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Issue 25 - August / Sept 2003
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Printed By
JPS Litho Ltd.
Poole

Hi-Fi+ is published six times
a year by; Hi-Fi+ Publishing Ltd

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can be contacted at:
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Editorial

One of the joys of being an editor is that you get to receive all the complaints. Okay, so there are those individuals out there who'll never be happy, and their missives can get a little tedious. However, there are also the invaluable observations of those looking in from the outside, critiques of a world that can all too easily get separated from reality. And when those comments start to develop into a theme, then it's definitely time to take them seriously. That's exactly what's been happening recently, with the "Too much analogue" stream mingling with the "Not enough digital" one. Not exactly a torrent you understand, but a definite flow nonetheless.

The Vinyl Survival articles have indeed ramped up the analogue content recently, but after Issue 26 they should have run their course. But the lack of digital isn't because analogue's taking up all the space. It's got more to do with the moribund state of CD development, combined with the still yet to happen yet much heralded hi-bit revolution.

There are important CD players appearing, and when they do we cover them. But the number and range of new models is a fraction of what it used to be, and (qualitatively at least) DVD-A and SACD options are still well short of taking up the slack. The biggest single bottle-neck has been the limited software availability, especially for DVD-A, but that at last seems to be easing. So with that in mind, Issue 27 will be featuring multi-channel music hardware and software, alongside two-channel hi-bit solutions.

You see, it's not that we're anti-digital, it's just that we want to make sure that what we cover is both relevant and representative. That's why we covered the Gabriel re-masters in such depth in Issue 24, and why a lot of our hi-bit coverage has been more exploratory rather than review based. Hopefully, we're reaching the point where that can change. That way you can point us in a new direction. Listen? We'd be mad not to.



"We're talking about a future classic"

July 2002 / VS55 / Hi Fi News Ken Kessler

"More than any other CD player,
the CD3 is the machine that renews my
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in the musical event"

November 2002 / CD3 / Suono Mario Berlinguer

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LS25 MKII/VT100 MKIII
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March 2003 / VS110 / Hi Fi News Dave Berriman



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Incoming!

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

Dear Sir

Many thanks for an excellent magazine.

Your review of Las Vegas C.E.S. 2003 aroused my interest. As a previous user of Magneplanar speakers, your reference to the Eminent Technology LFT – V111 panels was the case, and

I would love to own a pair!

Is there any possibility that you could inform me of Eminent's address or other information in this regard.

Yours Sincerely

Mr FD Goodey

Kent

You can contact Eminent Technology at:

225 East Palmer Street, Tallahassee, FL 32301, USA

Tel. 001 850 575 5655

Fax. 001 850 224 5999

E-mail. bruce@eminent-tech.com

Net. www.eminent-tech.com

Dear Ed,

I was pleased to find your article on Isolation in the latest issue. To be honest it's something that's been giving me one hell of a headache of late.

I have two problems. Firstly my wooden floor which floats on a felt underlay: not good, especially with floor standers (Living voice Auditoriums). Secondly my support, Quadrispire Q4, "the wobbly rack". Need I say more. After many years of reading your magazine I decided to re-instate my aged Rega deck but had big problems with isolation. What with no suspension and the bouncy floor it sounded terrible. Rega recommend an ugly wall shelf and were horrified when I suggested something different.

Enter the Townshend Seismic Sink. Utterly incredible. The soundstage, detail etc was greatly improved: I thought there was less bass but if you listened carefully there was more, just tighter and better defined.

This leads me to my question on speaker isolation. In your vast experience would I benefit from sighting the Auditoriums on something similar? Having pretty much the same sized boxes myself did you honestly find it beneficial

and worth the hassle.

Kind Regards

S Phyll

Via e-mail

Dear Steve,

The short answer to your question is yes. Although getting speakers precisely positioned and levelled on air isolation platforms is a pain, for you it's a once only exercise (as long as you make the necessary location marks). I would certainly use this type of support if I wasn't having to swap speakers so frequently. JK, who is clearly more patient than me, uses Townshend platforms under his OBXs. The benefits will be much the same as you heard with the turntable. Ed.

Dear Sir

If I may, I would like to raise a number of questions with you regarding multi-channel audio. I know that you have made some attempt to address this issue in your magazine, but I for one still have serious doubts about how to approach it.

In order to avoid compromising my current stereo setup I feel that it would be preferable to run a multi-channel system in parallel. However, as I have a pair of Sonus Faber Amati Homage speakers it would seem rather wasteful not to make use of them in the multi-channel setup. My first question is would it in any way degrade the stereo sound if I were to connect two sets of speaker cables to the speaker terminals? I assume that if this were acceptable that it would be preferable for only one set-up to be active at any time when in use to avoid any contamination.

My next question regards the number of speakers to be used in a multi-channel set-up. Why have a centre speaker when a stereo pair provide all the central imaging needed? If the centre speaker is not of similar quality to the stereo pair it will surely degrade the overall performance.

Does not the same argument apply to a sub-woofer? On the other hand, would a four-speaker set-up, two front and two rear, do justice to multi-channel recordings? I would use Sonus Faber Wall speakers that I assume would be a suitable match for the Amatis.

Perhaps I should add that home cinema is not a



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► consideration. I have no interest in car chases and explosions which would seem to have dictated the approach to home cinema sound. Why waste time watching Arnold Schwarzenegger when you could be listening to Mozart or Stan Getz?

My last question is regarding amplification. I would not want to spend a fortune on a multi-channel amplifier, but at the same time would not be happy with a significantly degraded sound quality. My stereo amplifier is a Border Patrol S20 which produces a truly wonderful sound, unlikely to be matched by any multi-channel set-up, but which sets a standard to strive towards. Do you believe that something like a Sony multi-channel amplifier would be acceptable?

I should be most grateful for any response you can make to these questions whilst realizing that there are no definitive answers.

Regards

Ron Kirkpatrick

Via e-mail

Dear Ron,

There are enough questions here to fill an entire issue of the magazine, which is why Issue 27 is planned for exactly that! However, in the meantime, the basic answers are as follows:

Under no circumstances should you connect two amplifiers to the same set of speaker terminals. They don't like it! The gulf between A/V and hi-fi sound is huge, and is largely down to the quality of the electronics and decoding. If you want to have any chance of a surround sound system achieving hi-fi performance then, regardless of whether it's six channel discrete or Dolby 5.1, you'll need to obey the following rules:

- a) The speakers must be as near identical as possible, including a centre or sub if used.*
- b) The amplification channels must be identical.*
- c) No the Sony multi-channel amp won't do.*

As regards whether to use a centre channel or not, neither the six-channel discrete or the Dynavector Super Stereo systems use them. If music is your primary motivation, you can dispense with the expense. My first port of call would be Dynavector's ADP-2 add on box. This might break my rules above, but it works in a totally different way to more familiar surround set-ups. It was reviewed in Issue 18 and costs about £800 plus a pair of very small speakers. You can reach the importer at (44)(0)1202 767873, dynevector@onetel.net.uk.

Dear Sir,

After reading MM's review of Sea Change by Beck in issue 22, I immediately went out and bought this album. When you see someone rave about something like this you think to yourself, "This must be truly inspiring music!". I love any kind of music, or art for that matter, that inspires emotion... you name it, love, hate, sadness, fear, anxiety, whatever.

You know that the artist has done a terrific job even if they've inspired you to go seek psychiatric help because you're so depressed after listening to the music. You point out that the music is "depressing... inviting, vulnerable... and despairing". Okay, maybe not the most endearing of emotions, but valid emotions none the less.

But this music is completely devoid of emotion. It's like an emotional vacuum. You don't feel anything at all while listening to this other than boredom. The best way to describe this album is musical wallpaper. After a while you don't even notice it's there. I'll grant you, the sound is first rate, and bravo for pointing out that the majority of modern releases are awful. My opinion is that most recordings must be engineered by people that can't hear. However, most people that buy this album will be greatly disappointed.

Charles Trevithick

Via e-mail

Reply from MM:

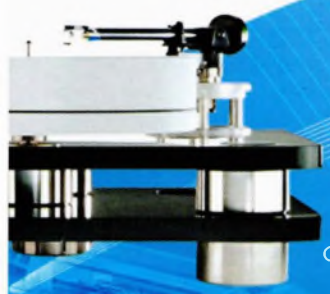
Dear Charles,

Thanks for taking the time to write a letter in response to my review of Beck's Sea Change album. I am glad to know you spent the time to read it! I wholly understand your point of view with regard to the seeming lack of emotion in the record. From a musical standpoint, it was not the most engaging of his works to say the least, therefore if the music did not entice you it may have seemed dull and of course "devoid of emotion" as you stated... However, that is the beauty of art, whether it is music, painting or anything else. We all perceive and interpret art differently as our individual tastes take hold. Where you might find a void of emotion, I find a well of negativity and sadness (some would even say that to be devoid of emotion one must be full of sadness, thus leading to emptiness). I am sorry that you found the album disappointing. However, we should be careful when we generalize, especially when it comes to pop music and/or culture. You said "most people that buy this album will be greatly disappointed." Let us not forget that "most" people are not you, nor I. The word "most" is a troubling one in and of itself. I could say that most people who enjoyed Odelay did not care for Mutations. Unfortunately there is no way to gauge for sure if the statement is correct, as it speaks to a volume of people beyond our grasp. The critical response to Sea Change was widely varied indeed, so again I understand your point. Also, with regard to your statement on engineers: having worked for one of the top five record labels for years I can tell you this - maybe it is not only the engineers that are at fault. Maybe we consumers do not place enough demand on quality, and therefore the big labels do not see a need to put out records with sonic merit. They look for the hit and the quick sales spikes. Thanks again for the response.

Michael Mercer



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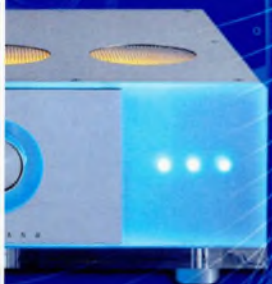
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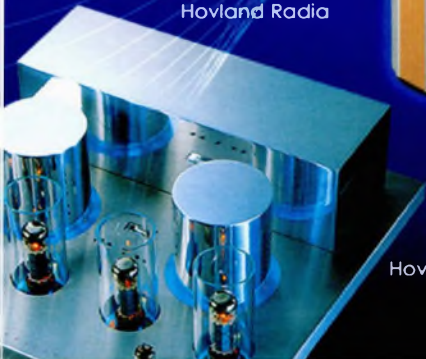
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Home Truths



by Jimmy Hughes

'If it ain't broke, don't fix it' runs the old adage. Wise words. Yet the history of hi-fi has always been one of dissatisfaction with prevailing standards. What was it Oscar Wilde said about having the simplest of tastes because he was always satisfied with the best? That's not so with hi-fi. However good The Best might be, it's never good enough. No hi-fi system, however impressive or capable, can match the experience of live sound in a good hall. So the goal is ultimately unobtainable.

Alas, how many of us can afford the best hi-fi anyway? At some point we have to be satisfied with what we have - if only to enjoy the music. Yet at the same time, there's an argument that says - to hell with impossible standards. In absolute terms does it matter how 'good' your hi-fi is? If it gets you in touch with the music and performance, that's enough. Don't confuse accurate, believable sonic performance with an authentic musical experience. They're not the same.

Such thoughts ran through my head a few weeks back - the last day of June to be precise - when I attended a press launch hosted by classical record labels Deutsche Grammophon, Decca, and Philips, plus some smaller independent labels. The purpose of the launch was to swear allegiance forsooth to the SACD format. This system offers backwards compatibility with CD; high resolution two channel stereo playback, and 5.1 surround sound.

In many ways it's an attractive package. You can play the discs on an ordinary CD player - providing they're hybrids. And if/when you get an SACD player, enjoy the benefits of improved two-channel sound and surround. As with past technological revolutions - shellac '78s to mono LP; mono LP to stereo; stereo LP to CD - the record companies no doubt hope we'll replace our existing music libraries on CD with SACDs. CD sales are in decline, and something new is needed to rejuvenate the market. SACD is copy-protected too.

Speaking as someone who has contributed generously over the past thirty-odd years to the coffers of the classical record industry, I have doubts that SACD will blow CD away commercially. The discs are set to cost about 25% more, and my guess is most people will care more about price

than improved quality.

There's also the question of whether or not Joe Public is actually unhappy with CD. Having been told CD offered Pure Perfect Sound Forever, most people think it's the Bees Knees. Myself, I'm finally satisfied with CD. Once Chord's DAC-64 came along, the last part of the jigsaw puzzle fell into place; CD finally delivered what the specifications originally promised. That it could still be better I don't doubt. The point is that it's good enough - more than good enough.

The surround sound demonstrations were interesting. We heard excerpts from Messian's *Turangalila* symphony (the 1993 Chailly recording on Decca, newly remixed) plus the closing part of act 2 from Puccini's *La Boheme*. In this recording, an off-stage military band was mixed so it appeared behind the listener. Then there was America from *West Side Story* in surround - from the famous 1985 DG set conducted by Leonard Bernstein.

The sound was far from perfect in the room, despite (or because of!) a hi-fi system costing around 50K being used. But for the most part you could hear what was on offer. Certainly the surround effects were impressive. But speaking personally I found it all a bit gimmicky and distracting; the modern equivalent of tennis matches and express trains in stereo. Forty years ago people were entranced by such things. Now it's old hat.

Do you see pictures when you listen? I do. I form imaginary visual images of whatever it is I'm listening to. If it's an orchestra, I 'see' the seating plan of players on a platform. All this is quite automatic - I hardly think about it. But it has a major drawback; if you're not careful, you can spend your energy 'visualising' the performance and not listening to the music. Much depends on how explicit the recording is in terms of stereo detail. The wider the stereo effect, the more spotlight and exaggerated the balancing of instruments, the more 'processing' your brain has to do to turn the sonic picture into a coherent imaginary visual image.

Because of this, I sometimes prefer listening in mono to stereo. With mono you know where things are; straight ►

► in front of you! Because there's no soundstage spread from left to right, you're not distracted by the left/right/centre placement of voices or instruments. I find mono reproduction very calming. It's simplicity means you can concentrate on the message, not the medium. Stereo and Surround are more exciting and perhaps more involving, but also potentially distracting.

It would be interesting to know how many people see pictures when they listen. And whether there's any difference between (say) younger listeners in their twenties or early thirties, and older people in their mid-forties or fifties. 'To close your eyes and imagine you're there' was the goal of hi-fi. And for many of us, I suspect, it still is. But is it so for the younger generation? Especially those listening to music that's largely computer generated with no link to 'reality' in the live performance sense.

I'm certain the majority of hi-fi enthusiasts visualise when they listen. That's why we close our eyes, and/or dim the room lights. Having your eyes open spoils the impression. If the recording being played suggests the vast echoing spaces of a huge cathedral, the last thing you want is your eyes telling you you're in a medium-sized living room. It ruins the illusion. Fine. But - fun as it is - recreating the sonic impression a jazz club or concert hall is always secondary to experiencing the music itself.

One of the SACD demonstrators exuded an almost schoolboy-like glee at the effects of surround sound, and the way it could be used to position voices or instruments around the listener. The music chosen highlighted this. Messian's ghastly *Turangalila* symphony for example. Agreed, it's great fun and makes a fantastic racket. But every time I hear it, I think of Beecham's Bon Mot about the English not understanding music but loving the noise it makes.

The short excerpt chosen treated us to a whizz-bang medley of impressive orchestral noises, and the surround mix placed the listener in the eye of the hurricane so to speak. It was quite exciting, and certainly very colourful. But I found the effect confusing

and ultimately rather tiring. With instruments popping up all around, it was difficult to decide what was where. Great claims are made about surround improving clarity, but in many ways I think the opposite is true.

For example, when you start reproducing deep bass from the rear channels, the sound seems to become muddy. The more you spread low frequencies between channels, the greater the danger of a bloated woolly bottom-end. It's the exact opposite of what happens in mono, where the bass gets drier and leaner. For this reason, I tend to prefer small slightly bass-shy speakers for the rear channels, rather than full-range ones.

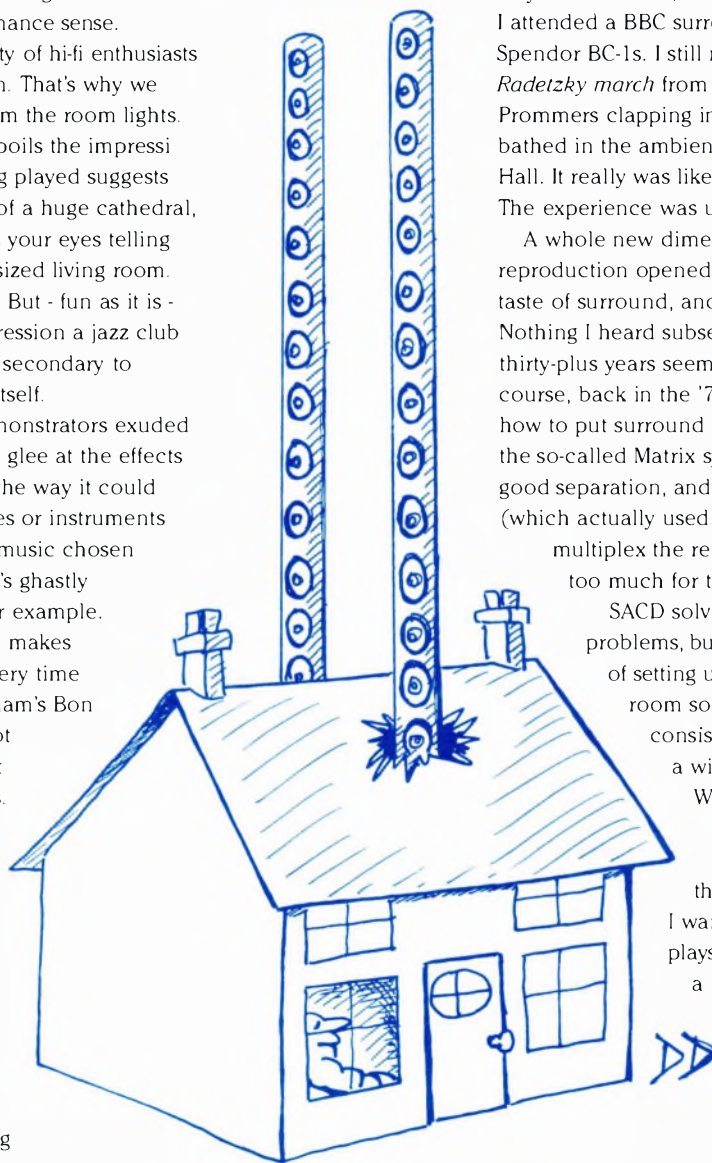
From the above, you might infer I'm not enamoured with surround sound. Not so. I was convinced long ago.

Way back in 1972, if memory serves me right, I attended a BBC surround dem using four Spendor BC-1s. I still recall hearing Strauss' *Radetzky march* from the Proms in surround - Prommers clapping in time to the music, bathed in the ambience of the Royal Albert Hall. It really was like being there. The experience was unforgettable.

A whole new dimension in sound reproduction opened up. It was my first taste of surround, and also (alas) the best. Nothing I heard subsequently over the next thirty-plus years seemed to get close! Of course, back in the '70s, the problem was how to put surround sound on LP. None of the so-called Matrix systems (SQ/QS) gave good separation, and RCA's CD-4 system (which actually used a 45kHz signal to multiplex the rear channels!) was too much for the LP of that time.

SACD solves such technical problems, but there's still the difficulty of setting up a system in a domestic room so that it performs consistently and reliably with a wide range of recordings.

When I was younger I liked farting about with hi-fi; the more complicated, the better! Now I'm older, I want something simple that plays music consistently with a minimum of fuss. I want to listen to music, not my system. For that reason, I see myself sticking with two channel stereo... ►+





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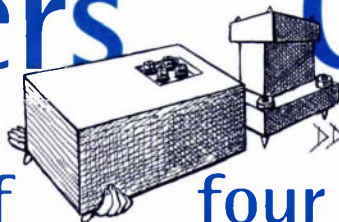
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Speakers Corner

Or, a tale of four speakers



by Paul Messenger

I spend most of my time worrying and writing about loudspeakers, simply because they're so much more varied – and hence so much more interesting – than the other components in the hi-fi chain. Just how dramatic those variations can be has been brought home rather forcefully over the past couple of months.

First to arrive was the biggest and heaviest speaker ever to move into my listening room. JMLab's Grand Utopia Be – the Be referring to its beryllium tweeter – has five drivers, each in its own sub-enclosure, stands nearly six foot tall, and weighs one fifth of a ton. It took five guys to unload it and get it into my room, and once planted there was no way it was going anywhere until I'd finished with it.

B&O's Beolab 5 had to wait in line until the GUBe had been collected, but was just as much a challenge in its way. This Dalek-like conical contraption is stuffed with innovations, incorporating 2,500W of active drive amplification, room-mode bass equalisation and special elliptical lenses for the mid and treble drivers.

After that hi-tech tour de force, it was time to go to the opposite extreme with one of the simplest possible speaker systems – a single-driver horn. Beauhorn has recently substantially revised its B2 by fitting a new drive unit, the renamed B2.2 Revelation sitting atop a 'floating world' plinth.

All three of the above are large and hefty affairs, so the final member of this group had to be one of the smallest on the market. Leema Acoustics' roots lie in ProAudio, and the tiny Xen – smaller even than an LS3/5A – was initially developed to handle multi-channel monitoring, and as midgets go, this is a mighty one

So how did these four radically different approaches compare? The Grande Utopia Be is in some ways the most conventional model – most like the regular speakers on the market. It's configured as a three-and-a-half-way – that's a three-way with an additional 15-inch 'subwoofer' driver operating in parallel alongside the regular 11-incher, and is horribly expensive at around \$45,000 the pair. But it's built on a huge scale, with massively solid cabinetwork, Focal's most advanced drive unit technology, and top class network

components.

It ought to have set a benchmark, and in many respects it does. The splendid beryllium tweeter is exceptionally clean and brings great clarity to the proceedings. The superbly inert enclosure and top quality crossover ensures a very wide dynamic range. The cleverly shaped baffle (vertically concave; laterally convex), with tweeter placed between two midrange drivers, gives precise 'small speaker' stereo focus, while the sound distribution is arguably the ideal compromise between narrow directivity and omni-directionality. And all those drivers ensures massive headroom and freedom from strain.

But all was not sweetness and light. One vital ingredient was missing, and that was the interaction between the speakers and the listening room. This factor is always unpredictable, especially with large speakers that have very deep bass – and they don't come much larger or deeper than this – and all the more so when the bass comes from a multitude of sources – and there are ten (six ports and four drivers) in toto here!

You can try to blame the speakers, or the room, but neither is actually responsible – the fault lies purely in the interaction between them, and that is very hard to predict. The consequence here was substantial (+5dB) bass excess below 70Hz, followed by a deep suckout around 110Hz. Ironically, JMLab's much smaller and less expensive Alto Utopia Be, placed in the same places in the same room, delivers a beautifully even and well extended bottom end.

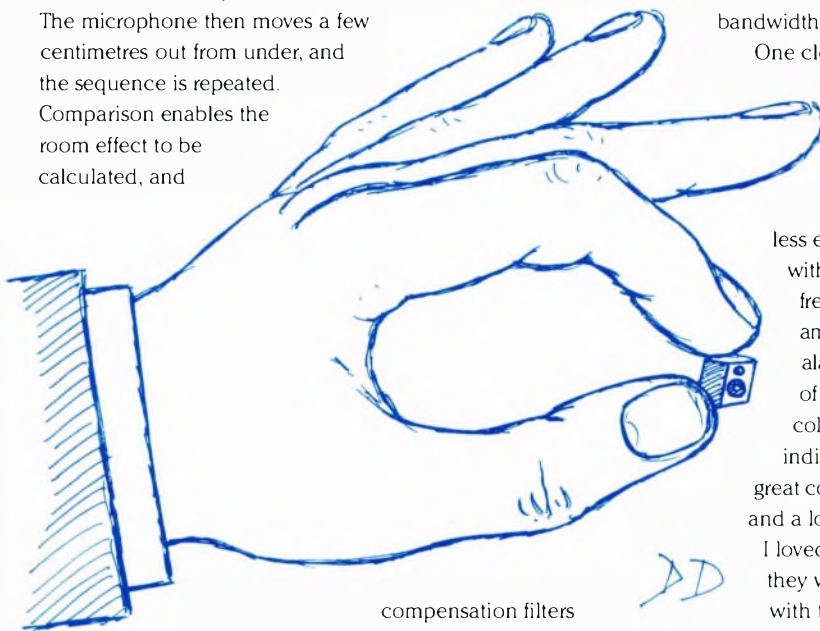
Also ironically, B&O's Beolab 5 was expressly designed to counter the problems I ran into with the Grande Utopia Be. Don't underestimate B&O. It may not have a high credibility rating amongst hi-fi enthusiasts these days, but that's in part because it has long outgrown the small specialist sector. In the 1950s and 1960s it was seen as a serious hi-fi brand, and responsible for many innovations. Today it enjoys very healthy sales of serious price loudspeakers, though these are invariably active powered devices operating as part of complete B&O systems.

Recent B&O speakers have been beautifully super-slim creations in polished aluminium, using tiny bass/mid

► drivers, criticised – entirely validly – for prioritising styling ahead of performance. The £10,000/pair Beolab 5 addresses this by building in a 15-inch low-bass driver, and in order to do this without creating a very bulky looking speaker B&O has adopted a conical shape, mounting the bass driver in the bottom surface pointing downwards towards the floor.

A very complex, though entirely automated system is then used to measure and adjust the bass output. The user merely has to press on the top surface for a couple of seconds. The speaker then goes into set-up mode, playing a sequence of test signals which is picked up by a microphone mounted on a motor-driven rod just below the bass driver.

The microphone then moves a few centimetres out from under, and the sequence is repeated. Comparison enables the room effect to be calculated, and



compensation filters are automatically inserted. Both the low- and mid-bass drivers are powered by 1,000W amps, ensuring plenty of headroom to cope with the EQ.

According to my in-room measurement technique, the Beolab didn't smooth out the individual up/down room modes, but it did ensure an accurate overall balance with impressive deep bass extension, and (clever stuff!) did so whether the speakers were sited in free space or placed close to a wall.

The Beolab 5 has another major innovation, in the form of semicircular elliptical 'lenses' that control the directivity of the upward-facing midrange and treble domes. Unlike the flat surface reflectors encountered elsewhere, the use of elliptical sections maintains phase coherence and hence stereo image precision, which is actually improved because the directivity of the lenses avoids floor and ceiling reflections. And because the lens is semicircular, it acts like a 'controlled wall', again maintaining consistent performance irrespective of placement.

The end result is a beautifully neutral, utterly discreet,

wide-bandwidth speaker with exceptionally fine imaging. The lack of passive crossover and fine enclosure control all help ensure a wide dynamic range here, though the built-in ICE-Power digital power amps might not satisfy refined audiophile sensibilities.

You couldn't invent a bigger contrast than the transition from B&O to Beauhorn – the brand that has done most to revive interest in horn systems driven by a single 'full range' driver. I put 'full range' in inverted commas here to stress that these speakers do struggle towards the frequency extremes – even a quite bulky horn like this has limited bass output and extension (on my in-room measurement, usable bandwidth is roughly 70Hz to 12kHz).

One clever bit about the B2.2R is that its new 130mm Italian-sourced driver has a tiny 85mm diameter cone, so the cross-sectional area of the rear horn can be kept correspondingly modest. The B2.2R's other distinguishing characteristic is that it's less extreme than, say, the Lowther-driven horns, with smoother and much more laid-back high frequencies, and sensitivity a (more than ample) 97dB. Despite the effective but slightly alarming decoupling plinth, there's still plenty of woodwork to add a fair amount of boxy coloration here, but there are also the indisputable virtues of the single-driver horn – great coherence, wonderfully natural dynamics, and a load that makes life very easy for the amplifier. I loved the Beauhorns, and missed them when they went away, but was intrigued by the contrast with the tiny (14x22x23cm) Leema Xen. This

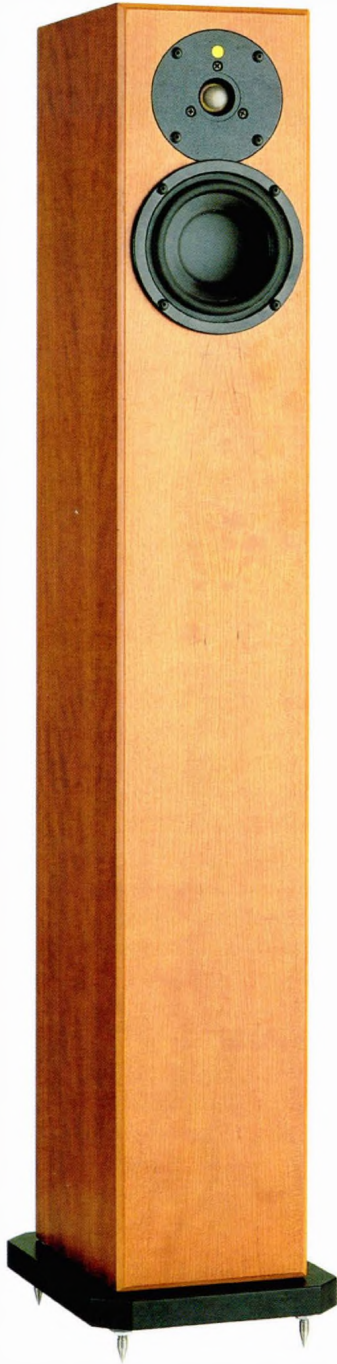
sounds beautifully free from boxiness, presumably because it has very little in the way of box – and what there is mostly made from damped steel. Coincidentally, the bass weight and reach was quite similar to the Beauhorn's, though the Xen has a very low 85dB sensitivity and a distinctly more forward character.

What you don't get here is the dynamic integrity of the horn, but what you do get is very low coloration, a beautifully open, smooth and coherent (if forward) balance, an exceedingly wide dynamic range, as well as something approaching the ultimate in lounge friendliness.

These four speakers all do their various things in very different ways, and beautifully illustrate the broad range of options that co-exist on the loudspeaker scene. There's no one 'right' approach – merely a collection of compromises which the enthusiast would do well to bear in mind when choosing his/her speakers. Which would I choose? Probably, and perhaps surprisingly, the Beauhorns, but these are all class acts in their different ways, and I could probably live happily enough with any of them.



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Music Matters



by Alan Sircom

Maybe I'm fickle; maybe I'm schizophrenic. But, while last issue I waxed lyrical about Digital Radio, now I'm a turncoat. Digital Radio doesn't suck quite as badly as some suggest, but there are big issues that need addressing, and I have a wish-list.

You see, it's easy for a Londoner to praise Digital Radio, because London receives digital radio broadcasts. Just like most of the bigger UK cities. But then, drive a few miles out of these cities and reception gets all skittish. Make that, non-existent. I secretly think digital radio signal strength is measured in Cathedrals; currently, if you are more than 20 miles from at least one cathedral, your chances of picking up digital radio drop significantly. As soon as you are up to two or three Cathedrals, you stand a fighting chance of some digital radio reception.

The people heading up Digital Radio remain bullish. The coverage will extend to 85% of the population by the end of 2004, they say. But, they seem to skip over the fact that 85% of the population does not live in 85% of the country. There will still be swathes of English (and especially Scottish) countryside that have no Digital Radio coverage by the end of 2004. Those parts of the country not covered by 2005 will have to wait an indeterminate period before they receive the service. If at all! Worse, the current crop of digital radio adverts, when played to people who have no chance of getting digital radio for the foreseeable future, only serve to disenfranchise listeners further.

In fairness to the Digital Radio people, they also claim that there's more than one way to receive Digital Radio – you can get it through Freeview, or other digital TV systems, or through the Internet. But there is a fallacy in the thinking here, too. The places where Digital Radio has yet to reach are generally the same places where Freeview is still MIA. Similarly, both broadband internet and digital cable TV services are rarely found outside of major conurbations. Suddenly, Sky's digital satellite service becomes the major digital radio supplier. And that's an

expensive premium if you only want the service for radio stations.

I mistakenly thought that one the joys of Digital Radio was its in-car performance, that you should be able to drive from one side of the country to the other with nary a drop-out or a retune required. Silly me! That particular selling point of the format has quietly disappeared, in part because no car manufacturer line fits a digital radio. It might also be because you cannot use it along much of the motorway system of the UK and – until such time as the Eureka 147 system gets adopted in more than just the UK – it remains an oddity. Unfortunately, this potentially good aspect of digital radio, one that might make people switch to the format, has become one of its biggest stumbling blocks. Perhaps this will be resolved by the later 'replacement' for AM radio called Digital Radio Mondiale, which is currently in test. When first announced, DRM was suggested to replace current AM and SW receivers by 2007. Now, where have we heard claims like that before?

It's not as if the current Eureka 147 Digital Radio format isn't proving a success. Ask the people at Pure – they can't make enough products to go around. So far, in excess of 160,000 receivers are in circulation; this may be a drop in the ocean compared to all the analogue radios in cars and houses around the UK, but still represents a significant chunk of listeners prepared to pay reasonably large sums for the format. It's a simple formula: if Digital Radio were available to a greater number of listeners, there'd be more Digital Radio listeners.

I feel strongly that there is a lack of commitment from the digital radio camp. Our system has been a European standard since 1994, in theory, but so far only the UK, Switzerland and Sweden have made any form of firm commitment to the standard. The likes of Technics (or, more importantly, Ford) are unlikely to wholeheartedly support a system that only works in a handful of countries.

And then, there is broadcast quality. Talk radio stations are prone to switching into monophonic



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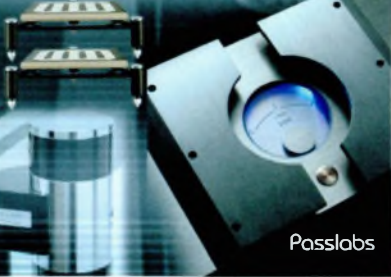
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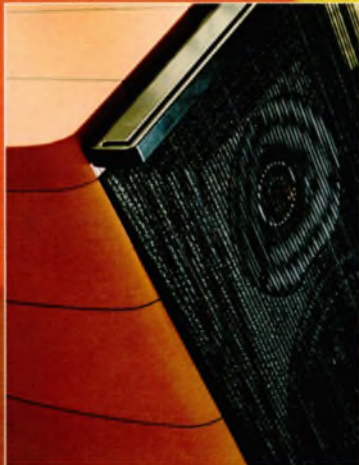
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▶ broadcasting, admittedly only for news broadcasts and the like. But to arbitrarily switch between 128kbts/sec (stereo) and 75kbts/sec (mono) frightens me; at the moment it is only for news pieces, but what's to stop more mono sneaking in. If it ever ends up with my Archers sheep baaaa-ing in mono, that's it, formal complaint time.

The big, big problem comes when you discover what sort of quality some of our Nordic chums are getting as digital radio test broadcasts. If you were a regular listener to Swedish Radio earlier in 2003, you didn't get 2000 stations; you didn't just get CD quality sound; you didn't even get the occasional Radio Three live uncompressed wonder-recording quality. Instead, you got one station of DTS-encoded 5.1 channel über-sound, taken from both commercially available 5.1 channel recordings and a collection of specially recorded events by Swedish Radio itself.

As I have said before, I am all for a plethora of

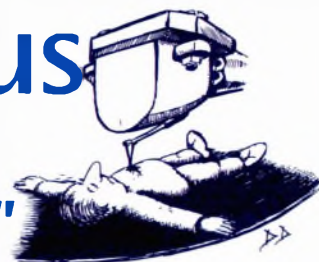
stations on digital multiplex. But I am greedy; I also want wonder sound; I want the option for Digital Radio to outshine analogue radio in the way that DVD picture and sound quality outshines VHS. And that's when the audiophile in me rears up again; I would happily sacrifice 30 or more of the 50+ digital radio stations for a couple of fantastic-sound stations. Of course, this is not commercially viable, but isn't that the point of public service broadcasting?

There's one ray of light, though. With all the inconsistencies of Digital Radio, it seems that the great analogue switch-off has become a mythical future event, perhaps one that will be passed down from generation to generation. The occasionally mentioned date of 2010 as the switch-off date now looks functionally impossible. So, if you want to invest in that super-duper analogue tuner... go for it; it is more likely to have crumbled into dust before it becomes out-of-date. ▶+

Postcard from Venus

I Married an Audiophile...

Or, "But maybe not in yellow!"



by Ricki Heller

Before I met my husband in the mid-1990s, I lived obliviously (and quite happily, I may add) in a world devoid of Rockport speakers, Cardas wiring or Krell pre-amps. To my uninitiated mind, a "good" stereo cost somewhere in the vicinity of \$1500. I had no trouble blithely bopping to the lyrics of Alanis Morissette, then switching mindlessly to the dulcet tones of the Boston Philharmonic playing Pachelbel's canon—all within the same hour, at the same volume, and emanating from the same set of speakers which were (as it behooved the listener) positioned according to functional convenience, one behind the couch and one perched on the sideboard, unobtrusively blending into the well-planned decor.

In those days, I felt sorry for those women known as "NFL Widows." I was blessed to find a man who cared as little for televised sports as I did. Little did I know that before long I'd be referring to myself as an "MBL Widow"

instead. I quickly began to understand what it means to be a wife relegated to second place behind a husband's all-consuming passion for his pastime.

It all started on our first date, when my then-recently separated guy invited me back to the cheap digs he shared with another divorced buddy. The building should have, by all appearances, been condemned—they didn't even have running water for the first six months—but I entered anyway, propelled by the allure of amorous interaction. While the house itself looked as if it were slated for next-day demolition, my beau's two rooms were immaculate. In the "sitting room," he pulled me over—this even before he kissed me!—to show me his stereo, a 1950s-era tube amp and turntable he'd assembled, to a great extent, by himself, from disparate parts. Immediately, my heart warmed to the guy. "Why, he's so impoverished he can't even afford a stereo!" I thought. "He has to buy old ▶

▶ junk from the local Sally Ann and piece it together!”

It never occurred to me that someone might choose to purchase, at exorbitant cost, these parts from second-hand audio dealers and specialty stores.

Even once we lived together and my own, all-in-one “stereo” was immediately put to permanent rest in the basement, I didn’t fully appreciate the gratis music system I’d been afforded. Twelve thousand dollars on a stereo system? I thought, aghast. Wasn’t his entire annual income barely double that amount?? I was even afraid, at first, to touch it, lest I break something and jeopardize my mortgage payment in order to replace it.

Of course, like many women, I was familiar with car enthusiasts and the inexplicable male penchant for big, complex, mechanical toys of all types. I simply assumed that, to my honey, stereo systems fell into this same category. I was functionally deaf to his entreaties about the full range frequency response of good systems, or the need to hear the full spread of instruments across the orchestral sound stage. To me, music was just music, and to my (albeit highly untrained) ear, it made no difference which system I attended to— I listened solely for the lyrics, the dance beat, a backdrop to baking or sewing or reading, the pleasant pattern of repeated words and sound that eventually spurred memory so I could sing along. It didn’t matter to me whether the wires were the blue or the yellow, whether it was called a needle or a “cartridge.”

I tried, at first, to understand it intellectually. Why were my Amy Grant CDs no longer worth listening to, simply because they were recorded poorly? I’d sit for hours as my sweetie read to me from magazine reviews, describing the incredible output one could glean from a 1250-watt tube system, or related the fantasy life lived by Harry Pearson, the Absolute Sound’s editor and chief reviewer. Despite my best efforts, my eyes would soon glaze over, and I’d nod perfunctorily as he droned on about the systems of his dreams. It must have felt, I soon realized, as he did when I talked about the benefit of doing the emotional exercises in Harriet Goldhor Lerner’s book, *The Dance of Intimacy*, or the spectacular period fashions

in the film, *Titanic*.

But everything changed cataclysmically one spring day, as we strolled through Toronto’s Yorkville district and entered an upscale audio store there. Not only do they stock the latest in audiophiles’ dreamiest systems, they provide perfectly structured listening rooms in which to sit, languidly, as you take in each and every one of them.

As we browsed, I was more interested in the artists being played than the machines on which they were playing. Then we went back to the very end of the hallway and a room in which was placed only a sofa and a Wilson Watt-Puppy system. Something fantastic—perhaps the Fritz Reiner *Scheherazade*—was playing. My husband told me to sit on the couch, close my eyes, and listen.

Devotion can be practised over a lifetime, but conversion takes only a nanosecond. Hallelujah! I had my epiphany at that moment. “But it sounds like the orchestra is here,” I marveled, struck dumb. There I was, a front-row, centre seat (only more comfortable and with a quieter audience) – all because of this phenomenal audio system. I was blown away. I could actually hear and feel the difference. It was chilling, it was exciting, it was transformative.

These days, when my hubby wants to buy new parts for the stereo, I may still balk at the expense, but I would never suggest to him it’s not worth it. I’ve learned to deal with the fact that even the smallest Christmas or birthday present will cost more than \$500. I’ve accepted the reality that our neighbours will knock regularly on

the door asking us to turn down the music. I’ve adapted to the fact that it takes longer to do everything else because music is no longer just the background, but an entire activity in itself. If my husband reorganizes our living room once every month in an attempt to place the system in a more felicitous arrangement, I don’t argue. And I’m waiting for the day when we can finally afford the system of his dreams. At that point, I’ll sit down with him, close my eyes, and just listen.



