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Issue 26 - Sept / Oct 2003
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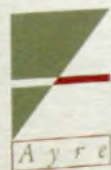
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It's show time again... and again, and again. As we hit the autumn, so we enter the show season, with events in London, Edinburgh and Dublin between now and Christmas, with Bristol, Manchester and London again soon after. That constitutes pretty good coverage, geographically speaking. All that remains is to make sure the various shows are worth attending.

In the past, we've been highly critical of the Novotel Shows, and still feel that having magazines running shows causes more problems than it solves. However, last year's return to Heathrow was welcome indeed, and credit where it's due, organizers Hi-Fi News improved things as far as could be reasonably expected given the parlous state of the previous year. More exhibitors, better facilities and better promotion all played their part.

This year, the Live show at Earls Court clashes with Heathrow. To me this constitutes an opportunity rather than a threat. Far from diluting attendance it will act to concentrate it. Instead of myriad exhibitors showing everything from \$40000 speakers to six-in-a-box 5.1 systems and folding cardboard NXT designs, we'll have fewer exhibitors of higher quality. What we'll end up with is a genuine move towards a proper, high-end audio show, which is what we actually need – a show that demonstrates hi-fi.

Add to that, welcome initiatives from the likes of Nordost and Naim in bringing live music to the show, and as long as the organisers don't backslide into the bad old ways, we could take another serious step towards the event the whole industry needs. Because, as anybody who attends the other shows I've listed will tell you, its quality not quantity that counts. I'd rather visit twenty serious and well-presented exhibits than a hundred and fifty mediocre ones. So with that in mind I've made this a special, high-end edition, in recognition of HFN's efforts, and by way of support and encouragement for them. Quite a few of the products in this issue will debut at the show: some debuted last year. Hopefully you'll enjoy them as much as us.

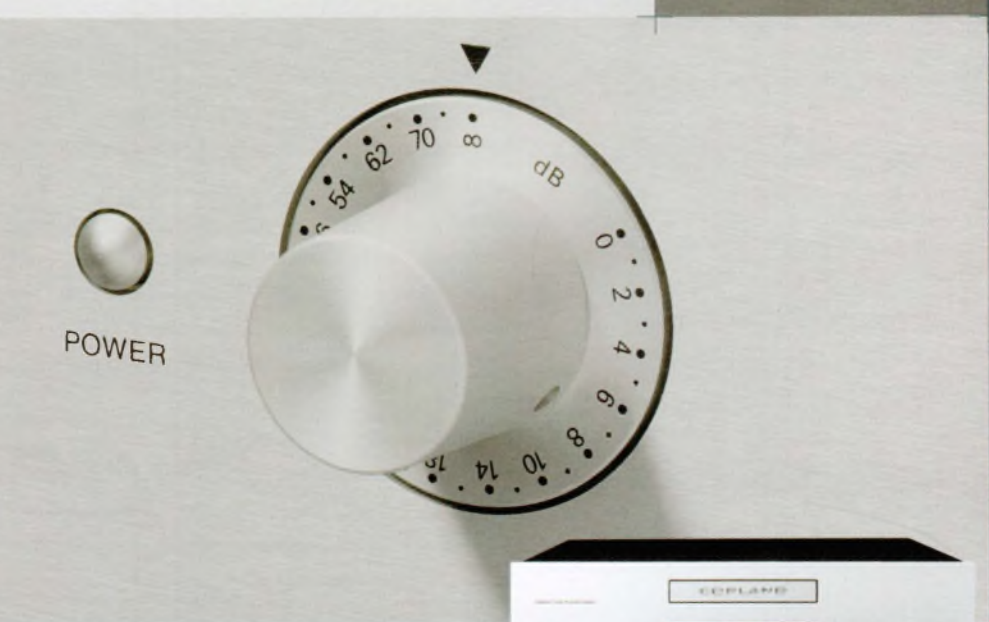




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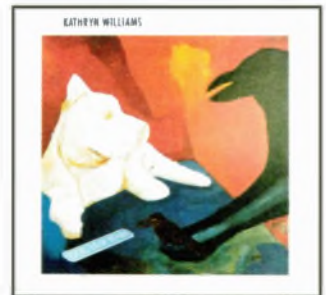
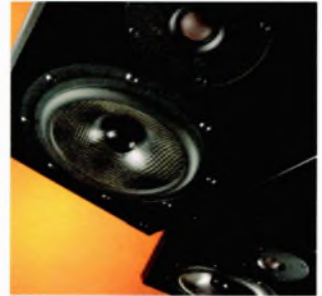
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Home Truths



by Jimmy Hughes

However big an improvement you think get when upgrading, the acid test always comes when you return to what you had originally. Suppose a friend (or crafty dealer) lends you a new piece of kit, and on installing it you immediately hear what seems like a huge improvement. It may well be that item X really has made a humungous difference.

But what will really confirm it is going back to whatever you were using before. If going back produces feelings of horror, panic, and intense disappointment, then yes - there really was a big improvement. And yes - the cheque book needs to come out. Going back confirms that the difference was a real improvement, and not just a change that impressed because of its novelty value.

I had a taste of this myself recently. Having lavishly praised the Jadis DA50 Signature integrated tube amplifier in last month's HFP, it was a sobering experience to return to the Rotel RA-02 when valve troubles resulted in the loss of one channel. This is no reflection on the Jadis' reliability. Alas, tubes are a bit like light bulbs; sometimes they fail prematurely for no good reason.

Of course the Rotel costs a fraction of what the Jadis would set you back. So you'd hope there'd be a fairly big difference between the two. Sad to say there was! The huge/deep/wide soundstage I'd begun to take for granted suddenly vanished. The Rotel sounded significantly 'smaller'; no matter how much I increased volume levels, I couldn't recreate the same impression of weight and dynamics.

Yet I have to say that, after a week or so, the difference seemed less significant. The more I played the Rotel, the more successfully I was able to kid myself things sounded as good as they'd ever done. What's lacking? The music sounded clear and open, with lucid clarity and a pleasantly sharp/detailed quality. Admittedly, using Tube Tech's Fusion CD player as a front-end helped mask the loss.

The added richness and spatial bloom imparted by the Fusion served to ameliorate any absence of these qualities in the Rotel. However, when comparing the Chord DAC-64 with the Fusion CD64 integrated CD player, I have to say the sonic gap between the two products was lessened by the Rotel. The Jadis proved much more able when it came to

highlighting sonic differences.

In spite of this, if I had to make a choice, I'd nearly always prefer to partner a superior front end component like the Fusion CD-64 or Chord's DAC-64 with a middling amp like Rotel's RA-02, than pair a typical CD player with a superior amplifier like the Jadis. When I originally reviewed the Chord DAC back in 2001, I only had it a few weeks before it went to another reviewer.

Boy was it difficult to adjust afterwards! The review period fell just before my birthday, and my wife and I spent a few days out of the country. Suspecting how badly I'd miss the Chord DAC when it was gone, I deliberately used the break to give a week or so's gap between listening sessions - hoping I'd 'forget' how wonderful the DAC-64 had sounded, given enough time.

It didn't work. As soon as I switched my system on the loss was palpable. Everything sounded 'flat' and uninteresting. I tried the odd tweak, but nothing seemed to bridge the gap. Eventually, several months later, a second DAC-64 was sent - arriving unexpectedly one cold Monday night. My wife and I had been to see a movie that evening, and didn't arrive back till late.

Nevertheless, I couldn't wait to get the DAC installed. The casework was freezing, but no matter; I wired it up and put on a CD of piano music. I've forgotten the disc in question, but it was nothing flashy or extrovert - just something simple that relies on timing and expression for effect. The improvement was huge. My wife looked at me and said - '...that sounds so much better!'

It did too. Suddenly the music had expression and delicacy; there was intelligence behind the playing. The sound was better in hi-fi terms too, but that wasn't the point. The main difference was musical. With the DAC-64, the music commanded the sort of attention and respect one usually only reserves for live performances - it had a similar air of reality.

Of course it's easy to get carried away here, making a single product (in this case the DAC-64) uniquely responsible for creating a fabulous sound. In reality, the different parts of the system work as a team, each contributing something ►

▶ to the overall result. Perhaps it's more accurate to describe good products like the DAC-64 as catalysts - able to create a big leap forward in performance.

The idea of the front-end being the dominant component in hi-fi system dates back to the '70s, when it became fashionable to partner expensive high-quality turntables with relatively modest amplifiers and speakers. The belief was that having a superlative front end would subjectively transform the sound of even fairly basic amplifiers and speakers.

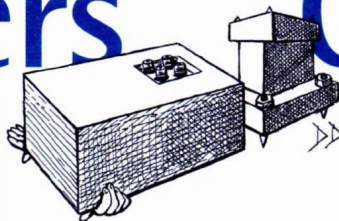
Conversely, having an outstanding amp and speakers was no use unless the source component was of commensurate quality. Indeed, having an excellent amp and speakers demanded the finest front end, otherwise the limitations of a mediocre turntable/arm/cartridge would be ruthlessly exposed. When CD came along, this approach became

harder to justify.

CD players, while not sounding identical, were pretty much of a muchness. There were differences, but not of the order you might experience from analogue front-end components. CD steadily improved throughout the '80s and '90s, but (for me) the real breakthrough came with Chord's DAC 64 and its WTA filter. Finally, CD had the expressive subtlety of good analogue.

Even so, circumstances (the room itself, and other items of equipment being used) need to be sympathetic for the leap forward in sound quality to occur. Having had more experience with the DAC-64 in different hi-fi systems over approximately two years, I know it's not a panacea. Usually, it acquits itself with honour; occasionally it fails to inspire. However, knowing what it can do, I'm inclined to look elsewhere for the problem... ▶+

Speakers Corner



by Paul Messenger

One reason I like reading and writing for Hi-Fi+ is that it doesn't let itself get distracted by technohype. Hype, spin and bullshit are, of course, the watchwords of the 21st century, as well as the stock in trade of those who make their living by writing. And while I wouldn't say that Hi-Fi+ is entirely immune, at least it doesn't fall into the trap of assuming that 'technology' and 'progress' are inextricably linked.

Indeed, the reverse seems nearer the truth. The Hi-Fi+ attitude seems more to respect the credentials of established technologies and products, while approaching the new and heavily hyped with the profound and justifiable scepticism borne of frequent disappointment.

Technology has brought us many good things over the past couple of centuries, but, unlike magazines, genuine breakthroughs don't happen every month - or, for that matter, every year. The techno-revolutions that truly change our lives probably only come once or twice in a decade, and those that transform our hi-fi systems are even rarer.

The last real sea-change in hi-fi was nearly twenty years

ago, when CD came on the scene. Even that was more of a convenience than sound quality revolution, I'm sure many readers will agree, though the elimination of surface noise was a major bonus, especially with classical music.

There's been plenty of evolutionary change over the past two decades, for sure. We now make recordings on CD rather than cassette; we use computers to grab music and radio over the internet; we store and swap hundreds of MP3 music files on and from our hard drives; we have surround sound with or without moving pictures; and we now have digital radio alongside analogue. All these are new or extended capabilities, though none can be said to offer a genuine improvement in sound quality per se.

There are, of course, two new initiatives that do claim to offer 'better than CD' digital sound. The trouble is, the public is rightly sceptical of the fact that there are two of them, and is in any case happy enough with its regular 16-bit 44.1kHz Compact Discs. Indeed, the youth of today seem perfectly happy with 128kb/s compressed MP3 music files, which is a totally depressing observation for anyone who gets ▶

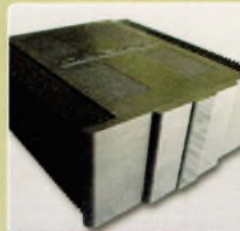
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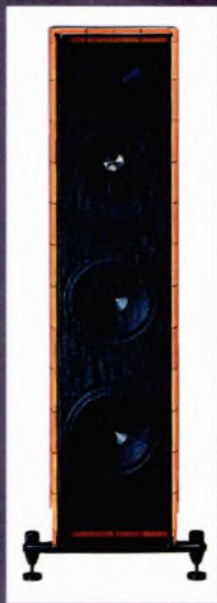
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▶ a buzz out of high quality hi-fi sound. These guys are never going to rush out and embrace the new 'high-band' SACD and DVD-Audio formats.

Happily, a modest but handy proportion of said youth is showing significant enthusiasm for vinyl, thanks to the example set by the DJ culture. Put them alongside the plenty of old fogies like yrs ttry who've never lost the faith, and it seems to me we already have our 'high band' format – even if it is fifty years old!

I run a top quality CD player, and while it's a very convenient medium, it doesn't have the seductively relaxing qualities of analogue vinyl. I'm not deaf to vinyl's limitations, which can be quite exasperating at times, but I am impressed by the way it keeps on getting better, thanks to steady improvements in the hardware. There's also its remarkable resilience as a format: I'm not great at predictions myself, but still recall arguing with a Sony PR person in the mid-1980s who told me that vinyl would have disappeared by 1990!

Vinyl has at least survived two decades of CD competition, and LP sales now comfortably outstrip pre-recorded cassettes. And in my opinion it's likely to see off SACD and DVD-A as well. It's too early to start writing the obituaries for the new high band formats, but the launch phase has been very poorly handled, and there's little sign of retail support for the software.

Even in America, that huge nation of 'early adopters', 'high band' software sales have been very slow. Stereophile's September editorial quotes US sales of 234,000 units for both formats combined during the first six months of 2003, compared to 661,000 units of vinyl.

Here in Britain, recent hardware sales figures strongly suggest that vinyl is making a comeback. Turntables were just about the only bright spot in some thoroughly gloomy recent hi-fi separates sales statistics. Boosted by considerable activity at the budget end of things, the turntable market actually grew 26 per cent during the year ending June '03 (over the year ending June '02), where the total separates sector shrunk 9.5 per cent. Turntable sales have actually now moved into third place (behind amplifiers and CD players).

And at least two well established British brands are joining in. Back at February's Bristol Show I was surprised to find that Cyrus was introducing a new turntable, sourced from German manufacturer Transrotor. Mid summer I received a press release from Musical Fidelity, announcing that it too was about to start building a turntable, which will come fitted with an SME-sourced tonearm.

The most powerful and persuasive argument for vinyl's comeback is simply that it's an entirely grass-roots demand-driven phenomenon. There's no vinyl equivalent to the 'Super Audio Forum' which Sony announced in July this

year which: "Aims to Further Extend Implementation of New Surround Sound Format" (SACD).

I don't deny the sincerity of some of those involved in SACD and DVD-A. Certainly Bob Stuart and the guys at Meridian are full of enthusiasm for what DVD-A has to offer, and know how to put on a thoroughly convincing demonstration of its very real benefits, especially with sympathetically recorded, wide dynamic range classical material.

But Meridian is very much the specialist hi-fi exception to a consumer electronics rule, and I'm much less convinced about the motivations of the large corporate players which make up the rest of the major 'high band' protagonists. It's been suggested that the launch of SACD had much to do with Sony and Philips effectively extending the substantial patent royalties both have enjoyed since CD came on the scene, rather than losing out to key DVD technology patent holders like Toshiba and Time-Warner.

We now live in an age where licensing tends to be more profitable than manufacturing. And since some licences require 'flat fee' payments, the cards are stacked in favour of the high volume producers, and against the much more modest production of the specialist brand. Increasingly high entry costs will make it increasingly difficult for even the larger specialist brands to keep up with the future technologies. It's therefore probably in the long-term interest of the specialist hi-fi industry to support and promote the vinyl and CD alternatives.

The one extra capability that SACD and DVD-A have over vinyl is of course surround sound, which obviously provides a strong selling point to consumers and the music industry alike, and probably represents the best chance to get the new formats going.

But I'm not convinced. I'll go along with the consensus that surround sound adds something worthwhile to movies. But find I actually prefer to listen to my music in two-channel stereo, for the most part at least. There's the occasional recording where surround sound can add a little extra atmosphere and involvement, but I find the whole 'immersion' thing tends to sound rather artificial. And I suspect many recording engineers agree, as they clearly have very little idea how best to use the extra channels.

Ironically, we went through this whole scenario nearly thirty years ago, with vinyl-based quadrophony. But then it's only human nature to go on repeating the mistakes of history. Multi-channel movies and music will find their places in the overall scheme of things, but a good slice of the enthusiast hi-fi sector will remain loyal to stereo and to vinyl, and will continue to rediscover the many delights of retro-hi-fi technology along the way.





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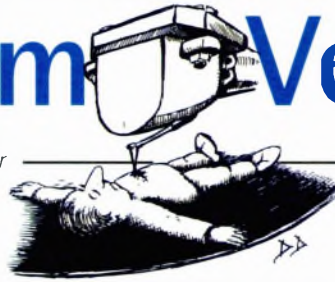
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Postcard from Venus

by Lynn Webster



I have this feeling that I ought to know what I'm doing with the hi-fi system by now. At the very least, I'd like to be able to switch the thing on and for music to issue forth, instantly, and every time. But for some reason or other it doesn't seem to work out like that. Instead, what usually happens is that I check to make sure the CD player is on (if it's all lit up then I know I'm in business), next, I choose a CD and place it in the drawer - success. I then locate the play button on the remote control and press it - voila! That's it really, it couldn't be easier. Cue music, and away we go. Except that we don't, because nothing happens. Which is weird, because I can see that the disc is being read and that all the right cables appear to be connected to all the right bits and the whole lot is radiating enough heat to keep a small family warm throughout winter. Yet nothing is happening. And whilst this is incredibly frustrating, it is not at all surprising, because I know that in five minutes time when I try it again and my partner (male) has appeared, it will suddenly, miraculously, begin working. And this does not surprise me either. It's been happening for years.

So what exactly is going on here - a curious phenomenon whereby hi-fi is rendered utterly useless unless there is a man in the room? I don't really hold with neuroses myself, but you've got to wonder at the possibility of a strange force of nature at work here given there's no such thing as gender sensitive hi-fi - a truly disturbing notion if ever there



were one. But that's too ridiculous to contemplate, because it's not true. It's fairly close though, just the other way around.

And to my mind, the term 'mutualism' is key here. I have latched onto this idea just lately because it fits very well with what I personally believe to be true - that is that men and women are very different - but also complementary. It may sound boringly stereotypical, but actually, accepting that we are not the same may go some way towards explaining why it is, for example, that when I cannot get a sound out of our system my partner instinctively knows where to look. And in this instance, acknowledging that our differences can be mutually beneficial works perfectly with the hi-fi analogy. I'm sure things would be different were I single, but because I'm not, there's no demand on me to look for a solution.

Take this as an example; I listen to music all the time, I always have it playing around the house, and am surrounded by mountains of hi-fi - have been for years.

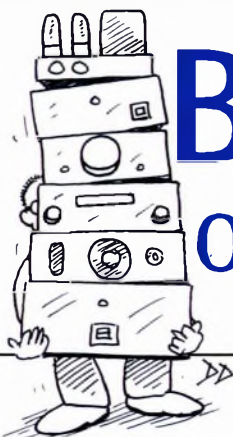
And yet the truth is, I still have absolutely no idea how it all works. I could probably name all but the most obscure parts of it, but I would still not have any clue as to why precisely they are there, or what it is they do. In short, after all these years, to me, the components that comprise a hi-fi system remain both very familiar and deeply mysterious at the same time. And even though I have witnessed our system being dismantled and put back together more times than I care to remember, I have

▶ never actually had a go at setting it up for myself. Why? Well, basically, I have no interest in how it functions or operates, and further, I have no need to because my partner does; which is no doubt why I have never developed any real understanding. And what's more, as long as it produces good sound and is pushed back into the corner as far as is humanly possible, I don't care. This is not something I'm particularly proud of; but then again, I'm not particularly ashamed of it either.

Given all this, and even armed with such an alarming lack of knowledge, there are times when the temptation to just have a go is simply too overwhelming to resist. Nine times out of ten it occurs when I'm alone (well naturally, because there wouldn't be a problem if my partner were there would there?). I want nothing more than to play a bit of music, and when it will not work, I do the most ludicrous things; like desperately plunge the wrong bits of cable into the wrong holes, then grow irrationally

frustrated when I discover it is not possible to defy the laws of physics. So I flick the switches on and off instead, and then, when it still will not work, I peer down the back in desperation, ridiculously hoping for some magical genie to pop out and show me where I'm going wrong. And all along I worry about whether I will blow something up or set the house on fire in the process. I imagine scenarios whereby the whole lot falls spectacularly, crashing to the floor just as my partner walks in the room. But still, this is not enough to stop me, until at last I concede I am being insane, and give up.

And all this for no better reason than I am simply too lazy to learn how to do it properly, or unable to muster the enthusiasm required to get to grips with the mechanics of it all. Yet I'm not alone. There are countless other women I know who feel the same way too. I've always felt that some ideas are best left alone, but one day soon, I'm pretty sure, I'm going to have a good go at this one. ▶+



Big Boys Toys...

Or, everything's big in Texas!

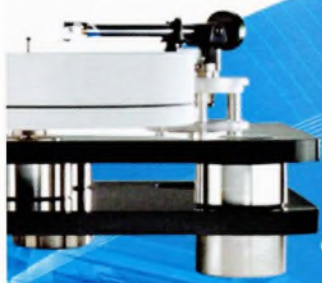
by Scot Markwell

Like so many other things they manufacture, Americans seem to have a penchant for making loudspeakers larger-than-life; from behemoth Wilsons to massive Dunlavs to the huge Wisdoms and more. It seems to be the philosophy here that if something is good in small or medium doses, than it just has to be better in gigantic portions. Sure, there are other really big speakers you can find out there if you are masochistic enough to want to try and shoehorn them into your listening room, including the Danish firm Horning's Algame model, a seven-and-a-half-foot, nearly 300 pound hybrid-horn monster that is intimidating even to me, and I have been around a bunch of Big-Daddy speaker systems. Even the UK has some home-(over)grown heavyweights like the Living Voice Air Partner and Air Scout, true full-range horn systems that are certain to raise eyebrows and test the Wife-Acceptance-Factor to

the limit. Not to be left out are the various iterations of America's Nearfield Acoustics Pipedreams systems. Started a number of years ago by the man who made Melos gear for over 20 years, Mark Porzilli, the company is now owned and operated by a wealthy Tennessee son named Craig Oxford.

