengths of digital radio so readily remind us of that power. Over the past few months, I have listened to more and a greater diversity of music than usual and this is directly related to digital radio.

Even with RDS and easy-to-adjust preset stations, most listeners will tune to just two or three stations during the course of the average week. This makes me an average analogue listener; I listen to Radio 4 for the Today Programme, Classic FM for background sounds and XFM (medium-cool London Indie station) when I want to pretend I am 10 years younger than I really am. And I often flick between these stations when the local pirates or mini-cab firm breaks in over the regular broadcast.

Switching to digital radio changes this listening profile. First, you don't change stations due to signal drop-out, because they don't drop-out and the local mini-cabs have no influence over your sounds. Then, you find the ability

to switch from station to station so painless that you channel-surf, just like any Cable TV or Satellite TV couch potato will do.

It's this last change that makes digital radio so attractive, and really revolutionises your listening. I have found myself enjoying music and talk radio that would never normally catch my attention. I have spent an entire day listening to YaaRRadio, the Asian pop station and thoroughly enjoyed it, despite understanding practically nothing I heard. At the last count, I have 50 other stations of enough diversity to keep me engaged, too. Some of it is trite, some of it is plain crap, but 51 stations mean you never have to settle for rubbish unless you want to. Admittedly, those living outside of London might pick up fewer channels (Yeah, like none in my case! Ed.) but this offers a mighty choice.

Unlike conventional broadcasting, digital allows narrow but deep programming. This means it should be possible to get the Obscure Sports Channel, the 1970s World Music Station and the Psychic Network (when it's not closed due to unforeseen difficulties). But, as broadcasters pay around £120,000 per year to appear on a digital radio multiplex, this makes current stations distinctly commercial. They have to be; if one multiplex covered all listeners, this would still work out at around £2 per listener per year at the moment. So it is up to the BBC to grow the network, and advertise these channels heavily. 'Advertise' being the operative word; ask yourself honestly how many people know of the existence or programming of BBC 7, for example?

All of digital radio is given a single page at the back of the Radio Times every week; this is more an apology than a guide to a new format. It's strange that The Daily Telegraph is a more regular supporter and promoter of digital radio than the BBC, given that Auntie Beeb is the foremost digital radio service provider countrywide.

The big question is how does digital radio make the grade? I think a three-pronged approach is needed. ►

► First, big-name companies need to ramp-up manufacture of digital chipsets and players, dragging the cost of admission to the digital radio club down to just £10-£20 per player.

Then, the likes of the BBC needs to promote digital radio heavily, to make the general public understand that it means more choice and less noise. It doesn't mean a digital read-out on a conventional radio, nor does it mean pay-per-listen radio.

Finally, the diversity seen on digital radio today needs to grow further; if digital radio is the only place where Korfball, Kendo and Koi Carp enthusiasts can access programmes about their pastimes, you begin to get a groundswell of listeners.

Digital radio is going to take off, but not yet. But when

it happens, it will be huge, possibly outstripping even DVD as a success.

Unfortunately there is a hi-fi related issue to cloud the waters... digital radio's sound quality. With packed multiplexes, the sound quality of many channels is below the already poor performance of analogue radio. And yet here's a confirmed audiophile praising the format... why? Because digital radio is more about spontaneity, and introducing the listener to new forms of music, than it is an audiophile's dream. I would love for there to be a Marantz 10B of digital radio, but the sound of the format so far appears not good enough to support such audiophile pretensions. Instead, think of digital radio as a gateway drug, that leads to hi-fi addiction.. After all, music is the best foundation stone upon which to build a hi-fi system. ►+

# Postcard from Venus



by L. S. Webster

Contrary to popular misconceptions, women and hi-fi are not necessarily mutually exclusive. I say this bearing in mind that there are women I know who say their partner appears out of nowhere, white with fear and flapping about like an old mother hen, wailing "I'll do that", whenever she goes anywhere near the hi-fi system! It gets worse still, quite possibly the horror of all horrors, if she is spotted loitering with intent brandishing an LP, or, the ultimate crime - a duster! This really is too much for him to take, poor thing. He can even stop breathing, Heaven forbid. Although apparently, it's a situation that can easily be resolved once she agrees to undergo a series of controlled trials on the complexities of turning on, using, or simply being in the same room as the system. Wow, and you thought women were fickle.

Naturally, all this has led to much speculation amongst female ranks, and at the risk of putting ideas into the wrong heads, I should tell you that some have even gone so far as to suspect the existence of a weird gadget hidden

amongst the myriad of components. Of course the possibilities are endless, but the general consensus is that it's probably some type of sophisticated electronic device which triggers an alarm audible only by 'him', thereby alerting 'him' to the impostor. (Don't go getting any ideas.) As you might expect, it's the type of theory that can arise during gossipy debates on the peculiar medley of hi-fi foibles. And we might be on shaky ground here, but to my mind this revealing male behaviour suggests one of two things. Namely that this type of man either seriously believes women are somehow incapable of using big grown up hi-fi without causing irreparable damage, or rather, it has all grown just a teensy-weensy bit out of proportion and he's become completely derailed about the whole thing. Instinct tells me it's the latter, because lots of people do appear to grow over emotionally attached to their hi-fi.

The question is why? Well, this is far from clear, but one thing I do know. If you too can relate to this sort of ►





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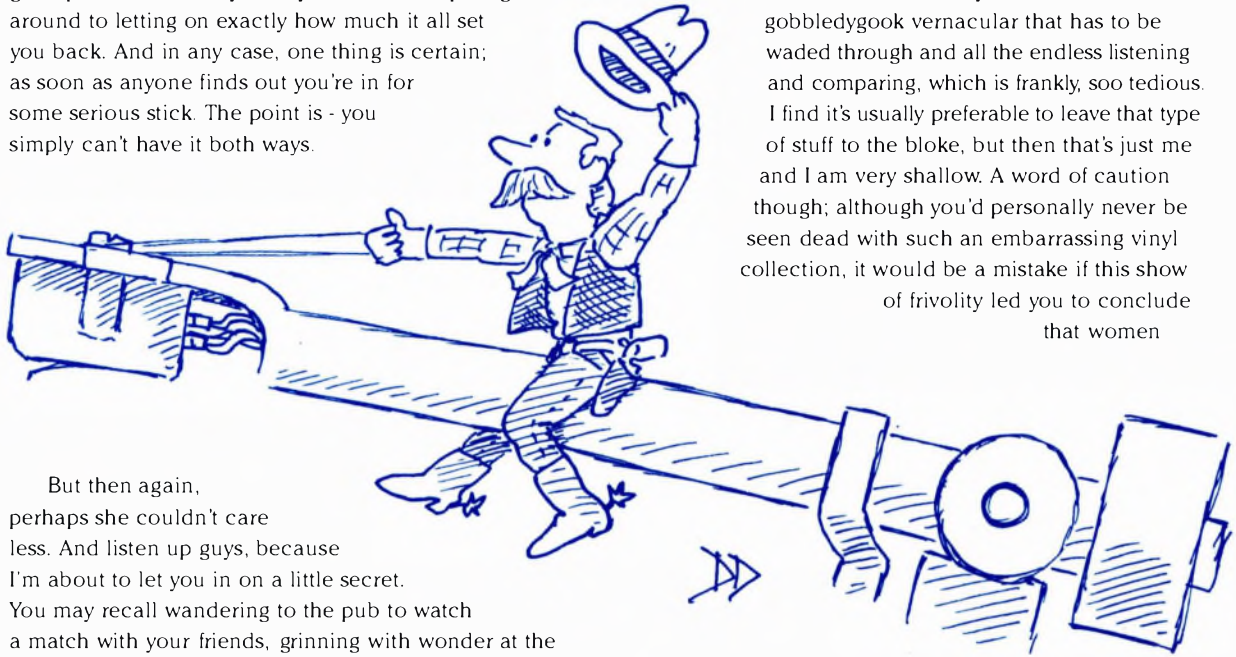
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► behaviour then it's perhaps worth considering the following for a moment. It's always a good idea to keep in mind that although it may look like something welded together at the salvage yard, you're the only one who knows it was hand knitted by a Tungusian Shaman from swamp moss, which you had to remortgage your house to pay for. Perfectly sensible to keep this to yourself, it's just not the sort of thing you can brag about really is it? And you wouldn't want to give anyone the impression you'd gone plain mad. Funny how you never did quite get around to letting on exactly how much it all set you back. And in any case, one thing is certain; as soon as anyone finds out you're in for some serious stick. The point is - you simply can't have it both ways.



But then again, perhaps she couldn't care less. And listen up guys, because I'm about to let you in on a little secret. You may recall wandering to the pub to watch a match with your friends, grinning with wonder at the ease with which you managed to pull off that neat little trick again. Perhaps, when you look back, she waved you out the door a little too enthusiastically. Well, women are nothing if not highly organised and it's entirely within the realms of probability that her best friend was already on the way round to your house with a bottle of wine and a stack of old LP's. It will have been arranged for days (after careful examination of the fixture list) and she will have been watching you intently (and covertly), memorising the sequence of buttons and knobs that must be turned on before anything happens. Because when girls get together we like nothing more than to have a bit of a laugh and prance about making outrageous fools of ourselves. And playing all those old records - the ones you'd assumed had been thrown out years ago - boogying around the house, singing completely out of tune at the top of your voice is pure and unadulterated therapy. In all likelihood, before your posse at the pub has even begun to shout obscenities at the referee, they'll already be on to the ultimate girl dance track, 'Dancing Queen'. What glee - tampering freely with the precious

system while the Tomcat's away. There's just something so incredibly satisfying about it.

I think it may remain a mystery forever to some men how women can listen to music without having a 'system' to play it through. But, like most things in life, the truth often turns out to be far more mundane. Such as, why bother? Especially when there's already a fantastic system completely at your disposal, and not only that, he actually enjoys doing all the groundwork too. Which is not to be scoffed at when you consider the gobbledygook vernacular that has to be waded through and all the endless listening and comparing, which is frankly, soo tedious. I find it's usually preferable to leave that type of stuff to the bloke, but then that's just me and I am very shallow. A word of caution though; although you'd personally never be seen dead with such an embarrassing vinyl collection, it would be a mistake if this show of frivolity led you to conclude that women

somehow lack a capacity to recognise or appreciate a superior musical recording; on the contrary. But there's a time and a place for everything, and there are moments when you listen to 'proper' music together which are lovely.

And this is precisely why it is well within your interests to show her the ropes without having a hissy fit. Take it in your stride, deal with it, then let it go. Very simple in theory. However, I think it would be helpful if you could do it without resorting to any of those strange coded terms only men have ever understood. And the end result? Who knows, before long you may even find yourself encouraging her to have a go at being DJ for a night? And better still, she may enjoy it enough to feel inspired into developing a broader interest in music. All of which helps to grasp a better understanding of exactly why it is you are prepared to go to the extraordinary lengths you do to get that little bit more from your music. In the end, it should be a win - win situation.





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Select any one title from those below:

1. The product I never should have bought, the product I never should have sold.
2. Less is more.
3. How come that whilst you can't see the king's new clothes, they are so easy to hear?
4. The whole is always more important than the parts.

Unlike most competitions, this one is open to all comers, without exclusion. The only limitation is on the amount of cable you can win. Four sets of interconnects and one set of bi-wired speaker cable (any one being up to six meters in length, the others no longer than two meters) should suffice in all but the most unusual cases.

You've got a while to think about your piece as the closing date isn't until the 30th of July. But before then you've got to get it down on paper and make sure it reaches us. After all, you don't want to miss your first deadline!

Entries should be clearly marked Writers Competition and sent with your name, address and full contact details (including e-mail address if you have one) to:

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They should be sent as 12pt printed text and additionally, as a Word Document on floppy disc or CD-Rom if possible. The Editor's decision is, as always final (something you'll get used to if you win) and no correspondence will be entered into. Good luck and go to it.

*Rylo*

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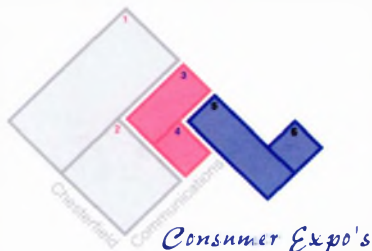
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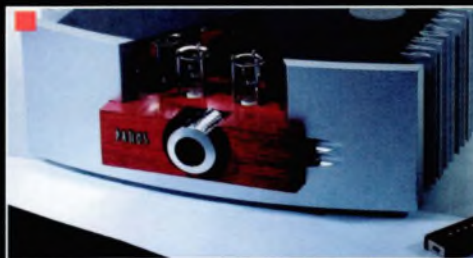
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# VPI TNT-HRX Record Player

by Roy Gregory

Trying to pin down the output of Harry Weisfeld's fertile imagination is worse than trying to hit a moving target. At least with a target you can see what you're shooting at, with Harry you never know quite what to expect until you open the box. It goes hand in hand with a policy of constant evolution, a policy that's a way of life at VPI. Add to that the fact that I've never met another company so willing to listen to sensible advice from outside interests and VPI products, particularly new ones like the HRX reviewed here, seem to exist in a constant state of flux. Further evidence rests in the fact that despite the vast array of turntables that the company offer, the entire family has evolved from just two basic designs, and one of those goes back earlier to the isolation plinths that VPI started out manufacturing for direct drive decks. It's a long and convoluted history, although one that's entirely logical, but with the HRX it's entered a new phase and a new plane of performance.

There have been many examples of technological or engineering trickle down with VPI 'tables. The original TNT platter found its way, along with the main bearing, clamp and thicker armboard, onto the HW19 Mk4. The Aries is a simplification of the TNT Junior, itself a simplification of the original TNT. Then of course there's the Scout, a simplified and re-engineered

Aries, and the inspiration, believe it or not for the new flagship, perhaps the company's first example of that rarest of events, trickle up. That influence is perhaps the least obvious element of what is a visually pretty impressive beast. Having said that, it's also at the core of the new



'table's step up in performance. We're talking main-bearing here, and in turn the constraints it places on the platter design.

In a quest for a cost effective bearing solution that wouldn't bust the ultra tight budget he'd set himself for the Scout, Harry adopted a Teflon thrust pad. The resulting bearing is both smooth and quiet. Smoother and quieter in fact than it has any right to be in a record player at the Scout's modest price (and a major contributor to that deck's stunning performance). Which is exactly what

got Harry started on a revised version of the TNT – a project that eventually transmogrified into a different beast altogether, and thus was born the HRX.

Indeed, the new table does away with many familiar elements

of the TNT. The separate motor and flywheel assemblies have been integrated into a single, solid aluminium housing, only there are now two motors facing each other and

running out of phase to cancel vibration. However, they still run from the TNT's external power supply, thus enjoying the same maniacally precise speed adjustment. The main

chassis has been reshaped and tapered, making it visually more attractive as well as offering a more diffuse resonant character. And for the first time, the chassis itself is a laminate, acrylic and aluminium in a beautifully finished sandwich. The suspension towers contain the same extremely effective air isolation pods as those on the TNT, but now they have thinner walls and are made from a single piece of stainless steel, doing away with the old Delrin top cap. The resulting gap between ►

▶ the suspension pod and the tower is filled with a collar of foam damping, resulting in even better isolation due to the reduced coupling, but no loss of stability.

But the real changes arrive with the platter. TNT's have always used composite platters, acrylic generally being combined with lead and stainless steel or aluminium. Despite the massive main bearing employed (the ball looks more like a marble!) the Teflon thrust pad won't support that kind of high-mass approach. So thinking laterally, Harry produced a thick, all acrylic platter to which he added

The slightly smaller footprint of the HRX also necessitates a revised version of the familiar JMW 12.5 arm. Dubbed the 12.6, it uses a heavier but shallower counterweight running on the threaded stub of the 9.0 in order to clear the rear suspension tower. However, the sliding weight combined with the threaded stub has made precise downforce adjustments a real fiddle, the locking screw only wanting to move in increments of a whole thread. As a result, a small screw on rider weight has been produced to make life easier, without sacrificing the benefits of the heavier main one sitting closer to the pivot. It works perfectly but,

away from the spindle to prevent mechanical fouling. The Triplanar is fine, but the Tangent requires a special platter with the peripheral mass relocated within its traditional dimensions. Thus you need to specify the arm when ordering, and a little forward planning might be in order.

The other thing you'll need to plan for is accommodating the deck. Smaller than a TNT it might be, but it still makes most racks look pitifully inadequate. I resorted to a couple of slabs of MDF with a layer of non-slip rubber matting between them. It worked rather well, but I'm sure it's far from the last word in support. I'm sure that Harry has a view on that too, so I'd take his advice.



a stainless steel peripheral ring. By placing the mass outside of the main platter dimensions he achieves the same inertia and speed stability from a lighter overall platter. Smart, but not as smart as the execution itself. You see, the external ring simply sits beneath the record, suspended from the specially machined shoulder in the platter. But you can also place it over the record in which case it acts as an extremely effective peripheral clamp. You also get what looks like a centre clamp, but in this instance it's simply a record weight, and the option of a thin, black plastic mat, of which more later.

unfortunately it arrived too late for photography. The VTA adjustment can now also be locked using a small, knurled thumbscrew. All good stuff.

The 12.6 is directly mounted to the chassis in the same way as on the TNT-HR (see Issue 10) although you can also order the HRX with a separate armboard, decks in the field already successfully employing Triplanar and Air Tangent tonearms. But here you run up against the one downside of the oversize platter. You'll have trouble getting some of the shorter arms out there far enough

Set-up is as straightforward as all the other VPI 'tables, and differs little from the procedure employed with the TNT Hot Rod. The deck stayed level and the speed stayed constant throughout the extended review period and other than that there's little to say on the practical side. ▶



► Systemwise I got to use the HRX with half a dozen cartridges including the Titan, DV-XV-1s, Accurate and Koetsu Black (courtesy of the interchangeable armwands) as well as the Groove and Plinius M14 phono stages. Amplification came from Tom Evans, Border Patrol and Hovland, while speakers included the usual suspects plus the Alon Lotus Elites and KEF Reference 207s.



It's an unusually long (and a very distinguished) list, but it helps to underline the sheer variety of systems in which the HRX was used. It's an important element in the conclusions regarding its overall sonic character – or rather, lack of one.

As suggested earlier, the HRX marks a new level of performance for VPI turntables. Where earlier flagships like the various TNTs have always scored highly on musical grounds, they've also possessed a particular character and family sound. That flavour has been reducing over the years, and the Hot Rod shaved off yet another layer, but with the HRX Harry has stripped away the remnants. More importantly, he's done it without diluting what has always made the VPIs so listenable. The sound of the HRX is still big, bold and stable, it still has dynamic pace and impact, and it still presents music with the sort of mobile weight and presence that few if any turntables match. The VPI sound has always been about musical energy and that hasn't changed with the HRX. Playing the Classic Records re-issue of the Everest Antill *Corroboree* (SDBR 3003) serves to underline that fact in spectacular fashion. The primal quality of the music is brutally threatening, sharp in contrast to the snatches of melody. The array of

percussion is brooding in the bass, whip-like and snappy further up. The drums have texture and are precisely located in the cavernous acoustic, the attack and speed of the other instruments is breathtaking in its impact and precision. It's then that you start to realise what lifts the HRX above its siblings.

The warmth and velvety smoothness that has defined the sound of all previous VPI decks (save perhaps the Scout) is no longer there, its absence heard in the sudden increase in focus and transparency, texture and tonal shading. Whilst it's a taint that has

been musically benign, even attractive in the rounded warmth that it brings to musical proceedings (did someone mutter "valvelike"?) there's no denying the evidence of the HRX. Warm and inviting it may have been, but it has also been costing the decks resolution. The new model manages to be just as inviting and entertaining, grafting on the extra transparency and resolution in place of the comfort factor of old. The result is significantly greater musical insight combined with lower listening effort. Listening effort?

Yes. The stability, clarity and musical organisation of the HRX makes it easier to hear into the performance.

What's even more interesting is the way the sound of the deck changes with different cartridges. Big, bold, stable: the natural assumption might well be to reach for a quick, detailed and incisive pick-up like the ultra lucid Titan. Sure enough, it's a combination that delivers explosive dynamics and astonishing clarity – a marriage made in heaven you might conclude. What then of a more self-effacing and less obviously dramatic transducer like the Dynavector DV-XV-1s? You might well expect the sound to flatten and lack drama, but that's not what happens. Instead, the easy flow and unforced quality of the Dr.T come to the fore, the sound transformed into one redolent with grace and poise, seductively musical in its own right.



Swap in the Koetsu Black, the Helikon or the Accurate and in each case the sound transmogrifies to embrace the key strengths of whichever cartridge you select. The only other product I've come across that achieves the same trick, coaxing the best out of whatever you partner with it, is the Triplanar. It too seems to allow the mounted cartridge to stretch its wings, breathing new life into the music played.

Using the Vivante/Alto 180g ►

▶ pressing of *Yola* (VA302) the nature and extent of the differences becomes clear. Playing 'Did I Hurt You' on the Titan separates the guitar better from its backing; the Dynavector lets you hear its strings. The Titan lets you focus on McEvoy's voice and vocal technique – the way she works the lyric.

drops into place, bringing with it a solidity to instrumental presence and a darkness to the musical background. I found myself liking its control and precision on larger scale works, but often preferred the lightness of touch and extra life on smaller, more intimate recordings that came without the weight.

(adjusting VTA accordingly, plus 70 on the JMW scale) brings you close to a half way house, with greater focus, separation, a darker background and more presence and mid-band energy – so much so that the sound can become slightly forward. In which case the weight really comes into its own, settling things down nicely. For the most part I found myself using the deck with mat and without weight, in which trim it combines a nice sense of



The Dynavector is tonally more natural and sweeter with a more credible dimensionality. The Titan displays the precise shape of the stabbed piano phrases, the Dynavector the harmonic structure and weight of the instrument. You pay your money you take your choice, but what's relevant here is how readily the HRX lets you hear not just how different these two cartridges sound, but lets you hear them at their best.

Of course, the platter options on the HRX offer their own set of sonic influences. The peripheral clamp, extremely effective on rim warps is simply too much hassle to use on a record by record basis. I found myself leaving it on the shoulders of the platter unless the record demanded its use. The record weight is another matter. Nice to handle, it simply

A matter of taste? More a question of individual recordings, their balance and style. Either way, it's a nice option to have. Which would make a nice conclusion of sorts if it wasn't for the late arrival of the thin plastic mat that I mentioned earlier. Using this

purpose and presence with excellent clarity and focus. It's a nice balance of virtues.

How does it compare to other leading contenders? Well, the Clearaudio Master Reference, Master TQi, Insider Reference set-up provides even greater clarity, transparency and focus coupled to a quicker and

more rhythmically explicit presentation. But it lacks the presence and beautifully weighted purpose of the HRX, as well as its sonic invisibility. In short, impressive as the

Clearaudio most certainly is, part of that quality comes at the expense of drawing attention to itself in a way that ▶

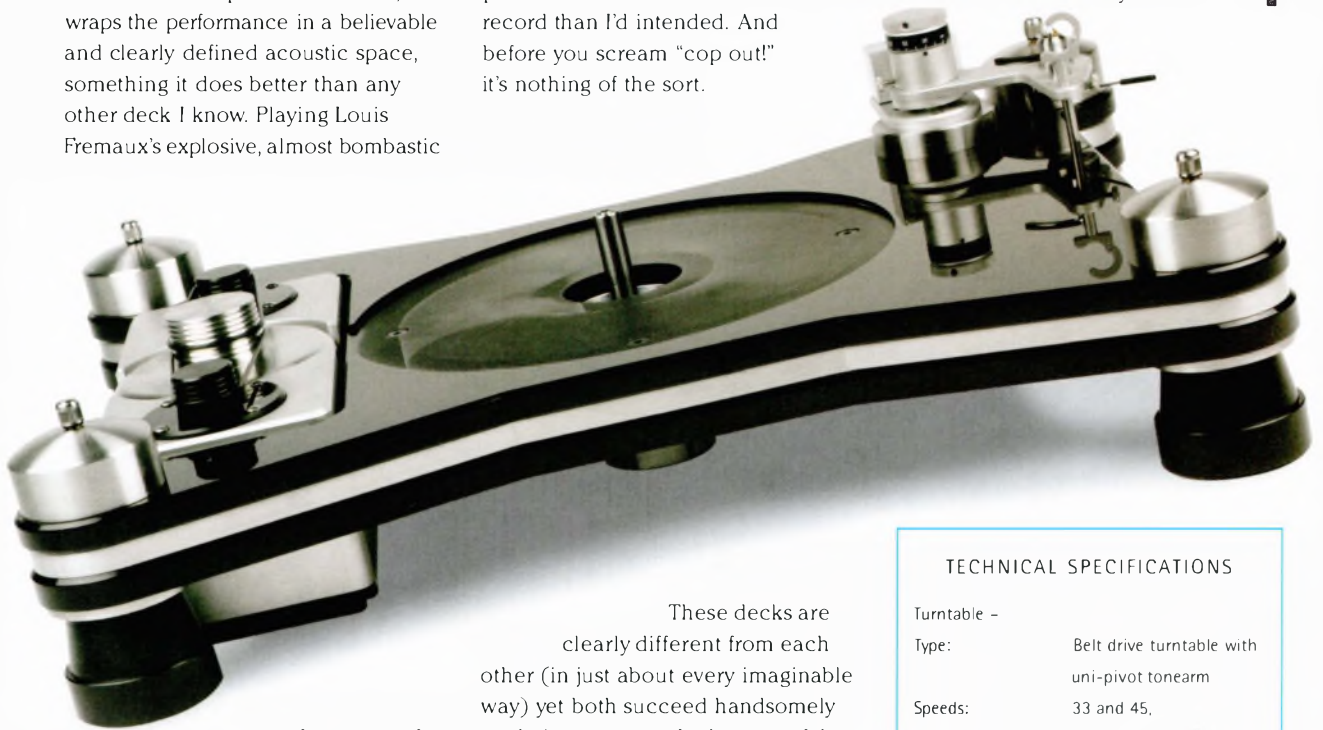




► the VPI manages to avoid. The big American deck also provides a more coherent overall acoustic – another VPI trademark. Unable to match the Clearaudio set-up for inner detail, it wraps the performance in a believable and clearly defined acoustic space, something it does better than any other deck I know. Playing Louis Fremaux's explosive, almost bombastic

and the fact that on more than one occasion I found myself having to restart the comparison process because one deck or the other had pulled me much further into the record than I'd intended. And before you scream "cop out!" it's nothing of the sort.

stands alongside the other frontrank options. Could I live with one? Simple to set-up, interchangeable armtubes, highly enjoyable sound. What do you think? ►+



performance of the Massenet *Le Cid* (CBSO, EMI Studio Two Stereo) the Clearaudio astonishes and beguiles with its speed, clarity and transparency. It's a dynamic firework show of a performance, one that suits the music – and one that you might well think would be hard to follow. Swapping the record to the VPI's platter and dropping the needle into the groove rewards you with a soundstage that lacks the expanse of the Clearaudio's but whose boundaries are better defined and which delivers a compact substance, presence and power. It seduces with its easy musical flow and melodic shape, its sense of drive and purpose.

Making these comparisons I was struck again and again by two things: these decks might sound totally different to each other, but both sound remarkably impressive. That

These decks are clearly different from each other (in just about every imaginable way) yet both succeed handsomely on their own terms. In the case of the VPI that means making music with purpose, power and presence, driving its musical message into the room. It's a performance that stands the HRX right in the front rank of analogue replay. You can quibble with this aspect or that of the overall package, and other decks offer a different balance of virtues, but what's important is that the HRX has a recipe all its own. If I want sheer detail and resolution then I'll reach for the Clearaudio. Absolute neutrality? Then it has to be the Kuzma/Triplanar combination. But for unobstructed access to the recording, musical presence and emotional communication the HRX tops the list. Until someone designs a deck that does it all (and no one has yet, despite claims or suggestions to the contrary, and yes, I have lived with the Rockport Sirius 111), the VPI

#### TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

##### Turntable –

Type: Belt drive turntable with uni-pivot tonearm

Speeds: 33 and 45, electronically adjustable

Platter Diameter: 342mm (inc. peripheral clamp)

Lid: None

Dimensions (WxHxD): 650x254x495mm

##### Tonearm –

Effective Length: 308mm

Effective Mass: 11.5g

##### Prices –

TNT HRX and 12.6: £10,000

TNT HRX: £8,000

JMW 12.6 Tonearm: £2,250

Spare 12.6 Armtube: £950

##### UK Distributor

Cherished Record Company

Tel. (44)(0)1579 363603

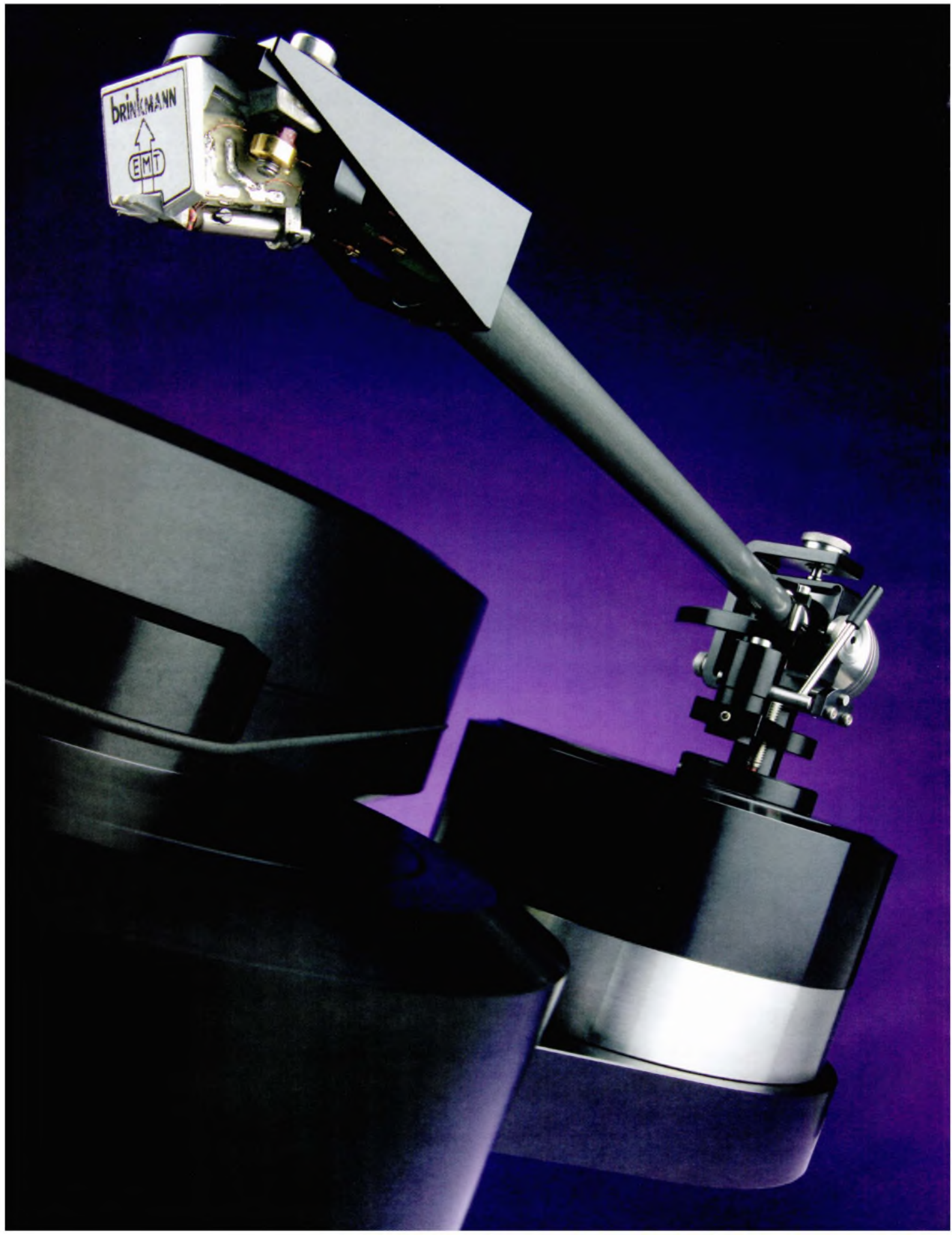
E-mail. [info@cherished-record-company.co.uk](mailto:info@cherished-record-company.co.uk)

Net. [www.cherished-record-company.co.uk](http://www.cherished-record-company.co.uk)

##### Manufacturer:

VPI Industries

Net. [www.vpiindustries.com](http://www.vpiindustries.com)





# Brinkmann LaGrange Turntable, 10.5 Tonearm and EMT Cartridge

by Jason Kennedy

Eccles cakes. Where would we be without them? Not enjoying state of the art tea ceremonies with so little ease I shouldn't imagine. There is a quandary however. Do you eat your cake before or during the supping of the tea? Before is good: there's no mixing of liquid and Eccles and you get to enjoy the full flavour. During however does bring a bit of moisture to the proceedings that some of these new fangled organic 'cakes require. My current thinking is to stick to the original Lancashire 'cake and consume it while the tea brews. Assam tea mind!

Speaking of tea when I first heard the name of this turntable my initial thought was of the ZZ Top track of the same name. It's a tune from their bluesy 1973 album *Ties Hombres* and celebrates a ho' house near a town of the same name in Georgia. This is not apparently where Helmut Brinkmann got the idea from. He took it from the 18th century French/Italian mathematician Jean Louis LaGrange who came up with a method and a theorem that go way over my head but clearly made an impression on Herr Brinkmann. I merely played the aforementioned track on his turntable of the same name and it sounded great, but then again so did everything else I put on it, so I don't think there's any special synergy there.

The LaGrange is the smaller (a relative term) of two Brinkmann turntables and differs from its brother the Balance by virtue of being capable of supporting two tonearms simultaneously. This is not the version tested here but the same deck with two tonearm 'wings', one at the conventional two

o'clock position and another slightly longer one at 10 o'clock to use with longer arms. I've never felt the urge to have more than one arm and cartridge but can easily see why this might be a good idea. One pairing could be better suited to electric music while the other excels with acoustic, and no doubt there are those who have found the perfect arm and cartridge combinations for specific



record labels.

(Err... how about Mono Jason? Ed.) Who am I to say that that way madness lies? I'd certainly have liked this facility for a recent tonearm group review for instance - that way madness certainly does lie!

Helmut Brinkmann has been making turntables in Achberg, Germany for 15 years but doesn't restrict himself to these heavyweight beauties alone, he also makes a small range of amplifiers to match. Something you get some hint of when you're told that there is an optional tube power supply available for both turntables: A strangely delicate thing to accompany such a substantial machine. The platter weighs a full 18kg yet is driven by a round section rubber belt that can't be more than 2mm in

diameter - start up time is inevitably not all that swift as a result. It seems pretty extreme but if you look at something like a Verdier you realise it's not alone and that this belt is by no means flimsy, as many prefer a silk cord in such circumstances.

The platter surface is glass which

Brinkmann claims is quick at channelling energy away from the vinyl,

I don't recall Rega making this claim but then its decks don't really have anywhere to channel it to. The bearing has a 16mm 'axle' that passes through two tight bushings, so much so that the bearing has to be thermostatically controlled in order to operate efficiently. A heating

element is used to achieve this, and a second power supply lead connects directly to the turntable's base to power it.

Drive is supplied by a free-standing motor within a beautifully finished case. Did I mention that the whole turntable is phenomenally well finished? I am talking SME grade engineering. It is remarkable value for money when you look at most of the competition. The motor case also features switches for 33 and 45 plus off. These are the nicest switches I've seen on a turntable, ever. They work electrostatically like old school Sony TVs; you don't actually press anything just put your finger on the button and it subtly illuminates. ▶

► The LaGrange doesn't have any form of suspension, relying instead on sheer mass to cope with resonances in the supporting structure. Brinkmann recommends using a black granite stone platform (60 by 40cm) for best results. All you need then is something to support that and the turntable! In this instance I went for a different approach and sat it on a Townshend Seismic Stand, an original floaty version that required some judicious counterbalancing to offset this turntable. This effectively suspended it, which will have helped the end result. Something to bear in mind if you're tempted.

The tonearm base can be completely rotated so that



different length arms may be accommodated. There is also a quick release clamping mechanism which allows arms already fitted to a Brinkmann base to be exchanged quickly and easily. Brinkmann's own arm is simply called the 10.5, a reference to its effective length in that most un-German of units, the inch. This arm bears a striking resemblance to that once made by Breuer of Switzerland, right down to the restrictively shaped headshell, the sides of which stop the installation of wider based cartridges such as the van den Hul Grasshopper or Colibri. The 10.5 is a finely crafted aluminium and steel construction with gimbal bearings and a damped arm lift. Damped while it's descending at least, you can pick the needle up quickly enough to bounce it if you're not careful.

The 10.5 has an effective mass of 10grams and what is described as a 'double cardanic suspension'. This presumably refers to the bearings which are adjusted for zero play. It has a base that Brinkmann calls a 'draw in collet', which is a bit like a bicycle seat pin clamp, the opening is squeezed tight rather than having a bolt threaded through it and pressed up against one side of the arm pillar (as found on Linn style armbases). This stops scoring of the arm support and allows infinite height adjustment albeit without the same ease as an SME Series V or Triplanar.

safe to say that this is a worthy needle for the deck. I would have liked to try something different but both my alternatives are vdHs and therefore couldn't be fitted.

This is a rather good turntable. You have to give it a little while to literally warm itself up but once it gets there you don't want to turn it off. I admit that I seem to have a liking for high-mass decks and this is the heaviest yet, so the omens were good before the needle hit the record. The result only served to reinforce my inclinations.

The LaGrange has incredible calm and assurance; it steps out of the path and lets the music flow in a way that is extremely rare with any source.

One key to its success is phenomenally low background noise.

It's not that other good turntables sound noisy, it's just that this one sounds eerily quiet. The noise floor has clearly been lowered. While the turntable and arm are dearer than the SME Model 20/ Series V I usually use, the EMT is less than half the price of my Grasshopper GLAIII. I stuck to the same Tom Evans Groove phono stage and played the output through a prototype Border Patrol preamp, Gamut D200 power amp and Living Voice Avatar OBX-R2 loudspeakers. All components that are clearly not holding the source back, yet this substantial turntable was distinctly quieter, with darker backgrounds and revealed finer detail as a result.

This reduction in noise presumably has something to do with the unusually precise nature of the sound, yet it isn't the sole reason. There is a degree of coherence, a sorting out of the various strands or instruments in each piece you play that suggests that resonance is under complete control. A sense ►



► that other record players are blurring the sound, missing the boundaries between notes and instruments. Here you can follow each musician in a dense piece with ease, the notes and the way they are played being uncannily clear. This does not however get in the way of the piece as whole, you can choose to follow the details or engross yourself in the composition. Of course each piece of music is merely the summing of the input of the musicians involved, and here the sum is clearly greater than the parts. The end-result being as captivating and clear in its message as vinyl gets.

Playing familiar material becomes a voyage of discovery with the LaGrange. The Don Rendell/Ian Carr Quintet's fabulous 'Black Marigolds' from Gilles Peterson's *Impressed* compilation



reveals solid, hard base notes from the pianist's left hand with harmonics that are usually lost, not to mention a dynamic energy that eludes most decks. But then I guess bass is always going to be a strong point of high mass designs; all that mass creates serious inertia and eliminates any danger of stylus drag.

Bugge Wesseltoft's *Moving* suffers more surface noise than is desirable (transparency is transparency after all) but also a lot more acoustic to percussion notes and a real menace to synthesiser bass. The phrase 'solid as a rock' crops up time and again in my

notes for the LaGrange and it would have been intriguing to be able to compare this with Max Townshend's latest Rock Reference. Surely a battle of the bass meisters to end them all! It would be a close run thing for sure, the depth and speed of bass kick drum from the Brinkmann is a wonder to behold. A wonder I would prefer to have held for considerably longer than the period this turntable came to stay.

This degree of low-frequency resolution does occasionally have its drawbacks. A copy of Beethoven's *Diabelli Variations* (Brendel on Philips) revealed excessive vehicle noise at its start.

Some form of filter might occasionally be useful if you enjoy classical vinyl. If on the other hand you prefer the power and energy of the

Mahavishnu Orchestra in full flight, this degree of coherence will come in very handy. The band's first album *The Inner Mounting Flame* is as dense as they come but here you get the white heat of jazz rock without the congestion that can accompany it. Cobham's drums driving the thing along while McLaughlin and Hammer try to out play each other and, mercifully, resist excessive self indulgence. Ted Nugent claimed the marvellous title *Intensity in Ten Cities*, but in truth it was better deserved by this incredible band.

Frank Zappa is arguably the musician's musician when it comes to the rock genre, yet he didn't limit himself to the form. The guitar duet 'Sleep Dirt' from the album of the same name is sublime, here it takes on extra solidity and presence that invigorates the performance. The following track 'The Ocean is the Ultimate Solution' really gives any source a work out. The drumming of Terry Bozzio at its best

combined with both electric and acoustic bass (Patrick O'Hearn) backing up FZ's stunning guitar can turn into a mess. Put it on the LaGrange and screw on the clamp (did I mention the clamp? It's a beauty) and you can follow the incredible playing and the bizarre chord changes with ease, the piece flowing as freely as its title suggests.

I could go on for a lot longer about this turntable and still not get around to imaging, timing or neutrality. Such hi-fi notions are swept aside by the quality of the music and the clarity and cogency with which it is reproduced. In short, I want one, and I want it bad. ➤+

#### TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Solid plinth, belt drive turntable, 10.5 inch tonearm with gimbal bearings and magnetic anti-skating, branded EMT MC cartridge (optional second armboard for twin arms)
Platter:	18kg glass surface
Speeds:	33/45 electronically switched
Power supply:	External for motor and heating element, optional tube PSU
Clamp:	Two piece, screw down
Output:	RCA phonos
Tonearm effective mass:	10g
Finish:	Black/steel, optional acrylic armboard
Price:	
La Grange Turntable:	£4995.00
Brinkmann Tonearm 10.5:	£2100.00
Brinkmann-EMT Cartridge:	£1250.00

#### UK Distributor:

Walrus Systems  
11 New Quebec St, London W1H 7RW  
Tel: (+44)(0)20 7724 7224  
Fax: (+44)(0)20 7724 4347

#### Manufacturer:

[www.brinkmann-audio.com](http://www.brinkmann-audio.com)





# Bluenote Bellavista Signature Turntable and U-3 Tonearm

by Jimmy Hughes

Turntable design is still something of a black art. Bluenote's intriguing £1994 Bellavista Signature and £375 U-3 tonearm are confirmation of that. A superficial glance reveals nothing astoundingly original or unusual. Indeed, the design bears more than a passing resemblance to various Michell turntables - especially the platter with its inverted, gold-plated weights. The arm is a uni-pivot; outwardly simple and basic - no lift-lower, no fluid damping. But don't be deceived; there's more to this record player than meets the eye. The individual bits are certainly good, but overall the results are far greater than the sum of the parts.

Things got off to a mixed start. There was a slight hum on the left channel (eventually traced to a fractured solder joint in the arm cable plug) and speed stability was questionable. Yet, despite these annoyances, there was something about the quality of sound and its coherence musically that struck me as highly promising. It's difficult to put into a few words. But essentially it boils down to a musical presentation that's cohesive, vibrant, natural, engaging, informative, very detailed and dynamic, while at the same time warm, rich and natural.

The great virtue of the Bellavista Signature is that it plays to the strengths of analogue, rather than trying to sound like a CD player. By that I mean it goes all out for warmth and fluidity, rather than cold antiseptic precision. It certainly gives a clean, ordered presentation that lacks nothing in terms of focus or definition. Yet

there's none of the dry slightly clinical quality that CD almost invariably seems to suffer from. Timing is excellent, making the music sound rhythmic and cohesive - like the people on your records are playing together collectively, rather than individually.