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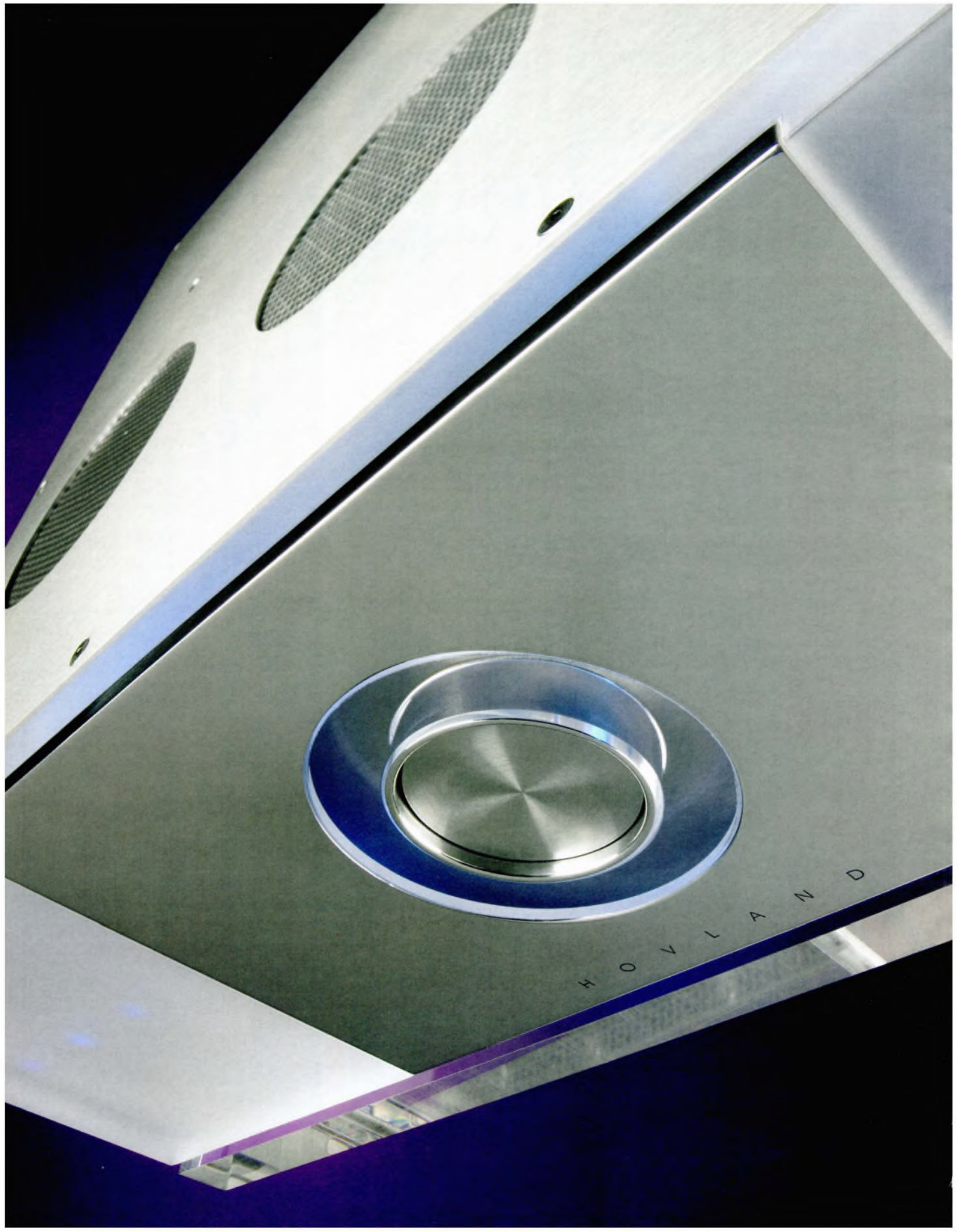
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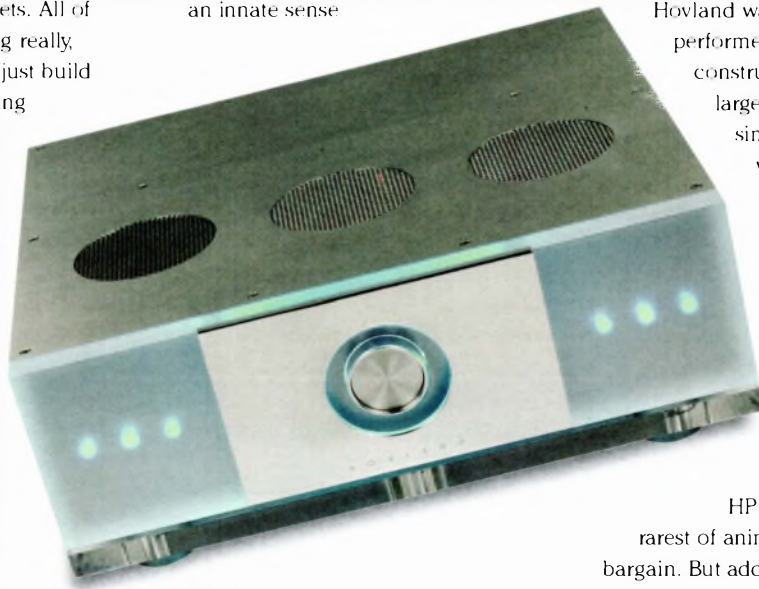
Hovland RADIA Power-Amplifier

by Roy Gregory

For a company with an extremely long history and which garners almost universal respect from the industry in general, you could hardly describe Hovland as high profile. Indeed, until the appearance of the HP100 pre-amp some three years ago, precious few members of the buying public were even aware of the name, and even to this day their products are one of the industry's best kept secrets. All of which is pretty surprising really, because Hovland don't just build some of the best sounding products available, they are all (in high-end hi-fi terms at least) realistically priced, and they are all amongst the best looking hi-fi that money can buy. That's why a company with only two products has found both of them gracing the cover of Hi-Fi+.

Forget furniture finishes or lumps of curvy wood trying to disguise otherwise plain rectangular boxes. Forget absurdly over-engineered construction, needlessly exotic materials or massive dimensions. The Hovlands are the perfect example of the Bauhaus principle: form follows function, the casework's size, shape and materials defined by the unit's purpose. In the process, Hovland have developed a genuine hi-fi aesthetic,

rather than borrowing one from another industry (such as communications) or pretending to be something it isn't. The results are efficient in the engineering sense, and certainly effective in the sonic one. With careful and intelligent execution, Hovland have turned them into visually stunning units devoid of excessive or unnecessary ornament. They are products that possess an innate sense



of style, quite capable of standing alone alongside the likes of Alessi.

But it would be a huge mistake to dismiss Hovland amplifiers as nothing more than a pretty face. One reason for the company's relative anonymity is that much of their effort over the years has concentrated on internal components and cabling. The electronics finally offered us the opportunity to hear the accumulated

benefits of all that experience and expertise combined in a single chassis. First up to the plate was the HP100 mentioned above, an all valve pre-amp that managed to take a new twist to both the circuitry and aesthetics of this most hacknied of all high-end product categories. Devoid of the cloying warmth and rack handles that had defined its predecessors, the

Hovland was a superb sonic performer with beautifully constructed casework. The large, rotary controls were simplicity itself to operate, while the turquoise blue back-lighting for the front-panel established the company's visual trademark. At a little over \$4K for a line-stage that challenged the established state-of-the-art, the

HP100 represented that rarest of animals, a high-end hi-fi bargain. But add in an optional high-gain moving-magnet stage at a price that belies its excellent performance, and even if you have a fancy outboard phono-stage or a CD based system, it's worth including as a stop-gap or against the day when you finally come to your senses (I mean, finally rediscover the joys of analogue).

Next up was the Sapphire, an innovative and even more visually stunning hybrid power-amp, delivering 40 Watts a side from its push-pull ►

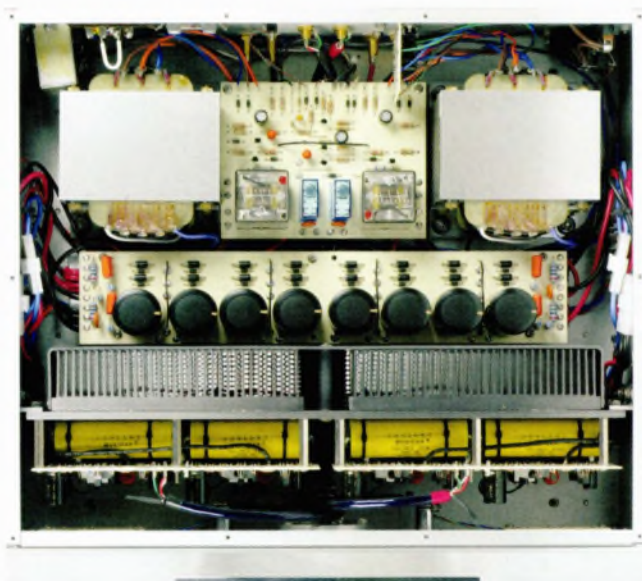
▶ EL34 output stage. It raised Hovland's reputation for musically natural and tonally neutral sound to an even higher level. Long on transparency and finesse, and sounding a lot more powerful than its rating suggests, even bridged it wasn't going to meet the requirements of more power hungry installations, whilst taking up a lot more room than most people want to give.

Which brings us to the RADIA, and Hovland's latest, and to my eyes at least, most attractive amplifier. Despite the fact that it's actually much more of a rectangular box than anything they've done before, it's still unmistakably a Hovland, carrying the same turquoise front-panel lighting and three circular cooling vents in the top plate that instantly identified the pre-amp. The large, circular power switch with its annular surround also echoes the styling of the HP100, and discussions with the company reveal that a similarly configured and remote control equipped version of the pre-amp is in the works.

Inside the RADIA is a totally dual mono, solid-state circuit, even down to the twin mains transformers. Considerable effort has gone into keeping things thermally stable, the close coupled driver stages and output devices being contained in vertical flues that exit through those circular vents. To ensure decent air-flow, the base-plate is raised on substantial cylindrical feet to give its large cooling slots space to breathe. Hovland also use a unique active thermal biasing circuit to provide rapid control of idling bias under widely differing dynamic conditions – a key contributor they believe to the amp's

astonishingly consistent sound irrespective of volume. The output modules use a mixture of matched J-FET inputs along with FET and bi-polar drivers feeding complementary bi-polar output devices, four per channel, arranged in balanced differential pairs. It's a configuration that delivers 125 Watts into 8 Ohms and 200 Watts into four.

The casework itself is a work of engineering art, beautifully machined lightweight aluminium panels bolting to an internal space frame. The front-panel, and more interestingly, the base plate are milled from clear slabs of 20mm Perspex, the thickness of the



material providing the necessary structural rigidity without introducing large amounts of metal into proximity with the circuitry. Front-panel controls are limited to the large, central power switch and three blue status indicators a side. The central ones stay lit while the amp is idle, the flank lamps lighting once it's switched to operate.

Things are similarly spartan round the back, with a small central plate carrying the input socketry (balanced or single-ended to order) and a single pair of 4mm binding posts per channel.

These are the source of my one gripe. Identical to the ones on the Sapphire, they take a 4mm plug in the end, but not through at right angles, which can be a right pain when it comes to bi-wiring. Apart from that there's nothing to report apart from an IEC socket and a small push button that disables all illumination but the status lights, for those occasions when you find the overall effect intrusive.

As regards accommodating the beast: well, it isn't small although at least it runs nice and cool, so space isn't the problem it might be. With a full 464mm width and 423mm depth, you will have problems with some

racks, like the standard sized Townshend Seismic Stands, although the Aavik that I used was fine, originally chosen as it was to house the resident Levinson 383. I ran the RADIA with the HP100 and a variety of speakers including the KEF 207s and Alon Lotus Elites. Cabling came from Hovland (a superb match at the price) and my preferred Nordost Valhalla, which allowed me to investigate the edges of the RADIA's

performance envelope.

Once you've finished this review it should come as no surprise whatsoever that I used the HP100/RADIA combination when it came to listening to the various Peter Gabriel re-masters in all their formats for the last issue. Whilst I'd never describe the RADIA as unforgiving (it is too sweet and harmonically correct for that) it will never disguise inadequacies in the signal, nor the partnering equipment, and whilst the sound is certainly effortless, it is also effortlessly

▶ revealing. Don't expect this to be a plug and play product. To hear what it's capable of you will need a top-notch source, cables and set-up.

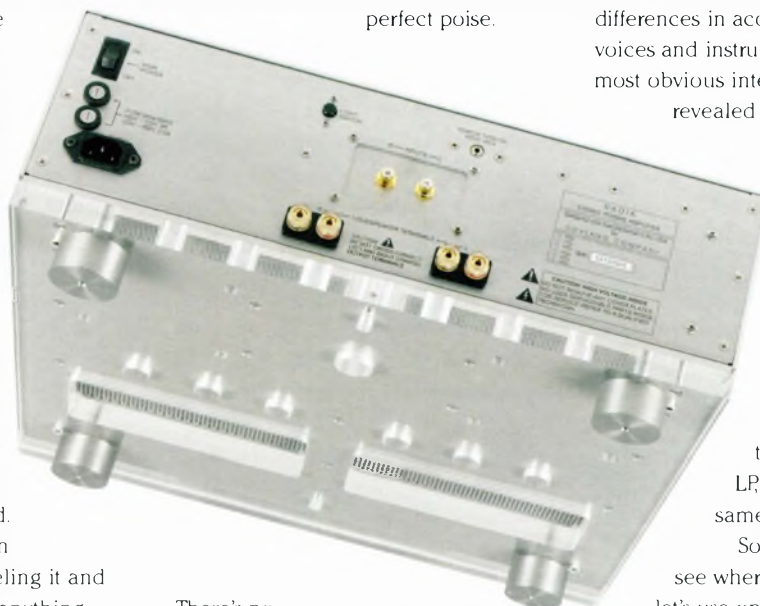
How revealing? Perhaps more importantly, what kind of revealing? Playing *Verve Remixed* (Verve 589 606-1) the mix of original material and the grafted on bass beats is immediately apparent – what was there to start with, what's been added on. No great feat you might think, but the impressive thing about the RADIA is that it does it by revealing the nature and character of the sounds, separating the acoustic from the synthetic rather than just the new from the old. It shows you what's been done rather than unraveling it and destroying the effect. If anything, it's more impressive as a result.

Comparisons between different versions of *Steamin'* (XRCD on the Wadia and Mo-Fi SACD on the Classe Omega) are similarly stark, the superiority of the new Mo-Fi pressing emphatic. Better weight, substance and energy add up to far greater musical presence, a performance that leaves the XRCD sounding weak and, well, old. It's still Miles, it's still great Miles, but Miles is better on Mo-Fi and the RADIA leaves you in no doubt of that fact.

What makes an amp so revealing? It's a combination of things, and not always the same things. In the case of the RADIA there are three key elements to its performance: speed, transparency and headroom (or should that be control). I was astonished just how fast the Hovland amp sounds. One of the things that makes Janis Ian's album *Breaking Silence* (Analogue Productions APP 027) so impressive

is its unfettered dynamics. Boy is that obvious on the RADIA. Snare beats arrive with real snap and impact, yet remain beautifully scaled rather than larger than life, overblown or over weight. For a genuinely powerful amp it's remarkably light on its feet,

rhythmically agile yet retaining perfect poise.



There's no clipping of notes or curtailing of harmonic structure in an effort to add the impression of speed. Musical energy is allowed considerable dynamic freedom and jump, yet never gets out of control or intrudes on other instruments. Indeed, instrumental lines are kept astonishingly separate, irrespective of pace or level, or the pace of what's going on around them. It may lack the body and enthusiastic presence of the Sapphire (an amp which, paradoxically sounds more obviously powerful) and it certainly lacks the sheer addictive vibrance of the JA30s. Instead it sounds wonderfully lively yet in control, not pinching notes or instruments, but rarely reaching the edge of its grip. Indeed, you have to push pretty hard before you detect the first hints of strain creeping into the equation.

The RADIA is also refreshingly free of grain, allowing you to hear way

back into the beautifully focused soundstage. How big a stage? That's down to the recording and the source component. Again, you can't expect the RADIA to lie, wrapping everything in a wonderful golden glow and acres of space. But if it's there on the disc then the amp delivers it. The differences in acoustic space around voices and instruments was one of the most obvious inter-format differences revealed in the Gabriel

comparisons. How much space around the singers at the start of 'Biko'? Depends on which version you play, but it expanded on the SACD before going truly open air on the LP and that's from the same tape!

So we're beginning to see where this is leading, but let's use one more example to clarify (no pun intended) things further. Playing the Diverse Records pressing of Alison Krauss, *Forget About It* (Div 002LP) two things strike you. Firstly the way the lead vocal remains a constant presence, the same size, the same acoustic power, whether it's singing solo or there's a full studio arrangement behind it. Secondly, the way individual instruments can take off on rapid runs, delivering sprays of notes without disturbing the pace or poise of the whole. It's this innate balance and inner control that makes the RADIA so impressive. The fact that it is at once delicate and authoritative. It is also somewhat stark, but like *The Soul* (the amp it sonically most resembles) that makes it no less engaging. There's nothing dry, clinical or over-damped about the sound of the Hovland. Instead it entices and seduces with the clarity of its view – what you can see, not what you can't. This is ▶

▶ no Dance of the Seven Veils, they've all been ripped away, leaving you to gaze in on the performance. Listen to 'Maybe' on the Sapphire and the RADIA. It's an instructive exercise. There's an attractively seductive quality to the smaller amp. It has a gentle, measured pace that brings pathos and pushes the vocals forward in the mix. The RADIA is more even top to bottom, showing you a bigger, slightly more distant but clearer and more immediate picture. Yes, I know that sounds like a contradiction, but read it carefully and you'll see that something can be at once further away and clearer as well as arriving quicker. More importantly, the balance of voice and instruments, the acoustic scale of the individual elements is far more natural. But the kicker is the pace. Faster, more insistent and introducing a dramatic edge to the song, all without any compromise in space, detail or intelligibility: Faster here is definitely better. There's more going on and it's better arranged. Just listen to the placement of the bass note that provides the fullstop to the first chorus, the bridge to the second verse.

"Maybe I can stand alone,
maybe I'm strong as stone"

So sings Alison and your heart melts for the fragility and vulnerability of the voice that delivers that defiant hope. This is what reproducing recorded music is all about. The Hovland communicates simply because it delivers all the elements of the music just where they should be, and thus the sense of the original performance. Which is of course a double-edged sword. If your turntable's got a fat bottom-end then the RADIA will reveal it in all its wobbly wonder, cellulite ripples and all. If your CD player chops the music into discrete bands and then delivers them all at slightly different times, I'm afraid that you're going to know all about the

horribly disjointed truth. But most importantly, if there's anything up stream of this amp that interferes with the timing integrity, the rhythmic organisation of the music, then the resulting shambles will not impress at all. The RADIA should never sound flat, disjointed or congested. If it does you can safely point the finger elsewhere.

It's not exactly surprising, but the easiest way to release the musical performance of the RADIA is to use it with the HP100, a combination which definitely delivers more than the sum of its parts. Whereas the Sapphire thrives on the ultra transparency and timing integrity of the Vibe, there's a magical element that creeps into proceedings when you use the valve pre-amp with the solid-state power-amp. Maybe it supplies just a hint of roundness to the RADIA's uncompromising honesty. Not much mind you, as the HP100 is a long way from traditional valve sound. What I think is more important is the pre-amp's way with a musical line, shape and spacing of notes that the RADIA seizes on with musical enthusiasm. Whatever the reason there's something going on here that raises the combination way above the ordinary.

Not so long ago I was comparing the new Tom Evans amplifier to the best of the logical contenders. Hey it's only 15 Watts after all. At that time the Sapphire couldn't compete with the clarity and musical communication of the S15 or the Lamm ML2s. Now, the RADIA hasn't just closed that gap, it's sitting right on their wheels. And it's brought a hundred or so extra Watts along for the ride!

I started this piece by giving you something of the Hovland history because it is important to understand the heritage and context that help define this product. As each of Hovland's products has appeared it has redefined performance and value benchmarks, and done it with style. The HP100 is a bargain in

anybody's book. The Sapphire too is a superb product, but in some respects it is in danger of being eclipsed by the RADIA. There will still be those who are drawn to its colours and easy intimacy, not to mention its stunning appearance. Which is only right because it is a great product. But as of now, the RADIA isn't just the best looking product Hovland have produced, it's simply the best in every respect. Used with the HP100 it provides magical insight into the musical performance, informing your mind, enticing your senses and holding your attention all at once. This one stays for as long as I can keep hold of it. ▶+

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Solid-state power amp
Inputs:	Either balanced or single-ended (user specified)
Input Impedance:	50K Ohm (unbalanced); 100K Ohm (balanced)
Input Sensitivity:	1.6 Volts for 125 watts/8 Ohms
Rated Output:	125 watts per channel into 8 Ohms 200 watts per channel into 4 Ohms
Dimensions (WxHxD):	464mmx183mmx423mm
Weight:	33.6 kg
Price:	£7,995

UK Distributor:

Metropolis Music Ltd.
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Manufacturer:

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Roy Gregory Hi Fi + Issue 9

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Border Patrol P20 Power Amplifier

by Roy Gregory

Way back in Issue 8, I reviewed the Border Patrol SE300B-WE amplifier, and was duly impressed, despite my skepticism when it comes to most things single-ended. Here was the first single-ended triode amplifier I'd heard that had authority at both frequency extremes and wasn't swamped in syrupy warmth and second harmonic distortion. In fact, the SE300B was pretty much as far from traditional valve sound as it's possible to be, whilst still retaining the dynamic virtues of thermionic amplification. It timed, it had tremendous dynamic integrity, it had superb clarity and organisation, it had eight Watts a side. Okay, so they were seriously impressive Watts, but unless you believe the "valve Watts are different to solid-state Watts" line of BS, eight Watts is still only eight Watts. And that seriously limits the available range of usable loudspeakers.

Since the departure of the Border Patrol I've also discovered the Lamm ML2 mono-blocks, single-ended amps with a little over twice the power and around six times the price tag! Very nice they are too – as they damn well should be. They too have authority, dynamics, timing, clarity and organisation. They too sound nothing like the majority of single-ended amps. Which led me to the following suspicion. If the only single-ended

triodes that I like don't actually sound like single-ended amps at all, then perhaps I just don't like what most people seem to like about single-ended amplifiers. Then along came The Soul (a single-ended

most SETs have such a pathetic power deliver into bandwidth that that's an irrelevance for them anyway.

Which begs the question, why saddle yourself with the flea-power output of the average SET if you don't even like what it does to the signal? I couldn't agree more. The only good SET is a properly engineered one, and those are rarer than the fabled fertilizer from the wooden horse that rocks. What people like about SETs actually seems to be the soft sound of inadequate power supplies combined with lashings of even order harmonic distortion, rather than any intrinsic benefit from the circuit topology or output device. All very cuddly I'm sure, but I guess that when push comes to shove, I'm just a push-pull kind of guy. Which brings me rather neatly to the Border Patrol P20, a 300B amp that meets all my criteria and has recently arrived for review. Quelle surprise!

The P20 is at once much the same and twice the amp that the SE300B is, at least physically speaking anyway. The main chassis uses the same profiled wooden surround and aluminium top plate. That supports the same 300B output tubes, only in this case there are four of them arranged as push-pull pairs. There's also the obligatory



Tetrode/hybrid amplifier of all things)

and it simply underlined my conclusion. Fabulous amplifier – absolutely none of the traditional SE virtues at all – except for linearity, but

▷ choke filtered power supply, the product that established the Border Patrol name. Only once again there's two of them, one for each channel. In fact, you can buy the amp with a single supply (as the P21) and then upgrade it later, but it's not a simple plug-in upgrade and requires the unit to go back to the factory, so it's the finished article that we're considering here. And that's just the first of a bewildering array of options that I'll work my way through. The power supplies are each housed in a standard Border Patrol case, but are rather more complex than the more expensive of the two standard versions. Whereas the MB (M for maximum, the B I'll leave to your imagination) supply a single discrete voltage for the amplifier's HT, the supplies err... supplied with the P20 actually deliver five individual voltages each, two destined for the HT and one each for the negative bias and various heater supplies of each channel. That requires nine wires compared to the standard versions four. Each supply is matched to its specific channel, correct connection ensured by the use of male and female mating collars on the two captive leads attached to the amp. Each supply has a ground lift switch, a sensible move given the dual power leads required and potential for earth loops that results.

One operational oddity of the amp is that, although one of the supplies acts as a master thus meaning that there's only one mains switch, the switch itself is located on the back of that supply,

making accessibility something of an issue if you prefer to power your equipment down. Unfortunately, there's physically no room to move the switch to the front panel and it would mean disturbing the preferred wiring layout, separating DC from AC. The other unusual feature

of mesh-plate Gold Dragons, a cost and qualitative option that I'll get to later. Otherwise there's a CV4068 input valve supplying a Mullard E182CC driver which feeds the inter-stage phase splitter transformer. Using a transformer instead of a valve to split phase affords greater accuracy, time consistency and zero feedback.



is the volume control option. This consists of a chromed knob mounted centrally in the front of the amp's plinth and connected to a stepped attenuator. This allows direct connection of a single source, allowing users in this happy circumstance to dispense with the cost and complications of a line stage. Alternatively, the amp is available with a standard, fixed input at a lower sensitivity, intended for driving from a pre-amp. Twice the output tubes and the push-pull topology delivers slightly more than twice the power, and that adds up to 20 Watts of class A grunt, which is far more familiar territory as far as I'm concerned. The amp arrived with a matched quartet of Western Electric 300Bs and an additional set

Connections consist of a pair of RCA/phonos for the input and decent 4mm binding posts with four and eight ohm output options.

One speaker that worked a treat with the SE300B was the resident Living Voice OBX-R, which was also on hand to try with the P20. But given the additional power available I was fascinated by the results with a wider range of partnering speakers. To that end I tried the Reference 3A Da Capos (fairly sensible) the Alon Lotus Elites (sensible if we stretch our credibility a bit) and the KEF Reference 207s (not sensible at all). I ran the P20 mainly from The Vibe line-stage, but also direct from both the Wadia 861 and Groove and Vendetta Research

▶ phono-stages. Cabling was Nordost Valhalla throughout.

It's a while since I had the SE300B at home and aural memory is a notoriously fickle thing, but what sticks in the mind (apart from its almost astringent neutrality – if the Vatican made amps then this would be it: complete with in-built guilt as regards any flights of fancy or unwarranted addition) is the gusto with which it delivered every one of its eight Watts. There's a world of difference between sounding powerful and actually being powerful. Indeed, the effect is all too often the exact opposite of the fact, and the SE300B took this to extremes. It got there so fast with so much that, whilst it never seemed to run out of steam (at least with a sensible load attached) you were frequently aware of the edge of the envelope and the precipice beyond.

The P20 is a totally different kettle of fish. It has twice the power and its push-pull output stage brings a greater sense of focus and leading edge definition. The result is an amp that offers virtually all of the attributes of its single-ended sibling, but grafts on a sense of ease and poise combined with more emphatic dynamic contrasts. It's as if the music has been brought within its compass, and along with that comes a confidence in the placing and level of notes. There's more space around each note, in both dimensional and temporal terms, making each one easy to hear, along with its

relationship to the next. It simply makes life easier.

That handles the ease and poise: what about the emphatic dynamics?

Well, at the same time that things become easier to hear, they happen faster too, so you have the slightly unusual situation that the music sounds slower in tempo but the amp is actually quicker. Think about it for a second and it all makes sense. If the notes start and stop quicker then you get longer (and more precise) spaces in between. The dynamic window is wider too and the increased sense of power and substance combine to create a showier, more immediately engaging and inviting sound. The musical performance becomes more dramatic, the playing more demonstrative.



Playing the Classic Records re-issue of the Cannonball Adderley classic *Somethin' Else* (Classic Records 200g/Blue Note 1595) the sound is big and stable, the bass really well grounded (it's those power supplies again). 'Autumn Leaves' opens with a beautifully measured limping walk of a bass-line, laid out in the piano's left hand and shadowed by Sam Jones on bass. The P20 gets the rolling rhythmic gait just right, the slight slowing... then the speeding up, but never, ever dragging. The two instruments are distinctly separated, and that's down to tonal and textural definition on this mono disc. Miles' horn entry is unmistakable. The tone is spot on, the poise and spacing of the simple melody. Nobody plays quite like Miles, and the contrast between his pure cool and the dirtier, fruitier bop-style of the Cannonball is what gives this quintet its special flavour, an evolution of the chemistry that fuelled his earlier outings with Charlie Parker. (No! Not that chemistry.) It's the subtle nuances of these musical relationships that the Border Patrol effortlessly reveals.

But what makes it special is the joyous energy it brings to the task, the fun it has doing it.

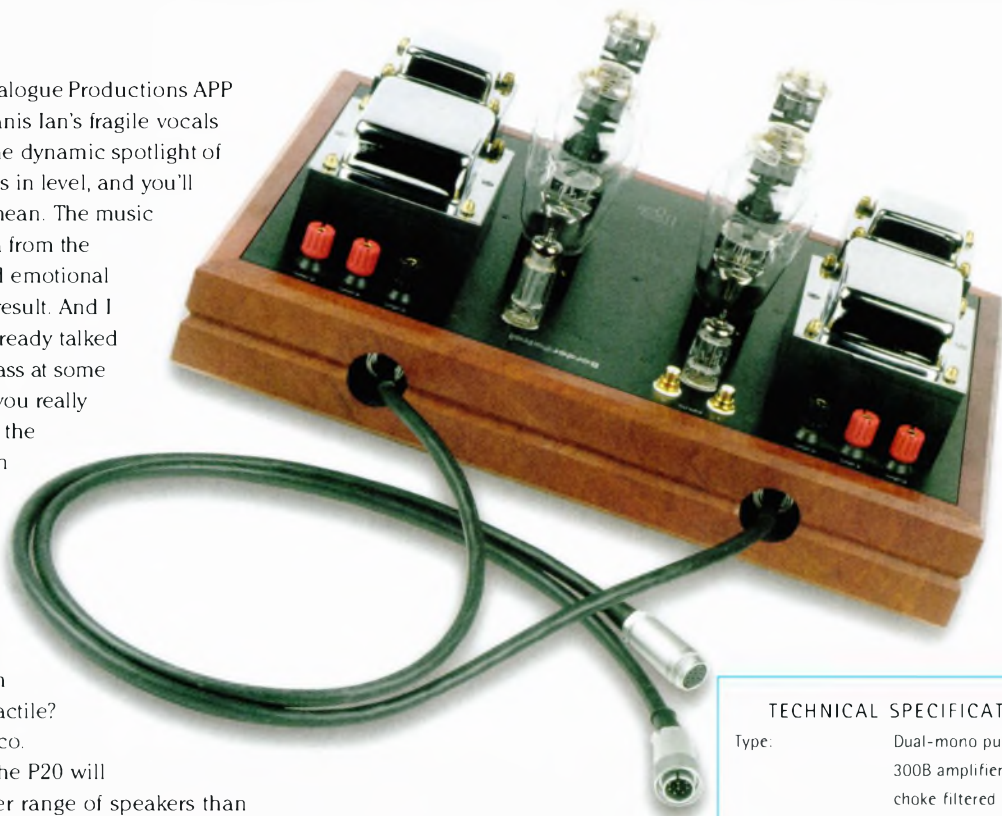
The clarity and stability that come from the firm bass foundation extend way up the range too. Art Blakey's stylish yet discrete cymbal work is one of the great pleasures to be had from *Somethin' Else*, and the P20 makes the most of his contribution, keeping it in the right place and perfectly in proportion. Female vocals are similarly well served, gaining air and delicacy, reveling in the musical space the amp allows them. Play Breaking ▶

► Silence (Analogue Productions APP 027) with Janis Ian's fragile vocals caught in the dynamic spotlight of sudden shifts in level, and you'll see what I mean. The music gains drama from the contrast and emotional power as a result. And I know I've already talked about the bass at some length, but you really should hear the bass lines on this album. Hear them that is, in the sense of around, behind and beneath the notes. Tactile? I should co-co.

Whilst the P20 will drive a wider range of speakers than the smaller SE, to hear it at its best, you'll still want to play it with something reasonably efficient. Impressive with the KEF Reference 207s, it was downright spectacular with the Reference 3As and the latest Living Voice OBX-Rs. Here, the authority, shape, pacing and tactile presence that the P20 brought to the nether regions of these physically modest speakers imbued them with a scale and sheer unflappable stability totally at odds with expectations. Tonal colour and separation were superb, with none of the qualitative sameness that collapses the individual character and texture of instruments (and performers). The P20 will never have the air and clarity, the detail and transparency of the Hovland Radia. But then the cool American will never have the presence, energy and sheer musical gusto of the Border Patrol. What the P20 provides is the tonal sophistication and lack of colouration enjoyed by the SE300B, but coupled to a serious dose of authentic musical energy and

improved focus and dynamic snap. Substituting the Mesh Plate Golden Dragons should bring added air, delicacy and fineness at the expense of some of the presence and sheer clout. I ran out of time to try the swap, but with meat to spare and based on past experience I feel that the P20 fitted with the Chinese valves offers a serious alternative to the Western Electrics, providing a different but qualitatively equal view of musical events. Cheaper too!

The P20 is a mightily impressive amplifier and one that explodes the triode myth. Once again, it proves that it's not what you use but how you use it that counts. Good engineering will out. I've listened long and hard to the push-pull Border Patrol and still haven't got it's full measure. And that's without the Mesh Plate option, which I've a sneaking suspicion I'll ultimately favour. Then of course there's the S20, the parallel single-ended version of the same beast. There's more, much more, to come...



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

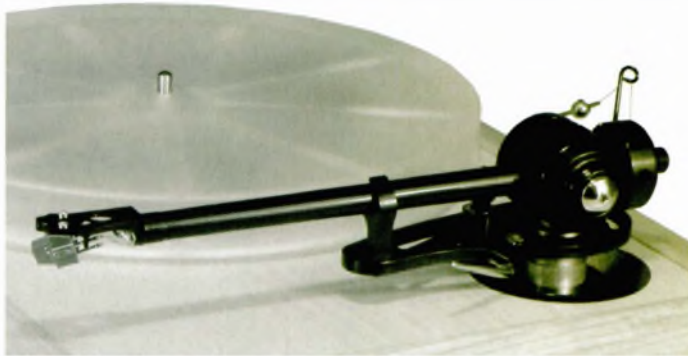
Type:	Dual-mono push-pull 300B amplifier with dual choke filtered power supplies
Valve Complement:	1 x CV4068 1 x E182CC 4 x 300B 2 x GZ37 4 x EZ80
Input Sensitivity -	
With Volume Control:	400mV
Without Volume Control:	1V
Rated Output:	20 Watts/Ch into 8 Ohms
Dimensions (WxHxD) -	
Audio Chassis:	430x220x330mm
Power Supplies:	220x145x345mm each
Weight:	16Kg each
Finishes:	Light ash or mahogany
Prices -	
P20 JJ300B:	£5750
Mesh-Plate 300B:	+£250 pr
WE300B:	+£500 pr
Volume Control:	+£250
P21 JJ300B:	£4500
PSU Upgrade to P20	£1750

Manufacturer:

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Jadis DA50 Signature Line-Integrated Amplifier

by Jimmy Hughes

A couple of days after installing the Jadis DA50 Signature, my wife leaned over and whispered those three little words every audiophile husband hopes his spouse will utter; 'Sounds Good Tonight!' I can't tell you how much her saying that meant to me. Our relationship was transformed. What more could a man ask for? She heard an improvement without me having to say my three little words; 'Notice Any Difference?' It confirmed my own positive impressions of the Jadis. I clearly married the right lady...

The amplifier arrived while she was out, and I quickly got it set up without saying anything. Amazingly, she didn't notice it was there. Incredible! I mean, it's not exactly small and with all that gold, it's hardly understated. That's why I was so pleased when she commented on the sound being better without my having to ask. The DA50 Signature is not exactly inexpensive. After spending £3490 you'd hope for something more than a subtle change.

The first thing that struck me about the DA50 Signature was its rich creamy tonality and vivid holographic soundstaging. While not exactly euphonic in the soft hazy romantic sense, there's a distinct richness and weight to the presentation - a brilliant glowing sheen. And it's very good at positioning voices and instruments stereophonically. Not just in terms of left-centre-right placement, but creating a tangible impression of space width and depth. The images feel real, rather than sounding like two-dimensional cardboard cut-outs.

At the same time, subtle details were

crisply focussed. Playing a recording of Sibelius' *Tapiola*, I was struck by the crisp way the winds articulated in a quiet section fairly near the start. There's a passage where Sibelius writes a skittish dialogue between strings and winds, and the Jadis really captured the individual tonality of the different instruments, the precise attack of each note, and each distinct pitch value. Fine detail was clearly audible without any sense of highlighting or exaggeration. Very impressive! Yet wholly natural and believable.

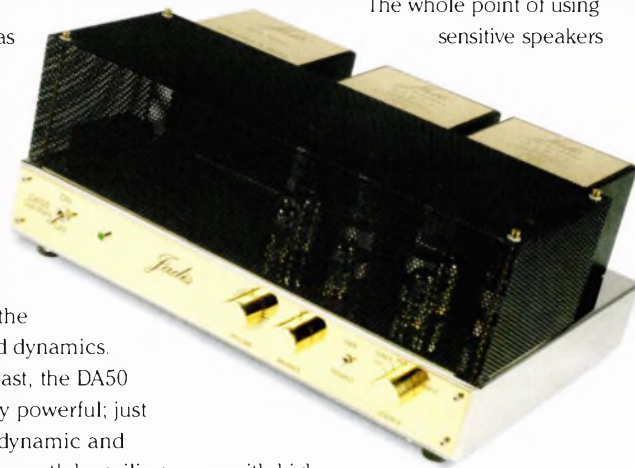
The other thing that impressed was the feeling of power and dynamics. Now, on paper at least, the DA50 Signature is not very powerful; just 30W. But it sounds dynamic and assertive despite a smooth beguiling tonal quality. The amp is line-level only (no built-in phono stage - five inputs plus tape monitor), and a high input sensitivity of 100mV is quoted. Even using a Russ Andrews attenuated interconnect cable (-11dB), the volume pot was typically set at about 9/10 O'clock.

Obviously, much depends on the sensitivity of your loudspeakers and the sort of volume levels you like to listen at. While the DA50 Signature is not an amplifier for headbangers, it does create the impression of having ample reserve power. Of course, in reality it hasn't; it's only 30W. But, by producing a big sound, it suggests power and drive. And that's the crux of the matter. With

a high-class low-powered amp like this you're not relying on brute force for dynamics but quality. There's a difference between a big sound and a loud sound.

Given enough power, any amplifier can produce earsplitting volume levels. But this is not true dynamics; nor is it the same as creating a big sound.

The whole point of using sensitive speakers



with high-class low-powered amplifiers is to create an impression of large dynamic swings and powerful holographic projection, by quality of sound alone. It's an illusion. The aim is a big effortless room-filling sound that's actually nowhere near as loud (in terms of spl) as it seems subjectively.

Of course you still need sufficient power for your speakers. Big choral works like Beethoven's *Missa Solemnis* represent the acid test for low-power amplifiers - much more so than heavy rock. You can easily get dynamic peaks going anything from 3dB to 6dB above the average 'maximum' loudness, and massed voices singing at different

▶ pitches accentuated intermodulation distortion. Choral music makes these misdemeanors very apparent!

With my regular EAR 859 or the Papworth TVA-1 (both under 15W) you have to set volume levels carefully to avoid hitting the buffers. Because every 3dB increase in level represents a doubling of power, you can be listening away quite merrily with no apparent problems. Yet in reality, you may be dangerously close to your amp's power limit. It takes very little to push the amplifier into distortion.

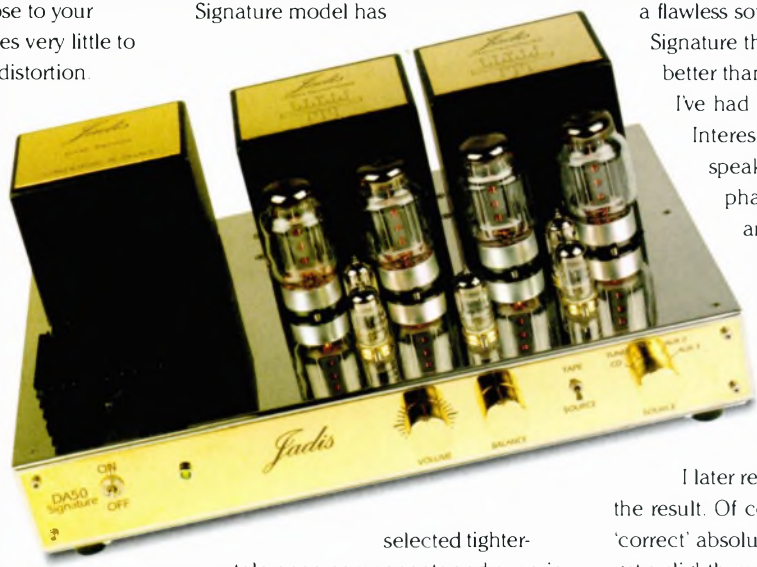
Turn the volume up a tiny fraction (or so it seems) and all of a sudden the sound starts breaking-up in climaxes. So it's subjectively very important how a low-powered amplifier behaves when it reaches its maximum output. The Ear 859 tends to compress gently when pushed beyond its limits. The sound doesn't breakup or clip, it just softens slightly and fails to expand. Often, the effect is so subtle you hardly notice it's happening.

The Papworth is slightly less gracious, and gets a bit ragged when pressed hard. The Jadis goes noticeably louder than either. But push it too far and it soft clips. My Impulse H-1 horn speakers are pretty efficient (about 92dB/W) but by no means as sensitive as some. Although I could get the Jadis to clip on heavy choral music, volume levels were so loud they were verging on the uncomfortable. Speaking personally, I'd never listen that loudly for pleasure, so headroom could be described as ample.

At the other end of the dynamic scale, I loved the way the Jadis focussed subtle detail and managed to make the music sound interesting and engaging

during passages when not much was happening. It's a very articulate-sounding amplifier, with great presence and immediacy. It never sounds 'flat' or recessed, even on music that's fairly uneventful. Hence you can play at relatively low volume levels and still achieve a colourful full-bodied sound.

Incidentally, Jadis once offered a standard (non Signature) version of the DA-50 at a lower price. The Signature model has



selected tighter-tolerance components and superior transformers, etc. However, the standard version is now no longer made. As with most amplifiers, there's a short warm-up time; in the case of the DA-50 Signature, it's at or very near its best after about 20 minutes, or so. There may be a slight improvement after this, but to my ears it's fairly subtle.

Having mentioned Beethoven's massive choral work *Missa Solemnis*, it was interesting to play Nikolaus Harnoncourt's live 1992 Salzburg Festival recording on Teldec. I'd previously found the sound a touch dry and hard, but the Jadis revealed more depth of acoustic than I previously recall. There was a nice sheen to the sound, and the soloists and chorus felt nicely 'distanced' rather than dry and close. The balance remained bright and forward, but in a fresh exciting sense rather than being aggressively 'hard' and claustrophobic.

Intrigued, I searched out the same conductor's 1982 Teldec set of Handel's *Messiah* - an early digital recording that's always disappointed - both on LP and CD. The sound is drier and less opulent than it might've been, but the Jadis helped minimise these limitations. You could hear that the actual hall acoustics were a touch cramped, rather than the dryness being down to poor microphone placement. Although still not a flawless sound, through the DA50 Signature the recording sounded better than I'd ever heard it - and I've had the LPs since 1983!

Interestingly, Jadis wire the speaker outputs in reverse phase. Now I always use my amplifiers with the phase reversed, but reverse the connections at the loudspeakers. So when I connected up the Jadis, I initially had it working in 'correct' absolute phase.

I later reversed this and preferred the result. Of course purists will want 'correct' absolute phase, but I feel you get a slightly more spacious result with the reverse phase connection. There seems to be slightly greater coherence too - better integration.

Jadis make provision for the amplifier's output impedance to be altered, but only by going inside and changing the links between taps on the output transformer. You'd do this to correctly match the amp to the speakers being used, and (theoretically) the 'correct' setting is the one that gives the highest volume - meaning that the transfer efficiency is at its greatest. However, you often get a tighter better controlled sound by selecting the lowest impedance setting - in this case 4 Ohms.

As supplied, the amplifier arrives set for 4 Ohms. Since nearly all speakers have a nominal impedance of 8 Ohms, this means there's a slight mismatch. Jadis would seem to have sacrificed a little output power for improved

▶ sound quality. Providing you can live with this slight reduction in maximum output (and I certainly could), the benefit is better control and improved fine detail. It would be possible to set different output impedances, but only attempt this if you know what you're doing. Valve amplifiers run at high voltages and can be very dangerous - ie lethal - to tamper with.