Oxford came to the table with a vision to refine and improve the initial design that Porzilli had more or less perfected. Well, maybe perfected is too strong a term for what Porzilli managed to do. Let us say that he got the speakers to the point where Oxford heard them and realized what could be done to make the speakers work commercially: Small details like immaculate cabinet finishing, consistency of finished product, and dependability of operation. The original Pipes system stood eight feet tall, over three feet deep, and rather dominated the room, ▶

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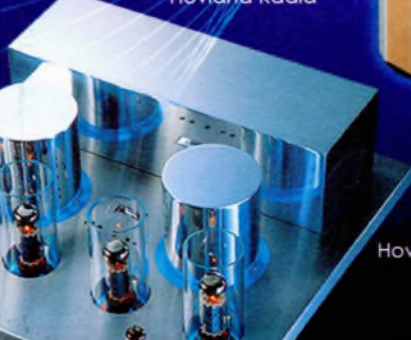


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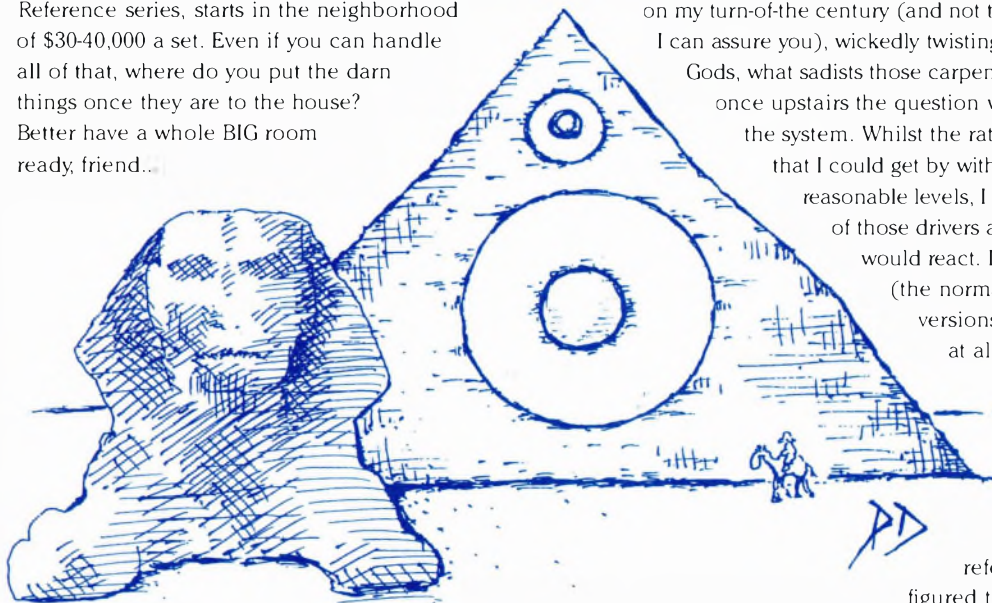


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► especially if you opted for four of the large round Reference subwoofers to go with the main speakers. Each sub contains two 18" drivers, so this gets out of hand quickly. Not to mention the amplifier requirements! For the main towers, a solid 200-300 wpc is about what is needed for intense (read: bloody loud) motivation. And the subs, with a four-ohm impedance with a lot of boost, need at least 800-1000 wpc to really get cranking. This makes things difficult (expensive) both from the standpoint of electronics and electricity consumption. This is assuming you can afford the entrance price, which, for the Reference series, starts in the neighborhood of \$30-40,000 a set. Even if you can handle all of that, where do you put the darn things once they are to the house? Better have a whole BIG room ready, friend...



However, there is a way to cheat. I was lucky enough a few weeks ago to come across a set of what Nearfield calls the 924 model. Oxford says they were an experiment and that the company only made about a dozen or so pairs. Said to be of relatively high efficiency and sold without subwoofer or crossover. Just a pair of six-foot towers loaded with mid drivers and a whole line of tiny fabric dome tweeters. The customer brings his own sub, crossover, and amplifier to the table. This is made rather easy because the towers have been designed to run alone without fear or fault. There are no worries about DC getting through and doing something naughty to the speaker bits because evidently, as I understand it, the midrange cones simply fail to respond below about 60 Hz. In other words, no high-pass filter for the towers which means that phase relationships will not suffer and that the whole affair will not burden the amplifier with yet another crossover component. And with a purported 96dB efficiency rating, I was ready to have some serious fun with the various small amps I had around for listening to Horning, Living Voice, and Reference 3A designs. With all

of this in mind, and thinking happy thoughts about all of the big whoopee I was going to have, I had one of my audio pals help me pry open the incredibly-well fastened crates I left sitting on the deck outside and lug the beasts into my downstairs living room. Then I had a look at my staircase and realized the contortions we were going to have to go through to get the beasts upstairs to the listening room. Oh my aching back...

Well, we managed to get them upstairs without injury to ourselves or the speakers. I don't know how. Must have been the Scotch. Took almost an hour. One step at a time on my turn-of-the century (and not the turn just happened, I can assure you), wickedly twisting and steep staircase.

Gods, what sadists those carpenters were!! In any event, once upstairs the question was how to configure the system. Whilst the rated sensitivity implied

that I could get by with perhaps 20-30 wpc for reasonable levels, I was not sure just how all of those drivers and the thing's crossover would react. I had heard other Pipes (the normal Signature/upscale versions) simply not sound well at all with smaller amps,

so I was prepared to accept it if my babies were not up to the task. So with fingers crossed I

hooked them into my reference system and

figured to use the Vaic Valve VV52 B stereo integrated SET amp, good for about 30 watts of Class-A power per side. And I used the Alon Thunderbolt subwoofer that had been serving as reference for several months. It has easily-adjustable crossover and level and phase controls and enough output to do some serious damage. Wired all up with Siltech and running through a Tom Evans Vibe with the new, two-piece power supply, I turned the amplifier on and put a CD on repeat and made myself just walk away for over an hour. Then I came back to listen.

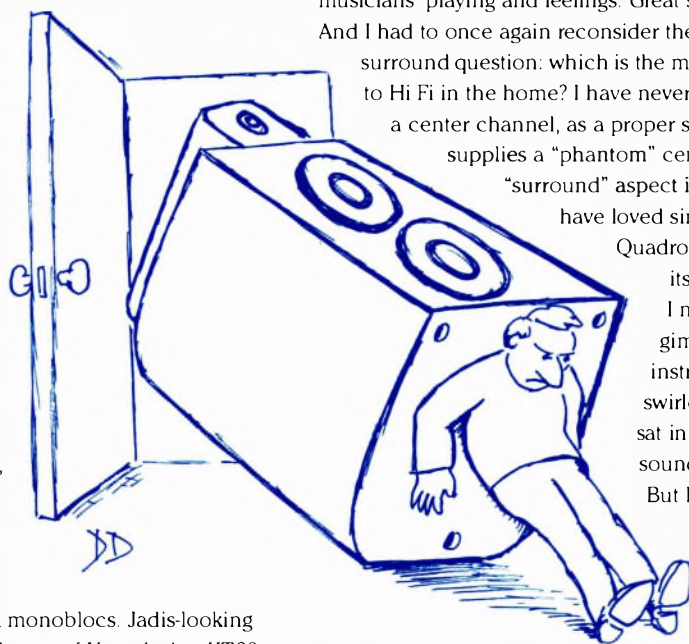
Wow. That is all I could say for a long while. Not only was the Vaic driving the Pipes with relative ease, the quality of the sound was impressive and somewhat amazing. So I began pawing through my recordings and playing everything from Bing Crosby to Carol Pope to Vaughan Williams in an effort to see if there was any really any hope of my keeping these towering things that actually cast shadows in my listening room. The question in front of me (remembering that I do this sort of thing for a full-time living) was is it worth it? I mean, having a pair of such massive towers lurking in the listening room that by their very presence seem to ►

► intimidate the rest of the system is an exercise in either bold adventure or supreme masochism. For Heaven's sake, I could now barely manage to take records or CDs off the shelves on either side of the speakers, as they encroached on what little lateral space I had. No worries, I thought. They were only here for a short spell; my real job, you see, was to act as broker for the sale of the speakers. How bad could it be to have a go at listening and reporting?

My first answer was from an unexpected source: my wife, Mary Ann. She listened to several things that she knew and pronounced that she had to have them. But Honey, I countered, they are too big; never mind that you have been on to me unmercifully about how too many things stereo were accumulating in the house... It made no difference at all. Like butting one's head against a standing stone. What was I to do?

Play the speakers, of course! Now that I had a free hand, something that I imagine many audiophile (men) would give their eyeteeth for, I decided to go for broke and see just what these lanky interlopers could manage given appropriate tools. Now, as I said, the 924s were driven easily enough to good levels with my 30 wpc Vaic SET, so I figured to put the spurs to them for real.

Out came the Art Audio Opus X monoblocs. Jadis-looking chrome chassis festooned with heaps of Yugoslavian KT-90 valves, the Opus Xs made 150 solid Class-A watts per side. Out came the new Manley Labs 300B linestage. Yes, I said 300B linestage. Who is whacky enough to use a pair of 300B valves to run a linestage? EveAnna Manley, of course! This irrepressible young Californian woman has taken an older design of her ex-husband David Manley's and revised/modernized it so that it is reliable and quiet and sonically luscious. Not the last word in HF extension, mind you, but gorgeous to listen to. Mated with the Art Audio amps, this combination produced a soundscape of such beauty, scale, and dynamic authority that for the first couple of days I simply forgot about any biting sonic analysis and just listened. To everything I could grab. CDs, records, whatever. Hell, I even hauled out the old tuner for some FM and my trusty old Marantz 3-head cassette deck so that I could play some of the dance tapes that I made for my wedding several years ago. Such big, loud fun I had not had in too long a time. It was like the old days when I just



listened to music with no particular thought of sonic dissection and no concept of ever being a journalist or a critic; I just did not want it to end. A reality check came to my rescue, as it were, in the form of a deadline for this august journal, which I have managed to blow, as usual.

One last configuration and I would be forced to turn in some copy lest I get sacked. So I hooked up the system in surround configuration using my Chase/Hafler Dynaquadapter and sat back for some tunes. My, my, my. I knew there was a reason I keep such an archaic box of bolts around; the effect was, as always, mesmerizing. Big, lush tapestries of sound that seemed to reach out into the room and envelop me in the musicians' playing and feelings. Great stuff. I was home again. And I had to once again reconsider the stereo vs. Quad/

surround question: which is the more realistic approach to Hi Fi in the home? I have never really felt the need for a center channel, as a proper stereo system easily supplies a "phantom" center image. But the "surround" aspect is something that I

have loved since I was a boy and Quadrophonic sound was in its (short-lived) heyday. I never really liked the gimmicky part where instruments or musicians swirled 'round whilst you sat in the center of what sounded like bedlam.

But I was always quite partial to the sense of ambience and air that you could get with correct setup and the proper

restraint on the rear levels. Unlike Jimmy Hughes, I think that I am wed to surround in my system. I will probably not go for one of the new "high-definition" digital formats, as I feel that my CD system of Forsell Air-Bearing transport and EAD TheaterMaster DAC is more than sufficient for my needs. Never mind the thousands of LP records that occupy almost every spare inch of vertical wall space in my listening room and some down-stairs, as well.

So, big speakers. Where does this leave me? I confess I am not totally sure. I am so used to dealing with the likes of these or the big Alon Exotica Grand References at the office that, on the one hand, these do not faze me. But being presented with such Leviathans at home, up close and personal, makes me realize that I just do not know. I definitely really like these 924 Pipedreams, but I could certainly use my share of the money from their sale. But then my wife would threaten to divorce me. What is a bloke to do?





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Dear Editor,

It was with some interest that I read the review of the ATC active 50's in the May/June issue of Hi Fi +. At the moment I am using a pair of ATC Passive 100's driven by John Linsley Hood homebrew mono-blocks. My special interest lies in the question of whether or not they should be activated. Your review suggests that each speaker can be activated for £495 per speaker. Discussions with ATC late last year suggest a price of £3600 for the pair! Ignoring this discrepancy and the actual cost, I am in a quandary as to whether or not to proceed. While it is almost certainly true that the mono-blocks do not have quite the grip or attack of the ATC active amplifier/speakers, they nevertheless possess a clarity and definition which I would be loathe to give up. The obvious answer is a comparison.

My ancillaries comprise a Meridian 500 transport, Perpetual Technologies P1A and P3A Digital Engine and DAC and a Tag McLaren DFA32R pre-amp, (no balanced output); a peculiar mixture, but very effective.

I would be pleased if you could explain the cost difference in your quote on the upgrade and also grateful for any suggestions to resolve the upgrade or not issue.

Yours faithfully,

Phil Morris

Via e.mail

Dear Phil,

Oh dear, I can hear the drums rolling and the firing squad convening. Unfortunately, JK was under a misapprehension. The upgrade cost he quotes is actually to upgrade older active models to the new tweeter, along with the necessary crossover mods. Your quote is rather more representative of a passive to active change. Apologies for any confusion caused or false hopes raised. As regards the upgrade or not debate, you've answered your own question – just listen. Ed.

Dear Sir

I would like to thank you for setting up the great interview with Peter Gabriel in your July-August issue. I have been a Hi-fi enthusiast for the last 20 years, a Peter Gabriel fan for the same amount of time.

Living in Canada I had never seen your magazine (I know you are distributed here but not in my area). It was on the PG web site that I discovered your interview and article concerning the SACD. After following Peter's career, I know all too well that he does not give interviews to just anyone.

A magazine that is about Hi-fi that dedicates 15 pages to PG, well it was too good to be true. Through the magic of the Internet I ordered issue 24. WOW! The overall quality of your publication is very impressive and has nothing to do with the advertising plagued Hi-fi magazines we have in North America. For once there was substance and rigour in the writing. It was also obvious that I was reading a British magazine. LPs here in North America are all but gone!

I must say that I enjoyed the article and was very pleased to see a proper retrospective done on the career of Peter Gabriel. This being said I have to mention an error and an omission in the discography on page 120. PG4 was released as *Security* in North America not *Serenity*. Before the release of *Up* Peter did *A Long Walk Home*, the sound track to *Rabbit Proof Fence*.

Well, I could go on for a while but I will finish by saying that I will enjoy my subscription for years to come.

Thank you

Martin Proietti

Via e-mail

Dear Sir

I feel the need to comment on Issue 24. I am a long-time reader and subscriber to Hi-fi magazines since 1968, and I still read HFN, HiFi+ Stereophile and TAS, and regard your publication as the best overall. However, I was unhappy with issue 24 and in particular the first paragraph of the editorial.

All editors of Hi-fi magazines seem to suffer from the need to establish their musical credentials. Who can forget the great groaning, editors of 'HFN', when they first took over 'Record Review' and tried to combine the two publications in one? But the simple and to me inescapable fact is that a hi-fi magazine is one thing and a music magazine, with its interviews, recording reviews, etc, is quite another. One of the plagues attacking hi-fi

► magazines, as you are fully aware, is of course video and home theatre. Your freedom from these interests is one of Hi-Fi+’s main strengths. I subscribe to your magazine because of its undiluted concentration on good equipment at all price levels. Now you seem to be threatening (bearing in mind your ‘get used to it’ line in the editorial!) to make Hi-Fi+ a mixed interest magazine.

Now please let us not get bogged down in a philosophical discussion on the balance of hi-fi and music in a hi-fi mag. My point is that I read (and subscribe) to hi-fi+ because it is about equipment. If I want to read about Peter Gabriel, there are any number of newsstand magazines which cover this area of music, as there are covering classical, country, jazz etc. Because they specialise in their given area, all these magazines can give much greater depth than a hi-fi magazine with a ‘music’ section. To put it another way, how many hi-fi enthusiasts buy Gramophone for its audio section?

Now, you might say that my complaint is because I am not interested in Peter Gabriel. As it happens, ‘Don’t give up’ is one of my favourite songs, though admittedly in the Willie Nelson/Sinead O’Connor version. No, my basic point remains the same: I want to read about equipment in Hi-Fi+ and that is why I subscribe. If I see a country music magazine with an article about Johnny Cash or Willie Nelson, I might buy it off the shelf. Likewise Gramophone or Fanfare if there was an article on Furtwangler or Barbindli or another artist in whom I was interested. Music is too large and diverse a subject to be a ‘section’ in a hi-fi magazine. What is the point for instance, in JMH reviewing half a dozen classical titles every couple of months when ‘Gramophone’ and ‘Fanfare’ will have covered literally hundreds of new and re-issued titles in the same period?

The Peter Gabriel articles covered 13 pages of issue 24. That is, on a rough count, almost 13% of the editorial content. That, in my view, is far too much for an article outside the magazine’s supposed subject matter, i.e. hi-fi equipment. You may say that I will not be equally interested in all the equipment reviews, which is of course true. But I still need them all, because they all touch on my main interest in the magazine and there will almost always be some general comment in every review which is of interest.

You mention Fi in your editorial. Remember what happened to Fi? It could not decide if it was a hi-fi or a lifestyle magazine, and of course ended up being neither and paid the price.

You have an excellent publication, the best in its field in my opinion, without the commercial compromises of HFN or Stereophile or the snobbery of TAS. Please don’t

spoil it by trying to be something else.

Yours faithfully

Mr A J Beedleston

From my point of view, much of the appeal in the PG piece was its cross-over into hi-fi concerns, firstly in the discussion of copy coding, but also in the way that it allowed a definitive, cross-format comparison. Both issues appertain directly to sound quality. As regards Fi, a magazine I rather enjoyed, certainly at first, I think its main problem was an ill-advised distribution deal, perhaps a result of an inflated sense of self-importance and market potential. Ed.

Dear Sir

I read your review of the Voodoo Isolation Platforms in the Jul/Aug issue with interest. Last year I moved to a 1920s house having previously lived in a modern house where the down-stairs floors were of solid concrete construction. On this flooring my Castle Harlech speakers performed superbly, but to my dismay the new house had wooden floorboards with a four foot space underneath them which caused excessive boom from the speakers regardless of positioning. I was despairing of finding a solution to this (other than moving house again!) when during the visit of my plumber one day I mentioned the problem to him. Much to my amazement (hi-fi experts exist in the most unlikely places!) he told me about the Voodoo isolation platforms that were made by someone he knew in Minehead, and that they had a stand at the Bristol Hi-Fi Show which was due to take place shortly.

Following a visit to the show they kindly let me have a pair to try and I am pleased to tell you that they performed exactly as you described in your review and have completely cured my problem. Furthermore I would say that the speakers are now performing more efficiently than in my previous house.

Yours Sincerely

Barrie Harban

Via e-mail

Dear Sir

Firm or squishy – which? And what’s more important – why? And finally – how?

I refer to RG’s review of the Amphion Xenon loudspeakers in Issue No 23. No problem with the review but what’s this about “the conservatives in the industry stick doggedly to their spikes”? Let me come clean – I have a Linn LP12, Naim NAC 32/NAP 160 and Linn Isobariks and I cannot afford to leave the flat earth yet.



► In my old house the Isobariks, mounted on their stands, were coupled via their inverted cups to the round heads of screws that were screwed into wooden floors through the carpet. The result was a very tight and dynamic bass, tuneful (of course) but lean i.e. very little sensation of deep bass. Room was rectangular 22 ft by 12ft.

I have moved into my new house with the system in a smaller sound room (wider but considerably shorter) but with a concrete floor. With no time to complete any tweaking it was time to listen and get first impressions of the sound in the new environment and to listen to some music from this system for the first time in a couple of years of waiting for the new house to be built.

Wow – for the first time I heard real deep bass from the Isobariks. What was wrong? Smaller room, Isobariks lurching about on carpet over strong rubber overlay. The only problem was that the bass was not as tight as I would like. Out came the newly purchased spikes, tap and drill. I am ready to inflict the four holes into each stand when I read RG's account of the Amphion Xenon's and his horrific claim that pads of soft polymer beat spikes (or is that cones?).

Why? As a mechanical engineer it is easy for me to understand and accept the concept that the speaker cones may move but not take the cabinet with them. Hence the cabinet has to be made rigid so the cones can preach the music message they want to and the cabinet sits still. What is the rationale that suggests squishy is better than firm? Please tell.

Now given a choice between drilling holes in the speaker stands (upsetting the stand's structural integrity even further) and piercing expensive carpet and underlay with spikes versus having a play with polymer pads that might bring me to the tightness I miss – no contest. So how do I get my grubby hands on said pads? Of course if there is something inherent in the Amphion Xenon's design that predisposes it to the squishy treatment or there is something inherent in the Isobarik design that precludes the squishy treatment – please advise.

Last point - I have just tried the Musical Fidelity XLPS as an alternative to the MM input in the NAC 32. It has made a staggering improvement for my Garrott cartridge on one Rega (I forgot to mention I also use two Regas as well). Not only do we now have a fuller richer sound, more accurate tone and harmonics but the bass notes are far more in tune. The flat earth is turning to round. The XLPS stays until something better comes along. I hope to try the LP12 with Troika through the XLPS MC input next

All I want now is tighter bass – firm or squishy – which?

If it is not possible to reply to this letter maybe an article in the next issue on the squishy rationale would suffice. In the meantime the arm is aching holding this revving drill.

Roy Townrow

Via e-mail

The short answer as with most things hi-fi is to suck it and see. Sprung bass will generally go deeper and tighter than spiked – but not always. Why? Because energy gets back into the speaker via the room, spikes, stands etc, very often converted into a narrow bandwidth. The soft mounting helps minimise this, leaving the cabinet to deal with the more predictably wide band energy coming from the drivers. I'd suggest that either Townshend or Voodoo platforms should be tried, although Vibrapods offer a simple and very cheap alternative. Ed.

Dear Sir

I found your editorial in issue 25 worrying. I feel Hi-Fi+ is the only magazine for the true enthusiast. My only criticism is that it is not published monthly.

I do not mind the odd article or review based on non-analogue products (but I shall not read them). I realise it is your aim to appeal to as many readers as possible, but it is my view that selling your soul to the devil, sorry – digital, is a mistake.

On a lighter note I must say how enjoyable and informative the articles written by Richard S Foster on the golden age of the LP are.

Regards

L Howell

Via e-mail

Rest assured analogue remains the reference as regards performance. However, it would be remiss (even naïve) of us to ignore the issue of digital sound quality. Aside from the issue of software availability, digital systems are improving at that needs recognising. Ed.

Dear Sir

I thought you may be interested in a much cheaper and just as accurate method for measuring the speed of a turntable.

Using a record with a 440 Hz standard tone and a tuning meter used to tune guitars, basses etc. Play the record and place the tuning meter so it can pick up the tone from the speakers. The pitch and any wow or variation in speed are at once apparent.

My tuner (Seiko Chromatic Auto tuner) has a calibrate position which allows you to move the frequency of the meter. You can then ascertain exactly how far off the speed is.

Jake Haskell

Via e-mail



The London Show

By the time you read this, the Heathrow show will be less than a week away. Hopefully, you'll be looking forward to attending what promises to be an even better event than last year's, itself a welcome return to form after the dismal years at Hammersmith.

Hi-Fi+ will be there, as per normal, with back-issues, binders and the like. But more importantly, at least judging from your comments last year, the Editor and hopefully a few reviewers will be on hand to chat with you, the readers. The new regime is possible because we've imported some foreign talent, in the not inconsiderable shape of Scot Markwell, to do the show report. That means that from 2PM onwards on



Saturday and Sunday, you'll find members of the writing staff on hand at our stand. Just who and how many is going to vary, but please pop along and let us know what you think of our efforts.