In hi-fi terms the sound is at once revealing and detailed, yet at the same time musically flattering and beguiling; the good things about each recording are brought out, without flaws and weaknesses being emphasised. You hear more of what's right with a disc, less of what's wrong. Rose-tinted spectacles? Sort of - but not exactly. Just because CD strips a particular recording bare (and makes it sound disappointing compared to how one remembers it sounding on LP) doesn't necessarily mean that CD is somehow more accurate or faithful in recreating the original musical performance. Or what was on the master tape.

Forget about hi-fi for the moment. It's about the way in which the various sounds cohere to recreate a living breathing musical performance. Actually, I think the Bellavista Signature does pretty well in the hi-fi accuracy stakes; but what impresses far more is its authenticity and sheer believability. Listening to it took me back over twenty-five years to the first time I experienced the LP-12.

In many ways, the Bluenote has the same involving musicality that distinguished the early Linn - qualities that were largely sacrificed over the years as the deck was 'improved'.

The turntable came with Bluenote's matching U-3 tonearm, into which I fitted a

Transfiguration Spirit 2 cartridge. Right from the start I was struck by how vivid and holographic the music sounded. Even quite poor LPs suddenly revealed depth and spatial detail that would ordinarily be submerged.

For a laugh I played Abba's debut LP *Waterloo* - a typically compressed colourless early '70s pop record - and was surprised to hear it sounding quite decent. The technology used to make *Waterloo* was clearly limited - there's a 'deadness' on many tracks, with no frequency or dynamic extremes. Yet heard on the Bellavista Signature the layering of background voices and instruments seemed to acquire a coherence, a rightness, that can't easily be described. You could follow all the individual musical lines while still taking in the whole picture. Moreover, it became clear that some of the playing was of a very high calibre. Even by the standards of its time (1974) *Waterloo* was pretty mediocre in terms of production. But playing it on the Bluenote combination seemed to minimise



▶ sonic limitations, allowing musical virtues to involve the listener.

The Bellavista Signature produces a full weighty bottom end; not in the sense of being heavy or emphasised, but solid, powerful, and free. Bass guitar lines emerge as though liberated, having a life of their own yet perfectly supportive and integrated. It's the very opposite of that artificially



tight, dry, desiccated bass quality one hears from most CD players. With the Bluenote, bass lines blossom and breath. And this helps give the spatial richness and depth mentioned earlier. The bass proved very tuneful too, making low frequency instruments easy to follow.

So, what is it that makes the Bellavista Signature work so well? As I said earlier, there's nothing outwardly remarkable about the design of this turntable. The difference seems to stem from careful choice of materials. For example, the turntable platter is made of a special plastic called Sustarin, selected for its compatible resonance qualities to vinyl records. It's inherently well-damped, and extremely rigid. Acrylic was rejected in favour of the Sustarin because the latter sounded better.

No mat is supplied, and you're not meant to use one.

The belt is highly unusual too, being ceramic-injected poly-vinyl. Apparently, a conventional rubber belt is available, but doesn't sound as good. The motor is a key component in any turntable, and Bluenote fit a high-torque 24-pole design that has plenty of drive. My review sample came fitted with an interesting alloy pulley that's a bit like a segmented orange.

There's a screw cap at the top which (when tightened) splay out the individual sections of the pulley, making the spindle slightly bigger - and the turntable run faster - thereby giving a degree of fine speed adjustment.

Now I had a few problems with this spindle. It's fixed to the motor's drive shaft by two small allen bolts. Unfortunately, the actual fit isn't quite as snug as it ought to be, so you tend to end up with the pulley running eccentrically. Careful adjustment of the two bolts is essential; even then I couldn't get the pulley perfectly centred. Judging by Bluenote's product literature, they prefer an

alternative spindle made from a hard plastic called Delrin. One came with the turntable and proved to be a nice tight press-fit. So of course I tried it.

It was perfectly centred, resulting in greatly-improved speed stability. However, was it my imagination, or did there seem to be a loss of sound quality with the Delrin spindle? I could hardly believe it. Basically the music no longer seemed quite a vivid and holographic as it had been. My first reaction was one of disbelief. Impossible! How could a drive spindle influence sound quality? So I went back and forth half a dozen times or more between the two spindles. And blow me if the alloy spindle didn't consistently sound better.

Every time I went back to the Delrin spindle the soundstage seemed to shrink; it was as though the volume had dropped by about 1dB. The impressive 'out of the boxes' holographic sound that had so impressed when I first began to listen seemed to diminish. It's crazy but true - I could hardly credit my ears. I'm told that using a rubber drive belt has a similar effect by comparison to the ceramic injected one. How fascinating that sonic performance should depend so heavily on a certain type of belt and motor pulley! Is that Black Art, or what?

Don't get me wrong; with the Delrin motor spindle the results weren't terrible - far from it. It's just that a certain magic had gone, leaving the music sounding slightly earthbound by comparison. It's the difference between a perfectly pleasant enjoyable sound, and one that's so involving you can't stop ▶



▶ listening. Even so, it's strange that sound quality should improve despite problems with speed fluctuations. You'd think the platter being slightly see-sawed back and forth by the motor would ruin things sonically. But quite the reverse.

Wanting to use the alloy spindle, I eventually came up with a solution of sorts; thick nail varnish on the shaft and hole to create a tighter fit between the two. Speed stability noticeably improved. But I still felt the Delrin spindle sounded more secure in terms of accurate pitch. Ironically, pitch definition in musical terms is superior with the alloy pulley - making it noticeably easier to hear its deficiencies when not properly centred! Hopefully the problems of loose fit and accurate centring can be sorted out, making the alloy pulley usable.

Uni-Pivot arms have the great virtue of simplicity compared to gimbal-bearing types. Properly designed, a good uni-pivot offers extremely low bearing friction. But - there's the problem of torsional motion, meaning the whole arm rocks from side-to-side as the record plays. Some uni-pivot arms control torsional movement with viscous damping fluid - an effective, if messy solution. The Bluenote U-3 arm makes no provision for fluid damping. It seems to achieve stability by keeping the centre of gravity low. Certainly, the arm stops oscillating very quickly if tapped lightly.

I found it possible to influence torsional movement by turning up the arm base in relation to the tone-

arm itself - though I'm not sure this is strictly kosher! Doing this changes the position of the internal cables relative to the arm's bearing casing, making them act as a sort of buffer? You do get a reduction in torsional movement, but possibly at the expense of increased friction. Incidentally, there's no 'stop' for the tonearm - you could keep turning it on its pivot till the cartridge wires break. For this reason the U-3 needs a certain amount of care during installation.



There's no bias (side thrust) either - you produce some anti-skating force by turning the base of the arm so the cartridge wires exert a little pressure of their own. Supplied in standard form, there's no lift/lower device. But apparently a nice one is available for £90 - and very nice it should be at that price! My review sample did not have a parking device. But one is supplied with the arm, and the Bellavista Signature would come drilled for it if you bought the combination together.

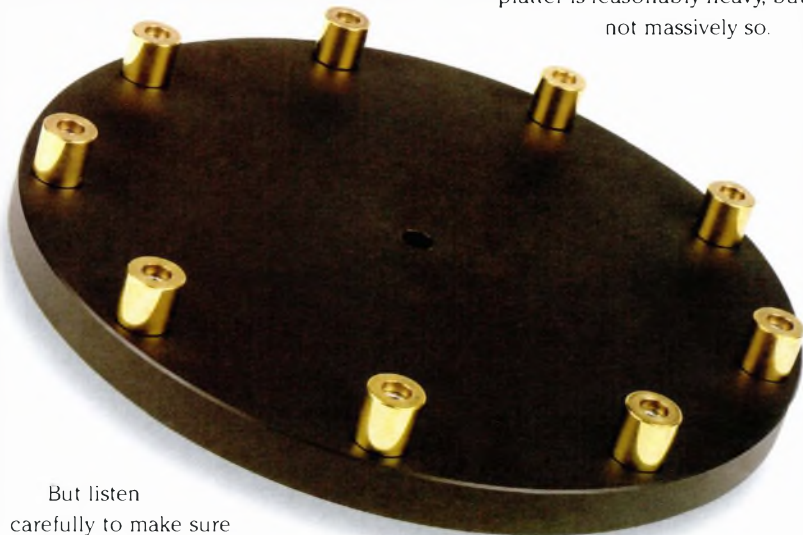
A de-coupled, eccentric counterweight is fitted, and once again, things are arranged to keep the centre of gravity low. Revolving the counterweight around its fixing shaft alters the azimuth of the

cartridge. The adjustment (although critical) is fairly easy to set. The counterweight is not calibrated, so you'll need stylus scales to set tracking force (I used the excellent Cartridge Man electronic scales, which are accurate and safe to use). The cartridge tags are very easy to fit, being quite large, and simple to adjust if a slight increase or decrease in diameter is called for.

It's difficult to be specific about the arm's absolute performance since I've only (only?!) heard it on the Bellavista Signature. But it certainly worked very well with the turntable and seems to be a first class match. It handled the Transfiguration Spirit 2 with aplomb. The lack of a lift/lower device is not necessarily a problem given a steady hand, but I'd imagine most users would want one. Apparently the UK importers are searching for a cheaper alternative to Bluenote's £90 option. A beautiful hand-made hinged lid is available too - for about £180 extra.

The turntable has no suspension. The plinth is made from two pieces of 20mm thick black perspex which sit on three adjustable spiked support feet. I used my review sample on an old glass-topped Origin Live Skyline platform. Some footfall was ▶

▶ transmitted to the stylus - despite having a solid concrete floor I could detect audible 'thumps' as my lissom wife walked past. However, there was absolutely no problem with tracking; the stylus stayed in the groove unperturbed. You could sit the turntable on a de-coupled support platform to reduce the effects of footfall, if this was a problem..



But listen carefully to make sure that sound quality isn't compromised in the process.

Alternatively, mount the deck on a wall shelf. The powerful motor is bolted to the lower half of the perspex plinth, so there's minimal de-coupling. It therefore needs a good solid support that's properly grounded so that some of its energy can be dissipated - hence my warnings about de-coupling platforms and their possible adverse effects on sound quality, despite improving isolation.

Direct-coupling a motor in this way improves the drive between motor and platter - clearly there's no compliant suspension to soften the interface. But there's a grave risk motor vibration will find its way to the stylus. However, somehow this has been avoided in the Bellavista Signature. There seems to be no transference of noise. To test this, I resorted to the old trick of resting

the stylus on a small box sat on the plinth and turning up the volume as the platter spun. Result? Silence. I could detect no motor noise whatsoever, subjectively bearing out the manufacturer's claim of a -82dB rumble figure.

The main centre bearing seems well finished and closely-toleranced - albeit nothing extraordinary. The platter is reasonably heavy, but not massively so.

The relative lightness of the platter coupled with the power of the motor and stiffness of the drive belt means that slight speed irregularities caused by an ever-so-slightly eccentric drive spindle aren't ironed out by the flywheel effect of the platter. The ceramic injected belt is spliced rather than one-piece, so there's a slight change in compliance at the join which causes a slight rotational 'blip'.

However, when used with the Delrin spindle, speed stability was beyond reproach. Having gotten so used to Pure Perfect CD for the best part of twenty years, no LP system is totally free of speed irregularities. How many records are perfectly concentric? Very few - there's nearly always a slight 'swing' from side to side. And because

the Bellavista Signature is so outstanding in terms of pitch definition, you seem to hear speed irregularities more readily.

A very interesting turntable then - one definitely worth investigating. It certainly surprised me - I wasn't anticipating anything as good as this. Assuming the problem with the loose fitting alloy motor pulley can be solved, Bluenote's Bellavista Signature is a winner. Hearing it makes you fall in love with your records again. And makes you understand why it is that discerning music lovers still bother with LPs.



#### TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

##### Turntable

Type:	Split plinth motor unit
Speeds:	33 and 45, manually set
Lid:	Optional (£180)
Dimensions (WxHxD):	482x229x356mm
Price:	£1994

##### Tonearm

Type:	Undamped uni-pivot
Effective Length:	233mm
Effective Mass:	Medium/High
Cueing Device:	Optional (£90)
Price:	£375

##### Distributor:

Eminent Audio  
 Tel. (44)(0)1746 769156  
 Fax. (44)(0)121 681 8772  
 E-mail. [audiognosis@ntlworld.com](mailto:audiognosis@ntlworld.com)  
 Net. [www.eminentaudio.co.uk](http://www.eminentaudio.co.uk)

##### Manufacturer:

Bluenote  
 Net. [www.bluenote.it](http://www.bluenote.it)



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# Michell TechnoDec Record Player

by Roy Gregory

Simplicity is the keynote of Michell's new TechnoDec. The design itself is clean and uncomplicated: easy to set-up, easy to use. It will appeal to those looking for a good turntable at a realistic price that's straightforward and unfussy to operate. At the same time there's scope for upgrades and improvements for those wanting to take the basic unit to the next stage. It means that you can purchase the turntable in standard form, and then improve it later as finances permit.

The turntable itself consists of a perspex plinth onto which the main bearing and tonearm are attached. This sits on three adjustable feet fitted with rubber pads to provide a degree of isolation. The platter is made from acrylic; basically it's the same as the platter fitted to the Giro, minus the gold weights. An optional clamp is available at £22.95. It's intended that no mat is used, the LP being placed directly on the platter.

The motor (again, the same one used in Michell's more expensive Giro) is housed in an impressive alloy case, and is physically separate from the turntable/arm assembly. It fits into a simple cutout in the side of the plinth. There's an outboard power supply which can be upgraded. The platter is driven by a thin rubber belt, and speed change between 33/45rpm is accomplished by shifting the belt onto one of the two steps on the drive pulley with your fingers - simple but effective.

The centre bearing is also conceptually the same as the one fitted to the

Giro, albeit in this case the 'short' version first seen on the Micro. It consists of an inverted shaft onto which a brass sleeve bearing sits. There's a captive ball bearing in the sleeve, and



a keeper groove near the bottom of the housing ensures the surfaces remain oiled. The fit is

tight, with no perceptible free-play. The platter fits onto the upper section of the bearing, and is held in place by a thin knurled retainer. All very simple! A good thing here is that the deck comes apart quickly and easily for cleaning and maintenance.

My review TecnoDec was fitted with Michell's TecnoArm. This is based on Rega's popular RB-250, but with several significant upgrades and improvements. The first is the Incognito arm cable, made by Cardas, and featuring no solder breaks between cartridge tags and phono plugs. Having what is in effect a single unbroken piece of cable greatly improves the cleanness and purity of the sound. There's a separate

earthing cable too, which helps improve sound quality. Less obvious is the fact that the installation of the wiring is also critical to the sound quality. As you'll find out in the next issue, Rega are only too happy to demonstrate the effect that incorrect tension in the internal cabling has on the arm's vertical friction levels (and sonic performance). The Michell staff who rewire the arms have all been trained by Rega, who also supplied the necessary equipment and tools to ensure that the arm's bearings are performing to spec. As far as I'm aware, despite Rega's willingness to train would-be re-wirers, Michell are the first company to take them up on the offer: A very sensible move in my opinion.

One persistent criticism of the Rega arms is the lack of any built-in vta adjustment. The Michell mounting collar supplied with the TecnoArm fixes that, a threaded ring similar to the Incognito Easy Riser



allowing the arm to be raised or lowered for correct cartridge alignment. The other change involves a replacement counterweight. Here, Michell were concerned to keep the centre of gravity low, and to avoid situations



▶ where the counterweight needs to be positioned way back from the pivot. This is a common occurrence and the price the Rega arms pay for performing so far beyond their modest price. All too often they find themselves supporting astonishingly exotic cartridges that are way heavier (in terms of price and weight) than was ever intended. To this end it's

sound was excellent - clean, tidy, and detailed - even using just the standard power supply.

Although the HR supply does give an extra feeling of stability and firmness, the benefits go beyond this. Subjectively, the sound is slightly louder and more dimensional, with increased dynamic range and stronger deeper bass. The motor has

more I liked what I heard - a good sign, obviously.

At the same time, the treble had that easy, natural, open quality that CD finds so difficult to match. To call it mellow implies a false softening-up or the addition of pleasant warm colorations. But it's more than that.

Put simply, there's a sense of natural air and space with good vinyl that's unmistakable. Surface noise was very low, incidentally, and the rubber support feet ensure that the turntable is pretty well isolated. I felt the sound improved adding a QR Developments Ringmat, but much depends on taste.

Now it just so happened that my reviewing schedule this month included the vastly more expensive Bluenote Bellavista Signature from Italy - itself owing something to previous Michell turntables. Inevitably, perhaps, there was a slightly feeling of disappointment going over to the TecnoDec. I missed the 3-D impression of depth and space imparted by the Bellavista, and its ability to reproduce the sort of subtle

possible to increase or decrease the mass of the Michell counterweight in order to end up with something that's compatible with whatever cartridge you're using - even if it's a 'heavyweight' monster weighing in at around 13g! The horizontal positioning of the weights themselves should help equalise the load on the arm bearings, improving stability. Incidentally, the counterweight can be bought separately at a cost of about £70, and I'll be looking at this and a couple of other after market alternatives in Issue 25.

Sonically, first impressions were of a solid, clean, well-balanced sound that was focussed and immediate. Tonal balance seemed neutral and open, with clear sharp treble and firm bass. Pitch stability was very good using the standard power supply, improving further when the more expensive HR supply was added. This can be bought separately for £299, and is well worth considering. All in all, the

noticeably more 'drive' with the HR supply, and this creates a stronger more purposeful musical presentation. Given the £575 cost of the basic turntable, £299 for a power supply might seem rather high, but the improvement is well worthwhile.

I couldn't help thinking how CD-like the TecnoDec's reproduction was. That's meant as a compliment by the way! There's a similar sense of clarity and immediacy, coupled with good pitch stability and an overall feeling of security. The TecnoDec is a very easy turntable to listen to, mainly because there are so few faults and nasties that might distract you from the music. The more I listened, the

dynamic nuances that usually get ironed out.

However, once I'd spent time with the Michell, and stopped making comparisons, 'limitations' in such areas as dimensionality seemed to recede. The TecnoDec undoubtedly sounds ▶





less holographic than the much more expensive deck, but one eventually forgets and accepts this. It's then that the virtues of the Michell strike home - for example, its excellent clarity and superb pitch stability. I felt confident the cartridge was tracking securely, and that loud passages towards end-of-side weren't going to cause havoc - very important!

As previously mentioned, the Bluenote combination offered some remarkable sonic qualities. But it's slightly loose pulley compromised speed stability. Although I loved its magical, almost holographic presentation, the pitch fluctuations were annoying. The TecnoDec was not as magical. But once one accepted this, it actually proved easier to listen to and enjoy. Why? Because there was so little (in the negative sense) to tell you that you were playing vinyl.

This is very important, especially if you're running LP and CD side by side. The two have to exist in harmony with one-another. Owning a Bellavista would almost certainly make you dissatisfied with CD; the digital front-end would typically sound 'flat' and dimension-less by comparison. Yet equally, unless the speed stability issues with the Bellavista were sorted out, you'd probably find listening to it frustrating and annoying compared to the rock-solid security CD players offer.

Someone buying a TecnoDec and TecnoArm should find good vinyl comparable to CD in terms of cleanness and low background noise, while at the same time having that added openness and dimensionality that only the best CD players could match. Certainly, my review turntable (with HR supply) more than held its own against CD via Chord's

DAC-64 - which is quite a compliment.

The basic TecnoDec with standard power supply retails for £575; fitted with a standard Rega RB-250 tonearm, the combination costs £699. The version I had for review, fitted with the superior TecnoArm, retails for £921; that's £575 for the turntable plus £346 for the arm. The beefier HR power supply adds



a further £299, making £1220 for the total package. Although still quite reasonable as high-end turntables go, it's obviously quite a bit more than the £699 starting price.

The concern here is that the £1220 price tag for the all-singing/all-dancing TecnoDec/TecnoArm combination is actually higher than a Michell Giro SE and RB-250 at £1058. The question is whether or not it might be better to opt for the superior Giro turntable, albeit fitted with standard RB-250. Only you can decide! Basically it depends on whether you want the ultimate version of a slightly lesser turntable, or a more basic version of something better: Not an easy choice. But bear in mind that the critical dynamic elements in the TecnoDec (bearing, pulley, motor and platter) all come from the Giro, and, platter aside, are identical or closely related to the ones found in the flagship Orbe.

If you're the sort of listener who wants to upgrade and improve your record playing equipment, and you've got just over a grand to spare, the Giro SE/RB-250 combination is arguably the better long-term bet. But you won't go far wrong with a TecnoDec; the full version reviewed here is a stunning piece of kit that produces superb results. Even playing old slightly worn LPs in less than pristine A-1 condition, I was surprised and pleased at how clean the sound was.

And bear in mind that the arm and HR power supply could easily be uplifted straight onto a Giro, allowing you to trade-in the TecnoDec for what I'm sure would be a nice, healthy allowance. Simply stylish and stylishly simple, Michell's latest offspring seems set to carry on the family tradition of combining sonic and engineering excellence.

#### TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Rigid turntable with standalone, mass loaded motor housing
Speeds:	33 and 45, manually changed
Lid:	Optional (£44)
Dimensions (WxHxD):	490x105x320mm
Weight:	4.5 Kg
Turntable:	£575
Turntable inc. RB250:	£699
TecnoArm inc. C/W:	£346
Counterweight:	£70
HR Power Supply:	£299

#### Manufacturer:

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# The Naim SL2 Loudspeaker

by Chris Thomas

When the SBL finally bowed out of production, just about a year or so ago, it ended a quite amazing 15-year run, during which time it received only one serious makeover when the original Mordaunt Short derived mid/bass driver was replaced with one of Naim's own design and manufacture. But since and long before production finally ceased Naim owners have been discussing and speculating over its replacement. Well, the SL2 is finally with us after a lengthy development period (I first saw a working prototype in Salisbury about two years ago) though whether it can strictly be thought of as a direct replacement for the SBL when it costs around twice as much is debatable. But, until a more obvious candidate shows up, it will be thought of in just this way. It's not surprising really when you look at the overall shape, layout and hardware that the SL2 uses. But take a long hard look around the speaker and you will see that all of the crucial areas of the SBL's design have undergone a radical rethink making this, in some respects, more of a Separate Box Loudspeaker than the original ever was.

I think they look tremendous, especially in the maple finish of the review pair, though, as with all things Naim, very little cosmetic work has been done without a solid engineering motive. So, let's start at the very bottom of the lower cabinet and the crucial interface between floor, base and box. There's a lot happening in this area as the incorporated aluminium stand that supports the speaker also provides a four spike floor mounting and the fixing point for the tweeter and as such needs to be as mechanically stable as possible. You certainly do not want

harmful frequencies from the lower cabinet finding their way into the stand and hence to the critical tweeter mounting almost three feet above. To achieve this Naim have taken the rather unusual step of decoupling the stand from the large and heavy lower box with a leaf spring arrangement. Give the speaker a solid prod on the front and you will see the whole thing rock, at a fairly high frequency, back and forth while the tweeter stays dead still. The deliciously curved front presents no encouragement for



standing waves to accumulate within the cabinet and the massive extended front panel provides tremendous stiffness while giving the optical illusion from head-on that the speaker is more of a panel than a box. This cabinet is very heavily braced and, as with all Naim speakers, internally treated at critical spots with mass dampers as well as being filled with a lightly packed acoustic damping material.

Where the SBL was a three-box affair, the SL2 utilises only two and the close, yet decoupled physical relationship between them shows Naim engineering ingenuity at its best. How to vent the bass/mid driver through the PAR (precision acoustic resistance) filter and into the lower box must, I would imagine, have occupied a fair amount of designer Roy George's time. The SBL required the use of a common bathroom

sealant to physically bond the two boxes together but the SL2, like the Allae, does away with that physical bond between the cabinets. The result is that the two boxes only meet at three points where loose fitting mini locating pins each capped with tiny 3 point spacers hold the boxes apart by a couple of millimetres. The size and consistency of the gap means that the two boxes effectively behave as one. This is a crucial area of the SL2's design. But there is a gap and that means that there must be leakage of air between them.

Naim found that to negate the effect of this it was absolutely essential that the opposing surfaces and hence the gap between the two boxes must be absolutely parallel and if you look you will see that both are machined aluminium.

The box that sits atop this carries the bass/mid driver and, in a separate section, a circular cut out for the tweeter. After experimentation with just about every relevant unit on the market Naim decided to stick with Scanspeak, as its qualities seemed better suited to the integration with their own driver. Where the SBL's tweeter was mounted in a box of its own, which itself attached to the integral metal frame of the bottom cabinet, the SL2 finds the Scanspeak at the top of a lengthy and flexibly mounted twin tube arm that extends from the base of the speaker. It runs straight up the back to a mounting block where the tweeter is secured. Mounting it this way ensures that it won't be affected by any resonances from either of the other two cabinets. With the top box in place the tweeter should find its way to the cut-out although, due to the length and compliance of the arrangement, Naim have provided a

► moveable front plate on the tweeter section of the top box which can be moved by loosening four allen bolts to adjust its positioning in order to centre the tweeter's location. Adjustment can also be made at the tweeter mounting point but this is probably best left to a dealer. This is again a very critical area of the design and one that owners should be made very aware of. No doubt dealers will initially install all SL2s but you should occasionally remove the sculptured foam grille and check that the tweeter is free of the cabinet and that the gap around it is even and consistent. Remember that the tweeter is attached to the base and if the speaker is moved for any reason, even if by a small amount, there is every likelihood that the tweeter will move too and this could easily result in it getting snagged on the cutout, which seriously impairs its performance. It is also another reason why initial levelling of the lower cabinet is so important. In fact I couldn't help wondering why, when Naim have obviously gone to so much trouble with the tweeter's isolation, did they bother to enclose it in a box at all. The answer is that the enclosure provides the tweeter with a small, but significant loading that is vital to the integration of the two units. The external crossover is fitted to the rear of the lower cabinet with decoupled mounts and can be easily removed if the speaker is to be used actively. But the old SBL tweak of leaving the crossover unattached will not work with the SL2 as it would place strain on the tweeter connection and impair the free movement of the unit.

Being a Naim speaker the SL2 is



designed to be used back against a wall, which makes them almost unique these days, though the accompanying literature suggests that it will be happy anything up to 18 inches away. In my room this never quite worked out. I tried them in every position and found that the sense of solidity, especially in the bass, was far better when they were as close as possible to the solid rear wall. And it is nice to reclaim some floor area and not have to tread lightly over expensive speaker cables. Pulling them out increased the depth of the soundstage but at the expense of just about everything else.

And therein lies the root of the age-old criticism of Naim speakers. Any speaker placed so close to a strong reflective rear surface like a wall is going to produce limited amounts of depth and the SL2 is no exception. It is far better than the SBL in this regard though, as its greatly increased resolution, superb bandwidth control and vastly improved top end layers the soundstage and leaves the speakers sounding "flatter" and more natural without sacrificing that sense of presence that all properly installed Naim systems should have.

Where the SBL's excitable midband would reach across the room and flatten you, the SL2 relies much more on its abilities to unravel the harmonic and rhythmic complexities

of music to bring a smile to your face. Because this is what this latest Naim speaker is all about. In fact, having also acquired the NAC 252 and NAP 300 to supplement the Spectral DMC-12 and DMA-100S for use with the SL2 I should say that this is one of the main attributes of all the latest Naim gear. And those who think that their equipment has lost something of that old rhythmic pulse should really think and listen again. There is no doubt that "the beat" has always been a really strong selling point for Naim aficionados but what the SL2 in particular does (especially with the 252/300 combo) is to open the whole of the rhythmic structure in a far more enlightening way. No longer is the emphasis of the resolution of tempo placed on the drum beat that marks the time divisions of the piece. Equipment that does this is often referred to as being "fast" and there is no doubt that speed is a prerequisite of all rhythmically strong equipment. But speed without ultimate control places undue emphasis on that part of the bar where the beat comes. And there is far more to understanding and feeling tempos than knowing where that lies. What the SL2

can do is to take you to what is happening between the beat, to the very rhythmic poise and balance of the musicians and once you can go there, a whole new world of musical possibilities opens up. It does this because it is so well controlled and has the ability to gain and lose energy fast, but without snatching at the beat.

And this is something that it exhibits across the whole of its bandwidth. For a while, after the speakers were first installed, I thought that they were a little light in the bass extension department ►





▶ and that what bass there was seemed somewhat stuck in the box, but as the extension slowly arrived with use I could appreciate that the available grip goes much lower and the bass is a lot leaner, better defined and more dynamic than the SBL, but with persuasive weight and presence. It is there to be exploited, but only if the rest of your system is up to it. There is also an element of the box in the lower bass, in that it never really projects far outside the speaker and it still seems a little over damped but this is, I believe, a bi-product of the separate cabinet technology and something that I always feel about Naim speakers. But, judging from the way that the system has been improving I would not be surprised if things carried on improving for months rather than weeks.

What really surprised me though was how tonally rich the midband was, particularly with the CDS2/252/300 combination which drives the SL2s to perfection. With a system of this quality the venerable NAC 5 speaker cable shows its limitations and I substituted some Nordost SPM hoping that it would not disturb the superb sense of musical integration that was becoming more admirable as the system continued to run-in. I need not have worried, as now there was an even greater sense of flow, purpose and more harmonic brightness to instruments and vocals. It also shows the amplifier to have a delicacy, deftness and subtlety of touch, both rhythmically and harmonically, that can be quite beguiling. Surely it can't be long before Naim introduce their own new speaker cable as the 5, unbelievable value that it is, is not really up to it at these levels. But it didn't need the SPM to convince me that the new tweeter installation is a rousing success bringing real colour and

a whole range of textures and shades within the scope of the speaker. This does not sound like the Scanspeak installation of the SBL or even the DBL, which now seem very grey in comparison. I admit that it does not have the air or depth of some speakers in the same price bracket, but that particular character would very likely not work with the SL2's overall balance, which is perhaps slightly on the conservative side. What it does have though is realistic impact and a noticeable lack of nasty compression both at the leading edge and when the going gets tough. Generally I feel that it is the best high frequency performance I have heard from a Naim speaker and it suits their latest amplification perfectly.

Any equipment review, it has always seemed to me, is in some part a system review. How can you appreciate a speaker like the SL2 without input from everything from the source, amplification, cabling and even supports? This was the first all-Naim system that I had heard for quite a while and certainly the first to contain so much of their latest electronics. With the CDS2 and the 252/300 all sitting on Fraim supports the only change I made was to the speaker cables. But,

what a system! It is in fact one of the most enjoyable I have ever used at home. The SL2 works extremely well with non-Naim amplifiers like the Spectral but within the context of a system incorporating the latest Naim electronics they make an enormously persuasive case for themselves. If they are the SBL replacement then they are more than worthy successors as they take the understanding, appreciation and enjoyment of music to new levels by unravelling the mysteries of the very structures that make up the language. I think they are really quite special. ➤



#### TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	2-way, separate box with arm sprung tweeter
Tweeter:	19mm wide dispersion Scanspeak
Bass/mid:	200mm designed and manufactured by Naim
Sensitivity:	89dB
Impedance:	6 Ohms minimum
Dimensions (HxWxD):	1027x282x350 mm
Finishes:	American Cherry, Maple, Black Ash
Price:	£4995.

#### Manufacturer:

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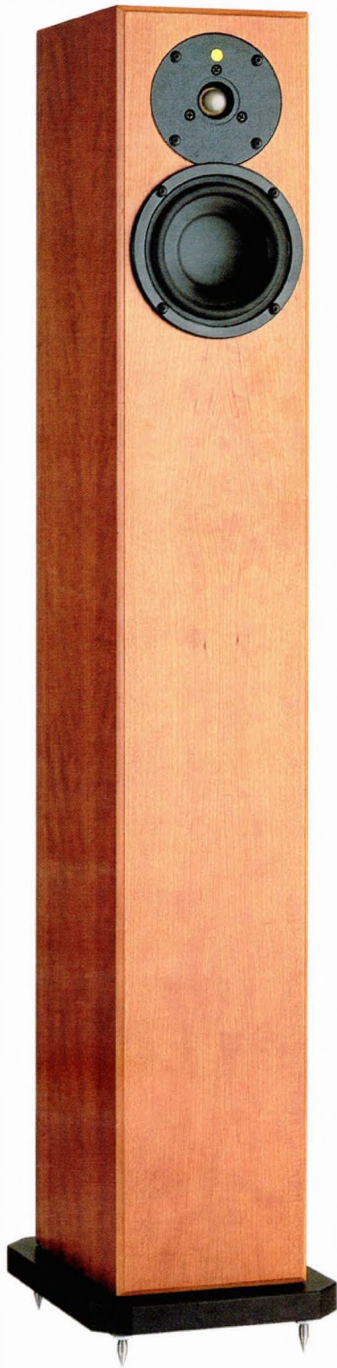


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# Spendor SR5 Loudspeaker

by Paul Messenger

Setting out on my daily constitutional this evening, I saw a sadly squashed hedgehog in the middle of the road. It reminded me of this Spendor SR5, a very strange looking speaker that might have been run over by the US 7th Cavalry (by a Humvee at least – I doubt it would have survived an Abrams). The curious shape certainly looks as though it might have started out as a regular cuboid box and then got itself squashed, and a chance encounter with road-kill might well have provided the designer with some inspiration. But I digress...

In outline this is one of the smallest and simplest speakers on the market – a two-way sealed box miniature, no less, just like its most obvious, venerable (and venerated) spiritual ancestor, the LS3/5A. However, the fact that it carries a hefty £1,000/pair pricetag is evidence enough of its serious intent, and implies serious engineering content too.

The reason for the funny shape – and a fundamental difference between this new baby Spendor and the LS3/5A and its clones – is simply that the SR5 is expressly designed to be used when fixed firmly onto a wall with its supplied bracket.

Spendor is best known for creating high accuracy monitoring loudspeakers with roots planted firmly in the BBC tradition, and indeed was one of the pioneers of the free-space stand-mount approach. To a significant extent, the SR5 is therefore something of a heresy.

But it's also perhaps a practical necessity in an attempt to come to terms with the realities of a multi-channel future, where the requirement to place five or even seven loudspeakers will place a premium on compact discretion.

I'm a bit of a multi-channel sceptic right now, as well as someone who tends to favour large loudspeakers, so it's unlikely that the SR5 will be high on my personal shopping list. But it's an intriguing little speaker nonetheless, and obviously an attractive prospect for

anyone looking to go multi-channel, so it well deserves a close-up examination.

The basic facts are that the SR5 is a two-way sealed-box 'miniature', using a small, high quality 140mm bass/mid drive unit with large shielded magnet, cast frame and 90mm polypropylene cone. The tweeter has a 25mm coated fabric dome, and the unit is fed via a high quality crossover and twin bi-wire/-amp terminals. In addition you get a decidedly unorthodox shape, plus a stainless steel bracket and fixing screws, and numerous other subtle but important details to suit this little speaker to its allotted task.

A combination of sealed-box loading and large magnet is intended to create a well damped and controlled bass alignment to compensate for the reinforcement of close-to-wall siting. Permitting some lateral swiveling to taste, the speakers may be used either way up, depending on how high up the wall they are mounted, and the 'tryptich' shape should help inhibit midband reflection interference.

The box is very tough, usefully shaped to avoid lateral standing waves, and with the front and back panels further braced through the main driver and a damping pad. More controlled damping is used between bracket and box, though the polymer damping rings did become unglued after repeated mounting and demounting. ▶



▶ The bracket itself is a substantial stainless steel item, good'n'tuff, and easy enough to fit to the wall – Spendor stresses that a solid wall is preferred. Connecting up can be tricky too, and is probably best done prior to mounting. The speakers are magnetically shielded (which would seem largely unnecessary if they're being fixed to a wall).

Sensitivity is quoted at 88dB, which is very close to the 87dB I'd give it, and that's in the context of an easy 8 Ohm load (6 Ohm minimum). However, given the efforts that have clearly gone into this design, my far-field in-room averaged traces were a shade disappointing, lacking something in both smoothness and bass output.

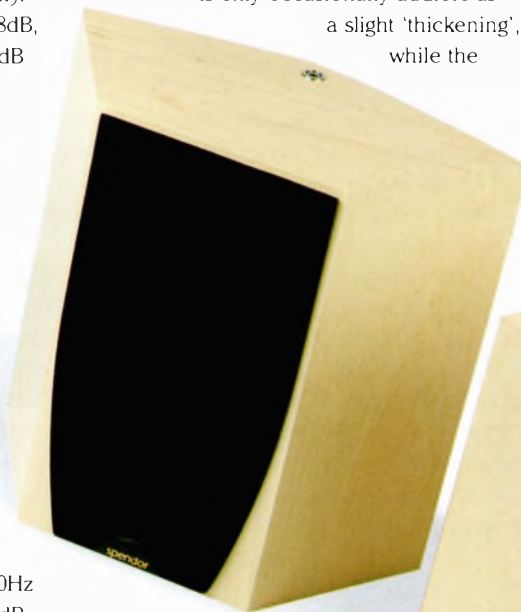
There's respectable bass extension here, as one would expect from a sealed-box system, but it's all a bit lightweight below 150Hz, with the 50-100Hz octave averaging around -7dB. The upper midband/presence (500Hz right up to 3kHz) is the most obvious strength, but there's a bit of peak lower down, at around 250Hz, and also a mild suckout at around 4kHz.

Making some allowances for its decidedly lightweight bass – arguably a little over-damped for my mounting conditions and largish room dimensions – this speaker does indeed go a long way towards meeting its design intentions. It certainly succeeds in entirely avoiding the usual rather 'cupped hands' effect associated with close-to-wall siting, and indeed the upper midband is altogether very impressive, delivering both speech and music with much more dynamic grip and enthusiasm than one would expect from such a tiny speaker.

Radio 3 was playing some Prokofiev piano music, and I was really impressed at the way the speakers were able to

bring out the true percussive nature of this powerful instrument. Speech too sounds notably expressive and lively, realistically portraying subtleties like regional accents with convincing clarity and purpose.

At the same time it's not entirely vice-free elsewhere. That 250Hz peak is only occasionally audible as a slight 'thickening', while the



treble could be sweeter and more open. Perhaps it was just misfortune that the SR5 followed on immediately after the Lumley Lampros 300 with its superior ribbon top end, since it does sound a little shut in and lacking in sweetness by comparison. Once one adjusts to the changeover, however, the SR5 does a decent enough job, albeit with a slight touch of nasal coloration. And if the treble does sound just a little too restrained for my personal preference, it's by no means unusual in this regard, especially amongst UK brands, and there are plenty of people who will prefer it this way.

Helped by the ease with which it can be mounted quite high off the floor, the stereo image delivers great

spaciousness and (given the wall proximity) a surprising measure of depth too, although lateral focus did seem a little broadened. The central midband has most of the traditional Spendor hallmarks of smoothness, evenness and low coloration, while the dynamic range is notably and impressively wide – unquestionably better than most box loudspeakers in this regard.

The 'box signature' is very low indeed here, so what you hear is very much what the drivers are delivering, unencumbered by the sort of droning warmth that the enclosure normally brings to the party.



This overall crispness means that although the bottom end is decidedly light in weight, it's also impressively tuneful, agile and informative, certainly delivering all the requisite musical cues even if it is a little short of gravitas.

Although I'd definitely recommend the use of a subwoofer to underpin these babies, I was nonetheless surprised at how effectively this small speaker could create dynamic tension through the bass region, and imbue the music with a real and vital momentum and sense of purpose. ▶



## Wall Mounting

Since some time during the 1960s it has been doctrine at the BBC – and in many other leading UK speaker companies for that matter – to align loudspeakers for, and recommend that they be sited, well clear of walls. At the same time, others have deliberately chosen to reject this dogma. The issues are actually quite subtle and complex, so let's take time out for a few paras to examine what's involved in speaker placement, and specifically the effects and implications of fixing a speaker onto a wall.

As far as soundwaves are concerned, the walls, floor and ceiling of a room – and to some extent large items of furniture too – act as mirrors, at low and midrange frequencies anyway (high frequencies are often absorbed rather than reflected).

However, although a light-and-mirror analogy goes some way towards explaining what's happening, it doesn't take account of the fact that soundwaves travel much more slowly than light, which adds its own contribution to the end result. Furthermore, although the output of a typical speaker might be 'flat' and even on-axis, it will show considerable variations in other directions, and of course it's these outputs that will be reflected back to the listener after bouncing off the walls.

The typical box loudspeaker is largely omni-directional at low frequencies, becoming increasingly directional as you move to higher frequencies, so the sound you hear in your favourite chair will be a mixture of the direct 'first arrivals' from the speaker, plus a bass-rich and time-delayed contribution via listening room reflections. (To check this, take your speakers out into the garden and notice how bass-light they sound!) In addition the time-delay means that the reflected sounds are also phase-delayed, and can create phase-cancellation at certain frequencies and path-differences.

The main reason for mounting speakers well away from walls (and on stands where appropriate) is to minimise the influence of the reflected sounds by maximising both the

delay and the relative loudness between the direct and reflected sounds. (The brain is quite good at distinguishing the 'first arrival', which is why stereo works at all.) Free space siting might be practical for a pair of speakers operating in stereo, but it clearly becomes less and less so as more and more channels are added.

At the opposite extreme, some recording studios use 'soffit' mounting, where the monitoring loudspeaker is fitted into the end wall so that it sits flush with a false wall. This will eliminate the most significant of the reflections, the one from the back wall, entirely, which is a major bonus in quality terms because a much greater proportion of the bass will be time-coherent. (I've converted my room to accommodate flush-mount speakers, and it works very well indeed.) But the dramatic room reconstruction involved is much more than most domestic users will contemplate.

Incidentally, the bass output of a free-space speaker will be dispersed in every direction (ie spherically), whereas that from a flush-mount will only be driving a hemispherical space, and will therefore give double the forward output (all things being equal, though some will be lost because it's further away).

If you move a regular box loudspeaker back against a wall from a free-space position, the midbass will receive a substantial boost (by about 6dB), but phase cancellation effects will tend to create significant unevenness – and hence coloration – in the critical midband.

The angled front 'tryptich' shape of this Spendor SR5 is clearly designed to deflect 'wraparound' midrange output along the wall, and inhibit it from reflecting directly forward off the wall behind the speaker to cause phase cancellations.

The other important issue for a wall-mount is to create an appropriate bass alignment to allow for the bass reinforcement the wall confers. The SR5 adopts two strategies here, first by using sealed-box loading (avoiding the extra bass output of a reflex port), and then a large magnet to ensure tight control and strong magnetic damping.

At the end of the day this is a very small speaker of course, but the lack of 'basso profundis' is really the only clue, as its sparkling dynamic capabilities give little away to larger units. The small, asymmetric and super-stiff enclosure adds very little of its own contribution, apart from rather effectively dispersing the unwelcome consequences of wall mounting.

The other day I heard that 'sub/sat' combos now represent a quarter of hi-fi speaker sales – a decidedly depressing statistic, considering the indifferent performance of most of the examples I've tried. Happily, the SR5 means that Spendor now joins a select band (headed by Cabasse) in producing a 'satellite' speaker worthy of serious hi-fi consideration, whilst also satisfying the multi-channel requirement for discreet domestic installation.

### TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Two-way magnetically shielded sealed enclosure with bracket for use on wall
Drive Units:	25mm coated fabric dome tweeter 140mm bass-mid driver with 90mm homopolymer cone
Bandwidth:	90Hz - 20kHz ± 3dB -6dB at 70Hz
Sensitivity:	88dB/2.83V
Impedance:	8 ohms (minimum 6.0 ohms)
Power handling:	15 - 125W (unclipped)
Dimensions : (WxHxD)	310 x 310 x 180mm (inc bracket)
Finishes:	Cherry, Maple, Rosenut or Black Ash
Accessories	Stainless steel wall bracket and fixings
Price:	£1000

Manufacturer:  
Spendor Audio Systems Ltd  
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info@spendoraudio.com  
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# The Resolution Audio Opus 21 CD Player

by Chris Binns

For various reasons I've had to wait a long time to get my hands on a Resolution Audio CD player – its been nigh on two years since I had a brief but tantalising glimpse of the CD 55. Following a highly favourable review by RG in issue 10, I was able to borrow it for a couple of days before it was snatched back by the importer; barely long enough for it to settle down, but enough time to get an idea of what it was capable of. And it left quite an impression – this was a player that I felt I could get excited about, and thoroughly enjoyed listening to, so I was keen to investigate further. Easier said than done...to begin with, the machines were in short supply, and several months later, just as it seemed as if my harassing of the distributors was going to pay off, they announced that Resolution was ceasing production of the CD55.

Uh, why? After all, the player had gathered quite a following in a comparatively short space of time, so there must have been some serious problems back at home base in California. It transpires that in common with some other manufacturers, Resolution had been having problems with the chosen Philips transport, specifically with consistency and availability; and looking to the future, opted to use a CD-ROM transport. Unfortunately, it soon became clear that this was not a case of substitution with a few modifications here and there, but required a re-design, almost from the ground up. Which is

why the Opus bears absolutely no resemblance to the '55 – indeed they look as if they are the product of different manufacturers. The radical changes that have occurred were not solely influenced by the CD transport. Resolution had, for a while, planned to complement the player with an amplifier and ultimately a tuner to produce a neat and compact high end system, a desire that has led to the more modular aesthetic of the Opus 21.

In a fair world, having taken such drastic action to solve the transport situation that, really should have been that. Having selected a CD-ROM mechanism on the basis of sound quality, the first units were shipped out, whereupon two problems emerged – there was a degree of mechanical noise that some users found disturbing, and in Europe, copy protected discs started to appear that would not play on the Resolution. While not quite back to the drawing board, the company have now found another mechanism that has cured these problems and offers the required level of performance.

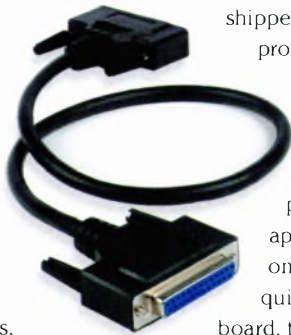
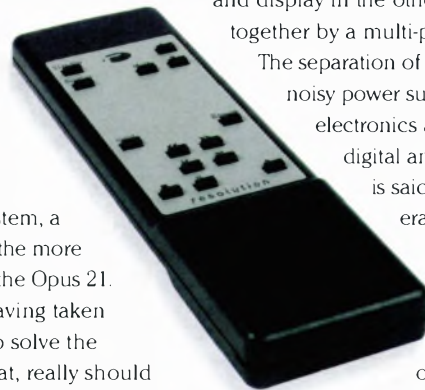
So it's been a while coming, but I finally had a Resolution CD player in front of me. Arriving in a small but highly practical wooden crate, upon unpacking it was obvious that externally there is no similarity between the old and new machines. To start with, the Opus 21 is

a two box player, and is considerably lighter than its predecessor, being constructed from aluminium as opposed to steel. The two small and very neat enclosures house the transport and all electronics in one, the power supply and display in the other, connected together by a multi-pin umbilical.

The separation of the potentially noisy power supply and display electronics away from the digital and audio circuitry is said to offer considerable benefits and is a topology that has worked well for Naim Audio amongst others. Three outputs are available,

the RCA and balanced XLR are controlled by an analogue volume control (which of course can be accessed from the remote control), while the 5-pin din bypasses this to give a fixed output of 2.5 Volts. Also provided is a digital input, which could prove useful in situations where you are driving power amplifiers directly using the volume control of the Opus and require the use of another digital source. Various combinations of black and silver finish are available for the front panel, while the whole machine looks refreshingly neat and well presented.

Internally, the unit is well constructed on high quality circuit boards with quite a lot of surface mount technology, while the power supply section uses no less than five mains transformers, with extensive regulation and mains input filtering. This only takes up about half the space inside the enclosure; there ▶





There was a reticence when it came to laying down the foundations of a musical performance - regardless of whether source material was full on rock or chamber music - that did not allow the music to communicate effectively. The most obvious shortfall seemed to revolve around rhythm and timing. You know almost immediately whether a system has got it or not, and in this case it was sadly lacking. Try as I might, I found listening rather academic. While I admit I was relying rather heavily on my memory, this was not an accusation that could be applied to the CD55, and to confirm this, the distributors arranged for the loan of one to do some comparisons. Sure enough, there was a considerable difference between the two machines, and while the Opus was superior in many respects,



it lacked the sheer drive and rhythmic organisation that the older machine possessed and which used to make listening so enjoyable. However, It also highlighted a degree of crudeness with the CD55, and a tendency to 'clip' notes or phrases - not immediately obvious, but I was sometimes aware of guitar notes on familiar recordings being deprived of timbre as they decayed. I suspect this effect is intrinsically linked with the sonic character of the machine, in the same way that bandwidth limiting can

emphasise dynamics and timing. By contrast the Opus sounded refined and altogether more sophisticated; it just needed a shot of adrenalin to give it a kick up the backside.

I had not as yet explored options regarding different interconnects and support platforms. While I am very aware of the differences such items can make, and at times have heard some dramatic transformations, I tend to feel that hi-fi equipment either possesses the more fundamental aspects of making music or it doesn't, and no amount of coaxing or tweaking will alter that. Then again, maybe the ingredients are there and you just can't get at them. The substitution of a pretty average, lightweight table with a Vertex AQ support system (borrowed from RG) had quite an amazing effect. This quite complex collection of isolation feet, coupling tripods and spongy bits exerted one hell of an influence on the player, and as you might have guessed, went a

long way to re-establishing the timing issues that were previously shy in coming forward. Suddenly the Opus sounded like it was far happier, and this reflected on the quality of reproduction which had an ebullience that had been absent before. Crucially, for me at any rate, as a result of this important aspects of the music were lifted out of the quagmire, and listening was much more immediate and accessible. I was now quite happy to listen to music for several hours at a time without any risk of creeping boredom. A little experimentation showed that best results were obtained with the transport sat alone on the Vertex, with the power supply supported separately. The only problem that I foresee relates to Resolution's concept of the tidy, high end system - stacking the units has a ruinous effect on sound quality, but the provision of a multi pin socket on the underside of the transport suggests this might have been an option. Highlighting the very different mechanical construction

▶ is provision for the fitting of two extratoroidal transformers, these form the basis of a power supply for the forthcoming amplifier (and presumably, tuner). Thus the concept of a small, modular high end system is realised, and with the design of the amplification in the hands of Dennis Morecroft of DNM, could prove to be an interesting proposition. It also explains some of the more European influences on the design of the Opus, like the use of a din plug for the main output - very DNM.

There was a basic remote supplied with the unit covering player functions and volume, but future units will be shipped with a more sophisticated device that will offer direct track access amongst other things. The good news is that it works effectively from most angles. However, there is one ergonomic problem with the controls on the actual machine. When the disc drawer is open and ready to be loaded, it is difficult to access the button to close it, a legacy of the original slot loading transport. While the machine I had for review had seen considerable use, it had also been recently fitted with the brand new (and pretty much silent) transport, so curbing my enthusiasm; I left it to run for a couple of days in order to settle down.

The Opus sounded sophisticated, refined and very detailed ...but on first impressions lacked the attributes that had so attracted me to the CD55, and to put it crudely, I found it rather boring.



▶ of the two machines was the fact that using the CD55 on the Vertex support had far less of an effect than with the Opus, serving only to clean up the sound a little, but almost indiscernibly smearing the dynamics.



There are considerable differences in performance between the fixed and variable outputs. Unfortunately it was difficult to directly compare them due to the aforementioned DIN plug, but having anticipated this the importers loaned me a suitably terminated Nordost Quattro-Fil interconnect, which I found to be quite an improvement on the supplied DNM lead. The variable output (connected using Nordost SPM) tended to sound a bit vague, with slightly less bite and focus, but of course would come into its own when used directly into a power amplifier. While this is fairly impractical in my system, I did try it out of curiosity with good results (and of course the convenience of remote control volume), but given the choice preferred the fixed output option feeding my pre-amp, which seemed to offer a better soundstage with greater depth.

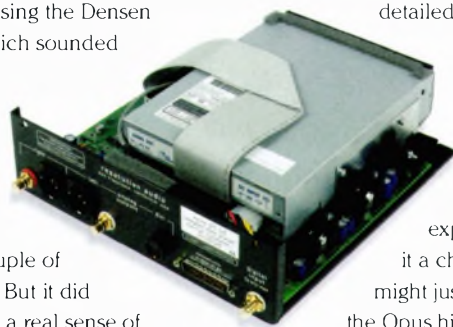
The Opus really is very sweet sounding. Devoid of any grain, it enabled aspects of texture, tonal colour and thus the character of musical instruments to be clearly portrayed. Smooth but not bland – string music

had a sumptuous quality about it, but not at the expense of detail, which has sometimes been a trade off with other players. Spacious and very open, acoustics and the associated boundaries were beautifully preserved, each note decaying perfectly into virtual silence. The overall effect could be quite seductive, particularly with orchestral music, quite often I would start to play a piece with the intention of listening to one movement and end up playing the whole disc. The Opus's strengths in this area were highlighted when I returned to using the Densen 400 XS player, which sounded quite coarse and almost rude by comparison, its much more up front presentation coming as a bit of a shock after a couple of months without it. But it did manage to convey a real sense of drama to the Peter Gabriel re-masters that I have been evaluating, whereas the Opus sounded far less emphatic and a little uncertain when the music became energetic and things got complicated. But that beguiling openness laid bare subtleties and aspects of the recordings that it would be all too easy to miss with other players.

The Opus 21 has been both rewarding and frustrating to review. I feel that the last couple of years have seen some major advances in the performance of CD players, particularly in this sort of price range. Previously

I felt that machines seemed to fall into one of two camps: they either majored on musical dynamics, or offered a very smooth, refined but ultimately unexciting performance. As someone who listens to a wide range of music and craves both of these aspects for my listening, it's been encouraging to see the gap closing, and the emergence of

players that I find really satisfying to listen to, ironically at a time when the medium is under threat. The Resolution has undergone a lot of evolution and changed direction quite considerably. While the CD55 was a player that was forward in character and did not hesitate to thrust its hand down the front of your trousers, the Opus is considerably more refined and classy. Polite, and possibly a bit too reserved in its presentation for some tastes, attention to the support goes some way to redressing the balance without compromising the highly detailed, finely etched qualities that make listening to music with this machine such a comfortable experience. Give it a chance and you might just discover that the Opus hides its musical light under a bushel: Revealed it burns bright indeed. ➤+



#### TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

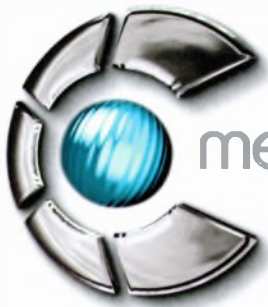
Analogue Outputs:	Balanced XLR Variable Unbalanced RCA Phono Variable Unbalanced DIN Fixed
Input:	Digital s/dpif RCA 75 Ohm
Output voltage:	5.0 Volts Balanced 2.5 Volts unbalanced
Output impedance:	100 Ohms
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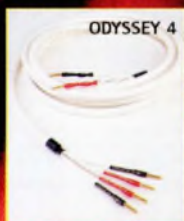
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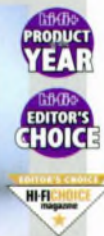


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# The Cyrus 8 Integrated Amplifier

by Chris Binns

"It's a feisty little bugger isn't it?"

Perhaps not the most technical of appraisals, but true nonetheless. The diminutive little box that is the Cyrus integrated is certainly powerful, but perhaps more importantly can keep its head with considerable dignity under the most demanding of conditions. Like driving a pair of not particularly efficient three Ohm loudspeakers with a madman in charge of the remote control. Most of the unkind jokes that are made about drummers are true... In this case the guy was going mental with the volume control, listening to a recording we had just done, with, I have to say, a rather over the top rhythm section. Before I could snatch the remote back we had explored levels that were utterly ridiculous, but at no stage was there any sign of stress – truly, the Cyrus behaved with all the decorum of some well endowed monster power amplifier.

There was a time when the delineation between integrated and pre/power amplifier combinations was clear cut. Apart from the obvious cost considerations, power output dictated that at some stage, you were going to need bigger boxes, more heat sinking, while keeping large transformers away from sensitive phono circuitry. Take that out of the equation and add in smaller, more efficient components, and one can begin to see why there are a number of highly specified integrated amplifiers about. But I was still highly surprised

by the sheer amount of grunt available from what is a pretty small box by any standards.

Built within the now pretty familiar compact Cyrus casing, the '8 is a refinement of the earlier 7 integrated, with a number of improvements on board, not least of which is the general finish of the metalwork,



which is even neater than I remember with previous products. Apart from that, there is nothing visually to distinguish this model from earlier incarnations: it is inside with the electronics that improvements have been made. Power output has increased to seventy Watts per channel into eight ohms, with enough current to almost double this into four – as I had already confirmed, this is a powerful, load tolerant design. Several areas of the circuit have received attention to bring this about. The power supply comprises a beefy 330VA toroidal transformer feeding large, high quality reservoir capacitors, in fact generally component quality looks to be good.

The output stage has been re-engineered to provide higher current capability while halving the output impedance, allowing greater control of the loudspeaker particularly under heavy drive.

It is also more efficient and this combined with more advanced thermal management means the amplifier should run cooler, ultimately improving reliability. Full protection is provided for short circuits or elevated temperatures: in the event that the amplifier has to shut down the output stage is electronically disabled – this prevents having to use a relay in the loudspeaker circuit with the consequent signal degradation. (I once witnessed a Lecson amp which had gone DC - the relay was attempting to disconnect the loudspeakers – the contacts vaporised and set the amplifier alight...)

Despite the simplicity of the front panel there is a considerable degree of flexibility; five line inputs (plus two tape, with dubbing from one to two) are complemented by two outputs, tape and pre-out. Actually, make that three; unusually these days there is a headphone output as well. This is activated by the switch on the front panel. A useful touch is that input sensitivity is adjustable on each input, enabling the user to unify volume levels from each different source. Parallel pairs of loudspeaker

▶ sockets are fitted, but much as I wish they were standard 4mm ones, they are actually the politically correct Camcon type. Volume position is usefully indicated by a ring of LED's around the rotary control:

Sounding rather harsh and brittle to begin with, a few days of running-in seemed to knock some of the hard corners away, and by the time I sat down to do some serious listening I think it had more or less settled down.

As I have already suggested, the Cyrus 8 is a powerful little amp. It sounds authoritative and completely in control – I was quite prepared to wheel in some kinder loud-speakers for this review, but it seemed to relish the challenge so I stuck with the Primary monitors for the duration, and not once did I question this decision, even with a brain dead drummer at the controls. My overwhelming

impression after playing several discs was that the 8 was confident and bold in its presentation. With rock music it set down the fundamentals at the bass end in such a fashion that it immediately sounded engaging, while the mid range was quite up front, with plenty of detail and precision.

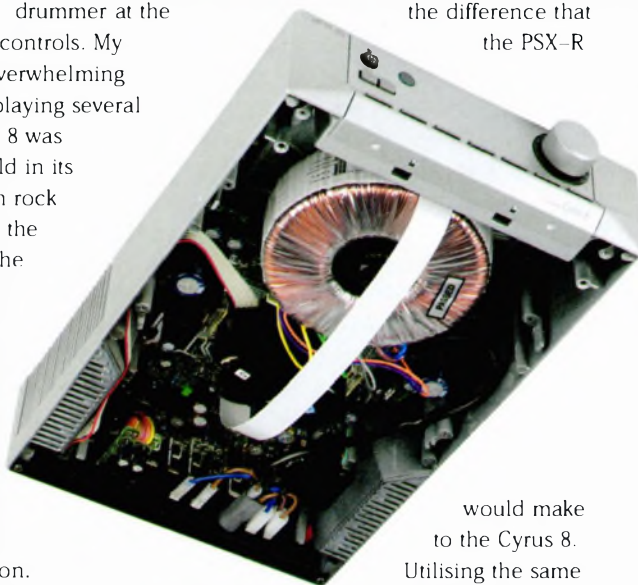
The top end, while not aggressive, was also quite forward and again clear cut, although there was a tendency for it to be a little incisive – I should imagine that loudspeakers with a 'zingy' metal dome might not

be a good match with the Cyrus. With orchestral music, instruments were reproduced realistically with all the relevant timbre and colour, while complex passages were handled well, the Cyrus's general air of authority keeping things organised; all the individual instrumental parts were easily discernable.

If the Cyrus lacked anything, I would suggest it might be a bit of warmth. There were times while I was listening that I thought it sounded a bit cold, maybe a bit too matter of fact; there are occasions when music becomes intimate and pulls you in, envelops you... The 8 is far too macho for that kind of girlie stuff. That's better left to single ended triodes. But then the Cyrus does everything that they don't, and I had to keep reminding myself that I was listening to a sub thousand pound integrated amplifier.

Having established itself as a pretty competent performer on its own, I was intrigued to hear the difference that the PSX-R

would make to the Cyrus 8. Utilising the same chassis, if anything it has undergone a more radical development than the amplifier, having developed from purely a large transformer plus reservoir caps (in the days of the ▶



likewise balance, which is accessed only from the remote. There is a mains power switch at the back, while the front panel switch leaves the amp in standby mode with crucial circuitry powered up and ready for use. The remote, incidentally, is well thought out and effective, especially if you are using Cyrus source components.

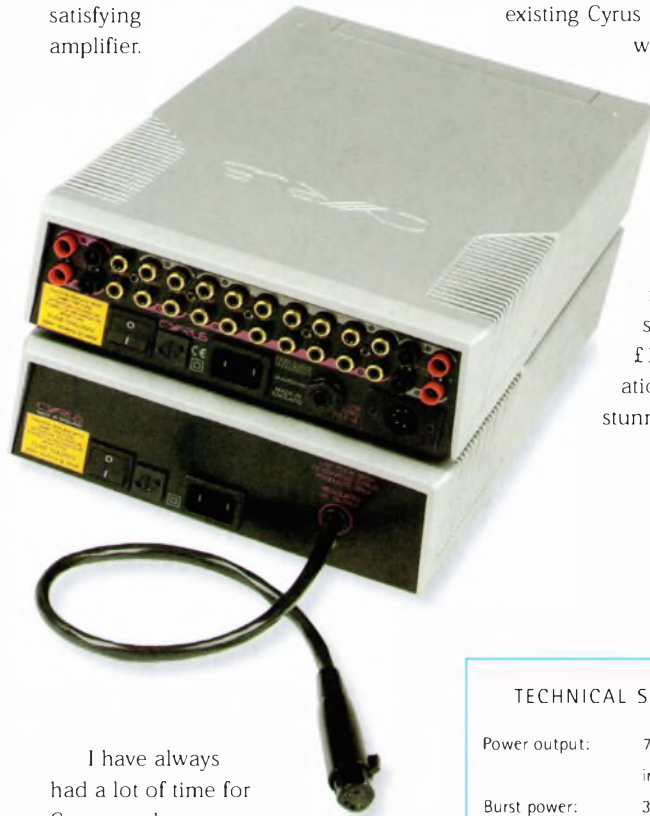
Coming from a complete mess of pre and power amps, there was something quite satisfying about installing the Cyrus 8 and being able to clear up the birds nest of cables that normally graces one corner of the room, and there is also the one big advantage of an integrated – one less interconnect cable. It did, mind you look a little bit lost in the space recently occupied by the large collection of power supplies and pre / power amps that it replaced.



▶ original Mission Cyrus two) to a fully regulated, intelligent power supply. If proof of this were needed, internally the PSX-R looks much like a stereo power amplifier in terms of components and topology, which is hardly surprising as this is effectively what it is, but supplying smooth DC as opposed to audio signal. The intelligence comes into it as the PSX-R is able to sense the requirements of the Cyrus equipment it is partnered with, such as the CD player or pre amp, and supply the correct rail voltages for the application.

The first thing I noticed was that the Cyrus sounded like a bigger amplifier. Not so much in terms of output volume, which was quite adequate anyway, but in the sheer presence of music emanating from the speakers. Broader, higher...just bigger; the whole presentation was enlarged over what the 8 could do on its own. Within the expanded sound stage positioning and imagery were much improved, while there was not only increased detail with better definition and edge, but a cleaner sound all round that had the effect of highlighting the 'darker' spaces between sounds very effectively. Bass performance was even better with more slam - exactly what you would expect from the addition of a large power supply to the power amplifier. Except that unlike previous PSX's, this one doesn't connect with the power amp. It specifically supplies the pre-amp section of the '8. If I hadn't of known, I would have sworn blind that it was the other way round, but then look at the upgrade hierarchy that worked so well for Naim; upgrades to the pre-amp power supply had a far more dramatic impact on performance than changing the power amp. The addition of the PSX-R takes the performance of the 8 to another level, in a really satisfying way - it seems as if the

very act of cleaning up the sound lets you further into the musical performance. The slight criticisms I had regarding the overall character being clinical and at times a bit uninvolved seemed quite diminished, the combination formed a very listenable and satisfying amplifier.



I have always had a lot of time for Cyrus products. Previous experience has shown them to be fuss free, reliable and highly capable of getting on with the job. The 8 is no exception. It is versatile from the point of view of system building, nice to use, and above all has driving capabilities that will not limit the choice of loudspeakers. (Incidentally, I've just thought - I wonder what it would sound like with a pair of electrostatics?) In many ways, it is the antithesis of low powered valve amplifiers both in character and what it will do, and I love the fact that it all comes in such a small, neat package. And at £800? Must

be a bargain. But I think the best bit is the option of the PSX-R upgrade. It does exactly what I hoped, addressing the weaker areas of the 8 and by doing so, bringing it several levels up in its performance; and much as I hate it, the term 'budget esoterica' really does apply. For an existing Cyrus 8 owner, at £350 it

would probably be one of the most satisfying and enjoyable upgrades they could make. That, of course is if they could resist buying it straight out: at £1150 the combination is really quite stunning. ➤

#### TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Power output:	70 Watts per channel into 8 Ohms
Burst power:	340Watts one channel driven into 1 Ohm
Frequency response:	- 3dB, 0.2 Hz - 85 KHz
Input impedance:	50K Ohm
Output voltage:	200mV (tape) 380 mV (pre out)
Dimensions (WxHxD):	215x73x360 mm
Weight:	5.5Kg (Cyrus 8)
Finish:	Silver or satin black
Prices -	
Cyrus 8:	£800
PSX-R:	£350

#### Manufacturer:

Cyrus Electronics  
Tel. (44)(0)1480 435577  
Net. [www.cyrus.co.uk](http://www.cyrus.co.uk)



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# The Real Deal

## Creek CD 50 CD Player

by Roy Gregory

"First do no harm" is a dictum much used in the medical profession. It's a shame more CD player designers don't follow it, especially at the lower end of the market. Way too many budget players spend all their time delivering more and more detail without ever trying to make sense of all that information. Unfortunately, it's one of the reasons that so few cheap players really satisfy (or get to appear in these pages): Hi-fi impressive, ten a penny, but really musical? Now that's another matter all together.

Of course, there are exceptions to this rule, and companies such as Rega and Rotel have consistently produced players that do succeed in putting solid musical performance ahead of the short-term spectacular. To that list you can add Creek too, represented here in the shape of their cheapest offering, the new CD 50, replacement for the venerable CD 43. The new players have finally shaken off the rather drab casework that clothed the older models, and despite its junior status the 50 shares the same solid aluminium fascia and silver option that grace the CD 53 giving it an altogether sharper appearance. It's a very necessary and long overdue step that finally brings the look and feel of the Creek machines in line with the opposition. And let's face it, people look and touch before they ever listen, so it can be difficult for superior sound quality to overcome substandard aesthetics. Well, it's not a problem the Creeks need concern themselves with in future.

JH covered the 53's internals in some detail back in Issue 18 so I won't labour the point here, as the two players share

a great deal in common. Instead, let's look at the differences. Well, it's slightly smaller in depth, the casework behind the fascia being formed from steel rather than the 53's aluminium. There's only one mains transformer rather than the two in the more expensive machine, along with less reservoir capacitance and a slightly simplified power supply arrangement. Besides that the 50 loses the balanced

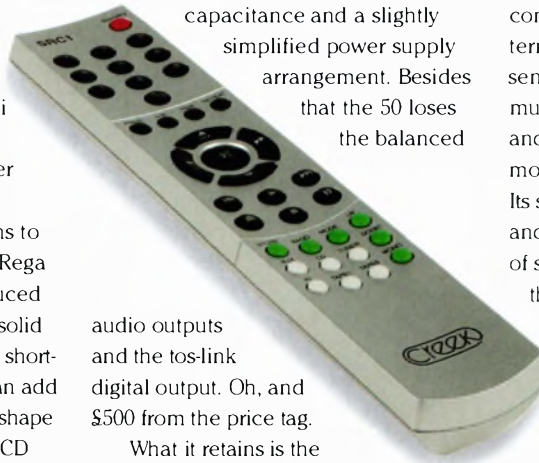
audio outputs and the tos-link digital output. Oh, and £500 from the price tag.

What it retains is the heavily filtered power supply, transport and chipset from the more expensive player, along with the considerable care and attention that's gone into protecting them from RF and other mains bourne nasties. It also, along with the fascia, shares the comprehensive control layout of the 53, which means that you can do most things short of programming the player (does anybody actually bother?) from the front panel. Everything else is covered by the supplied system remote complete with the necessary buttons to drive Creek amplifiers and tuners. You get the obligatory numerical keypad, but otherwise I'm happy to do without remote control, and the CD 50, in common with other machines, sounds better if you drive it from its

fascia buttons anyway.

Now, the resident budget players chez Gregory are the Rega Jupiter and the sadly unavailable Helios Model 1, both of which will set you back the wrong side of £1000, so they provide pretty stiff competition for the £700 Creek. Not that it quails from the comparison. Indeed, particularly in terms of clarity, separation and the sense of organisation that keeps all the musical elements in the right place and the right proportion it matches the more expensive players blow for blow. Its sound is open, precise and delicate, and if it lacks anything then it's the kind of substance, colour and sheer weight that comes with much larger price tags. However, having those things doesn't necessarily make a player better. It's not enough just to have them, you've actually got to know what to do with them, and all too often they become an embarrassment rather than the benefit they're supposed to represent. Too much weight or substance and a player can sound thick, cloying and earthbound. Too much colour and the mid-band becomes blurred and muddled, the highs rounded and sat on. Any of the above will rob the music of pace, life and ultimately interest. All of the above are crimes regularly committed by expensive high-end players from manufacturers that should know better. In stark contrast, the Creek's easy clarity and grace add up to the most important quality of all – listenability.

Playing the Cicero Buck album *Delicate Shades Of Grey*, the CD 50 effortlessly differentiates the various vocal styles employed by Kris Wilkinson ▶



▶ as she shapes the fragile delicacy of 'Lullaby', the raunchy, earthy power of 'Beautiful Daydreamer'. Likewise it immediately picks the raw, unfinished urgency of the last three tracks on the album, each recorded in a different studio. Pared down rhythm tracks or drums replace the slick production of the rest of the album and suddenly the two piece sounds exactly like what it is, with all the space and easy intimacy that allows. The Creek easily steps from one musical landscape to the next, keeping track of the common strands that bind the album together, while simultaneously revealing the evolving shape and nature of events.

It's this ability to provide unfettered access to the musical event that sets the CD 50 apart, whilst at the same time qualifying it for membership of a very select group indeed. Leave price aside for a moment. The baby Creek makes music engaging and intelligible, which puts it head and shoulders above most CD players. Its crisp clarity is easy to read and easy to enjoy, delivering the musical message intact and largely complete. This is a very easy player to like.

Of course, quickly compare it to any number of other machines, at this or cheaper prices and you might be disappointed. Detail, detail, detail: that and hyped mid-bass dynamics and dollops of extra energy, all designed to impress. But as I noted earlier, it's no good doing detail if you don't do organisation too. Otherwise it simply ends up confusing the issue. What starts out as superficially impressive rapidly wears thin. Instead, take your time and appreciate the Creek's manners and

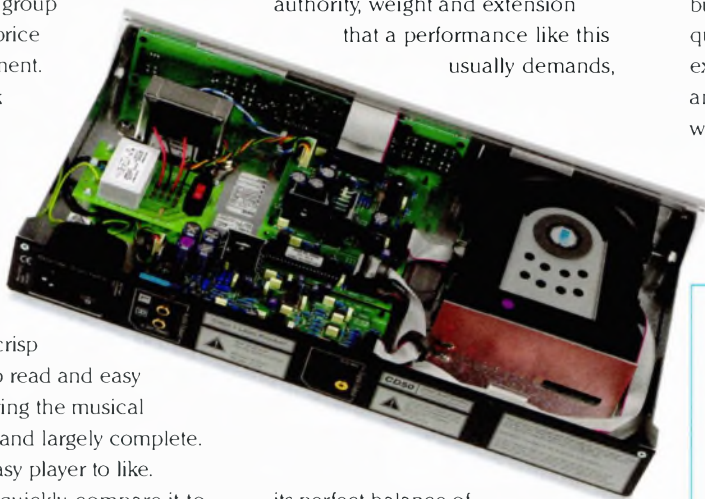
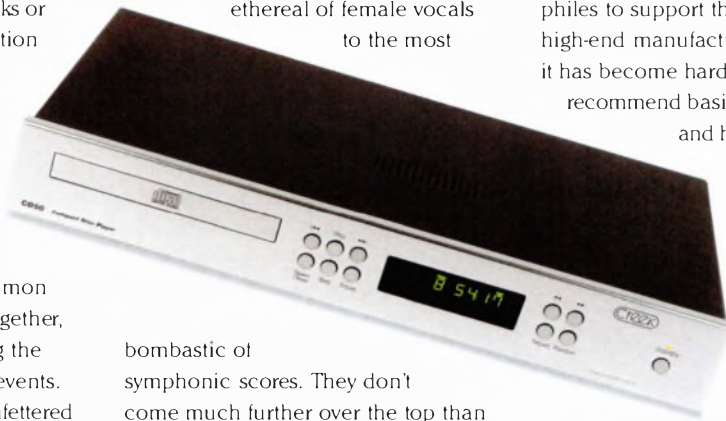
finesse, its sense of overall balance and musical purpose. These are the qualities that'll keep you listening to your player long after the novelty has worn off. They're also the qualities that mean it can handle everything from the most ethereal of female vocals to the most

bombastic of symphonic scores. They don't come much further over the top than Fritz Reiner's *Also Sprach Zarathustra* (XRCD JMCXR-0011) and even if it lacks the absolute low frequency authority, weight and extension that a performance like this usually demands,

its perfect balance of dynamic forces means the music's drama and impact remain impressively intact – especially through the quieter passages. Likewise the conductor's colourful performance of the Dvorak *New World Symphony*. Sure the timps lack scale and weight, but does that detract from the overall sense of the music. Meanwhile the nimble orchestration is deftly handled, the swift, almost cinematic dynamic sweeps perfectly placed and scaled.

It's a bravura performance from one so young.

Musically convincing yet affordable equipment is the life-blood of the high-end. Without it no new buyers catch the bug, there are no aspiring audiophiles to support the aspirations of high-end manufacturers. In recent years it has become harder and harder to recommend basic hi-fi equipment, and hardest of all have been CD players. With the CD 50, Creek have gone a long way to rectifying that situation. And I think it's safe to conclude that the role of stepping-stone to the high-end might not be the way they see themselves. If it was then I doubt they'd be building affordable machines that are quite so capable of embarrassing more expensive hardware. Buy the baby Creek and you might ultimately want more weight, a finer tonal palette and greater resolution, but I doubt you'll be left wanting more music, and that's a performance that impresses the hell out of me.



#### TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Integrated CD player
Transport:	Philips CD7
Outputs:	1 pr analogue (phonos) 1x digital (phono)
Output Level:	2.2V
Output Impedance:	100 Ohms
Chipset:	CS 4396
Dimensions (WxHxD):	430 x 60 x 230mm
Weight:	4.5 kg
Finishes:	Black or silver
Price:	£699

**Manufacturer:**  
Creek Audio Ltd  
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**Stereo Stereo**

For all the latest news on the show, stay tuned to Hi-Fi + for the updates as they happen.

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# Vinyl Survival

A format is a lot more than just a way to store information. Just ask Sony, caught up in the struggle to launch SACD. Of course, there's all the replay hardware that goes with it, but beyond that there's an entire infrastructure that embraces everything from styli to software storage systems. An established medium sits at the heart of an extensive web of interlocking manufacturers and suppliers, all offering mutual support. But once that format declines in popularity that supporting structure crumbles quicker than a sandcastle facing the incoming tide.

The twelve-inch long playing record enjoyed a healthy spell in the sun, embracing technological developments that stretched from the original microgroove pressings right up to direct cuts, DMM and single sided audiophile pressings. But whatever the record they all shared common replay equipment and accessories. Indeed, a vast industry was devoted to supporting and playing the humble LP; an industry that went into an almost immediate tailspin of terminal decline once CD had conquered the High St.

LPs never went away. Indeed, they're enjoying something of a resurgence in popularity, especially at the quality end of the market. The problem is that the very necessary supporting infrastructure has all but disappeared, or at best, gone underground, which presents the analogue aficionado with something of a problem when it comes to fuelling his habit. And not only that. The changing nature of the market and particularly the increasing importance of secondhand software have shifted the requirements. So with that in mind we have decided to serve up a users'



guide to analogue survival, a roadmap (in current parlance) to keeping your records playing. Part reviews, part commentary, it should be useful to vinyl newcomer and analogue diehards alike. This is only the first section, with more to come next month, (including record care and storage, pricey phono stages and tonearm pottractors) but what better place to start than at the beginning?

## Aging Turntables

When records disappeared from the racks at HMV then a lot of turntables went with them, along with the companies manufacturing them. That means spare parts can be a real problem, however, all is not necessarily lost. In the UK, whilst I'd hesitate to describe them as derivative, a great many designs shared certain common features, not least the Impex synchronous motor. Indeed, turntables are essentially so simple that they should, if treated with appropriate respect, give a long and trouble free life. Major repairs following an unscheduled trip down the stairs are probably out, but basic maintenance should be doable. That runs to bearing

oil and drive belts, and whilst you might not be able to get exactly the right belt or the audiophile approved grade of oil, both items are available from a number of sources.

Drive belts present the biggest headache. Clearly, the likes of Linn, Rega and Michell are still able to supply spares for their turntables. Outside of that, for 'tables that use a peripheral drive system then either VPI or Michell belts (especially the rather stretchy Gyrodec belt) can be pressed into service. The various AR/Thorens derivatives (which include Linn, Ariston, Systemdek, Logic Manticore and others I've long forgotten) can generally get by on a Linn belt, although Systemdek parts are still available from ART and Audionote UK. Likewise Pink Triangle still service all the decks they've ever produced, although some parts such as motors for the original Mk 1 deck are now no longer available. Clearly, using the wrong belt isn't ideal (although in some cases it might actually be superior) but it sure beats the hell out of ditching the entire turntable.

The best universal bearing oil I've come across is the specially developed Garrard version, still available through Loricraft. This was specifically formulated to run at low speeds and sounds noticeably better than the others I've tried. Where the manufacturer is still in a position to supply the stock grade, I'd go with that, or at least inquire first before swapping, but where that isn't the case, I'd have no qualms about using the Garrard type. And don't forget that Loricraft can also service and refurbish the old Garrard idler drive decks like the 301 and 401. ▶

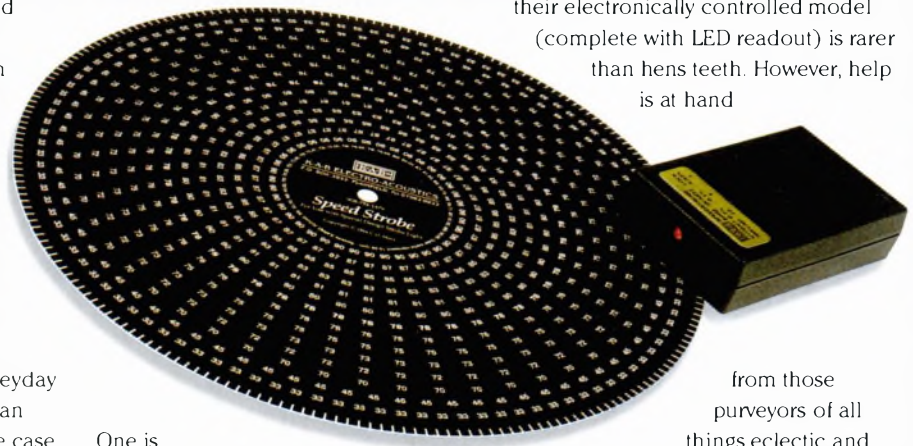
# Stroboscopes and speed accuracy

by Roy Gregory

You only have to look at the VPI TNT HRX to see the lengths to which designers go in the pursuit of speed stability. Two motors driving a flywheel, which in turn drives a platter fitted with a massive, peripheral weight. What's less obvious is the equal attention that goes into speed accuracy. Take a look at the separate power supply and you'll see that it allows adjustment of the voltage supplied to the motor in steps of 0.01 of a Volt, and whilst that might seem excessive, an increasing number of turntables are finally offering the owner the ability to fine tune the speed. Indeed, at the other end of VPI's range, even the basic Scout offers the simple but effective expedient of a grooved and tapered drive pulley. All of which is in stark contrast to the heyday of vinyl replay when you simply ran your deck as supplied (and in the case of the LP12, touched it at your peril!).

But, whereas the failings of speed stability are obvious those of poor speed accuracy are far more insidious. Indeed, at one time manufacturers had a habit of setting tables to run very slightly fast, making the sound quick and superficially more crisp and dynamic. Unfortunately, initially impressive, the result is to collapse the spacing between notes and the relationship between instruments, as well as sharpening the pitch. The result is to make it harder to hear what's happening, to understand the music. That makes it tiring to listen to, the pushy, hectoring quality quickly becoming irritating. If you have a turntable with adjustable speed, advance it a couple of notches and you'll see what I mean.

The way to set absolute speed accurately is with a strobe disc and a hand-held, battery powered lamp that's independent of the mains. There are a few out there, the easiest to get hold of coming from Loricraft, but by far the best I've found is made by Clearaudio. It takes the form of a white 180g LP printed with a strobe pattern on each side.



One is a conventional 50Hz spacing that can be used to read speed with most hand-held lamps. But it's the other side where things start to get impressive. This uses a 300Hz pattern that is used with a specially supplied battery lamp running a blue LED. The higher speed makes for greater accuracy, as does the blank groove cut into both sides. It means that for the first time you are measuring speed with a record on the platter and a needle in the groove. This is definitely the way to do it, albeit at a cost of £100. Pricy but perfect.

## And for 78s...

A seldom appreciated fact is that 78s present their own speed related problem to turntable manufacturers:

namely that they aren't actually cut at 78 at all. In fact, they could be cut at anything between 68 and around 92 RPM, which is a hell of a range when it comes to pitch variation. The problem of a simple, repeatable and adjustable pitch control is one that's bedeviled 78 users for years. Indeed, as far as I can recall only STD ever achieved such a set-up in a high quality turntable, and their electronically controlled model

(complete with LED readout) is rarer than hens teeth. However, help is at hand

from those purveyors of all things eclectic and audio, KAB, available in the UK through Moth. Their Speed Strobe is, as the name suggests, a strobe disc, complete with a 60 Hz hand held lamp, that depends on numbers rather than the more traditional bars. Simply adjust speed until the desired band of numbers is stationary and there you are. And with a numerical range that consists of 33, 45 and 12 discrete values equally spaced between 70 and 90, setting a specific pitch becomes both quick and simple. As long as you note on your discs the correct setting, achieving proper playback should be a piece of cake.

At £75, the KAB is a cheaper and more versatile alternative to the Clearaudio, and invaluable for those who want to step back in time to



- higher groove velocities. Besides, you can put the money you save on not having to buy an expensive, speed corrected *Kind Of Blue* towards the cost, which makes it even more of a bargain.

### Test and Set-Up Records

Further invaluable help when it comes to getting a turntable really dialed in, is hidden in the grooves of test LPs. The difference between a precisely aligned cartridge and one that's about right has to be heard to be believed, and whilst protractors are an essential starting point (and one I'll return to) there's no substitute for test discs when it comes to checking tracking, azimuth and downforce.



Of course, the final judgement comes from music, but you need repeatable benchmark tests too.



The best available discs are the ones from Hi-Fi News and Image Hi-fi, both laden with useful technical aids. A different, but equally useful disc is produced by Clearaudio. It consists of a dozen musical excerpts, beautifully recorded and complete with

detailed descriptions of what you should expect in each case. Combined with one of the technical discs it is a powerful aid to optimising vinyl replay (and protecting your valuable records into the bargain). ➤

# Affordable Phono-Stages

by Jason Hector

Outboard or stand-alone phono-stages have been seen as the best solution in the high-end for some time, but at the lower end of the market the extra cost of yet another box, the socketry, cables and power supplies was usually too much to bear. However, with the prevalence of line-level only pre and integrated amplifiers, the stand-alone phono-stage is often the only solution for those after a little of that black vinyl magic. In this review I will be reporting on the music-making abilities of four affordable options: The Project Phono Box, Rega Fono, Lehman Black cube and GSP Audio Era Gold. When the editor offered me this review I was really interested, but when you realise that three of the four phono-stages offer the choice of MM and MC it dawns on you that seven separate options need to be considered, and that is a serious amount of reviewing

by any standards. Luckily all of the options were different enough to make the process interesting and it was a pleasant surprise to find good value in all of these boxes.

All of the phono-stages were substituted into the current incarnation of my own system:

Upstream was a mixture of my LP12 shod with a Naim Aro arm and either a Dynavector 10X4 high output MC (to test the MM performance) or a Dynavector TeKaitora for MC. Thanks to Naim Audio I was supplied with a spare Aro arm top making cartridge swaps a little more of a Formula 1 and a little less of a "Ron's Tyres, give them a kick it's the only test we know" experience. Also pressed into service was my newly installed Well Tempered Reference turntable and arm with a Dynavector 17D2 cartridge. This allowed a little more insight into the

MC performance of the stages.

To control the signal from the phono-stage under test I was using a Dynavector L100 pre-amplifier, connecting this to a Dynavector HX75 power amplifier and Shahinian Obelisk speakers. All of the electronics rested on Hutter Racktime shelves. Interconnection was achieved with either Chord Company Chrysalis or home made cables using Bullet plugs and my preferred cable. Speaker cables were Naim NACA5. The reference phono-stage during the reviewing period was my Dynavector P100 and my memories of my Naim prefix which was removed from the LP12 for these reviews. The Dynavector P100 actually comprises completely separate, neutral and similar sounding MM and MC phono-stages in one box making comparisons and variable elimination a whole lot easier. ➤

Across the reviewing period I listened to a wide slice of my record collection to ensure I had a good sense of the strengths and weaknesses of the phono-stages and I tried to avoid direct A-B comparisons as much as possible. That said, the following records featured heavily when these phono-stages were being used.