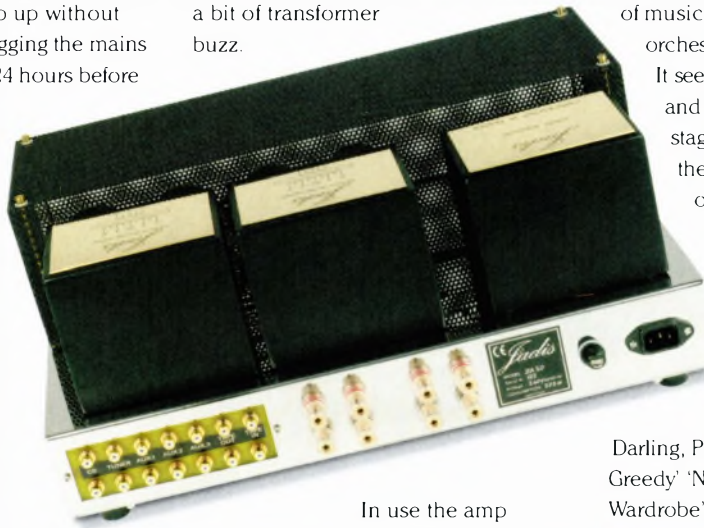
Don't open the amp up without switching off and unplugging the mains cord. Leave for at least 24 hours before opening up in order to allow the power capacitors to discharge. My advice would be not to bother with changing the output impedance; the amplifier almost certainly sounds best with the factory output setting, and in any case the increase in output power is likely to be a fairly small one.

The Jadis DA50's a heavy old beast, weighing some 25kg. Perhaps because it's reasonably compact, it feels heavier than one expects. It certainly weighs quite a bit more than the EAR or Papworth amps. So in sheer weight terms you get your money's worth. Most of the weight seems to be concentrated in the three massive transformers situated near the rear of the top plate. You notice this when lifting the amplifier up - it's distinctly back-heavy!

Noise levels are pretty low. With my ear pressed hard against the speaker grille cloth I could just detect a very faint low level residual buzz. With the H-1s this would be completely inaudible - even if you sat really close to them (not recommended) in a totally quiet room. My guess is that those using ultra-efficient speakers (Lowthers, for example) should find the Jadis quiet enough, but be warned - there is a little residual noise; no amplifier can be

absolutely quiet.

Mechanical noise is also very low - just a faint transformer buzz, barely audible when stood close by with your ear about a foot away. Of course mains transformer noise can vary with mains quality. My mains is reasonably quiet, and I've quite a few Russ Andrews devices in place to improve mains purity. Even so, my old EAR 859 has a bit of transformer buzz.



In use the amp gets reasonably hot, though not excessively so. Still, give it plenty of free space to ensure adequate ventilation.

The amp has a nice feel to it. I particularly like the stepped volume control, and being able to increase or decrease levels by precise pre-set amounts. However, you're not limited to discrete levels between click stops. The potentiometer track is continuous with click indent points. So you can set the volume between click points if that's the right level. Perhaps surprisingly, the balance control has no centre indent point.

Although impressed by the Jadis DA50 Signature's many good points, what I liked even more was the way it got on with the job, creating a vivid holographic sound without drawing attention to itself in the process. It's certainly an exciting involving amplifier to listen to; yet at the same time natural and unobtrusive. I felt very comfortable with it. Playing background music at

reduced volume levels with friends over, it was easy to talk as the music played; there was nothing insistent about the sound.

The DA50's very good at low volume levels, sounding open and articulate. Of course it fully comes into its own when played at more realistic levels, but you don't have to thrash it to make it come alive. I found it good on all types of music; solo piano and voice, full orchestral, choral, and rock and pop. It seemed equally at home with CD and LP (with an external phono stage) - the latter really exploiting the amplifier's holographic 'out of the boxes' soundstaging.

As the review period progressed my wife and I found ourselves saying lots more Three Little Words. Mine were things like 'Isn't This Good?'; 'I Want One!'; and 'Please

Darling, Please; hers were 'Don't Be Greedy' 'No You Can't' and 'My Wardrobe's Next'. Isn't life cruel? ➤

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Line only valve integrated amplifier
Valve Complement:	3 x ECC 82 2 x ECC 83 4 x KT88
Output Configuration:	Ultralinear
Inputs:	5 Line + Tape, all RCA/phono
Input Sensitivity:	100 mV
Rated Power Output:	30 Watts/8 ohms
Tape Output:	1 pr RCA/phono
Dimensions (WxHxD):	490x240x440mm
Weight:	25kg
Price:	£3490

UK Distributor:

Absolute Sounds
Tel. (44)(0)20 8971 3909
Net. www.absolutesounds.com

Manufacturer:

Jadis Electronics
Net. www.jadis-electronics.com



INPUT



McIntosh
C2200 TUBE PREAMPLIFIER

BASS

TREBLE

000 100

VERTICAL

HORIZONTAL

TONE BYPASS

MONO

REC MONITOR

SETUP

SENSOR

The McIntosh C2200 Pre-amplifier

by Chris Thomas

A very, very long time ago, when I was at primary school and aged about six, I had a girl 'friend' who was American; her father was in the forces and the family was stationed in this country. Tea and musical chairs, the height of sophisticated children's entertainment, was worth suffering for a glimpse of what seemed to me at the time to be the most incredible hi-fi system that I had ever seen, and as her father proudly proclaimed in a long Southern drawl, 'this, boy, is a real stereo'. While I remember very little about the girl, save that being American, one name would not do and she was called Mary-Anne-Griselda-Lou, or something, the hi-fi left a lasting impression. Apart from having a fantastic collection of knobs and buttons, it had large illuminated meters that bounced around with the music, and much later in life I realised that this had to have been a McIntosh; the equipment still looked much the same twenty years later. I blame this incident for hatching a fascination for meters on amplifiers that didn't die until I succumbed to the Linn/Naim philosophy in the seventies. Even then, I seem to remember only half jokingly over a drink suggesting to Julian Vereker that he should make a 250 with meters on just for the hell of it. Funnily enough, he never did.

In much the same way that Quad, Radford and Leak designs defined the state of the art for music reproduction in this country during the fifties and sixties, the Americans had such names as Dynaco and Fisher amongst others, while at the very top of the pile was McIntosh. Many of their designs have

become the source of legend, and when you see a McIntosh product it is easy to understand why. Their gear has always been expensive and built on a no compromise basis, but it is the uniquely American 'if its worth doing, its worth overdoing' approach that sets them apart from the mainstream. In much the same way that the yanks built cars in the fifties and sixties which were big, powerful and just so generally over the top with fins and chrome as to be almost

unbelievable, so was the McIntosh gear.

As part of the American lifestyle, it was designed for the man who wanted the most impressive stereo system, probably the kind of guy that these days would buy a Harley Davidson. He was buying a name, a legend, and something that would very much impress the neighbours. Of course, along with this came reliability and a back up service that was second to none (unlike your mid period Harleys...) and the

company took pride in looking after their customers. And, as the manual for the C2200 boldly states, 'You now own the best there is'.

With the revitalised interest in valve equipment over the last twenty years, early McIntosh amplifiers became highly sort after items, and having owned an MC275 power amplifier for a frustratingly short time, I can understand why, as it probably represented a pinnacle of design and performance at the time of its introduction, and can still hold its own today with a realistic power output



of 75 Watts per channel. Obviously McIntosh thought so, as they chose to reissue it in the early 1990's, followed a few years later by the matching pre amp, the C22.

The C2200 is the first, new Mac valve, or should I say 'tube' pre-amp design for nearly forty years. But it looks...old. With all the traditional Mac hallmarks, it looks like something

▶ out of the seventies, and it is big, brash and I guess you'd have to say ugly. But somehow, it exudes a certain vulgar beauty, and cannot help but be impressive; it is larger than most power amplifiers, has loads of knobs, and boasts not only a large fluorescent display, but behind the beautifully finished glass front panel, a pair of level meters.

Uh, meters? On a pre-amp? Oh yes. Just to capitalise on the 'impress your friends' stakes, the two large blue illuminated meters



undulate gently with the music, and if you don't like them, you can always switch them off. I am sad to say that on one level at least, the Mac was a huge success, judging from the enthusiastic comments from non hi-fi people. It would seem as if it fits their conceptions of what top quality hi-fi really should look like, i.e. technical and impressive. One female friend of mine however did helpfully point out that you know what they say about guys with big cars...

In terms of facilities, the Mac has just about everything you could ever want – about the only thing I couldn't see was a connection for a washing machine. In addition to the functions accessed from the front panel controls, the set up mode allows programming for specific require-

ments, a relatively simple operation aided by the clear display. There is not the space here to go into detail about what exactly the C2200 is capable of, but there is plenty of versatility for such requirements as multi room installations. Essentially, there are eight line level inputs (including one tape loop with monitor switch), with an option of balanced connection on four of them. Each input can be trimmed by +/- 6dB for level matching,

and can be titled appropriately. Re-programming the aux input activates the phono stage; the four valves involved are not powered up until this is done. Unfortunately this is moving-magnet only – maybe things are different in the States, but I would think most potential purchasers of a pre-amp at this price and who are into vinyl would be using a moving-coil cartridge. From this point of view, a sensitivity of 4 Millivolts puts the Mac phono stage into a bit of a no mans land, but it is however, very quiet for a valve design.

The other big surprise is the inclusion of tone controls. In an age where most serious designs leave them out on the basis that they do more harm than good (a concept which is the legacy of the Linn Naim revolution

some twenty five years ago), the C2200 must be about the only high-end pre-amp around to have them. It's a long time since I have had the ability to apply equalisation while listening at home. But you don't have to use it; the bass and treble controls can of course be taken out of the circuit.

Internally, the C2200 is as you would expect, pretty well constructed with all of the electronics contained on three substantial main boards. The line stage amplification is based around two 12AX7 and two 12AT7 valves, with a similar complement making up the phono stage, while all control functions, including volume are controlled by a micro processor. There is evidence of generous regulated power supplies, and attention to detail in the form of a neat clamping arrangement for the eight valves which will also provide a certain amount of mechanical damping. Signal switching is accomplished with 'reed' type relays, as the contacts are enclosed within a vacuum there should be no deterioration with age.

Naturally, the Mac can be remote controlled; the supplied handset will operate other pieces of Mac gear and looks hideously complex. It also wouldn't work properly in my room; the side trim on the pre amp case work severely limited the angle of acceptance, but with the option of plug in remote sensors I guess the problem could be overcome. Just as well then, as the C2200 was an absolute joy to use. Activating the standby switch brings the unit to life, and the display informs you that 'tube warm up' is occurring, and after about thirty seconds you are ready to go. No clicks, thumps, or noise of any sort, and all the controls 'feel' just right, enhancing an element of classiness.

I have to admit that I was a little apprehensive about trying the ▶

▶ McIntosh. Here, after all, was a piece of equipment that would seem to have made no attempt to come into line with more contemporary views on amplification - was its performance going to be as retro as its looks? No. Using the Mac with a selection of power amps ranging from the rather interesting Bonnac to the Primary valve amps, the results were always the same. The C2200

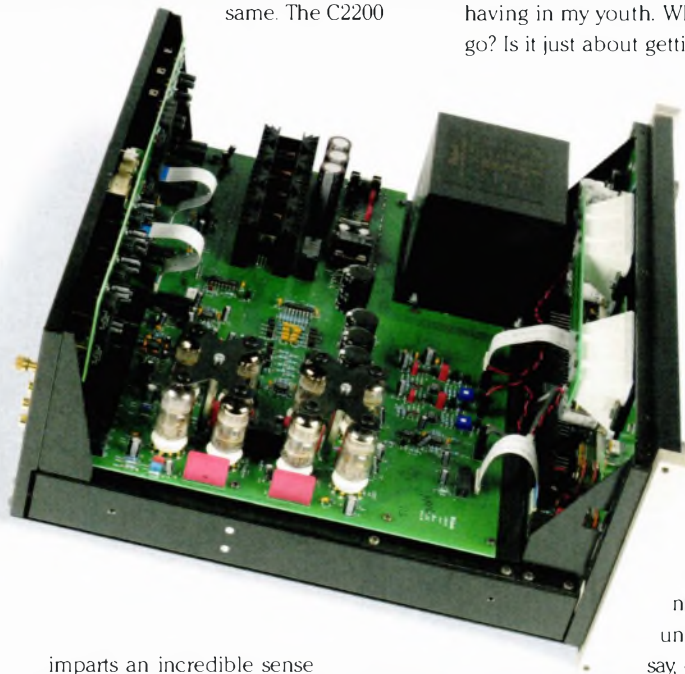
with a more 'lively' performance). Indeed it has a beautifully open presentation that lends a fluidity to reproduction, with plenty of detail and texture of sounds supporting the music rather than being exhibited for the sake of it. If there is anything retro about the Mac, it's the way that it encouraged the kind of enthusiasm for listening to music that I remember having in my youth. Where did that go? Is it just about getting older, or is

it that hi-fi equipment has changed and taken a wrong turn somewhere down the line? As for the tone controls, I spent most of the time listening with them out of circuit, but there are recordings that I have that I normally consider unlistenable due to, say, excessive bass energy or acerbic

treble. The controls on the C2200 have been well judged in this respect and enabled me to clear up the sound quite considerably. Did other aspects of performance suffer? Yes... a little. I noticed that sound staging and depth were diminished with the controls in circuit, and there was a slight deterioration of snap and focus, but then you don't need to use them all the time. The phono stage is as I have already said, quiet, but is strictly moving-magnet. While there have been valve pre amps where you could just about get away with a high- β output MC type, (the Rogue Audio for example) the 2200 is not one of them. Not having a suitable cartridge to hand, that is about as

far as I got, but it is worth noting that there is a small improvement to be had to line stage performance by turning the phono stage off. Perhaps McIntosh should make a line only version?

The C2200 did not turn out to be the way I expected it to. It would be easy to sideline the Mac on the basis that it cannot be a true high end pre-amplifier because it has far too much in the way of facilities, and would appear to be more flash than bang. Wrong. While its general flexibility may well make it a first choice in some situations such as high quality multi room set ups, hidden behind that ostentatious exterior is a first rate, audiophile pre-amplifier. As such, it is a first class product, and earns the accolade of being the most enjoyable that I have used for a very long time. ▶+



imparts an incredible sense of life and vitality to the process of listening to music, whatever the material. It does not sound 'old fashioned' or traditionally valve like. In fact it is difficult to pin any particular sonic character to it. It does however possess an extraordinary ability to keep you hooked, and there is nothing academic about the way it produces music. Hell, I spent far too many late nights trawling through both records and CD's indulging in marathon listening sessions with a big grin on my face, and I wasn't the only one to be so taken. While it is difficult to pin down exactly the elements of the Mac's success, it revolves around a certain exuberance that makes it musically very engaging. It is not however brash or lacking in refinement (as is sometimes the case

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Phono input sensitivity:	4.4 mV
Phono input impedance:	47K Ohms
Line input sensitivity:	450 mV
Line Input impedance:	22K Ohms
Output level:	8 Volts
Output impedance:	250 Ohms
Frequency response:	+ 0 - 0.5 dB 20 - 20,000Hz
Signal to noise ratio:	93 dB
Dimensions (HxWxD):	181 x 444 x 381mm
Weight:	13.2 Kg
Price:	£5490 Inc VAT

UK Distributor:

Absolute Sounds
Tel. (44)(0)20 8971 3909
Net. www.absolutesounds.com

Manufacturer:

Net. www.mcintoshlabs.com



output

source

volume

balance

ST-BY

MUTE

CD 1

CD 2

AUX 1

AUX 2

Audio Valve

AudioValve Eclipse Line-stage

by Alan Sircom

The \$2,000 AudioValve Eclipse preamplifier is a German line-level Pure Class A valve pre-amplifier with seven line inputs, one line output and a tape loop. There is also a pseudo-balanced XLR output, though the dual-mono preamp itself doesn't run along balanced lines.

Aaaah! German build quality – you just can't fault it. Here is a valve line-level preamplifier, made with swathes of clear Perspex and it's built to survive a 9.5 on the Richter Scale. It weighs 20kg, that's more than three stone in old money and that makes it weigh more than most integrated amplifiers. At least the ones without valves.

Part of that massive build comes from the 5mm thick laser-cut chassis that the double-sided, extremely solid mil-spec circuit board rests on. That motherboard is way out of the ordinary for a hi-fi company: Called FR4, it's a 2oz. pure copper panel developed using CAD/CAM software to produce a circuit board completely free from point-to-point wiring or solder bridges. All the signal and power tracks are entirely separated by grounding tracks, minimising cross-talk and noise.

It's not just the solidity of build that makes the pre-amplifier. The components that populate that board are of the highest quality, too. The resistors are all 1% metal film or rare-as-hen's-teeth Draloric NOS carbon designs. The electrolytic capacitors are all bypassed by polypropylene ones and the motorised volume potentiometer is made by Alps. There is no sign of a surface-mounted component at all. The juice is fed via a custom-made

160VA toroidal transformer, so over-specced it's more like the sort found in a good, healthy-sounding integrated amplifier.

The Eclipse uses four identical tubes from the ECC82 family. As standard, the amplifier uses a quartet of 6189 tubes, the leftmost ones being the input triodes and the right-hand valves are in the output stage. Of course, as the manual rightly points out, the input triodes have the greatest effect over the sound of the Eclipse pre-amplifier and these should be given the lion's share of the re-valve budget (you can use ECC82, ECC802S or 6189 valves – and you should pick the best ones you can).

There is a wonderful line in the manual which should be written in stone for anyone attempting to use a piece of consumer electronics. It reads "Anyone, unable to comprehend the instructions stated in the owner's manual should not operate the device." However, the instruction that "Children and minors are not to use the device and should be kept at a safe distance from the device while it is running" pushes the envelope a notch. This is a valve pre-amplifier, not a thermonuclear warhead. On the other hand, there are two dirty great holes in the top Perspex panel, presumably for ventilation. A kid could easily end up putting a hand inside and grasp a valve or two and burns or even electrocution could occur. Maybe that warning is valid after all.

AudioValve should consider including some kind of grille over those almost-exposed valves; it might not be pretty, but it would be practical.

The whole Perspex top-plate comes off by undoing the four knurled top screws. This gives you better access to the quartet



of tubes, as well as the four main fuses and – as long as you know what you are doing – the ability to adjust the phase of the mains voltage. You can also experiment with the sound quality a bit; by removing the lid, the sound becomes very slightly more open at the top end at the expense of some of the bolted-down solidity. It's not a big difference, though.

I am not entirely convinced by the looks of the Eclipse; depending on your viewpoint, it either looks like good Art Deco, or it looks like bad 1980s tack. All that black and gold looks terribly nouveau riche in the slick silver 21st Century. Still, it does drip luxury from every pore, even if it does so in a slightly garish manner. The four big gold knobs on the front panel include a function/output selection knob, which allows you to put the pre-amp into standby and can switch between outputs, although why anyone other than a reviewer would ►

► choose to switch from balanced to single-ended and back again during normal operation escapes me. The other three are source, volume and balance respectively, and under the output and input selectors are a row of LEDs to show what source has been selected. With big gold lettering throughout, this does add to the garishness of the product.

It comes with a chunky RCA remote control (it still has RCA written on the body of the remote – a bit of a giveaway), which can adjust volume and switch sources, but not much else. The remote eye on the front panel also seems to be less receptive than most and the remote seems to work through a pair of AA batteries in a surprisingly short time. But as remotes and valve pre-amplifiers are seen together about as often as Pamela Anderson sees her own feet, any form of remote control should be applauded.

How do you tell a great valve pre-amplifier from one built almost at random from a parts bin? Simple, turn it on, wick it up to the max and listen to the noises the preamp makes. You expect some hiss, natch, but most pre-amplifiers have their own distinctive hum and often make sounds that remind you of surfing instead of Stravinsky. The Eklipse is whisper quiet; so much so that it makes you wonder just how much of the hiss we associate with valves really is a function of the circuit design. Effectively, for day to day use, this pre-amplifier is free from background noise; only a really good solid-state pre-amplifier is going to have

a lower noise floor.

One of the great things about the AudioValve preamp is that there is practically no running in required. It's all done in the 48 hour soak test back home in Germany. All it needs is about half an hour or so for the pre-amp to hit its optimum thermal working conditions. That said, the Eklipse does bed down in a new setting and sounds distinctly better after 10 days or more of sitting comfortably in the same place.



If you do have very itchy feet, though, AudioValve usefully supplies a two-year transferable warranty, so if you decide you don't like the Eklipse, the next owner need not worry about losing a guarantee when you sell it on.

There won't be many warranties transferred, though. This is a fine piece of kit that will stay at the heart of a decent stereo system for years and years. It's got characteristics that warm (pun intended) listeners to valve sounds allied to the sort of strengths that are more commonly found in solid-state technology.

You get that wonderful smooth sheen of a smooth sounding valve pre-amplifier, which brings the good qualities out of anything you play through it. Whether it's Insane Clown Posse scaring next door's cat or Jessye

Norman singing Strauss' Four Last Songs, the tone is mellifluous and enticing. Yet it never becomes too rose-tinted; the Strauss piece, backed by Kurt Masur and the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra, can all too easily drift into a sort of opium-like dream state, but the Eklipse keeps things in check beautifully.

This smoothness also never once gets in the way of the detailing. This is a very detailed pre-amplifier, with only the slightest accent on the bottom end, as if to give a bit of an edge to the bass definition and keep the rhythm section bouncy. There is a bit of an LP12-like mid-bass bloom that is extremely attractive, but often hides a lack of deep bass substance, but this is hard to test

unless you have the sort of genuinely full-range speakers that are unlikely to be partnered with a two grand pre-amp. Otherwise, it is extremely transparent and digs deep into the information on disc.

So it's warm, slightly bass-oriented and very detailed – well, so far, so triode! Where does the solid-state sound part kick in? Put simply, this has the sort of hob-nail solidity few valve pre-amplifiers achieve (and the few that are more solid sounding have a price tag that wouldn't look out of place on a year-old Toyota). Put on something audiophillic, like the *Dead Man Walking* soundtrack, and you get to hear Tom Waits standing right in front of you, in a real physical space, resolutely refusing to move throughout the song. It's so palpable, you feel that the only way he'll move is by opening a bottle of Jim Beam in the next room. Even images to the far extremes of the soundstage are bolted down; the guitar in this passage often drifts around ►

▶ the left speaker, but here it was precisely nailed in place.

The soundstaging is extremely good too, although not in the image depth manner normally associated with hollow-state technology. Instead, the AudioValve Eklipse throws out a wide, big and rich soundstage, far broader than your speakers normally reproduce. It even has some image height, but image depth is slightly foreshortened. It has good image depth, but not the sort of cavernous, walk-in



soundstage you would expect when playing the Solti/Mahler *8th Symphony*. Instead, the imagery is confined to the limits of the room and only seems to reach a bit behind the speakers.

It's shoddy journalism to describe one product by comparing it to the characteristics of another, better known product. So let me be dressed in the finest shoddy for a moment – this product is so EAR-like it's impossible to let the similarity pass unnoticed. Everything about it, from the bullet-proof build, through the absence of hiss or noise, right on to the total solidity and integrity of the soundstage, is reminiscent of the sort of pre-amplifier Tim de Paravincini excels at. Ultimately, it's warmer than EAR designs, but that

may be no bad thing for many listeners.

All this talk of nailed-down solidity and fidelity to the tonal balance and soundstage placement of instruments, one might be forgiven for thinking the Eklipse is somehow boring. Or at the very least "worthy, yet dull". Wrong! While the pre-amplifier isn't the Evel Knievel of the audio world, it is exciting and dynamic and makes you jump when the music does. The almost glottal stops in 'Kill You' from Eminem's *The Marshall Mathers LP* strike out like being hit by a baseball bat and the funny-offensive lyrics leave you half smiling.

half hiding and half confused (Yes, that's three halves, but as I always say, there are only three kinds of people in the world; those who understand mathematics, and those who don't).

Let's be entirely honest about the Eklipse. It is a very fine, warm yet solid sounding line-level pre-amplifier, perfectly priced to challenge the sort of valve and transistor pre-amplifiers costing anywhere between £1,000 and about £3,000. Upping the pre-amp ante gets you a considerably less colored sound and even more detail and dynamic range, without sacrificing the solidity and enjoyable sound of the

Eklipse. But to criticise a £2,000 product for not being a £10,000 product is stupid. For the price, this is a real honey.

The AudioValve Eklipse should be the sort of electronics musicians use to listen to music. But, experience has taught anyone in the hi-fi business that most musicians listen to music on the worst, cheapest and often nastiest hi-fi around and would never consider shelling out good money for something as musically excellent as the Eklipse. Shame really, this pre-amp runs silent, runs deep and digs up all the musical detail you could wish for, without presenting it like something so cold and dead and wet that you can never be sure whether to listen to it or fillet, batter and fry it. This really does tread the right path between solid-state and valve sound. If you like the characteristics of both, AudioValve's pre-amp is a hard product to eclipse.



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Dual mono valve line-stage
Inputs:	7x Single-ended line in 1x Single-ended line out (+XLR pseudo-balanced) 1x tape loop
Output Impedance:	3000ohms
Output Level:	15V max.
Noise:	0.05mV (Volume noise limiter)
Valve Line-up:	4x 6189
Additional Functions:	Standby, mute, remote control
Dimensions (WxHxD):	420x130x320 mm
Weight:	20 kg
Price:	£2,000

UK Distributor:

Audio Reference
Tel. (44)(0)1252 702705
Net. www.audioreference.co.uk

Manufacturer:

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Net. www.audiovalve.de

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Alon Lotus Elite Loudspeaker

by Roy Gregory

Some products just seem right, right from the first moment you see them. Okay, so Scot Markwell had been on my case about the Alons, virtually dragging me into their room at CES, but from that first look (and listen) it was obvious what he was so excited about. The sound in the room was superb, running on the end of a system based on the one used by HP to drive the monster Alon flagships at Sea Cliff, and put together by the aforementioned Mr Markwell. But there was more to it than that. Importing speakers to the UK is a thankless task at the best of times. You just have to look at the history. Sure, Apogee and Magneplanar speakers enjoyed a brief period in the sun, helped by a passing fashion for panel designs which the native manufacturers seemed incapable of satisfying. Since then, only the very pretty Martin-Logans and the critically acclaimed Wilsons have achieved anything like their sales potential in this most difficult of markets. Even the spectacularly good Spica TC50 failed to achieve anything like the presence it deserved. One of a long list of failed contenders, Alon's challenge was always marred by an over generous bottom-end, well suited to US dry-wall construction, but less so to the smaller and more solid rooms found this side of the Atlantic.

Not so the Lotus Elite. What I was seeing was a speaker of almost European dimensions, its twin bass drivers contained in a compact, infinite-baffle, floor-standing enclosure topped with an open-baffle carrying mid-range and high-frequency drivers. What I was hearing was wide-

bandwidth sound with a smooth, smooth balance, a huge sound-stage and really impressive dynamics. Sure, designer Carl Marchisotto had added a pair of his new sub-woofers to the system but even-so...

Now, five months later, I'm looking at (and listening to) the same speakers sat in my front room, and you know what, I wasn't wrong about them the first time round. Which could make this the shortest review on record: they're great and I told you so! What - you mean you want more detail. Oh, okay, if I must...

I'm guessing here that Marchisotto has an unwise regard for vintage English sports cars (there's an Esprit in the range too) and that he should therefore know that his chosen moniker suggests performance at the expense of reliability and bits dropping off! Such are the vagaries of modern international marketing. The Alon Lotus Elite is available in two different but outwardly similar versions, standard and Signature. It's the standard model that we have for review. Outwardly it's a fairly straightforward three-way design. Under the skin, it

has more than its fair share of wrinkles.

The two pulp-coned 8" bass units each enjoy their own, separate chamber, and each chamber is a different size. According to Alon, this arrangement improves bass linearity, transient response and transparency. It's a claim that you have to take seriously given the speaker's performance. The drivers are mounted on a substantial 40mm baffle, and surrounded by a cosmetic trim that helps prevent

consistent diffraction from their chassis surrounds. It also mimics the French curve used on the mirror-imaged baffle tops to soften what would otherwise be a rather slab-like appearance.

The baffle extension supports a 130mm plastic coned (described as tri-laminate) midrange driver and a 25mm aluminium dome tweeter. Both drivers are mounted open baffle and deliver dipole output. They are offset at 45 degrees to each other, Alon's preferred disposition and one that they suggest gives more realistically scaled images than the more traditional vertical array. The speakers are set-up with the mid-range units outermost.

The mid-range driver sports a large cosmetic cover over its motor assembly, the size dictated by the use of weak but extremely linear AlNiCo ►



► magnets. The Signature version uses AlNiCo for all its drivers, along with external crossovers. The crossover on the review sample is internal, but the boards are physically separated for the two bi-wirable legs. Back to the mid-range driver, the smooth motor housing combined with the careful sculpting of the baffle's rear where it surrounds the driver should minimize turbulence in the rear output. The hard voice coil cover in the cone's centre is pierced by a small hole, though whether this is for venting or resonance dispersion reasons it's impossible to tell. The open rear of the tweeter is covered by a foam disc in order to prevent contamination by dust or other foreign bodies. Grilles are also provided for both the speaker's front and the rear of the flying baffle, although I preferred the appearance without them in place (as well as the sound).

Spikes are provided for the speakers, but they are much blunter than the UK norm. They won't pierce carpets although they do provide an otherwise stable footing. The front ones have a couple of thin nuts added to their tops so that the speaker tilts back very slightly with the feet installed. Experimentation suggests that this is more to do with the tweeter axis and the relatively low height at which it's placed than any attempt to time align the drivers. Set-up is pretty standard as regards positioning and general care, with but one proviso. The low-frequency extension of the speaker makes distance to the rear wall critical. In my room, two feet of clear space was spot-on, but even an inch nearer and the bass became slow and leaden, but more importantly, the mid-band muddled and the stage collapsed. Dull and sluggish, the resulting sound will have you wondering just what that idiot reviewer was getting so excited about. But get the bass to mid balance right and the dynamics blossom along with the space and immediacy of the sound-stage.

I don't have an efficiency figure for

these speakers, but they're a moderate load and the manufacturer quotes a minimum amplifier requirement of ten Watts per channel. The Border Patrol P20 certainly had no trouble kicking them into life, although they did suffer a tendency to close in at lower volumes, there being a definite threshold at which they sprang to life. I'd feel happier with a sensible minimum of 20 or so high-quality Watts. Even with the 125 Watt Hovland Radia, the effect was still there, albeit far less noticeable: more a shrinking and retreating of the stage than a clogging or close down. Playing 'True Love Ways' (Buddy Holly *Legend* MCA MCMD 7003) start at a low level and the stage is all there,



complete with boundaries, the distinct back wall, the control-room speaker high to the left. The players are where they should be, the detail and proportions of the instruments correct. But start to advance the volume control a notch at a time and the stage will swell, Buddy will step forward and straighten up, the music gains immediacy and life as the

micro-dynamics become more explicit. If you have to listen at low volumes or use a low-powered SET amp then you'll need to check this out. If you listen at more normal levels then you'll have no problems, but either way you should hear these speakers, because what they do is really quite special.

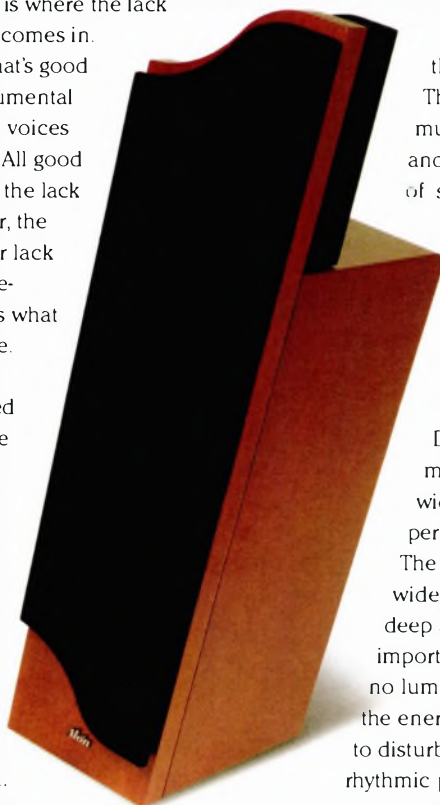
Check out the dimensions and you'll see that the Lotus Elites are far from large. They have a manageable footprint and whilst they require space behind them, they manage to remain surprisingly discrete, especially given the nature of the sound they produce.

The Alons pull two tricks that are unusual in a speaker at this size and price. By now you know that they go low in the bass (around the 35Hz mark, with another 6Hz from the Signature) but all too often that's a mixed blessing. Not in this case: The Elite's low frequencies are long on both extension and quality, but the really impressive thing is how they integrate seamlessly into the mid and treble. The evenness of the energy spectrum from this speaker is remarkable, as is its sense of tonal integrity. Provoke the tweeter and you can occasionally generate a hint of glaze and metallic smear, but you've got to try pretty hard and use some fairly underhand recordings. Otherwise, despite the disparate diaphragm materials involved, the tonality of singers and instruments is unusually consistent, an underestimated benefit that has a huge effect on the believability of what you hear. But the second (related) benefit is the real kicker that sets these speakers apart: They are astonishingly (refreshingly) free of box effects.

Roll these two attributes together and you have the foundation of the Alons' musical presentation and integrity. The combination of the wide bandwidth and the dipole mid and treble drivers produces a huge soundstage that extends well beyond and behind the speakers. In fact, the ►

sheer scale of the presentation is reminiscent of my old Magnaplanars, as is the proportion and nature of the images. If you want the sort of pinpoint, etched imagery that comes from harmonically challenged mini monitors then you'll be disappointed. These offer a larger, more dimensional and more realistically proportioned view of the original event, aided by the considerable depth generated by the speaker. The proportions and coherence of the soundstage will be effected by the nature and symmetry of the rear wall so if you want to get the best from the Alons then that's another consideration. More importantly, where the sound deviates from the more familiar dipole presentation is in the tighter and far more even bass response, devoid of the comb-filtered anomalies that afflict full-range dipole radiators. Plucked acoustic bass lines are especially tactile and satisfying, with excellent speed and attack, despite their weight and depth. And this is where the lack of box colourations comes in. Tonally, of course, that's good news. It leaves instrumental character intact and voices easily recognisable. All good stuff, but along with the lack of extraneous colour, the careful cabinetry (or lack of it) eliminates time-smear too, and that's what makes the difference.

The expansive soundstage combined with the quick, tactile bass and agile, rhythmically explicit mid-range makes for music that breathes but has purpose, is relaxed yet engaging. There's no sense of the pace being forced or artificially propelled.




Instead, the music has its own sense of tempo, just as much drama as required and dynamics on demand. It engages and entertains just as it should, and all from a discrete and domestically acceptable package. Praise be...

Complex music like Alison Krauss's 'Forget About It' offer a perfect example of the Elite's attributes. The different, interlocking rhythms are negotiated with ease, the sense and impetus they lend to the track keeps it moving without impinging on the delicacy and expressive breathiness of the vocals. The space and natural separation within the soundstage makes understanding the interlocking elements so much easier, as well as appreciating the contribution and excellence of the individuals. The overall coherence ensures that the whole is artistically greater than the sum of the parts.

This is the key to the Alons' appeal. They have a quality of effortless scale combined with an easy intimacy that

manages to relax and yet engage the listener at the same time. They also have a musical honesty and innate sense of spatial, dynamic and temporal proportion that keeps things satisfying and unusually credible.

Dynamic range may not be the widest but it's perfectly scaled. The soundstage is wide, but it is equally deep and tall. Most importantly, there are no lumps or bumps in the energy spectrum to disturb the music's rhythmic patterns and

distract the listener. It's this inner balance and sense of proportion that is rare at any price. For Carl Marchisotto to have achieved it in an imported model of this size and these modest dimensions makes the Lotus Elite something akin to the speaker holy grail: It's musical and accurate, it's a grower rather than knock your socks off impressive and it's even affordable. But take your time with the little Alons and you'll find it's a worthwhile investment. 



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Three-way loudspeaker with open baffle mid and treble drivers
Drive units:	25mm aluminium dome 130mm tri-laminate cone with AlNiCo magnet 2x 200mm pulp cone
Efficiency:	89 dB (estimated)
Bandwidth:	-3dB at 35Hz
Impedance:	8 Ohms nominal, 4 Ohms minimum
Dimensions (WxHxD):	255 x 1030 x 380mm
Weight:	35kg
Finishes:	Cherry or black ash
Price:	£4400

UK Distributor:

Alon UK Ltd.
Tel. 0207 6841490
E-mail. pammusic@bushinternet.com

Manufacturer:

Alon by Acarian
Net. www.alonbyacarian.com



Lumley Lampros 300

by Paul Messenger

John Jeffries has been a major player on the UK hi-fi scene for much of the last three decades, operating as a retailer, a manufacturer, and as the importer of a wide range of exotic high end equipment from around the world. Way back in the 1970s, his Nightingale NM1 speaker built itself quite a cult following amongst enthusiasts, while in recent years some quite elaborate confections have appeared under the Lumley brand.

While some earlier Lumley speakers were bulky and blunt looking affairs with a poor PAF (partner acceptance factor), the latest generation of Lampros models are unquestionably amongst the most aesthetically attractive loudspeakers on the market, featuring a clever combination of curved enclosure panels with a most attractive integral plinth, so that the end result looks significantly smaller than its bare measurements suggest. Not only do these speakers look particularly good, they also offer something a little unusual in engineering terms too, using two ribbon type drive units for the top end of the audio band.

There are five Lampros models in toto – four cute ones, labelled 100, 200, 300 and 400, plus the gigantic and massive new 1000. A year or so ago I reviewed the £4,000/pair 200 for another magazine, with somewhat mixed results, largely due to poor bass alignment of the reflex-ported enclosure. At the time I'd been unaware that foam bungs are normally supplied to block the ports and change the alignment if desired, and doing this immediately cured the unwelcome 'thumpy' character.

It therefore seemed a good idea to try out another model in the Lampros line-up, and see how it would stack up, with or without bungs. The spotlight here is therefore turned on the next model up the range, the £6,000/pair Lampros 300. It doesn't look all that different from the 200 at first sight, so one wonders why it carries a massive £2,000 price premium. It uses a 200mm rather than a 165mm bass driver, mounted in a slightly large enclosure too, but it's still hard to see why such changes can fairly account for a 50 per cent price increase over its slightly smaller brother.

That said, it turns out that the 300 is a considerably better loudspeaker performance wise, and while one might cavil a little at the price being asked, high performance is the bottom line here, and the superiority of the 300 is unmistakable – with or without the use of bungs.

The 300 looks like a full three-way loudspeaker, though in fact it's much closer to a two-way with an extra 'supertweeter'. It has a classy 8-inch cast-frame bass/mid driver, from German brand Iton, moving a 150mm diameter 'sandwich' cone, reflex-loaded by a rear port. The larger treble ribbon, with two slots, is

120mm long by 25mm wide, and comes from US brand Swan (though it's actually made in China). The Legend supertweeter is also from a US brand, and has a ribbon slot 55x10mm.

The integral plinth is a very pretty touch, elegantly shaped from layers of MDF and finished in piano-gloss black. It raises the enclosure just 16cm (including spikes), which is not a lot, but is probably sufficient to add a little something to the acoustic performance, as well as unquestionably enhancing the appearance. It's

equipped with sockets for

chunky 8mm spikes – four on our examples, though a tripod arrangement is now being used to avoid any rocking. Some long shiny silver spikes were supplied, and while they look very attractive, the lack of lock nuts seems rather a pity.

Every face here has some degree of curvature, which not only looks very nice but is also a credit to the skill and craftsmanship of JJ's cabinetmaker. The sides, top and base, covered in a choice of high quality real wood veneers, are all convex, while the black laminated back is concave.

The front panel (baffle) is convex and veneered at its lower end, though the drivers themselves are mounted on a thick flat extra section that doubles the thickness and tapers towards the top. This section is finished in the



▶ same silky velour material as the very tactile grille cloth. The enclosure is damped and mass-loaded by lead sheeting, while the avoidance of parallel faces will serve to spread out the frequencies of the standing waves generated internally.

Twin multi-way terminal pairs are fitted, about halfway up (or down) the back panel, and are widely spaced with big tap-like heads that will give any cable or spade a thorough clamping, while still allowing the 4mm banana plug option. Hovland capacitors and silver-plated wiring are used internally. There are also two movable links that provide very subtle adjustment to the relative levels of the midrange and treble ribbon drivers – these only make a tiny difference to the spectral balance, and I was happy enough just leaving them in the ‘flat’ position, but I guess this is useful extra flexibility for inveterate fiddlers.

Unlike conventional cone and dome drivers, ribbons have no separate diaphragms. Instead the voice coil is formed into a ribbon shape (usually held within a plastic matrix these days) and driven by powerful strip magnets. As such they should have closer control between motor and stator, with less tendency to resonate. They are also long thin devices rather than circles, so their sound distribution pattern is rather different. Rather than



the symmetrical pattern of circular diaphragms, the ribbon will give high frequencies very wide lateral dispersion, but will also tend to deliver them in a relatively narrow vertical beam. Providing you're sitting at the right height, this is not a problem, and may well be beneficial, giving superior stereo image focus by minimising floor and ceiling reflections.

Given the amount the two speakers have in common, I half expected the 300 to deliver a measured performance very similar to its smaller brother. In fact it did considerably better, and while the smoothest overall results were found with the ports blocked, leaving them open was much more viable than it had been with the 200, because the ports here

are tuned to a very low 25Hz. Most of their contribution therefore comes in below the instrumental region, and only augments the very lowest bass frequencies, which is mostly ambience.

Sensitivity is around 87dB here (3-4dB better than the 200), which is not high but is a very decent figure in view of the fine bass extension and the very easy-to-drive load (better than 8 Ohms throughout).

Best of all is the overall in-room far-field balance, which is amongst the best

I've ever measured, holding within surprisingly tight +/-4dB right across the band from 20Hz to above 10kHz, room modes notwithstanding. The upper bass and lower midband are a shade lean, and the upper midband a tad strong, but the transitions are gentle and the overall trend about as neutral as it gets.

I'd already worked out that this was a rather fine loudspeaker long before I carried out the room measurements, but without question its very superior neutrality is a major strength. It means that everything stays in good order across the spectrum, bass is even and deep, and the harmonic relationships that are the foundation of instrumental timbre remain properly proportioned.

The drive units and crossover network might be very well sorted here, but so is the enclosure too. The massive construction and clever shaping seems to have been very successful in eliminating any significant 'boxy' effects. Indeed, the 'box signature' is so

low, if you shut your eyes there's absolutely no way you can pinpoint either of the enclosures. All you hear is a very well formed and focused stereo image spread around, between and behind the speakers. Speech is quite untroubled, either by chestiness at lower frequencies, or spitchiness higher up, and while there is just a hint of pinching and nasality, voice reproduction is very natural, relaxed and neutral.

The core USP (unique selling point) here is of course those ribbon tweeters. ▶



► and whether they make an important contribution to the totality of the whole. The answer is yes, qualified by the observation that the top end here can easily get one a little obsessed by the various qualities and compromises of different types of speaker cables. If you've got a speaker with a particularly sweet top end like this, you owe it to yourself to feed it with cables that have a similar top end clarity and sweetness.

Whilst using a Halcro pre/power amp I got fine results with a curious co-axial speaker cable called Audience AU-24, which JJ imports to the UK, though sadly this cable is totally incompatible with the Naim amps (don't even try...). With the Naims I found some Nordost Valhalla (that I've been burning in for weeks) very effective, with the sort of top end coherence and sweetness that seemed to suit these speakers very well, though I'm sure there must be less costly alternatives that also do a good job.