And if that wasn't enough, the show's organisers have taken a leaf out of the Bristol book, by providing the last opportunity this year to hear the wonderful Eleanor McEvoy play live. Funded by Nordost (as at Bristol) these concerts (two on Saturday, two on Sunday) are free to show goers, and judging from the superb response in the West Country, should be reason enough on their own to turn up at Heathrow. We'll see you there. ➤+

Mark Levinson Rumours

The industry has been alive with tales of the demise of the Mark Levinson company, following the closure of the manufacturing plant in Middletown (CT). The unexpected arrival of a closure and clearance team from parent group Harman at the factory generated scare stories in the local press which rapidly migrated to the Net, and the rest, as they say, is history. But, now that the dust has settled, events have become a little clearer.

The Middletown facility has indeed been closed, along with the loss of most of the manufacturing jobs, but production has been shifted to the Lexicon plant at Bedford (MA) which also builds the professional Crown amplifiers. Looked at in the cold light of day, it makes little sense to run two manufacturing facilities a couple of hundred miles apart, particularly in the context of continental North America. The reasons for the unannounced closure can also be understood in an industry where the design expertise and intellectual property of an entire brand are encapsulated almost entirely on a few computer hard-drives. The hard-nosed commercial attitude of Harman might not win any prizes for



sensitivity, but it's about the norm for a US corporate employer. The revised Mark Levinson company will now form part of the Harman Special Products group, alongside Lexicon, Revel and Proceed, signaling the end of the Madrigal subsidiary.

The good news is that production is set to resume at the end of September, with those new products already signed off by Madrigal slated to appear in due course. Servicing and guarantees on existing products are unaffected.

Exactly what the future holds is less clear. The closer ties to Lexicon suggest that design convergence, or at least cooperation between the two companies is likely, while the growing influence of multi-channel music and A/V formats in the US market is hard to ignore. It's also hard to believe that Harman aren't interested in capitalising on that association for marketing purposes, a trick they've almost entirely missed up until now. What seems certain is that the Mark Levinson brand, one of the oldest and most respected in high-end audio, will continue. It's now more a question of the shape it'll take. ➤+

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Roy Gregory Hi Fi + Issue 9

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hi-fi+ Writer's Competition

Sponsored by **NORDOST**

Way back in Issue 23 we announced a writer's competition in the hope of unearthing some new talent to grace our pages. And by way of encouragement, those nice folks at Nordost put up a fabulous prize. The lucky winner was promised a complete cable loom for their system, constructed from the new Nordost Valkyrja mono-filament interconnects and speaker cable, in a first past the post, once in a lifetime opportunity to enrich their system and listening pleasure to the tune of £15000.

But, just like exams, too many of the responses missed the mark. The most popular deviation was the "here's my system/pet product or technology which I'm now going to try and bend into some semblance of relevance by appending the article's title to the last line". This approach was closely followed in popularity by the "lessons I learnt" strategy, while a single sub-category was so common as to rank third place all on its own. This was the response to The Product I Never Should have Bought, The Product I Never Should Have Sold title in which, you guessed it, said products are in fact, one and the same. It loses its originality somewhere around the tenth iteration, the remaining thirty or so just rubbing salt in the wounds. However, I did rather admire the writer who nominated What Hi-Fi as the Product He Never Should Have Bought: perception, cheek and a blatant attempt to curry favour all rolled into one – he should go far.

At least as far as the short-list in this case. And what a short-list it was. Whittled down first to fifty and then a mere fifteen entries, the final selection was forwarded to the publisher, myself and CB (a practiced marker as a lecturer at the local tech college). Anticipating conflict and confusion I made my position as final arbiter clear from the off, although such precautions proved unnecessary. The judgement was unanimous, so step forward our lucky winner:

Mr Steve Dickinson

You can read Steve's winning entry on the next couple of pages (and fume about the obvious superiority of your own efforts). In the meantime, the fortunate Mr Dickinson can look forward to wiring up his system with lashings of Valkyrja, tailored to his needs and delivered by Nordost, who in this case, as far as we're concerned, really are making a connection.



Mind you, 1200 words on one of the four chosen titles must have seemed like an enforced return to school, provoking waves of empathy with exam threatened teenagers everywhere. That, I thought to myself, will separate the wheat from the chaff. Which it did to some extent, but we still weren't ready for the sheer scale of the response: Or the task of reading and sorting hundreds of entries. If we do this again you'll only be looking at 500 words, I promise.

Less is more

by Steve Dickinson

I used to think John Cage was a charlatan. For readers unfamiliar with Modernist musicians, Cage was the composer of the moderately controversial *4 Minutes and 33 Seconds*, which a pianist performs by sitting quietly at the piano for the allotted four minutes. A friend of mine used to play it in two minutes - he claimed he was leaving out the repeats.

That was pretty much all I knew about John Cage, and it informed my opinion for perhaps 20 years. Then I resumed my musical studies, learnt a little more about Modernism, Cage and all, and now I think about him differently. So how to categorise him now, then? No longer in the box marked "Charlatans" certainly. "Modernist composer", I guess, will do for now - covers lots of possibilities without actually giving much away. Funny how we feel a need to classify things, isn't it? Categories allow us to have opinions without the bother of having to prepare arguments. I can say to myself, "It's trance/acid/funk/what-have-you, therefore I don't like it, therefore it is rubbish" without the need to actually consider the merits of the music in question.

My wife would say it's a man thing, this pigeonholing instinct, this having to have an opinion. Like an interest in cars or watches. Like lists of top-ten whatever. Like hi-fi.

Oh alright, then, a list of the top ten things I know about hi-fi:


- It's all about the music, when you get right down to it.
- There was never a tougher law of diminishing returns than in the world of high-end hi-fi.
- Timing is crucial.
- The best paper specifications and lab measurements in the world don't mean a damn.
- Whatever your budget, spend 30% on the front-end, 30% on the amplification, 30% on the speakers and 10% on cables.
- When upgrading, improve the front-end first, that way you'll maximise the potential of the other parts of your system.

- Soundstaging, presence and low-level detail retrieval are crucial.
- Whatever your budget, you are better off spending 50% of it on going to live concerts, 25% on recorded music and 25% on the equipment.
- "Musicality" is crucial.
- When upgrading, improve your speakers first, as that will allow you to hear the shortcomings in the other parts of your system more clearly.

Of these ten statements, only the first is true.

Oh, sure, some of the rest are true, some of the time. Most of them may be true, most of the time, but all of them are false, some of the time, except the first. And if you find yourself thinking that the first is occasionally, well, not the be-all and end-all, then you're in good company. Matter of fact, you're probably in the majority. Certainly I'm in there, somewhere.

If we're honest, most of us who read hi-fi magazines, and particularly the high-end ones, do so because we'll probably never afford the sort of equipment they feature. I can go to any issue of Hi-Fi+ and point to at least one piece of equipment which would, definitely, absolutely no question, change my life for the better. And that's without hearing a note. I'm getting my musical pleasure vicariously, through the words of a reviewer whose opinion I trust. Hell, he's probably reviewing the equipment listening to music I've never even heard.

So now I have to question whether I'm diverting from the Prime Directive. Would that piece of equipment, in my home, in my life, take me to my own musical Nirvana? Or am I being seduced by gorgeous casework, exquisite cabinetry and a couple of thousand well-chosen words? My own system hasn't changed much in four years: I know how it sounds, and I'm comfortable with it. Not necessarily content - I know where it has shortcomings which matter to me, but it has the capacity to bring me music and sometimes, I admit, I forget 

► that. I also worry that if I were to purchase the objects of my dreams, would my middle-class, work-ethic, guilt-driven sensibilities make me fret that I'd spent all that money, and maybe out there was something else which might have done just that bit better, for just a bit less? Or a lot less. I suspect I'd end up admiring the way that triangle tinkled, or the way those cymbals shimmered like never before, those timpani slam just-so and as for that cello timbre... So I worry that I'd spend time listening to the equipment not the music, in an attempt to get value for my money, and as a direct consequence I'd enjoy the actual music less than before.



It's far worse with cables, of course. At least with some drop-dead gorgeous piece of hardware there is something your friends and companions can admire, but tell them you've just spent the price of a small car on connecting the boxes together and you can almost see them nervously making sure they never let you get between them and the door... Actually, when was the last time you owned-up to what you actually spent on a piece of hi-fi equipment? Given that it has the capacity to bring us sublime pleasure, for extended periods, why do we feel ashamed of our extravagance?

In *4 Minutes and 33 Seconds* Cage was attempting to make his audience reassess the nature of music. By

asking them to listen attentively to all the extraneous sounds which occur spontaneously during a musical performance – the scraping of a chair, a cough from the audience, “noises-off” from outside the auditorium perhaps – he was making the point that music is a live and fluid thing. It is not right that we categorise music as classical, jazz, popular, or any of the countless sub-genres - we should reconsider the nature of music itself, and embrace sound in all its forms as potentially musical. Each performance of a piece of music is an individual, unrepeatable event.

That's why I no longer think he was a charlatan. I'm not sure *4 Minutes and 33 Seconds* is necessarily the way to go, but as music lovers, and hi-fi aficionados, we are accustomed to listening critically to the sounds we encounter. Okay, so recorded music takes away something of the individual, unrepeatable element, but the most praised

equipment is generally that which recovers and reproduces

more of the original event, and which exposes us to nuances we hadn't previously appreciated. The best

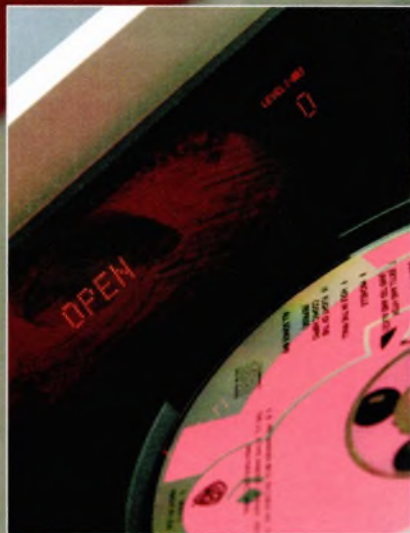
equipment puts less of itself between the listener and the music but for the modestly-heeled (like me) high cost can be a bigger impediment to enjoyment than sound quality.

4 Minutes and 33 Seconds is probably the definitive “Less is more” statement, and for 20 years I thought the person who said it was a fraud. In doing so, I exposed not only my own ignorance, but also the closed mind which fostered the ignorance in the first place. I have heard, in my own system, the fundamental difference speaker cables can make, although I suspect other factors prevent my system from resolving the subtler differences in mains leads and interconnects. But while unconvinced, I am no longer sceptical. Thank you, John.



MAX

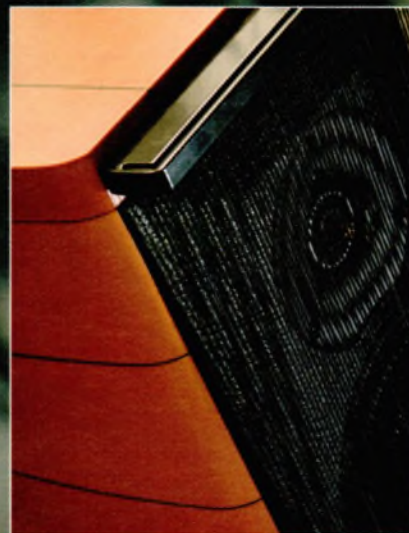
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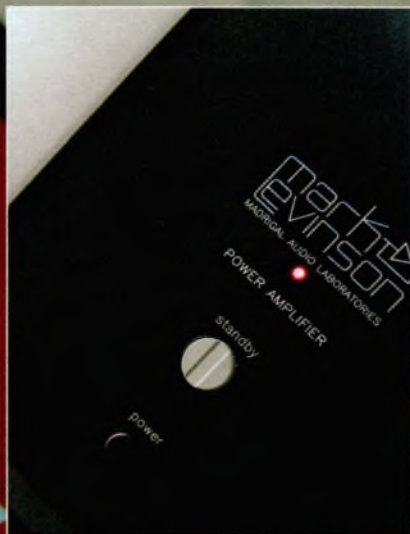
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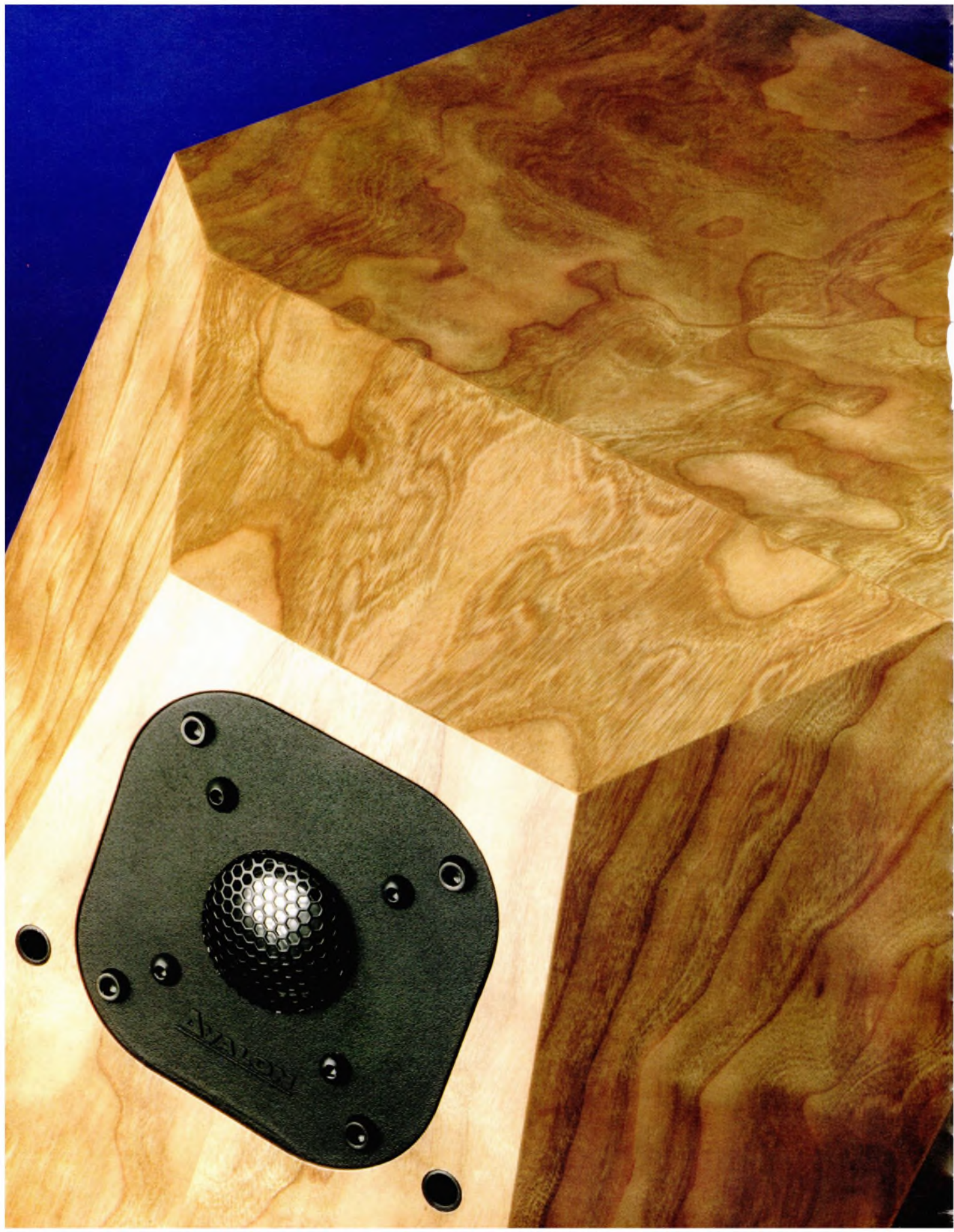
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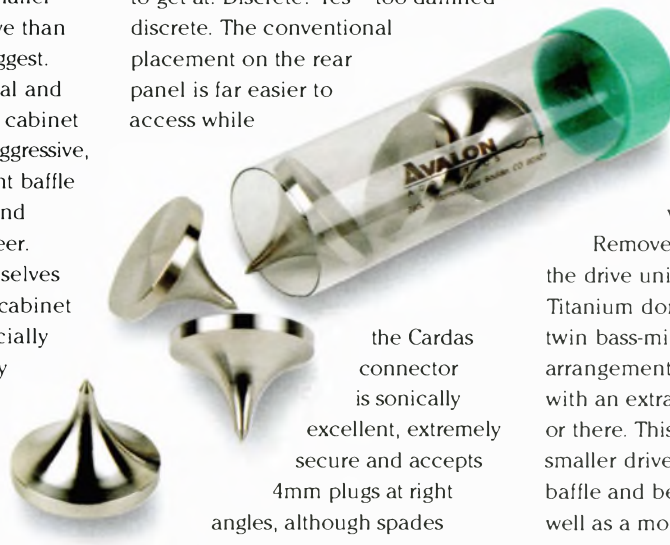
The Avalon Ascendant Loudspeaker

by Roy Gregory

Read the accompanying interview with Neil Patel and you'll see that he's pretty specific about his aims and ambitions regarding the Ascendant. Well, take one look at the results and it's clear that physically at least, he's hit the mark. Despite its solid proportions and less than sylph-like dimensions, the Ascendant appears far smaller and less domestically intrusive than the simple measurements suggest. The reasons for this are several and related. The rear slope of the cabinet makes them far less visually aggressive, the careful faceting of the front baffle further softening the shape and impact. Then there's the veneer. Avalon Acoustics pride themselves on finishing each and every cabinet in-house with their own, specially selected veneers, but even by their high standards the quality of the surfaces on the review speakers was exceptionally beautiful. And there speaks someone who all too often remains unimpressed by the charms of real wood finishes. No, by any measure, the Ascendants are certainly things of beauty, to the extent that you need to see (and feel) them in the flesh to understand the full effect.

The promised attention to detail is there too. Despite appearances, the Ascendant is a reflex design, the twin ports located in the base of the cabinet and spaced from the floor by the two blocks of wood placed front and back, which also serve to channel the flow of air. Those familiar with

Avalons will utter a sigh of relief when they see the rear mounted terminals and the choice of the superb Cardas binding block to do the job. It's an arrangement that replaces the previously bottom mounted screw terminals that accepted spades and nothing else, as well as being a pain to get at. Discrete? Yes – too damned discrete. The conventional placement on the rear panel is far easier to access while



the Cardas connector is sonically excellent, extremely secure and accepts 4mm plugs at right angles, although spades (Cardas of course) are still the preferred option.

Unchanged, but no less welcome, is the carefully designed grille with its mat of profiled felt that surrounds and separates each driver, and which still improves the sound of the speaker. How is it that no one else seems able to do this? Also unchanged are the sharply pointed and incredibly tough cones that are placed betwixt speaker and floor. It's an approach I heartily approve: You can slide the speakers about in order to get them positioned just right, the three cones ensure

stability, while their slender tips are guaranteed to penetrate any carpet without damaging it. The only downside is the inability to level the speakers precisely, although you can get around that with judicious placement of the cones and in extreme cases, the use of coins or shims. It wasn't necessary in my room, so I can't comment on the sonic effect of such action, but one thing I will say is that you do want these speakers vertical.

Remove the grille and you'll find the drive units in a vertical array, the Titanium dome tweeter above the twin bass-mid drivers. So no fancy arrangements or tricky crossovers with an extra half leg creeping in here or there. This is a straight two-way, the smaller drivers allowing a narrower baffle and better power handling as well as a more even performance at the top of their range. Each is built into a substantial, cast basket and secured with six allen bolts, although interestingly, and in a step typical of Avalon's attention to detail, the signal to each driver is subtly contoured to compensate for their differing physical surroundings and proximity to the floor.

Digging a little deeper beneath the skin you discover a massively constructed and braced cabinet. How massive? Well, the faceting on the front baffle is achieved by contouring of the panel itself, ▶

▶ which gives you a pretty good idea of exactly how thick it is! Pick the speaker up and that'll give you a pretty good idea too. The Ascendant is just about manageable, but considering that there are no massive drive units to add to that weight, your respect for the cabinet increases again. Having said that, the quality of the finish and the vulnerability of the edges and corners make this a definite two-man lift, unless you want to mar the appearance almost immediately. Audiofreaks are almost obsessively careful when transporting or maneuvering Avalons, and having lived with both the Arcus and the even more beautiful Ascendant I can understand why.

So, the Ascendant clearly checks out physically: the sonic picture is a little more complex. The good news is that if any thing the musical results are even more impressive than the visual ones. The caveat is that, as with most really cutting edge products, that excellence is a fragile thing and it's all too easy to destroy. Fortunately the Ascendant's demands are pretty clear and as long as you comply you'll not go far wrong. The first is adequate power, the second adequate attention to positioning. Get those two things right and you'll be well on the way.

Don't get the idea that the Ascendant is a power-sponge in the Apogee or SL600 mold. But don't be misled by the "near 90dB" sensitivity either. A brief foray with Tom Evan's 30 Watt S30 version of The Soul (30 real Watts if ever there were) served only to demonstrate how two individually excellent products can drag each other's performance down. Oh sure, it was clean and clear and detailed and open and lots of other things, but it wasn't dynamic and it wasn't music.

Using the Conrad-Johnson Premier 140 or Hovland Radia transformed proceedings. Audiofreaks recommend a sensible minimum of 70 valve Watts and I'd agree, with one proviso. You're looking for quality here, not just quantity, and even more so if you are using solid-state amplification. The Radia is exceptional, as are the Karan, Spectral and Rowland amplifiers, but that's the level of partnering equipment you should be considering if transistors are your thing.



Interestingly, I reckon the Naim NAP300 might be a nice match but I didn't have the Naim amp kicking around and it's not a combination I got to try and I can't see the two products co-existing in too many dealers.

Also interesting is the way the Ascendant reacts to the driving amplification. Use the Radia and the presentation is a model of self-contained ease, transparency and definition. The wide open soundstage is clean and stable, its boundaries and extent clearly defined, the dynamic envelope clearly scaled. In short, everything that you'd expect from the Radia, from its easy pace to its imperturbable calm. Swap to the Premier 140 and it's like listening to a different system, not just a different amplifier. The big tube amp brings a presence and life to the sound, that whilst it lacks the precision and separation of the Hovland, adds a whole level of emphatic emotional communication. Musically speaking we're talking chalk and cheese here, but let's remember that this is a speaker review, which brings us back to the central problem with the Ascendant: the speaker is so self-effacing that pinning down its own character is astonishingly difficult. Now bear in mind that the speaker is one of the system's two transducers, and that traditionally it's the transducers that are responsible for the greatest deviations from accuracy, and you begin to get some idea of the magnitude of Avalon's achievement with the Ascendant. Here's a speaker that leaves less of a fingerprint on musical proceedings than the amplifier driving it!