- Bruce Springsteen – *The Rising*
- Sue Garner – *To Run More Smoothly*
- Victoria Williams – *Happy Come Home*
- Tchaikovsky – *Violin concerto* – Decca SXML7558
- Cat Power – *You are Free*
- Orange Can – *Home Burns*

So onto the boxes ...

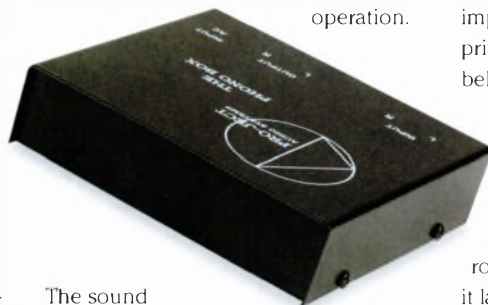
### Project – The Phono Box

The Phono Box is the cheapest phono-stage reviewed here and is one of the best inexpensive yet serious solutions available. I am certain it is the lowest priced unit to offer both MM and MC. The Project is housed in a very small and simple folded metal box. Power is provided via a wall wart type supply which outputs a stepped down AC voltage to the stage. The AC is rectified inside the Phono Box and the smoothed DC is then regulated for low noise. The circuit itself looks very simple (less to get wrong?) with just a couple of op-amps and a few other active devices sprinkled around the small PCB.

MM and MC settings are chosen through internal jumpers. These jumper settings are thoughtfully printed on the outside of the case so you shouldn't be losing them! Inputs and outputs are to standard phono sockets located on the back panel along with a serviceable earth post. One word of warning: getting the box back together after changing the gain setting is a tad messy, with four self-tapping screws holding it together, but at this price who cares?

### MM

Immediately obvious when the Project, in MM guise, entered the system was the lower gain on offer relative to the other units here. Fortunately hum and hiss are low so the volume knob can be employed without disaster. There was also a trace of DC on the outputs which meant a slight noise through the speakers on selection of the the phono-stage. Other than that it was flawless in operation.



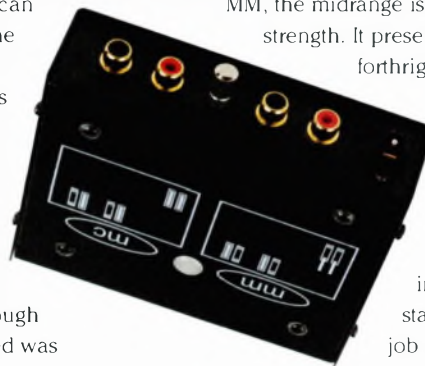
The sound was characterised as lightweight, particularly in the bass, but this can be a positive boon with lesser cartridges and systems because it won't expose any nasties. Drums do not strike you as the powerful things they obviously are and should be, and detail is obscured to some degree. The sound can be a bit slow and the congestion in the midrange is obvious and robs the sound of some of its ability to connect, simply because some inflection is missed. The treble response, though not terribly extended was realistic: cymbals for example sound better than you might expect, but while brass is raspy it lacked real bite. Unsurprisingly the Project fares better on simpler music and gets tripped up when things get complex and busy. Vocals were rendered well, nicely integrated with the music in time but projected from the mix and clearly

intelligible, although sibilance was exaggerated. The midrange is this stage's strength and since this is where the most information is presented this helps. But, most importantly, the overall result is musical and the Phono Box gets most of the message across.

### MC

Again the Project delivered a lower gain than the Rega and Lehman in their MC guises. It is an immediately impressive MC performance at this price point. In fact initially it is hard to believe how good it sounds when it is exposed to a top end source.

The Project concentrates absolutely on the fundamentals and largely gets them right. It often lacks detail so instruments are robbed of some of their richness, and it lacks resolving power when things are complex and the mix is dense, so that sometimes whole sections of instrumentation or backing is, well, lost. But again it's easy to miss the point. This little stage is enjoyable to listen to and vocalists, for example, are well presented and clearly sound like themselves. In its MC setting, as well as MM, the midrange is the stage's strength. It presents music in a



forthright, no-nonsense manner, missing subtlety but getting to the core meaning. Similarly with solo instruments: in this case the stage does a better job providing not too much is happening around it. In the MC setting it has better, more extended treble response but this does increase the fatigue factor slightly. The bass response is still weak and lacks depth and detail. It all turns one note and the notes don't start and stop as promptly as with the Rega for example, but the



▶ timing is still pretty good.

## Conclusion

It's easy to characterise this stage - musical message above everything else. It is also easy to criticise the sound, but at the price it is all but impossible to beat. It would match very well into "your first proper system" and show off upgrades both up and downstream. Good value in Hi-Fi? You bet!

Pro-Ject The Phono Box: \$45

Contact: Henley Designs  
Tel. (44)(0)208 688 6565  
Net. [www.henleydesigns.co.uk](http://www.henleydesigns.co.uk)

## Rega - Fono MM and Fono MC

Two separate Rega Fono phono-stages were supplied for this review, one for MM and one for MC as they are actually dedicated units rather than a single, switchable device. Power in both cases is derived from a separate wall wart type power supply which, like the Project, supplies AC voltage (24V in this case) to the stage itself. This low voltage AC is then rectified and regulated internally using some of the components on the neatly laid out symmetrical circuit board.

The Fono is well presented in a good quality case, especially considering the price. It matches the latest Rega house style and is available in silver or black. The Fono is a very professional looking component. Round the front we have an on/off button which has an LED at its centre indicating the stages power state. Round the back are 4 phono sockets to provide input and output and a decent earth post. I had to use a spacing washer or two to get a contact to the earth spade of the Aro arm lead.

The MC stage offers a range of loading options with independent

resistance and capacitance settings and 4 gain options all selectable via internal dip switches which are thoughtfully labelled on the circuit board. In the review sample these were not switched to the default setting and one channel had a different input resistance loading, so get your dealer to check yours before you turn it on.

## MM

An impressively musical performance is obvious from the moment the needle hits the groove. Bass is extended and vocals sound very good indeed, plenty of detail and almost all of the inflection gets through, and that really connects you with the singer. Drums have good weight but it is the timing of this stage that is excellent and it really brings a band together.

The MM Fono had low noise and was completely flawless in operation. The treble is not that extended and this helps to create a fatigue free sound, but does cause a lack of some bite with brass. It's that edgy rasp



that's subdued with the Rega. It's still there, just less obvious. Although the sound is detailed, the imaging lacks some focus, but this stage specialises on musical enjoyment and there it is very persuasive. It is a tuneful device, always emphasising the melody and hooks in the music, but not as leading edge focused as some. The sound-field between the speakers is multi-layered with instruments existing in a sensibly realistic space, making the

music a little more believable. This stage really punches above its weight.

## MC

The Fono in MC guise thrived on the signal from the TeKaitora. It really made the most of this cartridge's purity, detail and musicality. Bass response is very impressive: deep, minimal overhang and only becoming one-note when things go really low. It does not

take the full shape of notes in the bass but



does keep it all timed correctly.

The overall result is a really enjoyable sound. Tonally it is significantly weaker and less vividly shaded than the Lehman, lacking the ability to separate things out in the way the Lehman does. It is also veiled compared to my reference and the Lehman, but brass now has the required bite compared to the MM performance.

The MC stage presents drum strikes with much more authority than the MM stage and the result is much closer to the Era Gold and my Dynavector P100 than the Lehman. Vocals have real texture lending lyrics more subtlety and emotion, but the last few layers of information are lost. The MC Fono fares best on large scale sweeping orchestration or fast percussive music where its fast dynamics drag you into and along with the music and its tonal failings become less obvious.

## Conclusion

Another very good value product from the long-term masters of



▶ getting fun music from the big black discs. Not the most tonally accurate phono-stages, but what they lack here they more than make up for with a really enjoyable presentation of the musical message. Surprisingly considering this is Rega with their stated preference for MM cartridges, the MC Fono is more impressive than the MM version.

Rega Fono MM: £148, MC: £198

Contact: Rega Research Ltd  
Tel. (44)(0)1702 333071  
Net. www.rega.co.uk

### Lehman Audio - Black Cube

The Lehman is another two box device consisting of separate phono-stage and power supply, both of which are housed in simple but sturdy casework.



The power supply delivers DC voltage via a captive (to the stage) lead terminated at the power supply end by a good quality four-pin locking XLR connector. The Cube receives regulated positive and negative fifteen volts. The power supply is a long thin and squat block, sort of 2001ish if you stood it on end. The captive lead that connects it to the Cube is a good quality Klotz cable. Although it wasn't reviewed, the Cube is also available with a simple plug-top PSU that saves money at the expense of performance. You can of course upgrade to the bigger supply later.

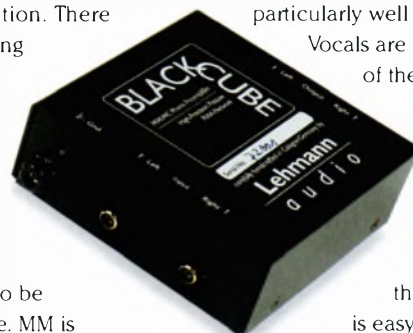
The Cube itself is housed in a smaller, square case. Inputs and

outputs are via phono sockets of reasonable quality, mounted on opposite sides of the box. The Input side also has an earth post in the form of a big 4mm binding post ensuring a high quality connection. There is a small LED indicating whether the device is powered or not. Turning the unit over reveals two banks of four Dip switches which allow the loading and the gain (MM or MC) to be tuned to your cartridge. MM is loaded with 47kOhm while MC has a series of options; 47kOhm, 470Ohm, 100Ohm, 80Ohm and a Custom load if your cartridge is not best suited to the loads available.

Internally, and reflecting the care and attention that characterises this product, the lid of the stage is damped with a rubber like slab. The single circuit board is a high quality multi-layer construction and the circuitry is implemented with good quality op-amps whilst considerable care appears to have been taken over layout and other component choice.

### MM

The moment you put the needle in the groove the first thing you notice is that you have lots of gain. The second thing is that the sound is very richly textured but neutral. The Lehmann has very good tonality with very impressive resolution of detail, but notes do not have the attack and control I prefer from my system. In a lightweight system however this could be a blessing. The Cube is slower and more deliberate than the Rega or



my P100 and though it times pretty well it's just less thrilling than either the Rega or the Era Gold. However, this more measured approach also has its appeal and the bass response is particularly well extended.

Vocals are projected in front of the music with good rendition of both male and female voices. You can't suspend disbelief, unlike the very best, but it is easy and engaging to listen to. Imaging with the cube is strong, stable and expansive, and the dynamic range is good, even if it just takes a little time to get there. The Cube simply sounds restrained next to the GSP Audio and Rega stages. Compared to the Era Gold, for example, we are sitting several rows further back from the performance. Overall the MM set Cube is more of a dissector of the music and production than an integrator of the various strands.

### MC

With the Cube set to MC the sound has a remarkably similar overall character to the sound with MM. We are presented with a detailed picture and the step up in quality to the TeKaitora is ludicrously large, delivering that hard to describe rightness of a big MC cartridge. The Cube has loads and loads of gain in MC mode with hardly any hiss, which is another blessing if your preferred cartridge has a particularly low output. Both large-scale dynamics and the resolution ▶





▶ of very small loudness changes are well handled and this allows the stage to sound good with the volume low. Fortunately the MC setting cures some of the reticence found with MM, you are moved a couple of rows further forward dynamically and fortunately miles closer to the musical message.

The way the cube resolves instruments into their own space and time is ahead of the other stages and it is easy to listen in on and isolate a particular performer or strand in the mix. Instruments sound very realistic but they are removed from you emotionally. There is better integration of the musical message with MC than MM but the cube still does not really gell as well as the Rega Fono or my P100. In all honesty, I preferred the way the Rega integrated the strands into a whole, but for those who prefer a more academic presentation the Lehman is an impressive phono-stage.

## Conclusion

The Lehman Black Cube appeals to the head more than the heart, with good tonality and detail resolution and is by far the best of the group for even-handedness across the frequency band. The MC performance was much more impressive than MM and this is a stage more suited to, and very good value for, somebody who demands low noise, accuracy, detail and realistic tone.

Lehmann Black Cube: \$325.  
With PSU upgrade: \$450

Contact: Activ Distribution  
Tel. (44)(0)1635 291357  
Net. [www.activdistribution.com](http://www.activdistribution.com)

## GSP Audio - Era Gold phono-stage

The Era Gold is MM only in this form. For MC cartridges a head amp is available but this would have pushed the total cost well outside of the

scope of this review. The Era Gold is supplied with the GSP Audio PSU1 high performance power supply, which supplies a DC voltage to the phono-stage via a pretty poor plug. The Lehman puts these power socketry arrangements



(GSP Audio, Rega and the Project, and we can forgive the Project on cost!) to shame. A locking connector is always the best solution for a separate power supply, especially with this much gain in the system. The rest of the build is basic but substantial. The phono sockets are of very high quality and again we have a large multi-way binding post for the earth lead.

The circuits are laid out in a very careful and compact fashion in an attempt to keep all the components as close together as possible in order to shorten signal paths. However, this idea then seems to be slightly compromised by connecting the board to the phono sockets via lengths of shielded cable. Noise from the Era Gold is low and you have plenty of gain. The unit was totally flawless in operation.

The era gold sounds like a combination between the better points of the Rega and the Lehman. So we have the better detail retrieval and instrumental tone of the Lehman, but with the faster and more agile sound of the Rega, all on top of the

all important integration of the musical message. Rhythms are well presented: it doesn't simply lock to the most forceful riff, nor is it metronomic where the performers are more fluid. The bass response is excellent and is easily the best of the MM bunch, with a tactile and forceful drum representation which really sounds like a stick hitting a tight membrane. The deep bass lacks overhang and is well timed and avoids any one-note tendency.

This phono-stage had a free and unrestricted sound which is clear and lucid,

allowing instruments to have a real reach out and touch sound with all of the harmonics present and correct. Vocals stand clear of the mix and like the instruments, are very realistic. When required the Era Gold really allows the emotion through.

Brass instruments are wonderfully raucous and real but the treble is slightly



splashy compared to the iron control of my DV stage. Frequency response does favour the bass and treble with the mid a little recessed, especially the lower mid, robbing some instruments of richness and tonal identity. Overall it's a very impressive performance, with the 10X4 and GSP Audio combination performing way outside of the expected envelope for their price. In fact, listening to this system in ▶

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► isolation, you start to question why you should ever spend more.

### Conclusion

If you are in the market for a serious phono-stage for MM or high output MC then the GSP audio will be the one the others have to beat. It is so good that you might even start doubting the need for an MC at all.

GSP Era Gold: £400

Contact: The Cartridge Man  
Tel. (44)(0)208 688 6565

### Summing Up...

I was pleasantly surprised by the sound quality offered by these affordable phono-stages. The Project Phono Box is ridiculously cheap and can show it at times, but the sound and features available at the price are fantastic and, in a way, that puts it beyond criticism. The Lehmann Black cube would not be my first choice but in many areas it offers a taste of the high end at a very sensible price. I just wish it was a little less restrained. There will be those out there who marvel at its abilities and for them it is probably the only game in town. The GSP

Audio Era Gold is beyond a shadow of doubt the best stage here for MM, almost making MC cartridges (at least low output ones!) seem unnecessary with its neutral yet enthusiastic and dynamic sound. So all of these stages offer good value but overall I believe that the Rega Fono, especially in MC form offers the best performance per pound/euro/dollar. It delivers good detail retrieval, pace and dynamics, and best of all, a fun and musical sound which connects you intimately with whatever track you throw at it. That's my favourite – but in the words of the ad... "How do you eat yours?"



# Moving On Up... Mid-Price Phono-Stages

by Alan Sircom

There's a temptation to compare and contrast when evaluating similarly-priced products that do the same job. But in the world of high end audio, each product stands on its own performance. So, don't look for 'the best' phono stage here, this isn't that sort of review!

All four phono stages were given a thorough run-in before critical listening. Each played records from an SME Model 10 turntable and a trio of cartridges designed to show what these phono stages can do: a still-serviceable Audio-Technica AT-OC9 low-output moving-coil, an Ortofon MC-7500 really low-output moving-coil and a Shure V15VxMR moving magnet

(where appropriate).

### Benz-Micro Lukaschek PP-1

Some think a phono stage should be basic, verging on the ugly: sound good, style bad. Benz-Micro (and its boss Albert Lukaschek) is not a subscriber to this utilitarian viewpoint; the tiny PP-1 phono stage is



immaculately finished in mirrored chrome metal and looks a class act.

It's a moving-coil phono stage only. There isn't even a power switch; just a pair of gold-plated phono sockets for turntable input, another pair for output to the amplifier and an earth tag, all on the shiny chrome top of the PP-1. Throw in an external plug-top power transformer and that's about it. There are no jumpers or DIP switches to adjust the loading, or allow switching between MM and MC cartridges. This is a deliberate action; such switchery would add extra, potentially sonically deleterious components in the signal path. So, it's minimal on the outside and minimal on the inside.



▶ The PCB is extremely small, with just two bipolar transistors in each amplifier stage, making exceptionally short paths. The bulk of the PP-1's circuit-board is taken up with sophisticated power supply regulation. Those components are all of extremely high tolerance, featuring extensive use of sonically-superior polypropylene and metal/plastic film capacitors and metal film resistors.

There is an innate sense of 'rightness' to the PP-1's sound, thanks in part to powerful and well-defined, yet not overblown bass, the sort of attention to detail chess grandmasters would be proud of and a soundstage so wide it could have its own post-code. But most of all, this is one of the most beautiful sounding phono stages around at the price. My prize LP possession – a late 1950s Decca recording of the D'Oyly Carte company performing *The Pirates of Penzance* – is so dynamic, so expansive and so detailed you can almost hear the make-up artists at work backstage. But, best of all, the sound is so magically performed through the PP-1, it makes you almost cry.

That sonic beauty doesn't mean the PP-1 is somehow veiled or rose-tinted. It simply delivers the full range of instrumental colour and harmonics. Paradoxically, that is proved by more raw and gutsy recordings like 'Trouble With Classicists' from *Songs For Drella*, by Lou Reed and John Cale. This stays raw and stark, but the humanity of Lou Reed's voice comes through the hard edged, digitally-recorded sound. Something big, warm and audiophile will sound like a big, warm audiophile's dream through the PP-1, but the detail and authoritative bass of the PP-1 also make this great for those who break out in hives at

the merest brush with audiophile sensibilities. Pinched or etched it isn't.

In short, this is the most expensive phono stage in the group and it looks and sounds like it. The Benz-Micro Lukaschek PP-1 has a luxury sound that's hard to get, even at twice the price.



Price: £690  
 UK Distributor:  
 Audiofreaks  
 Tel: (44)(0)20 8948 4153  
 E-mail: info@audiofreaks.co.uk  
 Website: www.audiofreaks.co.uk

### Plinius Jarrah

The jury is out on the plank of Jarrah wood that passes for a fascia on the Plinius. Either it's a rich and luxurious touch of class; or looks as tacky and dated as a hostess trolley. You almost expect a pair of valves sticking out of the top



plate of the product, but if you are looking for valve sound, this is not the place to go.

There are no valves inside the Jarrah at all, but there are stacks of discrete solid-state components. Hundreds of 'em, all of extremely high quality and not a one surface mounted. And not an integrated circuit in sight, either. There is provision for adjusting the gain and loading of the cartridge connected; although not in the same league as the Trigon Vanguard,

the Jarrah covers most phono cartridge bases. And, like all four phono stages in the group, it comes with a plug-top power supply.

The Kiwi-built phono stage makes a big, keen and dynamic sound, in the style of classic Krell electronics. It paints soundstages with broad strokes and huge dynamic range. It sounds heavily engineered, as if the densely-packed circuit board bestows some kind of bolted-down authority to the sound. This is very much a phono-stage for the cerebral listener, wanting to delve into the hidden recesses of the soundstage. Those who frankly couldn't give a stuff about image depth just so long as it can cope with Metallica at full thrash will not be disappointed, either. That sheer dynamic drive and energy can grip hold of any amplifier and drive it to its end-stops without any trouble. Add to this the sort of bass that delves into the darkest pits without being over-blown or emphasising the rhythm too greatly, and you have a performance that is extremely well balanced from top to toe.

Few phono-stages at this price sound so confident, so capable of being played with all forms of music equally well. It is perhaps ▶



► the best all-rounder of the bunch. Perhaps too competent; for this is the antithesis of the likes of the Trigon, and can be a bit of an excitement-free zone. While it is stunningly open and large, making the D'Oyly Carte appear vast and precisely detailed, the entertainment factor is less of a highlight. You can hear every voice in the chorus clearly delineated from every other, you can hear precisely what they are saying, you just don't get as emotionally involved with the performance compared to phono stages with more veiling but more fun.

But many people want a phono stage that adds or removes nothing to the performance, and the Plinius does just that. A winner for the cerebral.

Price: \$600  
 UK Distributor  
 Absolute Analogue  
 Tel: (44)(0)20 8459 8113  
 E-mail:  
 Absolute\_Analogue@email.msn.com  
 Website: www.pliniusaudio.com

### Tom Evans Audio Design Microgroove

Vinyl replay got a massive shot in the arm in the 1990s thanks to the Michell Iso phono stage. The Iso forced people to rethink just how good turntables could be and this is its spiritual heir.

It's a hard product to test. The Microgroove is more bespoke than it has any right to be at this price. Like the Benz-Micro PP-1, it has no adjustment, but unlike the PP-1 you can get the Microgroove tailored to fit



whatever cartridge you are using when you buy it (in fairness to Benz-Micro, the company has its own range of cartridges that are a perfect match for the PP-1, so has little need to push flexibility to suit the idiosyncrasies of other cartridge manufacturers).

Inside the Microgroove's opaque plastic exterior, the circuit-board is populated by chips like most phono stages sport resistors, but the type, make and design of these chips are strictly hush-hush. Tom Evans is secretive about his component selection and even breaking open the case won't help, because the chips have all identification removed.

Unless you cut your hi-fi teeth on DNM equipment,



the whole Microgroove ethos may seem a bit inverted.

Heavy metal cases are out; acrylic is in, and although there is an upgrade to the Microgroove Plus, the change involves an upgrade to the power supply regulation. The Plus version gains Lithos circuitry, making it in effect, half of the larger, dual-mono Groove so beloved of the Editor.

It might be the baby in the range but the Microgroove gives you an enticing taste of what the state of the high-end art is all about. It's immediate, detailed beyond compare, dynamic to the ends of your speakers and as precise as a fencing master. It's the precision that grabs you first. 'Sweet Jane' by The Cowboy Junkies on their classic *Trinity Sessions* LP retains all that languid, subdued nature of Margo Timmins voice, but the guitar often simply sounds strummed without any passion behind it. Here, the intensity of the strumming takes on an almost malevolent air. If you can call anything from the Timmins folk 'malevolent'.

However, it is just a taste. You don't get the liquidity of sounds or the space around the soundstage; you just get an impression of that. But, like any decent drug, that taste is enough to get you hooked. When talking of drugs, it seems fitting to mention Lou Reed, and the *Songs for Drella* track shows you

what the Microgroove is capable of; Lou's voice is sublime; physically 'there' in the soundstage, precise and accurate enough to hear hidden scads of vocal intonation and more, but the sense of acoustic is somehow less stunning than the voice. ►

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▶ Upgrading will improve this, but you don't need to upgrade immediately. The Microgroove manages to leave you both satisfied and hungry for more at the same time.

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 Website: www.audiodesign.co.uk

### Trigon Vanguard

Trigon is not one of the best known names from the land of Volkswagens, but it hails from one of German hi-fi's most respected names, Restek. The designers of Trigon electronics cut their audio teeth making those familiar chrome-fronted, esoteric audio



electronics, so it comes as a bit of a surprise to find that the Vanguard is one of the bluffest black boxes around.

It may not be the most stylish box, but the Trigon is by far the most configurable. On the underside of the square black case are a series of white on blue DIP switches, to adjust input gain, resistance and capacitance. Armed with the manual to explain what switch goes where, the Vanguard

will cope with practically every cartridge from the most 'umble moving-magnet to a low output moving-coil. (Well, almost – owners of super-low output cartridges like the Audio Note I0 LTD would need some kind of head amp, but such beastly outputs are rare, will not work with any 'real world' phono stage and are certainly not intended to be used with a £300 phono stage).

The Trigon is well made, with solid aluminium casework and a plug-top power supply. Beneath the case, the design is solidly IC based and uses good quality components throughout. There is also an upgrade to be had, by swapping that plug-top power supply for the (perhaps unwisely named) Volcano power supply.

Don't expect magical sonic transparency or sublime fidelity to the original recording; the Trigon goes right for the fun button. But it takes time to gain that sense of fun; at first, the Vanguard sounds clinically precise and almost, well, frankly boring.

A few discs into the warm-up process and you can't help reaching for record after record with a smile on your face.

So, for example, the Decca D'Oyly Carte recording from the 1950s lacks absolute 3D transparency, but instead makes you want to sing along to the music and kick back and enjoy G&S in a thoroughly Victorian manner. The sound is large and likewise, *Songs for Drella* goes straight for the heart-strings instead of the detail. And then there's the bass; it is warm and rich and extremely tuneful, capable of keeping a beat, no matter how challenging that beat is. It's expansive, too, with a big cuddly soundstage.

There is an parallel between the sound of the Vanguard and

that of a classic Linn LP12 turntable. Both have that tuneful, almost euphonic fun factor that may not be the most cerebrally precise response around, but who cares when the sound is this enjoyable? The Linn LP12 still sells in droves, and so should this fun-packed phono stage.

Price: £300  
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 Audiofreaks  
 Tel: (44)(0)20 8948 4153  
 E-mail: info@audiofreaks.co.uk  
 Website: www.audiofreaks.co.uk

### Conclusion

How do you rank the Trigon's exciting musical energy against the absolute detail of Tom Evans' Microgroove? What is the formula to balance the sonic beauty of the Benz-Micro PP-1 with the authoritative solidity of the Plinius Jarrah? Each one of these phono stages is beyond serious reproach and criticism, especially given their respective prices; they are simply different flavours of technology designed for matching your cartridge to your amplifier and your tastes. Spending more money on a phono stage will combine these musical threads, but you will often need to spend a lot more money to get that next step.





# Four Fixed-Coil Cartridges

by Jimmy Hughes

In days of old, when the analogue LP was king, cartridges such as the four reviewed here were looked on as potential saviours - or, less prosaically, as relatively simple and inexpensive ways of putting right the various ills and ailments afflicting the sound of your hi-fi system. Half the audio population fervently hoped and believed that out there somewhere was an affordable pickup that would deliver a smooth clean sound devoid of unpleasant harshness and excessive background noise.

Because the cartridge is the contact point with your records, and because (by turntable and arm standards) it can be relatively cheap, many enthusiasts hoped to find a reasonably-priced pickup cartridge that would somehow magically fix all the problems in their system. Naturally, I did not burden the four pickups reviewed here with such unreasonable expectations...

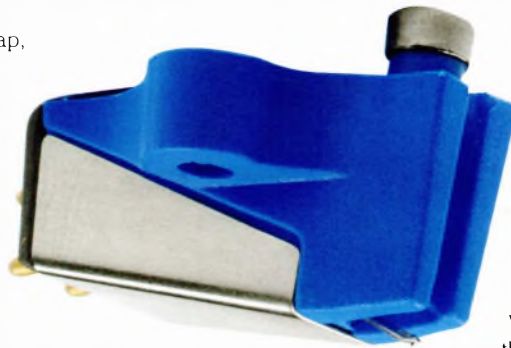
All the same, I did wonder how close they'd get to something truly exotic. So it was with mixed emotions that I removed the fabulous Transfiguration Temper W (see page 97) from the Rega RB-300 arm fitted to my Avid Sequel turntable. Time to find out if the Transfiguration really is as good as I said it was! For no particular reason I chose Rega's Super Elys first, and put a record on the platter...

## Rega Super Elys

Despite having an extra fixing bolt, thereby improving the interface between headshell and cartridge body, the Super Elys is the lightest

of the four cartridges in this test. It's also the only one with a fixed stylus assembly - meaning the whole cartridge has to be replaced when the time comes to renew the stylus. Since replacement styli cost virtually the same as a new cartridge anyway, this is not a problem.

Indeed, making the stylus an integral part of the body improves rigidity, eliminating a potentially troublesome mechanical interface. Rega claim that design changes have allowed a reduction in the number of coil turns used by about a third. Each pickup is hand-made



and tested/adjusted twice over a 24 hour period before being passed. Tracking force is given as 1.75g.

Of course a stylus guard is included, but it's a tad fiddly to fit. And with the fixing bolts in place (the ones supplied were used, incidentally) I couldn't get the thing to stay put. The extra fixing bolt means you're not really able to move the cartridge in the headshell to optimise geometry. However, Rega doubtless feel that any slight errors in geometry are amply offset (ha!) by gains in rigidity.

Superficially, the Rega sounds slightly less punchy and immediate

compared to the Roksan Corus and Reson Mica. But this is misleading. It's actually extremely well-balanced, and gives lots of musical detail without sounding obviously 'hi-fi' and over-lit. Bass is firm and solid, while the treble is crisp without being overly explicit and sharp. Mid-band is smooth and open.

The whole sound is perhaps a shade understated. But, the more you listen, the more you realise that actually the musical presentation is very cohesive. The holographic qualities of the Temper W were not apparent; but once one accepts this, the combination of crispness, clear pitch definition, and natural balance between frequency extremes made for musically satisfying listening.

Tracking's pretty good, but slight break-up was discernable on peaks. For tracking tests I chose an infamous '60s Decca LP of Ashkenazy playing Schubert sonatas - a notorious cartridge buster in its day! During some heavy chords there was a touch of roughness; increasing the playing force to 2g made things slightly better, but not much - though the overall sound did seem slightly more solid.

Super Elys: £150

Contact: Rega Research Ltd  
Tel. (44)(0)1702 333071  
Net. [www.rega.co.uk](http://www.rega.co.uk)

## Reson Mica

By comparison, the Reson Mica was more exuberant and sharply detailed. Treble detail was more crisply etched, so things like cymbal work were



▶ more immediate-sounding and brilliant. There seemed to be more colour in the sound, and certainly on a quick A/B comparison the advantage appeared to be with the Mica. That said, I felt the Rega offered better balance between frequency extremes.

Where the Reson Mica really did excel was tracking ability. At the manufacturer's recommended downforce of 1.65g it tracked Ashkenazy's Schubert almost perfectly - only a slight whisker of unease could be detected. Increasing the playing weight to about 2g cleared this up, leaving the sound clean and devoid of break-up.

Incidentally, there's often a compromise between sound quality and tracking ability. Many pickups give a crisper livelier sound when used towards the lower end of the range of downforce values given - say, 1.65g given a range of 1.5g to 2g. But generally speaking tracking ability will improve as downforce increases. Speaking personally, I generally prefer higher playing weights to ensure good tracking.

The Mica's stylus is removable, and the presence of a securing lug makes sure the fit between stylus housing and body is firm and true. The cartridge body is made from a special glass-reinforced nylon type plastic called Pocan. And this gives a solid low-resonance shell for the coils. A couple of brass ferrules are sunk into the body for the cartridge fixing bolts.

Being a fairly big cartridge, the Mica sits well clear of your records as

it plays, making handling a bit easier - you can get your digit under the headshell's fingerlift with less hassle. Surface noise seemed low, and this coupled with good tracking ability gave an impression of solidity and security. A three year guarantee is offered providing the registration card is sent back within 14 days of purchase.

Reson Mica: £155 (with any cartridge in exchange), £195 without.

Contact: Reson Audio UK  
Tel. (44)(0)1277 227355  
E-mail. [reson.uk@reson.de](mailto:reson.uk@reson.de)  
Net. [www.resonaudio.com/uk](http://www.resonaudio.com/uk)

### Roksan Corus

The Roksan Corus is a design that dates back to the late '80s, if memory serves me correctly. It has long been one of my favourite MM cartridges. And listening to it again confirmed that it still has many good points. Comparing it to the Reson is interesting; superficially, the two look virtually identical. Same shape; same Pocan body. Even the styli are interchangeable!

Sound quality is pretty similar too, though I felt the Corus sounded a shade more dimensional; the music seemed to project a shade more powerfully, as though things were separating out better. It wasn't a big difference, and to be truthful, I'm not sure I could reliably tell one from t'other without an A/B comparison. Tonal balance between Roksan and Reson is very similar.

Where the Roksan did seem to score over the Reson is tracking ability; at 1.75g it was comparable to the Reson at 2g. Increasing the playing weight of the Corus to 2g brought a marginal improvement in terms of solidity and

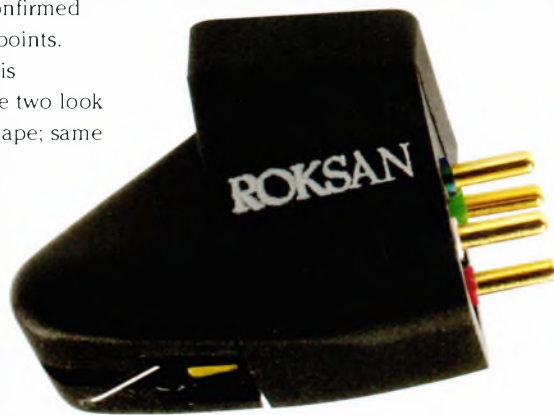
security. Climaxes that had sounded slightly unsteady with (say) the Rega Super Elys, felt very clean and solid with the Corus.

Roksan Corus Black: £195.

Contact: Henley Designs  
Tel. (44)(0)1235 511166  
E-mail. [info@henleydesigns.co.uk](mailto:info@henleydesigns.co.uk)  
Net. [www.henleydesigns.co.uk](http://www.henleydesigns.co.uk)

### Ortofon's 530/11

This is another lightweight cartridge, though at 5g it's still slightly heavier than Rega's Elys. It's the only one of the four with an integral flip-down stylus guard - the other three have removable plastic stylus covers. Sound quality was very good, albeit not quite as forward and crisp as the Roksan/Reson, and slightly less solid and well-balanced than the Rega Super Elys.



There didn't seem to be quite as much definition at middle and low frequencies, though the top was nice and crisp. Tracking proved excellent, and at the maximum recommended downforce of 1.75g the Ortofon 530/11 approached the Roksan Corus in terms of security. Ortofon claim the cartridge can negotiate an amplitude of 80µ; an excellent figure.

Tonal balance is crisp and open, with good transient detail and



► plenty of attack. Nevertheless, like the Rega, there was a slightly understated quality about the Ortofon. It didn't go all out to shock or impress, but instead presented the music in a smooth dependable way. I'm inclined to mark it down slightly for a lack of clarity/presence at middle and low frequencies, but that's all.

All four cartridges gave good results, and although differences emerged, I'd say if you really couldn't live with one, you probably could live with any of them. None matched the clarity, separation, or holographic imaging qualities of a top MC pickup like Transfiguration's Temper W. And, given the vast price differentials, nor should they've done.

One of the discs I used for my listening tests was the Crusaders live album *Ongaku Kai*, recorded during concerts in Japan. The sound quality of this album is good, but every-thing's so close-miked there's little sense of real people playing in a real space - it all seems rather compartmentalised and lacking in atmosphere. Or does it? Actually, much depends on what you use to play it...

Having had my Avid Volvere turntable upgraded to a Sequel just a few days before starting this review, it had been interesting to listen to this LP using the Temper W. Some cramping-up of the soundstage remained, but compared to what I'd heard last time I played the album everything sounded much more focussed and alive.

In particular, the bottom-end had real kick, while instruments like saxophone and electric piano sounded more colourful and expressive. Near the start of his keyboard solo on 'Rainbow Seeker', Joe Sample hits a clinker - and (because the pitch definition is so good, and the instrument is so well separated) you could really hear it.

Moreover, there was a vivid holographic quality about the sound; instead of seeming a shade 'flat', the sound-stage seemed to acquire height as well as width and depth. But - that

was with the Temper W! In the less rarefied world of the four magnetic cartridges featured in this review, some of that magic was lost. Despite the high quality turntable being used, the music lacked a certain distinction.

I mention this because, although there were differences between the four cartridges on test, they all offered much the same overall capability. None could do what the Temper W



could do. So, no life-changing experiences on the cheap, alas! That said, what I liked about the review cartridges was their consistency. Most LPs will sound very good when played with any of the four pickups tested here.

Back in the early '90s I actually went away from using moving coils for a while, preferring instead to listen to a good magnetic. The Roksan Corus was one of several MM cartridges I lived with long-term. What appealed was being able to play a wide range of LPs of varying vintages, in varying condition, and always achieving a sound that was pleasantly detailed without being too revealing.

Agreed, the ultimate in fine detail and holographic soundstaging was sacrificed. But after a while I hardly noticed. And in any case, the CD player I used then was largely devoid of such qualities. So there was greater consistency between LP and CD. Eventually, I went back to using pricey moving coil pickups. But, if need be, I could happily return to a good magnetic again.

Incidentally, the output levels of all

four review cartridges seemed pretty close, subjectively. So much so, I hardly felt any need to alter volume levels as comparisons were made. However, the Ortofon has a slightly lower output than the Roksan and Reson, with the Rega somewhere between the two. This partly accounts for the stronger more forward musical presentation of the Corus and Mica.

If asked to pick a favourite from the four pickups on test - and bearing in mind what I said about all four being eminently liveable-with - I think I'd pick the Rega Super Elys, making it my first-choice for its attractive sound quality and excellent balance of virtues. There's a slight weakness so far as tracking ability is concerned, but most LPs will not over-tax it.

If, however, the Rega's slight tracking weakness was a factor, then my choice would fall to either the Roksan Corus or Reson Mica - in that order. Sonically, it's quite hard to tell these two apart; they're very very close. But the Corus seems that little bit better in terms of tracking ability. And it's slightly more holographic. So it gets the decision, albeit by a short head.

Which leaves the Ortofon 530/11 bringing up the rear. However, in such a close-run contest, this is no disgrace especially given its much lower price. There's precious little wrong with the Ortofon. It's an excellent tracker, especially at lower playing forces. And the flip-down stylus guard is nice and practical, keeping the stylus safe from damage. It's also got the best tool kit and outer packaging, even being supplied with a nice set of scales.

Ortofon 530: £110.

Contact: Henley Designs  
Tel. (44)(0)1235 511166  
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info@henleydesigns.co.uk  
Net. www.henleydesigns.co.uk



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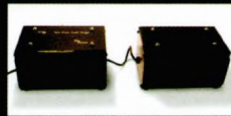
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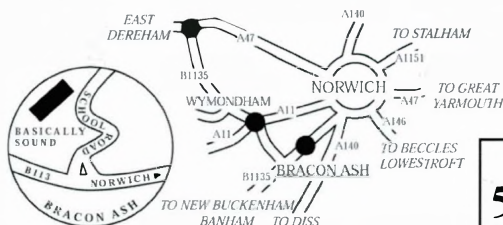
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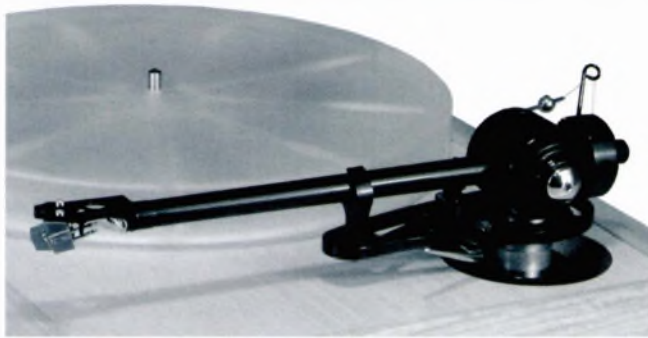
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# Dynavector 10X5 High Output Moving-Coil Cartridge

by Jason Hector

There are a great many reasons that people still listen to music on vinyl. For some it is because they didn't want to buy their record collections again. For others it is the opportunity to mix and bedroom-DJ. Others I am sure do it because of the retro feel, but for me none of these apply. When I bought my first record player (an LP12) I had barely twenty records and these were borrowed from a friend. No the reason I listen to vinyl is because it delivers more music than the other alternatives and I must be lucky because almost all of the new music I buy is available on vinyl (which is a big shock to many friends). As for second-hand, well the amount of music on good quality vinyl available for next to nothing in charity shops and dedicated record stores is fantastic. But is there a really cost effective way of extracting these sounds from those grooves? Well along with the affordable phono-stages I have been looking at for this analogue issue, I have been listening to something of a steal when it comes to cartridges: the Dynavector 10X5.

At the cheaper end of the cartridge market we usually find moving magnets, displaced by moving-coils as the price increases, until we reach the real "esoterica" where things weird and wonderful appear. At the 10X5's price point we are in transition. Entry-level moving coils slug it out with high end moving magnets. The 10X5, and its

predecessor the 10X4, are high output moving coils which means they are designed to drive moving magnet phono-stages. But, to be honest, the particular technology employed in a cartridge is less than important, it's the musical result that counts.

The successor to the well regarded 10X4, the 10X5 is very similar to gaze upon but has gained a pretty serious looking aluminium



mounting plate. The cartridge body is the familiar red plastic. There is no stylus guard so careful handling is essential. I don't see this as a problem and I'll bet plenty of cartridges have been destroyed by over zealous guard removal. Given the Dynavector's long and rather exposed cantilever, it looks

like a prime candidate for just such an inadvertent decapitation. The new mounting plate has removed the one issue I had with the 10X4: the sheer lightness of the cartridge which made it problematic with some arms.

The biggest differences between the two cartridges are internal. The 10X5 has gained many of the innovations already developed for and seen in the more expensive Dynavector cartridges. So onto the spec sheet come softened magnetism,

flux dumping and neodymium magnets. These, it is

claimed, remove the hardness or edginess present in so many MC's. Some numbers...

The output level is a healthy 2.5mV (measured at the usual 1kHz and 5cm/sec) and the new internals have reduced the impedance of the cartridge to 150Ohms meaning it should drive phono-

stages better. The tracking weight should be in the range 1.8 to 2.2 grams. Compliance is 12cu. The stylus is an elliptical diamond and the cantilever a 6mm aluminium pipe. Total cartridge height from diamond to mounting plate is 18.8mm and the distance from stylus to mounting hole centre is 9.4mm.

Unfortunately the cartridge





only arrived for review just after I had finished listening to all those phono-stages so unluckily I didn't get to try the 10X5 with the GSP Audio MM stage, but as I had been using a 10X4 to test MM performance anyway, the side by side comparison of the cartridges proved easy and instructive. Straight out of the box it was pretty obvious that the 10X5 is a different cartridge to the 10X4. The power and scale it delivers are far more reminiscent of the bigger Dynavector cartridges than its predecessor. The careful application of the filtered down technology has reaped very large rewards in this particular device.

The 10X5 was mounted into a spare Naim Aro arm wand (kindly supplied by Naim Audio for the period of these reviews) and the arm-lead was attached to the MM inputs of the superb Dynavector P100 phono-stage. The 10X5 tracked very well in the Aro with seemingly very low distortion across the whole LP side, confirming that the stylus to mounting hole distance suits the non-slotted Aro head-shell perfectly.