By chance I've had two other 'extreme tweeter' loudspeakers through here in recent weeks – the Focal beryllium inverted dome in the Grande Utopia Be, and an OTL valve-powered electrostatic unit in a T+A speaker. The electrostatic probably has the sweetest top end I've heard, while the Focal is probably the most detailed and incisive.

I don't think these ribbons quite scale either of those two peaks. But they certainly get a lot closer to the summit than regular dome units – as I discovered with some dismay when I disconnected the Lumleys in favour

of the Spondor SR5s. I was listening to *Late Junction* one night when a gypsy band called the Bovan Markovic Orkestar was being featured, and was entranced by the subtle detail and sweetness of the brass ensemble and

the delicate percussion instruments that were coming through.



The bass/mid driver used here is clearly a very capable device, reminding me yet again that an 8-inch driver is still arguably the best allrounder around for handling joint bass/mid duties. This Lampros 300 places its main emphasis on the midrange, which is smooth and clean and clear. The bass hangs on in there with decent speed and timing, and in truth the decision to leave open or block the ports would seem to be entirely a matter for personal taste and specific room interaction effects – in my room I liked it both ways, and couldn't quite make up my mind!

The dynamic range here is undoubtedly very wide, but I did miss the rather livelier and more expressive dynamics I tend to experience with higher sensitivity speakers. Music tends to lose a little of its tension in consequence, which can dilute the

emotional impact of some recordings. But that's a minor caveat in the impressive roster of fine characteristics on offer here.

Given the fact that I'd been a little disappointed by the Lampros 200, the fact that I've been thoroughly won over by the 300 came as a real surprise. The bottom line is that this speaker does nearly everything well or very well, with no significant weaknesses that I could discover either. Speaker design is all about juggling conflicting compromises, and the Lampros 300 is a fine example of getting this balancing act very right indeed. Chuck in the exceptionally tasty styling and the beautifully sweet and transparent top end, and I reckon JJ has a winner on his hands here.



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Three-way port-loaded loudspeaker
Drivers:	120mm x 25mm ribbon tweeter 55x10mm ribbon supertweeter 200mm bass/mid driver with 150mm carbon-fibre sandwich cone
Sensitivity:	88dB (claimed); 87dB (measured)
Impedance:	8 ohms nominal (and minimum)
Frequency range:	28Hz - 20kHz
Dimensions (WxHxD):	290 x 1160 x 490mm
Finishes:	Wide choice of real wood veneers, piano gloss black, specials to order
Price:	£6,000/pair

Manufacturer:
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The Cyrus Mono-X Power amplifiers and Pre-X Pre-amplifier

by Chris Binns

Time waits for no man...It hardly seems like it, but it has been three years (almost to the day) since I originally reviewed the Cyrus amplification, consisting then of the APA 7 and ACA 7. Preceding the latest X series, the power amplifier was upgraded to the APA 7.5, which incorporated a number of changes to counter criticism of the original model. It should be a salutary lesson – I felt that I came across as very enthusiastic in my appraisal of the Cyrus amplification, in particular the power amps, but it seems that Peter Bartlett (MD of Cyrus) didn't read it in quite the same way; it was only after a fairly lengthy conversation with him that I realised he had taken some of the mild criticism of his product quite seriously. In particular, I had some reservations about the bass performance, which I felt was not quite up there with the mid-band, I felt it lacked a bit of bite and authority which made it sound sluggish, particularly when compared to a mid-band which was fast and articulate, while also possessing a highly communicative quality reminiscent of a good valve amp.

After some intense research, Cyrus revised the earthing arrangement of the printed circuit board and substituted the slit foil reservoir capacitors for a more conventional extra low impedance type. My first impressions of the APA 7.5 were not all that favourable. Frankly, I felt that the baby had been thrown out with the bath water - sure, bass was firmer and more in keeping with a powerful solid state amplifier, but the lovely liquid mid-

range of the '7 had all but disappeared. It was only several weeks later when I was searching round for a power amp to use and, at that time my first priority was something that I could lift easily (!), that I came to use the 7.5's again. Whether it was down to running in, different ancillary equipment, or just me - my original judgement of them was unfair; they actually sounded rather good.

The intervening couple of years have not seen Cyrus standing still. It was felt that enough



improvements were available to warrant a new version of the APA 7.5, while the pre-amplifier has undergone considerable development that has in reality amounted to a redesign to bring it into line with the performance of the new power amplification. During this process, Cyrus have taken advantage of better sounding digital control electronics, mainly involved with switching and volume control, although none of this is obvious from the external appearance as the electronics continue to be housed in

the neat die cast chassis that has become the hallmark of Cyrus products. This is available in both black (although I would describe it as a very dark grey or brown) or silver finish.

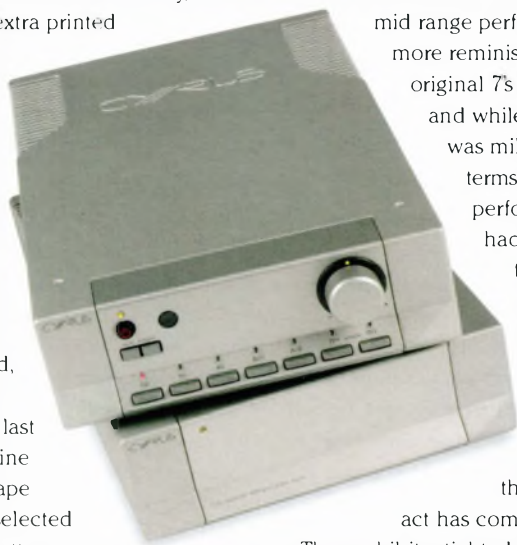
The power amplifier is almost featureless, save for a standby switch on the front panel – a partnering led turns from red to green to indicate full operation, or back to red in the unlikely event of a fault condition. The rear panel accommodates both an unbalanced input (with a parallel socket for daisy chaining) and a balanced XLR; a small toggle switch selects between them. A further phono socket labelled MC-Bus allows communication with other Cyrus equipment for remote activation; a word of warning though, mistaking this for the parallel signal output could have potentially disastrous results as it has DC on it. Also situated at the back are the mains switch and two pairs of (cursed) Camcon loudspeaker connectors. In the middle is the grille covering the small fan which is only activated at elevated temperatures, and more importantly while signal is present – as a consequence you will never hear it. Incidentally, the black version is more efficient at radiating heat away from the casework, and does run a little cooler than the silver cased unit.

The essential circuit is still based around the original ACA 7 design, the major feature of which is its freedom from global feedback, still somewhat unusual in a solid state amplifier. This has been further refined to increase the effective bandwidth over earlier ▶

▶ incarnations, however this necessitated further development of the power supply to implement it successfully, evident by the extra printed circuit board containing discrete regulation for the early stages of amplification.

The Pre-X pre-amp looks much the same as the integrated, (for a detailed description see last issue) with six line inputs (plus a tape monitor loop) selected from a row of buttons on the front panel, the volume/balance control is surrounded by a ring of LED's to indicate level and status. Programmable input levels and a comprehensive remote make the whole system very user friendly while two sets of main outputs are provided, note that there is no longer a balanced option. The remote supplied is known as the 'system navigator' - capable of controlling all Cyrus gear, including a complete AV set up.

With the usual burning in etiquette duly observed, I started off by using just the Mono-X's in my system. Familiar as I am with previous incarnations of the power amplifiers, they still surprise me with the sheer amount of energy and grunt they are capable of shooting into 'difficult' loudspeakers, surely one of the great attractions of these diminutive little boxes. The fact that you can carry one in each hand yet they are capable of delivering real power under arduous conditions greatly endears them to me. That and the fact that they don't particularly sound like a big amp...but I'm getting ahead of myself. To put the X's in perspective, whatever modifications have been made over the 7.5's, they



have been worthwhile. They are still recognisable as Cyrus mono-blocks, with an informative and liquid mid range performance, more reminiscent of the original 7's than the 7.5; and while the latter was miles ahead in terms of its bass performance, it had a tendency toward sounding dry and slightly artificial. It is with the X's that the balancing act has come together.

They exhibit a tight, dynamic and rhythmically informative bottom end with an open, rather un-solid-state mid-range that merges seamlessly with the top end, which is ever so slightly forward (possibly a Cyrus trademark), but not alarmingly so. The cumulative effect with the latest version is that they sound cleaner and more dynamic, further extending the possibilities of what these diminutive boxes can do.

If improvements with the power amplifier have been incremental, the Pre-X has leaped forward in performance. While the sound of the '7 was never anything to be embarrassed about, I felt that it never quite matched the capabilities of the power amplifiers – it was definitely a limiting factor in the system. The re-design has resulted in a considerable uplift in its capabilities, and it now compliments the Mono-X's extremely

well. Used as the centre piece of my system proved this to be the case, while functions such as the remote worked flawlessly, although the new logic for the volume control is a little bit coarse, and tends to shoot up alarmingly round about the half way mark when used via the remote. In terms of sound quality, the Pre-X is essentially neutral, a little on the dry side compared to some, but with excellent presentation of detail. The worst criticism I can make of it is that it can sound a bit academic, like its going through the motions rather than capturing the spirit of the music it is asked to reproduce. Am I being a bit hard? Well...yes, but then there is the option of the PSX-R to consider.

The addition of the intelligent power supply transforms the performance of the Pre-X. This oversized, highly regulated addition should really be considered as an essential item, certainly in a system that incorporates power amplifiers with the ability of the latest APA series.

While there is nothing wrong with the sound quality using the

Pre-X on its own, the performance never seems to leave the ground. Connect the PSX-R up and the improvement affects just about every area of performance – resolution, dynamics, sound stage...

in the context of the Cyrus system it just all fits together far more comfortably, and removes that shadow of doubt that the power amplifiers are left wanting of a better source. ▶



▶ The combination of the Cyrus units presented a powerful, authoritative and highly competent sound that lent itself well to a wide range of listening material. With a quite seductive mid range, I was able to listen to chamber music at low levels and derive real pleasure from the concise, articulate presentation, and while slightly on the 'cool' side, compared to, say some exotic valve amplification, was fluid enough to be pretty involving. Conversely,

When it came to 'rocking out', the Cyrus held its own at over the top levels, and continued to hurl drums and percussion at you with real confidence; more importantly, with the musical dynamics intact making the whole thing sound that much more real, even at truly antisocial levels. (At this point, I am recalling an evening spent listening to David Bowie's *Tin Machine*... I suspect that half the reason that this album got slagged off was because nobody ever listened to it loud enough...) So I had no real reason to crave any more power. But I had been left two pairs of amps to play with, and how else do you think I discovered that the black X's run cooler than the silver ones? One could

argue that using two pairs of smaller amplifiers might have some benefits over one large one, in that really big, powerful units can often sound thick and glutinous, and lacking in amongst other things, musical expression. I have just recently declined to review such a beast on these very grounds. Certainly, my experience with this particular set

up would suggest that there is a lot to be said for it. While a single pair of Mono-X's was more than adequate in terms of power



delivery, there was an effortless quality with the use of two that lent a freedom to more dynamic music, regardless of volume level, that was highly enjoyable. This was countered by a slight loss of focus and integration, which might well be a function of the loudspeakers, being less than ideal for bi-amping rather than the amplification, but I really grew to appreciate the 'big' presentation that the four amplifiers gave to my system.

In conclusion, what you need to know is that while the Cyrus product looks much the same as it has done for a few years, it has evolved.

In the case of the power amplifiers, this has been a refinement of what was already a successful design, and the painstaking effort has been worthwhile

in so much as the balance of attributes available from this unit is now absolutely right for the product. Meanwhile, the Pre-X pre amplifier has undergone a radical transformation, and is now in the enviable position of being equal to the performance of the power amps, which is no mean feat. Collectively, they form

an elegant, easy to use and very effective amplification system, which if you so desire you can fit and forget. But they are also worthy of true audiophile status; powerful enough to drive a multitude of loudspeakers with ease, yet capable of a highly musical and satisfying performance which, considering the asking price has got to represent a lot of amplifier for the money. ▶+

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Pre-X	
Inputs:	6 + Tape monitor
Outputs:	2 Preamp-out (RCA phono sockets)
Output voltage:	940m V
Max output voltage:	9V
Pre-amp Output impedance:	50 Ohm
Input sensitivity:	500m V
Input impedance:	100 k Ohm
Dimensions (WxHxD):	215 x 73 x 360mm
Weight:	3.7kg
Price:	£1000

Mono-X	
Continuous Power:	150W (into 8 Ohms) 240W (into 4 Ohms)
Burst Peak Power:	1500W

Max output Current:	80 Amps peak to peak
Sensitivity (RCA input):	380mV (for 50W into 8 Ohms)
Sensitivity (BAL input):	775mV (for 50W into 8 Ohms)
Input impedance:	19Kohm (RCA), 20Kohm (BAL)
Dimensions (WxHxD):	215 x 73 x 360mm
Weight:	5.5kg each
Price:	£1200 each

Manufacturer:

Tel. 01480 435577

Net. www.cyrusaudio.com



The Rega Cursa 3 Pre-amplifier and Exon 3 Mono-blocks

by Chris Binns

I think I first heard it said by Peter Walker, founder of the Quad Acoustical Manufacturing Company, that given a good hi-fi system, every piece of music will find its own correct level at which it should be played. Thus, it is unlikely that I would be disturbing the local wildlife with Debussy played at high volume on a Sunday morning, while there are times when I am playing rock music and feel that 'loud' is the order of the day, or night. Different systems reveal their strengths at different levels, and to contradict my first sentence I sometimes find that one of the indications of when a system is working well is when it can reproduce all the excitement of say, Neil Young at his dirtiest with all the energy of his band, full on, intact at quite modest levels. So be it, but there are occasions when regardless of the quality of musical communication, you just want to feel the air moving around you, and to hell with being civilised or considerate. I am lucky enough to live in a place where I can get away with this at more or less any time, a situation that I occasionally explore and use to its full potential.

Such was the other night. Having been to a highly disappointing concert of improvised, free form Norwegian jazz, where I admit that probably less than ten seconds of the performance made any sense to me,* by the time I got home I felt a powerful need to

play some very basic, accessible and down to earth music. Loudly. With a kick drum that was solid, powerful and went straight for the stomach, the rest of the music was projected forcefully over the top, and I went to bed with my faith in the ability of music to excite me restored.

The equipment that allowed such unruly behaviour was not some



enormous behemoth amplifier, but the Rega Exon mono blocks, made all the more interesting by the fact that they were driving inefficient, low impedance loudspeakers, for several hours. Should I be surprised? On the one hand, no, as I have a high regard for Rega products, but then again a pair of these will set you back a mere £1100.

I have not had a tremendous amount of experience with Rega electronics, extending only to the basic Planet CD player, a machine that I value highly for getting the basics of silver disc reproduction right at an affordable price, where many more

costly machines sadly fail. Last year I reviewed the P9 turntable with the RB1000 arm, and am in the process of buying one; its fuss free, straightforward approach to vinyl replay is very appealing, as is their whole approach to the problem of motor vibration. Whereas all other turntable designs seek to dissipate unwanted energy, Rega designed a power supply that all but eliminates it at source, offering an elegant simple solution, and typical of the way the company approaches certain aspects of design.

And so to the Cursa/Exon combination, which would appear to continue a reputation for offering high value for money products with an affordable price tag. While on the surface there would not appear to be anything here that's quite as innovative as the P9, there are a number of aspects to their design that are worthy of consideration.

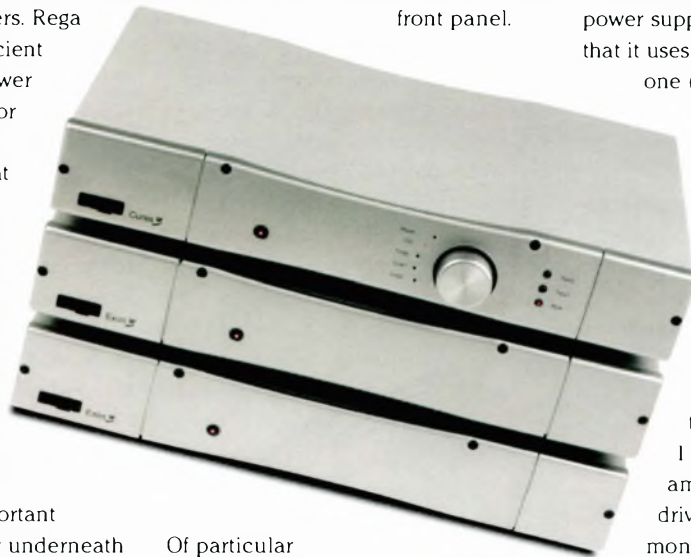
The Cursa pre-amplifier is of a straight through design, the basic version of which is supplied without remote control, the handset being available for an extra £25. It can be specified with either MM or MC phono input boards and these are interchangeable. Unfortunately, the review sample had MM boards fitted, which precluded serious assessment as I don't have a sufficiently serious magnet at home. The front panel has only a power switch, three push buttons and a large rotary control for volume, however, depressing this once allows it to function as the input ▶

*You could accuse me of being a musical heathen with a lack of understanding for cerebral jazz, but RG and his girlfriend were there as well and didn't get that much of it either. Or have I just really shown myself up?

▶ selector. The Cursa is quite well connected with four line inputs plus the phono, while there are two tape loops available, but there is no individual adjustment for gain on each input, although the overall gain can be adjusted for different sensitivity power amplifiers. Rega suggest that there is sufficient drive for up to five (!) power amps making it flexible for possible multi-room or bi-amped systems. A neat row of LED's around the volume control indicates level.

The Exon power amplifiers share the same general casework as the pre-amp, where the bottom extrusion forms a fairly substantial finned heatsink. It is important that there is some airflow underneath this, particular under heavy drive conditions. The handbook even suggests that in extreme conditions, the amps can be stood on their end, to provide better dissipation, and if that is not enough a fan can be used to increase the airflow. Has Roy Gandy been to one of my parties? Having been using them into a punishing load at high levels, I can confirm that they get pretty hot, and I did in fact 'up end' them a lot of the time. Full DC protection, including thermal shutdown is provided, but I didn't manage to trip it; take it from me, these are pretty load tolerant, while rated at a nominal 125 Watts into 8 Ohms and virtually doubling into four, there is plenty of power on tap. I gather that not only is electronics designer Terry Bateman into loud heavy music, he is also an electric bass player. 'Nuff said. Input and a link output are provided via RCA/phono's, while loudspeaker connections are provided by decent five way binding posts.

Internal construction of both units is neat and to a good standard. The pre-amp has the majority of the audio and power supply electronics mounted on one large board, while the control circuitry occupies a PCB placed just behind the front panel.



Of particular interest is the volume control circuit used; rather than opting for a conventional potentiometer complete with all of its shortcomings, Rega use a solid state design, but one based around a chip that has been developed in close association with the 'chip' maker.



Essentially, digital control accesses a resistor network, each of the 80 steps of control use the required resistors to provide 1dB of attenuation, while keeping input and output impedance

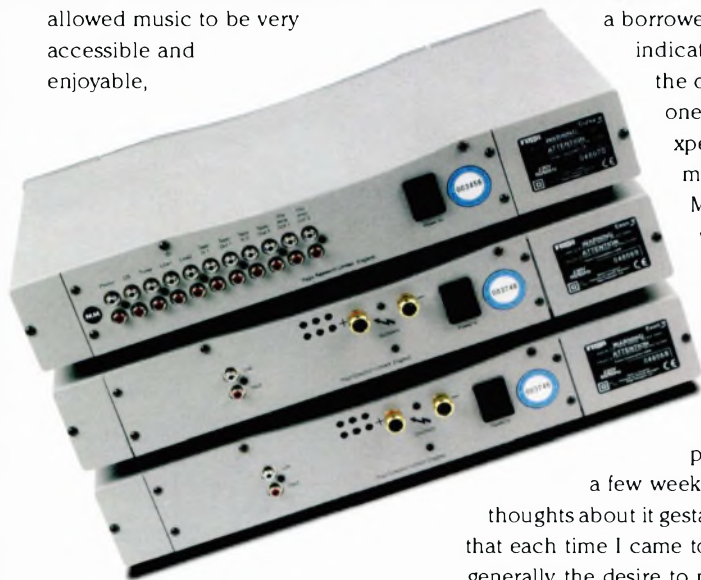
constant, a big downfall of conventional controls. It also allows channel matching to within 0.2 dB throughout the range.

The power amplifier is based around two pairs of high power bi-polar output devices, while the power supply is slightly unusual in that it uses two toroidal transformers, one (I think) for each rail. I am inclined to think (and experience suggests) that the use of two or more smaller mains transformers can have sonic benefits over one large one.

As I was in the middle of reviewing the Mac pre-amp when the Rega gear arrived, I pressed the Exon power amps into use in this system, driving not only the Primary monitors but the \$20,000 JM Labs Nova Utopia. Sophisticated company indeed, but the Rega's kept their shirt tails tucked in all night and gave no cause for

embarrassment whatsoever. As about the largest, and one of the most extended (with the possible exception of the Revel Salon) loudspeaker systems I have used in my room, the Novas fully exposed both the Exon's low and high-frequency performance. The bottom end is impressive – there is plenty of depth, with good speed and timing, while possessing a satisfying kick ▶

where necessary, even at fairly extreme levels. Mid-range was detailed, with good presentation, while the top end struck me as just a little ragged and closed in, lacking in air. But there was a great sense of 'wholesomeness' to the sound that allowed music to be very accessible and enjoyable,



a factor that I find more important than the last word in refinement. And please, let's not forget that we are talking about a pair of amps that cost just the wrong side of a thousand pounds.

I've probably done this all the wrong way, haven't I? Substituting the Cursa for the \$5500 Mac unit was bound to be a disappointment. Except that I allowed a good week for my expectations to settle down, and substituted the Utopia's for the Primary's to better evaluate the whole system. Coming to the whole Rega system from a fresh perspective, I thought it all sounded pretty good. As I said earlier of the power amps, what shortcomings there were regarding finesse were overtaken by a general musical integrity that by and large took the focus away from finer detail. It tended to pull this off better with rock music than with more subtle string music, where the slight lack of delicacy robbed

string tones of that emotive feel that can transform a performance from merely good to quite magical. My lack of a decent moving magnet cartridge hindered any detailed exploration of the phono stage, but a quick turn with a borrowed Grado indicated that all the qualities one would expect from a manufacturer of MM cartridges were there, and it certainly held its own against CD. I left the system in place for a few weeks to let my

thoughts about it gestate, and found that each time I came to criticise it generally the desire to play more music would take over. That in itself is quite a compliment; particularly when you consider a total price of £1650, while the power amplifiers were happy to let rip at any volume I so desired.

But I couldn't leave it at that. I would have to say, if pushed that I felt the Exon power amplifiers were capable of greater things than the Cursa would allow. A number of trials with different pre-amps suggested that their performance was being held back a little by the Cursa, and that they are probably the stronger force in the combination. It's far from unusual for power amps to outshine their partners, especially when they're priced so that people can actually afford to buy them. The Cursa is good, but somehow fails to truly liberate the full fire within the engine room(s) of the Exon.

But I forget myself. We are not talking about some high priced exotic import that requires no end

of pampering to get working properly: Far from it. The Rega combination is designed to offer enjoyable music reproduction with the minimum of fuss, be flexible and straightforward to use, and with virtually no limitations on what you use it to drive. As such it succeeds admirably. The fact that the power amps in particular can step up several leagues merely underlines just how successfully that goal has been achieved.



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Cursa pre-amp	
Type:	Solid-state, remote control pre-amp
Inputs:	MM or MC phono, 4x Line, 2x Tape
Phono input sensitivity:	MM 2.3mV MC 0.175 mV
Phono input impedance:	MM 47K Ohms MC 100 Ohms
Line input sensitivity:	220 mV
Line input impedance:	10 k Ohms
Outputs:	2x Line, 2x Tape
Output level:	212mV/830mV/1.25 Volts
Finishes:	Black or Silver
Price:	£548 (inc. phono stage) £25 (remote control)
Exon power amp	
Power output:	125 Watts/8 Ohms 225 Watts/ 4 Ohms
Input sensitivity:	1.1V for full output
Finishes:	Black or Silver
Price:	£548 each
Dimensions (Both units): 430x80x268mm	
Manufacturer:	
Rega Research Ltd	
Tel. (44)(0)1702 333071	
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Ayre AX-7 Integrated Amplifier (and more on the CX-7 CD Player)

by Chris Thomas

Although separate pre and power amplifiers are still the preferred option for anybody engaged in system building, there are now a number of integrated amplifiers that deserve real attention. Both the Mark Levinson No 383 and Jeff Rowland Concentra 2 models are generally musically underestimated though it must be said that neither are exactly cheap and there are several similarly priced pre/power combinations around that do a better job. But at less than half the price, the Ayre AX-7 has been making some waves of late. Yet another audio electronics company from Boulder, Colorado, Ayre have a superb reputation stateside and are being imported into this country by The Path Group. You may remember that I tried the CX-7 CD player a few months ago and was left thinking that this was a good, if slightly bland player that was joining the ranks of a number of other players of similar quality. It did not seem to have anything about it that truly elevated it above the crowd but it did have a disappointingly noisy transport that I felt was an issue even if others did not. I actually took a bit of grapevine flack for that one but someone somewhere must have agreed with me because Ayre have revised the player already with several internal modifications including a new transport and Path, conscious of my comments sent one along as a kind of sidebar to the AX-7.

If memory serves, there seem no external changes. This is still one of the cleanest looking CD players out there. Single-ended and balanced outputs are available, though the balanced provides a lot more gain (4.5 V as opposed to

2.25 V for the single-ended), and still present is the quirky digital filter switch that enables you to choose between two algorithms, one optimised for time domain accuracy and the other majoring on the frequency domain. All of which I still find odd. But the major improvement must be to the transport itself, which is now quiet enough that it has ceased to be an issue at all.

I am told that there are other internal modifications though I am not sure where, but one thing is for certain and that is that the musical performance really has improved considerably, but more of that later.

The solid-state integrated amplifier shares the casework and many of the CD player's design features. It has a pair of tape outputs and 4 inputs, two balanced and two single-ended and these are properly balanced and not just a single-ended XLR connection. Each input is characterised by a different symbol rather than an assigned name like CD or Tuner. Instead we have Star, Planet, Comet and Moon. They are all replicated on the front panel alongside a thoroughly readable window that displays the current volume setting and input selected though this can usefully be turned off, only illuminating briefly

when any changes are made. At the top of the display is a large rocker switch, which controls the volume. I am not usually a fan of such arrangements, generally preferring an old fashioned knob but here it works beautifully thanks to the reasonable speed of the motor, which makes accurate volume setting through its 66 dB increments easy and accurate. The speaker connections are unusual too. A clamp arrangement grips the cable terminations which ideally should be spade terminals though you can just about squeeze a pair of 4mm plugs into position though I doubt there is as much contact as with spades.

The remote handset is a model of economy and simplicity. The small plastic unit is split into two and controls the CD player as well. You can scroll through the inputs rather than individually selecting them, adjust volume, turn the display on and off and put the unit into standby. It is straightforward, but I always prefer a numeric keyboard for direct track access where CD is concerned. Ayre have opted for simplicity though and I must say it works well. It is worth mentioning where these components should be sited as Path have strong feelings that both the Ayre products do not sound at their best on glass surfaces. When I reviewed the CX-7 they sent along a set of 3 myrtle wood blocks, which I thought were quite effective, despite the fact that I was using the machine atop a Naim Fraim, which is a wood/glass hybrid. And they very kindly included another set for use with the amplifier. I have to say that, after the first players undeniable fussiness, changing the glass for a medite board did very little to improve the ►



▶ sound quality of the latest version though I would certainly advocate trying the wooden block supports as they really can offer quite startling results in a number of situations.

I connected the Ayre combination through to my Revel Gems using Nordost Valhalla speaker cable and both Valhalla single ended and balanced interconnects.

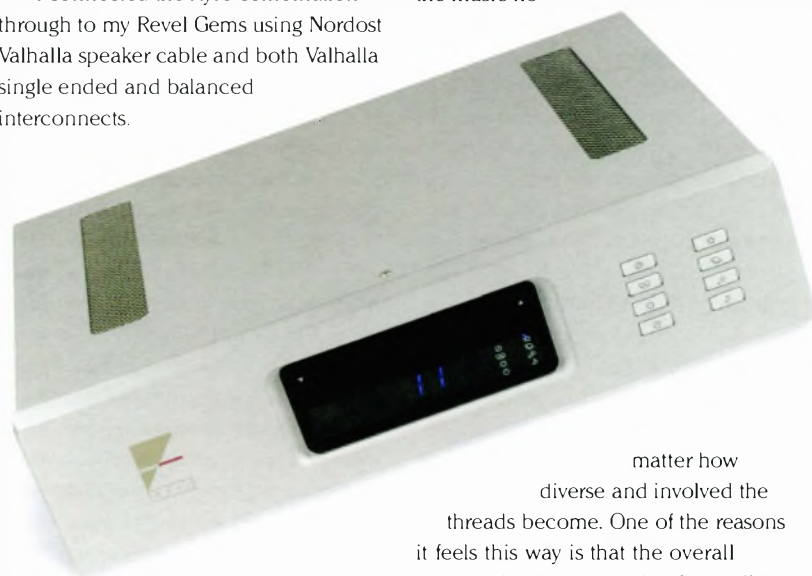
There is no question that balanced is the way to go with these Ayre products. Not only does the extra gain give the sound more weight, leaving the music more fulsome and stronger but also this is one balanced set-up that doesn't leave you with the feeling that the musical flow is overdamped or bandwidth limited in any way. Quite the opposite in fact and the inclusion of the Nordost cabling only guarantees that the CD/amplifier have the best possible chance to live up to their potential and after a month or so of constant listening I have to say that their potential is considerable. Firstly, the CX-7 is a greatly improved machine. It has made that leap from being good, but slightly matter-of-fact, to a genuinely involving musical experience. It reminds me of the Resolution CD-55 but with a greater degree of sophistication and like that player, it plugs you straight into the

music with its foot-tapping openness. Because of this it is a rhythmically strong CD player that, while not being the fastest or most overtly dynamic is always in control of the pace and timing of the music no

matter how diverse and involved the threads become. One of the reasons it feels this way is that the overall presentation is so attractive. I am talking front to back depth with instruments suspended in space and free of the speakers then both

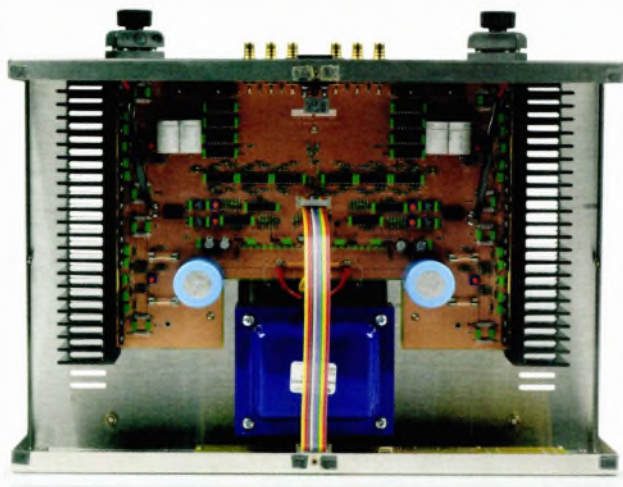
the CD player and the amplifier will delight you. Especially with the myrtle blocks in place this system just disconnects the music from the electronics and floats it in space, unconfined and undefined by speaker placement. History shows that, as far as solid-state electronics are concerned, it has generally been an either/or situation and when a system

was as pretty to listen to as this there was inevitably a price to be paid and this was normally in terms of overall speed and rhythmic focus. But the Ayres buck the trend. As a combination they are certainly not the fastest I have heard but they are bang-on, tempo wise, from top to bottom. There is no slowing of pace as the frequency drops and as the sound is so multidimensional and there just seems to be so much acoustic space available, the music never sounds squeezed or tonally or rhythmically limited. Lee Ritenour's great new album *Rit's House* and the track '78th & 3rd' is a great illustration of this. This is a swing number underpinned by a magnificent walking feel from Joey DeFrancesco's Hammond B3 organ, an instrument I normally hate, which also stabs out short and long chords to move the track through the changes. All the while the drummer is riding the cymbals and punctuating it with snare rim shots. The small four-piece horn section punches in and out while Rit himself is playing some absolutely great gliding jazz guitar in and around the rest of the band. But the beat isn't always where the action is as the Ayre shows by feeling in total command of all the percussive elements that the arrangement has fused together so beautifully. It manages that rare feeling of being tight and loose at the same time and has the space to spread the music right across the room without it ever sounding remotely fragmented or disjointed. There is true harmony of purpose here, both from the musicians and the equipment and this is only enhanced by the superb tonal development and character of the instruments. It is so easy to hear the signature of the trumpet, trombone and saxophone individually, so you really feel and understand the texture and



► fabric of their contribution as a horn section. As I said, there is some seriously good solo guitar playing on this track from Ritenour and it is handled with such ease and note control that it sound like the easiest thing in the world to achieve. But just listening to the way in which he slows and accelerates his note-play in and out of the tune, plus the sheer clarity of his phrasing really brings the music alive and shows that this Ayre combination is very good at portraying the depth, quality and subtlety of musicianship that a band like this is all about.

As a combination these Ayre components make a persuasive case to be used together. Rather like Naim



their tonality/bandwidth/rhythm equation seems so well balanced that removing them from this context always runs the risk of unsettling what they can achieve when together. I used the AX-7 for a while with my Naim CDS 11 and it showed what a good amplifier it was by illustrating the different ways that the two CD players perform though I obviously could not utilise the amplifier's superior balanced inputs. Now the sound had a completely different and somewhat more up-front character. The CDS 11 is faster, tighter and more immediate and incisive. It is a better CD player, but at twice the cost, you would expect it to

be and in lots of ways its inclusion made for a better system especially if you listen with your head, as you tend to in a dealers listening room. It also reinforced just what a fine amplifier this is. Output power, quoted at 60 watts into 8 ohms, is sufficient for all but the most inefficient speakers in larger rooms and it can really drive a speaker with great control and verve without ever sounding compressed, artificial or too electronic. But it has its own way of presenting music and this seemed to me slightly at odds with the CDS 11 version of events. The Naim is not about great depth and vivid sound staging in the same way as the Ayre and I always felt more comfortable when the CX-7 was in the driver's seat, despite the fact that the Naim CD player was ultimately more musically informative.

I cannot find anything that I don't like about this Ayre AX-7 amplifier. It has no real weaknesses at all, but a host of strengths that begin with its fine bandwidth, a great overall resolution of rhythmic and tonal detail and this

is all presented in a very broad and deep acoustic that, while it may not always be totally accurate, is nevertheless incredibly attractive to listen to. You want to twist my arm for weaknesses and I'll say that the very low bass could be a tad tighter and the ultra high end could have a touch more bite, but I'm searching under rocks here as neither of these things bothered me one iota while I was listening. Also Ayre must be congratulated for the improvements to the CX-7, which must now be one of the very best CD players in its class and is now fulfilling all of that early promise. Both of these pieces of equipment are

well worth a listen individually but I think that when you put them together through their balanced connections, they are more than the sum of their parts and make a very persuasive case for themselves. Considering their quality potential and having heard a lot of their market competition I would say that they are almost a bargain. ▶+

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Ayre CX-7

Type:	Remote operated Compact Disc player
Outputs:	1 x pair single ended - 2.25 V rms 1 x pair balanced - 4.50 V rms
Digital Output:	AES/EBU
Frequency Response:	DC - 20Khz
Power consumption:	30 watts
Dimensions (HxWxD):	12 x 44 x 35 cm
Weight:	11.5 kG
Price:	£2950

Ayre AX-7

Type:	Remote operated Integrated amplifier
Inputs:	2 x Balanced, 2 x unbalanced
Input impedance:	20 kohm unbalanced 40 kohm balanced
Max. input level:	4 V unbalanced, 8 V balanced
Frequency response:	2Hz - 200kHz
Gain:	35 dB (at volume level 66)
Dimensions (HxWxD):	12 x 44 x 35 cm
Weight:	11.5 Kg
Price:	£2950

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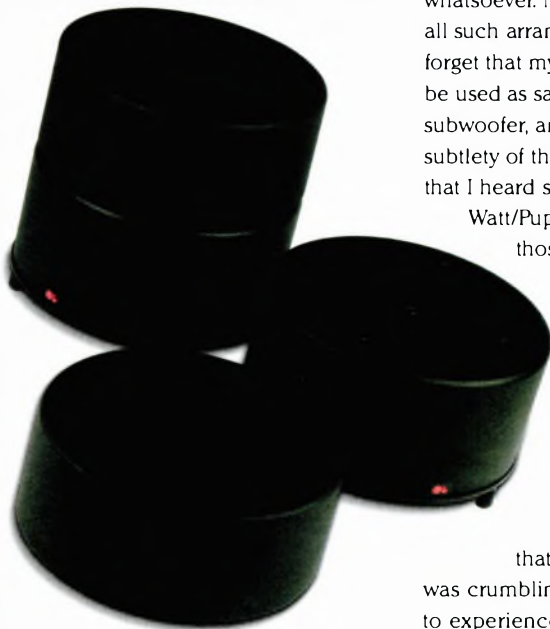


Music Of The Spheres...

The Anthony Gallo A'Diva and Dué satellites and MPS150 active sub-woofers

by Chris Thomas

Back in issue 19 my curiosity was aroused by RG's review of the Cabasse iO/Jupiter speaker system, which comprised two satellite speakers with a powered subwoofer, and subsequent conversations with Roy only fuelled my interest even further. And then, when, one issue later he gave a warm recommendation to the even dinkier Anthony Gallo system I thought it was about time I put aside my unfounded aversions to such things and stepped into the ring. Perhaps my reticence was not completely without basis though as, with a couple of very expensive exceptions, I had previously been totally unmoved by the few sub/sat systems I had encountered.



A friend had bought one several years ago after enormous domestic pressure was bought to bear by an audio-hating spouse. This came in the shape of a miniscule pair of speakers bolted high on the wall and a large black box, which could double as a coffee table. As far as I could tell the coffee table went "boom" while the speakers on the wall went "tizz". Musically there seemed to be no relationship between them whatsoever. Not wishing to denigrate all such arrangements I should not forget that my own Revel Gems can be used as satellites with a custom subwoofer, and I'll never forget the subtlety of the wardrobe-sized box that I heard supplementing the Wilson Watt/Puppy some years ago. But, those apart, I have heard the occasional sub/sat set-up but have managed to remain as apathetic towards them as I am to home cinema, though; as George Benson said "Everything must change".

So when Roy, sensing that my initial indifference was crumbling, offered me the chance to experience the rest of the Gallo

range I was up for it. Later when I rang him and told him about my time-consuming experiences setting the things up he laughed, "Welcome to the wonderful world of sub-woofer set-up" he said. And he was right. There is a learning curve to come to terms with if you are going to achieve the sort of performance that the Gallo system is capable of, but my advice is to stick at it. It will, in all likelihood, take a few days of fine-tuning; perhaps more; but the rewards may surprise you as much as they did me. It's just that you need to work a bit harder to achieve them. But in doing so you may well learn lots about the way that speaker systems work within real rooms.



The hardware under review is the A 'Diva and Dué satellite speakers with all their assorted fitting options, and the MPS 150 powered subwoofer. The Nucleus Micro, Gallo's smallest offering was reviewed in issue number 20 and the A'Diva utilises the same impressive 3 inch driver in a larger 5 inch metal sphere. Thanks to the delivery driver, who thought that the word FRAGILE meant that the package should be launched from a great height onto ▶

▶ a hard pavement, I was able to get an unexpected look inside as an A'Diva fell apart in my hands. This is an impressive little drive unit with an enormous magnet for its size. There is no crossover of course but it



does have a frequency response of 76Hz to 20Khz when mounted on the wall or its own stand and marginally less if squatting on its isolation ring. The A'Diva comes with all sorts of mounting gear which enable it to be sited just about anywhere on the wall, ceiling or shelf. But the isolation ring, which is just a rubber O-ring, is a simple and tremendously effective solution as the speaker can be easily moved or directed without any permanent

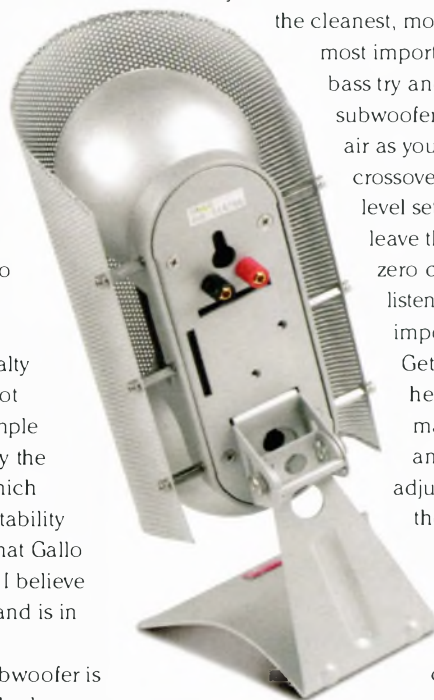
fixings needed. The most elegant places to site them though are the Wallflower stands, which are 36 inches high and curved like a swan's neck. A similar but more robust stand comes with the Dué. One problem is that the base of the A'Diva stand, though weighted, is round and I think rather



too small to offer the sort of stability that the Dué's egg-shaped base enjoys. The Gallo solid-core cable can be fed under the base and through the stand itself and on a hard floor, with the 4 stick-on rubber feet in place is still not as stable as I would like. But, put it on a thick carpet and a light knock could easily send it to ground faster than Ruud Van

Nistelrooy in the penalty area. Well, ok then, not quite that easily. A simple fix would be to supply the egg shaped bases, which would increase the stability enormously. I know that Gallo are aware of this and I believe that a wider based stand is in the works.

Then MPS 150 subwoofer is split into two parts, the lower houses the 10 inch downward facing driver while the electronics, connections and controls are in



a slightly smaller enclosure that can be mounted adjacent to or on top of the speaker unit. They are connected by a lead with jack plugs on either end. This is a really discrete sub-woofer and can quite easily be hidden away though, as I was to find out, positioning is not quite the site it and forget it procedure that I was hoping. Place

the subwoofer in a corner and you will get an increase in output of +6db, even next to a wall will give you +3dB but it is not the level but the quality of the bass that concerns. The subwoofer's three controls allow adjustment

of gain, crossover point and phase which can be continuously selected from zero to 180 degrees and the combination of these provide a multitude of possibilities for getting it spectacularly wrong. I have done enough twiddling and shifting over the past few weeks to write a book on subwoofer placement but I won't bore you with that. Put simply, if you want

the cleanest, most textural and most importantly, the fastest bass try and site the subwoofer in as much free air as you can. Get the crossover point and the level set approximately, leave the phase at zero degrees and listen. And the most important thing?

Get a friend to help you by making small, and I mean small, adjustments until the musical space between the front speakers and the subwoofer closes and you are getting a seamless

presentation, and then try the phase control. Your ears will tell you the rest. But it may well take ▶

▶ a period of some days before you have a set-up that works across a broad range of music. And if your dealer installs it you will still need to make small trim changes as your experience with the sound increases. I guarantee it. The old adage, which says that if you are aware of the subwoofer doing its thing, then it is probably too loud, is right. You will likely find yourself reducing the sub-woofer effect as you realise that trying to mimic the sound of a big speaker is not what this system is all about.