If we concentrate on common factors, then a picture starts to emerge.

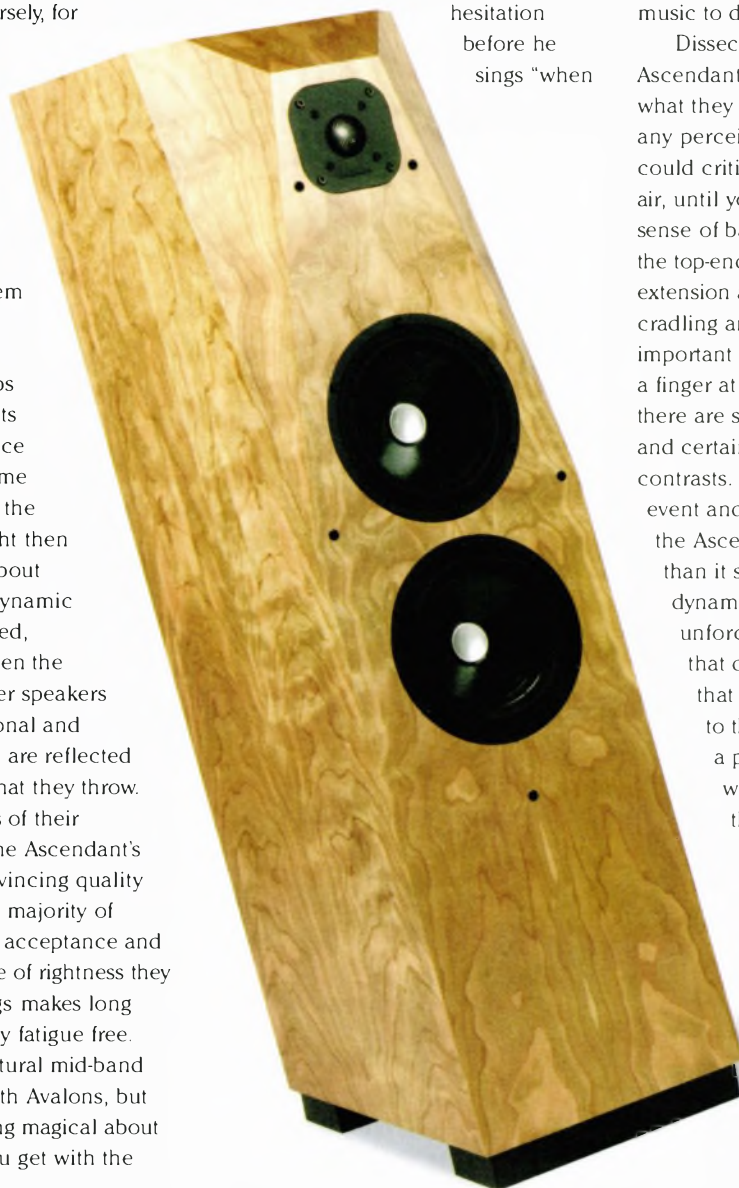
And picture is the right word, for everything that this speaker does ▶

► seems to start from its stereo performance. The Ascendant is capable of throwing one of the most clearly defined soundstages I've enjoyed at home, but what's special about it isn't the scale, the depth or the transparency. What's really impressive is the naturalness of its proportion and perspective. So much so that electronics that enhance soundstage depth, dimensionality or focus are ruthlessly revealed. When does soundstage become too much of a good thing? When you have more than you should have. Conversely, for years, the flat-earth contingent were (and still are) happy to dismiss imaging as purely cosmetic. However, stop and think for a moment about exactly what a system does in terms of reconstructing the precise relationships between instruments within a performance and it should become clear that if you get the spatial equation right then it says something about the temporal, the dynamic and the tonal. Indeed, comparisons between the Ascendant and other speakers clearly show how tonal and dynamic deviations are reflected in the soundstage that they throw.

The correctness of their perspective lends the Ascendant's performance a convincing quality that evades the vast majority of speakers. That easy acceptance and the immediate sense of rightness they bring to proceedings makes long term listening utterly fatigue free. The wonderfully natural mid-band is almost a given with Avalons, but there's still something magical about the sheer access you get with the

Ascendant. The effortless way in which they unravel the most complex instrumental and vocal relationships makes them both rhythmically and emotionally communicative. The wistful intelligence and self deprecating humour of Michael Weston King's album *A Decent Man* is pushed to the fore, the delicacy of the acoustic melodies supported and enhanced rather than buried by the backing. When he protests that he's "a decent man, I do the decent thing",

the telling hesitation before he sings "when



I can... and I can" the subtle shift in the lyric from innocence to self reassurance is unmistakable, setting you up for the denouement... "And if I can't then I'm not blind, I'll be indecent in my mind". The deft shift in sense is matched by the speakers' sleight of hand in their presentation. You can marvel at the subtlety and detail they reveal in the vocal inflexion; you can be astonished by their convincing timbral identity and the utterly natural phrasing; but you're going to have to dig past the music to do it.

Dissect the performance of the Ascendant and it tells you more about what they do right than confirming any perceived shortcomings. You could criticize them for a lack of air, until you appreciate their innate sense of balance and the way that the top-end precisely matches the extension at the bottom, the extremes cradling and supporting the all important midrange. You could point a finger at the dynamic range, and there are speakers that offer wider and certainly more obvious dynamic contrasts. But analyse the musical event and you quickly realise that the Ascendant is more dynamic than it seems. It's just that the dynamics are so natural and unforced, particularly in the way that dynamic shifts shape notes, that they don't draw attention to themselves. Bass, to quote a phrase, is sufficient. There's weight enough to satisfy, but the combination of texture, tonality and the lack of a one-note contribution from the box are what's really important. It's tactile, mobile and propulsive where required. Piano left-hand might lack the last ounce of sonority, the cushion of air beneath the chords, ►

▶ but it's way more natural than anything out of any other speaker this size. I certainly never felt the lack, and the Avalons arrived hot on the heels of the monster KEF combination.

Having had my musical senses assaulted by the recent Chesky SACD of *The Planets* (the most musically gruesome dismemberment I've ever heard committed to disc) I rushed home compelled to seek solace. On

the 'table went the Boult, rapidly followed by the Steinberg/BSO, my personal favourite. Not only did the system sooth my savaged brow, but the way the Avalons handled the Steinberg was a fascinating example of their ethos. They did nothing to disguise the frankly mediocre recording: they did nothing to hide the brilliance of the performance. Boult was his deft and subtle self, tonally and rhythmically delicate yet precise.

But the Steinberg grafted fire to the sinuous grace and power of the complex tempi. Its superiority was manifest, my preference underlined. It was clear not just which performance I preferred but why.

Towards the end of the review period I have to admit that curiosity got the better of me (as well as the convenience of another reason to leave the Ascendants in situ for another few days, despite products and deadlines pressing). A trip to collect the CDS3 from Naim in Salisbury afforded the opportunity to lay my hands on a NAP300: just too good a chance to miss. Listening was fascinating, confirming at once how far the new Naim electronics have come and just how Chameleon like the Avalons are. Long term Naim users (and even some members

of the company) would have been astonished at the integrity of the stereo image produced via the NAP300, while the Ascendant proved equally adept when it came to the rhythmic agility and precision so beloved of Salisbury. But it was individual musical lines that were really teased free of the fabric, bringing purpose and direction to the performance, underlining the shape and phrasing in a piece. The precision tonal intricacy of baroque music was the perfect playground for this unlikely combination.



Indeed, the Avalons revealed the Naim amp in a new light, underlining its newly found universality as well as the speakers' own adaptability.

It's all about balance, and in that respect the Ascendants are the high-wire artists of the hi-fi industry. They don't try to do it all, content to excel in their chosen arena. In this respect they exceed the already impressive Arcus by extending the envelope that bit further in all directions. Their uncanny naturalness depends on their

lack of exaggeration: in turn that excises the aural fingerprint that identifies sound as opposed to music. Neutral is now an overused and value-laden term, but the Avalons remind me why hi-fi writers coined it in the first place. They really do pass the signal without disturbance or favour. But the most important word in that sentence is 'pass'. Sure, they do all the hi-fi stuff, and do it remarkably well, but I've yet to find another speaker that subordinates those abilities so effectively in the service of music. What they pass is the fact of the music, but they do it so completely that you get the sense as the binding medium. When Neil Patel talks about the attractive simplicity of a two-way design, he's safe in the knowledge that he has the Ascendant to back him up. Two-way it might be, but it's a prince for all that.



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Reflex loaded two-way
Drive Units:	1x 25mm titanium dome tweeter 2x 160mm bass-mid drivers
Impedance:	4 ohms (3.6 ohms min.)
Frequency Response:	45Hz to 22Hz (+/- 1.5 db, anechoic)
Recommended Amp Power:	50 to 200 watts
Dimensions (WxHxD):	254x940x330mm
Weight:	32Kg
Price:	£7900

UK Distributor:

Audiofreaks
Tel. (44)(0)20 8948 4153
E-mail. info1@audiofreaks.co.uk
Net. www.audiofreaks.co.uk

Manufacturer:

Avalon Acoustics
Net. www.avalonacoustics.com

Interview:

Neil Patel of Avalon Acoustics

by Roy Gregory

Avalon speakers are not exactly run of the mill, especially when you consider their US origin. Decidedly different would be one way to put it. I was able to catch up with Neil Patel, owner of Avalon Acoustics on a recent visit to the UK. Over lunch, I asked him to define the background and thinking behind the company, as well as what sets it apart from the mainstream. Thoughtful and erudite, his answers make interesting reading.

RG. As owner of Avalon Acoustics, what is your role in the company?

NP. It's changed over the years, but mainly I would say responsibility for design and responsibility for voicing the products; basically, responsibility for everything that design entails.

RG. When you say "Responsibility for" I'm assuming that you have other people reporting to you...

NP. Not exactly. I have other people who carry out the tasks that are necessary in what is a very long process. So I don't supervise other designers: Basically the conceptions are mine, the development is theirs. You've met those guys. They are fantastic engineers and master cabinet-makers. They know the best ways to build things. So over the years we've developed a sort of shorthand – I say "I want to do this", they say "It's impossible" and then we work out a way to do it. I have great people doing cabinetwork, great guys doing measurements, and although I do some of that stuff myself, I really let them get on with the nuts and bolts of things.

RG. So, you're setting the agenda?

NP. Correct. I'm responsible for coming up with the next idea. Of course, there are also the basic business concerns involved in the management of the two companies, Avalon Acoustics and Avalon Music Systems. Music Systems is doing multi-channel and professional products, although that's physically a much smaller shop because we're really only doing assembly work back in the East(ern USA). The

real wood shop, where all the high-end cabinetry is done is in Colorado. Because there are these two discrete locations we have also had to develop an infrastructure to ensure that everyone communicates. I'm really good at staying in touch with Lucien Pichette and John Salvaggio (who run the plants), making sure they're aware of my day to day fiscal and design decisions, while they keep me informed on how things are developing in the outside world. That's basically it – but it's enough!

RG. Technologically speaking, the world is awash with loudspeakers, yet there are only so many people producing drive-units and other essential components. What sets Avalon speakers apart?

NP. That's a very good question. It's a question that's probably better answered by you in the press than by me, but from my perspective, it's about pushing the envelope: technologically examining all the things that stimulate us to move forward. What are the things that motivate us musically? What's missing from what we do now? It's about communicating, it's about motive, it's about bringing us closer to the music. It's not just about technology, or the expression of technology: sticking a driver on every plane of a box and calling it a loudspeaker. It's about directing technology to achieve certain goals that move us closer to the musical truth. So if you ask me what's physically different then I don't know. What I do know is that we pursue those ideals diligently and hopefully that's what makes us different.

RG. The products you produce are smaller, more discrete and often far cheaper than their competition. How does that affect the way in which you market them?

NP. In most cases I'd have to say that we've been fairly ivory tower in the way that we've designed things. We've never tried to be overly practical, meaning that we've never done market studies to discern what it is that people are looking for. The motivation has always been from a different, more idealistic direction. Having said that, the one dictate that we have religiously followed is the issue of size and the domestic acceptability of these things, ►

▶ especially in markets other than the United States, where the living spaces are far less expansive. Relatively small transducers that produce relatively impressive results are exactly what people want to have in their homes. Make them works of art in and of themselves, and they become a point of focus for the living space. When you get to Japan and other countries in the Far East, and I see our products in those environments often, I'm telling you, they look pretty big.

RG. A significant investment?

NP. Absolutely, but for these people the money doesn't really have much to do with it. They just want the best things, but they want something that they can live with organically, as well as something that delivers musical satisfaction.

RG. Do you think that there's a tendency with hi-fi, and particularly with speakers, to equate price and size and complexity with quality?

NP. I think there is. I think that there is the exposed "sense" of technology. The more ostentatious the look the more saleable that product is to a certain sector of society. The technology is all worn on the outside and the internal values become secondary. What you see is all you get in most of these products. We've always had almost entirely the opposite approach. We look at it almost like a ballet dancer: you do not want to look like you're working hard. You want it to be elegant, you want it to be beautiful. You don't want to sense the effort; the fact

is - this is enormously difficult to accomplish.

RG. We're talking Swan Lake rather than WWF?

NP. Exactly, and that's a very good analogy - not to say that all of those products are WWF; but when you see pectorals that size you occasionally ask yourself, what is that all about, what are they trying to hide?

RG. One of the things that struck me, because I was in retail at the time, was what happened when Wilson

launched the Grand Slam. For them it wasn't a flagship product, although it was the first, remotely affordable speaker from around the top of their range. Literally overnight it changed the speaker market, and suddenly, companies who had been quite happily existing with a \$30000 flagship were scrambling to produce something at the \$80000 price point, because unless you had an \$80000 speaker you were no longer taken seriously.

That really worries me because they are responding to an artificial benchmark. They may not have the appropriate technology or materials to produce a worthwhile \$80000 speaker. They may not actually need to price that high, but the market demands it.

NP. You're right, it's an artificial benchmark, and if you look at the parts

cost in some of those \$80000 speakers you'd be appalled at what the profit margins are. I think you're correct in that the Grand Slam did change things, but not just in terms of the market. It also affected the focus that loudspeaker designers then followed far more pointedly, ▶



► and that was towards dynamics and the moving of air. Not to demean the Wilson in any way, but the effect on other manufacturers has been to move away from subtlety and musicality toward a much grosser presentation. The Wilson is an exceptional product, but many of the folks who came afterwards only completed the rudimentary and obvious bits of the overall equation. They did loud and that's pretty much it, and that's entirely antithetical to our way of thinking.

RG. Having been to your factory in Boulder (See Issue 21 pp36) this notion of making the effort on the inside is readily apparent, even down to things like the fact that this is about the only range of speakers that sound better with the grille on than off. How much effort goes into the development or selection of specific componentry?

NP. A lot. At Music Systems I've started to use drivers specifically developed in conjunction with a drive-unit manufacturer. So we have developed designs that are being made exclusively for us. That's partly because, as you go down the price scale it becomes necessary to handle more of the frequency response issues within the driver itself. You need to employ more mechanical rather than electrical solutions. The cost ceiling really dictates that you have to start using your own drivers. For the higher priced products we find that the specialist drivers, built in small quantities, perform really well and that we're using enough of them to be able to match them, modify them, and do our own little tricks. Their inherent technological benefits, like the low mass of the ceramic drivers, make this approach more suitable for the high-end products.

As far as other components go, over the last few years I've found extremely few that were even acceptable. So basically, we've ended up having virtually all those parts made for us too. There's hardly a thing in our crossovers that you can buy off of the shelf. Obviously that wasn't the case on day one. It's been a long, long process, but now just about everything is either made for us or to our specification.

RG. It's not just the appearance of the speakers that's different. The stance of the company itself is also quite distinct, especially in your home market. You have a far lower profile, particularly in the press, than you'd expect, especially given the stature of the company and the performance of the products. Is that a deliberate policy on your part?

NP. I would say that that is the case with the US press.

I don't think it's the case in Britain, Europe or the Far East. I think that to an extent that reflects the way our markets have developed. From day one we were sending a lot of product to the Far-East. Then we expanded into the European market. The US was almost the last market to be developed. So we're faced with a different question. We have old, established markets. Do we risk supplies to those markets by trying to develop our home presence? As everything is essentially hand-made we could quickly create very real problems for ourselves. As it is, the US only receives a small percentage of what we produce.

RG. Is it impossible to maintain quality with increased production?

NP. It's not really that. It's more that the company, a bit like the loudspeaker itself, has an optimum size: It is analogous. If you are going to start building big, technological loudspeakers and start trying to expand your market beyond its natural boundaries, you should know your own limitations. This is the proper sized company for a product of this form. So if we are building things by hand and we're building them to this quality level, then we can only do so much and I'm entirely uncomfortable doing any more than that. So our domestic market hasn't needed to be driven by a strong press presence, a situation defined by how much product we can commit to that market. We simply had no need to pursue that avenue. I think that we are in good graces around the world, but how much individual distributors are pushing their markets is another question too. So it has been both a conscious and a de facto decision that the US market, as the last to be developed, doesn't demand a higher level of presence.

RG. It's also the least controllable market.

NP. That's true. We find, honestly, that in the US, people who are being asked to spend this much money on products are no longer as foolish as they used to be when it comes to audio. They are making much better life-choice decisions that will last them for a much longer time. They're not being frivolous in these decisions and they do tend to find the information they need to help them make those decisions. There are many, many ways to disseminate that information, besides the press, and I have found that in the US market, the best representative for our products has been our dealers. A committed dealer who knows the product and who can take care of the customer properly is closer to our philosophy. ►

► **RG.** As the person who's responsible for coming up with the ideas, what's the thinking behind the new Ascendant?

NP. That's a difficult question to answer in a succinct way. I have been thinking about the introduction of a new two-way, coinciding with the phasing out of previous two-way designs. I wanted to work to a certain size, about the height of an Arcus, the width of an Opus. I wanted to try some slightly different ideas as far as polar response is concerned, and I wanted to try to appeal to a slightly different market sector. I did think about the market place with this speaker, because I've been discussing this concept with the distributors around the world for a few years now. They told me: "Here's what we want. Something that fits in at roughly this price point, and that does roughly this job. Within those parameters it has to be an Avalon, it has to have the qualities of the rest of the range, but we want it to act as a nice introduction to the more expensive models."

That was the basic black and white consideration that drove the brief. Obviously, the motivational thinking is separate and different. I wanted it to be a bit more impressionistic in its sound. I wanted something that allowed greater entry into the emotional and mental processes in the performance, rather than the stark, almost neo-realism of a tool like our Mixing Monitor. I don't want to go over the top in discussing this, but you have to consider psycho-acoustics when you talk about loudspeaker design. It's very difficult to just talk about it technically. You have to say that this was something that I wanted to be a genuine entrance to high-end audio at a reasonable size and a reasonable price, yet providing all the imaging qualities, the grandness, the focus and the emotional connection that you don't get from lesser loudspeakers.

RG. And was it the issues of price and complexity that dictated that it was a two-way.

NP. No, that was decided some time ago. The tweeter is a unit that I designed specifically for this application, so it was actually an aesthetic choice. I wanted to keep a two-way in the stable. There are still positives that go with the format, in terms of top to bottom continuity and the solidity of the presentation. So it's a misnomer to assume that a two-way is compromised. On the contrary, there are very real benefits to be had from the simplicity. The Eclipse we will continue with as long as there is still a demand, but the new speaker will replace both the Arcus and the Avatar.

RG. Given that the Ascendant will be very close in price to the Arcus, what advantages does it offer?

NP. I'd say that it offers many things. A lot of the technology that was developed for the Eidolon Diamond's crossover has spun over into this design. The precise shaping of the cabinet facets provides a slightly more open polar response. The way the cavity behind the tweeter works is different; lots of little technical issues. Sonically it should combine the dynamics of the Arcus with the precision of the Eclipse. Slightly broader brush strokes than the Eclipse but it's also more efficient – almost 90dB. Second and third harmonic distortions have also dropped dramatically, as is the case with the Eidolon Diamond.

RG. Does that make it a truer speaker? Is that a fair description?

NP. I don't think so. I mean, we'll see what people say about it. We'll see what you say about it. But I don't think that was really the goal. The Mixing Monitor actually is a neo-realist loudspeaker, and it genuinely is truer. It includes all the naughty and nasty things that go on at the recording site, and most of the engineers have now figured out that if they move the microphone two inches then they're going to hear it move two inches through the Mixing Monitor. Hear it – you can almost measure it in the mix. It's an audio ruler. The Ascendant is not designed to do that. So is it truer? Maybe you could say that its communication is truer.

RG. I'm afraid that was a loaded question.

NP. I guessed it was.

RG. Where do you see Avalon going – what's the next stage of development?

NP. If you look at what we're doing at (Avalon) Music Systems with multi-channel and professional equipment, I see us entering those markets far more overtly. As you know, a great many recordings have been made over the years that have been monitored on our domestic products. For all that time, they've been saying "Do something for us – something that's designed specifically for us". So, the little Mixing Monitor is an entrance into helping dedicated engineers and end-users create better recordings. We're also looking at the surround market, whether that's home theatre or multi-channel music. We're developing products that are holistic, presenting the same sort of three-dimensional information that we've always delivered from two channels. Those are the areas into which we're diversifying, so it's diversification within our technological arena rather than branching out into amplifiers or something else.



Authority



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Reference 3a Royal Virtuoso

by Paul Messenger

This speaker is decidedly left field. It's a compact two-way stand-mount, yet a pair will set you back a considerable \$4,000. That doesn't make them the most expensive of their type around, but they're probably the most costly that I've yet tried – and that's from a population that's numbered in the hundreds. Yet it doesn't look that good. There's no fancy veneer, and the proportions are decidedly dumpy. So what's it all about?

The brand Reference 3a has a complicated history. The short version is that it started out in Switzerland, where the models were designed and built by a Frenchman named Daniel Dehay, who has spent some twenty years refining the main driver. Success in the US market towards the end of the 1990s, primarily as a partner to low power single-ended valve amps, followed by a takeover by Divergent Technologies headed by Tash Goka, led to production being moved to Canada, while very much retaining the flavour and approach of the originals.

Hi-Fi+ first encountered the brand in Issue 16 (May/June 2002), when RG developed a real crush on the 'Midi Master' – the MM De Capo, a costly, chunkily proportioned and heftily built two-way stand-mount. Indeed, so enthusiastic was Roy that the speaker went on to win Product of the Year and Editor's Choice badges nearly twelve months later.

However, the \$2,500 MM De Capo-i is only the least costly model in the Reference 3a range. For \$4,000 you can have a pair of these Royal Virtuosos, a model which has much in common with the MM De Capo-i, but with additional costly refinements, especially to the cabinetwork.