Playing Bruce Springsteen's *The Rising* (a real return to form from Bruce) the immediacy of the music is clear. Where the 10X4 makes a good stab at presenting dynamics the 10X5 encompasses them much more effectively. The drumming on this album is very well recorded and produced, it has become a good test disc with which to judge dynamics. The 10X5 passes the test giving the strikes real impact and authority. Bass has good extension and is fuller than the bass of the 10X4 without being overblown avoiding wallowing in resonance which can make music sound stodgy. In other words the bass stops and starts in the time frame intended. The difference between these cartridges is not small. The 10X4 had a verve and drive which was

extremely addictive and which I think made it the perfect cartridge for LP12 fronted Naim amplifier systems as the sound matches so well. The 10X5 has only improved on this trait with even better timing and dexterity augmenting this ability to play rhythms and tunes. The emotion in the *Rising* is very evident with either cartridge, but



with the 10X5 there seems to be more subtlety to the songs: not just the anger following September 11, but also the regret and the sadness, emotions which I knew were there from my usual vinyl transcriber, but which the 10X4 seemed to miss.

Spinning *New Folk Implosion* – Eponymous the 10X5 revealed enough from this album to draw you into what can appear, at first glance on a lacklustre system, a bland set of compositions. The album has a Nirvana-esque grunge which seems to overpower some systems so that the distortion is all you hear. With the 10X5 the layers of instrumentation are dug out and the slightly bizarre and occasionally jarring (at least on the first track) timing is well presented. What it misses is the sense of real space and separation that you start to get with more expensive cartridges.

The production of this album has placed the vocals out in front of the backing instrumentation and this allows a very intimate relationship between the listener and the vocalist. This connection was much more obvious with the 10X5 than the 10X4. More of the voice's structure is revealed so that we hear more intonation which clarifies intent.

No matter what music I played with the 10X5, including

Johnny Cash, Shostakovich and The Burn, I always felt happy using it. It simply

does its best to get out of the way of the music so you enjoy it that bit more. With all of the praise above you might think that it's pointless spending more. Well that isn't the case. The 10X5 still struggles when songs get really busy. There is a degree of congestion which can only be removed with the application of a more expensive product like the twice as expensive Dynavector DV17D2. Reading this over, I don't want to give the impression that the 10X4 was a poor cartridge, it definitely wasn't and anybody who bought one made a good choice (but then I would say that as I used to use one!). Indeed, it offers the main point of comparison simply because it used to be the only game in town, at least if the music mattered. It's just that the 10X5 has redefined what I expect from a cartridge at this price point, eclipsing the older model and turning a really solid performer into something rather special, especially when the \$250 price tag is taken into consideration.

Dynavector 10X5: \$250

Contact: Pear Audio

Tel: (44)(0)1665 830862

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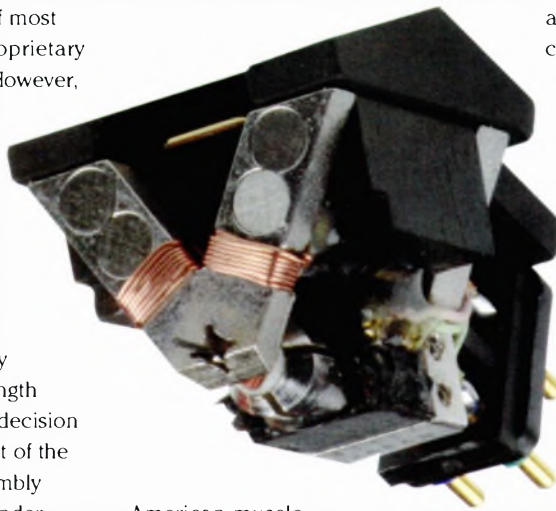
# Dynavecator DV-Dr. T XV-1s Moving-Coil Cartridge

by Roy Gregory

When Dynavecator launched the original XV-1 a couple of years ago, it was both a culmination of and a departure from their established design path. Familiar elements included the boron cantilever, incredibly fine wire used for the coils (around half the thickness of most others) and of course the proprietary Flux Damper arrangement. However, these important aspects of the design were grafted onto an entirely new (yet distinctly retro) generator assembly. Dispensing with modern high power magnetic materials of the type found in most of the competition, Dr Tominari elected to employ Alnico magnets, short on strength but long on linearity. It was a decision that required the development of the most complex generator assembly that I've ever seen, no small undertaking given the dwindling market share commanded by high-end analogue replay systems. But that was the cartridge's entire *raison d'être*. Alarmed by the possible loss of historical analogue recordings through archiving of tape and discs on digital media, Tominari set out to build a pick-up that grafted the proven technical benefits of CD onto the stellar musical performance of a top-flight analogue system. He succeeded handsomely with the XV-1, and now the 's' revision extends that achievement even further.

Let's start with the physical architecture, first established by the XV-1. The generator uses no less

than eight Alnico magnets, arrayed in two tilted rows behind a V shaped yoke. It's a layout that creates a cartridge that's both bulky and heavy, as well as looking uncannily like the V8 engine you might find inside a model of a classic



American muscle car, an impression that was further enhanced by the translucent red plastic bodywork that graced the original. The number of magnets is of course necessary because of their relatively low power, the two rows arrayed down either side of the gap in which the coil moves. The V shaped yoke contains a further four coils, constituting the flux damper circuit, and combined with the long magnetic array and a specially shaped insert to which the magnets are mounted, these produce an extremely uniform field.

So far so good: Where the XV-1s differs is in the attention it pays to

the stylus assembly itself, and the effects that its physical arrangement have on the magnetic linearity in which its coils move. Using the recently developed technique of electronic erosion or nibbling, it is now possible to produce incredibly accurate, complex yet tiny components. This technology has allowed Dynavecator to remodel many of the smallest and most intricate elements in the cartridge's moving assembly. The key part was the armature that carries the coils. Arranged in a cross shape, the coils have always previously been wound on cylindrical constructions. The new armature employs a square section that better mirrors the coil distribution, resulting in a further increase in linearity. This is matched to a smaller, square aperture in the yoke as well as a square receptor in the shaped element that supports the magnets. The tighter spacing around these parts allows the magnets to move slightly closer to the gap too. The overall result is an even more uniform magnetic flux density within which the coils move to generate their signal.

However, by far the most obvious change is the welcome demise of the perfectly functional but aesthetically inappropriate red plastic bodywork, an element that whilst it's something of a tradition at Dynavecator, has no place at all on a cartridge at the XV-1s elevated price. The XV-1s uses a



► carved ebony chassis in place of the offending part and looks a whole lot classier as a result, as well as deriving a small benefit in terms of more even resonant behaviour.

The final change is altogether practical, but no less welcome for all that. It's the provision of a stylus guard, which in this day and age is becoming something to celebrate. Given the number of turntables that no longer bother with lids, it's actually also fairly essential for those of us with cats, kids or cleaners. Unfortunately, this valuable item was missing from the unit supplied for review, forcing me to unship the armtube from the JMW when I wasn't listening. God knows what I would have done if I'd mounted the XV-1s in the Triplanar!

Ah yes, mounting.

Installing the Dynavector is straight-forward, the shoulders of its V shaped body allowing you plenty to get hold of, the tapped holes in the body making for easy mounting. The perilously exposed cantilever made precise alignment a piece of cake (whilst reinforcing my regret regarding the missing stylus guard). The only issues are related to the cartridge's 12.5g weight and expansive dimensions. Neither was a problem in the JMW 12.5, or would be in the Triplanar, but I wouldn't fancy your chances of wedging the XV-1s into the diminutive headshell of an Ekos, whilst the weight also rules out the Linn arm as well as the Rega RB1000. Oh sure, I reckon you could get it mounted eventually, but there's no way you'd be getting the best out of the cartridge, a best that is impressive indeed.

The key factors that Dr Tominari identified in the sonic performance of CD are its timing integrity (whatever else it might be, CD is definitely pitch stable) and the

evenness of its energy distribution, characteristics that account for its relative neutrality. Set against those attributes are its loss of harmonic information and instrumental colour, its fractured rhythmic character and lower overall energy levels – all things at which analogue systems excel. The XV-1s does the analogue strengths with Dynavector's customary aplomb, but it adds two particular ingredients to the mix. They can be summed up in a single word – unforced - but



they manifest themselves in different ways. On the one hand you have a cartridge which is as even and unexaggerated from top to bottom as any I've ever used. On the other you have one that, whilst it clearly can't effect the speed stability of the record player or concentricity of the record, has an uncanny ability to allow music to hit its natural stride. Unforced certainly describes the result, but it also describes the manner in which it's achieved.

The self-effacing quality of the DV-1s serves the music rather than the cartridge itself. It makes music that might lack the propulsive drive and dynamic drama of the Insider or

the sheer resolution and transparency of the Titan, the presence and power of the Red K Signature or the breathy life of the Miyabi 47 Labs, but what it makes is still, indeed might almost be more purely musical. Indeed, the cartridge it brings most readily to mind is the balance and poise of the Kuzma KC Ref, but with an added dimension when it comes to the deft handling of texture and tonal shape. Playing 'Biko' from the Classic re-pressing of *PG3*, the different, interlocking layers of the music are readily separated, perfectly disposed about the soundstage, the lyrics, even the ones in African dialects, are beautifully defined and articulate.

The, deep, thudding pulse of the bass line is solid and deliberate rather than pushy, yet, as the track builds layer on layer, it never drags or lacks pace. It certainly never lacks power. The various bass sounds are immediately identifiable and separate, Gabriel's voice instantly recognised, each element of the mix distinct, its place in the whole clear and clearly wrought. The bittersweet sense of the song, as it shifts from desolation to righteous hope is turned beautifully, a barely noticed sleight of hand that works on the emotional as well as the intellectual level: it isn't just the words, it's the way they're they're sung and accented.

Piano music, chamber music, jazz – big-band and small group – all pass under the needle with equal ease and grace. Proceedings are neither hurried or slowed. Indeed, pace never becomes an issue as each record simply settles into its own individual groove. Likewise, space and musical density shift without notice or apparent comment. This cartridge imposes less of itself on the signal than anything else ►

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► I've used, whilst unraveling the most complex music without strain or apparent effort. Its almost preternatural balance when it comes to the distribution of musical energy throughout the spectrum, the equally impressive and convincing quality of its stereo perspectives, are so refreshingly even and free of false emphasis that listening for hours on end is an absolutely strain free process. The XV-1s unlocks whatever music you ask it to, delivering both the fact and the sense of the performance in an effortlessly understated flow of coherent musical cues. And along the way, it mirrors one other aspect of CD performance: the way it almost eradicates surface noise.

I never reviewed the XV-1 (PM had that pleasure – and ended up buying one) but discussions with

the importer and my own impressions suggest that the 's' adds a touch of finesse, high-end extension and stereo separation. It brings these last elements of the musical equation into line. It may not score A++ in any single area of performance (save the deftness of its timing and placement) but it's a straight A+ across the board and that's its greatest strength. Not impressive in itself, the music it makes certainly is. Long term listening simply increases your appreciation of its communicative and emotive capacities. In its latest guise, Dynavector's flagship cements its place firmly in the front rank of high-end pick-ups, which makes it something of a bargain. It stands as a fitting monument to Dr Tominari's life-long pursuit of analogue and musical excellence. ►+

#### TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Low output MC cartridge
Output voltage:	0.3mV
Frequency response:	20 - 20,000Hz (±1dB)
Channel Separation:	30 dB (at 1KHz)
Channel balance:	1.0 dB (at 1KHz)
Compliance:	10 cu
Impedance:	6 ohms
Stylus:	Line contact PF
Cantilever:	6mm solid boron
Tracking force:	1.8 - 2.2 grams
Weight:	12.5grams
Price:	£2,900

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#### Manufacturer:

Dynavector Systems Ltd

Net. [www.dynavector.co.jp](http://www.dynavector.co.jp)

# Transfiguration Temper W Moving-Coil Cartridge

by Jimmy Hughes

Compromises are unavoidable when building products down to a price. Of course - how could it be otherwise? But, perhaps less obviously, even cost-no-object items intended to achieve state of the art performance involve compromises. Well, maybe not compromises but trade offs. There are all sorts of things that need to be balanced. Advantages in one area are 'bought' at the expense of drawbacks and limitations in others. This applies with a vengeance to pickup cartridges, where the designer is fighting to harmonise any number of conflicting elements.

With Japanese cartridge manufacturer Transfiguration, the Temper range of

pickups is meant to be their finest. And in some ways they are. If you prize subtlety, refinement, and incredible holographic imaging above all other considerations, then the Temper Supreme and Temper V have few equals. Yet while acknowledging this, I myself incline towards the Spirit 2 as a better 'everyday' cartridge, finding it gives greater consistency over a wider range of music types and quality levels of recording.

It's the difference between choosing something that works well on most records, and something that's selective - being unbelievably magical on certain discs but surprisingly ordinary on others.

The Spirit sounds great on virtually everything you play. It very rarely leaves you feeling disappointed. It sounds crisp, lively, detailed, and very articulate. Perhaps it adds a little brilliance of its own. But it's hardly noticeable - only by direct comparison to something truly neutral would the difference stand out.

I had the pleasure of reviewing the Temper Supreme a while back, and really loved it. In several important respects it goes beyond the Spirit, being able to recreate amazing subtleties that sometimes leave you astounded. Yet its smoothness and neutrality can just as easily result in rather ordinary sound from lesser LPs that lack the special ►

► qualities it feeds on. Because the Temper Supreme adds little (if any) of its own character, it relies more heavily on the intrinsic quality of the records played.

The Temper Supreme offers remarkable holographic imaging that can (on the right LP) be quite mesmerising. The music's recreated with a vivid three-dimensionality that is positively addictive.

Alas, having acquired a taste for such qualities, it's easy to be disappointed when playing recordings that lack the necessary ingredients. Under such circumstances the Temper Supreme can seem somewhat bland and featureless. The sound lacks brilliance and drive.

This may have something to do with having a lowish output. The higher output of the Spirit creates a stronger more purposeful musical presentation. Many low-output pickups have a delicate ethereal presentation, and part of the the Temper Supreme's charm undoubtedly came from this aspect of its design. Obviously, much depends on the phono stage used, and its ability to handle very low voltages. There's also a degree of system dependency and personal taste involved.

Whether or not Transfiguration were mindful of such 'limitations' with the Temper Supreme and Temper V, the new Temper W certainly provides a remedy. The most immediately noticeable difference is its greatly-increased output - up from 0.25mV to 0.5mV. It might not sound like much, but it creates a noticeably bigger presentation.

Now, it's not difficult to increase output; simply wind more turns of wire on the coil. Unfortunately, there's a price to pay; as the moving mass increases, the sound loses some of its finesse and

delicacy. Hence there's a trade-off between performance and output. However, in the case of the Temper W, Transfiguration have increased the output; partly by slightly increasing the number of coil turns, but mainly by improving the efficiency of the generator - actually getting the coils inside the

magnet assembly. This places the coil at the crux of magnetic focus, resulting in considerably more output than the Temper Supreme. Coil impedance has risen from around 3

Ohms (Temper Supreme and V) to 9 Ohms, but is still low. The new Temper W is even a good dB or so louder than the Spirit 2. It also sounds more focussed and immediate, with greater lucidity at the top-end. There's improved separation (both in terms of stereo width and the layering of voices and instruments) resulting in added vividness. The music sounds slightly faster and better focussed.

Compared to the Spirit 2, there's more detail and greater clarity. Yet overall the sound retains its integration and homogeneity. At one and the same time, presentation is subtle and refined while sounding vivid and incisive. This impression is aided by excellent tracking ability (slightly improving on the Temper V) - clean groove tracing with low surface noise.

Whether or not the presentation is quite as delicate and finely-shaded as the original Temper Supreme or Temper V is a moot point. Transfiguration intend keeping the Temper V in the range; the Temper W does not super-cede or replace it. It's my guess they regard both pickups as complimentary - a mix of different compromises to suit individual

tastes. So what exactly are the differences, and does a clear winner emerge?

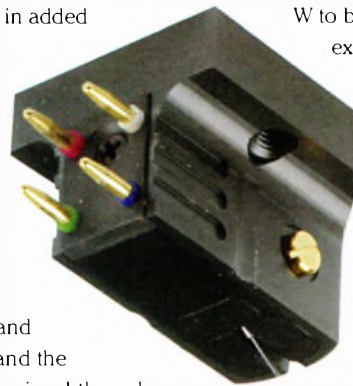
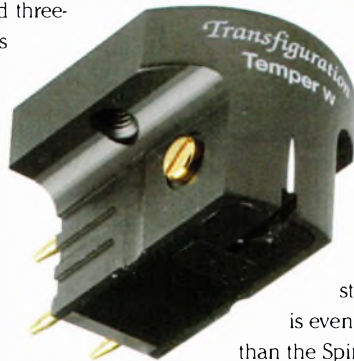
I'm relying on memory here, since it must be a couple of years since I last heard the Supreme, but I'd say the principle difference is subtlety. The new Temper W is not quite as stunningly delicate as the Supreme and V. Although it's very, very good, the new Temper W hasn't quite got the spacious airy openness I recall from the Temper Supreme - though it's a close run thing. So the Temper Supreme and V are better? It depends!

Personally speaking, the Temper W offers the balance of attributes I prefer. Like the Spirit and Spirit 2 it's an excellent all-round performer that makes virtually every record sound great. Perhaps a Temper Supreme or Temper V might create an extra degree of magic on certain LPs. However, on a broad balance of material from a wide variety of vintages, I'd expect the Temper W to be more consistently excellent and satisfying.

Tonally, the Temper W sounds pretty neutral and clean. As already indicated, surface noise is very low giving LPs a CD-like clarity and crispness - albeit with greater tonal differentiation and an absence

of hardness/forwardness in the upper mid-band. On a personal note, my CD sound at home is pretty good - what finally transformed it was the outstanding qualities of Chord's DAC-64. Yet good as the Chord DAC is, there's still an extra naturalness about LP - a smooth refined ease and openness - that's hard for digital to duplicate.

For the most part, living with the Temper W proved deeply rewarding but otherwise uneventful; it was very much a case of just sitting back and enjoying the music! I know - it's a tough job, but ►





▶ someone's got to do it. Little fazes the Temper W. It's adept at riding warped discs (lots of clearance between the disc surface and pickup underbelly), and very good at tracking. Very few LPs seem to tax the Temper W; indeed, it seems to improve on the high standard set by the Spirit and Spirit 2 - both highly capable trackers.

The squared-off body with parallel sides makes headshell alignment easy and certain. And Praise Be! a stylus guard is included! Not only is a stylus guard invaluable for protecting the delicate cantilever and tip when the turntable is not in use, its also helpful when mounting or dismounting the pickup. A long thin boron cantilever is employed, and this seems to fit into an aluminum shank close to the body. The Temper W has a metal body, and the coils are fully enclosed.


Physically, the Temper W looks fairly similar to the Spirit 2 - the colour is the most obvious difference. But there's a bolt going through the Temper W body, close to the front, that isn't there on the Spirit. Presentation, in a handsome polished walnut box, is very attractive but not excessively lavish. Internally, Transfiguration have moved away from silver wire, favouring a special copper formulation. Great care has been taken to ensure accurate long-term coil and stylus alignment too.

The suspension system is claimed to be non-sensitive to temperature, keeping the damping coefficient stable while improving tracking ability. An Ogura 3 x 30um stylus tip is employed, and the special coil arrangement is said to eliminate saturation while keeping dynamic mass to a minimum. If all this sounds like a mouthwatering combination, believe me it is. Pickup cartridges don't come any better than this.

Sonically the Temper W sounds utterly convincing; listening, you feel there could be no way of improving on what it's doing. Of course that's a terrible delusion; nothing's perfect. But that's the whole point; the art of hi-fi is to convince you you're experiencing perfection - even though you're not. It's all to do with priming your expectation levels, and then exceeding them, so you're left completely satisfied.

The Temper W is devilishly good at this; almost regardless of the record being played it seemed to recreate a certain magic. Not by adding its own colorations, but simply by maximising what's there in the grooves. I found this time and time again as I went through my LP collection. It's highly revealing, yet also kind and forgiving, emphasising what's right about each record rather than highlighting what's wrong.

Such exceptionally lucid transparent presentation gives laser-like clarity and

analysis without exaggerating faults. By direct comparison, my trusy reference Spirit 2 sounds a mite less detailed, without the incredible separation that characterises the Temper W. There's a fresh freed-up quality about the new pickup that the Spirit 2 (good as it is) doesn't quite aspire to; the new Temper W always seems that bit better-able to respond to the subtlest nuances and finest details in the music. I rest my case... 

#### TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Low-output moving-coil
Output Voltage:	0.5mV
Frequency Response:	10Hz - 20kHz, ±1.5dB
Channel Separation:	>30dB
Channel Balance:	<0.5dB
Compliance:	15cu
Impedance:	9 Ohms
Stylus:	PA
Cantilever:	Solid boron
Tracking Force:	1.8g
Weight:	7.6g
Price:	£2,250

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# Linn Akiva Moving-Coil Cartridge

by Paul Messenger

My personal association with Linn's cartridges goes back a long way - right back, in fact, to the 1970s, when the company imported Supex

models. These put the low-output moving-coil concept back on a UK hi-fi scene that had been dominated by moving magnet designs for more

than a decade.

Since those earliest days, Linn's strong relationships with its cartridge suppliers has enabled it to bring its ▶

► own ideas on cartridge design into the equation. It has gradually persuaded them to incorporate its own ideas on mechanical integrity. At regular intervals (of about five years), a new model has appeared incorporating one or two extra steps along the Linn road, while still adopting an innate conservatism in crucial areas.

Linn's first 'own brand' cartridge was the Supex-sourced Asak, which had much in common with the Supex 900's internals, but used a wider mounting platform and metal body. This was followed by the Asak T, which was partly rebuilt in Scotland, including replacing a brass screw holding the polepieces together by a much stronger non-magnetic stainless steel nut and bolt.

Next came the Karma, with a machined-from-the-solid alloy body (and the immediate ancestor to the current mid-price Klyde). Unlike its predecessors, this could be bolted 'Linn-tight' into even less than perfectly flat headshells without risking damage to the cartridge. Headshell fixing was then further enhanced by the Troika's tripod fixing, which also included integral lead-out wires.

The Arkiv marked a change from Supex to Scan Tech assembly, though according to Linn's Martin Dalglish the actual components involved (styli, cantilever/coils etc) actually come from the same original sources. The Arkiv was therefore still using the same basic moving parts as the Asak, its main change again focusing on the stator and its fixing, with the elimination of a phenolic interface. A new body was designed to provide some cantilever protection while avoiding adding any coloration to the 'nude' innards.

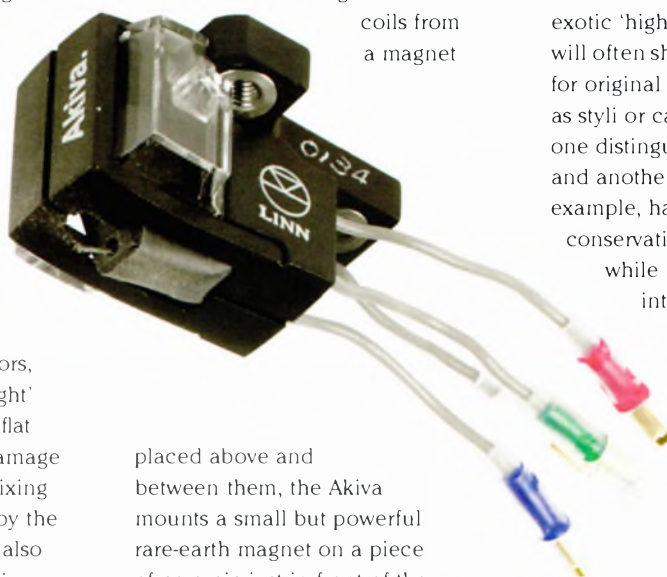
For the Arkiv B in 1997, Linn finally felt that glue technology had advanced sufficiently to allow it to move from an aluminium to a boron pipe cantilever without mechanical compromise. Which brings us right up to date with this brand new Akiva, the latest in a long line of low-output moving coil models, carrying a rather daunting £1,800 price tag.

So what's new this time around? A dramatic reduction in metalwork is the short answer. Instead of the conventional arrangement, where two metal poles or 'yokes' transfer the magnetic field to each end of the coils, setting up a magnetic field

along the line of the

coils from

a magnet



placed above and between them, the Akiva mounts a small but powerful rare-earth magnet on a piece of ceramic just in front of the coils, and this directly bathes the coils in a magnetic field.

This isn't the first 'yoke-less' cartridge to appear. Van den Hul's Colibri also rids itself of polepieces (in this case placing its magnet behind the coils), and Transfiguration has models without magnetic metalwork too. But it's still a sufficiently new and rare technique to attract attention and comment.

Under the bodywork, the front part of the Akiva consists of a machined unspecified composite material - probably some sort of

ceramic, from the look of it. A small circular section is machined out in front of the coils, to house a tiny but very powerful rare-earth magnet, which surrounds the cantilever. The key lies in finding a magnet powerful enough to energise the coils, but small enough to give sufficient record surface clearance. In fact the Akiva has a slightly higher specific output than an Arkiv B, and is also slightly lighter too. Another improvement is that the wiring at the cartridge rear is now moulded on to the metal body, to avoid vibration.

We might be living in a digital age now, but a surprising number of brands are still make and/or market exotic 'high end' cartridges. These will often share the same sources for original core components such as styli or cantilevers, so how does one distinguish between one brand and another? Linn's cartridges, for example, have tended to be quite conservative in choice of materials, while placing mechanical integrity at the top of the agenda, and it uses the thirty year relationship it has built up with Japanese component suppliers and assemblers to nudge them in that direction. Besides its tripod mounting, the screw through the front that holds the Akiva together is machined from special non-magnetic stainless steel that's much stronger than more commonly used brass.

Installation posed no great problems. Both the tripod fixing and 'flying lead' connectors are unconventional features on the Akiva, particularly oriented towards Linn's own Ekos tonearm, but they don't prevent its use elsewhere. I used Ekos, Naim ARO and Rega RB1000 tonearms very satisfactorily in the course of this ►



review. Both the latter tonearms required rather clumsy link pins to their own 'flying lead' connectors; while the Rega has an extra hole in the right place, I took a drill to the ARO headshell to add the extra bolt. The squared-off body made attaining geometric alignment easy enough (though the tripod arrangement does limit the flexibility).

Direct comparison to the Arkiv B reveal that the Akiva has a slightly higher compliance, but also slightly greater LF damping. Very high frequencies are a dB or so stronger too, while the remaining measurements look fine, comfortably meeting the 30+dB crosstalk spec right through the broad midband. Tracking abilities seemed slightly improved here too, giving no trouble with either Verdi's *Requiem* or the KLF's *Its Grim Up North*. I still heard a slight glitch on Leftfield's notorious *Inspection (Check One)*, though it improved on the Arkiv B here, and tracked best in the Ekos.

The promise of the press release was that the Akiva would 'eliminate' (my commas) surface noise. It doesn't, of course, but it certainly succeeds in reducing its audibility and intrusiveness by a substantial margin over its Arkiv B predecessor. Long a musical favourite, the surface of my particularly knackered copy of Tom Waits' *Rain Dogs* got chewed up years ago, to the point where playing it could be quite irritating. The Akiva didn't lose the 'bacon'n'eggs' noise, but did render it much less intrusive and annoying. This major plus, claimed to be a consequence of the lack of metal yokes and their influence on the changing magnetic fields, considerably reduces the vinyl 'signature', so what you hear sounds that much closer to a master tape.

The Akiva has plenty in common with the Arkiv B, sonically as well as mechanically, retaining the

latter's magnificent wide-bandwidth evenhandedness – always a major strength of Linn cartridges in my experience – while adding very welcome extra dynamic range by lowering the audibility of background 'mush'. That in turn set me re-exploring scores of favourite albums



going back through the years, regularly discovering all sorts of new insights.

The thing that has most obviously distinguished Linn's moving-coil cartridges in my experience has been their excellent bass performance – deep, crisp and agile, with a marvellous grip, clarity and freedom from resonance. The Akiva fully maintains that tradition, showing worthwhile improvements over its predecessor in every respect.

What you don't get here is the sort of sweetness and romanticism that often seems to be the priority with other brands. The Akiva makes no attempt to sugar whatever the recording and cutting engineers have laid down. If the recording is sweet, so is the reproduction. If it

(more than likely) isn't, the Akiva won't pull any punches. It doesn't maybe have quite the midband immediacy and time-coherence of a Decca or Clearaudio, or quite the imaging and lack of coloration of a top van den Hul. But you can't have it everywhichway with transducers, and the Akiva's awesome combination of fine dynamic expression and wide bandwidth is going to be very difficult to beat. It gets itself out of the way, and allows the music to get through with less vinyl 'signature' than any other cartridge I've encountered. When spinning Lambchop's *Is a Woman*, I had one cynical Pro Audio visitor shaking his head in disbelief that vinyl could ever sound this good. Every time CD seems to be sneaking up on vinyl, something new moves the goalposts, and that's just what Linn has done here. ➤

#### TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Low output moving coil
Stylus:	Line contact
Tracking Force:	1.6 - 1.9g
Pin Connection Type:	Flying Wire
Recommended Load:	> 50 Ω
Weight:	7.4g
Separation at 1kHz:	Better than 30dB
Output:	0.4mv
Recommended Arm:	Rigid, medium mass
Price:	£1,800

#### Manufacturer:

Linn Products Ltd,  
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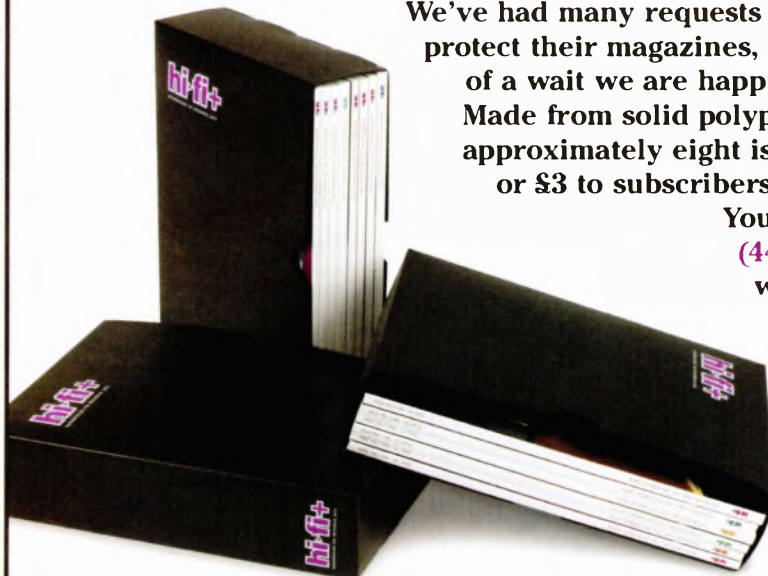
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# Taking A Second Look At Neat's Ultimatum MFS

by Roy Gregory

The high-quality, compact stand-mounted loudspeaker is something of an endangered species these days, given the preponderance of domestically acceptable floorstanders. Indeed, they have to do something pretty special just to justify their existence, let alone a purchasing decision, especially when, as in the case of the Neat Ultimatum MFS they are going to leave your wallet lighter to the tune of £3000. So, given JH's positive (nay, highly enthusiastic) comments regarding everything above the speakers' knees, I was intrigued to discover whether or not his concerns about the lower registers reflected the performance of the speakers in general, or, more specifically their performance in his room and system. So saying, rather than the usual return to manufacturer at the end of the review period (contrary to popular opinion, reviewers, at least the ones we use, don't get to keep whatever kit takes their fancy) I had the Neats shipped to me with the intention of delivering a second opinion.

And very glad I am that I did. This is one extremely impressive speaker. Indeed, everything that JH said about the mid and treble is absolutely true. Quick, open, dynamically incisive and rhythmically both expressive and coherent, the MFSs tear away the proverbial veils that obscure the inner workings of a recording. However, in my room, exactly the same can be said about the beautifully integrated bass,

one that's full of texture and detail as well as surprisingly extended from such a diminutive enclosure. And while we're on the subject of surprises, the Neats proved remarkably easy to drive.

Far from the traditional sledgehammer to crack a nut amplifier requirement that normally seems to accompany the combination of diminutive proportions and high-end aspirations, the MFSs were far more critical of quality than quantity, proving perfectly happy with the Hovland Sapphire, a hybrid of impeccable pedigree but with a mere 40 Watts on tap. Now, I happen to know also that PM has experienced the MFSs, and like me finds their performance in general and bass in particular to be extremely impressive.

Indeed, their general clarity, dynamic definition and explicit presentation of the music's structural elements are exactly the qualities that he admires so much in the Naim electronics in which he's placed his trust for years.

All of which begs a question: was JH's experience simply a room aberration, or does it have more to do with the difference in bass performance or balance between the Neats and his usual speakers? Well, having spent some

time with the MFSs I incline to the latter. Many a speaker designer will tell you that changes in bass performance are often most readily heard in the treble, which helps explain why it is so important to consider the balance of bass and treble extension when designing speakers. Indeed, speakers with limited bass extension can sound remarkably acceptable as long as there isn't too much treble to draw attention to the fact. Indeed, Jason's personal speakers, the Shahinian Obelisks are a case in point, combining as they do considerable bass extension and weight with multiple high-frequency units arrayed in an omni-directional head. It's a variable dispersion arrangement that makes conventional assessment almost impossible. Indeed, Dick Shahinian has become a past master at voicing his speakers, although they combine deep, boundary reinforced bass with large amounts of indirectly (as opposed to directly) radiated treble. It's a combination that leaves the Obelisks sounding rounded and almost dull at times, an impression reinforced by the spacious soundstage, and especially apparent in direct comparisons with other speakers.

Compare this approach to that taken in the Neat. Here we see the directly radiating tweeter (the ubiquitous Focal inverted titanium oxide dome) augmented with a pair of Emit upward-firing super-tweeters. This is high-frequency extension at all costs, and more importantly, irrespective of the limited low frequency capabilities inherent in the compact cabinet. The fact that the bass goes as low as it does, helped by the twin





▶ driver, isobaric set-up employed, certainly makes the imbalance a little less apparent, but how much of that low frequency lightness of touch and deft dexterity is down to the exceptionally clean and extended treble. Clean enough indeed to highlight the high-frequency air and extension of the Valkyrja cables over and above the Valhallas.

In other words, to what extent is the differing perception of this speaker's bass performance between myself and PM on the one hand and JH on the other, more a function of the way the speaker's treble

is actually propagated than anything else. JH, inured to the presentation of the omni-directional Obelisks may actually be more sensitive to the extensional imbalance in the Neat than either PM or myself, more used as we are to the vagaries of directly radiated treble information.

Either way, the Ultimatum MFS is an excellent speaker for those who want clarity and analysis combined with musical coherence. Its superb high frequencies and surprising bass extension don't come with the normal downside of demanding drive

requirements. Matched to your system and expectations they may well prove addictive – I know that I'll be sorry to see them go. ▶+

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# Voodoo Isolation AirTek Speaker Platforms

by Roy Gregory

I don't know who was the first person to put spikes under bits of hi-fi, but I bet he wishes he'd patented the idea. If there's a pair of speakers out there that don't come with floor spikes or spiked stands then it's a while since I've seen them, while the accessory market for support cones shows no sign of slackening. And this despite the general recognition afforded air suspension systems. Indeed, most commentators have agreed as to the benefits of such an approach, and the likes of Townshend and Arcici make a healthy profit from supplying them. The downside of course is that they are costly to produce (and hence buy) and not without their operational problems. Indeed, it was exactly the constant requirement to re-level the Townshend rack when changing equipment, as well as topping up its air bladders, that prevented me adopting that stand,

despite its stellar sonic performance. It's simply incompatible with the requirements of a reviewer.

Meanwhile, an alternative was offered, sneaking up unannounced on the blind



side of the Townshend Seismic Sink. The Voodoo Isolation Platform did the same job as the established design, but with a couple of improvements that delivered superior sound and operational performance. The sonic benefits were the result of its non-metallic construction, while the

adoption of high-pressure Presta valves rather than the Townshend's Schraeders made leaks and gradual deflation a thing of the past. Set the air-pressure so that it just floats the unit sat on the platform and that's it. I've been using it ever since, particularly under phono and line stages, where the improvements are extremely worthwhile and out of all proportion with the cost. Well, now it's been joined in the system by another pair of products, but this time they support the speakers.

Voodoo's Speaker Isolation Platforms share their construction (plywood base, MDF platform and a pair of air bladders) with the equipment support, but with two important external differences, at least compared to the early sample I have. The wooden cones of the equipment support have been replaced by four conventional, M6 spikes on ▶

▶ the review samples (pesky things git everywhere) while the platform itself is available in a range of real wood veneers designed to match the finish on your speakers. This pair arrived in a rather nice cherry, which certainly seems to be the finish de jour, and the wood finish options now also extend to the equipment supports. The spikes too are optional, Voodoo themselves preferring to stick with the oak cones, but they do offer



leveling on uneven floors and were a Godsend in my situation where the front edges of the speakers overlap a thick rug.

Given the necessity of precisely positioning your speakers relative to the room boundaries and getting them absolutely vertical, getting them mounted on wobbly platforms is far from a simple job, the difficulty exacerbated by the weight of the average speaker system. The best approach is to make sure you're getting the best sound out of the speakers stood on the floor and then measure their position precisely. Next, remove their spikes and place one of the speakers on a platform. Adjust it until it's absolutely vertical using a small spirit level, measure its position and then calculate, using both sets of measurements, where to place the platforms. Oh, and use masking tape to mark the position of the speaker on the platform before you shift it into place. Sounds obvious I know, but it's easy (and boy is it irritating) to forget. In fact, A/B testing requires marking the original speaker position, the position of the platforms and the speakers on the

platforms! Even then, what with removing and replacing spikes it still isn't exactly a piece of cake. Having said that, the sonic impact is such that A/Bs shouldn't really be necessary. Oh, and if you're wondering about stand mounted speakers, Voodoo offer the platforms with integral uprights and top-plates in a variety of sizes to suit. Those and the matching rack which features

individually isolated shelves are both pencilled in for imminent review.

Placing the speakers, in this case the Living Voice

OBX-Rs, on the Voodoo platforms frees the midrange from the cabinets, bringing voices and instruments extra colour and identity. That lucid openness comes from the improvement in the bass. Lighter in touch and superficially lacking weight, what you quickly realise is that it actually goes deeper now, with more air, texture and much better pitch definition. Listen to the Dolly Varden track 'The Thing You Love (Is Killing You)' from *The Dumbest Magnets*. The opening guitar lines float with more shape and delicacy, the acoustic having a greater sense of body. Diane Christiansen's brief, hummed intro to the vocal, off-hand and passed by on many systems, is clear and separate, despite its low level. But it's the bass and drum entry that really makes you notice what's going on. It can sound rooted, heavy and stodgily earthbound, but not with the platforms under the speakers. They allow you to separate the bass and drums, bringing pitch air and life to each that free the music's foundations,

giving it life and just the gentle subtle push the track needs.

You'll get similar effects on large scale classical works, where the sound-stage takes on a new sense of definition and volume and the bass breathes below the orchestra rather than simply thudding along at vaguely the right moments. It rumbles but it also floats, and that's the key. It's here that you realise that the new, defter touch actually balances the rest of the range far more naturally. Despite the impression of less weight, it actually delivers more range and as a result wider musical expression and power. I suspect that you're actually getting just as much low frequency energy, just more naturally distributed rather than concentrated into narrow, mechanically imposed frequency bands. Less is more? Certainly, as long as the bass contained on the disc possesses pitch and texture (don't laugh, just go and listen to a lot of modern pop) then you'll hear the benefits. If you simply want as much weight as possible, or want it delivered in the bite sized chunks that some people describe as 'rhythm' then you won't. But then that's the beauty of hi-fi. You pay your money and you take your pick. None of us are slaves to any reality other than the one we choose to recognise, but in mine, suspending speakers makes a great deal of sense, and the best way I've found of doing it is on the Voodoo platforms. ▶

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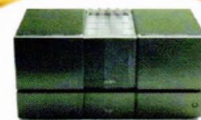
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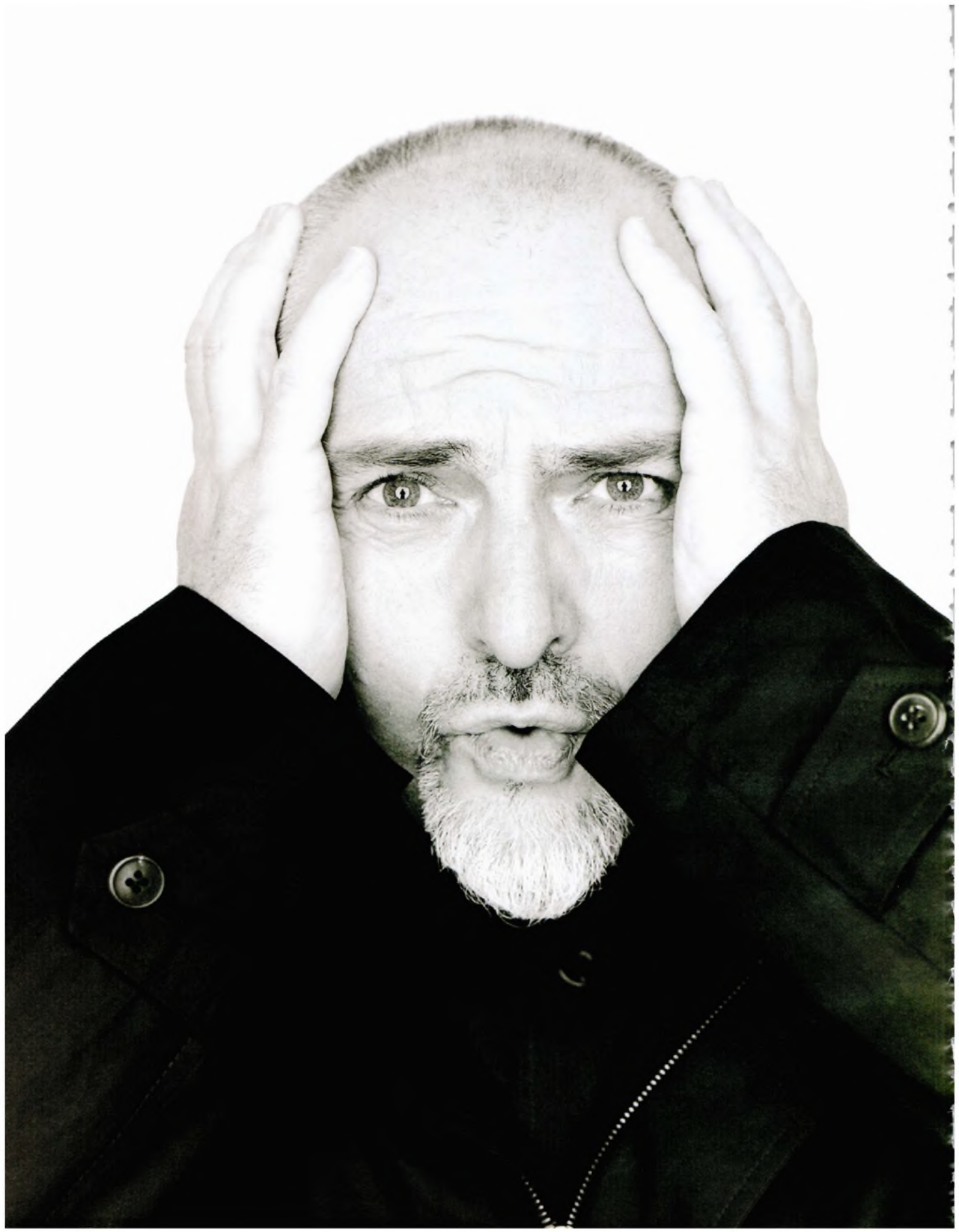
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# Back To The Future... (Re-)Mastering Peter Gabriel

With the arrival of the re-mastered Peter Gabriel catalogue, it seemed like a good time to revisit this substantial body of work, and grab the opportunity to discuss the project with the man himself. So saying Chris Binns was despatched to the Real World studios in Box, where he met Peter in his personal studio. Meanwhile, David Ayers launched into the back catalogue while RG listened to and compared the re-mastered CDs with the new SACD issues and the Classic Records 200g LPs. Altogether it represents an insight into not just Gabriel's own work, but attitudes within the music industry (within which Real World are one of the most enlightened elements) towards new formats and possibilities. It also offers the opportunity to finally pin down exactly what mastering or re-mastering is, and just why it's such an important issue in the sound that we hear at home. But first, let's hear from the man himself...