The A'Diva is much easier to site and I tried two approaches both using the excellent Ayre AX-7 integrated amplifier driving through the high level inputs. The first on the rubber rings sat upon a mantelpiece and the second on the Wallflower stands where I could vary their position more easily. Without the hindrance of a bass unit attached or nearby, the mid and treble that pours through them is strikingly lucid, open and extraordinarily fast. Shelf mounting leaves them sounding slightly congested in comparison with the stands but the proximity to a hard surface does flesh out the mid somewhat but at the expense of ultimate clarity, speed and attack which is what the Gallos do so well. And it is this clarity and the resulting sense of instrumental separation that captures the imagination as the A'Diva avoids any sense of brittleness or compression even when dealing with quite complex material at healthy levels. Performance is surprisingly full

bodied and though the speaker doesn't have an obviously extended high end, when you get the sub just right there is a lean punchiness to the system which, while it could never be considered uncoloured is always musically informative. But move to the stands and bring the A'Diva more into the room and away from reflective surfaces (this may well require another subwoofer tweak) and you will be rewarded with

one of the tightest and most stable sound-stages around. It is critical here that the subwoofer crossover point is correct to avoid any directional information from leaking across and unbalancing the sound. But this, in my opinion, is where the system sounds at its best and most dramatic. This is not a speaker

that majors on tonality or instrumental warmth but rather on vitality and sheer clarity. It presents a window onto dynamic shifts and musical technique and enables you to step that bit further into the mid-band and look at each instrument individually and track their development through the piece.

But, if you want an even closer and more detailed view of your music then the Dué is a better, albeit more expensive bet. These, though only 11 inches in height and four inches across consist of two four inch mild steel spheres separated by a cylindrical high frequency driver named CDT by Gallo. On the face of it this seems like an impressive unit. It has a huge curved diaphragm with a radiating area greater than a dozen 1-inch dome tweeters, virtually unlimited output and a dispersion pattern of 180 degrees, which means that it has the same response on and off axis. Add to this an extended high end of up to 40Khz and it would seem to be, on paper at least, the ideal tweeter. There is a removable metal grille/diffuser that reduces the size even further but, having tried them both

ways, I chose to leave them in situ. A very clever bracket that bolts to the back enables the Dués to be mounted in several configurations, on shelves, walls etc, but

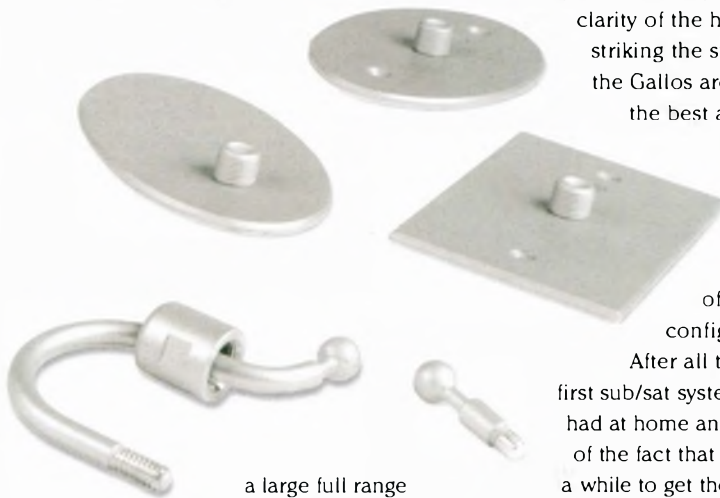
I much preferred them on their stands and in the horizontal, as opposed to vertical position.

The Dué is an entirely different proposition to the single ▶



▶ driver A'Diva. It reproduces music on a much larger scale and puts more flesh on the bone by being tonally richer and stronger. A small tweak on the subwoofer cross-over point and the whole sound-stage just snapped into sharp, and I mean really sharp, focus. This sounds much more like

scale and an added sense of presence plus an unexpected but welcome increase in depth to the wide sound-stage. If you enjoy the minutiae of music or perhaps you want to hear the guitarist's hands on the fretboard, working the note, the singers microphone technique or the clarity of the hammer striking the string then the Gallos are amongst the best around.



a large full range speaker with a stunningly energetic mid and a slightly burnished top end. The tweeter reminds me of a decent ribbon that trades ultimate extension and attack for colour and texture and it works exceptionally well here. The clarity and articulation right through the Dué's range means that you will certainly get a sense of presence and sheer detail that more conventional speakers would struggle to match at this price level. The subwoofer suddenly seems tighter and much faster and the sense of rhythmic progression, already good, moves to another level as the soundstage opens up and the elements are exposed. But is the midband clarity and resolution that lingers in the mind and the way in which the larger Gallos can maintain a starkly open character, especially with vocals or instruments with a percussive part of their nature. Add a second subwoofer and things get more serious yet. Now there is more weight, even greater

It took me a while to really feel comfortable with any of the Gallo configurations.

After all this was the first sub/sat system that I have had at home and regardless of the fact that it took me a while to get the adjustments just right, this is a vastly different portrayal of music to almost any other speaker that has passed through my hands over the years. There is so much potential here, especially with the Dué that I think they are certainly a viable alternative to more conventional, similarly priced box loudspeakers especially if space is at a premium. The sheer joy of being able to hear the



mid and top with such ease and not through a morass of low frequency grunge is liberating and eye opening at the same time. They are certainly not going to be for everybody and there will be far more issues setting them up as an audio as opposed to a home cinema system, but with a bit of perseverance they are never less than interesting and often quite stunning.

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

A'DIVA
 Type: Single 3-inch unit - Mica Polypropylene compound.
 Cabinet: 5-inch mild steel globe
 Sensitivity: 88dB/W
 Nominal impedance: 8 Ohms
 Power Handling: 50 watts (100 watts with crossover)
 Weight: 1.6 Kg
 Price: £250 each

DUÉ
 Type: 2-way, 3 driver satellite
 Mid-Drivers: 2 x 3-inch Mica-Polypropylene compound
 Tweeter: 180 degree Kynar CDT
 Cabinet: 2x4-inch mild steel globes with tweeter between.
 Sensitivity: 89Db/W
 Power handling: 100 watts
 Dimensions (HxWxD): 28x10x10.5 cm
 Weight: 2.6 Kg
 Price: £500 each

MPS 150
 Type: Powered subwoofer
 Frequency response: 24Hz - 160 KHz
 Driver: 10-inch long throw
 Variable phase: 0-180 degrees
 Combined weight: Amp+sub = 17.5 Kg
 Combined dimensions: 30x27.5 cm
 Price: £500
 Wallflower stand
 Height: 36-inches
 Price: £125 a pair
 Dué stand: £170 a pair

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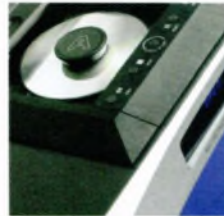
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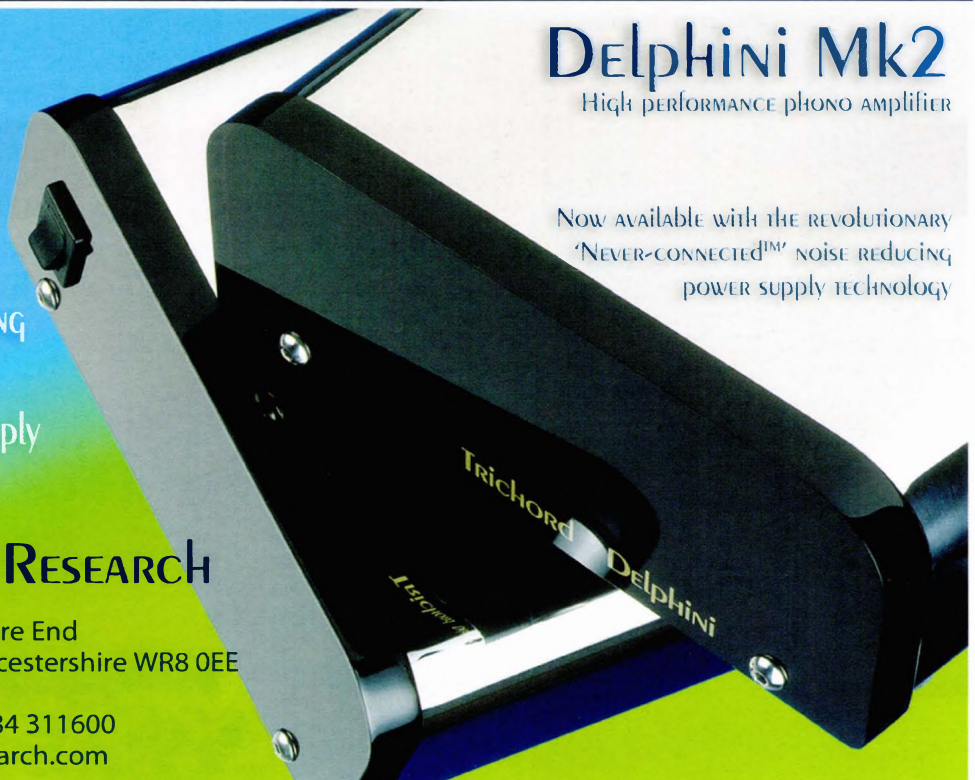
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The Totem Acoustic Forest Loudspeaker

by Jason Kennedy

Now, fruit, or "old man's cake" as it has been dubbed by those whose lack of sophistication, is not to be underrated as a tea time comestible. If a decent example is selected it is a rich and moist bake that compliments the more chewy varieties of tea. I find Ceylon to be a particularly good choice but that's a personal thing. Colour is also key with darkness being a desirable characteristic.

How much of the stuff they consume in Quebec is not clear but we aim to find out in due course. Totem, while not the first brand on the block to produce a high class compact monitor was one of the earliest to invest the genre with the sort of componentry and build associated with very high end loudspeakers. In 1989 when founder Vince Bruzzese produced his first loudspeaker, the Totem Model One, it was one of the most expensive little speakers around, dearer even than the Acoustic Energy AE1 which was itself considered pretty outrageous at around £600. Quite why Vince decided to call such a compact speaker Totem is not entirely clear: It's one of the least pole like speakers around. But that's a classic association rather than the meaning of the word, a totem can it seems be any animate or inanimate emblem to which a group looks up. So I guess a loudspeaker has totemic qualities of a sort, especially if it is imbued with the power to be what Vince calls a 'soul-mover' for the music lover: An unlikely but highly appropriate quality to strive for in an audio component.

Since the happy days of the Model One Vince has expanded the Totem range quite considerably and it now contains eight monitors and six

floorstanders alongside 'home theater' components of which we'll say no more. Well perhaps a little more as Vince describes the Forest as being well suited to both surround sound and stereo duties. It has a shielded main driver and is more than happy to be played loud. Those home cinema guys do like to play loud albeit because this is the only way to get any dynamics out of compressed formats like Dolby Digital and DTS. However many suffixes you put on the end and however many extra stages of processing you introduce in the amplifier, DVD soundtracks never sound transparent or genuinely dynamic in the way that uncompressed formats can. Even the 16-bit, 44.1kHz limitations of the humble compact disc are a breath of fresh air after processed surround sound. But back in the land of maple syrup, Joni Mitchell and Rocky Mountain bicycles you can also find Totem and its unusual approach to cabinet construction. Vince describes the way Totem boxes are built as 'lock-mitred' which means that rather than being folded together from a long slab of MDF with V shapes cut across it, these cabinets are made of separate interlocking sheets. This joint system provides a larger joint surface area than normal and is said to confer greater rigidity from a relatively light box.

The main mid/bass drive unit in

the Forest may look like the Dynaudios that feature so strongly in the rest of the Totem range but bolt counters will have noticed the excess in that department for starters. Dynaudio apparently does not make a driver for a box of this volume and this is an American ATI drive unit with a large, three-inch voice coil and plenty of excursion. It has been modified by Totem and helps extract low frequencies down to 33Hz, which is surprisingly low for the relatively

compact nature of the box.

It's less than a metre high and features a separate

compartment at its base which can be mass loaded, effectively reducing the volume of the speaker proper but allowing it to have a sloping internal floor to

counter standing waves. Oddly however Vince himself does not recommend you load the speaker because it acts as a resonator which reinforces the bass if left unplugged. I guess if you are after a tighter bottom end you could follow the filling instructions.

The main drive unit is only six and a half inches across, including the surround and most of the mounting ring, the polyprop cone comes in at four and a half inches. Yet put this speaker in a medium size UK room and the bass is quite extraordinary in terms of depth and power. This might be explained by the so-called monocoque cabinet construction, which also features veneer on the insides as well to equalise ►



▶ internal and external tensions" and cross braces set at differing angles. There again, maybe it's the "innovative double porting"? In fact it's most likely a combination of factors, but either way is an impressive trick to pull off. The sensitivity, at 87dB, is lower than some but combined with an impedance that is said not to drop below 6.4 ohms it's far from a tough load unless you've got just the one end of a triode to drive it with.

Maybe the secret lies in the aluminium 'Claw' feet. These attractive castings are screwed into the speaker base as an alternative to spikes and a refreshing change they are too. You can use them as is or put the supplied ball bearings between them and your carpet. Though they are not recommended for hard floors you should feel free to experiment. Not only do the balls make it easy to adjust speaker position but they offer a carpet friendly alternative to the traditional pointy things. Spikes merely serve to vibrate the floor and thence the equipment sitting on it, but that's another soap-box. I kicked off with the balls under them on a carpeted floor but ended up getting (far) better results by substituting the Townshend Seismic Bases, albeit raising the system price by nigh on £500 in the process.

Covering the other end of the band, from 3kHz up to 20kHz is a metal dome SEAS tweeter, again modified by Totem with a special chamber. This is the usual 25mm metal dome variety with a grill to protect it from the rougher elements in society - yes children, I mean you! The leafless Forest sprouts a brace of twin, gold plated WBT terminals ready for bi-wiring, all you have to do is figure out which side to put the positive wire. Closer inspection does reveal colour coding but this is only visible with your eye near socket level. Craning your head over the back is not enough. Still you will only have to do it once or twice. Internal cabling is PTFE covered, silver-plated copper chosen for its sound quality and resistance to corrosion.

The aforementioned bass enthusiasm only revealed itself once I had finished running the Forests in downstairs in the living room and hauled them up to the listening room, a smaller domain with a resonant frequency in the region of 40Hz. In the larger room the bass was clearly deep and powerful but in the 'inner sanctum' it was humungus, but strangely not over the top once you put a couple of feet between speaker and rear wall. This is probably because the port resonance is very close to the room resonance. The physical characteristics of the speaker alone were not sufficient to explain the prodigious bass but this coincidence paints a fuller picture. Either way it was a lot of fun hearing the nether regions on a variety of discs, not to mention the genuine tump on a Sly & Robbie compilation that you would usually require a large active speaker or



something a lot heavier to deliver.

What you don't usually get from that type of speaker is the openness and dynamic energy that the Forest delivers. Despite its low sensitivity this is a surprisingly lively and energetic speaker. It produces wide open space, particularly in the depth domain where soundscapes seem to expand behind the speakers giving the music space to unfold in. They are particularly transparent to degrees of reverb and compression, this aspect of the sound standing out whatever the recording. Led Zeppelin's *How The West Was Won* live recordings proving to have acres of space and atmosphere backed up by heavyweight bass courtesy of

Bonzo's massive drum playing. Try the track 'Dazed and Confused'; you can feel the crowd and the tension as the greatest rock'n'roll band of its time throws down the jam in supreme style. That track does however disappear up its own proverbial about half way through - success unfortunately has a tendency to go to a rock star's head, usually via his nostrils.

With classic vinyl such as Billy Cobham's supreme *Spectrum* the Forest's treble can get a little bit much. It seems to pick out cymbals in a big way and with a drummer's album that can be a problem. I found that positioning them square to the rear wall rather than pointing them at the listening seat was beneficial in reducing this emphasis. It also served to expand the soundstage albeit at the expense of narrowing the listening sweetspot. Most of the material I played via the Eikos CD player, Sugden Masterclass AA pre-amplifier, Gamut D200 and Townshend speaker cable worked well, often very well. This is a highly entertaining and yes, soul

▶ moving loudspeaker which laughs at the anality of the dynamically challenged without compromising on detail. In fact you can hear an awful lot through them. Dense hip hop lyrics from Eminem and Reggie Noble (on Missy Elliott's *Da Real World*) open up and reveal themselves for you to enjoy, while heavy duty riffs like Ben Harper's *Faded* can't help but instil an urge to thrash the imaginary plank. Even Radiohead's latest, *Hail to the Thief* has some good tunes on it once you've played it through a few times, and with a speaker like this you'll want to.

While not perhaps as tonally convincing as the rather more expensive Living Voice Avatar OBX-R2 the Forest is nonetheless quite capable of revealing the subtleties of instruments and voices. The choir on *Sacred Feast* is a good example of multiple voices in harmony where each has its own character yet they need to blend in for the piece to work. This speaker reveals the depth of the venue to an unusual degree and this space allows the voices to be heard individually, well almost, and collectively. The aforementioned Sly and Robbie track from the *A Dub Experience* album (all the best dub albums seem to have the least inspiring titles) uses reverb and echo extensively, with the electronic percussion making full use of the space created. The bass drum and guitar hit some cracking notes lower down the scale, almost to the extent that you think the speaker is hitting its end stop



- but we weren't playing that loud, were we?

Just to check whether the bass is over the top with these Totems I put on Aphex Twin's 'Windowlicker', a track that will reveal a lack of low-end control in any system. Happily it came through loud, clear and clean.

Substituting Seismic bases for ball bearings brought forth a considerable improvement in precision however. Dynamics in both level and spatial respects improved markedly and a degree of ease and elasticity was introduced that reinforced the gutsy, grinworthy nature of this robust 12incher.

I don't want to give the impression that this is merely a block-rocking speaker, though that is clearly one of its qualities. It is also quite sophisticated and at least as transparent as one could hope for at the price. It reveals a level of detail with which only the best of its peers can compete, this due to wide bandwidth, low coloration and lest I forget, an excellent sense of timing.

The unusual cabinet construction clearly contributes to the latter, allowing the speaker to reproduce the attack and decay of notes with convincing accuracy. There is a slight sense in which it actually seems to be cheating, dynamics and bandwidth without coloration is a rare combination at almost any price and I suspect the resonant chamber of adding a degree of euphonic coloration at low frequencies. But however it does what it does this is a much better (or cleverer) blend of compromises than one usually finds. It's a surprising and surprisingly appealing package that gets to the heart of the music but reveals the flesh and bones in the process.



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Two-way, reflex loaded loadspeaker
Drive-units -	
Woofer:	6.5inch (160mm) polypropylene with 3" voice coil
Tweeter:	1inch (25mm) aluminium dome
Crossover point:	2.5kHz (compensated 2nd order filter)
Bandwidth:	33Hz - 20kHz (+2dB in room)
Impedance:	8 ohms (6.4 ohms minimum)
Sensitivity:	87dB
Power rating:	120 watts continuous, 200 watts peak
Size WxHxD:	205 x 910 x 267mm
Price -	
Black ash or Mahogany:	£2,390
Cherry or Maple:	£2,560

European Distributor:

Joenit, Belgium
Tel. 0032 15 285 585
E-mail. info@joenit.com

Manufacturer:

Net. www.totemacoustic.com



The Real Deal

Revolver R33 Loudspeaker

by Paul Messenger

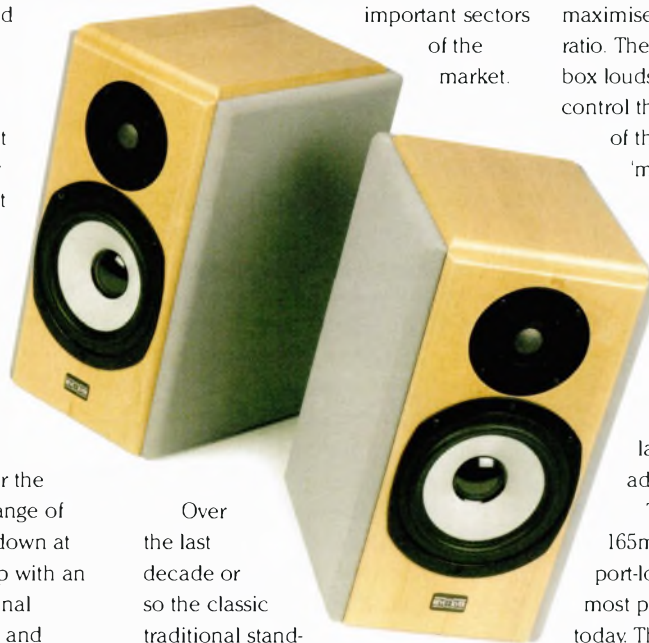
If memory serves me correctly, the Revolver brand was founded by Colin Higham back in the early 1980s, the name owing everything to the fact that its core product was a vinyl-spinning turntable. Although it was a critical and commercial success in the short term, the timing was poor, as the 1980s were the decade of CD's launch, and a bleak time for record player sales, so Revolver disappeared – but only temporarily.

Under new ownership, it resurfaced in the mid-1990s, this time as a budget loudspeaker brand, but stayed around only briefly before disappearing again. Now it's back again, once more focusing on loudspeakers but now owned and operated by some of the top management that left the AGI operation (JPW, Heybrook etc) a couple of years back. The two core models that start the ball rolling include this R33 stand-mount and an R45 floorstander; an R25 centre channel is imminent.

One might query whether the world really needs another range of loudspeakers, but someone down at Revolver has at least come up with an interesting and (mostly) original approach to the presentation and styling. In place of the almost ubiquitous real or imaginary wood finishes, these Revolvers cover the back and sides in an attractive silver-grey cloth, saving the chunky 'pearlised maple' wood for the other three faces. Burgundy red or black cloth may be specified as alternatives, to suit individual decor. Whichever, the net result is attractively different, and seems well camouflaged to fit into the typical

lounge where fabrics are the rule rather than the exception. All the woodwork has radiused 'soft' edges, and the drivers are nicely recessed into the front panel, though surprisingly there's no attempt to provide a matching grille, so the drivers will always be on display. The hefty build involves laminated double-thickness panels for the top, base and front, plus internal bracing.

At £499/pair this is no beer-budget speaker, but rather a serious contender in one of the more important sectors of the market.



Over the last decade or so the classic traditional stand-mount configuration has tended to be eclipsed by compact floorstanders, probably for two reasons quite unrelated to sound quality. First, they avoid the need for speaker stands, which might be essential to the stand-mount from a performance point of view, but which are usually considered less than aesthetically desirable. Secondly the floorstander appears to

offer better value for money, both by virtue of its much larger box and also because it avoids the need for additional stands.

If the floorstander seemed to be taking over for most of the 1990s, the new millennium has seen a revival of interest in stand-mounts, and a recognition that this is still the format that makes most sense for most stereo music systems. It has the better shape inside and out, acoustically speaking, but the more important factor is that it maximises the driver-to-box surface area ratio. The essential task of the regular box loudspeaker is to avoid and/or control the radiation from the surface of the box while providing the 'mechanical earth' that enables the drivers to operate accurately. Keeping the box as small as possible therefore makes a lot of sense, with the key proviso that it needs to be large enough to accommodate and bass-load a main driver large enough to deliver adequate loudness.

That in turn explains why a 165mm (6.5-inch) main driver in a port-loaded 14-litre box is one of the most popular speaker types around today. There are benefits to be had with more drivers and larger boxes, but there are also drawbacks too in extra complexity and costs. When all the variables are weighed and balanced up, the 6.5-inch two-way is hard to beat.

Revolver's example has a high class, cast frame 165mm bass/mid driver with a 118mm diameter woven glassfibre matrix cone, loaded by a generous rear port, while the tweeter uses a 25mm ▶

▶ metal dome. Connection is made via twin (bi-wire/-amp) terminal pairs, supplied with rather fiddly links in place, feeding a high-class crossover using air-cored inductors, metal-film resistors and polypropylene capacitors.

I first saw and liked the look of these Revolver speakers at a recent hi-fi show, forming the impression at the time that this R33 stand-mount might have the edge over its larger floorstanding R45 stablemate. As luck would have it, I tried the larger three-way first, and wasn't particularly knocked out by it, but now I've got my hands on the stand-mount two-way it's pretty clear that my initial diagnosis was pretty accurate.

There's a directness here that's very appealing and communicative, along with a smooth evenhandedness which is a powerful reminder that if you can get the midband right, you're much more than halfway down the road. This isn't a perfect loudspeaker, but it is a very

In-room far-field measurements showed few surprises, indicating a well executed design with just enough variation to impose a measure of character. The R33's biggest strength is its unusually smooth and even balance across the central midband. The presence octave, 1.5-3kHz, is a little restrained, while output is just a little 'hot' around 4kHz in the lower treble. Curiously, this peak coincides with a slight dip in the impedance trace, suggesting it has probably been introduced deliberately during the voicing. The port here is tuned to a relatively high 58Hz, so deep bass isn't really on the agenda here, and output is also inevitably a little strong around the 55Hz mode that is a characteristic of this particular listening room. Free-space siting is strongly indicated here, with bass extension provided down to a decent enough 40Hz. However, output in the upper bass and lower midband is decidedly lean. On our measurement sensitivity is a relatively modest 87dB – a couple of dB below the manufacturer's claim – but that's in the context of a very undemanding load from the amplifier's point of view, the impedance only falling below 8 Ohms above 10kHz.

entertaining and engaging one, because it does the important things really well, and doesn't muck up the less important ones along the way.

As a regular radio listener, I find accurate speech reproduction quite important, and here the R33 is thoroughly impressive. There's no obvious boxiness or thickening from that tough little enclosure, while the voicing is close to ideal – just sufficiently laid back to avoid any aggressive tendencies when partnered by less than the best electronics, yet not sufficient to make voices sound 'shut in'.

One by-product is a slight touch of nasal coloration, it must be admitted, but it is only slight and detracts only marginally from the openness. And although the effects could do with a little more weight, I also enjoyed movies in stereo mode with the R33s, partly because of their excellent diction, but also the fine spacious imaging and freedom from boxiness.

Given the lower treble peak that showed up in the far-field measurements, I half expected to find sibilants overemphasised, but that wasn't at all the case in practice. The peak was in no way intrusive or even obvious, and probably just served to sharpen up the transients a little. I really enjoyed the delicate fine detail and expressiveness of Jorma Kaukonen's guitar work on Hot Tuna's *Live at Sweetwater*.

The very 'quiet' box ensures a wide dynamic range, with fine agility and freedom from the sort of thickening and overhang that is not uncommon amongst the less costly floorstanders. There's no 'chestiness' on male voice here, but one can also accuse the speaker of some lack of warmth and

'body'. Cellos in particular, and violas to a degree, don't have quite their full harmonic richness, while bass guitars could have a little more weight and drive.

While you're not going to find sonic perfection at £499, you will find considerable charm, and that's really

the core strength of this cute little Revolver stand-mount. It faces plenty of competition, but does so with its own uniquely different styling package and a beautifully clean, smooth and even midband, that's at once very informative yet also very easy on the ears. ▶+



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Reflex loaded two-way stand-mounted loudspeaker
Drive units:	165mm woven glass fibre cone bass/mid unit 26mm metal dome tweeter
Bandwidth:	45Hz - 28kHz, +3dB
Efficiency:	89dB claimed (measured at 87dB)
Nominal Impedance:	8 Ohms (min 4.8 Ohms)
Dimensions (WxHxD):	210 x 390 x 280mm
Weight:	8.5kg
Magnetic Shielding:	Yes
Finishes:	Cherry with black, burgundy or gray fabric
Price:	£499

Manufacturer:

Tel. (44)(0)870 0470047
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The Real Deal

Creek A50iR Integrated Amp

by Paul Messenger

It's many years since I've had the chance to try a Creek amp, simply because I don't get to review many amplifiers, but I've always had rather a soft spot for Mike Creek's devices, which have long set a benchmark for supplying no-frills audiophile standards at a near-budget price.

'Keep it simple, stupid' is clearly one of the dictums behind this new integrated amplifier, so anyone in search of features and facilities had better look elsewhere. The front panel is pretty much reductio'd ad absurdum, with just two rotary knobs (one for volume, the other input selection) two buttons (one for on/off, the other tape monitoring), a status LED and an infrared reception window.

The back panel looks just as straightforward, with five line-input phono pairs, one selectable via a tape monitor switch, plus a record-out pair. All inputs are passive, with sensitivities of around 450mV. Vinyl users are also accommodated, as one of the input pairs, labelled Aux/Phono, may be configured for MM or MC pickup cartridges by specifying the appropriate extra input module. An additional pair of phonos, separated from the rest, is ambiguously labelled: "Pre-amp Output (Power amp Input)" – and entirely ignored in the instruction leaflet!

The usual two pairs of speaker socket/binders are fitted and claimed to deliver a perfectly adequate 50W per channel into 8 Ohm loads. A single pair of 4 Ohm speakers may also be satisfactorily used, albeit with a slight drop in the available voltage. Once again a rap over the knuckles for the

proof-reader (I think we might be on dodgy ground there Paul – Ed.) as the instruction leaflet reads W rather than Ω when discussing speaker loads.

The 50-series components succeed the well established and highly regarded 43-series, and (not perhaps before time) follow the dictates of current fashion by replacing Creek's traditional green lettering on black background with a much more modern and classy looking styling package.

Like its partnering CD50 CD player, the A50iR has an attractive silver slim-line fascia in chunky (10mm) brushed alloy – and one that's very nicely finished too, with no sharp edges. The rest of the casework is rather more prosaic black-painted bent steel, with ventilation slots top and bottom – not that this amp gets more than slightly warm, even when working hard.

In fact, this integrated amplifier comes in two versions. A £475 A50i is the standard version, while our £550 A50iR version comes with a particularly neat little remote handset, codenamed ARC-53. Unlike our esteemed editor (who doesn't give a monkey's, probably because he's younger and fitter), I'm very fond of remote control, and am quite certain that I get significantly more use out of a system when the amplifier has this feature.

Trouble is, this A50iR only offers remote control over volume, and while this is useful in itself, it's probably slightly

less so than being able to switch the inputs. Frustration at the inability to do this is heightened here by the fact that the cute little handset includes all the necessary input selection buttons, because it's also used for the more costly 5350SE model which does switch inputs remotely.

That's really the only complaint.

In other respects this seems a very impressive little package – all the more so because it's both relatively affordable and made in Britain. (Creek seriously considered using offshore manufacturing a year or two back, but backed down when its customers made it clear they weren't happy at the prospect!) The published specification looks all in perfectly good order, and Creek claims to use innovative proprietary circuitry in this amplifier, although no details are provided.

While the input socketry is a bit close-packed for my large fingers and some of the bulkier phono plugs around, connecting up the A50iR proved very straightforward, and the listening immediately rewarding.

The short overview is that this amp lacks a little top end sparkle and openness, but holds everything together beautifully and coherently through the mid-band in particular. Stereo imaging is particularly good, in the way it sets up a convincing soundstage and focuses individual images very well, with good location, a wide dynamic range, ►



▷ and a fine sense of depth and transparency.

Many amplifiers have a tendency to emphasise one or another part of the frequency range, but that didn't seem to be the case with this little Creek, which seemed to remain essentially neutral throughout, aside from that top end restraint, and a slight 'thickening' through the lower registers.

My first step was to feed the A50iR from the tape outputs of my regular Naim NAC552 pre-amp, partly because this is the best way to get access to my Prefix-equipped vinyl spinner, and partly because I could also remote-switch my regular sources easily via the 552.

This arrangement actually worked very well, and I simply let the Creek get on with it for a couple of days, mostly driving a pair of KEF Reference Model 205s – a complex multi-way speaker system that's a far from an easy load, but which also has a lovely open neutrality. And while A50iR doesn't deliver the dynamic poise and tension of my regular



and very costly Naim power amp, it remained very listenable and enjoyable throughout, showing no real signs of weakness barring a slightly 'softer' and more laid back presentation than usually experience.

I had a Creek CD50 CD player on hand to provide a more relevant partner

for the A50iR, and settled down to some serious listening sessions with this and my reference Naim CDS2 as sources, and bringing Rega's Mira 3 amplifier into the frame for comparison. I started spinning one of my current, if obscure, favourites – Hot Tuna's *Live at Sweetwater Two* (1992, Relix), and was conscious of the way the Creek combo glossed over some of the fine detail on this largely acoustic recording. The mechanical noises of fingers on strings and frets were less obvious than expected, especially when using the less costly Creek CD player, and this did

rob the recording of some of its 'liveness' and atmosphere. Something of the same was true with Lambchop's *Nixon*, where the little Creek did a fine job of delivering the broad midband with great delicacy and realism, but also seemed just a little lacking in bass authority and top end 'sparkle' compared to the alternatives on hand. The Rega, for example, delivers a slightly 'bigger' all round sound, but without the notably 'tidy' quality that the Creek brings to the party.

The inherent high quality of the Creek amp is obvious from the way it has no difficulty in distinguishing, for example, between the Creek and Naim CD players. What sets it apart, however, is that it does so quite effortlessly and without really seeming to try. It might be a little too

matter-of-fact for some tastes, even a shade dull at times, but does dig down below the skin of the sound and into the kernel of the music, and does so in such a way that is most unlikely to cause irritation, even with the sort of inexpensive and modest quality loudspeaker systems with which it's likely to be partnered.

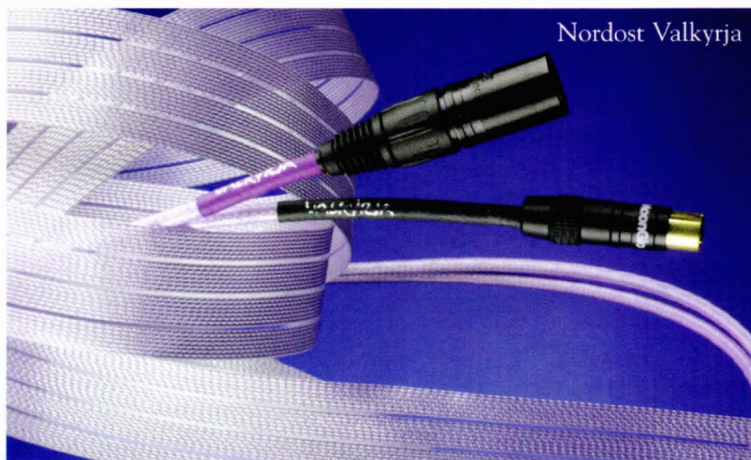


TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Power Output (Both Channels):	50 Watts into 8 Ω
Maximum Current (5mS for 3% THD):	>18 Amps
Power Amp Slew Rate:	> 40 V per μS
Input Sensitivity (Passive Line):	450 mV line level input for 50 W
Signal to Noise Ratio (A weighted):	> 100 dB
Separation (Line Input @ 1kHz):	> 60dB
Remote Control:	Volume Et Mute only
Dimensions (WxHxD):	430 x 65 x 250mm
Weight:	6kg
Price:	£550 (€475 w/o remote vol)

Manufacturer:
 Creek Audio Limited
 12 Avebury Court, Mark Road,
 Hemel Hempstead
 HP2 7TA
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 £POA
 Yamaha CT-810 AM/FM Tuner £750
 Stax 40/40 Headphones £275
 1 mtr Kondo KSL LP interconnect normal price £2000 £995
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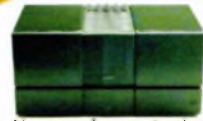
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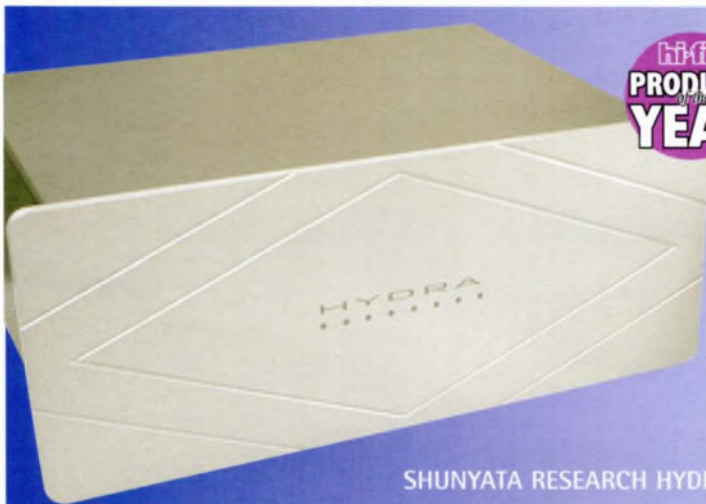
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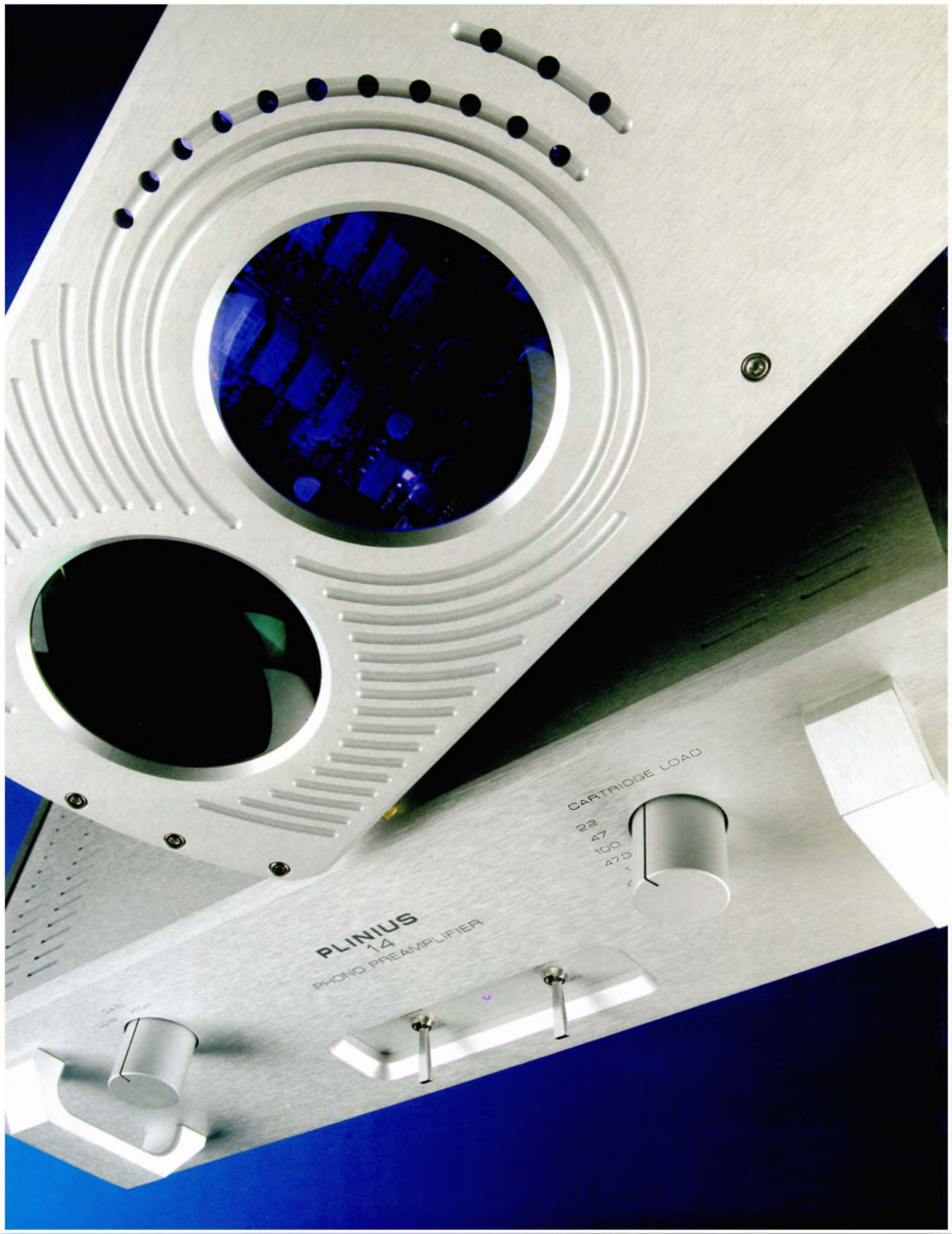
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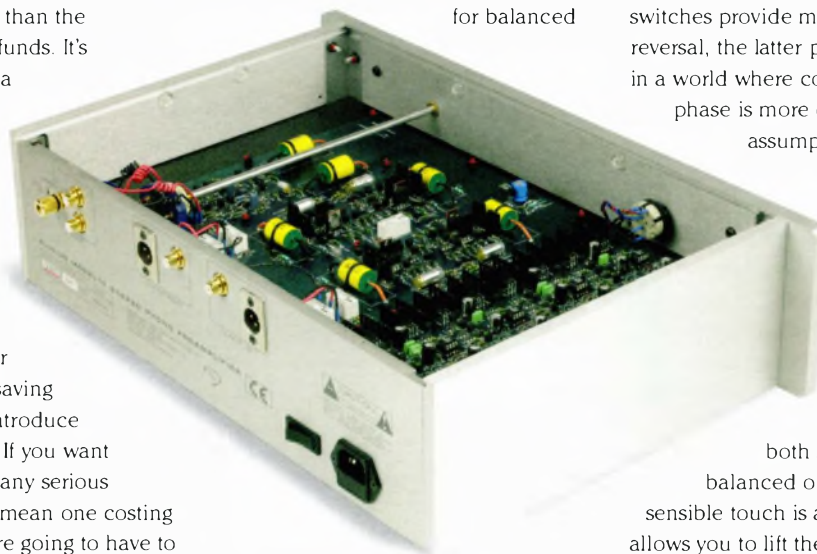
The Plinius M14, Chord Symphonic and something a little different

by Roy Gregory

In the last couple of issues we've looked at a whole collection of exotic and almost inexcusably expensive cartridges – the good news being that once you get beyond a couple of thousand pounds personal taste and priorities assume greater importance in deciding preferences than the expenditure of extra funds. It's entirely possible that a £2.5K contender might suit you better than one costing £4K, or even more. Unfortunately the reverse might also be true. But before you start rubbing your hands at the idea of saving a bit of money, let's introduce you to the bad news. If you want to get the best out of any serious cartridge, by which I mean one costing more than £500, you're going to have to spend at least four figures on a phono-stage. Spend over a grand on a needle and the phono-amplification becomes critical to realising the potential benefits of your purchase.

It was a lesson brought crushing home by arrival of *The Groove*, a phono-stage that totally redefined expectations of LP performance, banishing in one fell swoop, problems I'd always attributed to the record player itself. Overnight we had a new benchmark for phono-stage performance – albeit a resolutely hair-shirt one. And there's the rub. To get the best out of *The Groove* (itself about to receive a performance leg-up in the shape of *The Pulse* power

supply) you need to be confident of your gain and loading requirements. Hardly ideal if you want to run more than one cartridge, an increasingly common occurrence. Then there are other versatility issues, such as a possible preference for balanced



connection or phase reversal. So, with this in mind, I've been looking at a couple of full facilities phono-stages, the Plinius M14 and Chord Symphonic.

Plinius M14

If you are one of those who believes that phono-stages should be heard and not seen, then you'll not be purchasing a Plinius. This is arguably the largest one-box phono stage I've ever seen, its full width rack mounted casework complete with front-panel handles and an overall height of five

and a half inches. That makes it bigger than many line-stages, a product type it's easily mistaken for, courtesy of the control layout and its two large rotary knobs. These give you high and low gain settings and six discrete input loading options. The traditional toggle switches provide mute and phase reversal, the latter particularly useful in a world where correct absolute phase is more often based on assumption rather than fact.