Why Royal Virtuoso? The name harks back to the original Royal Master

model that built the company's reputation, and which was based on multi/high density synthetic Corian cabinetwork. This Royal Virtuoso is essentially a cross between the RM and the DC-i. The enclosure here is built out of conventional MDF, and then each panel is covered in Corian panels that provide further damping and mass-loading. All Reference 3a's speakers are under continuous development and refinement, and an imminent plan for the RV is to replace the separate Corian panels with a complete moulded sleeve, which will be much easier to make, and also more effective.

Refinement and painstaking development seem to be at the heart of this brand. Apparently it took considerable trial and error to come up with the precise positioning of the internal bracing that works best, for example, while further extensive listening resulted in the use of a costly bi-wire/-amp twin terminal block from Cardas.

The Royal Virtuoso uses the same main driver as the MM De Capo-i, but an even better tweeter – a SEAS Millennium-series device, which is widely regarded as one of the finest available – and with improved protection circuitry too. Direct-coupling drivers to amplifiers is a major design tenet here, to which end the main driver uses no crossover network whatsoever, while a single select-grade paper-in-oil capacitor is used to high pass filter the tweeter feed and protect it from low frequency power and excursion.

The hand-made main driver has a generous 8.25-inch cast frame, secured by eight bolts. It has a woven carbon fibre cone set in a polymer matrix, roughly 150mm in diameter, and a central protruding shaped polepiece

extension.

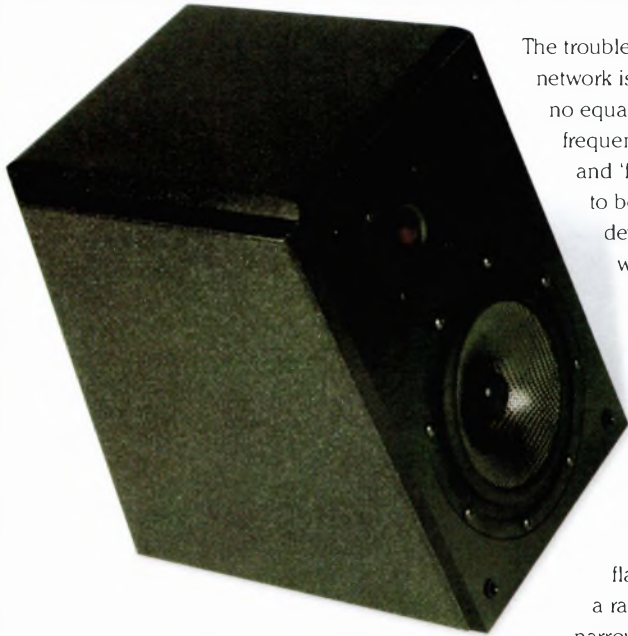
The box dimensions follow 'golden ratio' principles, and although top, base and sides are rectangular, the front and both sides tilt backwards, at rather different angles so that parallelism and associated standing wave focusing is avoided here.

The tweeters are both offset from the centre line of the front panels, helping to de-focus the edge-of-baffle discontinuity standing waves, and the speakers are built as mirror-image pairs. Unconventionally, the recommendation is to mount the speakers with the tweeters nearest the outside edges, and with the speakers placed quite close to a wall, facing directly ahead with no toe-in.

A long, flared, bent and tapered port reflex-loads the main driver. It's tuned to 50Hz, and exits towards the top of the rear panel. Another feature is something called a Vibra-Puck – an epoxy suspended multiple crystalline material – which is glued onto the back of the main drivers, the idea being to absorb and dissipate spurious vibrations in the main driver. In addition, the drivers are mechanically grounded to the cabinet.

It's interesting to draw parallels between this speaker and some others. In appearance I was immediately reminded of the Spica TC50, a popular US design in the 1980s, which had a similarly squarish and tilted back baffle, though the Spica was actually wedge-shaped, as I recall, with a thick woolly blanket around the drivers.

I was intrigued to read, in his review of the MM De Capo, Editor Roy's very appropriate reference to the venerable but still highly regarded AR18, which was also noteworthy for its minimalist crossover network. For my part I should mention my own soft spot for



The trouble with the minimalist network is that because there's no equalisation to 'tailor' the frequency response, a neutral and 'flat' balance is unlikely to be achieved, and the deviations from 'flatness' will be heard as a distortion of the tonality of instruments and voices.

That's certainly true of the Royal Virtuoso. My measured in-room far-field averaged responses were far from flat, mainly because of a rather pronounced and narrow peak in the upper midband, centred on 850Hz and around 4dB too strong, exacerbated by a mild suckout just above this peak, 1.1-1.4kHz.

Elsewhere, the 2.2kHz crossover transition is impressively seamless, and the treble proper is smooth and well ordered. The bass region is not particularly smooth or extended, rolling off quite rapidly below 50Hz. Close-to-wall siting is clearly helpful in giving a good balance 50-120Hz, though the upper bass and lower midband, between 120Hz and 400Hz, is notably weak.

The claimed sensitivity of 92dB (1 watt at 1 metre) is only achieved around that 700Hz-1kHz peak on my measurements, the average registering more like 90dB, which is still pretty good. The quoted impedance of 8 Ohms is more or less met, the trace dipping just a little below 6 Ohms in the mid treble, while the load itself looks very easy to drive. The power rating here is more than ample 120 watts, but that combination of a decent sensitivity alongside an easy load look well suited

to valve amp drive.

One of the more useful and relevant observations when trying out a new speaker is how it compares to its predecessors in the listening room. The RVs had the dubious privilege of following a pair of much larger and more costly JMLab Alto Utopia Bes, yet they by no means disgraced themselves. The first surprise was just how good that SEAS soft dome tweeter could sound, even following the excellent Focal beryllium example. And if the RV lacks the Alto's bass reach and neutrality, there was no denying the considerable charm of its direct-coupled immediacy, crisp timing, impressive dynamic freedom and expression.

Connected up to my regular Naim oriented electronics – specifically the NAC552/NAP500 amp combo – the balance anomalies were rather obvious, with consequences that were somewhat inconsistent. With some material it

▶ Rehdeko speakers, which are strange but also rather wonderful in their way – idiosyncratic in balance but probably the 'fastest' and most time-coherent speakers I've ever heard, with great dynamic drama.

Then there are completely crossoverless single-driver horn systems like the Beauhorns, and others based on Lowther and similar full-range drivers, which are also dynamically very convincing. All of which tends to suggest that crossovers are probably worth avoiding if possible, as they seem to soak up dynamic expression. However, the evidence for this is essentially anecdotal, and eliminating networks is not without its own set of problems.

Take the long historical view and the single full-range driver system was the norm up until the 1960s, and tweeters were a rarity. As tweeters started being added, the crossover became necessary to protect their delicate voice coils from powerful low frequencies. Networks were a further refinement which followed later still, adding equalisation to the mix, and probably inspired by the BBC practice of placing monitoring neutrality at the top of the agenda.



seemed positively beneficial – I really liked the way Kurt Wagner's voice on Lambchop's 'Is a Woman' was focused and projected, for example. Likewise, The White Stripes' *Elephant* was

► hugely entertaining and communicative. But I was less happy with the effect with a full orchestra, where the violins tended to be emphasised at the expense of the 'cellos.

This is not a characterless speaker, yet while it does lack strict neutrality, it also has some very real strengths. The trick to getting the most out of it is to avoid emphasising the former and make the most of the latter, through careful choice of ancillaries. Because of the way it emphasises the midband, the RV also highlights the slight congestion and lack of transparency in the Naim amp's midband, which is why this isn't an ideal combination.

The solid state Orelle amp combo (reviewed elsewhere in this edition) has a sweeter, more transparent and laid-back midband than the Naim, and this consequently made for a rather happier partnership. But things got better still when I took the thermionic route.

I don't tend to keep examples of valve amps 'in stock' for comparison purposes. By chance I did, however, have a prototype of a new single-ended model called Merlin, from a brand new company called Graves Audio, and was delighted with the results with these speakers. Midband liquidity and dynamics are the stock in trade of such amps, and the Merlin didn't disappoint, so the 'spotlit' midband of the speakers focused onto the amp's biggest strength. Furthermore, this type of amplifier usually adds extra warmth too, which helped to compensate for the rather lean upper bass of the speakers.

Unhappily, S-E valve amps are incompatible with summer temperatures soaring into the 30s, and an extended heatwave coincided with the period I was reviewing the RVs. I therefore ended up using the cool-running Naims for most of the time, and still found the Reference 3as both highly entertaining and also exceptionally communicative – qualities

that are actually fundamentally more important than the tonal balance.

The raison d'être for a high quality hi-fi system is surely that it should make all kinds of music – especially the unfamiliar – as accessible as possible, and it's here that these speakers really score. A little to my surprise, I found myself listening to and



thoroughly enjoying Gyorgy Ligeti's *San Francisco Polyphony*, from the Proms one night – a work that is far from easy, and far from my usual musical diet.

I mentioned Rehdeko speakers a few paragraphs back, and while the two brands have very different sonic characters, there are some parallels nonetheless. What I particularly like about the Royal Virtuoso is that it goes some way down the same road, yet without the same degree of extremism. This speaker has very little timesmear, and hence delivers fine transient integrity, yet it also manages to avoid any aggressive tendencies.

Dynamics are vigorous and exciting, bringing a real feeling of tension to the proceedings. Yet the sound here has good transparency in spite of close-to-wall siting, delivering solid and stable

stereo images with good location and perspectives. There's no apparent cabinet 'boxiness' here either – the claim that this speaker has an unusually 'quiet' enclosure is clearly well founded.

The only real coloration here arises from the aforementioned balance anomalies, the trick being to find sympathetic ancillaries such as an appropriate, probably valve-driven, amplifier that highlights the strengths and avoids drawing attention to the weaknesses.

When I first connected up the Royal Virtuosos, I wasn't at all sure I was going to like them. It took a few days, but their charms comprehensively won me over. They're not perfect, but they do possess a healthy dose of real magic, are musically very communicative, and make listening to the hi-fi system a whole lot of fun. By the time I had to pack them up for photography, I knew I was going to miss them a lot, and that's the acid test for any piece of hi-fi kit. ►+

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Two-way reflex loudspeaker
Frequency response claimed:	44Hz-22KHz \pm 3dB
measured (in-room far-field):	40Hz-20KHz \pm 7dB
Sensitivity:	92 (90dB measured)
Impedance:	8/5 Ohms minimum
Dimensions (WxHxD):	30x40x33cm
Weight:	25kg each
Price:	£4,000/pair

UK Distributor

Absolute Analogue
Tel: 0208 459 8113
Web: www.absoluteanalogue.co.uk
E-mail: absolute_analogue@email.msn.com

Manufacturer:

Divergent Technologies
Web: www.divertech.com



The KEF Reference 207 Loudspeaker (and PSW5000 Active Sub-woofer)

by Roy Gregory

Long has been the history of KEF's flagship Reference Series loudspeakers. Indeed, the original 105 "Dalek on castors" probably pre-dates the flagship moniker. But one thing that each and every KEF Reference speaker has had in common is a singularity of purpose. The company has resolutely ploughed its own furrow, irrespective of fashion or favour. When everybody else was bolting their drivers tighter and tighter, KEF stuck to de-coupling. I'm not sure they're convinced by floor spikes: at the same time they rely heavily on in-house technology whether it agrees with current thinking or not. All of which is essential to understanding the 207: where it comes from, what it is – or perhaps more importantly and topically, what it's not.

There's no escaping the fact that the 207 bears more than a passing resemblance to the larger B&W Nautilus designs. But, despite popular wisdom to the contrary, these are no slavish copies. Indeed, the resemblance is purely superficial, more the result of available technology than any conceptual (or sonic) similarity. Take B&W's N801 as an example: a pure three-way, reflex-loaded loudspeaker with wide bandwidth and a correspondingly challenging efficiency and impedance characteristic. The almost identically priced 207 is a six-driver, five-way design with twin, independently and differentially ported bass-drivers, that trades bandwidth for efficiency and an easy load. In fact, when the 207s first arrived I was driving them quite happily with Border Patrol's 20 Watt push-pull 300B. It's could also be described as a time-aligned, low-diffraction, super-tweeter equipped

design that makes use of the latest monocoque cabinet construction techniques (as offered to the rest of the loudspeaker industry). That's what I mean about form being dictated by available technology. Oh, and one other thing: despite their size (the 207s are big – no, make that huge) and imposing and visually dominant styling, I've had more female visitors fawning over them than any other single piece of hi-fi – ever. There's something cuddly about the KEFs and that's not something you could ever say about the 801s.

The 207s use more drivers than is decent in polite society, even if two of them are visually superimposed into the UNI-Q array. Every available, flat surface is covered with them, making me wonder whether they'd have crammed a few more on the sides if they weren't curved. The main cabinet is a complex, three-chamber construction with a narrow (considering it houses three 10" drivers) frontal aspect, and a deep, elegantly elliptical rear. It's so deep that it takes on an almost aerofoil appearance. Internally, the two bass drivers enjoy separate enclosures each tuned to a different frequency. While the lower one vents through the front port, the upper one has a vertical port concealed beneath a stretched fabric cover positioned behind the head unit. This arrangement allows compound tuning of the bass, as well as eliminating the problematic vertical standing waves that can afflict

tall, narrow cabinets. The curved cabinet walls, internal baffles and bracing also make for a rigid and inert cabinet without resorting to excessive internal damping. The end result is low secondary radiation and colouration combined with reasonable efficiency. KEF quote a -3dB point of 40Hz (-6dB at 28Hz) which isn't that impressive for a speaker of this size until you consider its 91dB efficiency and 8 Ohm load.

The bass drivers use overhung voice-coils, balanced

Faraday rings and reinforced paper cones. Above them, isolated in its own chamber and de-coupled from

the cabinet, is mounted the lower-midrange unit. It's an unusual approach that was first seen in the Maidstone that we enjoyed so much back in Issue 3. The idea

is to ease the transition from the large diameter bass radiator to the much smaller mid-range unit, making for more even dispersion and obviating the need for the bass and mid units to work higher or lower than they're happy. Derived from the bass units, the dedicated driver has a thinner, lighter cone and a light-weight Neodymium motor assembly. This uses a single Faraday ring to reduce flux-modulation, coupled to an extremely linear long-coil arrangement. Its low overall mass makes for effective de-coupling, while a phase-plug replaces the dust cap found on the bass driver, further optimising it for its chosen task. Although in this instance the twin bass-drivers are actually the ►



▶ same diameter as the lower-mid unit, KEF feel that the ability to tailor its performance still affords significant benefits. The bass units are crossed over at 120Hz, the lower-mid driver taking over as far as 400Hz.

Above the main cabinet is perched the separate mid-treble housing, its propeller boss shape continuing the aeronautical theme. The body is an aluminium casting, de-coupled from the lower-mid housing by rubber grommets and in the front of which is mounted (and again de-coupled) the latest UNI-Q driver. This represents a complete revision, although the basic UNI-Q concept and benefits remain unchanged. For the first time, it employs a deep-drawn titanium dome for the tweeter, careful profiling of which has extended the first break-up mode to around 32kHz. Given that the driver starts its roll-off at 15kHz (don't forget the hypertweeter), that keeps even the lowest-frequency artifacts well out of the operating band. The 25mm tweeter of course nestles in the neck of the 165mm mid-range driver. This is carefully profiled to provide an acoustic wave-guide for the high-frequencies, ensuring identical dispersion characteristics irrespective of frequency, important as this is one of the great giveaways when it comes to trying to seamlessly combine drivers in the critical 3kHz region. The cone itself is polypropylene, co-moulded with its flat, thermoplastic rubber surround in a single process, ensuring consistent coupling of these two all important elements. Crossover point between the two parts of the UNI-Q array is 2.7kHz, lower than usual for a conventional three-way – but that's where the uniform dispersion comes in, allowing the drivers to operate at their optimum frequencies, rather than the range

dictated by concern over audible crossover points.

The cherry on top of this particular cake comes in the form of KEF's new "Hyper Tweeter". Presumably this is more super than a super-tweeter! Marketing

speak aside, this 19mm titanium dome, housed in its own, chromed steel bullet, is claimed to extend way beyond audibility,



flat to 50kHz and maintaining useful output as

high as 70kHz. Well, I for one have no way of verifying those claims, but the extended bandwidth of the new Hi-bit digital formats will be justification enough in most purchasers' eyes. Of course, if they stop to use their ears then they'll also hear the clearly audible benefits of decent high frequency extension. How high is beside the point. A good super-tweeter actually benefits any system, regardless of source, and the KEF certainly qualifies.

Peripherals include a decent set of grilles (although for me the speaker looks and sounds better naked), and

decent M8 spikes, although in keeping with earlier KEF Reference designs, the anchoring arrangements leave a lot to be desired. Fine, they've finally beefed the spikes up and they are still providing the large chrome locking discs. But guys, guys, guys... If your locking disc is getting on for 2cm thick then you need to provide extra length in the spike! That and a decent, solidly mounted threaded ferrule for it to screw into. On the 207, the front spikes seem solid enough, the rears rather less so.

Right, whinging over. The terminal plate at the bottom rear of the cabinet offers the neatest set of three-way connections I've yet come across.

These allow easy single, bi or tri-wiring with no prospect of shorted amplifier outputs. The lower terminals feed the bass, the middle ones the two mid-range drivers, the top ones the tweeter and super-tweeter. There are also three screw sockets at the top of the panel. Depending on the placement of the screw-in plugs, these offer a choice of two different bass cuts, flat, or a mid-bass lift designed to help counter the effects of the dry-wall construction so prevalent, particularly in the USA. The right hand socket provides a 0.5dB high-frequency contour, the various options allowing the user some degree of room compensation. I first encountered this approach on the Reference 3/2 where it worked really rather well. A similar, though simpler arrangement was provided by the Amphion Xenons, and once again it proved extremely useful in optimising their in-room response. Well, the 207s are no different, and KEF are to be applauded for persevering with this deeply unfashionable yet profoundly practical facility. I ended up perfectly content with the standard, flat balance, but that doesn't make the options a waste of time. Put simply, it means that more people are going to enjoy more performance more of the time. And while we're on the subject of practicality, some bright spark at KEF sank a small spirit level into the top of the 207. ▶

► Now, whilst the KEF does actually possess flat surfaces on the top so that a conventional level could be used, the mere presence of the integral one underlines just how important it is to get a speaker like this absolutely vertical.

And not just for sonic reasons either.



Something this big looks real weird if it's leaning over.

The partnering equipment for this review was the same as that for the other speakers in this Issue, so see the Avalon piece for specifics on sources and pre-amps. Cabling was the Nordost Valhalla and amps I'll get to. Set-up was remarkably straight forward, although be warned that moving the KEFs any distance is far from easy, the combination of size, weight and curved surfaces making them hard to get a secure hold on. Thankfully, KEF also supply a set of casters to aid installation. I wound up with them 16" out from the rear wall. This placed the front baffles in

the normally preferred position, but reflects the sheer depth of this speaker. I toed them well in, firing at the listener's shoulders, rather than the centre of their forehead, an angle that gave the best image focus and most expansive acoustic. With that taken care of I started on serious listening. They never moved again.

Now I'm a bit schizophrenic when it comes to speakers. On the one hand I crave simplicity and efficiency: hence my love affair with the Reference 3A da Capo. On the other I want bandwidth.

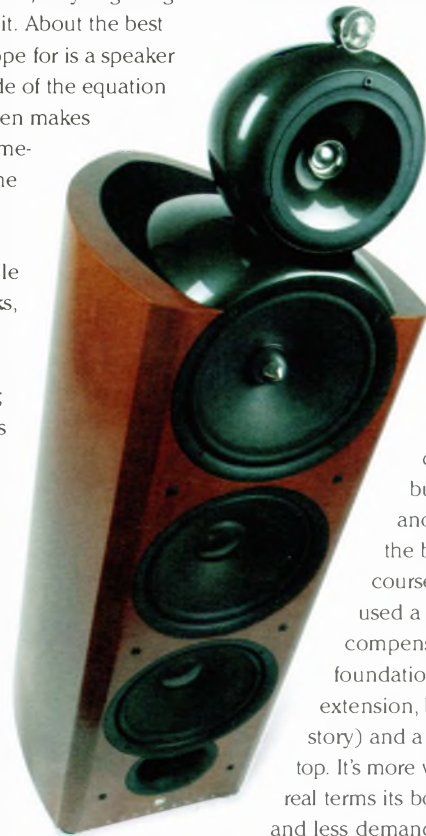
Whilst these two ideals aren't entirely mutually exclusive, they're getting pretty close to it. About the best that you can hope for is a speaker that does one side of the equation really well, and then makes a decent stab at something approaching the virtues of the other.

Sometimes that involves playing subtle psycho-acoustic tricks, particularly where bass weight and scale are concerned; sometimes it involves taking extraordinary care. I can reel off examples of each, but when it comes to the careful implementation of a complex theoretical approach, the speaker that springs to mind is KEF's Reference 105/3. Seeking to balance believable scale with decent efficiency and evenly controlled dispersion, they came up with a six-driver system that offered 93dB efficiency. But the real kicker was that the attention they'd paid to dispersion, combined with the then new UNI-Q technology, delivered astonishing

coherence from such a complex speaker system. It sounded tight, together and agile, open, dynamic and transparent. It also sounded like exactly what you fed into it. I loved it. But all too often it under-performed in the market place, blithely revealing the catastrophic effects of poor system matching or set-up so readily concealed by less demanding transducers. It was never the commercial success it so roundly deserved to be, but it taught KEF a hard lesson.

The ongoing history of the Reference Series has been an attempt to retain the virtues of the 105/3 whilst providing a rather more forgiving presentation. Well, we're three generations down the line and things are getting seriously interesting. The 207 might have lost a couple of dB along the way, but it's added another 10Hz at the bottom end (of course, the original 107 used a Qube active bass compensator to provide foundation worrying extension, but that's another story) and a lot extra at the top. It's more versatile and in real terms its both more attractive and less demanding of space.

The practical implications in terms of system matching are to move the speaker away from the realms of the 20 Watt class A amp (the unbelievably butch and powersupply rich Border Patrol aside) and closer to a sensible 40 Watt minimum. The 105s made a heavenly marriage with my EL34 equipped JA30s: The 207s proved ►



▶ Equally nuptially blessed with the Hovland Sapphire. Having said that, both the c-j Premier 140 and the solid-state Hovland Radia made equally strong cases. It seems that KEF have finally hit the jackpot – a speaker that actually brings the best out of partnering equipment.

But we're getting a little ahead of ourselves here. We know that these are all good amps: What about the speaker?