**CB:** So how did the project come about?

**PG:** I think that it was sparked off when Sony approached us with the idea of the back catalogue being released on SACD. Having said that, it was something that I always wanted to happen at some stage, because there's no doubt in my mind that increasingly there's the capacity with equipment to make things sound more like they did when they were recorded, and thus minimise the distance between what was intended and what comes out.

**CB:** What was your involvement in the actual re-mastering process?

**PG:** Most of the work was done by Tony Cousins at Metropolis, with Richard Chapel, (Peter's engineer) and I would go in there a bit for each record, usually at the beginning and the end to provide some feedback... but I didn't stick it out. I thought it might take a couple of weeks – in the end the process took months so I would tend to go in initially or late in the day; it varied, but I think that the effort has been worthwhile. There are improvements in all of them. Tony Cousins is a great mastering engineer. With most of the

albums he was trying to tweak here and there, and because it's someone else's work. I don't think he had the confidence to screw it up in a more radical way, whereas it's my material - so I have no fear of upsetting someone and will push something hard to make it work in a different way.

Sometimes he would be cautious in respectful way, not to overdo stuff, I would always make suggestions and I have particular ideas about EQ, but I was being guided by Tony, and sometimes I would say no - lets have twice as much EQ on this... The second album for instance, was recorded faster than the others and I never really liked the sound of it, but that was the only one that really felt was lacking, so

I asked him to push things considerably and I think we delivered more on that than ever before. It's the one that has changed most radically, for me, but in all of them I think there are improvements. In some ways with 5.1 there's the capacity to get more inside the music, and that really is the aim of the musician I think, to place the listener into their world. Actually, for the best part of a year I've been listening in mono. I've got a 5.1 system - but a typical situation - my wife hates the way it looks! It's the battle of the drawing room. And then I walk into Tony Cousin's room at Metropolis, probably one of the best sounding rooms I've ever heard, and you think again – no I want to listen to other people's music like this.

**CB:** Your music is quite dense, and there are times when there is an awful lot happening musically with loads of layers; I think the re-masters help in this respect by sounding cleaner and more open.

**PG:** I would agree with that. Open is a good word. That's one of the things that Tony has done really well. In many ways that was what we were trying to achieve... and there is much better definition with the re-masters.

**CB:** There is definitely more consistency to the sound between the albums...

**PG:** ...But without homogenising it; they still have their own life and internal integrity preserved, but they match better as a series. I wasn't that enthusiastic about the

▶ whole project in the beginning, although I thought it was a good idea, something to be done at some time in the future.... But the more I got into it the more I felt that this was going to make a real difference. Put the originals alongside the re-masters and you really will hear the difference.

**CB:** Are you someone who revisits his music?

**PG:** No. I think like a lot of musicians I move pretty swiftly onto the next thing. So actually the re-mastering really was the first time I had heard the body of my music in one lump.

**CB:** How did that feel?

**PG:** I was just curious really, in a lot of ways, because some of the stuff retains its life for me while other material has fallen by the wayside – maybe not whole albums, but some songs seem to live much better. I remember the intention on all of them, but not all of it was delivered. I think as I've got older I've learnt more about it, and I've also worked with some great people so I think I now have a better chance of getting to where I want to be while avoiding the pitfalls. For example, on some of those occasions when recording you felt each time it goes into transitional stage you lost something, when it goes from composition to band for instance, it sort of died a death and you had to work to build it up; sometimes getting in the studio was like that and sometimes cutting was like that. I think I'm better at it now!

**CB:** Was it difficult listening to your past recordings and not wishing to make artistic changes or alterations?

**PG:** I find I have that frame of mind maybe three months to a year after the album has gone out and then I can put it to bed, and accept it for what it is - some are not fully realised, or could have been better written, but I'm quite happy to accept that stuff now and just get on with it, and

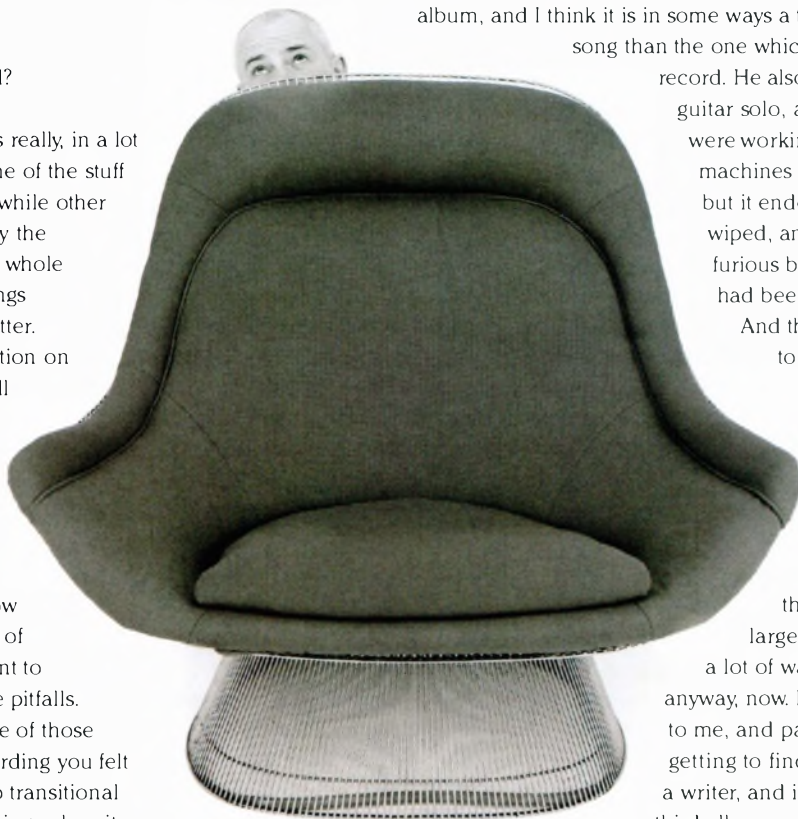
say, well, we can learn from that. For example, on the first album 'Here comes the flood', the arranger of the orchestral part did some beautiful stuff in the verse, but the chorus ended up as one of those rock meets orchestra bombastic things – at the time I was just so excited to be working on my first album, away from a band and in a room where all these wonderful instruments would play my music, and I think I didn't have the self confidence to sit back and make judgements. Robert Fripp, who worked on the first album (and produced the second) had done the original demo of the song with me which was just piano and voice, which he added some Frippertronics to and used on his solo album, and I think it is in some ways a truer version of the song than the one which appeared on my

record. He also did this really great guitar solo, and because we were working with sixteen track machines there was a limit, but it ended up mysteriously wiped, and I was absolutely furious because I knew it had been done deliberately.

And that seemed amazing to me, because I was very fortunate to grow up in a time where artists were allowed to control their destinies, which didn't happen before that time and has largely been eroded in a lot of ways, for young artists anyway, now. It was sort of shocking to me, and part of the process of getting to find out who I was as a writer, and it took me to the third album, really, to have real confidence and know what I was doing. Which is a long time in someone else's book. But not very long in my book!

**CB:** So the more gentle version that appeared on *Shaking the tree* was an opportunity to redress the balance?

**PG:** Yes, I wanted to get that version on there, its much simpler. I'd still like at some point to do songwriter versions of some other tracks; maybe put them on the website - you do hear it in a different way. If you listen to, I don't know, Dylan or Lennon, and you hear the demos or rough versions, you get a completely different interpretation ▶





▶ of the song, maybe much more of what they intended...

**CB:** So you really were focused on tidying up the sound rather than being distracted creatively?

**PG:** In some ways I was tempted to go back and remix things; but its a difficult thing - although its an interesting thing for the artist, almost inevitably audiences are less approving, if you do go back and remix stuff they feel the thing that they liked and remember as being part of their history has been fucked around with, if they have favourite song they want to hear the familiar version.

**CB:** Was it nostalgic?

**PG:** Very. You remember the studio, the smell of the room, the games you were playing – while recording the second album Risk and Scrabble were the in thing. And of course the people, the arguments about music – all the details, a bit like looking at an old photo album. When I did some of the Genesis stuff again it was just like being back in the band and the relationships were the same, and the humour. It's funny, people know this from leaving home, you go and

do a thousand things and you come back and its like you never left.

**CB:** But it was basically an enjoyable process?

**PG:** Yes, and quite constructive in a funny sort of way, a certain amount of it coincided with working on the new album, and I felt that it was good in that I have learned something and I have moved on.... I think I am a lot better at recognising and capturing the magic of subtlety and emotion and putting onto record.

**CB:**What are your feelings about re – releasing material on vinyl?

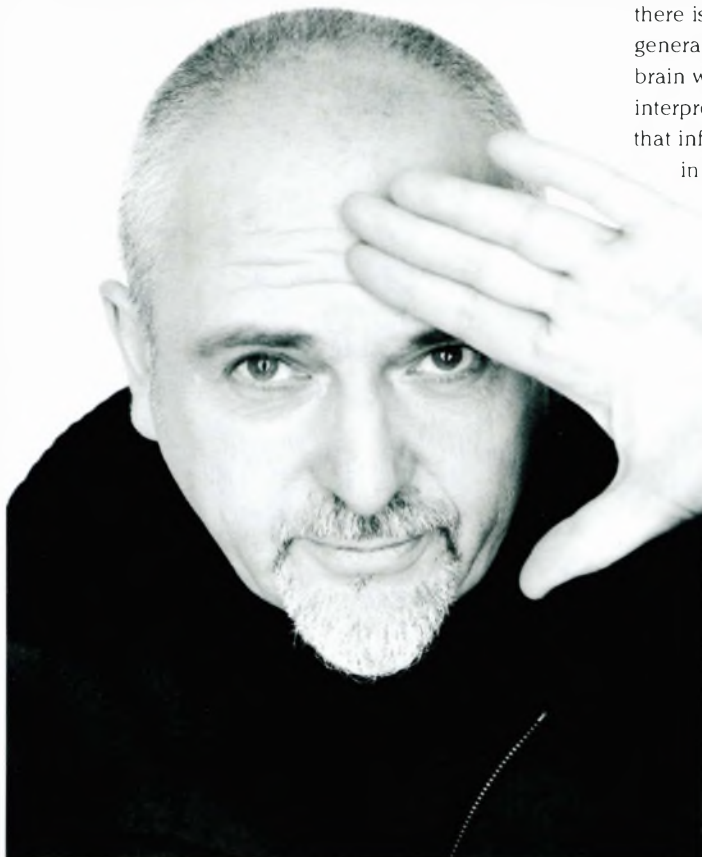
**PG:** As soon as CD came in, like a lot of artists I lost all enthusiasm for vinyl. Suddenly there was this dynamic possibility, I always like to have a big bottom end – I like to feel the bass movement. In vinyl days this was difficult and presented problems, with CD I could get 'more' on to a disc. But now im older and wiser and I do think that there's elements of vinyl that I prefer...I think that part of that is to do with the way the brain functions – with analogue systems, right at the edge of the periphery say, there is a tendency to airbrush details, whereas digital is generally cut, hard slices. With the airbrushed edge the brain will fill in the higher harmonics and do a lot of interpretation, like a pattern recognition tool – comparing that information against a history of what has been heard in the past, while with digital there is not a lot of imagining to do.

**CB:** There are interesting connections here. The audio community has a current fascination with frequencies above human hearing – ultrasonics, which according to current theory should make no difference. But you can hear a change...

**PG:** I think that is very interesting – you feel stuff instinctively maybe, that you may not actually sense or register as being sound and there's something at work here, and resonance is enormously important.

**CB:** So you don't regard the whole vinyl revival as a bit of an anacrophiliac pastime?

**PG:** No, I think it's a very real alternative now, I suppose kept alive by the DJ culture. Whereas a lot of kids used to grow up wanting to be a guitarist, they now want to be a DJ – that's the team model, but when we listen to

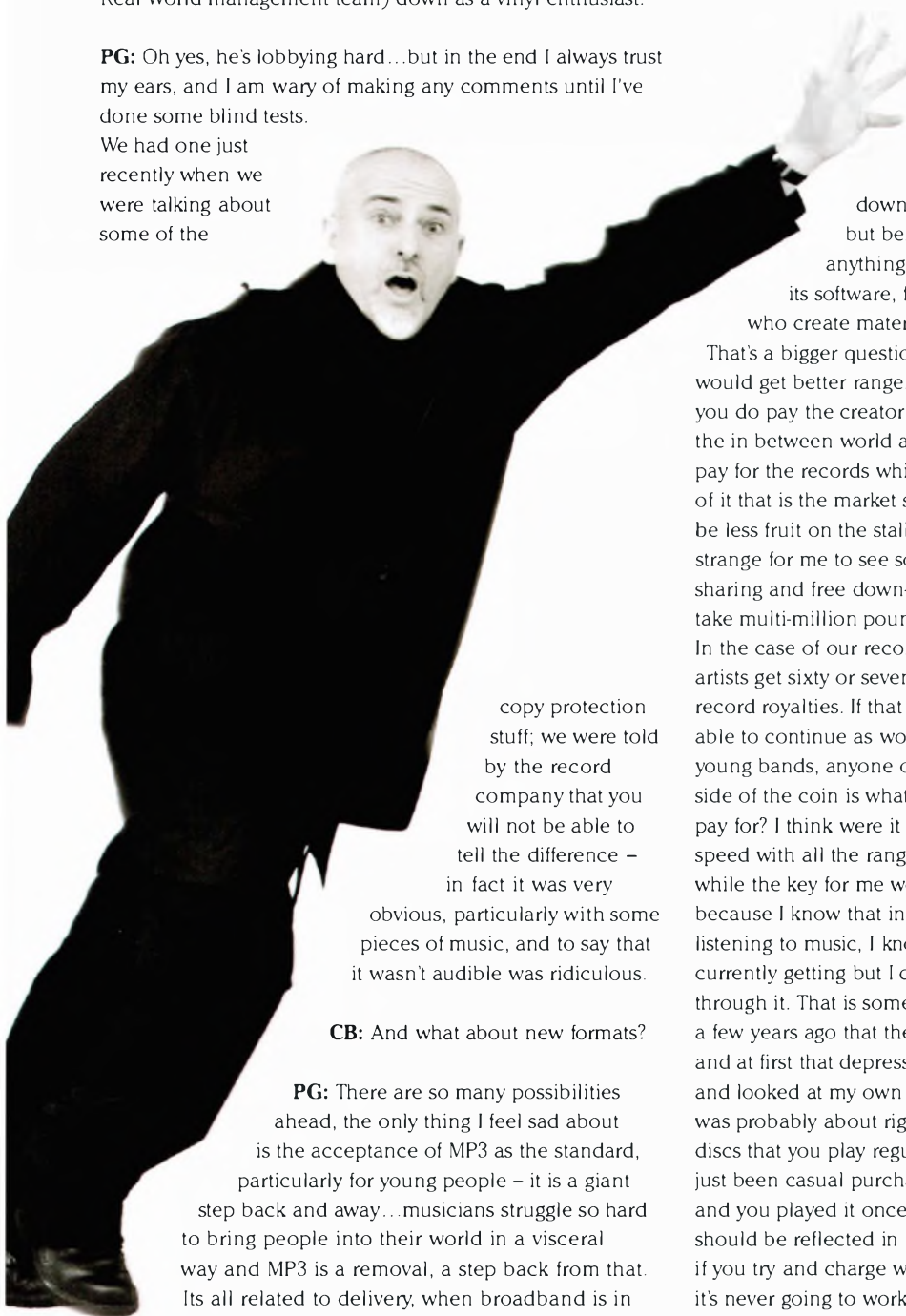


▶ it I really do see the strengths and the warmth as a really musical format.

**CB:** and of course you've got Mike Large (A member of the Real World management team) down as a vinyl enthusiast.

**PG:** Oh yes, he's lobbying hard...but in the end I always trust my ears, and I am wary of making any comments until I've done some blind tests.

We had one just recently when we were talking about some of the



copy protection stuff; we were told by the record company that you will not be able to tell the difference – in fact it was very obvious, particularly with some pieces of music, and to say that it wasn't audible was ridiculous.

**CB:** And what about new formats?

**PG:** There are so many possibilities ahead, the only thing I feel sad about is the acceptance of MP3 as the standard, particularly for young people – it is a giant step back and away...musicians struggle so hard to bring people into their world in a visceral way and MP3 is a removal, a step back from that. Its all related to delivery, when broadband is in most homes and downloading is quicker with

higher resolution, I hope there will be a much better format. And of course cost of storage is coming down

all the time, so I think this is a temporary aberration.

**CB:** and your view on the copy protection issue?

**PG:** I'm on two sides of the fence, maybe three, as an artist, but I've also got involved in OD2, which is a digital distribution network, so I've spent a lot of time discussing the issue.

In some ways we are the canary down the mine, the first battle ground, but behind us goes anyone who creates anything that can be turned into data whether its software, films pictures or music. Do people who create material have entitlement to get royalties?

That's a bigger question for society. I would argue that you would get better range, better quality and better choice if you do pay the creator something. We live in the luxury of the in between world at the moment where some people pay for the records while others get it for free. It is the part of it that is the market stall, and at a certain point there will be less fruit on the stall if there's no money coming in. It's strange for me to see some artists saying 'yeah I'm all for file sharing and free down-loading' and at the same time they take multi-million pound contracts from record companies. In the case of our record label, Real World, many of the artists get sixty or seventy percent of their income from record royalties. If that is taken away, a lot of them will not be able to continue as working musicians – the same applies to young bands, anyone outside of the mainstream. The other side of the coin is what is it people would be prepared to pay for? I think were it me, I would look for convenience and speed with all the range of musical possibilities on offer – while the key for me would be that it was well filtered, because I know that in twenty hours of watching TV or listening to music, I know that there is better stuff than I am currently getting but I don't have the time or energy to wade through it. That is something that I would pay for. I read a few years ago that the average record is played 1.3 times, and at first that depressed me a lot until I thought about it and looked at my own record collection and realised that it was probably about right; while there maybe twenty or so discs that you play regularly, there is a ton of stuff that has just been casual purchases – maybe you liked the cover – and you played it once and never went back to it. This should be reflected in the price one pays for the download, if you try and charge what you would pay in a record store it's never going to work.

**CB:** Do you not feel that people still want to physically own music in the shape of an artefact? ▶



► **PG:** I think it's partly an anal instinct in us that we want to collect artefacts and show them off. There is a display mechanism at work too, like peacock feathers on a date, and part of who you are is what you are wearing, what you read, and of course what you are listening to; these are flags that you use to identify yourself within your tribe... (CB goes very quiet at this point)

**CB:** The writing process – you have always had a unique method of putting songs together. Do you still use rhythms as a starting point?

**PG:** I still love working from a rhythm; there are still times when I will pick a harmonic idea and develop that out into a rhythm, but I would say that 70 % of the time its rhythm first. As a writer its fantastic that you can take your hands of the keyboard and something continues, in the old days if you weren't generating it, it would stop, but at the same time that can trap you into mono tempo, you then have to work harder to open it up and develop the idea.

**CB:** The Fairlight sampler – you were probably more responsible than anyone else in pioneering its use. Has there been any subsequent technology that has been as influential on your writing?

**PG:** I don't think there has been anything as fundamental as the Fairlight. In many ways that was like a dream come true; you could grab bits of sound and suddenly make music with them. Now the leaps that technology makes for the music maker are perhaps more incremental, but they're still quite considerable, for example the stuff on software that you can now get to manipulate sound is very interesting. The midi world - the control you have to manipulate is a wonderful tool for a composer, but there is a certain element of life and breath that you can take out of music once you go through that door. The technology can lead you sometimes. Its been said (I think it was Robert Fripp) that there are three parts to the relationship of learning and expertise; the first being ignorant exploration, where the naivety can sometimes be a real strength, the second stage of struggling with technique is the least interesting to any one else, and the third part wherein the technique can disappear, so once again you can have the emotion and the ideas. I'm never very patient or disciplined so I rarely get that far, I think I'm more of a jack of all trades when it comes to putting my work together.

**CB:** The record label, Real World, has done a lot to expose music of different cultures, although there appear to be more mainstream artists emerging such as Joseph Arthur. Are you still active in casting the net and finding new artists?

**PG:** Very much so. I still have a lot to do with areas like A&R and artwork, but not so much with the day to day running. I'm glad you mentioned Joseph Arthur – I think he's a major talent, lyrically and musically, and I really feel he's on another level. I've always hoped that Real World would be not just about world music but also about interesting experiments and collaborations and good song writing, because that's a sometimes neglected tradition that I would like to play a part in helping to preserve. But unfortunately the 'world music' tag can work against us sometimes when we're trying to sign more traditional song writing talent...

**CB:** Does it still provide you with opportunities to make contact with people who you would like to contribute to your albums?

**PG:** Oh yeah, its like a railway station here, all sorts of people come through and I hear interesting noises and say oh can I have some of that please! That often happens, and you get exposed to all these wonderful colours and it's a fantastic gift for a composer to have this palette available.

**CB:** You've done a number of film soundtracks. Do you find it a different process from writing material for a Peter Gabriel album?

**PG:** There's less responsibility, as you're working for somebody else. And you don't have to worry about words, yet you can still realise parts of your own musical hunger that may not come so easily within a song. I think I'm a more natural melody and rhythm writer, and much as I love words, there's a freedom that comes with having an empty page. I've also been lucky enough to work with directors who are musical, and respect that part of it so it feels collaborative rather dictatorial. So they've always been good experiences. Sometimes I'm able to recycle stuff, which can be productive, I think in classical music you have themes that are explored in all sorts of ways, but with rock music there is generally just one version, and then it's gone, its history.

**CB:** I feel bad asking this, but there was a long wait for *Up*; is it going to be another ten years before the next album?

**PG:** I hope not! No, I hope it's a bit like buses, you wait a long time and then there are three of them. I have got quite a lot of stuff started, but I'm probably not going to look at it till October as I'm touring now until early July, and then I'm going to take some time in the summer to be with my family. ►

PG Photography by Steve Double

## ► Re-mastering – what is it?

There are a number of clearly defined stages in the path from a microphone to the finished product containing the music that you listen to. While the formats, equipment and techniques may have changed, there are three distinct processes that occur: recording, mixing and mastering. Where music has been 'created' in the recording studio (I am not thinking so much of orchestral recording which is more the capturing of an event, quite often directly to stereo) it is recorded onto a multi-track machine of some description. In the old days we were talking 2" tape, whereas now the predominant system in large professional studios is Pro-Tools, a computer based hard disc system. The individual tracks are then mixed down into a left and right format, and it is here that the process of mastering begins – quite simply taking the two track material and preparing it for duplication onto the chosen format. This can involve a number of processes, tidying up and editing beginning and ends of tracks, unifying the levels of each song, finalising the running order, and an overall shaping of the sound. Most importantly of all, the EQ for each track is decided. What is actually done will depend on the format that the material is being mastered for.

Originally, with vinyl, considerable compromises had to be made in terms of running time versus dynamic range and bass content – the more you tried to squeeze onto a side in terms of playing time the less room there was for wild excursions of extreme bass and high levels. Critical decisions had to be made concerning compression and to a lesser extent, frequency shaping and the possibility of putting the bass into mono. In other words, literally shaping what goes onto the disc. Achieving good results became something of an art form; good cutting engineers acquired something of a legendary reputation, Doug Sax of Sheffield labs for example.

With the arrival of CD, things changed considerably. There was a general feeling that, with the constraints of vinyl out of the way, mastering was relatively unimportant. (I hope that after reading this, you will disagree!) The idea of economical re-mastering for CD, albums previously released on vinyl was obviously an attractive one for the record companies: for minimal outlay they could re-release already recorded material and lure the general public into buying it again on the basis of it being 'digitally re-mastered' and hence, superior in quality.

Only quite often it wasn't. Probably the biggest influence on the success of a re-mastering project is the material that the engineer has to work with. This depends on what the record company has managed to unearth, and bear in mind that we could be talking about material that might have been recorded thirty or forty years ago. As well as the original master tapes, there can be safety masters, production masters, second generation copies... There could be problems with deterioration of the tape, depending on age and storage conditions, and if the original master isn't available the production master might be used. Unfortunately, this could have been the copy with all the EQ processing and directives for cutting vinyl. As for the stories about CD re-masters being made from actual records, I don't know, but I have bought CD's to replace lost vinyl, and one or two sound as if they have been recorded with a crystal microphone in front of a Dansette record player.

### The Peter Gabriel re-masters

With the entire Peter Gabriel back catalogue stored at Real World, work started there on preparing the analogue 1/4" and 1/2" tapes; bearing in

mind the age of some of the material (PG1 is now over 25 years old) a certain amount of ageing had taken place. 'Baking' the tapes at a low temperature served to refurbish the backing and prevent further deterioration during the transfers. The requirements of the project were quite ambitious. As well as a one to one 1/2" analogue copy of the tapes for cutting the vinyl releases, they also simultaneously produced 16bit/44K, 24bit/48K, 24bit/96K and DSD stereo masters, thus embracing all foreseeable formats. Because Sony were interested in the release of all of the Peter Gabriel albums on SACD, they offered the use of their high resolution editing system, the Sonoma, and the decision was made to transfer all of the digital material onto it at Real World to minimise further wear of the tapes.

Once at Metropolis where the re-mastering was to take place, engineers Tony Cousins and Crispin Murray compared the Sonoma copies to the original masters, played back on the highly modified Ampex machines used by the studio. These proved to be far superior to the one used at Real World, easily out-performing the digital copies, so the whole process was duly repeated,

once again transferred the tapes across to the Sonoma. After PG and Richard Chapel (his engineer from Real World) had been in to listen and make comments about what they wanted, work began in earnest. All of the audio alterations such as EQ were carried out in the analogue domain in the feed to the computer; Tony Cousins feels that such processing in digital requires processors to work significantly harder with a consequential drop in performance.

It was at this point that they discovered that the Sonoma was not as user friendly as the SADiE editing system with which they were more familiar, but the SADiE was not suitable for mastering SACD. Purely by chance, they heard about the imminent arrival of DSD compatible cards from SADiE, who loaned the first unit in the country for the project. So a third pass was made from the master tapes. Comparing results with the 96K pass, the general consensus was that the DSD versions were simply not as good as they should have been, leading to the replacement of the SADiE's converters with new ones from dCS.

So the transfers were done yet again...

Finally, the laborious process of editing could begin. There was a considerable amount of cleaning up and repair work to be done, where for example there had been drop outs on the original tapes. One of the problems was that with the earlier albums that originally only saw release on vinyl, there were a number of problems such as hiss between tracks that would have been covered by LP surface noise, but would be glaringly obvious on CD. It was also an opportunity to clear up print through on the tape, the most obvious example of which is at the beginning of 'Sledgehammer' on the 'So' album. Listen to the re-master and it's gone... So, a project that was originally scheduled to take a couple of months ended up spanning nearly a year and a half. The repeated returns to the original tapes, the trawling through different hardware, highlight how critical such aspects of the process can be – and the potentially disastrous damage possible from shortcuts and assumptions. In this case, the meticulous care has really paid off. The results are quite exceptional, and stand as a great example of what can be achieved, and what re-mastering should be about.





# Peter Gabriel - Living in the Real World

by David Ayers

With Realworld re-mastering the entire Peter Gabriel catalogue, and with Classic Records also re-issuing the solo albums on vinyl, following on from their fantastic pressings of most of the Gabriel period Genesis albums, it's high time to reconsider the work of this iconic British artist.

No overview of Gabriel the solo artist should ignore his work with Genesis, the fertile field in which his precocious talents first took root. As is much documented, Genesis started as extra-curricular activity for a bunch of boys at Charterhouse school. They initially came to the attention of Charterhouse old boy, Jonathan King. He saw potential in the band and managed to secure them a contract to record an album to be produced by him. The end result *From Genesis To Revelation* was unlike any subsequent Genesis album, as King pulled rank on the band to move the record away from the band's vision. The album itself is a pretty but insubstantial record, interesting only to completists and the average rock journalist who has neither the wit nor the attention span to appreciate the longer pieces to be found on the succeeding albums. *From Genesis To Revelation* would give the band their first studio experience, and the knowledge of what to look out for in a sympathetic producer. Before too long they would meet Tony Stratton Smith, on the recommendation of Rare Bird producer Anthony Young. Stratton Smith had recently set up Charisma Records, and it was there that Genesis would find a nurturing ground for their introspective and thoughtful rock epics. Stratton Smith, like Chris Blackwell of Island Records, was prepared to allow a talented group to grow and experiment, assuming that they would achieve eventual success that would repay his long-term investment

in them. This is in marked contrast to the current situation where only instantaneously and massively successful bands retain their deals, as the big corporations look for a return on their investments within the year. Genesis' Gabriel period music may be indelibly stamped as coming from the early 70's, but their very existence is as much

a part of that era's long term view to label signings as the cultural landscape itself.. Gabriel, perhaps surprisingly, is a shy individual, but as lead singer he was thrust into the limelight on stage. In what appears to be a defence mechanism, he started to adopt many stage personas, incorporating more and more theatrical elements into the stage show from the *Foxtrot* album onwards. I saw Genesis several times after *Nursery Crymes* first came out and found that even then, whilst the rest of

the band were fairly anonymous on stage, Gabriel was a charismatic performer, keeping the audience enthralled. This ability coupled with the later theatricals led many to believe that Genesis was Gabriel's band, but this was never the case. The reality is that every member made their unique contribution to making the band what

it was, and in so doing provided Gabriel with a safe environment in which to hone his considerable skills. My personal favourite album from this period is *Nursery Cryme* although the popular choices would be either *Foxtrot*, with the sprawling 20 minute opus 'Supper's Ready' and the staccato stage favourite 'Watcher Of The Skies', or *The Lamb Lies Down On Broadway* which for many is the culmination of Gabriel's vision



▶ with Genesis. Across its four sides *Lamb* tells the story of Rael, a New York punk who is dragged down Orpheus style into a semi-mythical hallucinatory underworld where he suffers multiple humiliations before finding redemption. The story is totally Gabriel's leading many to believe that he wrote the whole album, music as well. Quite frankly you only have to listen to the preceding *Selling England By The Pound* and the subsequent *Trick Of The Tail* albums to realise that this is nonsense. Whilst the album sprawls a bit, and the production robs it of some of the power it should have had, this rock opus reached the imaginations of many a grammar school music fan, and the subsequent, highly theatrical tour was hugely popular.

Prior to *Lamb* Gabriel had left the group, but was persuaded to rejoin to record and tour with the album. Once the tour was finished Gabriel left again and promptly disappeared. It would be three years before his first solo album was released.

Entitled simply *Peter Gabriel* the LP shipped to the stores in 1977, and a single 'Solsbury Hill' was released to minor success. 'Modern Love' was a subsequent single but made little impression on the charts. 'Solsbury Hill' with its bright and clear acoustic guitars and catchy chorus soon became a hi-fi show favourite, sounding good on most systems. Personally I would rather use the dark and disturbing opening track 'Moribund The Burgermeister', which is a much sterner test. As a whole the album carries the heavy stamp of Bob Ezrin the producer, even leading to comments that Gabriel was in fact a session musician for an Ezrin album. An alternative view is that Gabriel at that time needed an environment where, away from the support mechanism of working within a group, he could feel safe enough to write the songs he wanted to without the extra requirement to realise them exactly to his vision. I don't find this surprising: Gabriel was used to the shaping process that occurred to his songs when in Genesis, and using a strong producer is in many ways no different. In fact for his second album he turned to Robert Fripp, another talented and thoughtful musician who had

actually played on the first album, as producer. The final product, which was also called *Peter Gabriel*, but is commonly referred to as *2* or *Scratch* after the cover image, was as much a product of Fripp's production as the previous album had been Ezrin's. With *2* Fripp had another agenda, fitting it in with two other albums he produced around the same time to make a trilogy,

something that will be covered in an upcoming article. *2* is probably the Gabriel album I play least, despite outstanding tracks such as the delicate and beautiful 'Mother Of Violence', the moving if overblown 'Home Sweet Home', and the King Crimson like 'White Shadow'.

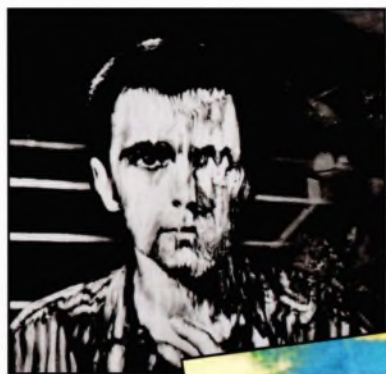
At the start of the eighties, Gabriel released another self titled album, this time produced by Steve Lillywhite. It is this album that really

sets the tone for Gabriel the solo artist. It has all his trademarks, such as the rhythm driven song writing, the huge cast of guest musicians whose contributions are used sparingly throughout, and the use of the studio as an experimentation area for creating the exact sounds wanted for each song. In this respect Lillywhite seems to be the right

producer for the artist, allowing Gabriel to find his true voice. The album is quite simply superb, ranging from the rock struts of 'I Don't Remember', through the politically aware single 'Games Without Frontiers', to the straight cry from the heart for the injustices in South Africa that is the album's keynote song 'Biko'. In many ways this

was the album Gabriel had been promising to make all along, and boy did he succeed. From a hi-fi point of view, if you can't clearly tell that the background vocals on 'Games Without Frontiers' are provided by Kate Bush, then you probably need to upgrade!

Another two years were to pass before Gabriel's fourth self titled LP. This time produced by Gabriel





► himself and David Lord, the LP took many by surprise. *4* is a much quieter and initially introspective album than its predecessor, despite the thunderous opening track 'Rhythm Of The Heat'. The music itself is multi-layered, yet with acres of space. Like *3* there are no cymbals to be found in the rhythm section, relying on a more tribal beat. By this point Gabriel had discovered the Fairlight sampler, as well as the Linn drum machine. The Fairlight in particular allowed unusual sounds to be sampled and then manipulated to be played back as another musical instrument. These days this is commonplace, but in 1982 this was brand new technology for musicians. Gabriel spent much time exploring the textural possibilities of recording various sound samples from non-musical sources. *4* is an extraordinary album for its intelligent use of available technology in creating a dense and rewarding recording that is timeless. The most commercial track 'Shock The Monkey' was released as a single, once again to minor success, but the big time was still waiting round the corner.

The following year *Peter Gabriel Plays Live* was released. Bought by many for the unreleased song 'I Go Swimming' the album is an enjoyable live take on tracks mostly taken from *3* and *4*. After that Gabriel was approached by Alan Parker to score the soundtrack for his film *Birdy*. Not having the time or material to produce a brand new composition, Gabriel went back to *4* and reworked many of the tracks for the score. The soundtrack was released with a warning that the music contained within was not new. The music works extremely well both in the context of the film and as a stand alone album, but many were disappointed by the recycled nature of the contents. However few would expect the album that was to follow, albeit after another long wait.

In a move that is now the norm, the next album was prefaced by the release of a single and accompanying video one month before its release. The groundbreaking video from Aardman Animations and the superbly upbeat song

'Sledgehammer' suddenly had everyone talking about Peter Gabriel once again. Endlessly looped on MTV, and winning several awards, Gabriel had found a new medium for his

talent. When *So* came out it sold in massive quantities. Recorded digitally and direct metal mastered it had a bright and immediate sound that made it a popular choice for hi-fi demonstrations, although repeated listens show an unpleasant patina from those early digitisers.

Musically it is Gabriel stripped bare and commercialised. I can see why it was such a huge success, with its catchy tunes and reduced tonal sophistication.

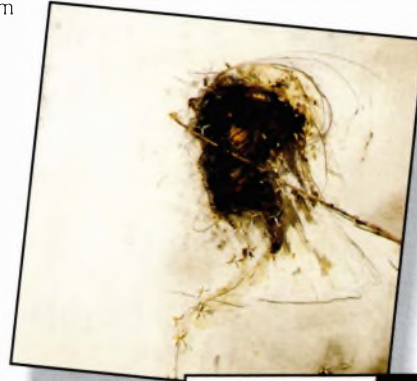
Unfortunately that same lessening of depth reduces its long term appeal.

That's not to say it is a bad album, in fact for many musicians it would be the pinnacle of their achievement, but for an artist of Gabriel's abilities it is mere confection. The recent CD re-master has done much to reduce the 80's digital unpleasantness, and I will be very interested to hear the upcoming

Classic Records vinyl reissue.

One of the really positive aspects of *So*'s success is that it finally gave Gabriel the financial returns he had long deserved. He had finally arrived, having stepped back from the edge by quitting Genesis. With his former band mates also basking in great success, Stratton Smith's vision in signing them years before was finally justified. Fêted as a star on both sides of the Atlantic, Gabriel got the offer to create the soundtrack for Martin Scorsese's controversial film *The Last Temptation Of Christ*, the soundtrack to which appeared in modified form as the album *Passion*. Sadly overlooked, and not seen generally as part of Gabriel's main body of work,

*Passion* is an amazing amalgam of world music influence and western rock. Although lacking in songs as such, the whole album is a dense and rewarding soundscape that improves with repeated listening. If you have previously ignored this album, then



▶ I suggest you take the opportunity of the re-issue series to discover it.

Apart from the career spanning greatest hits package *Shaking The Tree* another three year wait was in the offing before the next album, 1992's *Us*. It is an intensely personal album in which Gabriel attempts to lay the ghosts of his various relationships, in particular with his ex-wife Jill and the actress Rosanna Arquette. A densely textured album that once again incorporates world music elements although much less overtly than with *Passion*, he weaves a tapestry from many disparate sources and guest musicians. So much recording was done for the album that many performers never saw their contributions appear. The resulting double album and CD is a masterpiece, for the most part deliberately measured in pace yet immensely rewarding. Two tracks, 'Steam' and 'Kiss That Frog' hark back to the commercialism of *So* but even these have layers not to be found on that previous offering. The first side of the LP, i.e. the first three tracks: 'Come Talk To Me', 'Love To Be Loved', and 'Blood Of Eden' are a master class in powerful yet understated intelligent rock music. 'Blood Of Eden' in particular is so haunting that it is nearly impossible to move on to the next track without a pause to let it settle in the mind. *Us* is my all time favourite Gabriel album, although it's a difficult choice.

A live album followed in 1994, which re-interpreted many of the older songs. Although it's interesting to hear this I wouldn't consider it an essential purchase. Once again Gabriel disappeared from view, this time while he worked on various non-musical projects, and latterly on the music for the Millennium Dome experience. This was released as the album *OVO* and makes for difficult listening shorn of its visuals. This is one album I would like to see released on DVD-V so that the complete experience can be appreciated.

Moving on to last year, and finally a new 'proper' Gabriel studio album, *Up*. Highly significant for the hi-fi community, released as it was on audiophile quality vinyl by Classic Records simultaneously with the CD release, the album was also recorded for multi channel. When I reviewed *Up* for a previous issue I commented that it is very much like *Us part 2*. In terms of its texture and pacing it certainly is, although the album is less focussed, and in places Gabriel is playing with other styles making it something of a patchwork quilt. Brilliant in places, but as whole slightly less satisfying than *Us*. I get the

impression that it could be a transitional album to something extra special on his next release.

*I am indebted to Spencer Bright's excellent authorised biography of Peter Gabriel for some of the factual information contained within this article.*



### Discography – the albums

#### With Genesis

From Genesis To Revelation	(1969)
Trespass	(1970)
Nursery Cryme	(1971)
Foxtrot	(1972)
Genesis Live	(1973)
Selling England By The Pound	(1973)
The Lamb Lies Down On Broadway	(1974)

#### Solo

Peter Gabriel (1)	(1977)
Peter Gabriel (2)	(1978)
Peter Gabriel (3)	(1980)
Peter Gabriel (4)*	(1982)
Peter Gabriel Plays Live	(1983)
Birdy (OST)	(1985)
So	(1986)
Passion	(1989)
Shaking The Tree	(1990)
Us	(1992)
Secret World Live	(1994)
OVO	(2000)
Up	(2002)

\*Released as *Serenity* in the US





# Table of Contents...

## Comparing the re-mastered CDs with SACD and LP issues

by Roy Gregory

The Gabriel re-mastering project undertaken by Real World offers us an unprecedented opportunity for inter format navel gazing. Not only do we have identically re-mastered versions of the entire catalogue on CDs and the soon to be released SACDs, but Classic Records are fast catching up with their all-analogue LP releases. But it goes farther than that. The whole project has been overseen by Real World who are just as interested in the sonic outcome of their efforts as we are. To that end they have been unusually obliging when it comes to furnishing the catalogue on all three formats, as well as the all-important history and precise details of the mastering process itself. Thus we have a unique case history for each set of recordings and a catalogue of masters which spans the technological gamut from 1/2" analogue right the way through to DSD.

Of course, a full comparison of each and every disc in all its versions would be a mammoth undertaking, even if the necessary pressings existed – which they don't – yet. However, we are far enough into the release schedule to draw some serious and quite surprising conclusions. Obviously, the re-mastered CDs present no availability problem, but the same cannot be said of the yet to appear SACDs and the as yet incomplete Classic LP series. The latter has so far reached *PG4*, and whilst I returned from Frankfurt with a test-pressing of *So* clutched in my grubby little mitts, it's a pressing which is yet to receive official approval. Fortunately, Real World produced a full set of SACD test-pressings (or whatever you call the digital equivalents) which left us with the following scenario:

CD, SACD and 200g LP versions of *PG1-4* and the latest album *Up*. *PG1-4* were all taped to analogue masters whereas *Up* was a straight DSD master (including surround sound options that I'm not even going to mention here). Now, it would have been nice to include at least one album that started life as a straight multi-bit master, but as the only available option is *So* (for which the LP is a test-pressing anyway) I'm not sure it's fair to draw generalised conclusions from what was a less than fabulous example of the digital recording art in the first place. For that I'd rather wait until Classic get as far as *Passion* or maybe *Us*. From the above options I chose to use *PG1* (because everybody knows it), *PG3* ('cos it's my favourite) and obviously, *Up*.

### The System

For the purposes of this comparison I chose to use the Hovland HP100 line-stage and Radia power amp, feeding the KEF Reference 207 speakers via Nordost Valhalla cabling. Power was supplied from a Russ Andrews Mains Block and Kimber Leads, complete with a full suite of Super Purifiers and Silencers. The all important source components consisted of the resident Wadia 861 CD player and Clearaudio Master Reference record player (the latter chosen to limit the gross difference in overall spectral balance between the digital and analogue front-ends, and fed through The Groove phono-stage). SACD replay was entrusted to the single-ended outputs of a Classe Omega SACD player, a substantial two box machine with a reputation as one of the finest early implementations of SACD mechanics. It doesn't offer six discrete audio outs, thus putting an exclamation mark after the full stop I'd already mentally placed after the surround sound issue. Also, and by way of experiment, the Wadia's variable outputs were connected directly to the Radia, a mode in which it's proven its mettle in the past. Volumes were carefully matched and listening proceeded on the basis of one track at a time, although for examples I'll tend to rely on the better known songs, so that all you readers out there who don't possess a complete Gabriel back catalogue needn't feel left out.