Round the back you'll see conventional RCA/phono inputs, together with a decent earth binding post, alongside both single-ended and balanced outputs. A final sensible touch is a small switch that allows you to lift the chassis ground, another thing that's often assumed to be a good thing until it causes a problem. Fit and finish is to the high standards we've come to expect from Plinius, while I guess styling is best described as traditional bordering on the old-fashioned. Power arrives through an IEC socket.

The sound of the Plinius is much the same as its appearance: big, solid and stable. Whilst it might lack the immediacy, transparency and ultimate resolution of *The Groove* (the whole *raison d'être* for the latter's eschewing adjustments) the M14 does have a nice feel for the shape and structure of the



▶ music. Founded on a deep, solid bass, the soundstage is large and well defined, but more importantly, instruments are well separated and stay that way.

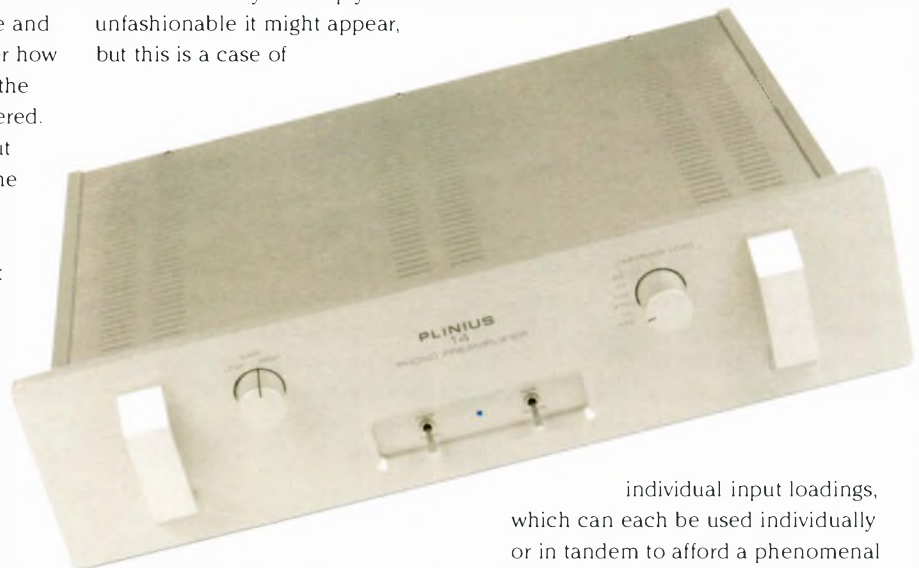


The Plinius has control in spades. Even the busiest passages are handled with an air of calm, and if the slight lack of top-end extension leaves it sounding just a shade dark and shut-in (compared once again to The Groove) it also makes it surprisingly kind to surface noise and high-frequency nasties. No matter how congested the recorded climax, the Plinius sounds calm and unflustered.

The front panel control layout was simplicity itself to use and the selectable loadings are well chosen. The high-gain setting was perfectly adequate to accept the 0.3mV delivered by the Insider Reference, while the low-gain position brought a sense of ease and grace to the Koetsu Black. The overall presentation was engaging and enjoyable, but erred slightly more to the cerebral and soulful rather than the impressive or dramatic. Unfailingly musical, many listeners will welcome its easy poise and stable presentation, relaxed and ideally suited to long term listening. It might sound as if I'm damning the M14

with faint praise, but the big Plinius really does represent the ultimate all-rounder. One on one with a hair-shirt design like The Groove, you might miss the speed and attack on plucked guitar strings, the tiny dynamic details that bring a voice to life, but listen on

in isolation and you'll start to appreciate just what a well rounded and musical device the Plinius really is. Deeply unfashionable it might appear, but this is a case of



old-style and all the better for it, long on substance and low on listening fatigue. If adjustments are what light your candle, listen to the Plinius M14. It might just bring a smile to your face.

Chord Symphonic

The Chord phono-stage is as unremittingly modern as the Plinius is staid. The beautifully sculpted and curved block of aluminium that constitutes the casework will be familiar from Chord's DAC 64, although in this instance it has two of the domed windows in the top-plate, complete with the obligatory blue illumination. Pick the compact Chord up and you'll be astonished at just how solid it feels, while with a box this pretty I doubt you'll want to be hiding it away.

Round the back, the Chord has about a fifth of the space available on the back of the Plinius, but manages to cram all its considerable battery of controls and connections onto just the one side. There are single-ended and balanced inputs and outputs, along with twelve individual push-buttons. These allow you to choose from four discrete gain settings (58, 68, 74 and 85dB) as well as six

individual input loadings, which can each be used individually or in tandem to afford a phenomenal range of resistive loading options as well as either 50 or 150pF capacitance. There's a switch to select balanced or single-ended input and one to select the sophisticated rumble filter, another overlooked facility these days. ▶

▶ I don't care how good your turntable is, are you telling me none of your records are warped. And with an increasing appreciation of historical material the quality of what's on your discs is itself becoming far more variable in the problems it presents.

The windows provide a view of the PCB, and this is equipped with small LEDs



that light adjacent to legends printed on the board to indicate setting status. Very nice, very neat, but no real substitute for clear labeling of the switches (and what about the sockets) on the back panel itself. Once again power enters through an IEC socket, but with all this hardware to accommodate something has to suffer, and in this case it's the earth post, one of the meanest I've ever come across: Small, fiddly and with too short a thread. A small blemish on an otherwise immaculately presented product, hopefully Chord can sort it out.

First acquaintance with the Chord was something of a disappointment. The sound was nice enough but it lacked air, space and transparency, the resulting effect locked too securely on the vocal and rather earthbound and sat-on as a result. That was with the settings optimised for the Clearaudio and based on past experience. Oh dear I thought.

Which is when I started considering all those little black buttons on the back of the unit. Sure enough, further experimentation transformed things. First, engaging the rumble filter reduced the earthbound effect and increased transparency. At last I could see a little way back into the stage, rather than having all the images crowding forward. Next step was the discovery of a default gain setting. The four gain options actually reduce overall gain!

The default setting was essential to obtaining proper substance and musical energy at frequency extremes with the Clearaudio, hence the previously mid-prominent performance. I do think that this is something that should be made clear in the otherwise excellent manual. Final piece in the jigsaw was backing the loading off from the normally preferred 100 Ohms to 270. What a difference. Space, air and yes, I'm sure I even heard some life in there!

Of course, I've given you the short version, and the reality involved much gnashing of



teeth and rending of clothes. The number of options available here is simply mind-boggling. However, the result is what's important and the real story here is that the adjustments on the Chord are simple to use and make a real musical difference. In final trim and fully optimised, the Chord is an impressive beast. Just be aware that all those

switches are an essential part of realising that performance, not just an optional extra.

The Symphonic is the quietest unit here, a fact that mirrors the clean, polished competence of its musical performance. It treads a middle line between the easy grace of the Plinius and the ultra-transparency of the Groove. It's clean rather than transparent, quick and tidy rather than having the life and jump of the hair-shirt option. It does all the hi-fi things well, and more importantly, keeps them all in balance. Refreshingly free of exaggeration the end result errs to the academic, a characteristic familiar from Chord's other amplification. Timing and the shape of a melody lag behind the Plinius, absolute separation and detail are better. You get all the notes, crisply defined but less organically presented when it comes to the flow from one to another.

Given my druthers I'd opt for a little less definition and control in return for a little more life and verve, but that's personal taste talking. That option is out there (along with its own associated compromises) for those who want it. But for those spoilt by a high-quality digital source and who demand similar noise levels and technical attributes from their vinyl

front-end, the Symphonic offers enough of what's right with vinyl without what's wrong with it being allowed to intrude or irritate. Spectral balance, devoid of that irritatingly familiar fat bottom end that afflicts too many record playing systems will integrate perfectly with a system balanced to make the most of silver discs. Don't make the obvious mistake here and assume that the Chord Symphonic is a phono-stage that makes vinyl sound like CD. It's actually a phono-stage that's learnt a few important lessons from the ▶

▶ digital format. There are those customers who'll take one listen and breathe a huge sigh of relief.

And now for something...

...completely different. As promised, and for your delectation, a sneak peak at something you've probably never heard of, and will probably never see again. What, you might well ask, is the point of that. Indulge me for a moment, for this my friends, is history.



Here is where it all started. Maverick designer and general electrical genius John Curl, father of the legendary Mark Levinson JC1 pre-amp amongst other things, got fed-up with being taken advantage of by the hi-fi industry and set up on his own account. Like many things he was involved in, his new company, dubbed Vendetta Research, promised more than it delivered, but before it disappeared it produced this fabulous phono-stage. Something of a visionary, Curl had recognised that the writing was on the wall for full-facilities pre-amps, so he made his moving-coil stage with a line-level output. Either that or he was just plain disgusted by the quality of most MM stages, but that's another story. So, it might have been the Michell Iso that popularised the MC to line-level concept (at least as far as the UK is concerned) but it was significantly pre-dated by the Vendetta.

Presented as a totally dual-mono design, the Vendetta consists of a pair of slim cases, both attached to a single, rack width face-plate, and each with its

own captive, cubic power supply.

That means two mains plugs folks. In terms of facilities, that's simple. There aren't any! RCA/phono inputs and outputs, together with a nice solid earth post for each channel. There are two small circuit boards in each case, but the only adjustments available take the form of a loop of gold wire and four erratically positioned sockets accept it. Completely unlabeled I decided to leave well alone, although subsequent listening suggests a setting lower than the

default 47K. Vague I know, but the problem is that I can't exactly ask the designer, can I?

Why review the Vendetta? A number of reasons really. First and foremost, with any mature technology there's always the option to pick up golden oldie equipment at bargain prices. It might have been a pace-setter in its day, but it's interesting to see how it stacks up to today's benchmarks. Is it legendary because it's rare: is it rare because it's simply no damn good? Then of course there's its historical significance. And finally... Well, finally, because I got the chance to hear a unit I've always dreamt about, which is

reason enough really.

There's only one word to describe my reaction to the Vendetta and that's... Wow! I've waited a long time to listen to this unit and to say that it's exceeded my expectations is a major understatement. Conceptually, the Vendetta is far closer to The Groove than the other two phono-stages auditioned here. Sonically it's far closer too, although there are differences to be sure.

Once again, The Groove shades things in terms of transparency and resolution, but not by as much as you'd think. The Vendetta responds with superb overall coherence. It has the same grasp of tempo and pace that the Connoisseur possesses, carving beautifully shaped phrases and musical lines. Music with the Vendetta always makes sense, always communicates, and I think that leads to its greatest strength of all.

There's a seductive quality to its sound that draws you into the performance. Part sweetness, part colour and part authority, the result simply convinces. I could go on at some length and into increasing detail, but I'm not sure it would serve any purpose. The bottom line is, that short of the Connoisseur and the Boulder, this is, alongside The Groove, the best, and certainly the most enjoyable phono-stage I've used. It matches the current benchmark for performance in a category that it established getting on for 20 years ago. And don't go thinking that this is a case of rose tinted spectacles. I approached the Vendetta with just as critical a stance as any other unit that arrives for review. That I was completely seduced by the results says it all really.

Sadly, the Vendetta is rare, although second-hand examples aren't particularly expensive (until now ▶

▶ that is!) so I wouldn't put it too high on your personal wish list. I'm just glad I finally got to hear one, proving along the way that class will out, and that newer doesn't necessarily mean better. There are older units that still cut the mustard, and some of them are available for very affordable prices. However, before you get all gung-ho about vintage equipment, bear in mind that there are generally service and support issues to go with it. And if you do go this route, make sure that it's the sound that seduces you, not the history or the idea of a bargain. What's really impressive about the Vendetta is that it meets today's products on their own ground and still shows them a trick or two.

This all started because the Vendetta's owner wanted to know whether it was time to upgrade. Well Tony, the answer is a resounding no, at least not unless you're thinking of spending serious money. And if you do ever upgrade, the price of the free consultancy is first refusal on your existing unit. I could give it a very good home indeed. ▶+

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Chord Symphonic
 Type: User adjustable, solid-state phono-stage
 Inputs: 1pr single-ended RCA/phono
 1pr balanced XLR
 Input Loading: 50 or 150pF
 33, 100, 270, 4K7 or 47K Ohms, discrete or in combination
 Gain: 90, 85,74, 68 or 58 dB
 Outputs: 1pr single-ended RCA/phono
 1pr balanced XLR
 Dimensions (WxHxD): 335 x 65 x 145mm
 Weight: 5Kg
 Price: £1995

Manufacturer:

Chord Electronics Ltd.
 Tel. (44)(0)1622 721444
 E-mail. sales@chord.electronics.co.uk
 Net. www.chordelectronics.co.uk

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Plinius M14
 Type: User adjustable, solid-state phono-stage
 Inputs: 1pr RCA/Phono
 Input Loading: 22, 47, 100, 470, 1K and 47K Ohms
 Gain – Low: 60 dB
 High: 66 dB
 Outputs: 1pr single-ended RCA/phono
 1pr balanced XLR
 Dimensions (WxHxD): 485 x 140 x 335mm
 Weight: 9.5Kg
 Finishes: Silver or black
 Price: £2750

UK Distributor:

Absolute Analogue
 Tel. (44)(0)208 459 8113
 E-mail. Absolute_Analogue@email.msn.com
 Net. www.absoluteanalogue.co.uk

Manufacturer:

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Care In The Community?

Looking After That Old Friend In The Record Rack

by Reuben Parry

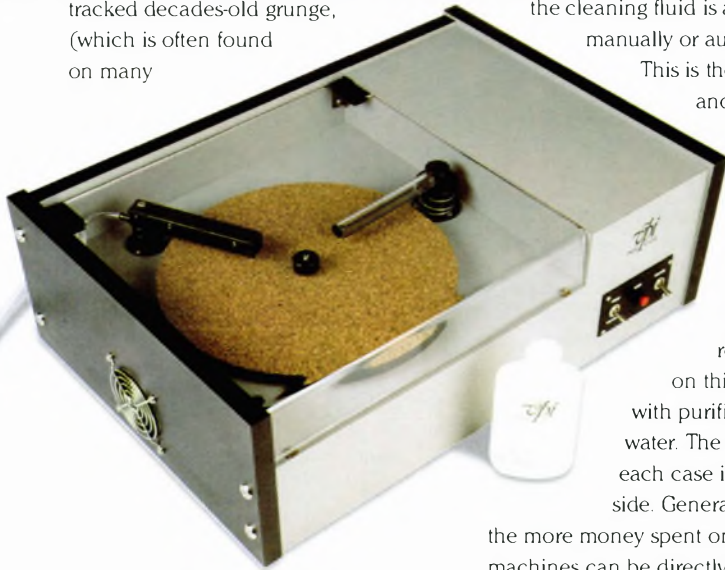
Vinyl hygiene and general record storage is a depressingly unglamorous subject. Most of us can happily spend thousands of pounds on vinyl replay but invest very little thought or capital on the protective sleeves, record racks and cleaning systems that will allow you to get the best out of your collection. This is false economy. For a relatively modest outlay you can ensure that these often very costly purchases, both old and new, continue to retain their condition and value as well. It can

also incidentally help protect and preserve the life of your cartridge in its thanklessly concentric journey and improve the sound achieved from vinyl replay. So really this is one of those timely reminders about the merits of grooming and presentation. It's a dirty job but someone's got to write about it, and here goes.

As a basic starting point the carbon fibre LP cleaning brush is an essential "dry" cleaning system. These brushes and there's a good selection to choose

from remove the visual everyday detritus, dust and fluff that settles on a record. Moreover the minute carbon fibres will also to quote Madonna "get into the groove" without causing any damage. I still have a twenty-year old Hunt EDA brush that works just as well today as it did on the first day that it left the box. Modern equivalents include the Decca MKIII and Clearaudio Souther SD5152 brushes which retail at around the £15.00 price point and do a brilliant sanitation job. ▶

▶ When brushing just doesn't cut through all that embedded whole-grained mustard then it's time to consider a wet cleaning system. Greasy finger marks, unseen sticky substances down in the grooves and deeply tracked decades-old grunge, (which is often found on many



cherished second-hand buys), or even those mould release agents present on every new LP, simply requires a more sophisticated approach. There are manual cleaning kits out there which will set you off in the right direction with cleaning fluid, applicators and a reservoir bath to spin the record through. These are reasonably priced at between the £30.00 to £50.00 point. If your intention is to only clean a few records then this economical method will prove adequate. However, when a record collection has grown and grown into many hundreds or even thousands of LPs, EPs, singles or maybe even 78s, then special measures need to be taken. This is a time when the big boys's toys come into their own.

The way forward is clear. Buy a dedicated semi-automatic record-cleaning machine like those found in the Moth, VPI, Loricraft or Clearaudio ranges. Don't get me wrong, this is not a step to be taken lightly. We are talking

about spending as much as a £1000.00 on a noisy but to my mind essential box of tricks. Experience tells me that all these machines do pretty much the same thing. They have a motor mechanism that spins the record while the cleaning fluid is applied either manually or automatically.

This is then worked into and around the grooves and then removed to a reservoir by a vacuum pump. The process is repeated but on this occasion with purified or distilled water. The end result in each case is a pristine LP side. Generally speaking

the more money spent on one of these machines can be directly related to the ease of the overall operation. Different reviews will always have their favourites. Simon Groome, for example, loves the Loricraft. While I myself during five years

of faultless record cleaning would not be parted from an extremely reliable VPI HW16 machine that has repaid an asking price of nearly £500.00 many times over. You pay your money and take your choice where these are concerned. But if funds are short then why not consider a real enthusiast's approach: namely the Moth Cleaning Machine which in its kit form retails at a modest £225.00 for the MKI or £255.00 for the MKII version. With some basic wood working skills building the MDF box to house the tricks is a straightforward exercise. In the hands of a professional carpenter, well, I have seen just what can be achieved with one of these kits as it was transformed into an absolutely stunning piece of oak finished furniture.

A question you must ask yourself after having selected the right tool for this job is, "what's your poison?" To be fair some of the distributors like The Cherished Record Company (CRC) take this decision away from you by supplying VIP's own concentrated cleaning fluid with the machine. Of course record-cleaning veterans out there will have over time developed their own home brews. But personally I'd be wary of any recommendations you may receive, especially alcohol-based ones, and start by using one of those branded fluids. Moth Group markets their own which retails at £15.00 for a litre and £35.00 for the five-litre container. They also carry an excellent range of Last products that includes Last Record Cleaner at £15.00, Power Clean and LP preservative for £27.50

each. An alternative would be to use Disc Doctor—a potent little non-prescription cocktail imported from the States by CRC. This unpronounceable collection of chemicals cuts through everyday contaminants like dirt, grease, mold and



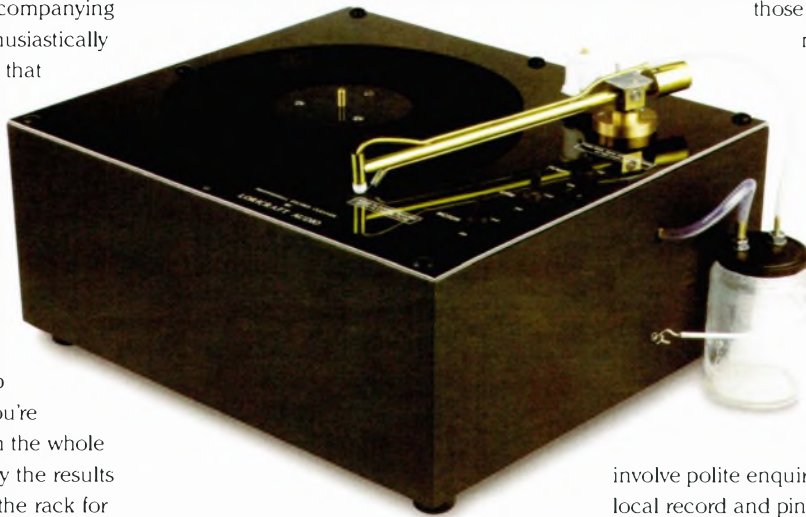
▶ mildew, while also removing spores to inhibit any mold regrowth. Detritus is dealt a seriously deadly blow here. Moreover with this cleaner you can safely treat LPs, 45s, Acetates, Shellac and plastic 78s, as well as Edison Diamond Discs. Understandably, across America, the Sound Archives, University Collections and Retailers have recommended its use. However, always thoroughly read the accompanying instructions before enthusiastically embarking on cleaning that first record. In fact my advice (and you're getting it whether you want it or not) would be to practise using that new cleaning machine and these liquids on a worthless but grubby charity shop purchase. Only once you're totally comfortable with the whole process and satisfied by the results should you reach into the rack for a precious recording.

So, you've successfully and properly cleaned a record that can and will be found in any Oxfam, that ubiquitous copy of *The Sound Of Music* is now in a sparkling, good as new, condition and you're tempted to play it. Snap out of it, now! This is just a short step away from madness. Before you know it a Julie Andrews poster will be given pride of place on the living room wall and you'll find yourself wondering what ever happened to the Von Trapp family in post-war Germany. Don't be distracted. There's still more important record care work to do. So what's next? Well, I think you should immediately zap that LP with a Zerostat 3 static reduction pistol. Static electricity across the vinyl surfaces attracts dust. Let's not encourage it back. Cleaning records twice is definitely a chore.

Then, instead of returning the record to its original liner, why not place it in a new anti-static inner sleeve like

those manufactured by Nagaoka. This in turn can reside within a traditional paper sleeve before going back inside the album cover.

Having attended to a record's personal hygiene needs, it's probably worth thinking about extending all this grooming to the protection of the artwork from dirt, discolouration and general wear



and tear. The one stop shop for a truly comprehensive range of paper or polythene-lined inner sleeves and polythene and PVC outers for seven-inch, ten-inch and twelve-inch records, together with a host of other accessories, is the West Yorkshire based mail order Company, Covers 33. Examples of their reasonable pricing regime are as follows: The twelve-inch polythene outer sleeves start at \$6.00 per fifty, seven inch PVC sleeves are \$5.00 for twenty five and the twelve-inch white paper inners are priced at \$11.00 for a hundred. If you start to believe in records as artefacts as well as music then these basic measures will automatically become a thoroughly good habit to get into. It's these small touches that make all the difference when spinning these discs on the turntable or perhaps when selling them as top dollar "mint" copies on ebay at some stage in the future.

The final link in this record care chain is the choice of a suitable "Residential Home". Stacking all those recently cleaned and repackaged LPs against the listening room wall is at best a short-term solution. Proper furniture is needed to house them. Options include the bespoke cabinetmaker quality units advertised in the back of publications like *The Gramophone* magazine or those convenient and nicely finished wood veneer flat-pack storage systems from high street stores such as Ikea and Habitat. Also worth considering are the black MDF cubes from Moth Group that hold around 120 LPs each.

Other solutions involve polite enquiries at both your local record and pine shops. It's surprising how many of them sell or will build you a made-to-measure piece. Examples that I know of close to home are Piccadilly Records in Manchester they stock an unfinished MDF While nearby in the Peak District is Changing Rooms of Whaley Bridge, a pine shop that has supplied me with all my CD storage and who would build LP furniture if requested.

Realistically, though, most of us will want to look no further than the flat-pack solution. And to be fair Ikea and Habitat have plenty to offer in this department. For value, it's hard to quibble with Ikea's venerable Billy. A range of book shelving available in two laminate and three veneer finishes, a tall bookcase two metres high and 60cms wide will set you back as little as \$29. Like I said, hard to beat. However, there are a few provisos with Billy. Firstly, the shelves are not the thickest, which means you should avoid the 80cm wide



▷ option even though it might appear to offer even better value. The resulting sag is not a pretty sight! Secondly, a fixed shelf is used to brace the carcass and it's damned inconveniently positioned, meaning that unless you move it up, you'll only get four rows of records in each unit. Worry not, it's a fairly simple mod. Finally, the shelf depth is only 27cm so your records will overhang the leading edge slightly. No big deal, but it does mean that you can't use the optional doors to protect them from cats and the like. (You only have to look at the record spines in second-hand shops to appreciate that mine are not the only feline hoodlums who see exposed record sleeves as the perfect scratching post!)

A better, albeit more costly alternative from Ikea is their Bonde system. Sets of four, eight or twelve cubes, each around 36cms square and 40cms deep, they are perfectly suited to record storage, come in a choice of white or two wood veneers. There is the option of solid or glass doors, or drawers that will accept all your associated tools and accessories or racks for CDs. The 218cm tall, twelve cube unit starts at £115, but boy does it hold a lot of records, including the bulkiest of box-sets.

Both the Ikea units daisy-chain together really easily, but fully loaded they should certainly be attached to the wall. One other suggestion: The backing boards on both these systems are fairly flimsy. Examine the tacks that hold them in place and then take a trip to your local hardware store and get some nice barbed shaft equivalents with nice big heads. Then use about three

times as many as Ikea provide. The last thing you want to be doing is unloading your record storage just so that you can knock the back-board back into place. Use the standard tacks and sliding all your records in and out will detach the thin boarding quicker than a boxer's retina.

Alternatively Habitat stock a nicely finished 80x80cm beech veneered unit



Ikea Bonde

which is usefully divided into four sections that internally measure 360x360mm each. With a depth of 330mm and full-piece back panel, they provide excellent record accommodation and will comfortably house approximately 400 LPs for the \$89.00 asking price. That makes them more expensive than the superficially similar Bonde units, but then they are more robust. The 360mm height again allows you to fit in those awkward sized box sets. Moreover, you can safely stack two or more of these units.

Lastly, once you've cleaned, protected and racked up all those

records what about systematically organising the collection? This will appeal to anyone who has an anal personality or owns thousands of LPs and can never find the one they want to play. I have occasionally been known to slip into both categories, so imposing a bit of structure in my life was a necessity. The easy part was sectioning out the rock and

pop, blues and jazz, soundtracks, twelve-inch singles, folk and country LPs. They all get put in alphabetical order by artist and then alphabetically again by album title. To aid you in this task Moth Group supplies the CD-ROM *Rock Database* and tabbed LP dividers. However, classical music, mainly because of the huge number of titles involved, required a little more thought. In the end I chose to firstly divide the classical LPs by Record Company. In this way Columbia precedes Decca which is in turn followed by DGG, EMI and so on. As there are many sub-labels issued by these Companies when I look, for example, at the Deccas they are again broken

down into alphabetical label sub-sections like Phase-4 PFS; Ace Of Diamonds SDD and Decca SXL 2000. Only then do I put the albums in an alphabetical order by composer and then by the work. It's a convoluted method, I know, but this way I can quickly track performances down. I could have just as easily organised them by composer and composition but I have in the past had a reputation for being a bit of a "label" man and still suffer from that mindset.

Well, I've written about it. Hopefully you've read it. So go take some care!



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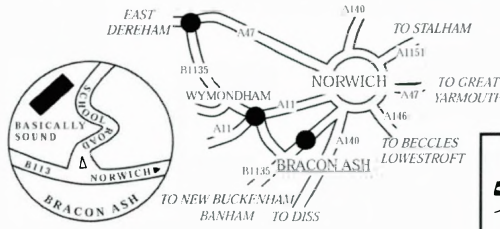


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


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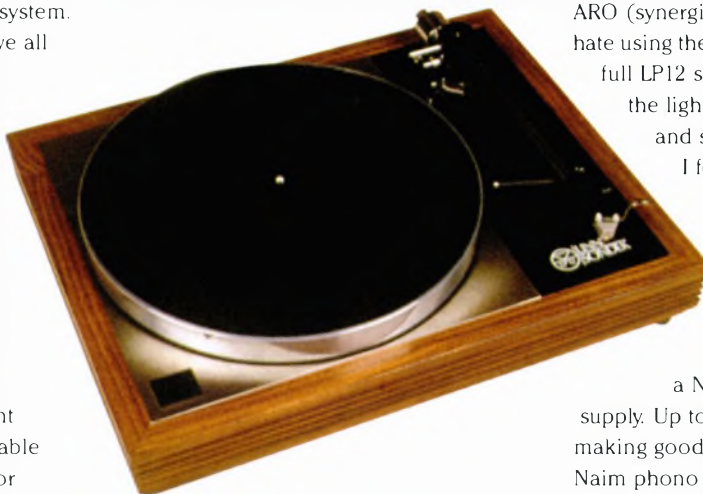
Tales from the Diskworld... or, Hectors odyssey...

by Jason Hector

Since my profile was written for Issue 1 of Hi-Fi+, way back in April 1999, my system has metamorphosed completely and taken some new and unforeseen directions. This has largely I believe, been due to two things: exposure to more equipment and a better understanding of what I am trying to achieve with my system. Hang on a minute aren't we all striving for accuracy and therefore the same thing? Well I don't believe we are. I would sooner listen to some cheaper gear that manages to sound musical but lacked detail, imaging and bandwidth than some super detailed, pin point soundstage and sterile sounding equipment that some others seem unable to do without. Not better or worse, just different. Whilst most people would want the same things from a top flight system, it's in the lower and middle-end gear where compromises are necessary and where differences of opinion over what is really important can appear (and matter).

So in any system of mine, emphasis would be placed, above all, on the musicality, the ability to play music with pace, rhythm and timing, or to use the old flat earth parlance, the PRaT attributes. But I also want my system to sound natural, with good tonality and the way it integrates the musical strands has become a key differentiator when I listen to a new component.

In the system as it stood in issue 1 the Shahinian speakers were probably the most unusual devices, already putting their stamp on the sound as a whole. In many ways the subsequent upgrades have really had the aim of extracting more of this speaker's particular



performance envelope (along with its bigger, or at least more expensive brother, the Obelisk). These speakers are capable of such a natural and lifelike presentation, and ultimately musical flow, that they have become the key parts to my system. I cannot really see myself buying another make, as no other speaker I have heard can quite equal the way their particular strengths match my own requirements (mind you I'd love to have a set of Quad ELS57's for a while...).

The first set of upgrades were analogue based. Now, considering the pretty poor state of my then CD player this might at first sight seem strange, but most of the new music

I was listening to (Indie and older stuff largely) is available on vinyl and I had far more LP's anyway. But enough of my insecure justification, what did I do? The first change was to bolt a Dynavector 17D2 cartridge to the Naim ARO arm. This cartridge interfaces extremely well with the ARO (synergistically even, though I hate using the word) with the slightly full LP12 sound dovetailing with the lightness of presentation and speed of this cartridge.

I felt with this upgrade that the analogue front end had really entered the high-end and just to really unbalance the sources I added a Naim Prefix and Power supply. Up to this point I had been making good use of the excellent Naim phono boards in the 102 pre-amplifier. The Prefix takes those boards, well the circuit anyway, and places it in a box in the LP12, allowing a very short arm lead. The Prefix is also powered by a separate power supply in typical Naim fashion. This further benefits the phono performance, but interestingly also improves the rest of the pre-amplifier. I guess that it is easing the load on its power supply. The turntable was now sounding really good, with the expected hallmarks of speed, timing and the dynamic drive you would expect from the marques involved. The 17D2 was proved to be a high resolution cartridge when fed into the Prefix and the system started to



► pull far more music from the grooves, while the NAC102 lost a degree of confusion when the music was stepped up a gear.

Up to this point I had not considered changing any of the standard Naim signal or power leads simply because I hadn't heard anything that improved on them. Sure, several leads could give me a more Hi-Fi sound but at the expense of a believable, integrated and musical result. Following my review of the MusicWorks products in issue 2, I kitted out my system with these leads full time. They were a major step forward, allowing greater detail to appear in the room, with lower distortion which freed up the systems dynamic capabilities. All this though was only desirable as the canny guys at MusicWorks managed to keep the musical "whole" intact. A band were still playing together not sounding like they were playing different tracks, which seems to be the result with many cable-based tweaks to a Naim system.

The next upgrade, from Naim Audio NAC102 to NAC82 pre-amplifiers was also a tad odd (if very orthodox) at this point as my CD player was by now very obviously the weakest link and I should have said goodbye. But I had my eye on a second-hand two-box player for the future and the NAC82 was the obvious next upgrade so in it came. The legendary Naim upgrade path is something that most people will have heard of but I doubt that many reviews have been written detailing the sort of improvements you get when moving through, say, the pre-amplifier ranks (hint, hint Mr. Editor). The NAC82 pre-amplifier is a great device it allows many power-supply combinations over the NAC102 and it brought much greater control over the sound. This advance was more like the improvement you would expect from a power amplifier upgrade

because of the types of gains. By tightening up the presentation I was now treated to a far more entertaining result. Where notes blurred together with the NAC102, the NAC82 was capable of separating them out leading to more information and understanding, making many recordings far more interesting and accessible.

Finally the digits had their long awaited upgrade with the addition of a pre-loved Micromega Pro Transport and DAC. This old player came up for a good price but was, frankly, a big gamble because of its age and lack of support in this country. So far, touchwood, rabbits foot in top pocket etc.,



it is working well and sounding great. It looks the part as well with its large Perspex manual lid and top-loading mechanism it makes playing CD's an almost turntable like experience. Unfortunately it was no match for the analogue front end but it did and still does allow me to enjoy the silvery discs when I have to. In fact I would say that this player would compete with many current designs up to £2.5K or so. Sure it was rose tinted and lacked for detail (both traits that have been cured somewhat by subsequent changes, see below) but for pure musical enjoyment it is hard to beat.

A stand used to be a simple device. Weld up a couple of bits of steel tube, add spikes and a couple of sheets of glass and hey presto,

a Hi-Fi rack. Not anymore, with the Mana devotees pushing their multi levels high into the stratosphere and Aavik (and more recently Naim) pushing prices the same way, it was with some trepidation that I undertook a review of the Hutter Racktime system to see how it compared to the Quadrasphere that normally had the duty of holding the boxes off the floor. The Quadrasphere was originally chosen for my system because of its natural sound. It seemed to neither add nor subtract from the tonality and music being played and it certainly allowed the system to play music although it did, with hindsight, restrict the absolute detail retrieval and could, particularly if the system wasn't wonderful, sound wooden. The Hutter managed to remove this complaint. It is extremely easy to set-up with very predictable results. I have only praise for this product. It again allows the system to be natural and deliver a musical performance (if it did not manage this task it would have been straight out the door I can assure you) but it also digs deep into the detail in a recording and, most impressively, it manages to let the system create music in the correct scale. What do I mean by this? Well a Hutter supported system seems to create a sound that is in keeping with the music, so a small ensemble exists in a real space, with instruments that are neither Rosanne Barr overblown nor Calista Flockhart skinny. Similarly a large orchestral piece is presented in full scale, not some 1:24 representation; a very satisfying result. Over the time I have used the Hutter it has continued to impress. No matter what you throw at it, it just seems to get out of the way, letting each box do its thing and the fit and finish puts it in a different league compared to most of its competition. It is furniture in the best sense of the word. ►

▶ So far so good; lots of changes all for the better, but I knew there was one part of the puzzle that was incomplete. I had made a common Hi-Fi mistake. I had listened to something at my dealers that I couldn't afford but from then on I felt a need to have. The product in question was the Shahinian Obelisk, the speaker up from the Arcs. I've actually done it again by the way with the Obelisks big brothers the Hawks (will it never end?), although therapy (a firm hand from my wife) is keeping this particular lust under control - that and the risk of bankruptcy.



The Obelisks are a relatively compact pseudo-omni that, like the Arc, use a passive radiator to increase the bass output and many mid and treble units arranged over a pyramid atop the speaker to fill the

room with beautiful sounds in the upper octaves. These speakers produce a beguiling, all enveloping soundfield that the listener has no difficulty falling into. Instruments have that natural tone I have been pursuing through these upgrades and they time and integrate incredibly well throughout their full and wide bandwidth with minimal time smear. They are also much more transparent than the Arc, but the increased detail is never allowed to swamp that all important musical message. Although I still lust after the Hawks I am completely satisfied with the Obelisk.

At this stage the system had reached a position where

I was very pleased with it. This situation is rarer than most people let on in this business but the seeds for change were planted by exposure to various review items, in this case the Lavardin IS Reference integrated amplifier and the Chord Company ProDAC silver digital cable. As I reported in issue 13 the Chord Company lead brought fresh life to the venerable

Micromega combination which was very pleasing as my vinyl front end was so far ahead of the digital one. It still is, but the Chord Company lead narrowed the gap for very little outlay. The Lavardin had, perhaps the largest, if indirect effect on my system. I only borrowed it to see what all the fuss was about after reading PC's review and I was

System as of Issue 1 of HiFi+:

Linn LP12 with Armageddon power supply
Naim Aro tone-arm
Dynavector 10X4 cartridge

Naim NAC102 pre amp with NAPSC digital power supply and HI-cap analogue power supply

Naim Phono boards inside.

Naim NAP250 power amplifier.

Musical Fidelity CDT CD player, modified by yours truly with better power supply.

Spiked slate slab for some isolation.

Shahinian Arcs

(or Linn Kans for a laugh every now and then)

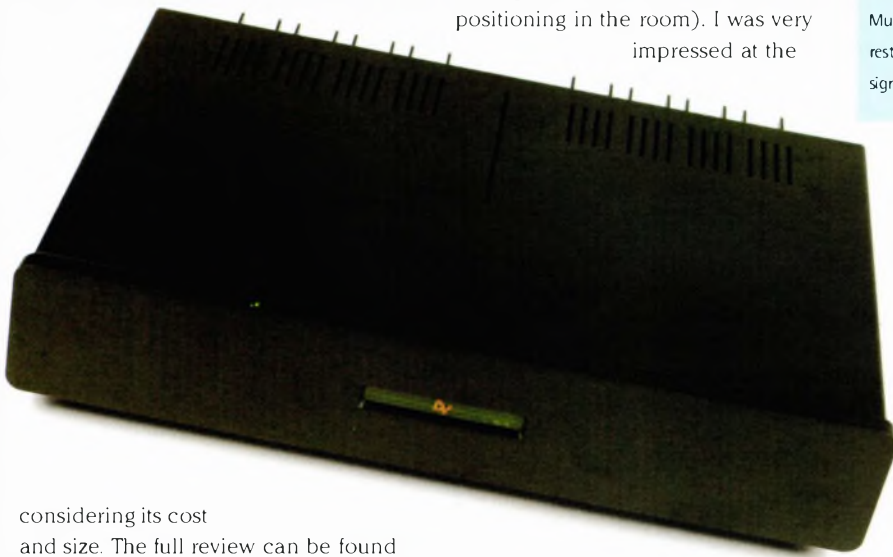
Quadraspire racks and standard Naim cabling throughout (except for CD player to pre-amp which was a Chord Chameleon)

convinced it wouldn't drive the now permanently and finally run-in Obelisks. Well I was right about driving the Obelisks: advance the volume too far and the sound fell apart, but if I kept the dB's low I was shocked to find this small single box amplifier delivering things my own amplification only hinted at. The Naim amplifiers were better at driving the music into the room, but the Lavardin was far more subtle. The Naim amplifiers timed off the leading edges, the Lavardin tried to be more even handed, delivering better dynamic contrast. I liked it a lot and I would happily recommend this amp to anybody that lives in an apartment or has efficient speakers or just doesn't want to play loud. But this left me with a problem. I wanted the sort of performance the Lavardin opened the door to, but at decent volumes. Bearing in mind that the Naim Audio amplifiers had done sterling service at the sharp end for seven years or more you can see this was a big change for me.

In the end it was reviewing



► the Dynavector HX75 that finally convinced me to change the power amplifier at least. I was pretty confident that the HX75 was going to be good with the Shahinians (it's designed to drive them after all) but it also needed to be flexible enough to allow me to review other speaker brands as well. Well no problem there! With the Royd RR1 and lately the Neat MFS's for example, the HX75 proved itself a very even-handed and very powerful amplifier. Capable of great musical expression this amp had to be a permanent feature in my system and it has delivered those attributes I heard with the Lavardin while having a pretty limitless driving capability (I haven't heard it struggle yet)



considering its cost and size. The full review can be found in issue 14.

Suddenly my "best laid plans" of leaving the system alone and improving my financial situation were scuppered by the option of buying a very low-mileage Dynavector TeKaitora cartridge to replace the 17D2. Well I couldn't turn that down. I broke all the rules with this one: I bought it without listening to it and went solely on recommendation. Luckily the advice was spot on and when I bolted it to the Naim Aro it was a revelation. I hadn't realised

quite how good a top quality cartridge could be, not in a showy way but just sounding more real. In fact it has caused a definite problem as I really am not sure I could live without it so any donations to the next one are gratefully received, that's all I'm going to say on this upgrade so expect some more words in these pages soon ...

With the Prefix and the NAC82 in the system I still had a large percentage of the Naim house sound. During the review of the Neat MFS's before I had them optimised to my room, I borrowed a Dynavector L100 (out of production now while we wait, impatiently, for the replacement L300) to try to open the sound out (although the real solution was better positioning in the room). I was very impressed at the

performance of this pre-amplifier in my mixed-bag of a system. Over the next few months I arranged things to attain more exposure to the Dynavector. When the phono-stage reviews for Issue 24 were imminent I had to take the Prefix out of the system to allow an arm-lead back into the LP12. The issue then was what to replace the Prefix with for a reference. Eventually the solution was to replace the Prefix and NAC82 by

Changed to (for a little while)....

Linn LP12 with Armageddon power supply

Naim Aro tone-arm

Dynavector 17D2 cartridge

Naim Prefix in the LP12 powered by a Hi-cap.

Naim NAC82 pre amp with NAPSC digital power supply and Hi-cap analogue power supply.

Naim NAP250 power amplifier.

Micromega CD Pro transport and matching Pro DAC

Spiked slate slab for isolation.

Shahinian Obelisks

Hutter Racktime racks

Chord ProDAC Silver Plus digital lead and Chameleon power supply to power amp lead and DAC to pre-amp interconnect and MusicWorks mains leads and Megablock. The rest of the leads are the trusty standard Naim signal leads.

mint examples of a Dynavector L100 pre-amplifier and the also out of production Dynavector P100 phono-amplifier for the period of the reviews. They have now become permanent fixtures. As Roy pointed out in reply to a letter in the last issue, I used to be firmly in the Flat-Earth camp but with exposure to other products I had realised that I was missing out on too much and to be honest, I probably fancied a change. I still can't see the point in holographic imaging - sounds false to me but I like to hear an acoustic space and I like instruments to have the right scale. What was surprising to me was that I could still achieve an integrated rhythmically correct sound with the added extras of good tone, scale and decent dynamic discrimination. Sounds a bit pretentious but the difference between loud and soft transients that make live music



And finally...

Well Tempered Reference turntable
 Well Tempered Reference tonearm
 Dynavector TeKaitora cartridge

Dynavector L100 pre-amplifier
 Dynavector P100 phono-amplifier.
 Dynavector HX75 power amplifier.

All interconnects are homebrew
 bullet-plugged cables
 Speaker cable is Kimber 8TC

▶ what it is, is more realistically portrayed with my new amplification. The sound is full bandwidth and very controlled with excellent transients, I think this is one of the key benefits of using an amplifier system that is designed with your speakers in mind! In a similar vein I recently swapped to Kimber 8TC speaker cable. It had never worked in any system I had liked previously, but the Shahinians are internally wired with it and the Dynavector/Shahinian reference system uses Kimber so who was I to argue? Well I did and held out with my Naim NACA5 for a while, but now I am convinced. Between Dynavector and Shahinian the 8TC simply allows more through so I gained even better bass response and cleaner treble, and surprisingly to me it didn't stuff up the timing.