The 207 shares many of the attributes that drew me to its long dead relative. What it lacks is the air of quickness and obvious transparency that the 105/3 possessed. But the operative word here is "obvious". Remember that the 207 loses out to the tune of a couple of dB in efficiency and carries nearly an extra octave of bass, both things that create an impression of slower response. But as we know it is (or should be) only an impression. Actually listen to a track that you know inside out and you'll find things are happening quicker and more completely than you're used to. Playing Dolly Varden's *The Dumbest Magnets* underlined exactly this point for me. From the opening guitar phrases and echoed melodies of 'Apple Doll', to that first, almost accidental brush of a cymbal, I was aware that the KEFs were delivering something different yet more complete than I was expecting. Suddenly I was working less hard to fill in the gaps. The guitar strings had all the immediacy and attack that I was used to, but the instruments were much more coherently structured, scaled and discretely positioned in space and time. There was no lack of drama, just a greater sense of whole and the elements that build and layer to make this complex yet direct music so effective. The temporal window in particular was rock solid, the drums locked in space, the distance between

them and the front placed guitars and voice, natural and convincing musically as well as spatially. And the beautifully spaced melody, all sustain and hung notes, that opens "The Thing You Love..." made it even more apparent.

It is this remarkable spatial and temporal coherence that is the KEFs' trump card: Remarkable for its extent, remarkable for the fact that it emanates from a speaker that involves so



many different drivers and such a complex cross-over. You'd think that with four cross-over points to choose from, including one right at the ear's most sensitive frequency, you'd be able to spot at least one. Try it. If you can you're a better man (or woman) than me. Extensive runs up and down the range, cello, double bass, violin and voice failed to reveal a telltale step or shift in the spectral balance, shape,

height or size of instruments or performers. Rock solid images, stable in space and perfectly proportioned were all my reward. Even multi-miked studio productions refused to bend or wander any more than the mixing desk dictated.

Of course, the top-end extension provides plenty of air, but it's the effects further down the range that are actually more important.

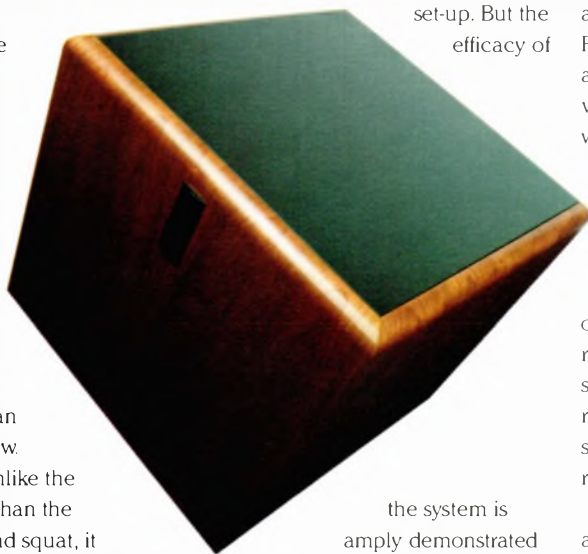
Here, the presence of a super tweeter seems to provide more accurate energy envelopes, locking notes together far more precisely, fixing the rhythmic and expressive content far more explicitly. And don't think I'm talking about upper registers here. The precision and placement of notes is, if anything, most apparent with bass notes. They take on a leaner and far more definite character, with sharper leading edges and better definition of their decay. This gives you clearer placement of notes and a greater sense of texture. But it also robs you of some of the weight, albeit false, that speakers rely on to trick you into an impression of greater scale than they're actually delivering. It's one that's successfully employed by the Reference 3A Da Capos and the Alon Lotus Elites, and far less successfully by the vast majority of others. Shorn of the flabby bottom end that we've come to expect from speakers at home, the KEF sounds leaner and smaller than its imposing dimensions lead you to anticipate. The twin reflex layout pushes things deeper (and cleaner) than you'd think from the numbers, but it dies pretty quickly after the 28Hz -6dB point, and cleanly enough for you to hear the corner. You're trading quality for quantity here, but if the potential buyer is going to have any question marks over the 207, particularly compared to the obvious competition, then bass weight is likely to be where they reside. Yes, you can push them back and fill ▶

▶ them out, but that simply undermines the extraordinary precision and clarity of the mid-band. No, there has to be a better way.

And there is. Oh Yes! It was in Frankfurt that KEF were putting on what was for me the best surround sound music demonstration of the show. The system? Five 207s, but more importantly, a single PSW5000 sub-woofer. The enquiry was made and the product duly arrived, although accommodating it in a domestic environment was rather more testing than obtaining the unit for review. This is one big box, and unlike the 207s it seems even bigger than the dimensions suggest. Big and squat, it sits on four beautifully turned alloy feet that space its massive, downward firing 15" driver from the floor. Despite reflex loading, KEF claim that response is flat to 18Hz, testimony to the brute force available from a Kilowatt of class D power. Outwardly, there's nothing terribly sophisticated about the PSW5000, the rear panel offering all the usual inputs and controls, but including as you'd expect at the £4000 price, balanced options. There's also a switchable filter slope offering 12 or 24 dB per octave options, the latter providing the best match to the 207s' rapid roll-off. Finally there's an independent, unfiltered LFE input for use in A/V systems.

But pick up the accessories box and you're in for a surprise. It contains a remote control! The handset allows remote adjustment of level, crossover frequency and phase as well as operate and standby. Now this is one area where remote control makes a lot of sense to me. Unfortunately, the execution leaves a little to be desired. Sub-woofer adjustment requires minute changes to control settings, and the bigger or deeper the woofer the more precise

those settings have to be. The control logic used on the PSW5000 is too course in operation, the LED readout too imprecise to be useful for anything but crude, initial set-up. But the efficacy of



the system is amply demonstrated in the phase and standby settings where the remote facility is an invaluable aid to system integration. And yes, I know that constantly variable phase shouldn't work with a reflex enclosure but it does here, so for the moment I'm going with my ears rather than the theory. Should KEF be dismayed at this criticism? Far from it. What they should do is take a promising system and develop it further. A better display, finer adjustment (two or even three speed) and user settable memory to allow repeatable comparison would make it just about perfect.

I ran the sub via its line-level inputs with the 207s operating full range, as is my want. But once the PSW5000 is dialed in its contribution more than justifies the time, effort and cost involved. Take the 207s' remarkable

focus and coherence and add some serious bass extension and you graft a palpable acoustic space onto proceedings, as well as reinforcing the extra clarity and temporal precision already provided by the supertweeter. Playing EMI's *Dark Side* SACD, the addition of the PSW5000 added whole vistas of missing information. But it wasn't just about the bottom end. Turn the sub off and the scale, energy, space and dynamics all collapsed, almost like a variable mute switch. Turn it back on and the performance just swelled in front of you, enveloping the speakers, the room and you, one after another. No sub – the bottom corner in the bass response is all too obvious. Add the sub and the low frequencies simply reach for the foundations.

Less bass heavy material was just as impressive, as were less carefully manicured recordings. Stewboss are never likely to win a Grammy for recording quality, but the gritty



minimalism of 'Wanted A Girl' has never enjoyed the separation and clarity that the 207/PSW combination brought to its busy mid-band. The swirling shimmer of the opening is resolved into separate panned percussion, the melody ▶

▶ carried by the bass guitar has never been so taught, agile or pitch distinct. And Greg Saffarty's voice? Well, it was Greg – at his expressive, wistful best. The added weight and clarity brings a natural body and substance to vocals, making them more real and far more individually identifiable. Likewise, large scale or small, classical or jazz, acoustic instruments revel in the space and separation, the stage boundaries and individual tonality that the sub delivers. Often when playing subs, it's a question of swings and roundabouts, better on the big stuff, but a little clumsy on the smaller, more intimate recordings. Not with the KEFs: I can honestly say that I couldn't find a single recording (and it became something of a cause celebre) that didn't benefit from the PSW5000's contribution.

The musical virtues of the 207/PSW5000 combination make them a must hear option for those considering a serious multi-channel music system, the options from amongst the rest of the Reference Series and the promise of 0.5dB tolerances when it comes to frequency response merely underlining the potential. A/V? If it can do multi-channel music (and it can!) then home cinema is a snap. Markets like Germany and the US will be quick to see (and seize) the benefits. The question is whether the conservative element in the UK two-channel backwater will get over their prejudices long enough to listen and enjoy.

The Maidstone was a much misunderstood and undervalued achievement, under-rated by reviewers who were perhaps comparing when they might have done better listening. It was the Dolly Parton of the flagship speaker world, short in stature but impressive in breadth: So much so that many listeners never got beyond the visually impressive to appreciate the musical integrity that lay beneath. And they shared a purposeful generosity with the diminutive chanteuse too, making the most of what you fed them.

As a follow-up, the 207 trades just enough of that generosity for hi-fi credibility to make it a serious contender. As a speaker, it's very much the sum of its considerable parts, and for once the theory translates directly to the observable performance. What you're promised is what you get, except that with typical English reserve, KEF are rather underselling the product's virtues. Yes you can have sound that's more immediate, and certainly that's more forward, but it will cost you dear in other areas. Balance and coherence are its watchwords, attributes that place the KEF solidly in the mainstream as far as musical style goes. Yet, impressive as the 207s are, the addition of the



PSW5000 ameliorates their compromises and creates a system with no significant weaknesses. Indeed, such is its performance that it challenges speakers that are far more fashionable and cost many times as much. B&W might be the current critics' darlings but with products like the 207, KEF could well blindside them as they bask in the reflected glow. The only crack in the pretender's armour is a price that's too low to see them taken seriously against the imported opposition. Perhaps it's just as well the PSW5000 is out there, if only to hike the price into the realms of high-end respectability. Perhaps British speaker design is entering a new purple patch. Perhaps this particular prophet will finally receive the respect it so richly deserves in its own land. ▶+

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

KEF Reference 207		Dimensions (wxhxd): 400 x 1290 x 685mm
Type:	6 driver, 5-way, twin reflex loudspeaker	Weight: 66 kg ea.
Drive Units:	1x 19mm Titanium dome hyper-tweeter 1x 25mm Titanium dome tweeter 1x 165mm Polypropylene flat-surround UNI-Q mid-range 1x 250mm Reinforced paper upper-mid 2x 250mm Reinforced paper bass	Finishes: Maple, Black Ash, Cherry Price: £8999
Crossover points:	120Hz, 400Hz, 2.7kHz, 15kHz	KEF PSW5000 Type: Remote controlled, bass-reflex, powered sub-woofer
Bandwidth:	40Hz – 55kHz ±3dB, -6dB at 28Hz	Drive Unit: 380mm Reinforced paper cone
Efficiency:	91dB	Bandwidth: 18 –250 Hz ±3dB, -6dB at 16Hz
Impedance:	8 Ohms nominal (3 Ohms minimum)	Amplifier: 1000 Watts, Class D
Power Handling:	50 – 400 Watts	Maximum SPLs: 118 dB
Maximum SPLs:	117 dB	Dimensions (wxhxd): 590 x 545 x 590mm
Shielded:	Yes	Weight: 60 kg Finishes: Maple, Black Ash, Cherry Price: £4000
		Manufacturer: KEF Audio (UK) Ltd Tel. (44)(0)1622-672261 Net. www.kef.com

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The Focal-JMLabs Nova Utopia loudspeaker

by Chris Binns

Catching sight of the Utopia loudspeakers in my living room, the face of the estate agent broke into a large grin. 'Uh, probably better that a prospective purchaser doesn't see these...'

I am about to have neighbours.

The fact is that for the last eleven years I have had the luxury of having virtually no restraints on playing music (or making a cacophonous din when it comes to band practices), such is the location of my house. This has to a large extent been subsidised by filling the remainder of the building with lodgers who have put up with the sonic bombast either because they have a great taste in music (!) or the rent is fairly cheap for such an idyllic location. But I grow tired of being the landlord, bank manger and student councillor, leaving two other options; sell up and find somewhere smaller, or for my continued residence by the river, divide the house back into two cottages and keep one. This was the tortuous path that I chose to take, and amongst the many problems I encountered, one of the biggest was trying to convince the builders that I really did want the dividing wall to be two feet thick – with sound insulation.

Whether or not this is effective will soon be put to the test, as the vacant cottage is now on the market. While the guitars, drum kit and other such like horribly noisy devices have been banished to the stables, I have managed to retain the living room that has been so effective for listening to music, within which the Focal-JMLabs Nova Utopia have been residing for the last couple of months and causing a

degree of astonishment from various parties including the aforementioned estate agent. As he said, would you really want to live next door to someone who owned a pair of these? The Novas are, I think the biggest loudspeaker that I have used (possible exception - the Vitavox Thunderbolts, but being more industrial/PA they don't really count) eclipsing the KEF Maidstone and the Revel Salon for size. Big, and pretty imposing... as a general rule, the bigger a loudspeaker gets the more one is going to notice the aesthetics of it, and at night on a metre and a half tall, the Nova Utopia is unlikely to slip into the background. While not exactly attractive (to my eyes at least) the Focal-JMLabs is ultra

luxurious

in its presentation; with a cabinet front that is highly polished, dark grey metallic lacquer, and side panels of natural burr ash, the whole construction is beautifully, no, exquisitely finished, and together with the fine attention to

detail they exude a real sense of class and quality.

As befitting a top of the range product, bar one – there is the even bigger Grande Utopia – the Nova encompasses all of Focal-JMLabs technical expertise and as such forms an impressive list, while the aesthetics are quite conservative there is the culmination of many years of research within this design.

A three way loudspeaker using four drive units, bass is handled by a 13" woofer reflex loaded by a large rectangular port at the bottom of the cabinet, handing over to a pair of 6.5" units in a D'Appolito configuration, between which there is an inverted dome for high frequencies. The Nova is effectively constructed from four separate enclosures (one for each unit) with a degree of mechanical isolation between them, while construction embodies the principle of the more mass the better; each speaker weighing in at a hefty 125 Kilograms.

Both the bass and mid drivers use the latest incarnation of Focal-JMLabs' familiar W sandwich cone. The concept is not new – Harold Leak was probably the first to use it in the early sixties. But having witnessed the combination of human and technological input that goes into manufacturing the cone assemblies (see the accompanying article), it



► is easier to understand why the company is so enthusiastic about the idea of the W membrane. The end result is a driver that needs far less in the way of crossover filtering to achieve the desired response, and combines the advantages of most of the cone materials used today.

The motor assemblies of these drive units are also unique. Made up from a number of small ferrite magnets rather than the more conventional ring, this allows greater precision in manufacturing and better heat dissipation from the voice coil thus reducing thermal compression under dynamic conditions. This idea is taken a stage further with the mid range unit by machining the pole pieces to match the layout of the seven magnets (hence the slightly silly sounding 'power flower' tag).

The high frequency unit has also benefited from considerable research. While following the form of the now quite familiar inverted dome for which Focal are renowned, both the motor assembly and the diaphragm have seen considerable upgrade. RG covers those changes in detail elsewhere so I won't bore you with repetition. These developments should produce readily audible benefits, but have also enabled JM to offer a unit with a virtually flat response to nearly 40 KHz, and at a time when the audio industry is fascinated with the concept of add on super tweeters, that is quite a bonus.

The crossover marrying these units together is, as you would expect, of the highest quality, down to the silver plated internal wiring and proprietary WBT binding posts; there is only one pair of these so bi-wiring or amplification is not an option. The large, beautifully engineered spikes provide a solid but easily adjustable support for the Nova's – an important consideration with a loudspeaker of this size. The

effective profile of the front baffle places the drivers in a radius providing a degree of time alignment or focus, and considerable changes in tonal balance were evident with fine tuning of the loudspeakers 'tilt'.

I had few, if any preconceptions regarding the Utopia, save for the fact that I was a little concerned as to



how they would react in my room, as experience has shown that getting the balance right with large loudspeakers with extended bottom end requires a considerable amount of patience. On hand to help was an impressive array

of ancillary equipment: CD source was the striking French Metronome Kalista player, and vinyl replay was handled by either the Rega P9 or a Linn Sondek, both fitted with variants of the Lyra Helikon cartridge.

Due to a reasonable sensitivity and relatively kind load, the Utopia proved to be quite flexible in terms of amplification, which provided a whole range of opportunities with some interesting results. What was to prove more of a problem was integrating them into my listening room – initial trials indicated that the bass end was somewhat uneven and out of control. In reality, my room was barely big enough for the Utopias, and there was not a tremendous amount of leeway for manoeuvre, but it transpired that fairly small adjustments of a couple of inches or so made a hell of a difference. I had so far resisted using the spikes to allow easier handling (and preserve my now pock marked carpet), and assumed that with a speaker of this mass they would make little difference. Once I had (painstakingly) got the positioning more or less right, their addition served to bring a welcome tightening to low frequency reproduction that made all the difference to the tonal balance.

Maybe it's just me, and it is probably a remnant of a misspent adolescence, but there is always a slight thrill that runs through me when I get my hands on a really large, capable pair of loudspeakers. While the Utopias are not averse to a bit of head banging and doing the loud 'impressive' thing, one got the feeling that they were a little disdainful of such behaviour, and indeed, I don't think this is what they are really about. The Novas are extremely listenable at quite modest levels and have a 'rightness' about them that makes music immediately accessible. I am loathe to describe their sound as warm, as that implies a sonic character that possibly suggests lack of resolution, and that would be wrong, as they are capable of tremendous

▶ detail and insight into a performance. It is just that while they are clean and uncoloured there is no hint of that cold, clinical approach that some loudspeakers have, and they are always inviting to listen to, if that makes any sense. If they were a piano, they would undoubtedly be a Steinway B as opposed to a Yamaha or a Bechstein.



With most of the problems of positioning in my room more or less sorted out, I would describe the bottom end as generous and a bit rounded, with plenty of power and weight, and above all, extension. I was never able to quite get rid of a bit of a hump around 40 – 50 Hz, but as I have already said, I don't think the room was big enough. This was probably responsible for robbing some of the dynamics and

attack from electric bass and kick drum, and greatly influenced by the amplification used. Mid range was expansive in every sense, throwing a deep wide soundstage, only limited by the proximity of the side walls. Neutral, articulate and highly natural with voices, it was also fast and responsive lending a real sense of life to performances. This gelled almost imperceptibly with the treble, which once it had settled down was probably the best that I have heard from a moving coil drive unit. There are people who dislike the Focal tweeters, while I have used variations of them for quite a few years and maybe have got used to them, but by and large I find them free of the vices of metal domes while offering a speed and articulation that soft domes seem to miss. The beryllium unit takes this performance a stage further by adding extra definition and sparkle, with a cleanliness and speed that makes most other units sound dirty and coloured.

For a lot of listening I had been using the Hovland pre-amp with the Radia power amp which RG reviewed enthusiastically in the last issue. I must admit though, that substituting the McIntosh C2200 pre-amp into the system injected an incredible sense of life and body into the system that the Novas seemed to relish, and me too. Here was a high end system that seemed to work on all levels, and brought a certain kind of magic to many listening sessions, and judging by the grin on other peoples faces I was not the only one. Whether contemplating the intricate beauty of Julian Bream playing lute music or getting a real adrenalin rush from Peter Gabriel's soundtrack for *Passion*, the system did everything that one would expect expensive hi-fi to do, and there were at least a couple of people who went away from an evening of listening to music shaking their heads in wonder.

With the Radia and the Bonnac power amplifiers taking turns, both rated at a hundred-ish Watts, I never felt the need for more power. Likewise, the Levinson 383 integrated proved to be a big hit with the Novas, where the bass performance in particular seemed to click. But it was the results with smaller amplifiers that yielded the real surprise. The Hovland Sapphire at a mere forty Watts sounded absolutely gorgeous, and provided an intimacy with music at most levels that was highly satisfying.

The Nova Utopia is truly a luxury product. The one caveat I have is that they need a large, substantial room to get the best out of them, but I suspect that anyone contemplating their purchase would either already possess such an environment, or consider building one. They are, unlike many high end loudspeakers, comparatively undemanding of partnering amplifiers and do not require ridiculous amounts of power to work successfully, somewhat the opposite in fact. That degree of flexibility must be seen as a really positive attribute, one of many that goes toward making the Nova Utopia a very desirable loudspeaker.



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Three-way reflex
Drive units:	1x 25mm Beryllium inverted dome tweeter 2x 165mm W cone mid 1x 330mm W cone lf
Bandwidth:	25Hz-40kHz (±3dB)
Impedance:	8 Ohms
Efficiency:	91.5dB
Dimensions(WxHxD):	440 x 1337 x 621mm
Price:	£21499

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Visiting the Focal-JMLabs Factory

Whilst CB was reviewing the Nova Utopia, I got to visit Focal-JMLabs' factory in St-Etienne, near Lyon, there to discuss development of the new Utopia series with Managing Director Gerard Chretien. There's far more to the new speakers than a fancy tweeter (see side-bar) and it was Gerard who set the agenda for their development as well as being one of the "Gang of Three" who finalised their voicing. With fourteen years as Editor at L'Audiophile magazine before joining Focal-JMLabs, he should know a thing or two about listening, while the team approach to design projects ensures plenty of technical support. It's a methodology that produces rapid as well as impressive results, the current Utopia range having appeared in about a quarter of the time that it took to produce the originals.

The heart of the new speakers is their drivers, but over emphasis of the technology used tends to miss the point.

Whilst the technology is both innovative and convincing, it's the ends rather than the means that are really important. Standing beside the six foot tall, four-way Grande Utopia, Gerard describes it as "a really very simple speaker", without so much as cracking a smile. That simplicity derives from the drivers, or rather the degree of control that the designers can exert over their mechanical characteristics. The beryllium tweeter is getting all the press, but the W cone technology, refined and employed in the mid-range and bass drivers is just as important. The composite cone construction uses an extremely stiff and light glass and resin membrane combined with an expanded foam backing to provide damping. By varying the thickness and profile of the membrane and foam layer, then the mass, stiffness and damping of the cone as a whole can be manipulated, but more importantly, ►

The inexorable rise of the inverted dome, or – nobody does Beryllium like Focal-JMLabs'

For most of us, the first time Focal-JMLabs, or rather, Focal, their driver generating alter ego, registered on our radar was when an odd tweeter began to grace speakers with high-end pretensions. Appearing if not first then certainly most noticeably on Dave Wilson's original WATT, it was unusual for its yellow colour (long before marketing men discovered Kevlar) and inverted dome. Yep, when everybody else's domes were sticking resolutely outwards, Focal's looked like your five-year old had already got to it. But like all really good stories in hi-fi, this one starts from an attractively intuitive base.