Of course, we've already been through the protracted process that led to the digital re-masters. Now we need to trace the same path for the analogue re-issues. Classic Records were supplied with the analogue clones taken from the Metropolis tape machines. These were devoid of any compression or EQ. Instead, a 24bit/48K digital re-master was also supplied, to provide a sonic reference as to Peter's intentions. The mastering itself was left to Bernie Grundman at RTI, the overall brief being to mimic as far as possible the effects achieved in the digital re-mastering. The records were pressed on 200g Quix vinyl, and without the



- Groove Guard profile, in line with Classic's latest thinking. Real World also supplied a conventional 180g pressing of *Up* (also pressed by Classic) for comparison. The latest album is available on both weights, the Classic version being a Deluxe run of 2000, so this is one part of the test that Gabriel fan(atic)s or the truly anally retentive can carry out for themselves.

### Listen Up...

Right, let's get the preliminaries out of the way straightaway. In every case, the CD version of these discs was clearly bettered by its SACD and vinyl counterparts. However, the relative gaps between the different formats varies significantly, and so too does the order of the ranking.

Let's start with the clearest cut example, *PG3*. In each case the sonic observations are made relative to the re-mastered CD.

The SACD version delivers significantly better separation, transparency and focus, courtesy of an obvious reduction of fine grain. The space within the soundstage, around and between the instruments and vocal tracks, is far blacker compared to the finely textured gray found on the CD. The noise floor seems lower, the dynamic range greater, the soundstage deeper and more expansive.

Bass goes deeper and is far more solid, both it and dynamics in general being better rooted.

Playing 'Biko', the massed voices that open the track are far better differentiated and separated, the space wide open in comparison to the cramped confines of the CD. They're sweeter, more detailed and far more refined too. As noted before, the bass beats go deeper with greater solidity, shape and texture, but the most impressive thing about the low frequencies is the shape and concentration of the energy, which doesn't bleed or muddy the midrange. Likewise, the distant bagpipe chorus is exactly that: distant, placed towards the left rear corner of the stage, held in its own acoustic, where the CD allowed it to wander into a mid-centre location, submerged in the rest of the mix.

Indeed, there's only one area in which the CD edged the

SACD, and that was in the realm of musical flow and shape, but I'd put that down to the relative maturity of the front-end electronics. This is an area in which the Wadia excels. It's also an area where first generation CD players fell flat on their faces. Given the margin of superiority that the SACD enjoys in terms of detail, information and harmonic structure and refinement, it will only be a matter of time before the players start to arrange it a little more precisely.

Next up to bat was the 200g LP. The presence and dimensionality of the opening voices on 'Biko' was a clear step beyond the SACD, while the bass was heavier and more propulsive. Space within the soundstage was even more obvious, highlighted by extra acoustic cues, while dynamics were even quicker and wider. There was absolutely no sense of hesitation to the pace and progress of the track, the structure and shape drawing you in and driving it along. The result, especially on the vocals, was a far more emotive and communicative quality. It simply sounded more powerful, both as a song and as a recording. The bottom line here is simple: it was the LP that got you singing, and with a song like 'Biko' that's all she wrote...

Likewise 'Songs Without Frontiers', which again demonstrated the SACD's superior clarity, detail and focus when compared with the CD. Voices were more intelligible and identifiable,

especially Ms Bush's backing vocals. But again, it was the LP with its added substance that got the momentum and underlying menace of the track just right.

Results on *PG1* were similar overall, but here the additional control and refinement displayed by the SACD brought it far closer to the LP, which, whilst it still exhibited its customary presence and clout, was made to sound course, ragged and even muddled in comparison. Like I said, it narrowed the gap, but didn't manage to close it completely. 'Moribund The

Burgermeister' was wonderfully detailed and controlled on SACD (shades of dCS?), but the energy spectrum became fractured, the post-Genesis swirl of the chorus arriving on a bright shelf half way up the soundstage. ►



► 200g – worth the bother?

With both 180g and 200g versions of *Up* on hand, it would have been negligent not to make the comparison. The difference here has less to do with weight than it has to do with the profile of the vinyl. The 180g records still incorporate Groove Guard, a modification to the disc that dates from the days of auto-changers. In those days, record manufacturers concerned about possible groove damage from repeated stacking of records incorporated raised 'lands' around the periphery and under the label, thus spacing the vulnerable areas from each other (and, unfortunately, the platter). The result was a gently curved profile across the playing surface of the record. Classic's 200g pressings fill in the dips, hence the extra weight, to provide a properly flat surface to mate with the platter.

Listening to the two, the 200g version offers blacker backgrounds and firmer, deeper bass, making music more substantial and dynamically emphatic. Clearly superior you might well think, but the danger is that all that grounding leaves things earthbound. There are benefits to be had, but like everything else when it comes to records, their delivery will depend on the care with which the various considerations are balanced. In this instance, Classic have got it about right, the added weight and sheer wallop of the flat profile easily out-punching the 180. When it comes to historical material? Well, we'll have to wait and see.

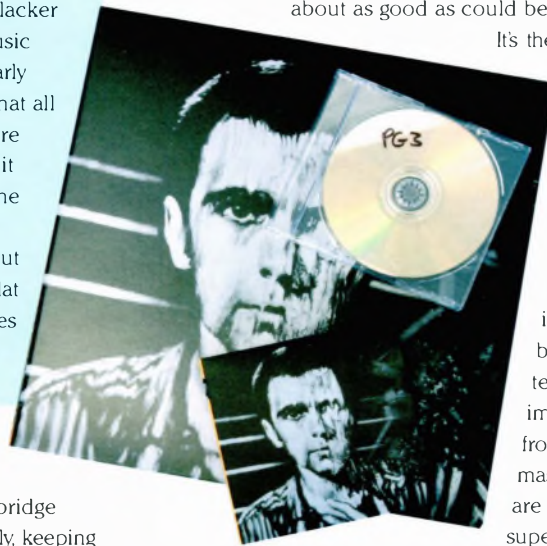
The 200g LP was more coherent and even if it was less obviously detailed or separated, it managed to bridge the energy gap into the chorus far more convincingly, keeping everything in the same plane whilst making the passage far more dynamically convincing. It might have been a little unruly, but at least it was all going in the same direction and at the same time. As DA observed in his overview of the re-mastered CDs, the muddled and complex mix plays into the hands of the added control of the digital media and it takes a good turntable to compete. Move onto something simpler, the joyful romp of 'Solsbury Hill' and the LP's quicker dynamics and fleeter feet widen the gap, the SACD's finesse and detail unable to match the presence and power (yes, power) of the turntable. Not quite a draw then, but a close run thing.

On then to *Up*, and the most interesting results of all. The CD performs to a higher standard than the other re-mastered discs, but the SACD and LP still offer superior sonics. Only in this case, working from the (non dCS) DSD master, the SACD rams home its natural advantage. The LP has impressive body but lacks the control at frequency extremes and overall poise and balance of the hi-bit digital disc. 'I Grieve' demonstrates

the SACD's ability to keep multitudinous layers separate, generating a beautifully textured soundscape for the intimate, clearly superimposed, vocals. There's a delicacy to the touch, a finesse that suits the fragility of the track. There's also no trace of the rhythmic hesitancy experienced on *PG3*, the stately majesty of the track flowing fourth unimpeded.

The 200g LP sounds flatter than in the other cases here, without the dynamic jump and sheer presence enjoyed on *PG3*, and noticeably lacking in fine detail and acoustic cues compared to the SACD. 'The Barry Williams Show' exhibits the same disparity but to an even greater extent, the SACD clearly offering the preferred option, especially when things get busy.

It's not an outcome that I expected, and one that came as quite a surprise after prolonged exposure to the superb pressing of *PG3*. However, astonishment aside, the result is about as good as could be wished for.



It's the first clear validation of the DSD/SACD process under fully understood and controlled, comparative conditions. It's heartening indeed, and if the benefits in archival terms are less impressive than from DSD original master tapes, they are still audibly superior to CD, with

the development life of the SACD replay technology stretching ahead of it. To what extent the character heard is a product of the machinery (and particularly the dCS converters) used, and to what extent an inherent characteristic of the format itself remains to be seen, but of one thing I'm certain. This is first generation technology and I'd expect development to be both significant and rapid. Meanwhile, there's life in the old dog yet, with vinyl LP still achieving discernable benefits from its continued development, whilst at the same time offering an enviable benchmark for musical reproduction. I'm rather looking forward to the musical future if this is what it holds.

It remains only to thank those at Real World, Classic Records and Metropolis for the considerable time and effort they committed to the preparation of this article. DA, CB and I are all most grateful, and richer for the experience. ►+



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# Record Reviews

## How To Read Them














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

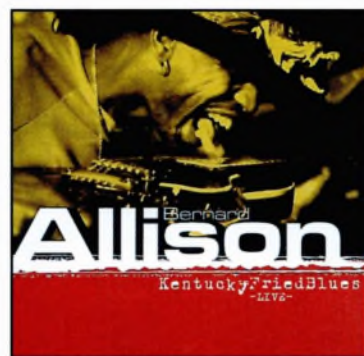
The ratings at the bottom of each review reflect the reviewer's opinion of the recording quality, and musical merits of the album. You'll soon realise that a great many musically significant albums offer less than wonderful sound. Don't let it put you off! For your information the scale rates a standard,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

The reviewers are identified by their initials.

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

### Key to Icons

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



Bernard Allison

### Kentucky Fried Blues Live

RUF Records RUF 1092 

Bernard Allison comes from prime blues stock, his father being the late, great, Luther Allison, a performer of legendary status and a lot to measure up to.

When Bernard was a young boy he used to accompany his father on lengthy tours around the states, and by the age of seven was dreaming of becoming a guitar hero. By the time he'd graduated from high school, Allison had earned himself a slot as lead guitarist in Koko Taylor's band. He then formed his own band – honing his singing and playing skills – before returning for a second spell with Miss Taylor. He left to accompany his father on a European tour as bandleader and then struck out on his own again, releasing a string of critically acclaimed albums and backing them up with incendiary live performances, of which Kentucky Fried Blues is a perfect example.

Allison plays with fiery passion and it's not difficult to spot his influences. Elements of Albert King, Freddie King, Johnny Winter and Stevie Ray Vaughan are on show here, along with a fair amount of his father's explosive technique. One of this album's highlights is an 18 minute romp through Buddy Guy's 'Leave My Girl Alone', which features some beautiful soloing and showcases Allison's guitar talking trick (it has to be heard to be believed!) Bernard Allison's going from strength to strength with every release – and he's still only 37 years old.

AH

RECORDING  
MUSIC







## The Bluetones

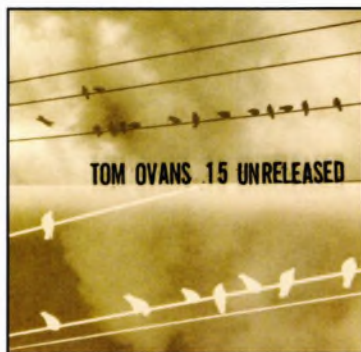
### Luxembourg

Superior Quality Recordings Blue 019 

When a band fails to set the world alight, then disappears for a suspiciously long time you rightly treat their return with caution. The Bluetones then, have never been huge, have never been radical, have always simply made good music, quietly in their own little world. And so, three years after *Science and Nature*, the Bluetones return with *Luxembourg*. They gave up trying to satisfy the critics long ago, and in doing so set themselves free from the vagaries of fashion. So just as *Science and Nature* was a low-key gem, so *Luxembourg* shines in its own modest fashion. This album would never get a 10/10 from me, but to ignore it would be your loss. With *Luxembourg* the Bluetones move back towards the Britpop brilliance that made them, with clipped guitars and superbly tight production the record sounds brisk and nervy. But ultimately this is the sound of a band that are no longer young, no longer fresh, but entirely happy with that fact. Beautifully understated, *Luxembourg* contains humour and emotion in equal parts. Crisp performance and intelligent songs make this an album only the Bluetones could have made. I love it.

MC

RECORDING   
MUSIC



## Tom Ovans

### 15 Unreleased

Floating World FW014 

A chiselled voice and the jaundiced eye that captures each and every dark and strikingly desolate image of modern American life has seen Tom Ovans become an almost unrivalled chronicler of the morose. In an age when morality, integrity and principle are at best traded as commodities, that serrated edge to his highly individual blend of folk-blues cuts through this plutocratic skin and works at the very sinews which have and still continue to hold an iniquitous society together. Those painful and frequently uncomfortable observations, which have been sharpened over more than three decades of song writing roam across personal and public themes. There's the doomed romance of 'Dance With Me Girl' which also metaphorically ruminates on the probable fate of North America. Then there are those brutal realities of a disjointed Reagan foreign policy, which turned much of Central America into a war zone ('Little Child') and seems destined now to be repeated throughout the Middle East some twenty years on. Although many of these fifteen previously unreleased songs were written in the 1980s they do still possess a disturbing degree of topicality. To me it suggests two things. The songs have enduring qualities and that despite the passages of time little has changed to redress the imbalances.

RP


Supplier: Cherished Record Co. 01579 363603

RECORDING   
MUSIC



## Cornershop

### Handcream for a New Generation

Wiiija Records WIJCD1115 

*Handcream for a New Generation* has taken a long time to climb high enough in my mental album chart to warrant a review, but climb it has. Cornershop certainly waited long enough after their superb *When I was born for the seventh time*, and in that time music had moved on, so it should be no surprise that with this album they changed their own sound dramatically. Underneath it all Cornershop's basic rhythm guitar and drums structure remains, as does Tjinder's monotonous lexical brainteasers. But now the band more closely integrate the sounds of Tjinder's dance project Clinton. Samples, loops and sequencers fill the album with warm analogue textures. Guest vocalists also make a striking addition, with everything from funk to reggae making an appearance. In *Handcream*... Cornershop drop their old focus on songs and begin to strip things down to beats and textures. It's this sparse production that makes the album such a slow grower, but it's also this that gives it its enigmatic attraction. It's seventies funk with a modern dance framework. Cornershop have managed the transition from classic guitar band to post-modern studio entity with a skill rarely seen, and made a strange a wonderful album in the process.

MC

RECORDING   
MUSIC



Gerry Rafferty

Another World

Hypertension Hyp3218

Most people (knowingly or unknowingly) have been exposed to Gerry Rafferty's music at sometime in their lives, if not through Stealer's Wheel's 'Stuck In The Middle With You' then certainly by 'Baker Street', his massive solo hit featuring that sax solo. 'Baker Street' gave Rafferty a hit album, *City to City*, which topped the charts in Europe and America for months.

Over a career spanning 30 years Rafferty has released a string of fine solo albums, but the last recorded output (excluding the 1996 compilation 'One More Dream') was 'Over My Head' in 1994, so this album has been a long time coming.

*Another World* features 14 mainly self-penned songs recorded in a variety of locations around the globe and includes contributions from Mo Foster, Pino Palladino and Mark Knopfler, who guests on three tracks. It's a good, strong album but opener 'All Souls' (with it's Enigma-Esque spoken intro) and 'Land Of The Chosen Few', are the standouts for me. Rafferty doesn't have a powerful voice but it's very distinctive and he certainly has a fine ear for a catchy melody. He sat himself in the producer's chair for *Another World* and for the most part has done a fine job; the only gripe to my ears being an over reliance on the infernal drum programming, which just occasionally takes the album into dreaded chart territory.

AH



Grace Griffith

Minstrel Song

Blix Street Records G2-10068

In the States, Grace Griffith is an acclaimed interpreter of both contemporary and traditional folk songs. Here her pure, hauntingly attractive voice caresses and underscores ten lovely and frequently reflective ballads that remain heavily weighted in favour of works by modern songwriters. Intimate and compelling performances of John Martyn's 'May You Never', Jane Siberry's 'Bound By The Beauty' and the Richard Farina 'Swallow Song' sit comfortably alongside a pastoral gem like the Scottish 'Searching For Lambs' or the themes of the seashore in an Irish 'Kind Friends and Companions'. There is also a nice guest appearance by Dougie MacLean who harmonises for his 'Feel So Near'. They all benefit from some beautifully simple arrangements which rarely stray beyond the guitar, cello or piano in their effective and complementary support of those alluring Griffith cadences. She is definitely a fine singer who represents an easily accessible alternative to the outstanding crop of young English Folk musicians that include those contrasting talents of Eliza Carthy and a more traditional performer like Kate Rusby. On *Minstrel Song* these new and old Worlds of the folk song entwine rather than collide.

RP

Supplier: [www.hotrecords.uk.com](http://www.hotrecords.uk.com)



Jim Kweskin Band with Samoa Wilson

Now and Again

Blix Street Records G2-10076

These timeless and quite charming performances of ten swinging country blues and jug band songs of ten include a vivid exploration of classic Leadbelly, Nina Simone, Joseph J. McCoy and Arthur Hamilton material. Enlivened acoustic arrangements for 'Linin' Track', 'Sugar In My Bowl', 'Why Don't You Do Right' and 'Cry Me A River' cleverly feature the guitar, mandolin, upright bass, fiddle, harmonica, piano and alto sax playing of an ensemble who draw out a series of refreshingly diverse and wistful insights. Yet it's the sweetly innocent and airy qualities of the youthful Samoa Wilson vocals, combined with Jim Kweskin's distinctive, but slightly old fashioned and comfortingly reminiscent delivery, which provides a memorable musical centrepiece. Infectious, foot-tapping and passionately rhythmic numbers such as Leadbelly's skiffle-like 'Linin' Track' reveals just how much fun there is still to be had from a kind of thoroughly relaxed jam session that could have come straight from the late 1950s. An unfussy and solidly engineered digital recording then sympathetically reproduces these telling moments with accurate and coherent instrumental images that dovetail into some nicely weighted and correctly proportioned singing.

RP

Supplier: [www.hotrecords.uk.com](http://www.hotrecords.uk.com)







John Mayall

### Stories

Eagle Records EAGCD223

On his 51st recording (2001's John Mayall and Friends - *Along For The Ride*) Mayall enlisted the help of some of the blues world's most talented players - past and present. Peter Green, Otis Rush, Steve Millar and Gary Moore rubbed shoulders with youngsters Jonny Lang and Shannon Curfman to produce a memorable release. But for this latest album he's decided to stick with long serving members Tom Canning, Joe Yuele (His drummer for 17 years!), Hank Van Sickle and scintillating Texan guitarist Buddy Whittington.

It's fair to say that some of Mayall's releases over his 40 year career have been a bit patchy, but *Stories* has a consistently strong set of songs and Mayall sounds as hungry here as he did on the seminal album *Bluesbreakers* with Eric Clapton in 1966. The *Bluesbreakers* have always been a springboard for some of the rock and blues world's greatest guitarists and *Stories* allows current master Buddy Whittington plenty of room to shine. On Rick Vitto's 'Feels Just Like Home', Buddy's guitar chugs and slides all over the place, while 'Romance Classified' (his own composition) features some muscular rhythm playing and wonderful rock-fuelled soloing. Gorgeous seven minute closer 'The Mists Of Time' is the album's highlight for me; Tom Canning's organ playing melts into Whittington's lovely fluid soloing, creating the perfect backdrop for Mayall's laid back vocal and meandering piano. Highly recommended.

AH



Kevin Coyne

### Carnival

RUF Records RUF 1087



Before he became involved with music Kevin Coyne was a social worker and a therapist at a psychiatric hospital, experiences he later incorporated into his early solo works with Virgin Records. He cut some fine albums for the label, especially 1973's *Majority* *Razorblade* and 1978's *Dynamite Daze*, an album that garnered praise from none other than Johnny Rotten! In 1980 he parted company with Virgin and released a couple of albums for the independent Cherry Red label, but by this time his creative juices had been sapped by alcoholism and a painful marriage break-up. Relocating to Germany, he began recording for local labels as well as publishing books, exhibiting his paintings and acting in films and on stage. This latest album is recorded on German label RUF and finds him in inspired form, with a collection of songs that rank alongside his best work.

Coyne's often described as 'Eccentric' and 'Strange' (which he finds very annoying) but *Carnival* is an uplifting record, mostly written by himself (apart from blues standards 'Rolling And Tumbling' and 'Sugar Mama') with the emphasis firmly on creating a fun filled record. This he achieves admirably with tracks like 'The Wobble' and 'Party, Party, Party' but he shows his tender side as well with the achingly sad 'Missing You', the most poignant ode to lost love that I've heard for many a year.

AH



King Curly

### Familyman

Hot Records Hot 1085



King Curly, fronted by rhythm guitarist and singer/songwriter Steve Appel, is a much-talked about band from down under that proves itself to be the very antithesis of those familiar Antipodean macho rock stereotypes. Appel's songs, like the autobiographical title track and 'I Wish I Was A Girl', reveal enviable amounts of sensitivity as they describe the way in which your life changes when you have children. Or as they reflect on the time when you stop being a child and puberty kicks in. That burst of testosterone, the confusion and frustrations of those teenage years, leads to what must be a remarkable confession for an Australian man to make - the desire to change one's sex and experience it all from the girl's point of view! Sparse "Garage Cabaret Pop" arrangements, which includes the careful use of viola, accordion, sax, trumpet, harmonica and double bass are coupled to a relaxed vocal thread that personifies an honest, intelligent and unaffected approach. No wonder Appel has been called a "...thinking woman's sex symbol". His angst is real life and his demons are instantly recognisable. He simply humanises these themes knowing that we can all identify with love handles, the precarious job market, blinding moments of crass stupidity and those primitive teenage urges in the trouser department.

RP

Supplier: [hotrecords@pavilion.co.uk](mailto:hotrecords@pavilion.co.uk)





Mark Knopfler

The Ragpicker's Dream

Mercury Records 063292-1

Knopfler, courtesy of those yuppie anthems with Dire Straits in the 1980's, inevitably drags a cartload of musical baggage around behind him. Almost to a point where we are probably better off thinking of him not as yesterday's superstar, but as the seasoned session player who has quietly graced countless albums in the last decade. It's easy to forget that this is a guitarist who's regularly backed the likes of Clapton, Van Morrison and Steely Dan. When coming from this direction it affords us a far less clouded view of his song writing talents and that instantly recognisable, pithy but resonant and extremely dextrous, fretwork that has distinguished his playing down the years. Here this stylised contemporary folk-blues pensively guides the listener through a North-Eastern landscape where songs such as 'Why Aye Man' and 'Fare Thee Well Northumberland' echo speech pattern rhythms as they flesh out the themes of unemployment and homesickness. Elsewhere, the "Englishness" of 'Old Pig Weed' and 'Hill Farmer's Blues' butts up against unmistakable American currents found in songs like the title track, 'Coyote' and 'Daddy's Gone To Knoxville' as Geordie meets the crackers.

RP

Supplier: Cherished Record Co. 01579 363603



Oh Susanna

Oh Susanna

Hot Records Hot 1093

Recently I attended my first Oh Susanna gig at the Talking Heads pub in Southampton. What struck me most (apart from her fantastic band) is just how much more powerful Suzie Ungerleider's voice appears live. What's also evident is the control she has and how little effort it takes her to go from a seductive whisper to blow-the-shed-down hurricane levels.

Suzie played most of the songs off this new CD as well as some old faves and simply dazzled us with her amazing talent. She gave each song an introduction; why they were written, where, who they're about etc, and she made the whole evening so personal – it really was a joy.

That's not to say that on record she's disappointing – nothing could be further from the truth. When you can write songs as good as these and sing with a voice capable of reducing an angel to tears, you can't possibly fail. All the songs weave magic, but four or five are born-to-be classics. The treatment she gives to little known Dylan song 'I'll keep it with mine' is truly heart stopping – as is 'Billy', a song about bass player Bazil Donovan's cousin, a heroin addict very close to death.

Twelve great songs, great playing, awesome vocals – *Oh Susanna* has it all. Its well worth 14 quid of your hard earned money and you'll be hard pressed to find a better live act anywhere.

AH



Minnie Riperton

Les Fleurs Anthology

Stateside 7243 5 35127 1 2

Chicago roots. That soaring multi-octave voice. A career of many missed opportunities. The stellar hit single and an untimely death in 1979 at the age of thirty-one after three years fighting against breast cancer, summarises, but doesn't even come close to really describing the impact that Minnie Riperton had on Seventies soul music. This collection, from the experimental soul rock of the opening 1971 track 'I Am The Black Gold Of The Sun', right through to those songs like 'Every Time He Comes Around' and 'Reasons', which are taken from the Stevie Wonder produced *Perfect Angel* LP, focuses on her incredible voice and the natural feeling she had for music. Riperton and her husband, Richard Rudolph, wrote many of these songs, including the last two mentioned and of course 'Lovin' You', which bravely doesn't make its appearance until side four. Patiently playing through the preceding numbers first helps make sense of how such a timeless hit came about. Another eleven tracks lifted from the solo albums *Stay In Love*, *Minnie* and *Love Lives Forever* completes this window on to a remarkable body of work.

RP

Supplier: Cherished Record Co. 01579 363603







## Canned Heat

### Friends In The Can

RUF Records RUF 1066 

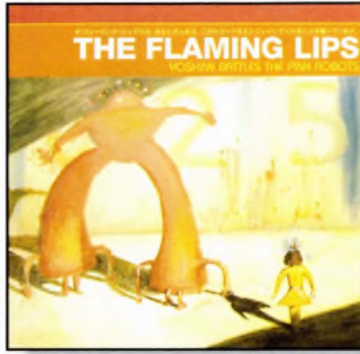
*Friends In The Can* is the first recording of the 21st century from the latest incarnation of Canned Heat, and this time around they've invited some of their friends – past and present – to help them out. Most of the songs on this album were tried out on the road over a two-year period, one of the main reasons why it has such a great 'live' feel. The song writing is consistently strong and the guest players weigh in with some inspired performances. Walter Trout sings and plays to his usual high standards on his own composition 'Home To You' and Taj Mahal delivers an impassioned performance on John Lee Hooker's 'Never Get Out Of These Blues Alive'. The award for best guest performer though has to go to Robert Lucas, an excellent singer with a voice that could stop a herd of rampaging wildebeest dead in their tracks.

Original members Larry Taylor and Harvey Mandel join in the fun with a rousing rendition of the old chestnut 'Let's Work Together' and Taylor turns up again on 'Little Wheel', a song left over from John Lee Hooker's *Healer Sessions* and featuring the great man (Canned Heat's premier inspiration) on vocals and guitar.

*Friends...* comes packaged in a sexy little tin which Canned Heat say you can use to "store your stash". However, it's not necessary to be chemically influenced to enjoy its contents!



AH

RECORDING   
MUSIC 



## The Flaming Lips

### Yoshimi Battles The Pink Robots

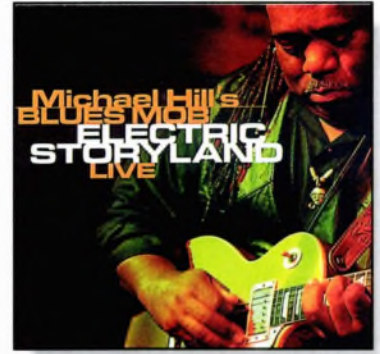
Warner Bros. 9362-48141-1  

An awesome and incredibly visual live band, on stage The Flaming Lips happily make use of giant romper suits, glove puppets, glitter and buckets of fake blood! In the studio they are just as unpredictable and inventive. Indie pop from Wayne Coyne, Steven Drozd and Michael Ivins has seldom come in so many shapes, forms, programmes and mixes. Yet beneath this breathtaking kaleidoscope their music features a chunky bottom end which (together with the quite ethereal melodic line) rhythmically stabilises a truly surreal thematic thread. The five tracks on side one are heavily indebted to Manga and the Godzilla Japanese B-movie genre. Here their heroine, an unlikely high-kicking and black-belted young girl, Yoshimi, fights those none too threatening and rather comical pink robots seen on the cover art. Part homage, part piss take, this is an album which may even stretch to some underlying messages about the plight of the individual in a mechanised ethos. Either way there's weird shit aplenty going on here and side two with tracks like 'Ego Tripping At The Gates Of Hell', 'Are You A Hypnotist?' and 'Approaching Pavonis Mons By Balloon' doesn't get any saner. Throw it all together and press it on cherry red vinyl and you get a refreshingly original and hugely entertaining release.

RP

Supplier: Cherished Record Co. 01579 363603

RECORDING   
MUSIC 



## Michael Hill's Blues Mob

### Electric Storyland Live

RUF Records RUF 1088 

Michael Hill is a bluesman with a social conscience. Born in the Bronx in 1952, young Michael grew up listening to Jimmy Hendrix and politically driven artists like Bob Marley, Marvin Gaye and Curtis Mayfield, and this shines through in his song writing. *Electric Storyland Live* is a double CD packed with songs from Hill's first four studio albums and also features two brand new songs, 'Heart Of New York' and 'Something In The Sky' – both inspired by the events of September 11th.

Disc one comes from an intimate club setting called 'The Roadhouse' and exhibits what Hill calls "That Old School Vibe". Operating as a three-piece with Hill on guitars, Bill McClean on Drums and Pete Cummins on Bass, the band tear the place up with some high octane playing, fusing reggae, soul, rock and funk into a blues stew that challenges the way the genre is portrayed.

Disc two is recorded at a much larger venue called the union hall, a setting with "More modern instrumental separation", according to Hill's liner notes. The tighter of the two sets, it includes a fine ten minute tribute to cream called 'Chocolate Cream Jam', and 'Young Folks Blues', a ferocious rocker featuring a rousing guest performance from another RUF recording artist, Ana Popovic.

Michael Hill is one of a handful of artists giving modern blues a fresh and exciting twist. He's a shining light in an increasingly sterile world.

AH

RECORDING   
MUSIC 

# Sonic Satori



by Michael Mercer

## Jason Mraz

### Live at Java Joe's

Independent Release –  
Purchase through [www.jasonmraz.com](http://www.jasonmraz.com)

Jason Mraz: I hate to drop some music industry lingo on you (you can take the man out of the industry, but you can't take the industry out of the man) but this kid's got pipes. He's young, vibrant, and holds the key to true success. I only hope that key opens the necessary doors and they swing wide open for him! A brilliant lyricist and soulful performer, Mraz is the package that the big labels are looking for, but I think his talents are beyond their scope. How could they put this guy into a Gap ad, or, could his music be a good soundtrack to a car commercial? Who knows, and frankly, who cares. This is solid pop music. Elektra was smart enough to sign him for his release *Waiting For My Rocket To Come* back in October of 02' but where was the marketing team? No more dollars for the little guy it seems. Despite the label's negligence the album has sold over 119,000 copies (according to recent SoundScan numbers). That speaks volumes about his ability to captivate an audience, whether it is live or through a stereo system. The lack of support on Elektra's part might have been the best thing for this hungry artist, as it may have sparked the desire to release the extraordinarily live and engaging *Live at Java Joe's*. This record is simply a gem, a showcase into Mraz's ability to master both his instruments (his guitar and voice) and entertain a crowd. 'Dream Life of Rand McNally' is a tremendous storyboard of a song. Witty and humorous, this track jumps from dreams of sexual encounters with the Spice Girls to political banter and Hunter S. Thompson references. Do you want to bask in a grand jam session? Check out 'Common Pleasure' Jason and his band maintain full control technically, while letting the music take its own course at times, chanting and playing through drummy breaks and guitar plucks. His rendition of the classic 'At Last' makes listening to the song tolerable again (I forget the film, but some Hollywood blockbuster rendered that song

unlistenable for a while). Mraz cites such influences at the Dave Matthews Band and Ani DiFranco. This makes perfect sense, as he combines poetry with organically woven chord progressions and simple, yet poignant arrangements. The biggest surprise, and a pleasant one to say the least, is the sonic merit of this CD. The digital sound is astonishingly dynamic and airy. Guitar tones soar, and dissipate as if they were occurring in real time and space. The vocals are warm and emotively delivered. The percussion, while sparse, is so coherent you can hear (and even feel) the space surrounding the skins, and the fingers that are tapping the beat to them. There is a live presence and textural quality captured on this disc that I have only heard from companies such as Classic Records, Chesky, or MoFi. How they did it? I'm not concerned, but it is blissful blaring through my reference system. It seems the only way to purchase this CD is through Mraz's own website, so; go surfing!!

## Ben Folds

### Ben Folds Live

Generation X, void of singer/songwriters? Well, maybe Mr. Folds is a tad older, thus putting him slightly ahead of my generation by age. However, I consider him a product of the void as his music has gained recognition over the last ten years or so through the ears of the youth, and as an artist he is an inspiration to say the least. While the advancements of technology have enabled artists to do more with their perspective mediums, it has also inhibited their pure creativity, at least in the eyes and ears of this reviewer. It seems these days that anybody with the money to buy a Korg Triton and an Akai MPC sampler coupled with the right contacts (or right place, right time) can get a record deal and get some airplay somewhere. Folds brings his music to the masses the old fashioned way, via his voice and his piano. Sure he has incorporated other instrumentation in his releases (and used a live audience to approximate the sound of a string section, very creative) basically, he embodies the

singer/songwriter term. He writes and he plays an actual instrument! This album, composed completely of live excerpts from his last U.S. tour (or maybe he's toured since, my apologies if I'm not up on his itinerary) is a showcase of his refined talent for entertaining and his musicianship. 'Brick' is one hell of a ballad. The raw emotion he brings to the piano keys creates such an image; it's like watching the video accompaniment to the song. You can actually envision the story, a refreshing looking glass into the abilities of a truly gifted songwriter. He also explains the story behind the song to the audience, as it was the cause of some controversy amongst his fan base. The track is about him and his high school girlfriend deciding to abort her pregnancy. Having the courage to admit that on stage (knowing full well there could be a house full of closed minded concert goers there) shows his dedication to his craft. His cover of the great Elton John's 'Tiny Dancer' speaks more to me than the original. I don't mean to imply that it is BETTER by any means. Every time I've heard the song I've always wondered what was so great about it, why people were so crazily nostalgic when they heard it. Then a scene in the movie *Almost Famous* gave me a glimpse of its magic (is that pathetic, I'm not sure). But when I hear Ben Folds sing the words, and the hairs on the back of my neck raise, I know why the song is so brilliant, and maybe it is because he is a part of my generation that his version speaks to me so deeply. This is a compilation of live performances, so the sonics are not part of the focal point. They are however, decent, and worth the listen on any reference system. Folds vocals are well balanced and placed in the mix, and the music is coherent. The crowd noise is, well, crowd noise! A great album to play while hanging out with a few good friends latenight on a Saturday. It will spark conversation and laughter, what a record should do. This album has entered this reviewers top 20 list.

### Live at Java Joe's



### Ben Folds Live









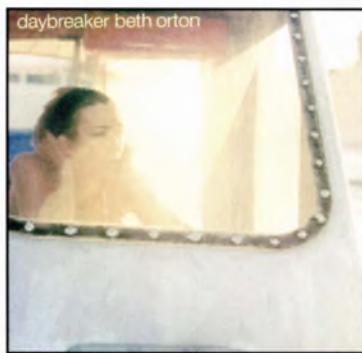
Cat Power

You Are Free

Matador Records OLE 427-1 **120g** **CD**

Singer-songwriter Chan Marshall, aka Cat Power, has in the past been branded the "Queen of Sadcore" mainly because of the carefully enunciated lyrics, deliberate tempos and an untrained Southern voice whose feline qualities were deceptively well-suited to her tortured worldview where drowning in pain seems to be an everyday experience. Musically, well, here she sometimes reminds me of a rudimentary and sparse-sounding Foo Foo Et The Boy, but with large dollops of melancholia thrown into the mix. On other occasions the empathy, warmth and emotional strength in her singing has more in common with a tradition that includes Mitchell, Vega and Shocked. *You Are Free* is her fourth album and the best. The alternative rocker gives way to her pop heart. Tracks like 'Good Woman', 'He War', 'Shaking Paper' and 'Speak For Me' are propelled by the dynamic presence of drummer Dave Grohl and more encouragingly paced vocal come-ons and side steps from Marshall. Meanwhile, the lyrics continue to tackle the toughest of subject matter. 'Names', for example, treads a difficult path through adolescent sex, crack addiction and incest. Only Chen Marshall's acknowledged lack of ambition could stop her becoming one of the great siren-like artists who can effortlessly marry these harrowing images to beautiful vocal constructs.

RP



Beth Orton

Daybreaker

Heavenly Recordings HVNLP37 **180g** **CD**

Beth Orton's delicious voice and cool intelligent writing has almost single-handedly made the folk influenced pop idiom a fashionable genre amongst U.K. clubbers and serious listeners alike. Charming and obviously autobiographical songs about destructive relationships and a lonely childhood spent in the Norfolk countryside occur less frequently now. They have given way to romance's universal truths where the fissures and fractures carved into the human heart figure strongly within new tracks like 'Concrete Sky', 'God Song', 'Ted's Waltz' and a delightfully prophetic, 'This One's Gonna Bruise'. The beautiful throaty singing: Orton's poise, timing and effortless smoky delivery of lyrics that can in an instant shift from a soaring optimism found in new love to those bruising realities of being dumped, has the capacity to move you to tears. Supporting musicians include guest spots by the great Emmylou Harris and an irrepressible Ryan Adams. A genre bending production hints at those trademark British folk rhythms but augments and updates them with an intensity of the clubland sound. This is an album that sheds light on each of these seemingly disparate forms and in the process evolves into an engaging hybrid medium of its own that should satisfy parties from both camps.

RP

Supplier: Cherished Record Co. 01579 363603



Bruce Springsteen

The Rising

Columbia 508000-1 **120g** **CD**

His mantle as the mouthpiece of blue collar America may have slipped and been passed on to a new generation of less affluent musicians, but Springsteen has remained an affectionately held institution nonetheless. He is and continues to be a phenomenal and intuitive rock star who perhaps senses the incongruity of still writing about those working class issues like the job, his hometown, the girlfriend or his beaten up car when the trappings of success are outwardly so obvious. The songs, along with the man, have mellowed some with this passage of time and now tracks like 'Lonesome Day', 'Waitin' On A Sunny Day', 'Worlds Apart' and 'Mary's Place' seem content to mull over troubled relationships where the economics play a less significant part. The cutting edge lies elsewhere in an unmistakable subtext whose images in 'Empty Sky', 'Into The Fire', 'You're Missing' and 'My City Of Ruins' slice through those unforgettable New York scenes during that fateful September day. Thoughtful music superbly supported in the studio by those old friends from the E Street Band and members of the Nashville String Machine, Alliance Singers and the Asif Ali Khan Group.

RP

Supplier: Cherished Record Co. 01579 363603







# The History Man

by Richard S. Foster

"Coup d'Archet was originally founded in 1997 to make available to discerning music lovers a number of lost recordings by the legendary Hungarian violinist, Johanna Martzy." This is the opening statement on Glenn Armstrong's website: <http://www.coupdarchet.com>.

I would be less than honest if I didn't confess that I know Glenn well . . . I have great respect for what he does and the absolute care he lavishes on all his projects.

I know this because we've had discussions in the past on what he would and what he wouldn't offer to his clients.

Our many conversations have enlightened me to trials I could never have imagined. Indeed this article owes much to hours spent on the phone.

Unfortunately for all of us, there are recordings that he has uncovered in various archives in Europe that are just not up to the standard he requires for public release.

Sometimes an archived recording was cut directly to lacquer, an acetate if you will, that had already seen more than its fair share of plays. Other times the oxide had begun to fall off the tape in the canister, or maybe the engineer of the day simply wasn't up to snuff. Sometimes the tapes had disappeared entirely: stolen or 'borrowed' many years ago. While of course some of these problems could be partially cured by a trip into the digital domain, this was never an option for Armstrong, a staunch advocate of analogue reproduction.

Searching, finding, and listening to these recordings is only the tip of the iceberg. Believe me. Perhaps the

most difficult job he has is negotiating with the Broadcasting companies who own the tapes. I've heard a variety of stories and some of what he goes through is just a nightmare I wouldn't want to be involved with.

No one handed him a golden key that would open all the doors. Every contact at every stage was personally made. (He told me recently that he had received an e-mail from a Frenchman interested in embarking on a similar venture asking for every shortcut and contact, and all aspects of the licensing process. Armstrong's reply was simple: "Ceci est une blague, n'est pas?" This is a joke, right?) Similarly he controls every part of the production process, from editing the liner notes to

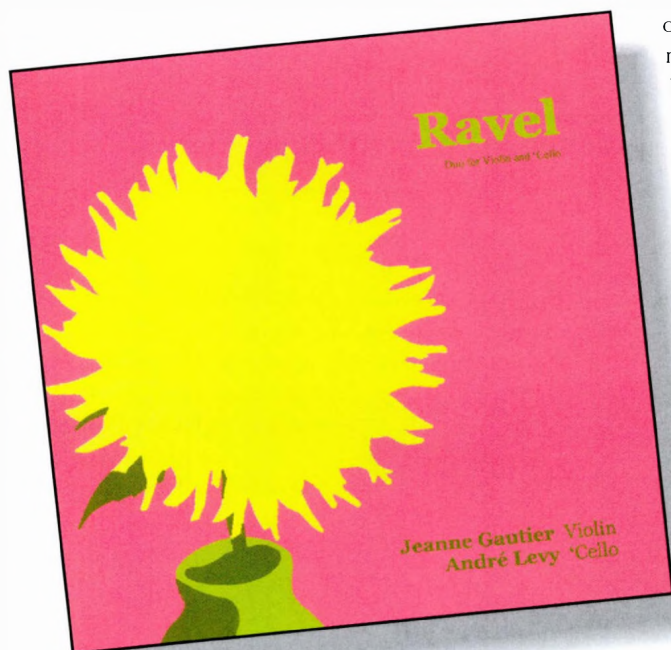
designing the artwork for the jackets.

In '97 vinyl was still fighting for its life. Armstrong was alone in presenting unknown classical music on LP. For that very reason, he says, he was taken in hand at Abbey Road and at the Hayes factory. The day the factory closed in April 2000 was a bitter one. It was for him a magical place. The search for a pressing plant as good was to take some time and would delay the next LPs by almost a year.

Armstrong is one of those perfectionist types when it comes to the production of his releases. Initially, Coup d'Archet (Stroke Of The Bow) released seven recordings of fabulous material, never before available, by the great Johanna Martzy. They won acclaim and awards from the critical music press.

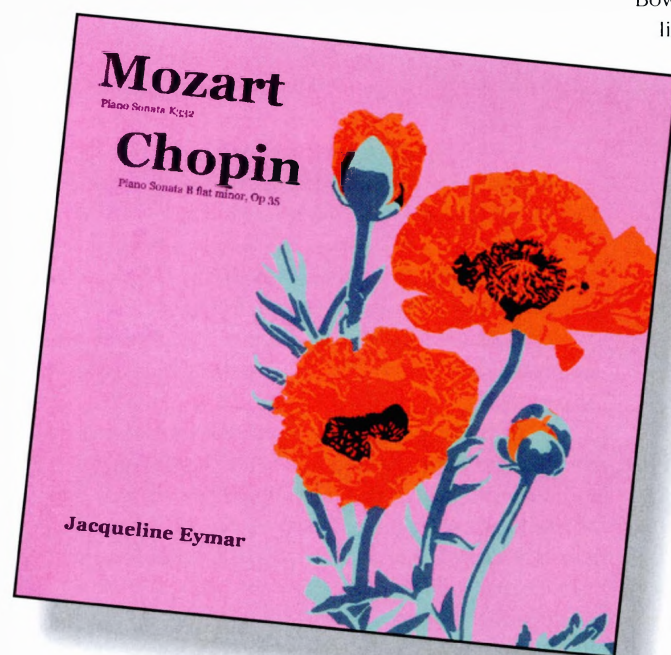
It cannot be over emphasized that Armstrong does NOT reissue previously released material. All the





▶ recordings he has released are first time releases (obviously they were, for the most part, aired once or twice a few decades ago - but they have never been made available to the public any other way).