My last and probably most traumatic upgrade as well as the biggest was the replacement of my Linn LP12 turntable. This was a big step for me as, like many others, the LP12 really marked my own personal entry into serious Hi-Fi. Up to the start of this year I had not considered replacing the LP12. It sounded bloody good, friends told me all the time (to

steal from an old Naim ad.). But I let myself be introduced to the final piece that turned my system into a full Pear Audio system – the Well Tempered (WT) range of turntables. In my case I was spoilt, I heard a Reference with a Dynavector DrT XV1-S cartridge. Like other chance encounters that I've had the WT was an unexpected success (I'm quite quick when I'm not slow). I had always thought that the LP12 was the last word in producing well integrated and timed tunes and making it all sound like music.



Well the WT range has exploded that. In the full Pear system you can exploit all the benefits that the Shahinian/ Dynavector system brings. Neutrality, clarity, speed, bandwidth ... it's all there and all correctly handled. And its not just the Reference. Recent experience with the entry level record player

has further impressed me with what this brand of turntables and arms is capable of. In one system a full loaded LP12 has recently been beaten off by the basic WT Record-player, a result that the ex-LP12 owner and myself were equally surprised about. In fact it has made me reconsider the old source first adage of turntable before arm, arm before cartridge ... The WT range hasn't made me question it, more like reinforced it to a new level. I now think that big cartridges are wasted in many of the turntables you find them in. Sure you get an improvement over cheaper products but you don't hear the whole story. The turntable and arm hold the cartridge back. With the WT I have closed a circle, just as in Issue 1 where I was using a cost-effective 10X4 in the LP12 and Naim Aro I am now getting the maximum performance from my TeKaitora in the WT reference combo. It's also worth noting that a \$6500 turntable and arm with a \$500 cartridge completely outperformed a \$3400 turntable and arm with an \$1800 cartridge. Give it a few years and couple of cartridge replacements and suddenly the big deck is better value for money as well! I won't say much more about the WT Reference as both the editor and I are going to be reviewing it. Perhaps I have already ruined the surprise, but I don't want to give too much away.

And that just about wraps up Hector's Odyssey. I now have a system that I am completely satisfied with. It makes music, it engrosses me, it allows access to new bands and styles, it entertains. Mind you there is the new Dynavector pre-amplifier on the way... oh and those Hawks, and what about a new CD player ...system evolution, ITS ENDLESS! But certainly damned good fun so far!



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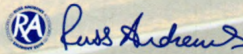


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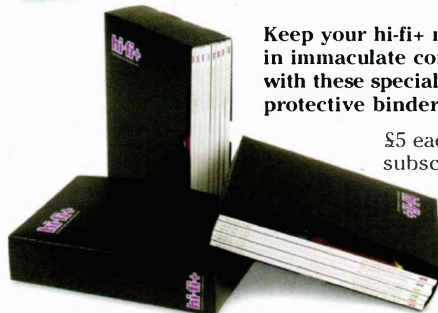
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Norwegian Would...

by Reuben Parry

The eclectic, often off-beat viewpoints expressed are what make Maria Solheim's work so arresting and refreshing in a world dominated by pap-pop mediocrity. Yet far from an obsession, her music is a natural extension of a life that's full of other demands and commitments. Here, the Norwegian singer songwriter takes a break from working with Burmese refugees in Bangkok to talk about her musical life.

RP: Firstly, please allow me to apologise in advance for an ignorance of most things Norwegian. My cultural reference points are pretty well limited to trolls, Polar explorers and, musically, Kari Bremnes. So can you tell me if the homegrown contemporary rock and pop scene in Norway is as strong as your CDs would suggest or do overseas musicians dominate it?

MS: I'm sorry to say that I don't know very much about the Norwegian music scene either. I guess I've had a hang up on music from the Seventies and the Nineties, but the musical trends even in a small country like Norway are so hard to follow that it's easy for bands to get overlooked.

RP: Who has influenced you the most then, both inside and outside the world of music?

MS: When I really started to get into music, I was influenced and inspired by bands like the Doors and Portishead, and musicians like Anja Garbarek, daughter of Norwegian jazz saxophonist, Jan Garbarek. Lately, I have been listening to a lot of Sixteen Horsepower and Woven Hand, which I really, really like. I've also discovered a strange, little known singer songwriter from the States: Pedro, The Lion and a psychedelic band called Souljunk. Outside of music, I've had a great interest in the bohemian lifestyle and art of Oslo in the late Nineteenth Century, as well as being fascinated by Christianity and the life of Jesus.

RP: What music do you listen to and why?

MS: As I said, I listen to a lot of bands like Sixteen Horsepower and also a band called Bon Voyage. David Eugene Edwards who is the lead singer in Sixteen Horsepower may be one of those people I admire most. He has a way of writing lyrics and melodies, and in the way the band arranges them, that makes me cry. David has got something to say and has got the nerve to say it.

RP: Having the nerve is important to you?

MS: Well, I'm not talking about rude behaviour, or shouting for shouting sake. But having an opinion and actually managing to communicate this in an understandable and touching way impresses me.

RP: How and when did you get that all-important first break into the music industry and where do you see your career heading in the future?

MS: I met my producer (Bengt Egil Hanssen) when I was fifteen, and he has been a great help both personally and musically. In this business a lot of things revolve around having the right contacts and I have been so lucky to be introduced to maybe the finest people in the music industry in Norway. My management team is a very informal and hands off outfit. But tell me how many artists do you know who get sent home made Strawberry jam from their management company?

When it comes to my future it is very hard to give you an answer. You cannot really predict anything in this business. The only thing I can say is that as long as there is music coming out of my fingers and I feel that I have something to say, I will sing. It feels right and it looks right at this time.

RP: Fifteen was very young. Did music interfere with growing up and all the normal things that teenagers get up to?

MS: My producer did not become my producer until I was seventeen. He was a mentor and inspired my song writing and became my friend. There was not much



► talk about a contract until I was seventeen. So I did normal things and was a normal teenager. I had a strong interest in music, though.

RP: Has KKV (your record company) tried to steer you in any particular musical direction and if so, why?

MS: KKV has given me total freedom, I was very young when I started working with them, and they have given me excellent advice, but I still have the last word in every case where the music is concerned.

RP: How would you describe your musical style?

MS: Sweet and sour pop under construction.

RP: The debut album, *Barefoot*, with its' cleverly written songs like 'Suspicion', asks some really searching questions about the nature of modern relationships. Are these songs largely autobiographical and would you say that you write from a feminist perspective?

MS: I use different perspectives. But largely it's autobiographical.

RP: Can you tell me more about those perspectives?

MS: 'Suspicion', for example, was written after a conversation with a good friend. We disagreed about a certain subject, and I wrote the song as a reaction. I felt he married his suspicion. 'Before She Goes To Bed' is more biographical. I like to look at the songs as paintings. Sometimes you paint certain landscapes, and the colours you use depend on the exact colours in nature. Other times you use colours depending on your emotions, and sometimes you paint non-figurative paintings to just explain emotions... Using different perspectives makes it easier to see more sides of a case. And sometimes also it prevents arguments! (Laughs)

RP: 'Suspicion' and the track 'Two Minutes and Ten Hours' taken from the latest album, *Behind Closed Doors*, are amongst my personal favourites because of the unusual way in which they approach and freshen up commonplace

themes of marriage and the ending of relationships. How did you come to write them?

MS: *Behind Closed Doors* is an album about fear and safety. 'Two Minutes and Ten Hours' is not taken from a concrete situation, but is as a result of the emotions and insecurity that I've carried around for a long period of time. Song writing for me is to put my thoughts into perspective, and to look at things apart from my feelings. I am an emotional person and I can often get stuck in my emotions if I do not write down the reality.



RP: What are your views on the quality of pop music today and song writing in general?

MS: It is hard to make generalisations when it comes to music. I can say that I do have problems with the commercial music industry. Still, in this jungle, I do hear and see wonderful musicians who have something to say and who are not afraid to say it. Though it is sad that so many good song writers never get heard because they refuse to follow meaningless rules about looks and behaviour.

RP: Do you think that songwriter's have certain social responsibilities?

MS: I think everyone has a social responsibility, including song writers. Music is an opportunity to raise your voice and to point at concrete problems. I am also of the opinion that when

a person reaches the point of being famous he or she is responsible for the people who look up to them.

RP: Are there any taboo subjects, topics or themes that you believe you could not bring yourself to write a song about and if so, why?

MS: I don't think I would release songs of a private nature with full names and addresses! I think that problems should be discussed in private... as long as it's not big political issues that need the attention.

RP: If you were not a musician, what career would you pursue?

MS: Very hard to say. Maybe, I would be a missionary in China.



► **RP:** Do you have a strong spiritual side?

MS: My faith affects all that I do. It's my biggest joy.

RP: Kari Bremnes has reworked songs into English for her *Norwegian Mood* CD. When you are song writing, do you write the lyrics down in Norwegian first, or do you consciously compose in English?

MS: I compose in English.

RP: Does writing in English create any particular problems of its own?



MS: Well, it is not my native language. There are expressions and words that are natural to use in Norwegian that are not so natural to use in English...I have had many questions from the Norwegian media about why I do not write in Norwegian...I guess when I started to write lyrics in my early teens I did not want my parents to understand what I wrote...Now it is natural to continue writing in English since I have an audience outside Norway.

RP: Did you get involved with and/or have any strong views on the way your albums were arranged, recorded and mixed?

MS: I have strong views, but I do not arrange everything myself. I have a wonderful band and I knew my producer well, so this was good teamwork.

RP: Would you change any aspect of how these CDs sound and if so, why?

MS: To be honest, I would love to do the first CD again...to change some arrangements. I did not have my band at that time, and it would have been great to see how much the sound would change if they had been with me.

RP: The backing musicians on *Behind Closed Doors* seem to be very sympathetic toward your songs and their sentiments. However, there were changes in the line-ups between this and the debut album, why was that?

MS: *Behind Closed Doors* was recorded with my band. The first album was recorded with studio musicians.



RP: If you had to make a choice between performing live or making a studio recording, which of these would you prefer to do and why?

MS: I love both. But playing before an audience is indescribable. I love it. There is something special when you look the audience in the eye. You get a whole different kind of communication.

RP: Are you working on material for a new album at the moment, and if so can we expect there to be any significant changes in style or direction?

MS: I am working on new material. And there will be another producer on the next album. This will make a change and I am looking forward to hearing the results myself!



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
-  DVD
-  SACD
-  Hybrid SACD
-  MultiChannel SACD
-  120g LP
-  150g LP
-  180g LP
-  Availability As S/H LP
-  Vinyl Double Album



Sadao Watanabe

California Shower

JVC XRCD24 VICJ 61031-1 

Yes, I know, Watanabe was a favourite of hi-fi dem's back in the late '70's and this album does have echoes of the Grusin and Ritenour albums that were also favourites at that time. This is hardly surprising in that both play on this set, but then so do Harvey Mason, Chuck Rainey and Ernie Watts. If you can listen through some of the more obvious 'seventies'isms' here (not too easy with every track I accept, the second number does sound like a long lost sibling to the 'Starsky and Hutch' theme), it quickly becomes obvious that Watanabe is a very capable player with a quite lovely tone. Sure this is fusion music and whilst it doesn't scale the heights of *Weather Report* or *Return To Forever*, it is superbly played, all of it is very enjoyable and some of it is just darn good. Listen to the gorgeous melodic take on 'Desert Ride' to give just one example.

The recording still stands up well and this XRCD24 version gives it the necessary polish to make it sound like it was (very well) recorded today. My only quibble is the short playing time of just under 37 minutes.

Chuck away your prejudices and give this a listen!

DD

Supplier: www.vivante.co.uk





Hot Hot Heat

Make up the breakdown

B-Unique/Sub Pop BUN047

A few months ago Hot Hot Heat came from nowhere with their single 'Bandages' and took the charts by storm. Let there be no doubt about it, 'Bandages' was a classic single, but are Hot Hot Heat simply a one hit wonder?

Quite frankly - I'm not sure. Hot Hot Heat are (irrespective of being Canadian) part of the same blossoming New York punk-funk scene as Radio4. They mix funk and ska rhythms with punk sensibilities and produce a rough, retro sound which suits the music perfectly. But, for some reason, the album never quite clicks. The music is never let off the leash, the punk never really feels out of control, the funk has no soul and the songs can't quite cut it. Which is a shame, because there is so much about the album which I love.

Perhaps as they grow more comfortable with their sound, as the zeitgeist for punk-funk passes, they will hit the highs that must be within their reach. As it is, it's a mixed bag. If you like Radio4, then this is an album for you. Otherwise, you have to accept that you might just be disappointed.

MC



Kari Bremnes

Norwegian Mood

KKV FXCD 221

Since it's release three years ago *Norwegian Mood* has received some rave reviews especially as a 180g LP. Stylistically, these timeless Kari Bremnes roots-based songs which so casually span folk, jazz and blues idioms have to date stood up to the tests of time pretty well. In an HDCD format their recording takes on another dimension. The ethereal and delicate yet full-bodied sound of her vocal line in songs like 'Day' and the rolling lyrical melody to 'Wave On Rock' has an unbelievably lifelike presence. Moreover, each and every cadence is delivered without unduly drawing attention to the production process. This is a natural sounding CD with a capital "N". Whereas other recordings barely offer a glimpse of the ways in which the vocal thread can react or interact with instrumental scoring, it is here on *Norwegian Mood* that those authoritative Bengt Egil Hanssen piano notes and a plump and vibrant Giermund Silseth double bass are recreated in such a way as to reveal their true relationship with one another and the deliciously rich Bremnes singing. The result is a perfect sense of timing and an accuracy that gives you confidence in all the performances.

RP

Supplier: hotrecords.uk.com



Michael Kaeshammer

No Strings Attached

Alma Records ACD10202

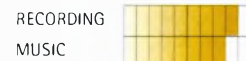
Normally when I see the word 'Jazz' appear on a press release I give the album a pretty wide berth however, this disc by Canadian Michael Kaeshammer could be the one to turn me on to Jazz in a big way.

Kaeshammer studied classical piano in Offenburg, Germany as a young boy, but progressed to listening and emulating the boogie-woogie masters at the tender age of 13. By the time he was 16 Kaeshammer was a fully fledged performer playing at clubs and festivals all over Germany.

No Strings Attached, Michael's second release for Alma Records, is what I would call a 'light jazz' album that also incorporates elements of gospel and blues and a healthy dollop of scintillating boogie-woogie. The opening number 'Snow At Lake Simcoe', a Kaeshammer original, was inspired by the movie 32 Short Films Of Glenn Gould and is as moving and dramatic as its title suggests.

Michael breathes new life into Scott Joplin's 'Maple Leaf Rag' and lays down foot stompin' boogie woogie on 'Nora's Boogie' and 'Boogie Woogie Stomp', but the real pearl for me is 'Drown In My Own Tears', a gospel number featuring a sensual organ intro from Art Neville and a smoky, Tom Waits-ish vocal from Eddie Bo. *No Strings Attached* is a terrific album performed by some of Canada's finest musicians. Its also a blinding recording!

AH





Nils Lofgren Band



Live

Hypertension HYP3220 

Nils Lofgren has had a long and glittering career, coming to prominence as a lead singer and guitarist with Grin and then creating a fine body of work as a solo artist, most notably with the superlative Cry Tough. He's probably best known as lead guitarist in Bruce Springsteen's E Street Band, where his sparkling playing has lit up great albums like *Tunnel Of Love* and more recently *The Rising*. His last solo album, the mainly acoustic *Breakaway Angel*, was a triumphant return after six years away from the recording studios. Now comes *Live*, a double album containing 23 tracks of blistering fretwork recorded at the charmingly named Rams Head Tavern, Maryland in 2002.

The band, consisting of Lofgren on Guitar, Timm Biery on drums, Buck Brown on keyboards and second guitar and bassist Wade Matthews are in superb form and cover a wide range of styles from acoustic rockers ('Putting Out Fires'), blues ('Too Many Miles'), ass-kicking rock workouts ('Damaged Goods') and ballads ('I Don't Wanna Talk About It'). All but four of the tracks were written by Lofgren and go to prove what a consistently fine songwriter he's been throughout his career.

Live contains a bonus cut of 'First Time Ever I Saw Your Face' (recorded at his home) and was produced by Lofgren who has to be congratulated on a tremendous job – the sound quality is really quite awesome. Terrific stuff.

AH
RECORDING 
MUSIC 





Easy Star All-Stars

Dub Side Of The Moon

Easy Star Records ES-1012 

The commercial opportunities that these big anniversary dates offer are nearly always snapped up by the music industry. *Dark Side Of The Moon's* 30th birthday celebration is no exception. A special edition CD and LP release was always on the cards. However the idea of marrying Pink Floyd's classic and highly affected Seventies art rock to the reggae dub medium must be either the whim of a madman or a blinding moment of genius. We owe this extraordinary union to Easy Star Records vice president Lem Oppenheimer who conceived this project back in 1999. After those many months spent arranging, recording and mixing the immense and frequently experimental music of *DSOTM* we now have a rousing red, gold and green hued conduit into this resonant Floydian vision. Moreover, reggae's richly instrumental and heavily rhythmic possibilities serve up some juicy and quite distinctive cuts. No more so than a catchy version of 'Time' which features the well-known chesty baritone of Corey Harris alongside a speed-rapping Ranking Joe. Elsewhere reggae legends like the Meditations and Frankie Paul contribute lead vocals for 'Eclipse' and 'Us And Them', while that rock anthem 'Money' in the hands of Gary "Nesta" Pine Et Dollarman almost has you believing it was originally a Jamaican tune. This release should show rock and reggae fans the merits of both mediums.

RP
Supplier: hotrecords.uk.com
RECORDING 
MUSIC 



Biffy Clyro



the vertigo of bliss

Beggars Banquet Records BBQCD233 

Biffy Clyro have become synonymous with the still nascent "brit-rock" scene, and rightly so, pairing world class songs to exceptional performances. But with *the vertigo of bliss* Biffy Clyro seem to have ditched the tunes and instead concentrated on telling stories.

Gone are the hook-rich singles of their first album, replaced with much longer, much spikier, progressive rock epics. Gone too is the flowing quiet/loud dynamic that characterized the first album. The songs now use much harsh stop/start dynamics that break up their impact. In fact Biffy Clyro's second album, *the vertigo of bliss* is a distinctly difficult record to come to terms with. Biffy Clyro could have simply recorded another *Blackened Sky*, sat back and watched their fan base grow. Instead they have created something far more challenging. But the essential reasons to love Biffy Clyro remain. Rest assured the songs are still there (albeit sometimes well hidden), as is the explosive interplay between the band. But it is the singer's intelligent and uniquely emotional performances that define Biffy Clyro, and these come across just as strongly as ever.

Biffy Clyro have been accused before of being rock by numbers, this record should at least set that record straight. Not everyone's cup of tea for sure, but well worth a try.

MC
RECORDING 
MUSIC 



Pet Shop Boys

Release

Parlophone 7243 5 38150 1 **120g** **CD**

For more than twenty years now the Chris Lowe and Neil Tennant axis has been one of our most inventive and accomplished acts. "Melodic", "camp", "ironic", "witty" and "laconic" are all aptly and often used descriptions for their brand of dance based pop and the 2002 album, *Release* is a natural progression in that sequence. The ten tracks here are thematically weighted in favour of romantic subjects. Sometimes they dwell on love's fickleness, 'Love Is A Catastrophe' and 'You Choose', while 'Email' and 'Home And Dry' reflect upon absence, insecurity and the sense of longing felt no matter what your gender preference. Indeed, 'The Night I Fell In Love' is unequivocal where gay relationships are concerned. The "Pet Shop Boys" sound underpins them all though through those distinctive and instantly recognisable vocals, programmes and mixes. Outwardly clothing these songs with an anonymous looking sleeve-one which hides the primary colours of a crumpled bloom on the liner as well as an LP pressed on [collectable?] white vinyl-is symbolic. Even the impurities seen within this pressing, while they may be detrimental to the sound, still, at one level, serves as a telling metaphor for the vagaries of the human heart.

RP

Supplier: Cherished Record Co. 01579 363603



Candy Kane

Whole Lotta Love

RUF Records RUF 1091 **CD**

God, how music needs artist like Candy Kane. In the age of *Pop Idol*, *Fame Academy* and one talentless boy/girl band after another, Miss Kane is like a breath of fresh air. This girl has personality, a huge presence (in more ways than one), a massive voice and, more importantly, talent to go with it. Candy's an ex-stripper and her bad girl background slots in nicely with her earthy music. On opener 'Something's Got A Hold On Me' she rips it up with all the verve of Etta James in here prime - believe me, this girl is one powerful singer. She comes over all sugar pie desanto on Carole King's 'Wrap Around Joy', squeezing acres of fun and happiness out of a great tune, and then gets nice n' sleazy on the boogiefield 'Put It All There', which features some fine harmonica blowing from Charlie Musselwhite. Candy's choice of covers is all done in the best possible taste, with her version of Willie Dixon's 'Whole Lotta Love' not straying a million miles from the definitive Led Zepplin version. She's not afraid to cover more contemporary material either adding a lovely sensual Dinah Washington makeover to Difford and Tillbrook's 'When the hangover strikes'. 'Whole Lotta Love' is a whole lotta fun from a whole lotta talent and I would love to see her live - I reckon it would be a hoot.

AH



Connie Lush

Unfaithfully Yours?

Blue Rhythm Records BR103 **CD**

Connie's last album was 2000's *Live At The Royal Albert Hall*, a fine example of her live show recorded when she supported BB King on his UK tour. BB is a committed fan of La Lush (as she's affectionately known in Europe) and she has performed at his world famous Blues Club on Beale Street, Memphis as his guest. Hailing from Liverpool, Connie Lush is a vibrant sassy performer who's as much at home singing tender Ella Fitzgerald style jazzy ballads as she is belting out full-on blues rockers and big soul drenched numbers. She might only be five feet nothing but to watch this woman live is an experience never to be forgotten; She has excellent stage presence and a wonderful, easy going way with her audiences. Her latest album *Unfaithfully Yours* is her most accomplished to date and finds her stretching out as a songwriter of some substance, she wrote (or co-wrote) seven of the ten tracks, and the quality is such that they sit comfortably alongside Randy Newman's 'Guilty' and the classics 'I'd Rather Go Blind' and 'Don't Sound Out Of Place'. Her band have been with her for over ten years and back her superbly, but special mention has to go to guitarist John Lewis whose contribution on this album is enormous and marks him out as one of this country's most innovative and stylish blues players.

AH





Dead Ringer Band

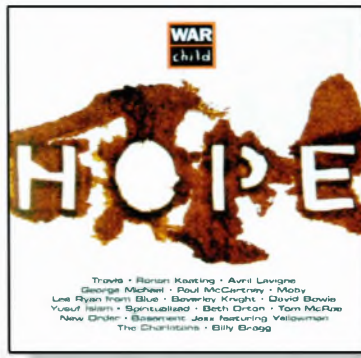
Till Now

Massive Recording Co 7322882 

Before the meteoric solo career Kasey Chambers (along with the rest of her immediate family) featured on four Dead Ringer Band albums. A healthy cross-section through their particular brand of Australian contemporary country music that was recorded between 1993 and 1998 appears on this generous eighteen-track compilation. Fans of *The Captain* and *Barricades Et Brickwalls* will be pleased to find more songs that centre on Kasey's captivating voice. In addition to the seven numbers written by one Chambers or another there are another eleven covers that prove how well they all handle and interpret other people's music. The pick of these songs include an opening Maria Mckee 'Am I The Only One', the beautifully paced Nanci Griffith 'Wish It Would Rain', that evocative Slim Dusty penned 'Saddle Boy' and John Prine's heart rendering 'Speed Of The Sound Of Loneliness'. Like most pick-and-mix collections it lacks an overall cohesion but is worth the admission fee for any of those individual gems that have at least been transferred to an acceptable standard. A CD then, that provides useful starting points from which to investigate either the Kasey Chambers or Dead Ringer Band catalogues.

RP

Supplier: hotrecords.uk.com



Warchild

Hope

London Recordings 50466 5846 2 

Now I would normally try and avoid reviewing a compilation, but if that compilation is the most listened too album on my hi-fi for well over a month, then I tend to think again. In 1995 the children's charity Warchild set about to produce an album in just one week, using the cream of Britain's newest talent. The result, *Help* was a defining album of the era and one that rarely leaves my side. Now, in order to try and bring relief to the children of Iraq, they have repeated the effort to make *Hope*. But, leaving that aside, what you have is an album where artists play against type and produce breathtaking results. Paul McCartney and David Bowie in particular produce their best recordings for decades, but (as with *Help*) it is the lesser names that give the album its power, with Tom McRae and Billy Bragg both producing tracks of exceptional quality. Ignore the fact that it is a charity record, and ignore the fact that it is a compilation, this album holds itself together and produces a coherent listening experience. But the real strength of the album is that, as a consequence, it brings out the best of genres that might otherwise have been a turn-off. On this record even Lee Ryan from Blue seems OK.

MC



Bjork

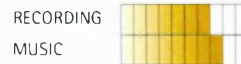
Greatest Hits

One Little Indian TPLP 359 

Not the first compilation disc courtesy of this ex-Sugarcubes vocalist (a collection of re-mixes lifted from her debut LP appeared in 1994) but surely a far more representative fifteen track exploration of the music that has comfortably crossed over into clubland through its hard techno beats in songs such as 'Army Of Me' or the house-orientated material that spawned early hits like 'Human Behaviour'. More recent examples of Björk's inventive and piercing song writing includes 'Hidden Place' and 'Pagan Poetry' taken from the 2001 album, *Vespertine*. There's even room for 'Play Dead'; a version of which featured on the soundtrack for that abrasive and frequently disturbing indictment of youth culture, *The Young Americans*. Whilst few would regard these as palatable insights, they do both musically and lyrically focus the attention in an undeniably vivid and instantly recognisable way. Making this LP a great starting point for a new generation of listeners, while to those already in the know it serves as a telling summation of all that has gone before.

RP

Supplier: cherishedrecord.co 01579 363603





Sonny Rollins

In Japan

JVC XRCD24 VICJ 61036-1 **(XR)**

Recorded in 1973 live at the Nakano Sun-Plaza, this isn't one of Sonny Rollin's best-known recordings. However, Rollins accompanied by Yoshiaki Masuo (guitar), Bob Cranshaw (bass), David Lee (drums) and Mtune (congas), generates such energy from the first bars of the opening track 'Powaii' he quickly blasts away any feelings of second best about this set. Propelled by some nimble bass work from Cranshaw this is an incendiary opener with some great soloing from all involved as the band stretch out in this 18-minute number. Rollin's piercing tones naturally leading the way. This is followed by their take on the Rollin's classic 'St Thomas', its calypso beat and straight-ahead treatment making a refreshing gear change after the frenetic pace of the previous number. Next up is one of my favourite Rollin's tunes, 'Alfie'. It gets an extended workout and at over 13 minutes the number doesn't feel a minute too long as Rollin's wrings every last drop of emotion from the tune. The closer is 'Moritat' ('Mack The Knife' to you and me), which echoes in some ways the trick that Rollin's pulled off so outstandingly with *Way Out West* with his ability to take hold of a tune with slightly comical overtones and turn it into great jazz. He does so again here and the audience clearly love it. Even if you've accumulated all of Rollin's better-known stuff, this would be a worthwhile addition to any collection.

DD

Supplier: www.vivante.co.uk



Tom Gullion

Greens and Blues

Naim cd060 **(CD)**

This album is a tribute to Chicago and takes its title from the elevated trains that criss-cross the city. In fact, all the music was composed or arranged whilst Gullion was riding these trains. That's not to say that the music here is a literal transcript of that but the experience, the myriad distractions of the city passing by the windows of the train, helped Gullion to focus and more clearly set down his ideas. Recorded by Ken Christianson using a pair of vintage AKG mikes direct to two-track over an intensive two day session, Gullion (tenor and soprano sax) is joined here by John Moulder (guitar), Steve Gillis (drums), and Rob Amster (bass). The spacious, warm acoustic (as in Gullion's first release *Cats Cradle* namcd029), of the Union Church, Hinsdale is equally as evident as in that session, the whole thing feeling very natural and 'live'. Kicking off with Coltrane's 'Lonnie's Lament' the quality of this band is immediately evident. Driven hard by Gillis' percussion Gullion really takes flight here, as does Moulder with a particularly nimble solo. There are no weak tracks here, but I particularly like the closing number 'Lament' dedicated to its composer, J.J. Johnson. It's a truly beautiful piece. This is a strong, assured set from a very talented quartet. The recording does it full justice sounding unforced, full-bodied and very natural.

DD

Supplier: www.naim-audio.com



Carmen McRae

Alone, Live At The Dug

JVC XRCD24 VICJ 61037 **(XR)**

McRae began her career as a vocalist with Benny Carter's orchestra in the '40's moving on within the same decade to the Mercer, Ellington and Basie bands. She made her name as a leader in the '50's and enjoyed a long and successful career through to the early '90's becoming famous for her witty interpretations, distinctly toned voice and great phrasing.

This album, recorded live in Tokyo in '73 finds McRae at the peak of her powers. Accompanying herself on piano, her smoky tones and confident delivery set the album apart. She's clearly enjoying herself as she romps through a set of standards. Just listen to her laconic take on 'As Time Goes By' (nice to hear it with the full intro by the way), or her delivery of the bluesy 'Supper Time'. Appropriately enough given the title of the last number, the feel of a club gig is very evident with tinkling glasses and cutlery interspersed with polite applause. Fortunately this isn't distracting a la *Jazz at the Pawnshop*, and simply adds to the atmosphere of a really enjoyable set. The recording is entirely natural placing you front row (or front table I suppose), and whilst McRae is no Billie Holiday this is a relaxed and outstanding set.

DD

Supplier: www.vivante.co.uk





Ella Fitzgerald

Fine and Mellow

Pablo/ Acoustic Sounds **180g**

I have a much played original of this album and remember being knocked out by the title track on *Jazz Record Requests* many, many moons ago and rushing straight out to buy the set. For me it ranks alongside the very best of Ella's later work and even after all these years it's never been far from the turntable. Joined by a knockout band including Clark Terry, Joe Pass, Zoot Sims, Ray Brown and Louie Bellson, Ella is on top form throughout. The opening take on Holiday's 'Fine and Mellow' is drenched in the blues, and Ella uncharacteristically is at her raunchiest here. The band excel themselves and as the pace builds both Sims and Terry contribute great solos, perfect accompaniment from Pass and driving percussion from Bellson. It really is five minutes of pure joy. The rest of the set is also very strong with 'Round Midnight' and 'Rockin' in Rhythm' amongst a stack of other standards. Sure Ella's voice by '74 when this was recorded is past its peak but the enthusiasm, the feeling for a lyric and the phrasing are all there. However, strong as the set is, it's the title track that gets me every time. The album also ranks as one of Pablo's best-recorded releases but Acoustic Sounds have definitely gilded the lily here. What was already a solid, dynamic recording set in a spacious and very believable acoustic has gained in all areas. If you haven't heard this before you owe it to yourself. Rush out and buy a copy now!

DD

Supplier: www.vivante.co.uk

RECORDING	
MUSIC	



Carmen Lundy

Old Devil Moon

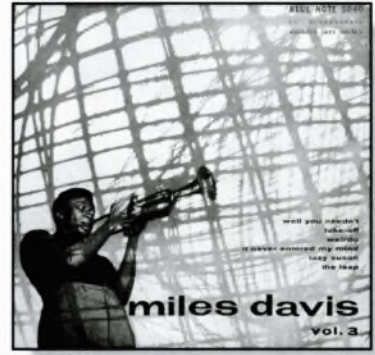
JVC XRCD 0037-2 **XR**

Recorded in '97, this album features seven standards alongside four originals. Backed by a fine, fluid rhythm section featuring Billy Childs (piano), Santi Debriano (bass) and Winston Clifford (drums). The band is expanded with some stellar players including Frank Foster, who contributes some lovely tenor to 'When Your Lover Has Gone', Randy Brecker and Omar Hakim. Lundy has a resonant and expressive voice and she deftly handles the standards in this set. Standouts from these include the Latin flavoured title track and a particularly brisk treatment of 'Star Eyes'. My favourite is a poignant, relaxed take on Ellington's 'In A Sentimental Mood'. This brings the best from Lundy's deep, sensual tones. Foster and Child's work here stands out here too. The only grit in the Vaseline of what could be a superb jazz set is in the treatment of Lundy's own numbers. Here the orchestration is fleshed out with synth and electric bass and the style is much more 'jazz lite' than the out and out jazz treatment of the bulk of this set. 'Love Me Forever' is a good example; with its breathy choruses and funky bass it'd sit more happily on a Luther Vandross album than here. For all that, this is a very enjoyable and well-recorded set from an artist I previously knew little about and am now glad to have been introduced to.

DD

Supplier: www.vivante.co.uk

RECORDING	
MUSIC	



Miles Davis

Volume 3

Blue Note/ Classic Records **10" 12"**

Presented as a facsimile of the original Blue Note 10" and in a 12" 45rpm plain-sleeved version this is an intriguing combination. Accompanied by Horace Silver, Percy Heath and Art Blakey, Davis is captured in what was at the time of its release his strongest album. It's here, emerging from heroin addiction, that he first spreads his wings as a true leader, contributing distinctive solo's throughout and setting the tone of the whole album. There's an early take of 'It Never Entered My Mind' a track that was to come to full flower a few years later on his album 'Workin''. The faster paced stuff like 'The Leap' and 'Take Off' are equally confidently handled and this 10" album forms a lovely, bite-sized chunk of delectable early Davis. The (mono naturally) sound quality is fine, plenty of presence to Davis' horn, firm bass and an entirely natural cymbal sound. Moving to the 45rpm 12" though was fascinating. The music gained most obviously in pace, crisper and distinctly more urgent, the performances also gained a notch or two in involvement in that Davis' horn sounded better integrated with the rest of the band, it was less dominant and therefore more easy to pick out the subtle interplay at work and the characteristics of the other instruments. This delivers all the experience of the real 'rare as hens teeth' (as Ray's Jazz would have it) thing

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The History Man

by Richard S. Foster

The Oxford Dictionary tells me one definition of the word 'rare' is, "...of a kind seldom found, done, or occurring, uncommon, infrequent, unusual, exceptional; few and far between...". Taking this back a further step, their definition for the word 'scarce' is, "...restricted in quantity, size or amount;...existing in limited number; hard to find; rare...".

Fascinating how these two words, which to my mind signify major differences in the collector's world, are so connected. I've always thought of something scarce as an item that is in very short supply but is available on the used collector's market very infrequently. Rare is a word I associate with records you almost never see . . . Certainly not items that regularly appear in the market or are offered for sale more than once a year.

One of my pet peeves is record dealers who seem to mark almost every item in their catalogue as "rare". It's not actually helping anyone, least of all them. I think the smart dealer/reseller is the one who instills confidence and is prepared to deal honestly and offer quality advice to his customers. Unfortunately these people are few and far between.

Many of the titles that dealers label rare — and in my opinion this word is used for only one purpose, and that is to increase the price - are actually far from it. Many of the Decca SXL 2000s are justifiably sought after for their sonic or performance qualities. Yet, if you look at dealer listings more often than not you'll see the "r" word appended indiscriminately to these discs. Just take a look at the Mozart *Notturmo*, Mendelssohn's *Midsummer Night's Dream* and his *3rd Symphony*, all with Peter Maag, the Rodrigo *Guitar Concerto* with Argenta, the Stravinsky ballets by Ansermet *The Firebird* and *The Rite of Spring*. Notch it up a level and examine the three most expensive operas in the SXL catalogue: *Le Nozze*, *Don Giovanni* and the *Magic Flute*. Every single one of these items comes up regularly on the lists of the major UK dealers, yet they all continue to use the word rare to justify the high prices they ask for them.

Based upon the Oxford, none of the above would qualify as rare or even scarce. Interesting.

The problem is that once you categorize these records, which aren't actually rare, just expensive, in this way, it devalues the term. What do you use to describe something that's genuinely, indisputably, see it once in a lifetime rare.



Real rarities in the Decca catalogue are very few in number, although they do exist. Probably the best example is SXL 2100, the Leimer *Piano Concerto No. 4* with Kurt Leimer at the piano and Robert Wagner conducting the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra. One major UK dealer says it exists only in test pressings. Sorry, but he's wrong. I've had it in my hands, played it and promptly thought it one of the worst recordings and for me, contained some of the most uninteresting music I've ever heard.

Believe me when I tell you it was the genuine article: 'original recording', made in England (at six o'clock on the label) and it contained all the proper alphanumeric matrices including mother, lacquer and stamper information. Now that's what I consider rare.

This leads me to wonder, "just because something's rare or even scarce (in the true sense of these words) can you assume that the performance is worthwhile?" After all, things must be rare for a reason, right?

Let me pass on to you a story I found quite amusing and which relates to the question posed above. I recently noticed an e-bay sale of a very rare Max Rostal/Monique Haas recording on Deutsche Grammophon. SLPM 138 016 contains the Ravel *Sonata for Violin and Piano* and the Mihalovici *Sonata* (ugh!). This is Rostal's only stereo recording and quite simply put...it's rare. The record changed hands for approximately \$750. Another person known to me was very upset that he was unable to acquire the item. He offered the seller over \$1000 to not sell it to the rightful winner, but to him. The seller declined and the transaction at \$750 took place. I know the purchaser and he was aware of what the secondary individual was trying to manipulate in the background. When he received his

▶ "prize" he called me on the telephone and said how 'god awful' the performance of the ravel was. My reply was along the lines of, "now you know why it's rare." The beauty of the story is that the original purchaser resold the item to the secondary buyer for the \$1000-a 25% profit in less than one week! Not bad!

I recently had an experience with a buyer of "rare" recordings from Japan. He wanted to purchase my copy of the Ludwig Hoelscher/Joerg Demus recording (also on Deutsche Grammophon) SLPM 138 012 performing two Brahms *cello sonatas*. I was not too interested in parting with this, but I had not listened to it in at least ten years, so on the turntable it went. Well listen I did and the next thing I knew, the LP was in a package bound for japan. Talk about putting you to sleep!!! I made a CD-R of the performance....it must contain the slowest tempi in the world. Another example of why perhaps, a record is rare.

Let's discuss a few items in the EMI catalogue that I consider rare. Where better to start than the (in)famous de Vito Bach/Mozart *concerto* disc (ASD 429 with Kubelik, the London Symphony on the Bach and the Royal Philharmonic for the Mozart). This is widely believed to be the rarest of the ASDs. As a single record this may be so. I'd call the item scarce. I see it come on the market at least a couple of times a year. Is it good? Well, let's just say the performance is pathetic. I mean Kubelik has to s-l-o-w the orchestra for de Vito in the Bach... It's embarrassing. Made when she was well past her prime, the recording probably owes more to opportunism on the part of EMI, to one of whose senior executives she was married, than to artistic considerations. The advent of the new stereo format and her reputation did the rest. Nice to know that nothing's changed then. In this case it was quickly (mercifully?) Deleted from the catalogue. And before you ask, I don't consider Guido Cantelli's wonderful performance of the Beethoven *7th* with the Philharmonia rare... Again, scarce is a better word. We can discuss the merits of the three Bruckner performances by Carl Schuricht - ASD 493 for the *9th*, ASD 602/3 for the *8th* and ASD 2284 for the *3rd*. Of these three, the *8th* is very scarce with the others bordering on being scarce: wonderful performances by the way, with the *9th* available through testament (as is the de Vito travesty and the Cantelli wonder).

So if you want to talk rare and EMI in the same sentence, where do you start? One record that has always struck me as exceptionally rare is ASD 531, containing works by Debussy,

Enesco and Ravel with Christian Ferras playing violin and Pierre Barbizet, piano. The record received great reviews from the critics of the day, but you almost never see this item available. When you do see this record available, it's going to be the wrong side of £1000! I see at least a half dozen plus copies of the de Vito record for every one of the Ferras/Barbizet, yet one is a lousy performance, the other quite magical. Maybe the guys who buy these discs do listen to them after all!

There are other examples of recordings that contain a fantastic performance but which are definitely yet inexplicably rare. How about Sir John Barbirolli conducting the Berlin Philharmonic in Mahler's *9th symphony*. This was a very historic occasion, and the liner notes tell us, "at the start of the recording sessions, the members of the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra were told by their general administrator that they were about to undertake something of exceptional importance. Sir John Barbirolli was the first Englishman to conduct the orchestra in a recording session since 1937, when Sir Thomas Beecham recorded Mozart's *Die Zauberflöte* for The Gramophone Company Limited." This is a wonderful recording offering a strong

and vibrant performance by Sir John with the orchestra playing with the class and quality they were known for under the baton of the great Wilhelm Furtwängler. The original is now very hard to find as EMI ASD 596/7. However there is a later re-issue available coupled with the Mahler *6th* and offered as SLS 851. The sound quality is not as stunning as the ASD, but the performance doesn't change one iota and remains one of my favorites. Maybe it was because of the release of Klemperer's great performance on SAX that ruled the day?

There are several EMI SAX issues which fall into the rare/scarce category and they include the Leonid Kogan Violin concertos of Tchaikovsky and Beethoven as well as the Lalo *Symphonie Espagnole* - all scarce items. I'd certainly put those fabulous performances of Ravel (the box set SMS 1017 - not the individual issues of SAX 2476/9) by Andre Cluytens in the scarce category. The box is truly hard to find. I'd consider Samson Francois' performance ▶



▶ of the Prokofiev *3rd* and *5th* concerti with Rowicki on SAX 2533 to be rare. A performance enjoyed by some, but not to my liking. I'd also consider his Debussy work on SAX 2469 to fall in that rare category. Unfortunately this is one I've not heard.

To my mind the granddaddy of the EMI stereo rarities is SLS 751 [SLS stands for stereo library series] (ASD 274/7) of Mozart's *Le Nozze di Figaro*, conducted by Vittorio Gui and the Glyndebourne Festival Orchestra and chorus. Artists include Sena Jurinac, Graziella Sciutti, Risë Stevens, Monica Sinclair, Hughes Cuenod, Sesto Bruscantini, Franco Calabrese and Ian Wallace. This 1955 production is the first EMI stereo release of an opera (as well as the first SLS box set). Because the mono production ALP 1312/5 was released in January of 1956, when this stereo issue was available in November of 1959, it was really too much to ask the public to buy the same performance, but just in a "new format" - and at full price. This is a fine production, primitive stereo sound and a performance that I consider average. My heart belongs to Kleiber on Decca.

RCA in America made a similar error when they released the stereo version of Reiner's fabulous *Also Sprach Zarathustra* as LSC 1806 (not available in the UK in the SB series). They had released the mono version a few years earlier and people were just not willing to buy the same performance in this new format. This was a pity because the Reiner is one of the finest stereo records ever produced. They compounded their mistake by releasing only one year apart, a mono and then stereo version of Schubert's *Trout* with the festival quartet, first LM 2147 and then LSC 2147. Once again the public were not prepared to pay out twice for the same performance. Both these records offer excellent sound, yet the circumstances of their release means that they are now both hard to find, especially the *Trout*.