Designer Jacques Mahul wanted a drive-unit with the good dispersion of a dome tweeter but with better dynamic behaviour. By inverting the dome and using a stiff fiber-glass diaphragm, he was able to drive it at two-thirds of its radius, rather than around the periphery where half the impulse goes straight into the suspension. The voice coil also serves to stiffen the overall structure, making for a higher fundamental resonance. The result was better transients, more energy and cleaner treble. By adding a floppy, almost long-throw suspension (in tweeter terms at least) the result became almost like a mini-woofer, the lower suspension resonance making the tweeter useable down to around 2KHz, and in the process making the mid-range driver's job an awful lot easier. So far so good, and it's win, win, win. But, the stiff dome still produced some unpleasant artifacts at higher frequencies. These were largely



ameliorated by a shift to a titanium diaphragm, coated with a damping layer of titanium oxide (a technique reminiscent of that employed in the composite W cones, which separate the layers that provide stiffness and damping, making them individually tunable). This banished the nasties ►

► the composite nature of the structure means that these three key parameters can be altered independently of one another. It allows unprecedented mechanical control of the driver's response, allowing the elimination of mechanically generated problems at source, rather than requiring a corrective cross-over. Further developments in the magnetic assembly, the so-called Power Flower magnetic structure, have helped eliminate



eddy currents and created a far more linear field in the coil gap, adding to the evenness of the driver's response.

The combination of the two W coned mid-range drivers with the beryllium tweeter makes the Nova and Grande Utopias phase and time coherent from around 250Hz to beyond 40kHz, the cross-over employing 24dB per octave slopes and no corrective elements at all. This Optimum Phase Cross-over (or OPC) as it's dubbed by

Focal-JMLabs, offers a major advance over the far more complex designs employed in the earlier Utopia speakers.

All the Utopia drivers are hand assembled in-house, a production approach that is time consuming and, as a result, costly. However, JM insist on it as it allows the closest tolerance parts to be used and results in



it was vapour deposited by Yamaha for both the mid and treble drivers of the NS1000 (brave when you consider that the material can be lethal if ingested) as well as being used in 40 Micron foil form for the cones in JBL's high-end compression drivers. With its unequalled combination of low mass and extreme stiffness, it's an obvious choice, although those things combined with its poisonous nature make it a bear to work with in anything other than flat foil sections. But JM had their eyes on a higher prize. Not only did they persuade a company in the US to produce 25 Micron beryllium foil (in which form it's more expensive than gold) they developed a technique to hot-form it into an inverted dome. It involves heating the foil to around 1000 degrees C and then stamping it in a single operation that has nevertheless resulted in a pair of patent applications.

Add the inverted beryllium diaphragm to the basic design and you end up with a tweeter that extends out to around 45kHz. But that's not all. Worried by the high power demands in modern systems, especially in AV applications, JM were concerned by the comparatively low permeable temperature of neodymium magnet assemblies. So in the latest version of the design they've used samarium cobalt magnets, reinforced by a neodymium focussing ring to make up for any loss in power. However, talk to Gerard Chretien about the new tweeter and he sees these things as secondary. What he waxes lyrical about is the material's self-damping properties, a characteristic that results in the astonishing extension but also the actual quality of the treble produced. It's this he insists that makes beryllium a wonder metal.

► to beyond 10kHz, where a phase plug was employed to banish them. But the search for greater extension and cleaner treble drove JM to look elsewhere: and besides, that phase plug still rankled, ruining an otherwise elegant engineering solution. The answer was beryllium. Not exactly new,

▶ the most consistent drivers. As Gerard is quick to point out, small losses in consistency or variations in tolerance at this point directly effect the ability of the drive units to produce the finest timbral and micro-dynamic details. This concern with the minutiae of musical reproduction extends to the mounting of the drivers themselves. Each unit is given its own mechanically separate enclosure to inhibit intermodulation distortion, while the substantial baskets are securely bolted to



massive front baffles. The old lead lining that used to be employed in the cabinet construction has gone, fallen foul of health and safety legislation, but the new enclosures, with their beefed up baffles and extensive bracing actually weigh more.

The added extension at the top-end has also necessitated a rethink at low frequencies, where any inadequacy in speed or dynamic response suddenly becomes very obvious indeed. The ability to tailor the performance of the cone clearly helps, but the seriousness with which JM are treating this problem is most apparent on the Grande Utopia. Here, what appear to be bi-wiring terminals on the back (a departure from the rest of the strictly single-wired range) are actually nothing more than a separate leg for the 15" woofer: At the same time its output is limited to below 50Hz, making it a true sub-woofer. Herein lies the purpose of the separate terminals: they are there to allow bi-amping and if necessary, level adjustment of the lowest frequencies, essential if you want to maintain timing and dynamic integrity through the vital upper-bass and lower-mid: Any unwanted weight from low-bass harmonics will seriously slow the pace and momentum of the music.

All this care and attention to detail can certainly be heard in the end results. Listening in JM's palatial listening room, the dynamic integrity of the Utopia speakers, from the Micro through to the Grande, is impressive indeed, clearly revealing the familiar flattened dynamics and pacing limitations of the Halcro amplifiers. Clean these amps may be, but musically communicative? Not as far as this listener is concerned. On the other hand, their top to bottom evenness is ruthlessly revealing of discontinuities in the partnering speaker, and even the Grande Utopia was impressively coherent. Any concern regarding the control and subtlety available from the two large and



► widely spaced bass drivers was instantly allayed by the natural proportions of the soundstage and recognisably rounded double basses on the Barbirolli English String Music. Despite the character inherent in the recording the Grandes effortlessly sorted the instrumental identities, placement and the height (and sonic effect) of the hollow riser on which they stood: One, two, three, four, all present and correct, with perfect control over the recording's exaggeration. Impressive indeed when this is exactly the sort of difficult bass that often sounds happier on much smaller speakers.



So, will we be seeing beryllium and W cone technology appearing in other manufacturer's products: A Wilson Grand Slam Be perhaps? Although Focal first came to the hi-fi world's attention as an OEM manufacturer, this aspect now constitutes less than three per cent of Focal-JMLab's business. They are so hard pressed to meet the driver requirements for their own speakers that they no longer carry out special driver development for new clients, and although they continue to produce individually specified drivers for their existing clients, the development of new, individually tailored

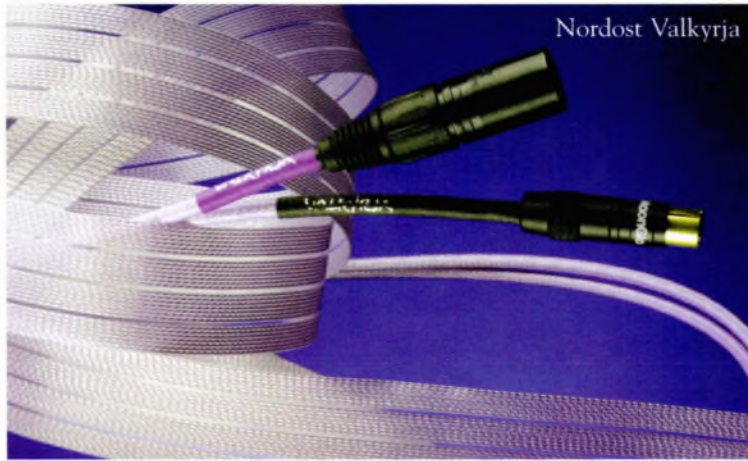
models even for them is something they seek to avoid. Although there are W cone drivers in their standard OEM range, they obviously don't offer the precise tailoring options available to JM's own speaker designers. The bottom-line? Don't expect to see that beryllium tweeter in anybody else's speaker soon. ➤+



Talking of which, perhaps the most impressive and interesting demonstration of all involved the new Chorus 706s, a small stand-mounted two-way and the second cheapest speaker that Focal-JMLabs produce. On the end of the same system, it delivered an astonishing performance, refusing to be cowed by the presence of its most expensive relations. Star of the show? The clean, sweet treble extension delivered by the TNC tweeter. This aluminium/magnesium alloy inverted dome is a direct spin-off of the manufacturing techniques developed for the Utopias' beryllium unit. Offering extension out to 25kHz, it might not be able to match the performance of its more expensive brother, but it doesn't match its price either. Offering the same dispersion benefits from its low 2.4kHz cross-over frequency it nevertheless manages to grace the budget speaker line. And don't think this is just about numbers. This new tweeter offers real quality too.



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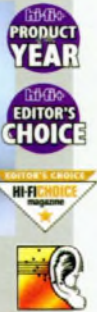
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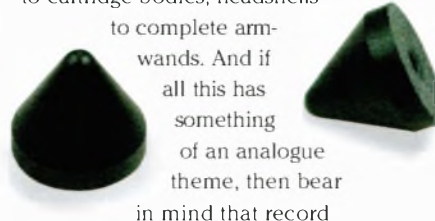
Clearlight Audio Diamond Symphony Loudspeaker

by Roy Gregory

Clearlight Audio might have first come to notice in the UK as the producer of those clever (and effective) little RDC cones, but a lot of water has passed under the bridge since then. And whilst the step from £5 cone to \$12000 loudspeaker might seem like a long one, the story isn't quite as simple as that. After all, whilst Clearlight might be best known for those astonishing little cones, they've produced equally successful racks (that also employ RDC) and cables (that don't). Each have, in their own way, redefined what's possible at the price, demonstrating along the way that the company has more than one string to its bow. But loudspeakers are designer Kurt Olbert's first love, and oddly enough, they're where the RDC story really starts.

Resonance Damping Compound (to give it its full title) is a resin that's been loaded with granules made from a variety of substances, everything from cork through to lead. The resultant chaotic structure is incapable of supporting a dominant resonance, instead dispersing vibration evenly across a wide bandwidth. But the really clever bit comes when you start specific application. By varying the mix of granules you can influence the precise behavior of the material and its effectiveness in regard to specific frequencies. Indeed, it was initially developed for use in the diaphragms of the ultrasonic probes used to test alloy wheels. Previous efforts had proved disturbingly prone to failure, literally shaken to bits by the high frequencies involved.

It didn't take a genius to work out that what worked at ultrasonic frequencies would also work in the audible range and that castable, machinable and configurable, RDC was made for audio applications. Indeed, projected products have included everything from arm bases to cartridge bodies, headshells



to complete armwands. And if all this has something of an analogue theme, then bear in mind that record

players are just sophisticated vibration measuring devices and it was a record player that actually first drew me into the Clearlight room at the Frankfurt show: And what a record player. The Clearlight Recovery still sets the standard for sheer tonal accuracy as far as I'm concerned. But standing behind it in that room were a pair of the biggest and most ambitious looking speakers I'd seen in a long time. Top and tail symmetrical bass cabinets bracketed a cast RDC mid/treble enclosure, creating a tower somewhere in the region of seven feet tall. Well, they were taller than Kurt so they had to be pretty tall. They were shiny, black, visually dominant and domestically rather more Darth Vader than Martha Stewart.

Well, some three years on, they're sitting in my front room – it's just that

in that time Kurt's thinking has moved on rather, especially on the domestic front. Indeed, the speakers I'm looking at are only just a little over three feet high, although they're still modular, still shiny black and still top of the range. The range? Oh yes, I forgot – the Diamond Symphony is actually the top of a three-model range, all of which use the same monocoque two-way head unit. The base model offers a simple box stand. The next one up has a passive bass enclosure built from MDF. On the Diamond Symphony the bass enclosure is still passive, but uses a larger, 12" driver in a composite RDC/MDF cabinet.

Let's look at the structure in a little more detail, but start from the functional goals and see how the form follows them. The head unit is a one-piece RDC casting, taking advantage of the molding technology to provide an enclosure with no parallel internal walls. It's also cast from an RDC mix that is twice the density of the one used for the more familiar cones. The idea is simple: provide the drive units with their optimum working environment. That means dealing with the rear wave (hence the non parallel surfaces to cut down standing waves) and the mechanical energy that passes directly into the cabinet from the driver basket itself. Obviously the RDC structure itself has a large part to play in this, the casting process allowing variable



▶ wall thicknesses while the material itself prevents energy spikes from bending modes. But you can't destroy energy, only dissipate it in an orderly way, and it's here that the panel in the base of the head unit comes in. Similar in type to the precision acoustic couplers used by Naim between the cabinets in the SBL, NBL and SL2, the combination of a permeable membrane and the multiple slots in the base panel allowing a controlled bleed of energy from the cabinet.

The head unit sits on a quartet of RDC cones that locate into small RDC washers atop the bass unit. There's also a four-pin connector that joins the head unit to the bass module, carrying signal to the mid and treble drivers. As much care as goes into the interior shaping of the head, just as much goes into its external profile, time aligning the drive units and surrounding them with non-parallel, carefully chamfered edges to provide optimum dispersion. It's an approach shared with Avalon and helps the speaker disappear, sonically speaking, in the listening room.

Having taken all this care over their environment, you can be sure that the drive-units themselves are pretty special. Although based on apparently conventional parts, the bass and mid drivers are built to Clearlight's specification and then further modified with a hand applied damping material, a different mix being used for each type of driver. This spiral damping pattern helps control the resonance and in the case of the mid-range unit, the dispersion of the driver, helping integration with the tweeter. The tweeter itself is built entirely in-house, with the lobed faceplate also helping enhance dispersion. The ribbon is a concertina design that expands, or breathes, under the influence of the

signal, making it extremely rugged. Indeed, Clearlight suggest that the unit is near indestructible under even fault conditions.

Externally, the bass module is simplicity itself. A large and carefully contoured port is located in the lower front face of the substantial molded RDC front baffle. It's matched by a similar though unported RDC panel at the back, with a thick, MDF carcass



sandwiched in between. Once again, enormous care has gone into minimising parallel surfaces within the cabinet as well as tapering the RDC elements to further inhibit resonance. But this is no simple reflex cabinet (as the linearity and sheer quality of the bass should tell you). Hidden inside the cabinet, feeding the port is a similar membrane controlled acoustic coupler to the one used in the mid-

range enclosure. In visual contrast to the head unit, the bass driver is hidden behind a carefully executed cloth cover. Given the aggressive overall effect, it seems a little like Adam's fig leaf to me.

Now, in theory, the rigidity and careful resonance control of the cabinets, combined with the exceptional care taken over dispersion and driver axes, should

make the Diamond Symphony less critical of placement, and that's certainly a primary design goal. Whilst no 12K loudspeaker system is ever going to be plug and play, the Clearlights certainly offer a far wider acceptable listening window than the competition. This is not a hot-spot, head in a vice for best results loudspeaker, which makes a nice change. So listening position isn't that critical: how about the position of the speakers themselves? Well, to answer that one we need to start from the sound of the speakers. because their character is going to be both their biggest strength and their gravest weakness, depending of course on your point of view.

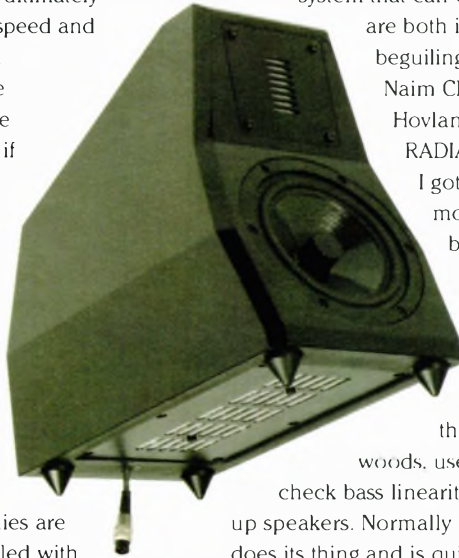
The observation or claim that some box-speakers sound almost like electrostatics has been used, abused, rehabilitated and even marketed, to the point these days that it's almost meaningless. So, whilst I'm going to start by saying that the Clearlights are distinctly electrostatic in character, I'm going to have to continue by explaining what I mean by that.

To me, the best electrostatics have a quickness and delicacy that is a direct result of their low moving mass. You can hear how quickly they start and stop moving: their sound has a lack of inertia which taken to ▶

► extremes can be almost ethereal in character. Of course, that's where you reach the point of over egging the pudding, and whilst its superficially attractive, it will be ultimately frustrating. It's this speed and delicacy, detail and articulation that the Clearlights have: the low-mass signature if you like. But here, it's coupled to the pin-point imaging and focus that comes from only the very best mini-monitors. Pin-point in the positional sense, that is. The images presented by the Diamond Symphonies are also beautifully scaled with believable height and size. It's a heady cocktail: the best aspects of electrostatic and mini-monitor without the positional, practical or sonic shortcomings of either. Well that's not quite the whole story. The scale of those images is the result of the speaker's bandwidth and the fact that there's a 12" bass unit delivering some useful extension.

Now, whereas a lot of products sound the way they look, that couldn't be further from the truth in this case. Squat, black and angular, the Clearlights are all delightful delicacy and wide-open space. Likewise, don't be misled by the dimensions of that substantial bass unit. If you are expecting A/V type bass delivery you'll be sorely disappointed. The Diamond Symphonies are all about quality, not quantity, which is just as well as that bass has to integrate with the head-unit! But whilst the Clearlights might lack the sheer weight and wallop their dimensions could lead you to expect, their grasp of pitch,

texture, pace and the shape of bass notes is astonishing by any standards. Bass transparency is where they're coming from, and on the end of a system that can exploit that they are both impressive and beguiling. Used with the Naim CDS3 driving the Hovland pre-amp and RADIA power amp, I got some of the most informative bass I've ever heard. *This One's For Blanton* is a hoary old chestnut in this neck of the woods, used as it is to check bass linearity when setting up speakers. Normally it goes on, does its thing and is quickly consigned back to its jewel case. But playing it here I was struck by two things.



Firstly, just how clearly the effects of small changes in the positioning of the speakers could be heard. Secondly, just how fluid, tactile and pitch specific the

notes from the plucked double bass were. They had timbre, shape and a sense of energy about them which caught the attention, especially the way Ray Brown tapered each one with his fingers. At the same time, the placing, attack and strength of the piano notes was absolutely precise, as was the angle of the keyboard in the soundstage. The result was compelling, communicative music from a recording that I thought I'd worn out years ago, so familiar has it become.

Much of this performance, especially the timing and precision of the mid-band, is a result of the speed and attack available at low frequencies, again highlighted by the performance of a tweeter that stretches up to 38kHz (something of a recurring theme amongst this group of speakers). But herein lies the rub. Change to the Analogue Productions 180g pressing of the *Blanton* (as opposed to their gold CD) and the picture suddenly muddies. The bass goes fat, detached and slow, the soundstage collapses, the piano seems aimless rather than purposeful. Now I know that the album can sound better than the beer-mat, so what goes on? The answer is speaker positioning. Pull the Clearlights forward around 5cms and suddenly everything clicks back into focus, only more so, with a little more scale and weight to the piano.

What's happening here is that the speakers are telling you all too clearly just how big a difference there is between the spectral balance or energy distribution from the CD player and turntable. And that's using the CDS3 which definitely leans to the analogue as CD players go, and the Clearaudio Master Reference which has the most even (even CD like) balance of any turntable I've used save Clearlight's own Recovery. I didn't get to try the latter, but reckon I was pretty close to a best case scenario. ►

▶ Using the Wadia 861 widened the gap: I shudder to think of the effect of a TNFHR on proceedings. It's a classic case of the speaker being a victim of its own excellence. I could make it sound great with CD. I could make it sound great with LP. Any attempt at a compromise was exactly that: all too obviously compromised.

Likewise the overall balance. The speed and clarity of the speaker is bought at the price of some compromise in harmonic development and complexity. It's a common feature and perhaps the most obvious characteristic of low-mass designs. In this regard, the impact is purely subtractive, the speaker adding absolutely nothing of itself. Using it with the ultra clean RADIA might seem like too much of a good thing, but using more rose tinted amplification simply slows down the leading edges while the speaker makes the gobbets of extra weight as obvious as a moustache on the Mona Lisa. Better to play to its strengths and revel in the results.

By now you might be getting the idea that I don't like this speaker. Nothing could be further from the truth. It doesn't have the easy acceptability of the big KEF or the preternaturally convincing quality of the Avalon, but it has significant strengths of its own and is both more immediately and more obviously impressive than either. If you value detail, clarity and organisation, you're going to be bowled over. Listening to female voices as diverse as Ella and Alison Krauss, the detail of their vocal inflections, the precision of their phrasing, the myriad tiny bits

of information about how they're standing or moving relative to the microphone make for captivating listening. With Krauss, and even more with Nanci Griffiths, there's a captivating fragility and vulnerability



to the singing that adds real directness to the songs.

Changing amps on the Clearlights is a different experience to the norm. There seems to be no issue regarding control over the speaker, which is perfectly happy to deliver its potential with anything sensible you care to partner it with. What it also delivers is the character of the driving amp, and any excesses on its part will be ruthlessly revealed. You don't need Amps, you don't need Kilowatts, but you do need good, clean quality. I'd be fascinated to hear these speakers

on the end of Lavardin's IT integrated – at less than a third of their price.

Those who crave electrostatic levels of clarity and transparency, who want that quality right across the audible range but who shiver at the very concept of a hybrid need look no further. Those who seek precision imaging combined with realistic scale and perspective, walk this way. Those who want a musically compelling and communicative performance, listen up. The Clearlight Diamond Symphony delivers all this and more. If you value musical colour over musical clarity of purpose they might wear thin, but if you want to cut straight to the heart of the matter then here's a roadmap, written in bold and back-lit. It doesn't get any clearer than this.



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Modular speaker with RDC head unit and choice of passive, ported bass cabinets.
Drive Units:	Clearlight Ribbon HF 165mm HF, 305mm LF
Sensitivity:	90dB
Bandwidth:	35Hz - 40KHz
Dimensions (WxHxD):	400x1030x570mm
Weight:	54Kg
Price:	£12000

UK Distributor:

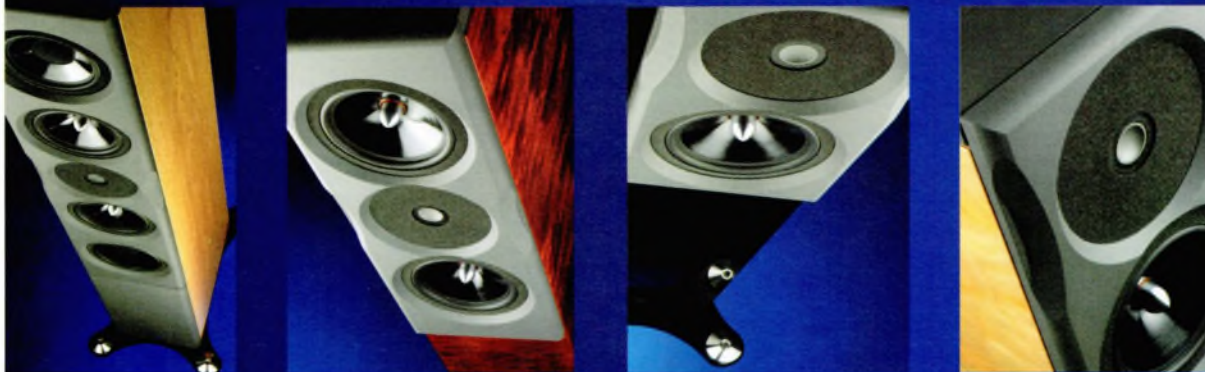
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Sonus Faber Cremona Auditor Loudspeaker

by Chris Thomas

There has never been a better time to buy a quality small speaker and if proof were needed then look no further than the Cremona Auditor from the Italian company of Sonus Faber. This is a speaker of such balance and tonal refinement that, even before I start I just know that I am going to find it difficult to criticise even the smallest thing about it. It makes as persuasive a case for itself as any piece of audio equipment that I have heard for quite a while and its combination of physical and sonic virtues might just convince you that anything bigger, uglier and generally more unwieldy is unnecessary. If you listen in a very large room then there is nothing like a full bandwidth speaker that is able to reproduce music on a grand and powerful scale. But these are rare and very expensive beasts indeed that require expensive nurturing from partnering equipment and will often throw the general inadequacies of room acoustics into painful and boomy view. And yet the places where I see them the most often are in small rooms, always far too close to surrounding walls and corners with no space to breathe and with the listeners unable to get far enough away from them to allow the drivers to integrate. It's an uncomfortable experience and the remedy often takes a real leap of faith by the owner who associates small speakers with small sounds and no bass. This might have been true once but certainly no more. The best of them can be tremendously coherent musically, as they are able to start and stop faster, and hold onto the

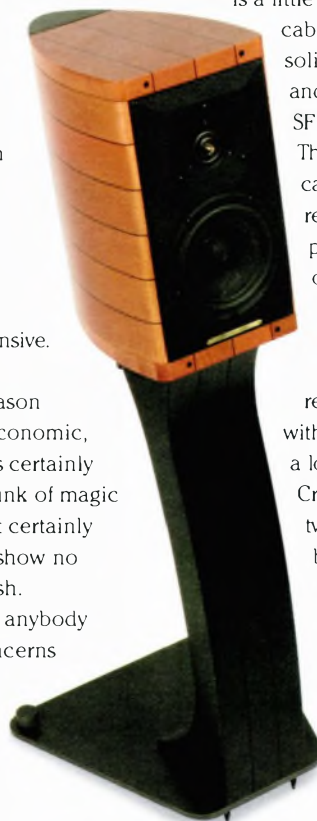
dimensions and shape of a soundstage and keep it in focus as well and in most cases, better than a big 'un.