When he could find no more suitable Martzy material he looked for other artists who had been similarly passed



over by history and the recording industry. He was not interested in seeking out the popular greats because he felt there was already more than enough on the shelves. Did anyone really need another Milstein recording?

The next three releases moved the project into the French artist genre, an area unknown to all but a few exceptionally knowledgeable collectors. Two wonderful recordings by the great French pianist and pedagogue Yvonne Lefebure featuring Ravel and Beethoven and a stunning LP of Bartok and Prokofiev *sonatas* with Michèle Auclair playing violin with Jacqueline Robin better known by her first husband's name, Bonneau) at the keyboard were met with public indifference.

While Martzy was marginal, her cult following was significant and sales were comfortable. Lefebure and Auclair or was it Bartok and Ravel?) were clearly not going to recoup their costs by through traditional sales route of international distributorships. Armstrong was offering the music but the world at large wasn't interested. So after ten releases with the original formula his thoughts turned to re-evaluating his business strategy. Taking a page out of Walter Legge's book he decided that a small edition available only by subscription would be the way forward. He knew that such a radical shift would alienate much of the following he had built up, but he had no choice if he wanted to survive.

This was the birth of L'Archet d'Or (The Golden Bow). This annual series is a strictly signed and number-limited edition of 250 sets. PERIOD. When they're gone . . . they're gone. And I know they have been selling. The first series of four recordings, issued in the later quarter of 2003, has been a resounding success in the collecting community, and contains:

**OR I - Jeanne Gautier/Yvonne Lefebure - Mozart Sonata for Violin and Piano K379 31.5.59)**

**Jeanne Gautier/Aimee Van De Wiele - Bach Sonata No.5 in F minor for Violin and Harpsichord 24.05.59)**

**OR II - Jeanne Gautier/André Levy - Ravel Duo for Violin and Cello 27.5.61)**

**OR III - Jacqueline Eymar - Mozart K332/Chopin Funeral Sonata 10.02.62)**





► **OR IV - Camilla Wicks/ Isidore Karr - Encore Pieces; Sicilienne, von Paradis; Shimcas Torah from Baal Shem, Bloch; Slavonic Dance No. 1 in G minor, Dvorak/Kreisler; Malaguena, Sarasate; Banjo and Violin, Kroll; Sonata No. 12, Paganini; Romanian Dances, Bartok/Szekeli 12.2.51)**

Who, I can hear you all cry, ARE these people?? I sympathize, because less than a decade ago I didn't know them either. With the exception of Camilla Wicks (ah!) all the artists featured are among the greatest French instrumentalists ever.

I'm not going to go into the performance value of these recordings.

They are all, in my opinion, at the top of the charts. These are treasures I have listened too often since receiving my set and I am very excited about the forthcoming releases especially the Bundervoët Ravel which Armstrong assures me is the most 'sublime and poetic' reading he has ever heard). Series 2, I am told will be arriving in September, and will include the following:

**OR V - Marcelle Meyer: Mozart Piano Sonatas /Fantaisie/Adagio 1953/56).**

**OR VI - Jeanne Gautier/Nadine Desouches: Stravinsky/Ravel/Martinu 1.1.56)**

**Jeanne Gautier/Lelia Gousseau: Roussel Sonata No.2 13.4.57).**

**OR VII - Maurice Maréchal/Cecile Ousset: Beethoven Op 5.2, Brahms Op 38, Cello Sonatas 1.1.58/13.10.59).**

**OR VIII - Agnelle Bundervoët: Ravel Gaspard de la Nuit/ Debussy Images Book 1 1959).**

The jackets are works of art: hand pulled silkscreen prints folded and glued by hand. Attention to detail even includes the mylar outer sleeves which accompany each release, sealed with coloured tape that matches the individual jacket. All four LPs are housed in a beautiful purple clothbound slipcase. What more can I say?

Subscription price has now been lowered to £300

from £350 and original subscribers of the first series will receive series two at the modest price of £255.

Sounds like a lot of money for four records. I guess it is. But you haven't heard the records! All I can say is that these performances are astonishingly wonderful. The playing is absolutely at the highest level of musicianship. The sound quality is truly remarkable. The clarity and fidelity of the instruments is startling. Armstrong continues to have the lacquer masters cut at Abbey Road and the manufacturing by Pallas GmbH, Germany on 180gram virgin vinyl.

Oh, and of course . . . all recordings

are 100% analogue and monophonic.

And, lest I forget, one of the gems in the first series is the rarely recorded Ravel *Duo for violin and violoncello* . . . this with Gautier and Levy. There was a previous recording by this legendary team available on an 8" Le Chant du Monde recording LDZ - M 8145 (French only issue). It has recently sold in a public auction (May 2003) for in excess of £1600. Those who have had the opportunity to compare the two issues, myself included, felt the AO issue the superior recording and performance . . . by wide margins.

The entire presentation from the beautiful jackets, to the slipcase, to the detail . . . would be a bargain even if it were twice the price. This is not to be missed . . . because you will be sorry if you do.





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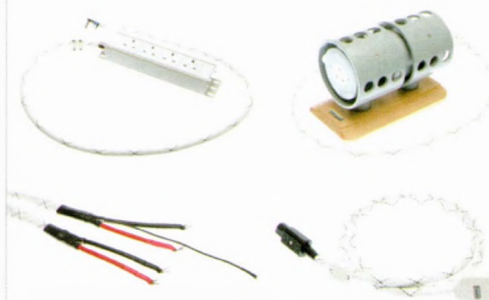
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## Vivaldi L'Estro Armonico, Op 3

Europa Galante  
Fabio Biondi

Virgin Veritas 7243 5 45315-2 (CD)

Although the Seasons will always be Vivaldi's most popular opus, *L'Estro Armonico* remains his greatest instrumental work. Quite apart from its sheer inventiveness, the music has a freshness and festive sun-drenched splendour Vivaldi never surpassed. It's also Vivaldi at his most imaginative and daring, finding opportunities to excite and amaze at every turn. Speaking personally, my favourite *L'Estro* has long been Claudio Scimone's Erato set from the 1970s - performances that really capture the euphonic brilliance of this warm sensuous music in ways that elude most scratchy-thin period instrument performances. The old Erato set still gives enormous pleasure, but Biondi and Europa Galante go even further with a combination of stylish virtuoso brilliance and crisp lively attack that is absolutely captivating. There are one or two quirky moments - the relaxed opening to the first concerto for example - but for the most part the interpretations are exciting and challenging, giving a fresh slant on the work. The playing is quite breathtaking for its cutting-edge sharpness and panache. It sounds as though everyone's really enjoying the music, and delighting in the opportunities it gives for displays of finger dexterity! The recording too is exemplary; sharp and lucid, with excellent focus and attack, but tonally sweet and natural, and wholly unexaggerated.

JMH



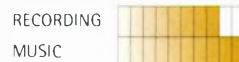
## Beethoven Piano sonatas 22, 23 'Appassionata', 24, 27

Maurizio Pollini (piano)

DG 474 451-2 (CD)

Given a career spanning over 40 years, you'd think Maurizio Pollini would have recorded all the Beethoven *sonatas* by now. But no; having begun recording Beethoven for DG back in 1976, he's not even half-way through! I heard him play the *Appassionata* live in London's Royal Festival hall way back in 1979, and the effect was overwhelming. At last he's recorded the work, and the performance is mightily impressive: lucid, crystalline and muscular. Pollini's incredible dexterity clarifies even the densest textures, making usually hidden inner lines audible. His fabulous technique rarely sounds stretched; the coda of the *Appassionata* is superbly articulated, but one doesn't feel the pianist struggling against overwhelming forces. The other sonatas are quite beautifully played; the combination of direct simplicity allied to powerful intellectual control and flawless technique results in commanding performances. If Pollini's interpretations lack a certain warmth and sense of personal involvement, there's no doubting the hand of a master. For a limited period DG are including a bonus disc containing exciting live performances of *sonatas 23 and 24* recorded June 2002 in Vienna's Musikverein. Technically, although not as immaculate as the studio performance, the live *Appassionata* conveys more of Beethoven's power and rage - the final moments are a tour de force few pianists could match.

JMH



## Brahms; Violin Concerto Beethoven; Symphony no. 5

Kyung Wha Chung (violin)  
VPO, Sir Simon Rattle

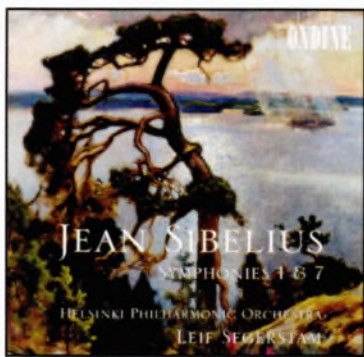
EMI 7243 5 57165-2 (CD)

That Kyung Wha Chung has waited over thirty years to record the Brahms *concerto* seems remarkable. But the long wait has been well worthwhile. She gives a performance of stunning mastery, by turns soaring and passionate, lyrical and honey-sweet. The Vienna Philharmonic under Rattle play with exquisite concentration and refinement. From the opening measures one senses this is going to be an outstanding performance: the hushed intensity of the orchestral playing promises great things to come. It's their way of providing a perfect backdrop to an artist they clearly like and admire. Although Chung's technique is well-nigh flawless, there's a necessary sense of struggle. The Brahms *concerto* is no easy ride (what was it Huberman said about it being a Concerto for Violin Against Orchestra?), and it must sound as though the soloist is grappling with near insurmountable odds. The finale brings playing of incredible passion and presence, underlining the reasons why Kyung Wha Chung has held her place among elite violinists for over thirty years. Beethoven's *fifth symphony* is played with a mixture of fire and ice, being fast but not especially furious. There's a slightly reigned-in feeling to the performance, as though Rattle and the orchestra couldn't fully let themselves go. Sound is a little dry and close in the *symphony*; richer and more spacious in the *concerto*. Recommended for the Brahms.

JMH







**Jean Sibelius**  
Symphonies 1 and 7

Helsinki Philharmonic orchestra  
Leif Segerstam

Ondine ODE 10072

With this issue, Segerstam begins a new cycle of the Sibelius *symphonies* for Ondine. He's passed this way before, recording an excellent and at times very characterful set of Sibelius *symphonies* for Chandos between 1990 and 1992. The new accounts of *symphonies 1 and 7* are faster than the Chandos versions: more direct and straightforward, with fewer mannerisms. Is that a good thing? Well, yes and no. It depends on whether you find Segerstam's wilfulness illuminating or annoying. I tend towards the former view, and like Segerstam's romantic heart-on-sleeve approach. That said, there's a taut bracing quality with the new performances that's very engaging and exciting. It's as though Segerstam feels less need to impose his personality on the music, being more inclined to let things speak for themselves. Certainly, the new Helsinki performance of the *first symphony* gains in dramatic urgency. For all Sibelius' romantic leanings, there's a strong classical streak in his music. The new *Seventh* is more organic than the earlier one, growing and expanding with an inexorable logic that sounds idiomatic and inevitable. The Ondine recordings are technically good; less reverberant than the Chandos ones, with excellent detail and natural balances. The sound isn't quite as outstanding as Segerstam's earlier Ondine recording of the Sibelius *Legends*, but really there's nothing to complain about.

JMH



**Rachmaninov; Piano Concerto no 3**  
**Prokofiev; Piano concerto no 3**  
Mikhail Pletnev (piano)  
Russian National Orchestral  
Mstislav Rostropovich

DG 471 576-2

Interpretatively, these are commanding, authoritative performances. Pletnev has sufficient technique to make the immense difficulties of both *concertos* seem like child's play, and his interpretations are refined and powerful. But against such musical virtues must be set at least one drawback; a couple of small cuts in the Rachmaninov *concerto*. Neither is especially large (the first comes in the opening movement's *cadenza*; the second in the *finale*), but purists will object. Clearly, Pletnev believes these cuts make the *concerto* more cohesive, and certainly he plays the music with none of the soggy Romantic baggage that bog down other pianists. Everything is clean-cut and sharply profiled. Musically, Prokofiev's *third piano concerto* is quite different of course, and lends itself admirably to Pletnev's steely approach. His playing is very staccato at times, almost to the point of brusqueness. But it suits the spiky brilliance of Prokofiev's diamond-hard music perfectly. It's amazing to hear the solo part articulated so cleanly at such speed! The recordings are crisp and detailed, with excellent clarity and forward but natural balances. Those who can forgive Pletnev for making cuts in the Rachmaninov will find this a disc to treasure.

JMH



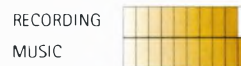
**Toru Takemitsu**  
Quotation of Dream

Paul Crossley, Peter Serkin (pianos)  
London Sinfonietta; Knussen

DG 453 495-2

Whether or not you choose to investigate the various 'meanings' of the individual pieces included on this well-filled CD (each one has an evocative title), one thing's certain; Takemitsu is a master of orchestral colour, and always draws ravishing sonorities from the forces he writes for. Even when the music gets loud, there's something very ordered and concordant about the writing - helped in no small measure by the meticulous refinement of the present performances under Oliver Knussen. Somehow, even discordant passages sound harmonious and stangely beautiful. In the second piece on the disc, *Quotation of Dream*, Takemitsu borrows from Debussy's *La Mer*, seamlessly shifting between his world and that of the great French composer. Indeed, many of the pieces on the disc have a sensuous French feel, calling to mind Ravel, Messiaen, and even Dukas - the brass fanfare *Day Signal* that opens the disc suggests the start of *La Peri*. Although the disc contains seven separate works, the choice of pieces (and the order in which they're played) creates a complimentary feeling - as though one were listening to a single work. DG's sound is beautifully clear and lucid. Detail tells effortlessly, doing justice to Takemitsu's richly coloured tonal palette with its many subtle hues.

JMH



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**Aretha Franklin**

**Soul '69**

4 Men With Beards/Atlantic 4M111 **180g**

This record label goes from strength to strength and along the way disproves the old maxim that you shouldn't trust a man with a beard. These unshaven blokes consistently select magnificent albums to reissue and an underrated *Soul '69* is no exception. Here the Queen of Soul takes the raw power and immediacy of that medium and expands its horizons to embrace the subtleties and sophistication of jazz. Hence the inclusion of bassist Ron Carter for 'Elusive Butterfly', guitarist Kenny Burrell on 'If You Gotta Make A Fool Of Somebody', 'Bring It On Home To Me', 'Ramblin' and 'Crazy He Calls Me' and saxophonists like Pepper Adams, King Curtis and Frank Wess elsewhere. But of course we are irresistibly drawn back time and again to Aretha's intelligent and dynamic vocal delivery which often possess both tremendous rhythmic impact and contrasting moments of delicacy for songs like the beautifully crafted 'Tracks Of My Tears'. Their transfer of these awkward Atlantic master tapes has been expertly handled. It certainly couldn't have been easy managing the transient peaks of those raucous trumpet and trombone obbligatos.

RP

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**Franz Liszt**  
**Hungarian Rhapsodies 1, 4, 5**  
**Battle of the Huns**  
**Vienna State Opera Orchestra**  
**Hermann Scherchen**

Speakers Corner/Westminster WST-14100 **180g**

You can tell this is an early twin-channel recording; the word STEREO is emblazoned on the top half of the cover in letters larger than those identifying composer, music, and artists! The soundstage is wide and deep, with the orchestra placed in a spacious but not too reverberent acoustic. There's a little congestion in climaxes, and massed violins and brass are a touch thin at the top. Otherwise, the sound is clean and well balanced – pretty good for 1959, if less impressive than the best Decca LPs of the period. Scherchen's performances are carefully considered rather than wild or exciting, and a bit more gypsy fervour would not have been missed in the *Hungarian Rhapsodies*. Anyone knowing the Ivan Fischer set of all six *Rhapsodies* on Philips CD will find Scherchen very plain. Hunnenschlacht is played with quiet dignity, but the organ is not an impressive instrument (it sounds like a portable!) and it lacks the power and grandeur needed to bolster the climaxes as Liszt intended. It's also out of tune with the orchestra – a common occurrence in many recordings during the analogue era. The LP transfer is cut at a nice high level, and the cover art's nice. But musically the results are a bit mixed.

JMH



**Gram Parsons**

**Grievous Angel**

Rhino/Warner MS2171 **180g**

The brief but influential career of International Submarine Band founder and ex-Byrds vocalist Gram Parsons is almost as remarkable as those events surrounding his death. Like many geniuses he had a self-destructive side and it was these excesses and the drug dependency that eventually killed him in September 1973. The theft of his body after the funeral and its cremation in the desert by his road manager, Philip Kaufman, simply added to a sense of mystique which permeated the two solo albums recorded with Emmylou Harris. The Parsons/Harris relationship, both in and out of the studio, has rightly been seen as a pivotal moment in the development of contemporary country rock. On *Grievous Angel* the touching lyricism for 'In My Hour Of Darkness', combined with those plaintive duets heard in 'Hearts On Fire' and 'Love Hurts', reveals the beautiful and poignant sentiments embedded within the writing. Their voices dovetail perfectly to take this music away from the hick country roots with a well-wrought expression of sorrow and vulnerability. The Linda Ronstadt collaboration, 'Brass Buttons', is equally effective. Terrific guitar playing from Bernie Leadon and Herb Pederson which is well supported by the cream of California's session musicians who later became Emmylou's Hot Band.

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**Johannes Brahms  
Violin Concerto  
Erica Morini  
London Philharmonic  
Artur Rodzinski**

Speakers Corner/Westminster WST 14037 **180g**

One of the legendary names from the past, Erica Morini was 61 years old and nearing the end of an illustrious career when she made this stereo recording of the Brahms concerto for Westminster in 1956. It's a lyrical, full-blooded, if somewhat fragile performance, played from the heart. Technically, the solo playing is very good, but Morini's technique is not as powerful and assured as one routinely expects today. It takes one back forty or fifty years, to the days when Heifetz (with his unassailable virtuosity) stood head and shoulders above virtually all his contemporaries. Then, such technical perfection was regarded as exceptional, whereas nowadays it's taken for granted. Yet perfection can sometimes be boring and soulless. Morini's Brahms concerto may not be the finest on records, but it's a real performance with none of the rough edges taken out. I never heard the original LP, but would guess that this new Speakers Corner 180g vinyl re-issue is almost certainly superior. The disc is cut at a nice high level, and the sound has good body and depth. Like other Westminsters, the upper treble is a bit congested and thin. But the basic sound is pretty good, especially given its vintage.

JMH



**Linda Hoyle**

**Pieces of Me**

Akarma AK 220 **180g**

*Pieces of Me*, released in 1971, is an enigmatic album. This was the only solo release by Linda Hoyle who had earlier found some limited success as lead singer of the progressive band, Affinity. It is a marvellously versatile showcase for her singing and song writing abilities. She is a vocally dextrous performer, one equally at home with jazz, blues, rock or folk idioms. An opening Vietnam protest song, Nina Simone's 'Backlash Blues', is given the brash and intensely expressive treatment you'd expect from that of a Janis Joplin. She then effortlessly switches to the folk "flowers in your hair" persona on a radiant and tonally rich 'Paper Tulips' whose gentle cadences wash over you in waves of nostalgia. Her soulful, emotionally engaging, dynamic and above all else, intelligent shaping of these songs and that for those rockier numbers heard elsewhere on this LP are underpinned by a stellar band that includes British jazz-rock guitarist Chris Spedding, keyboards king Karl Jenkins and drummer John Marshall. Overall, this is a brilliant choice for re-issue, which Akarma has lovingly recreated as a tactile gatefold sleeved edition. It only leaves you to digest these lyrically binding songs and wonder why Hoyle's career ended so abruptly here.

RP

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**Maria Muldaur**

**Richland Woman Blues**

Grooveland GLS 108 **180g**

Over the last decade Maria Muldaur's soulful voice which is noted for its jazz tinged delivery has enjoyed something of resurgence. Here we are treated to a glorious celebration of the early blues where traditional Muldaur arrangements of songs familiar in the 1920's and 1930's comfortably rest alongside Leadbelly's 'Grasshoppers In My Pillow', John Hurt's title track and two Bessie Smith numbers, 'My Man Blues' and 'Lonesome Desert Blues'. Beautifully sparse acoustic sets (with no more than three terrific musicians to a song) eloquently tap directly back into music from around the Delta that redefined the portrayal of a human spirit in adversity. The singing (which includes spots for Bonnie Raitt, Angela Strehli, Tracy Nelson and Taj Mahal) is simply amazing. Muldaur's rich nicotine and whiskey stained sounding vocals are just totally intoxicating. The Playing - breathtaking - as Roly Salley (bass), Amos Garrett (12 string), Dave Mathews (piano), Roy Rogers (slide) and Ernie Hawkins (guitar) instinctively give masterful performances in, respectively, 'Me And My Chauffeur Blues', 'Grasshoppers', 'Far Away Blues', 'Soul Of A Man' and 'I Belong To That Band'. The bonus disc in this set is a four-track LP. Cut at 45rpm, it is sonically stunning and doesn't duplicate any of the thirteen songs from the main album.

RP

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**Sarah McLachlan  
Touch**

Classic/Arista RTH 2004 **180g**

**Solace**

Classic/Arista RTH 2005 **200g**

With the vinyl release of *Fumbling Towards Ecstasy* and *Surfacing* Classic Records had a pair of sure fire audiophile hits on their hands. *Fumbling* was inspired by those disturbing scenes McLachlan witnessed during a World Vision charity tour to both Thailand and Cambodia during the early Nineteen Nineties. It provided the clay from which she was able to shape an unsettling vision of the darker sides to a human condition. Blending these experiences with her earthy and poetic approach to the songwriter's craft and wrapping it all up in the most sophisticated of production values was to prove to be an irresistible combination. *Surfacing*, which on its release reached the dizzy heights of number two in the US album charts, was an equally reflective and well thought out offering, one that also had the added benefit of a hit single in 'Adia'. By the time of these LP transfers Sarah McLachlan had fully blossomed into a complete folk-rock performer. Now Classic has travelled back into the Arista vaults to transfer her earliest recordings. The 1988 debut, *Touch*, which marked the twenty-year old McLachlan's emergence from a Nova Scotia folk scene, unveiled these fledgling talents on a much wider Canadian stage. Like *Solace*, it too was recorded at the Mushroom Studios in Vancouver with McLachlan receiving the song writing credits throughout for both. A dreamy-sounding opener, 'Out Of The Shadows', and the later 'Uphill Battle', 'Strange World' and 'Sad Clown' are all strongly held songs that showcase her more serious



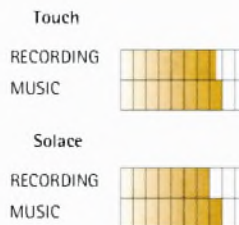
concerns even if they do lack that incisive edge found in the disturbed vision of *Fumbling*. Perhaps I have unfairly compared these two albums. They were, after all, separated by six years. But I do find *Touch* to be a less persuasive album. The charming degree of innocence sometimes borders on naivety. Surprisingly good work in the studio, which includes Greg Reely's solid engineering, does spread an amiable degree of warmth throughout an acoustic that certainly suits those flowery almost perfumed lead vocals. Sarah McLachlan definitely shines in this role of youthful folk singer. Plenty of attention is also given to the reproduction of her classical guitar, twelve-string and keyboard playing. This versatility, together with bass, percussion and the electric guitar of Stephen Niklev, has an accurate and lifelike presence that has undoubtedly aided its selection for reissue. *Solace*, which appeared after a three years hiatus is a worthy follow up disc which reveals her developing maturity as a writer and performer. Its title thematically suggests that this will be the music of consolation, comfort and reconciliation and in songs like 'Shelter', 'Mercy' and 'Home' she cultivates this atmosphere. They and that internal dialogue which occurs elsewhere within tracks such as 'Into The Fire', 'The Path Of Thorns' and a plaintive love song like 'I Will Not Forget You', raises the issues of homelessness, heartbreak or even life's frustrations in general. Though McLachlan may not always offer a concrete answer to these issues, she does instinctively step in to

apply the Savlon, a plaster and give the unfortunate ones in question a consoling hug or pat on the head. All, while rhythmically cradling the listener with musical cadences that echo those sentiments found in her lyrics.

Does 200g vinyl enhance this experience? No, to my mind it does not. Unless you use a tonearm like the JMW 12.5, where dialling in the precise VTA for any slab of vinyl can be done easily in seconds, then I think you might find there's a genuine weight problem here. Old Decca engineers have down the years been at pains to explain to me that the optimum vinyl weight is anywhere between 140g and 160g. Above this and the vinyl is technically more difficult to work with. Sonically, these new Classic heavyweight cuts remind me of the Mobile Fidelity LPs that appeared in the 1990s. They sound plump and by that I mean there is a slight loss of fine definition. That space above, between, below and around the vocal and instrumental images is less tangible.

RP

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# An Abundance of Argos

by Richard S Foster

Perhaps one of the most eclectic catalogues of English recordings comes from the Decca subsidiary label, Argo. Early monophonic issues even included spoken word works by Chaucer, Shakespeare and T.S. Elliot to name but a few. The catalogue was filled with choral, baroque, keyboard, plays and soloists of many disciplines. Perhaps it was a catch all for whatever the executives at Decca deemed fit for the lesser label rather than the Decca banner. Whatever the reason, we're very fortunate to have these releases.

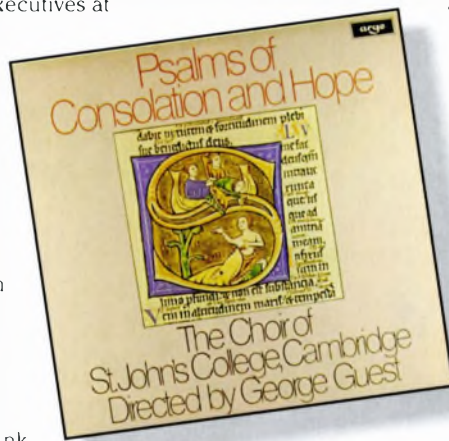
I'm not going to tell you about the Elgar *violin sonata* with Max Rostal's violin and Colin Horsley's piano. Nor will I mention the Walton *violin sonata* with the same duo. These, in glorious mono, are worth 100's of pounds. Please just forward them to my editor as I know he will pass them onto me. Should I say thank you now?

There can't be anyone who's been reading audio journals for the last twenty years that hasn't at one time or another, heard that great Argo stereo, ZNF1: *Noye's Fludde*. As the title indicates... it's a biblical depiction of the Noah's ark tale, a Chester Miracle Play set to music by Benjamin Britten. It's truly a special recording and has been on the TAS list for close to quarter of a century. (Unfortunately for many years, HP listed the reissued ZK1 as the ONE, but I believe that has now been corrected).

This is a fabulous catalogue with something for everyone. It's so interesting to see one release from CPE Bach, and the next issue from Roberto Gerhard or Gordon Crosse or Frank Bridge or WA Mozart. Haydn and Handel get plenty of coverage throughout with many choral works

that are just so special.

I'm really not going to talk about the fabulous ZRG5000 series of choral works, nor am I going to mention those wonderful concerts with absolutely stunning sound of Spanish(ZRG5457) and French(ZRG 5458) Harp music with Marisa Robles. And you can be assured that I will not comment on the stunning Mendelssohn release of *String Symphonies Nos. 9, 10 and 12* with Marriner and the Academy (ZRG5467). I don't even think I'll mention the two finest recordings I know that contain the complete Rossini *String Sonatas* (ZRG 506 and 603). I mean who is really interested in the fine Dvorak *Serenade for Strings* (ZRG 670 [coupled with a wonderful Grieg Holberg Suite]) or who really cares about one of the finest Tchaikovsky *Serenade for Strings and Souvenir de Florence* on ZRG 584?



The Argo teams did a magnificent job of finding the greatest churches and venues to create magical and marvelous recordings. Willcocks, Guest, Ledger and Norrington are but a few of the great leaders of some of the finest choral works ever put on record. I'm particularly fond of the work of George Guest and The Choir of St. John's College, Cambridge. No, I won't tell you that one of the finest choral records ever produced for voice and organ is ZRG 892, *Psalms of Consolation and Hope*. (Find the English pressing over the Dutch—the Dutch has lower bass, but the voices are better on the English pressing). This is just a stunner. There is such separation in the rows of singers, not only as they sing first from the left and then from the right, but you can actually hear soloists standing above and below each other. A mesmerizing experience and a recording that I guarantee, if you've had a bad



► day, after 10 minutes, all your cares will be gone. But be forewarned... this one is very elusive.

Oh, and did I mention that this catalogue is a showcase for the recordings of Sir Neville Marriner and the Academy of St. Martin-in-the-Fields? Just to set the record straight - pardon the pun - music was very much in mind with the building of the Academy in the early 1700's. George I, an ardent patron of music, presented the church with its first organ in 1726 (at a cost of £1500). There has been music and song ever since.

In September of 1958, came an appeal to "all music lovers" to help take the chamber orchestra that John Churchill had built to the next level. Neville Marriner was hired because he met the requirements of a strong knowledge of chamber music (he had formed a trio in 1949 with Alan Loveday, violin and Anthony Hopkins, piano) with a detailed knowledge of the baroque repertoire. This is where I would like to concentrate today, mainly the Marriner recordings, and I hope you will enjoy and agree with some of my selections. By the way, during the "record producing days", after H V Karajan, Marriner was the second most recorded conductor.

**Argo, ZRG 575: Stravinsky: Pulcinella; Apollon Musagète. The Academy of St. Martin-in-the-Fields. Directed by Neville Marriner. Producer and engineer uncredited. Recording first released September, 1968.**

Well... if you're looking for a demonstration quality recording... this is it. This *Pulcinella* is the finest performance I know on record. There are some fine suites available, but nothing even comes close in scope or texture. Highlights are certainly the *Tarantella* and the *Gavotte* with two variations. One of my favorite sections is the *Duetto* for trombone and double-bass. This is an absolutely first class recording in every way. *Apollon Musagète*, a ballet commissioned by a famous American patroness of music, Mrs. Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge was first performed in April of 1928. A ballet in two scenes, I think Marriner beats everyone I've

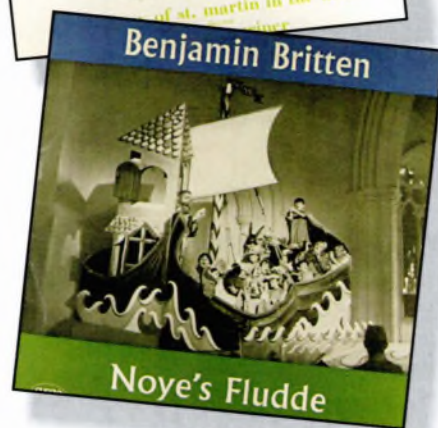
heard in this piece as well. I find his interpretation years ahead of Ansermet's on Decca and even Stravinsky's own performance on American Columbia. A piece with very delicate airs, this may not suit everyone's tastes, but it is a beautiful work none the less even if it lacks some of the rambunctiousness of Stravinsky's other ballets. Please seek this disc out if only for the *Pulcinella*. Highest recommendation.

**ZRG 845: Barber: Adagio for Strings; Ives: Symphony No. 3; Copland: Quiet City for cor anglais, trumpet and strings; Cowell: Hymn and Fuguing Tune No. 10 for oboe and strings; Creston: A Rumor. The Academy of St. Martin-in-the-Fields. Directed by Neville Marriner. Celia Nicklin: oboe, cor anglais; Michael Laird: trumpet. Produced by Chris Hazell with sound engineers Stan Goodall and Simon Eadon. Recorded October 1975 in St. John's, Smith Square, London and first released July, 1976.**

A stunning disc of American 20th century composers that belongs in everyone's collection. This record was active and in

print in the Argo/Decca catalogue until they stopped manufacturing records. I remember seeing the film *Platoon* in 1986 and was just captivated by Oliver Stone's use of Barber's *Adagio* throughout. The tragedy and emotion this music imparted has never left me. It is among the most beautiful works I know. We move from the beauty of Samuel Barber's work to one of the great

composers of American music, Charles Ives. It's Ives at his most uncompromising and if you're not familiar with his work, I think you'll find it quite adventurous. Aaron Copland is considered by many as the greatest American composer of the 20th century. The theme of *Quiet City*, is quite simply, a city at rest. A lovely piece I turn to often. Its peace and tranquility has a wonderful calming effect. ►





▶ This work is so different from his wonderfully raucous *Appalachian Spring*, *Billy the Kid* and any other number of his sonic splendors. Henry Cowell, was a fascinating composer with a variety of styles. He loved to experiment, spent time in Europe as a composer-pianist, and collaborated with Lev Termid in 1931 in the construction of the Rhythmic on. *The Hymn and Fuguing Tune* series spans a period from 1943 to 1964. We have here *Number 10* which dates from 1955. The liner notes tell us, "It is written for an oboe and strings and needs no analysis being a lucid essay based on a lovely four bar's theme heard right away on the oboe." Couldn't have said it better myself? Side two ends with a piece from Paul Creston, a self taught composer. He composed more than 50 works for orchestra or band, much in the way of percussion music. Here we are treated to a musical essay written for a string orchestra. Quite engaging. One last comment on this record: because it was so popular and in the catalogues forever, the sound can get quite strident in later issues. Spend the time seeking an early quiet copy. They exist and will cost you next to nothing. Fabulous recording.

**ZRG 719:** *Bizet: Symphony in C; Prokofiev: Symphony No. 1 in D major (Classical). Academy of St. Martin-in-the-Fields directed by Neville Marriner. Produced by Michael Bremner with sound engineer Stan Goodall. Recording first published October, 1973.*

This Bizet is about as perfect a recording as one could ask for. The sound is rich, sonorous but not too reverberant. The playing by the Academy is spirited and lively as one would hope for in this highly enjoyable fast paced 4-movement Symphony by the French composer. Yes, Marriner and his ensemble do a marvelous job with a wide range of material and you will fall in love particularly with the *4th movement* at the beginning of side two. And now for the Prokofiev: Not since Efreim Kurtz and the Philharmonia recorded their monumental release for EMI as ASD 263, in 1958, has anyone even come close to capturing the essence

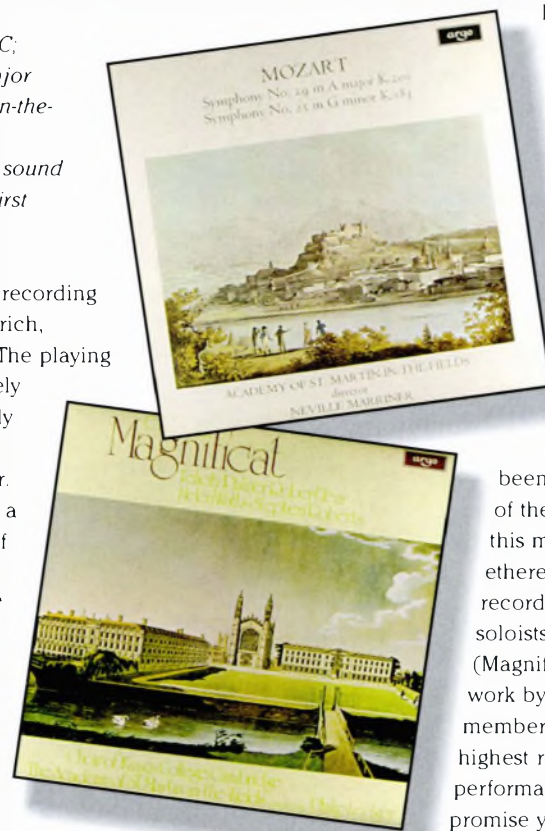


of Prokofiev's *Classical symphony*. This is just a spectacular composition from one of the great Russian composers of the 20th century and he was just 26 years old when he wrote it. You're absolutely enthralled from the opening first movement to the finale: *molto vivace*. A stylish work that will delight one and all. Highest recommendation.

**ZRG 853:** *C.P.E. Bach: Magnificat (Wq. 215). Felicity Palmer (Soprano) Helen Watts (Contralto), Robert Tear (Tenor), Stephen Roberts (Bass). Choir of King's College, Cambridge. The Academy of St. Martin-in-the-Fields directed by Philip Ledger. Recorded at King's College Chapel, Cambridge. Recording producer: Chris Hazell; recording engineers: Kenneth Wilkinson, Michael Mailes, John Dunkerely. Recording first published February, 1977.*

Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach was the second son of Johann Sebastian Bach and Maria Barbara Bach. He studied mainly in Leipzig and even received a degree in Law. Summoned by Frederick the Great, Crown Prince of Prussia, he was to serve as the chamber musician at his court in Rheinsberg. Written approximately 1748, two years before his father died, this was a very impressive undertaking considering the extensive *Magnificat's* (at least two I'm aware of)

his father had written. It has been said that his father approved of the work his son created. I enjoy this music and find it captivating yet ethereal and highly relaxing. The recording is outstanding and the soloists are absolutely magnificent (*Magnificat?*). Investigate this beautiful work by one of the lesser explored members of the Bach family. The highest recommendation for sound and performance, it offers a journey I promise you will make often. ▶



**ZRG 594:** Wolfgang

*Amadeus Mozart: Symphonies Nos. 13 in F (K 112), 15 in F (K 124), 16 in C (K 128), 14 in A (K 114). Academy of St. Martin-in-the-Fields directed by Neville Marriner. Recording first published November 1968.*

**ZRG 653:** Wolfgang Amadeus

*Mozart: Symphonies Nos. 24 in B flat (K 182), 23 in D (K.181), 26 in E flat (K 184), 27 in G (K.195). Academy of St. Martin-in-the-Fields directed by Neville Marriner. Recording first published April 1970.*

**ZRG 706:** Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart:

*Symphony No. 29 in A major (K.201), Symphony No. 25 in G minor (K.183). Academy of St. Martin-in-the-Fields directed by Neville Marriner. Produced by Michael Bremner and sound engineer Stanley Goodall. Recording first published March 1972.*

Okay, let's get very serious for a moment. I'm sure by now you can imagine how much competition there is in the catalogues when it comes to Mozart *Symphonies*. Böhm, Jochum, Szell, Klemperer, Walter to name but a tiny few. Well I have some news for you. Marriner and the little Academy do a fabulous job across the board and one of the best features is that you're given glorious sound with extremely spirited performances. I love them. My favourite treatment of *No. 25 in G minor* is here and it, as well as other Marriner/ Academy interpretations, were used throughout that wonderful film *Amadeus*. All three of these records go for almost no money... most dealers won't even handle them so you're left to the charity shops, flea markets, book stores and wherever else records "nobody wants" are found. Well go and find these and sit back and enjoy some of the finest Mozart *symphonies* you've ever heard. Highest recommendation for all three recordings. (And don't shy away from ZRG 679 [*Eine*



*Kleine Nachtmusik*] or ZRG 705 Mozart *Divertimento in D and Notturmo Serenade in D!* Extremely engaging and wonderfully recorded.) These recordings have it all: they're really inexpensive, fantastic performances and they offer outstanding string sound. What else is there?

**ZRG 674:** Stravinsky: *Capriccio*; Shostakovich: *Concerto for Piano, Trumpet and Strings*. John Ogdon: piano; John Wilbraham: trumpet.

*Academy of St. Martin-in-the-Fields directed by Neville Marriner. No production or engineering credits. Based upon the photo on the jacket and the credit of the photo, this would have been recorded at the Maltings, Snape. Recording first published February 1972.*

Stravinsky composed the *Capriccio* in Paris in 1929.

He acknowledges some of

his sources, speaking of Weber and Mendelssohn, 'the Beau Bummers' of music, in relation to the first movement, and of an element of 'Rumanian restaurant music' in the second. I think the *Capriccio* a more polished work than the piano concerto and it seems to find a more elegant way of combining piano and orchestra. Ogdon, a very fine pianist works very well with the Academy and everyone is right at home with this 20th century composition. Truly the piano and orchestra play as one. A delightful piece of music not recorded enough. Wilbraham is the king of the show in the Shostakovich in this production even though Ogdon should be taking more of a lead part. Written in 1933 (*opus 33*), I find this to be an audiophile delight and a musical masterpiece. This is a record you must have in your collection and it will, as so many of these lovely Argos, set you back almost nothing. Highest recommendation.





▶ **ZRG 657:** *Bartok: Music for Strings, Percussion and Celeste; Divertimento for Strings. The Academy of St. Martin-in-the-Fields directed by Neville Marriner. No production or engineering credits listed. Recording first published in February 1970.*

Marriner in Bartok? Well, on first blush that's kind of what I said. But you can't judge a book - or was that a record - by its sleeve. I'm not going to list the soloists on both pieces because there would be no more space in my article. Needless to say they are all first chair or dedicated soloists in their fields and I can tell you that this record really shines. It's been recorded well, the perspective is up close but not too upfront and the sound is just excellent. These are two of Bartok's popular works and there are many contenders in the catalogues for top honours here. I have to admit I'm personally partial to Rudolph Barshai's account of the *Divertimento* on original Decca SXL 6026-but that's going to cost you a pretty penny. If you're lucky, you'll find an early reissue on Decca Ace of Diamonds SDD 417. I'm also a big fan of the Fritz Reiner-Chicago Symphony Orchestra collaboration on American RCA Living Stereo LSC 2374. So there, I've laid out my own personal preferences. BUT... this Academy is very comfortable in Bartok and they do a rousing job. Great timpani work by Eric Pritchard and the nonexistent engineers give us first class sound. Regarding the *Divertimento*... first class all the way. There is no other coupling of these two items on one record that I'm aware of that can beat this disc. And for the price... well that's just laughable. Scoop up all you can find and give them to your friends for presents. They'll think you're a prince. Highest recommendation!

**ZRG 878:** *Francis Poulenc: Concert Champêtre for Harpsichord and Orchestra; Organ Concerto. George Malcolm organ and harpsichord. Academy of St. Martin-in-the-Fields directed by Iona Brown. Produced by Chris Hazell. Organ Concerto recorded in the chapel of St. John's College, Cambridge, July 1977. Engineers: Kenneth Wilkinson, John Dunkerley and David Frost. Concert Champêtre recorded in Walthamstow Town Hall, March*



1978. Engineers: Stan Goodall and Martin Atkinson.

This is one of my desert island discs. It is without a doubt one of the sonic masterpieces of modern record manufacturing. Poulenc composed the *organ concerto* in 1938 and to my mind - and ear - it's one of a small handful of outstanding recordings for orchestra and organ. The venue at St. John's is alive in this recording and believe me, if you've ever heard an organ live... and know how an organ can breathe, this record duplicates that

feat. For me there is just not enough superlatives to award this master-piece. Malcolm is one of the all time great keyboardists and is at home with the King of Instruments

and Brown does a magnificent job of involving yet not in any way interfering or being over bearing with the soloist. There is a delicacy with her control of the Academy and you are simply teleported to another planet. Spectacular in every sense of the word from start to finish.

As far as I'm concerned, this is one of the most spectacular 22 and a half minutes you could ever possibly spend.

Hearing this record on a large system will simply leave

one with a sense of awe as to how great records truly are. By no means is *Champêtre* a lesser work... just different. A delicate work opening with a formal-sounding fanfare is then answered by a passage of percussive 'crushed-note' chords, so say the liner notes. Dedicated to Wanda Landowska this work was completed between the years 1927 and 1928. There is a Stravinskyish feel to the work but it really is pure Poulenc. As mesmerizing sonically and as powerful as the *Organ Concerto* is, there is a playfulness that allows one to think in terms of a time when life was less complicated. A delicious side two to one of my all time favourite records... and you can bet I have two copies. Good luck finding yours and this record gets the highest of recommendations. Oh, and by the way... the Penguin boys prefer Simon Preston and Andre Previn as they rate the EMI ASD 3489 above the Argo. No doubt in my mind they really missed the boat. Grab this if you see it.





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