A couple of American audiophile recordings come to mind when we continue the scarce/rare discussion. Rare, and a real prize it is, is RCA LSC 2449. Clearly a Decca engineered recording (although also not released as an SB) it has Alexander Gibson conducting the Royal Opera House Orchestra, Covent Garden in three delightful selections. Side one is an all Gounod program: ballet music from *Faust* and a wonderful four and a half minutes of his *Funeral March of a Marionette*. For American television viewers, this last piece was the theme of the weekly Alfred

Hitchcock television series. Side two is a very exciting suite from Bizet's *Carmen*. This is a highly sought after album and has one of the greatest covers ever to grace an album jacket—a wonderful picture of the Devil from *Faust*. Copies of this, when they turn up on the second hand market, comfortably fetch approximately £400.

Another audiophile recording, once highly sought after by collecting enthusiasts because of the mystique created by its presence on the tas list, is the mercury living presence issue, SR90144 of *Hi-Fi a La Espanola* with Frederick Fennell conducting the Eastman-Rochester "pops"

orchestra. The bloom is off the rose as far as this recording is concerned since it was later released on CD by Philips in their Mercury series and then again by classic records on vinyl. Neither the CD nor the Classic comes anywhere near to the sonic majesty of the original, but as someone I know once said the content is musical wallpaper anyway. The album contains a variety of selections from Percy Faith's *Brazilian Sleigh Bells* to Guarneri's *Brazilian Dance*. On paper at least, Fennell has picked some interesting selections for this album and it is still a scarce item to find today. In years past, the us copy of this LP sold for upwards of £1000, but its heyday is long gone and the price has now settled at less than half that figure.



I've not even begun to scratch the surface in the

discussions of does scarce or rare mean good or bad? The problem is that the bastardization of the terminology in order to help justify exorbitant pricing means that the cost of a record is absolutely no guarantee of sonic or musical quality. Instead, as we have seen, records can be rare or scarce for any number of reasons – not least in some cases because they are truly awful. Does that make them a waste of money? Not necessarily, but you need to be sure why you're paying top dollar, and what it is you're buying. There are genuinely impressive discs that command the musical, sonic and financial heights, but they're few and far between. Others are expensive for different reasons. Unfortunately, the ease with which those people selling these discs manipulate the semantics of their profession does little to help the purchaser. Knowledge is power.



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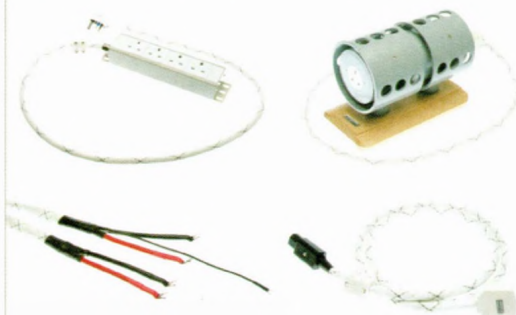
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Tveitt
Piano Concerto No. 4 "Aurora Borealis"/Variations on a Folksong

Gimse/Süssmann /RSNO/Engeset
Naxos 8.555761 (CD)

Few will have heard of Norwegian composer Geirr Tveitt, let alone know his work. He incorporated the folk music of his native country into much of it, but managed to avoid any form of over-romanticised sentimentality, and created a style that is pretty much unique. His *Fourth Piano Concerto 'Aurora Borealis'* is actually a three-movement tone poem, full of luminous textures, with evocative keyboard writing that creates a wonderful sense of mystery, and reveals the bold ruggedness of rhythm that is at the heart of Scandinavian folk music. The single-movement *Variations on a Folksong from Hardanger*, for two pianos and orchestra, is actually longer than the *Piano Concerto*, but with a lovely theme, these beautiful variations are easy to follow and never dull, with the pianos avoiding the simply percussive qualities that can result from this form of composition being put in the wrong hands. In fact, both the performers and the engineers have excelled throughout, with first-rate playing, sympathetic direction and a vibrant sound. In the early 1970s, a fire destroyed much of Tveitt's music, so we must be grateful that these two works survived, and that Naxos have discovered these gems to record.

SG

RECORDING
MUSIC



Tchaikovsky
Symphony No 6 Pathétique
Rautavaara, Apotheosis

Swedish Radio S O, Franck
Ondine ODE 1002-2

Those who believe there's nothing more to be said about the mainstream classical repertoire should hear this remarkable account of Tchaikovsky's *Pathétique* conducted by Mikko Franck. It's a powerful performance of brooding anger and (ultimately) nihilistic destruction. Tempi are very broad, leading to an overall time just short of 55 minutes - some 8 to 10 minutes longer than average. Yet the performance doesn't feel slow; just weighty, inexorable, and ultimately inconsolably tragic. Franck makes sure the music doesn't drag, and keeps rhythms crisply sprung and articulate. But such things are incidental. The key to this performance is its incredible concentration and far-sightedness; its seriousness and intensity. The climax of the first movement's development section (from about 15min) is electrifying, as is the coda of the finale - a vision of bleak tragedy, bereft of hope or salvation. It's a performance to put beside Bernstein's (DG); there can be no higher praise. Rautavaara's short orchestral piece *Apotheosis* is atmospheric and richly-hued - like a highly saturated variation of Ravel's *Une Barque sur l'Océan*. Ondine's recording is sonorous and detailed without obvious microphone spotlighting. Tchaikovsky's dark scoring is revealed with great clarity, yet balances remain open and natural. You can almost feel the woody-brown textures of the double basses in the finale.

JMH

RECORDING
MUSIC



Schumann
String Quartets Nos. 1 & 3

Zehetmair Quartet
ECM New Series 1793 472 169-2 (CD)

Despite Schumann's *quartets* being very much under-performed, they can certainly be put on a level with his orchestral works, piano music or songs - at least when hearing such committed performances as these. Some have regarded them as lacking romantic expressiveness, but the Zehetmair Quartet have revealed the complex blend of tenderness and vitality that epitomises them and reveals the tension in much of the composer's better loved works. Some may be unsettled by the daring tempos employed here, such as in the *Scherzo* and finale of *String Quartet No. 1*, but these animate the dynamics of the work, giving the performance a real sense of spontaneity. In fact I have never heard these works sound so exhilarating. There is certainly a physical energy to the playing, but this is allied to a care for the musical colours and textures, conveying exquisite poise and a sense of emotional lyricism. This has all come about through a sensitivity to Schumann's music. All four members of the ensemble play with masterful technical assurance, and ECM have provided an excellent recording. It is just a pity that all three quartets were not included, when they would all fit on one CD.

SG

RECORDING
MUSIC





Mahler
Symphony No 6

Orchestre National de France
Bernard Haitink

Naive V 4937

Bernard Haitink's '90s Berlin Philharmonic cycle of the Mahler symphonies on Philips was never completed alas (*symphonies 8 and 9* were left unrecorded), so it's a pleasant surprise to see this Radio France account of the *sixth*. Taken from live performances given over 2 days in October 2001, the overall timing is slightly faster than either of his previous studio versions with the Concertgebouw and Berlin Philharmonic respectively, so the performance fits on one CD. But the first movement repeat is missing - something Haitink previously observed. It's unusual to hear a French orchestra playing Mahler, and one wonders how often the Orchestre National de France had encountered this music - though Maazel taped the *first symphony* with them for CBS. Whatever the answer, they play the *sixth* superbly. They make the right sort of burnished sound too - ripe, sonorous, craggy - though the recording gives the top-end slight prominence. Tonally, the recording is very sweet and open, but slightly on the bright side - the upper partials of the brass are emphasised, though the sound remains clean. The orchestral playing is alert and disciplined, but not regimented, and the performance has plenty of fantasy. Applause is included, but some idiot shouts 'Bravo' at the end - a sure indication that he didn't understand a single note. Stunned cowed submission is the only fitting response to Mahler's *sixth*!

JMH



Schubert
Octet in F major, D803

Gaudier Ensemble

Hyperion CDA67339

Over a decade has passed since the release of the Gaudier Ensemble's first recording of this work, on ASV. While that particularly refined CD was admired for its intrinsic worth, illustrating this work as a step on Schubert's "way to a grand symphony", there have since been a few changes to the group's personnel, with the present players revealing an even better understanding of the piece. The new version may lack some of the all-embracing beauty of the old performance, which exhibited flowing lines and an almost eternal sense of loveliness, especially in the *Andante* and the particularly gripping opening to the finale, but it reveals the details of Schubert's composition more comprehensively. And the playing provides a sublime tension as each of the performers respond to the others' input with a high degree of intelligence, especially in the *Allegro vivace*. There is still a wonderful romantic quality to proceedings but, while full of the most intimate moments, the newer performance leaves a more open impression. This is helped by Tony Faulkner's engineering, which provides sound that is particularly spacious, all resulting in a far more compelling and consistent example of fine, large-scale chamber music.

SG



Respighi
La Boutique Fantasque (after Rossini)
La Pentola Magica, Prelude and Fugue (after J. S. Bach)
BBC Phil, Nosedà

Chandos CHAN 10081

Of course the main attraction here is the colourful ballet score *La Boutique Fantasque*. Brimfull of catchy Rossini tunes, it's a work that never loses its freshness or appeal. Nosedà's performance is by turns brilliant, sparkling, and witty, and he plays the music for all it's worth. Yet although buying the disc for this work alone is justified, in many ways it was *La Pentolo Magica* (another ballet score, lasting about 25 minutes) that caught my ear. Rarely performed or recorded, it deserves to be better-known. As so often with Respighi, the music is very evocative and atmospheric - not perhaps as immediately appealing as (say) the *Three Botticelli Pictures*, but attractive enjoyable music, worth returning to. The orchestration of Bach's *D major prelude and fugue* is from another age, when baroque music needed (or was felt to need) the equivalent of a face-lift to make it acceptable. Today we innocently enjoy the opulent vulgarity of Respighi's expert scoring, perfectly realised in this fresh effervescent performance. The recording is typically Chandos; fairly reverberant, with the orchestra set well back in a lively acoustic. Clarity is quite well maintained, though the impression is more one of atmosphere than sharp detail.

JMH





La Belle Marie
Songs to the Virgin from
13th Century France

Anonymous 4

Harmonia Mundi HMU 907312 

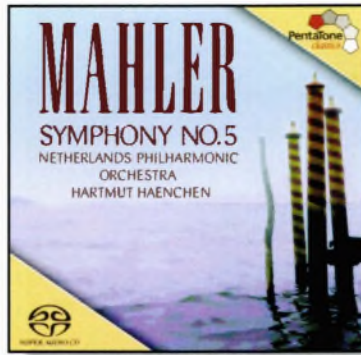
While the American female vocal group, Anonymous 4, have decided to disband after 17 years to pursue individual interests, they will still be around until the end of the 2003-4 season.

As usual, this release features repertoire gained from original manuscripts, but also utilises research into pronunciation of French and French Latin from the period. That music is a varied and compelling collection of conductus and chansons, all anonymously composed with the exception of the monophonic conductus, *Beata viscera* by Perotin. Their performance is also typical, producing sound of remarkable unity, with voices impeccably in tune and a tremendous clarity of tone. Over the years, that tone may have observed a touch of mellowing, but this vocal quartet still present the highest standard of musicianship, and now add a few extra shades of colour to their glittering presentation. The more complex, livelier works feature some wonderful interplay between voices and, like the singing, the engineering is up to a very high standard.

If you can see this group live, then I urge you to. Like listening to this delightful release, it will only emphasize what you will be missing once its members have finally gone their separate ways.

SG

RECORDING
MUSIC



Mahler
Symphony No 5

Netherlands P O
Hartmut Haenchen

Pentatone Classics PTC 5186 004 

It's a bit naughty of me to write about this surround-sound SACD, having only heard it as a two channel CD. But, even in its CD format, the recording is impressively detailed and sonorous. Dynamic range is very wide, and as a result it's a good idea to increase volume levels by something like 3dB to 5dB. Recorded live in Amsterdam's famed Concertgebouw, the sound is not overly reverberant, but nicely balanced. Played at realistic volume levels, climaxes have shattering power, while quiet passages sound clear and focussed. Perspectives are wholly natural, and clarity is excellent with no hint of microphone spotlighting. You hear lots of detail because the sound is so open and transparent. There's some impressive deep bass too. A little audience noise is sometimes audible, but not much, and you really sense the ambience of the venue between movements as people cough and move in their chairs. So - no complaints from a sonic point of view; one of the best-sounding Mahler 5s ever issued. The performance is good too; well-paced and expressively played, without tricks or gimmicks. Haenchen doesn't try to milk every last drop from the score, yet neither is he aloof or cold. The overall timing of just over 68 minutes is slightly on the fast side, yet the playing doesn't sound rushed or hasty. A very good performance, superbly recorded. Applause is included.

JMH

RECORDING
MUSIC



Alkan
Esquisses, Op. 63

Steven Osborne

Hyperion CDA 67377 

While Charles-Valentin Alkan's compositions for the piano may have earned a not altogether unfair reputation as being difficult and full of the most extraordinary flamboyance, requiring a performer who possesses the most remarkable virtuosity and perfect technique, these 48 Sketches represent a far more restrained side of the composer's character. Even Steven Osborne's notes in the accompanying booklet explain that he had previously avoided Alkan's works because of a similar judgment. Now, having introduced these *Esquisses* to us, Osborne deserves our gratitude.

They were written over a period of several years, before being assembled for publication in 1861. While they still hold material that will test the pianist, they are often sublime, requiring a performer of the utmost sensitivity, and in Osborne they find the perfect exponent. He is receptive to their diversity of mood and contrasting character, and produces playing of great luminosity, revealing an extraordinary range of expressions, such as the grotesque lyricism of *Les Diablotins*, the rapture of *Délire* or the simply poignancy of *Petit air dolent*. With very good, sympathetic engineering, those preferring the emotional and more exquisite side of music for the solo piano, as well as the pianist's art, should look no further.

SG

RECORDING
MUSIC



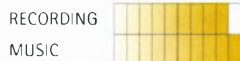


Dvorak
 The Golden Spinning Wheel;
 The Noon Witch; The Water
 Goblin; The Wood Dove,
 Royal Concertgebouw orchestra
 Nikolaus Harnoncourt

Teldec 2564 60221-2 (2CDs priced as 1)

Three of the four works on this double CD have previously been issued as fillers to Harnoncourt's recordings of Dvorak's symphonies 7, 8 and 9. Since the combined timing of all four works only just exceed 83 minutes, Teldec have put out this two-disc set for the price of one. The performances are detailed and sensitive, and Harnoncourt displays plenty of sympathy for Dvorak's folksy Bohemian idiom and his special unique sound world. In many ways Dvorak's symphonic poems are neglected pieces. Yet they're among the best works this composer wrote, and each of the four scores included here contains music of the highest quality. The orchestration is particularly impressive, and Dvorak creates some telling sonorities to illustrate the subject, using a whole gamut of effects with great subtlety and imagination. The live recordings sound very atmospheric and highly detailed. The orchestra is nicely set-back in a warm but not overly-reverberant acoustic, and the results are well-nigh perfect. If you didn't buy the symphonies, treat yourself to this double CD and speculate on what you missed!

JMH



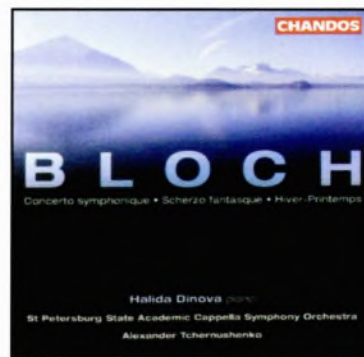
Weigl
 Symphony No. 5 'Apocalyptic'
 Phastastisches Intermezzo

Rundfunk-Sinfonieorchester Berlin
 Sanderling

BIS CD-1077

Karl Weigl worked under Mahler in Vienna. There he enjoyed respect and admiration, despite being regarded very much as a traditionalist in a progressive age, until 1938, when the Nazis marched into Austria, forcing him to emigrate to America. The *Apocalyptic Symphony*, although not premiered until 1968, was composed in 1945 and dedicated to President Roosevelt's memory. It is full of tonal riches and harmonic complexities, revealing a certain Mahlerian irony, but with an underlying admiration for the likes of Beethoven and Brahms. It opens with sounds of the orchestra tuning, over which the trombones blast out the first movement's main theme, establishing order from chaos. The *Scherzo* has an oriental feel to it, while the *Adagio* is one of the most beautiful written during the 20th Century. The finale consists of a bitterly ironic march into a man-made apocalypse before bells announce the conclusion to this remarkable work. The delightful and utterly original *Phantastisches Intermezzo* is scored more lightly, revealing areas of profound contrast. Throughout, Thomas Sanderling and the Rundfunk-Sinfonieorchester Berlin reveal great commitment and understanding, delivering sparkling performances of intense feeling, and with excellent sound, this is a superb release.

SG



Bloch
 Concerto Symphonique
 Scherzo Fantastique, Hiver-Printemps
 Dinova (piano), S O State Academic
 Cappella of St Petersburg
 Tchernushenko

Chandos CHAN 10085

Bloch is dangerously close to being a one-work composer; only *Schelomo* is played/recorded with any frequency - and even that much less often than it should be! Yet he had a unique voice, and wrote music that amply repays the time taken to get to know it. All three works on this disc are high quality pieces. The *Concerto Symphonique* (1947-8) in three movements is a big ambitious work for piano and orchestra lasting some 40 minutes. It has the same archaic seriousness as *Schelomo*; although you know it's music written during the past fifty or sixty years, it somehow feels much older - like the score for one of those Hollywood Biblical epics from the '60s. And while you won't whistle it on your way to work, it's music of real substance. Bloch definitely had something of importance to say. The *Scherzo Fantastique* (1948) has something of the diabolical in its make up - a malevolent streak quite different to the almost religious fervour of the *Concerto Symphonique*. Both works feature solo piano, and Halida Dinova grapples manfully with Bloch's big-boned writing. The disc ends with the atmospheric *Hiver-Printemps*; an early work (1904-5) beautifully scored for orchestra. Chandos' recording is very good; not as reverberant as their typical European sessions, but clear, open, and well-balanced.

JMH



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This is a record that goes some way towards proving how the interpretative and technical strengths of Sixties European jazz musicians have for far too long remained in the shadow of their more illustrious and better known contemporaries from across the Atlantic. The album, structured around four pianist (Dieter Reith, Elsie Bianchi, Ewald Heidepriem and Wolfgang Dauner) was taped during four sessions at the SABA Studios between October 1963 and April 1964. It features ten tracks that include standards like Ellington's 'Take The Coltrane' and Cole Porter's 'What Is This Thing Called Love', alongside arrangements and compositions by these principal players. It's an impressive format that kicks off with the Dauner Quartet's swinging and smartly executed 'Take the A-Train' and closes with Heidepriem and The Frieberg Modern Jazz Group's solid and unpretentious cut of Porter's 'Big P'. These astute performances and those elsewhere by the Elsie Bianchi Trio and Dieter Reith's Quintet are full of pithy observations and virtuoso moments carefully framed within natural sounding and informative acoustics. Definitely an album worthy of serious consideration.

RP

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The Rolling Stones

Beggars Banquet

ABKO 8823012 


There is something about the Rolling Stones; you had to be there! There is a whole generation of people (mostly men, aged between 30 and 60) who have a long-standing affinity with the Stones that never, ever really goes away. To this demographic, ABKO's CD/SACD hybrid reissue collection of 1960s classic Stones albums is at once manna from heaven and a time machine, plopping you back to a time when you thought you looked pretty cool in your crushed velvet loon pants. *Beggars Banquet* is one of the late 1960s period albums, when the Stones turned dark and moody and became more of a challenge to The Doors than The Beatles. The tracks are raw, potent and some are still powerful; 'Sympathy For The Devil' has lost none of its freshness, despite being 35 years old. The SACD re-master gets you far closer to the recording studio sound than was ever possible on vinyl, perhaps unless you own a test pressing of this million-seller disc. The DSD transfer is remarkable, in a warts-n-all way; the analogue hiss, the minor little tape glitches are all there and even more noticeable than with the standard LP or CD pressing (although, strangely, the CD layer of the disc is also wonderfully detailed sounding, too); if this were an audiophile recording, you may be upset by these, but here you feel somehow closer to Mick and the boys. When they weren't pensioners.

AS



Bob Dylan

Blonde On Blonde

Sundazed/Columbia LP 5110  

In their quest for authenticity Sundazed have retrieved the original mono master tapes from the Columbia archives and begun to release the best Dylan albums on this format. Two of the most important, *Highway 61 Revisited* and *Blonde On Blonde*, appeared within six months of one another in 1966. They cemented Dylan's movement away from the folk scene and into a new field of rock music, with both offering an absorbing commentary on the Sixties social revolution through the great man's fondness for parables and exaggerated storytelling. Here though there are those pithy and exceptionally wise songs like 'Visions of Joanna', 'Just Like A Woman' and 'I Want You', which thematically move us forward into that perilous realm of the love affair as well. The trademark barbed and acerbic wit, underwritten by compact-sounding keyboard lines and comparatively tenacious guitar hooks, continues to explore all these concerns to their very limit. But in Bob Johnston's Nashville production it might just be possible to detect a softening in attitude. Musically brilliant and sonically intriguing, this is an indispensable record that should be in every collection whether you run a mono system or not.

RP

Supplier: Cherished Record Co. 01579 363603



■ 2 STUNNING ALBUMS ON 3 GREAT FORMATS

Steely Dan: *Everything Must Go*

Steely Dan enjoyed tremendous success throughout the 70's with highly acclaimed albums such as *Aja*, *Royal Scam* and *Katy Lied*. Having split in 1981 they reunited as Steely Dan in the early 90s. This album marks the duo's first release since 2000's stunning *Two Against Nature*. *Everything Must Go* is yet another classic jazz pop album from the 'Dan and should be in every fans collection. Tracks include *The Last Mall*, *Things I Miss The Most*, *Lunch With Gena* and *Everything Must Go*.

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Vivante publishes a monthly newsletter, *On The Record*, which highlights new releases on all audiophile formats, includes special offers and features columns written by top Hi-Fi and music critics.

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The Ray Brown Trio: *Soular Energy*

One of the best-recorded and entertaining jazz albums of them all. Features pianist Gene Harris, guitarist, Emily Remler and tenor sax player, Red Holloway on mix of originals and standards. Tracks include *Cry Me A River*, *Sweet Georgia Brown* and *Take The A Train*. In the US critics and jazz lovers have been raving over this SACD incarnation on *Soular Energy*, maybe now it's your turn!

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ADVERTISERS INDEX

A' Audio Solutions	135	Griffin Audio	136	Origin Live	35
Absolute Analogue	79	Hazlemere	94	Path Premier	ifc
Absolute Sounds	2	Heatherdale	94	Pear Audio	129
Audio Atmosphere	95	Hi fiforsale.com	89	Quadraspire	95
Audio Consultants	8	HiFi News	13	Radlett Audio	136
Audio Images	135	Icon Audio	69	Russ Andrews Accessories	111
Audio Reference	59	IF Designs	69	Signals	130
Audio Reflection	105	Infidelity	136	Sounds of Music	130
Audio Republic Ltd	136	Integrated Engineering Solutions	80	Stone Audio	35
Audiophile Club	81	Joenit	17	The Cartridge Man	135
B&W	4 & 5	KJ West One	14 & 23 & 58	The Emporium	130
Basically Sound	105	Kronos HiFi	129	The Right Note	80
Border Patrol	94	Lamm	135	The Studio	111
Castle Sound & Vision	129	Manger Audio	69	Trading Station	124 & 125
Chestergroup	48 & 49	Metropolis Music	19	Trichord Research Ltd	81
Chord Electronics	obc	Midland Audio Exchange	20	Tube Shop	59
Definitive Audio	68	Music Matters	136	Vivante	139
Doug Brady HiFi	93	Neat Acoustics	79	Voodoo Isolation Systems	130
Dynavector Superstereo	130	New Audio Frontiers	95	Walrus	6
Experience Filtration	129	Nordost	29	Wollaton Audio	89
Final Lab	68	Noteworthy Audio Ltd	136	Worthing Audio	105
Focal JM Lab	ibc	Oranges & Lemons	130	Zuch Audio	10

My Favourite Things

by Richard S Foster

I thought I'd share some of my favorite stereo classical recordings that offer great sound, wonderful performances and what is most important, they won't break the financial bank for any collector. Sometime in the future perhaps I may bring out some of the break-the-bank 'heavy hitters', but for now let's stay in the realm of normality. There is more great music offering wonderful performances and fabulous sound than any one collector could possibly hear in a lifetime. There is also a whole

bunch of recordings I wouldn't ever listen to again . . . so the river does flow both ways.

Of the great sounding recordings I'm going to share, most are fairly easy to obtain - but you're going to have to get creative. I've seen them listed on the monthly lists put out by Peter Fülöp's *Mikrokosmos Mail Order Company* (<http://www.mikrokosmos.com>). They've also been listed with Dave Canfield's *Ars Antiqua* (<http://www.arsantiqua.com>).

I've tried to stay away from listing some of my true favorites of the early stereo era. There are too many from the Decca, EMI, RCA, Mercury, CBS, Deutsche Grammophon and Philips catalogues that unfortunately are getting really scarce and what is more important, very pricey when found. Don't get me wrong. There are plenty of records from most of these companies that were sold in the 1970's that are spectacular and inexpensive. Let's start with a great issue from Germany:

Deutsche Grammophon 2530 609

Stravinsky: L'Histoire Du Soldat. Text by C.F. Ramuz; English version by Michael Flanders with Kitty Black. Boston Symphony Chamber Players; *The Narrator: John Gielgud; The Soldier: Tom Courtenay; The Devil: Ron Moody. Dramatic Supervision: Douglas Cleverdon. Production and Recording Supervision: Thomas W. Mowrey (music); Franz-Christian Wulff (text). Sound Engineer: Günter Hermanns. Recording produced in 1975, released February 1976.*



As you can see from the credits, this is quite an involved production. I am aware of another performance in French and I'm not sure if there isn't a production in German also... all records contain the same catalogue number. Obviously the Boston Symphony Chamber Players (Joseph Silverstein, violin; Henry Portnoi, double bass; Harold Wright, clarinet; Sherman Walt,

bassoon; Armando Ghitalla, cornet; William Gibson, trombone and Everett Firth, percussion) recorded the music and then the DGG engineers dubbed the character performance they wanted to release, either in French, German or English. Of course each characterization contained different artists. Even though this mid 1970's production contains 29 minutes on side one and 30 minutes on side two, the sound quality is fantastic

▶ from top to bottom! The music is delightful. The performances are outstanding. You're captivated the moment the stylus hits the grooves and you will enjoy the wonderful job Gielgud and company creates. Courtenay makes quite the gullible soldier whom... well I shan't continue, you must find out for yourself. Ron Moody, a wonderful Fagin in Carol Reed's adaptation of the Dicken's Novel *Oliver Twist* and brought to the large screen as *Oliver!* - plays a fantastic 'Devil'. Here's a little hint for those who've not yet discovered the Boston Symphony Chamber Players on Deutsche Grammophon. They recorded approximately eight recordings for the company in the early to mid 1970's. Not all the music is going to suit everyone's taste, but I guarantee you the performances and sound quality offered is top rank. Oh, and lest I forget, this record might set you back less than £5. Highest recommendation.

Eterna 8 25 560:

Haydn: Concerto No. 1 in C major and Concerto No. 2 in G major for Violin and String Orchestra.
Karl Suske, violin. Otmar Suitner conducting the Staatskapelle Berlin.
 A 1964 production
 Made in the German Democratic Republic.

This is going to be one of those records you won't find every day, and most likely it will be obtainable through the mail order dealers I've listed above. I am sure that most of the readership has not explored the Eterna catalogue because it has only been in recent years that these records began to attract the attention of collectors. Suske is a fantastic violinist. I would put him in the same league as any of his contemporaries in the West and in many cases I consider his playing and intonation superior to anyone. Unfortunately Suske did not make many violin concerto recordings. Most of his records are the quartets or sonatas of Beethoven and Mozart. They are outstanding performances and contain superb sound and are among my most cherished performances. It is unfortunate however, that most



of these are expensive. The sonatas run in the £35-£75 ranges and the quartets are at least £90 and up. This particular recording was in the catalogue for quite some time and I've experienced early and later pressings of this issue. To my satisfaction, while the very early issues (a black label) offer the best sound, the second label (blue/green) is absolutely fine. What captures you immediately is the spaciousness of the recording. I have absolutely no idea where this was recorded (my German is nonexistent) but it appears to have been recorded in Dresden. This is a big sounding record that will fill your room with air, ambience and rich but not overly reverberant, string tone. These works are delightful and have not been recorded enough. I urge you to seek this recording out and anything else you may be lucky enough to find with Karl Suske. Incidentally, the playing of the Staatskapelle Berlin under Suitner is also of the highest order. This recording will tell you everything you want to know about how good - or bad - a job your system is in resolving the nuances of a string orchestra. To my ears, this is one of the most

accurate recordings I've ever encountered and offers excellent string sound. Another top recommendation which will set you back less than £15 when found. Good luck!

Telefunken 6.42621

Double Bass Concertos.
 Giovanni Bottesini: Concerto for Double Bass and Stings in B minor; Domenico Dragonetti: Andante and Rondo for Double Bass and Strings; Karl Ditters Von Dittersdorf: Concerto for Double Bass in E Major.
Ludwig Streicher:
Double Bass. Münchener Kammerorchester with

Hans Stadlmair conductor. No production or engineering credits given. Recording first issued in 1980.

The Double Bass is probably the hardest instrument for recording engineers to create in proper perspective to the rest of the orchestra. The finest example of a near-perfect execution I am aware of is on EMI ASD 3264 *Music for Double Bass* with Rodney Slatford playing with Neville Marriner and

▶ the Academy of St. Martin-In-The-Fields. Having said that, there is so much to love about the playing of Streicher. The Bottesini pieces are not often recorded and I am glad to have it with the other selections on this LP. Streicher was 60 years old when he made this recording and his intonation, control and delicacy all comes through in these fine performances. I would think at the time of this recording, Streicher was the leading double bassist in the world. He's been recorded by Telefunken on several records - all worth having. This is one of his best. I'm not too troubled that the instrument is a little too large for my tastes because this is a record I listen to only for the performance. Don't get me wrong, the sound quality is just excellent, but it's Streicher's playing that totally captivates me. A record that is not difficult to find and will certainly cost you less than £5. Strongly recommended.

A side note for those interested in pursuing more double bass music: The double bassist Gary Karr became a bit of a cult figure in audiophile circles, especially with Japanese collectors in the 1980's. There are many examples of his work available on the Seven Seas and King labels. However, they are harder to find, more expensive, and much of his recorded output for these labels are arrangements of works not meant for double bass, but meant for the big sound crowd. In my opinion, the finest double bassist alive today is the American, Edgar Meyer. Most of his output is as a jazz double bassist, but he has a strong classical background. He recorded approximately four albums for MCA in the late 1980's (jazz only) and now of course, all is output is only available on compact disc. While Meyer has recorded much with Yo-Yo Ma and others, he's also released a very interesting CD on Sony, SK89183 that contains three of Bach's *Unaccompanied Cello Suites* (Nos. 1, 2 and 5) which he arranged for double bass. Believe it or not... it works.

RCA Red Seal RL 25094

Satie: *Gymnopédies I and II*; Fauré: *Pavane, Opus 50*;

Ravel: *Introduction and Allegro for Harp, Flute, Clarinet and Strings*; *Le tombeau de Couperin*; *Pavane pour une infante defunte*. *William Bennett, flute; David Theodore, oboe; Tom Kelly, clarinet, James Brown, horn; John Wilbraham, trumpet and David Watkins, harp. The National Philharmonic Orchestra conducted by Charles Gerhardt. Produced and recorded by Kenneth Wilkinson. Recording first published February 1978.*

I stumbled over a US pressing - ARL1-2783 - of this record a number of years ago and loved the



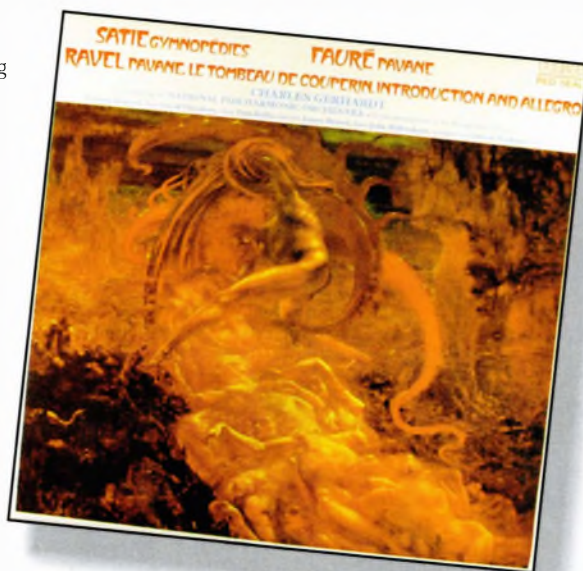
playing. The sound was okay, but surprisingly for a Wilkinson recording, I wasn't overwhelmed. Then I found this UK issue and immediately I knew that I had the one. The sound is absolutely wonderful. The Gerhard-Wilkinson collaborations on many of the Reader's Digest issues, the RCA Film Music Collection series is well documented. Although you may not feel Gerhardt is the 'ultimate' conductor for this fine record of French composers, I think if you heard how he leads the NPO through these works your opinion would change. Here we have a veritable who's who of distinguished British soloists - the soloists of the NPO - captured with that Wilkinson sound of an orchestra and conductor very comfortable with this repertoire. There will be another time when I will get into the merits (or lack thereof) between the US pressed versus UK pressed issues of RCAs, but this time, the UK RCA pressed product is far, far superior. I enjoy and listen to this recording often. It has everything

► I'm looking for. I find the music soothing yet exciting and as I've said before, the sound is fantastic. This may not be easy for our North American readers to find in a UK pressing, but certainly our UK readership should find these in all the usual thrift/charity shops for almost nothing. I absolutely give this my highest recommendation. Not to be missed.

Vanguard VSD 71158 (US) VSL 11048 (UK)

Edgard Varese: *Amériques*; Milhaud: *L'homme et son désir*; Honegger: *Pacific 231*. The Utah Symphony Orchestra, *Maurice Abravanel* conducting. Recording first published in 1968.

I've been fortunate to compare the UK issue to the US issue. Normally I will not make up my mind with just one of each record to compare. There are so many variables at stake (a topic yet again for another time). Having said that, in this instance the US issue (orange label) was vastly superior to its UK counterpart. Contrary to what the liner notes say, *Amériques* was first completed in 1921, not 1922. While the work was introduced by Stokowski and his Philadelphia Orchestra in 1926, there were extensive changes made by the composer in 1927. I've got to admit I'm a big fan of this composer. I find his works rhythmically exciting and they have that 'edge-of-your-chair' quality that keeps me coming back for more. For me his three most exciting works are *Amériques*, *Ionisation*, and *Arcana*. This performance is yet again another sonic blockbuster - it will certainly get those woofers woofing. Some of the nineteen percussive instruments Varese utilizes in this score create sounds I've heard no where else on record. Ever heard the 'singular lion's' roar? It's an instrument also known as string drum. Included are a total of 21 percussive instruments utilizing 10 performers: An orchestra within an orchestra. This is one of the most exciting 22 minutes and nine seconds on record! Side two has an interesting Milhaud work. Literally 'The man and his desire' scored for fifteen



Telarc Records 5038

Holst: First Suite in E Flat, Op. 28, No. 1; Second Suite in F, Op. 28, No. 2; Johann Sebastian Bach: Fantasia in G Major; George Frederick Handel: The Music for The Royal Fireworks. The Cleveland Symphonic Winds, *Frederick Fennell*, conducting. Producer: Robert Woods. Sound Engineer: Jack Renner. Technical Consultant & Mastering Engineer: Stan Ricker. Recording first published in 1978.

percussive (although nineteen are used) and twelve solo instruments as well as the 'desire' which is played out with the four vocalists. An interesting work we don't often hear, it is suggestive of work we would hear a half century later by Stockhausen, Elliott Carter and others. This is an almost seventeen minute work and is followed by a six minute artistic wonder by Honegger - *Pacific 231*. This composition always reminds me - for whatever reason - of a steam locomotive (Hey Richard, what exactly do you think a Pacific 231 is? Ed.) that is in a wildly outrageous hurry as the tempo builds faster and faster and faster. If you're a fan of the unusual, and have a bit of a percussive bent, I urge you to find a copy of this issue. The North American dealers offer this item when available, always at less than \$15US. Make sure you find that deep groove orange label pressing! Top recommendation.

Yes... digital. Sorry, this is one of my guilty pleasures and I absolutely love it. I think Fennell was one of the finest wind conductors ever. His recordings for Mercury's Robert Fine and Wilma Cozart are legendary. I have to admit that I am truly an analogue man, but there is something about some of these early Soundstream Digital Recordings that is truly amazing. I would have loved to have heard this system progress further, but apparently it was not compatible with Sony's PCM1000 which became the industry standard and Soundstream died a rather quick death. I think Telarc was way ahead of the curve with these recordings, and while not every one is "musical" there isn't any doubt that this Fennell disk is highly

▶ enjoyable and suffers from none of the nasties one normally associates with digital. The instruments sound natural, there is great ambience and acoustic space-after all, it was recorded in Severance Hall in Cleveland-and the performances are meant to be lively and exciting. There may be a little too much 'thwack' in the side/bass/kettle drums used . . . but honestly, I don't care. The Holst pieces are classic and in Fennell's hands, I think the composer would be very pleased. The liner notes tell us, "The music recorded here as *Fantasia in G* is the middle portion of a three-part *Fantasia for organ*, listed as #572, Volume XXXVIII in the Bach Gesellschaft edition of complete works... "Richard Franko Goldman, in collaboration with Robert Leist, prepared this wind band version as a memorial to Richard's father, Edwin Franko, whose band had made transcriptions of Bach's music an important part of their repertory." In my opinion, it's an interesting adaptation and if one uses their imagination, they can aurally visualize this certainly for organ. The Handel score, edited by Anthony Baines and Charles Mackerras is really an interesting change to what I normally consider the 'standards' for this work. I'd have to say I'd take Szell, Marriner, Leppard or even the old Pye recording with Mackerras and the Pro Arte over this arrangement. While this works, it's just not how I associate this music. Let me state that I rarely listen to the Bach/Handel side, but for me, I never tire of listening to the Holst pieces and they are just so well done. Strong recommendation and at bargain prices.

Vanguard US- VSD 2141

Louis Moreau Gottschalk: Symphony "A Night in the Tropics"; Gottschalk-Kay: Grand Tarantelle for Piano and Orchestra; Morton Gould: Latin-American Symphonette. Utah Symphony Orchestra conducted by Maurice Abravanel. Reid Nibley, piano. No production or engineering credits. Recording first published in 1963.

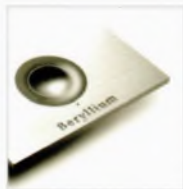


I'd like to know if there is an original UK issue of this record. I've never seen one and have no idea when Vanguard began 'producing' their own product for the UK market. Gottschalk was born in New Orleans in 1829. Considered a child prodigy as a pianist and was sent to Paris to study. He became a very successful concert pianist in Europe in his very early 20's and won wide acclaim in bringing 'exotic' compositions of his own. In 1859 he composed *A Night in the Tropics*, originally for two pianos. The second movement really opens to give us a wonderful "South American" flavour. Side two opens with Morton Gould's *Latin-American Symphonette*. The four movement work, *Rhumba, Tango, Guaracha* and *Conga* are another treat for the ears and will certainly have your toes tapping.

The music is captivating immediately with Gould's use of maracas and strings and the sound is really quite excellent. A delightful twenty minutes that will have you coming back for more. For me, the hit of the show is the last seven minutes and eighteen seconds. Gottschalk's *Tarantelle* was published posthumously and I think this is a great showpiece. The work is an exciting bit of fluff played well and is a sonic masterpiece. You are instantly drawn into the excellent playing by Nibley and Abravanel and it's a whirlwind affair from start to finish. This record contains great sound and offers a bit of different repertoire for many. Finding an original black label 'Stereo Lab' pressing today is going to be quite difficult. It's not an expensive record, just hard to locate. Fear not however. This was one of the first reissues (APC 003) offered by Chad Kassem's Acoustic Sounds (<http://www.acousticsounds.com>) and not only is the record still available, they did a fine job. Recommended.



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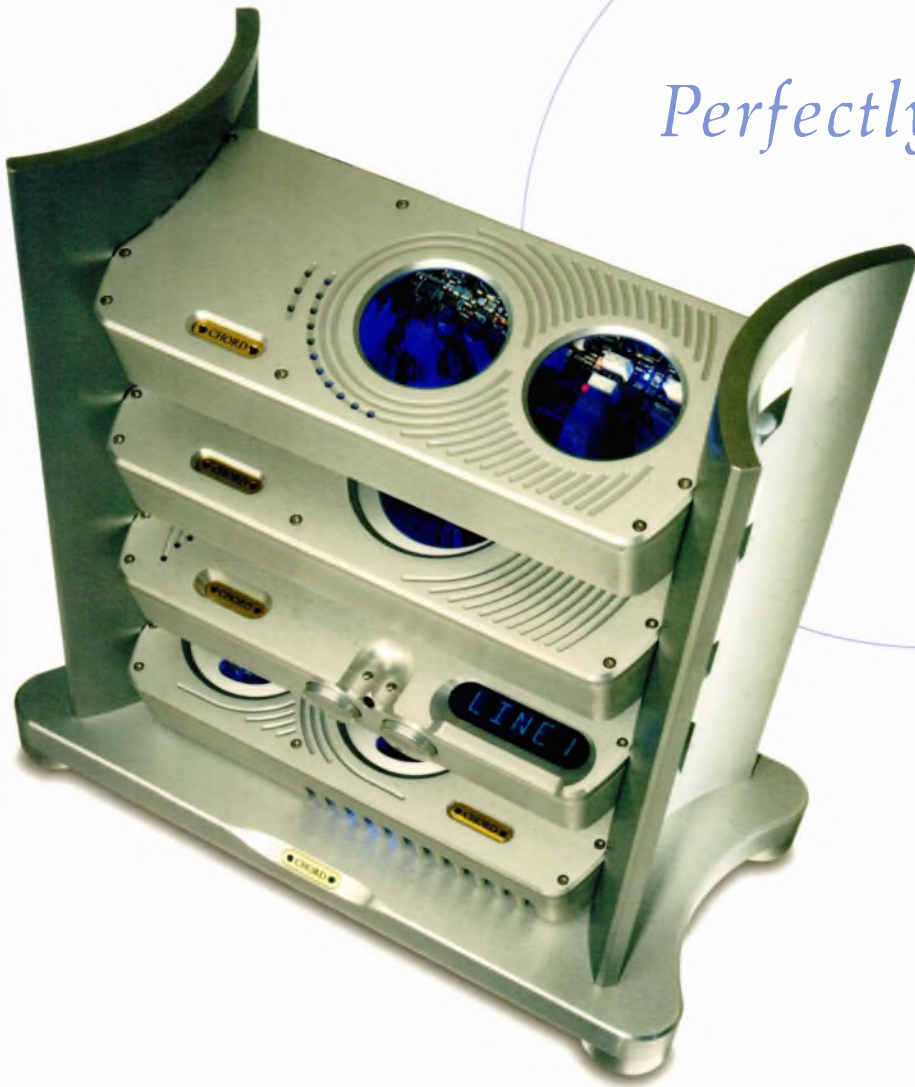


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