The Red Rose R3, changed my mind about what is possible, low frequency-wise from a small speaker. This really was a total surprise as so much deep and coherent bass poured out that it surely had to be a trick, achieved through frequency manipulation and psycho-acoustics. Whatever it was, it sounded really great and set new standards for me. The general consensus from everyone who heard it was to question the need for anything bigger. Far better to spend the money elsewhere in the system as the R3's could certainly take it. Their problem was that they looked like a cheap speaker with unimpressive cabinet work and for £3.5K, not including stands, were too expensive. They have now been dropped for some reason that must surely be economic, as their replacements certainly seem to lack that chunk of magic that the original most certainly had and themselves show no improvements in finish.

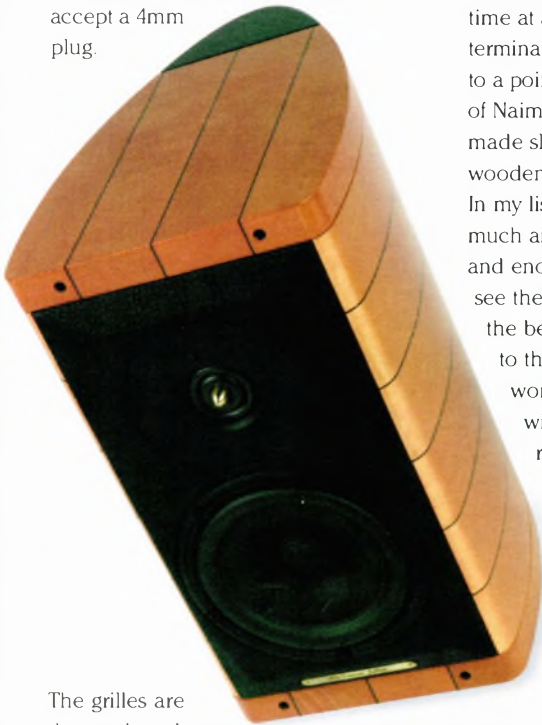
I cannot imagine anybody voicing the same concerns over the build quality and finish of the Sonus Faber Cremona

Auditors. In fact, when you take them in your hands and examine them, inch by inch, you may wonder how they can make such a thing for the price at all, what with packaging, exporting and with manufacturer, importer and dealer all presumably making a decent margin. Sonus Faber have always majored on exquisite finishes and the Cremona Auditor makes the point most succinctly. This is the baby brother of the floor standing Cremona. The review samples were a wood finish but they are also available in light graphite grey for those who feel the maple striping is a little too furniture-like. The

cabinets are formed from solid and laminated maple and are boat-backed or, as SF call them, lute-shaped. This is used to control inner cabinet standing waves and resonances by denying them parallel surfaces to bounce off. The quality of the finish is exemplary with a medium lacquered lustre that is neither gloss nor matt and really has more in common with a musical instrument than a loudspeaker. The rear ported Cremona Auditor incorporates two drivers on its leather-bound baffle, both from Scanspeak. The bass/mid driver is a 150mm model with a paper cone, sliced to avoid break-up while the tweeter is 29 mm Ring Radiator with an aluminium phase



▶ plug jutting from the front. The speakers are single wired but can easily accommodate doubled up bi-wired leads as the superb quick-lock connectors have been well thought out and have a large enough hole through their centre to easily accept a 4mm plug.



The grilles are the tensioned rubber band type that has become a Sonus Faber trademark on their rarer models over recent years but can be quickly removed by sliding out the metal end pieces from the cabinet. I prefer the sound of them with the grilles in place.

As for speaker stands, I can see no reason to look any further than those which are designed for the speaker and which came supplied, especially as the Cremona Auditor bolts to the stand at such an angle that time alignment is taken care of without the need for sloping of the speaker's baffle or staggering of the drive units themselves. The gentle curve of the stand upright also effectively extends the baffle downwards to a certain extent and this may well contribute to their musical presentation. But there is something

so right about the look and sound of the little Cremona on this stand that I didn't even bother to experiment with alternatives. My advice is to buy them as a package.

Setting the speakers up for use with a variety of amplification took no time at all. The spikes supplied were terminated in a small ball as opposed to a point and I slotted them into a set of Naim Chip floor protectors, which made sliding them around on a wooden floor quite ridiculously easy. In my listening room they needed as much air around them as possible and enough toe-in so I could only just see their inner side panels. This gave the best sense of shape and depth to the soundstage and it is very worthwhile being a bit fastidious with this adjustment as the rewards are so very worthwhile.

There is a performance wall that many small speakers run up against when asked too many questions by the source and amplification. You may get an excellent return when the speaker is used with

decent quality electronics where everything is working in some sort of balanced harmony. But up to the level of information coming from the CD player or turntable and feed that through a more capable amplifier and often you will find that the speaker does not have the ability to resolve the increased level of pure musical and instrumental detail whether it be rhythmic, tonal or just straight forward leading-edge control.

No such problems here though and I can imagine that you would need to move quite a way up the performance ladder before these SF's cried "enough". I used the Naim CDS3 as a source and a variety of amplification from a basic and slightly underpowered Naim NAC72/ NAC140 through to a Tom Evans Vibe with Pulse power supply and a Jeff Rowland 101 power amplifier all connected by either Naim or Nordost Valhalla cabling, and I never felt short changed. The Sonus Fabers, at 88 dB sensitivity seem rather easy to drive and more than willing to respond to the quality and varying strengths of whatever amplification was in use at the time.

Overall their balance is slightly warm. The treble rolls off a little early, softening things a tad, but still shows good response to small dynamic shifts and quite excellent ultra-clean attack. You would really have to screw-up with your choice of amplification to make these Cremonas sound brittle or uncomfortable. Likewise, at the other

end of the spectrum the bass is almost as remarkable as that of the Red Rose R3's in terms of the actual extension. But you will be amazed at how well controlled and subtle it is. Even Charlie

Haden's subterranean explorations during his meeting with Pat Metheny on *Beyond The Missouri Sky* (Verve 537 130-2) could not ruffle the little Cremona. This speaker is about colour and texture that, coincidentally is what this album majors on and if you like to think of music in these terms then you're in for a treat. Haden creates a huge colour wash of warm colours while the higher tones are Metheny's particular area ▶



► of expertise, but it is the feeling of musical togetherness that the Cremona Auditor really excels at opening up. This disc is subtitled *Short Stories* after all and the threads and melodies that run through it are explored by both these great musicians in a very focussed yet broad acoustic space. And if there is a speaker with a more attractive sense of presentation then I cannot bring it to mind at the moment. You like imaging, sound staging and three-dimensional pictures being painted in front of you? Then check out this Sonus Faber. It is simply so attractive and inviting in the way in which it portrays music that it can often beguile you with its sense of space and location before you actually get round to appreciating and exploring the music itself. Close your eyes and the Cremona Auditor really does disappear and the music extends far beyond the speaker's physical boundaries left to right, front to back and up and down, yet the instruments and vocals remain solidly locked into position somewhere in the vast soundstage. And they don't move around or feel compressed. And this Sonus Faber does this with disc after disc and it never sounds artificial, forced or contrived. But this is not an either/or situation because the Cremona keeps a firm grip on proceedings as well and is tight, controlled and quite ruthless at times. In short, it does all those musical things that a great speaker should do. Play an awfully produced piece of music through them and that is what you get back.

But if your collection reads mainly Metallica, Judas Priest and Slayer then perhaps this is not the speaker for you. It rocks well enough but doesn't have that cutting brightness or forward edginess, though it can go very loud and is very punchy. I am not saying that it is too accurate to play this type of music. If you want to hear accuracy

then go to a recording studio control room and marvel at how absolutely awful the monitors sound with a direct feed from the studio itself. Accuracy was something manufacturers used to strive for a while ago before they realised that there was no market for it,



as nobody knew what it was anyway. For me it is far more important that I enjoy listening to the music and that, when my curiosity is aroused, I can walk into the piece and hear just what the musicians are doing. Systems that are built around the premise of being accurate are inevitably expensive, tedious and of only academic interest.

The beauty of these Sonus Fabers goes far deeper than their skin. For what I believe is an excellent and competitive price they really do offer huge possibilities for real-world listening rooms which have to double as living rooms (or should that be the other way round?) They are the proof, if any was still needed, that big floor standers are fast becoming redundant and unnecessary for average sized

living rooms. They will respond musically to the very best amplifiers, source components and cabling available and will react to improvements in the chain with more music. Surprisingly enough I discovered that they are also marketed as a surround-sound speaker that are normally voiced quite differently to a stereo pair. Whatever the case, this is quite

easily the best new small speaker that I have heard since the premature demise of the Red Rose R3 and offers a very considerable saving of the folding stuff over that model. It really must be heard. It's that simple. ➤+

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	2-way, rear ported.
Drive Units:	150mm Scanspeak 8530 Revelator cone driver 29mm Scanspeak Ring Radiator.
Cabinet:	Laminated solid maple wood.
Bandwidth:	46Hz – 40kHz
Sensitivity:	88dB /1 Watt / 1 m
Impedance:	4 Ohms nominal
Power Handling:	50 watts – 250 watts
Dimensions (HxWxD):	350x190x320mm
Finishes:	Natural or Graphite
Price:	£2149
Stands:	£399.

Importer:

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

Manufacturer:

Sonus Faber, Italy.
Net. www.sonusfaber.com



Duevel Bella-Luna Loudspeakers

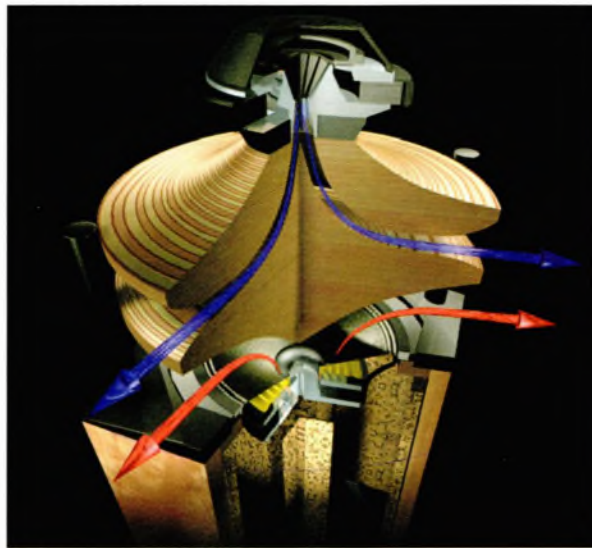
by Jason Hector

Talk to most Hi-Fi enthusiasts and they claim that Hi-Fi shows don't tell you much about the sound of a piece of kit. Conversely, and liking to be different, I am beginning to think that shows are a good place to judge the sound quality of a component. Not the absolute sound quality perhaps but the sound quality relative to the other bits at the show. You see a good component will still sound pretty good even under and in spite of show conditions and if the designer/distributor knows what they are doing they will get much of the performance out. Which makes shows a good test of the distributors as well. I raise this because it seems that Duevel omni-directional speakers have a reputation for making excellent sound at shows. It seems that anybody who has heard them, including the editor, has really rated how well they have worked and a quick trip to the website delivers loads of quotes and awards for best sounds at show. And hence the pair that I now have for review.

The Duevel is a German omni-directional loudspeaker and, only recently, amplifier maker. Their product range (three speakers and one integrated amplifier) is distributed in the UK by Walrus systems who supplied me with a pair of the middle of the range Bella-Luna loudspeakers.

Duevel have some unusual views on why omni directional speakers are the best solution to sound reproduction in the home. As far as I can make out, and

I am paraphrasing from their literature, they believe that directional speakers produce an unnatural narrow beam of sound that contains the direct and indirect sound of the recording. This makes it more difficult for our brains to differentiate between the direct and indirect sound. If we struggle with this differentiation we perceive the sound as unnatural and we are more easily fatigued. So far so good, they then go on



to say that an omni on the other hand excites the whole of the room it is in and this can allow the brain to make more sense of the audio signal with less effort. I must admit I struggle to understand how this works in practice but whether this theory is right or whether the Shahnian theory (simplified here by me) of "point source radiating in all directions is more like real instruments and that is what we try to create with the speakers" is more accurate is irrelevant to my enjoyment of the music when it is

played on a good omni-directional loud speaker. A good omni-directional speaker seems to disappear from the chain and allows a really natural easy-going sound into the room; the Duevels have lived up to the show hype and are a very good omni-directional loudspeaker.

You will certainly recognise a pair of Duevels in the demonstration room. The most obvious visual impression is given by the two pieces of beautifully turned wood that are fixed one upon the other at the top of the speaker. These are also the key components to the operation of these loudspeakers. Please refer to the diagram at this point because the description gets a little messy. Right at the top of the speaker we find the tweeter. This is mounted so it is down-ward firing into the first of the turned, and in this case horn-shaped, wooden pieces. Directly below the wooden tweeter horn we find the second piece of turned wood. This one takes what can only be described as a spinning

top shape! Strictly speaking it is not below the tweeter horn since its upper point enters and extends well into the centre of the downward facing tweeter horn. This creates a horizontally circularly symmetric horn loaded slot for the tweeter to vent from. So the sound waves from the tweeter are guided between these two pieces of wood to emerge, again symmetrically, all around the speaker at an angle of 90 degrees from the tweeters actual radiating direction. The lower point ▶

► of the “spinning top” is suspended over the upward firing bass/ mid driver. Again this acts to spread the sound pressure waves (at least the mid range frequencies) from the driver and steer them through 90 degrees. The final result is a very close approach to a lateral omni directional speaker and best of all it is an elegant and not a ruinously expensive solution! The two turned wooden pieces are locked rigidly in place above the cabinet proper by four (one for each corner of the cabinet) machined metal rods. The wooden pieces are simply bolted to the supporting rods which are attached to a baffle mounted into the top of the cabinet. The bass mid/driver is securely fixed to this same baffle.

The bass/mid range unit is described by Duevel as “a high efficiency 8” diameter cone loud-speaker with 1.5” diameter voice coil. Other features are a carbon diaphragm and a double roll textile suspension. The woofer has a die cast chassis, a large magnet and a vented pole plate”. All good stuff and an interesting mix of old (textile surround) and newer (carbon fibre) materials. The tweeter also uses carbon fibre for its cone. Again a powerful magnet arrangement keeps control of the 38mm design. The tweeter then vents through a clever phase plug straight into the mouth of the horn formed by the upper piece of turned wood. Duevel have designed the Bella Luna to have an output that is linear in phase and this is achieved in part by using a simple crossover and top quality components. The Bella Luna also boasts a healthy 91dB output at 1W and 1m and a not totally ruinous 6 Ohm load. In much of the literature they recommend valve amplification (although their own amplifier is solid-state, try to work that out if you can) as do Walrus, but I used them with my usual Dynavector solid-state amplifiers with excellent results.

Straight from plug-in the Bella Luna’s

failed to impress; the treble was a bit harsh and the bass pretty loose. On the positive side the mid-range seemed to be working well! After a few minutes, yes that short a time, the treble had calmed down, sweetening, and the bass tightened considerably. These speakers were obviously cut from similar cloth to my own Shahinian Obelisks. They are both kind to poor recordings while still letting you know exactly what is happening upstream. With Richard Thompson – *Old Kit bag* (Diverse records wonderful pressing) on the Well Tempered Reference the speakers slipped



quietly out of my consciousness, getting out of the way and leaving me

to enjoy the music. To analyse the sound in the most general way, it is immediately clear that these speakers offer a very neutral window into a recording and the music it contains. They reproduce the tone of instruments very well and have the organic natural sound of the few good omni-directional speakers out there. Couple a decent dynamic range and low distortion to a wide in-room bandwidth and they could embarrass many more expensive and fashionable solutions. Play Bruce Springsteen –

The Rising and the Boss’s voice was projected well clear of the backing, making the lyrics clear and the emotion obvious. But this album was more variable with the Duevels and on a couple of tracks I found myself thinking they sounded a little slow. Not in the sense of overhang but the tempo of the track seemed slower. It’s a common effect with speakers that offer superior separation when compared to those that favour leading edges. So, slower actually equates to clearer (if less driven).

Onto some rock with the Kings of Leon – *Youth and Young Manhood* and the White Stripes – *Elephant*, powerful albums that test any systems ability to follow rhythms under dynamic hard driving. Although the Bella Luna’s fared well on this material they are a bit too polite for my tastes. The music emerged intact and timed correctly, musical and with the threads integrated but lacking in that last bit of excitement. It’s like some of the visceral impact, subtlety of rhythm and tempo and emotion is traded off for the resolution and tonal neutrality. With the Obelisks you want to jump up and dance, with the Duevels you are more likely to relax in your seat. The speakers handling of dynamics is impressive and they remain unflustered at very loud levels. The speaker’s bass output is notable, fast but also deep and punchy, these loudspeakers don’t try to sound quick by curtailing bandwidth. To achieve this depth of bass the speaker is ported at the base of the cabinet. Unsurprisingly this is accomplished in a novel way as well, none of the “shove a drain-pipe in the back” here. The cabinet has had its lower corners removed at an angle creating four apertures. Internal cabinet pieces are used across the corners to form a triangular cross-section port at each corner while bracing this section of the cabinet. The cabinet itself is very well constructed and from its weight has plenty of bracing. It does not make itself felt when music is playing meaning it makes a very good support for the drivers. Of course mounting ►

▶ the bass driver on the top means it is working against the cabinets strongest direction, a further benefit of the design. The speakers base is slightly larger than the cabinet increasing the stability of these pretty tall columns and is sculpted to lessen its massive black look.

Walrus supplied me with a pair of Bella Lunas that were pretty well run in and this particular pair had their cabinets mounted on the Walrus preferred compliant rubber feet. Speaker wire is attached via some big chunky single wire only (lets hear it for single wiring ... hurrah) multi-way locking connectors which accept 4mm plugs. It is recommended that the speakers are placed 0.7 to 1.2m from the back wall and a similar although not identical distance from the sidewalls.

The new long player by Holly Golightly – *Truly She is None Other* (expect more coverage for this wonderful singer-songwriter after her appearance on the White Stripes latest) is simply fantastic fifties retro indie music. The detailed treble and expressive mid range of the Bella Luna's combine to give great realism and expression to Holly's volatile voice. The speakers pretty much disappear even off axis although they do not manage this trick quite as well as the Obelisks since there is more of a sweet spot with the Bella Luna's. The drums on this album are well handled, bass drum has the necessary power. The loose skin effect of the kit sounds just right and cymbals crash and shimmer metallically.

Alison Krauss – *New Favourite* and Ron Sexsmith – *Cobblestone Runway* (both on Diverse) again demonstrate the fantastic tonality of the speakers and their detail retrieval abilities. It's hard not to compare them with the Neat MFS's I have reviewed recently. The Duevels sound a little more natural

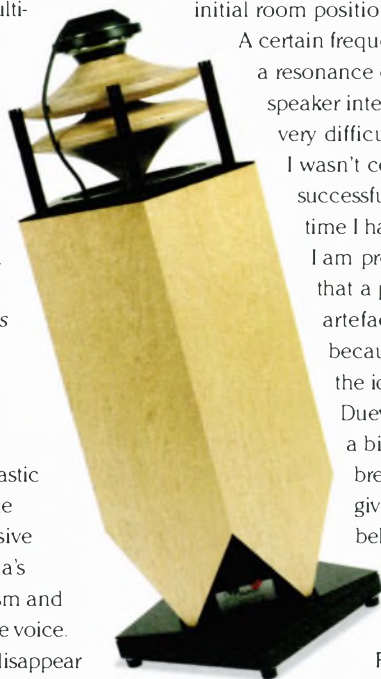
while the Neats win out in terms of pure treble quality. The Duevels miss that last ounce of resolving ability and power in the treble that the Neats have while their bass is more extended. The Neats sound faster with more drive but the Duevels render voices more realistically. The Neats paint a more precise acoustic space and image whereas the Duevels offer a bigger and more realistic impression of space. I call it a draw! Interestingly the Ron Sexsmith album was the only one I played that caused the Bella Luna's any problem in the initial room position I tried.

A certain frequency excited a resonance of the room speaker interface that was very difficult to tame, I wasn't completely successful for the whole time I had the speakers. I am pretty confident that a peculiar room artefact caused this because I do not have the ideal room for the Duevels. They do like a bit more room to breathe in. I could give them room behind or room to the sides but not both. On the live Ben

Folds crowd noise is fantastically real and you feel part of the audience as the announcer introduces Mr. Folds. The piano is pretty well handled and the Duevels sense of correct scale is very good on this album. But the piano did sound more lightweight and hollow than I am used to and the percussive element was also slightly underplayed; but piano is a particular Obelisk strength. Ben's voice was again presented with plenty of detail, with all of the inflection intact. The speakers coped superbly with the shifts in pace that are all over this album, demonstrating plenty of agility across

the frequency bands.

I have enjoyed having these speakers to review. They have really impressed me with their natural sound and excellent treble, especially their capabilities with vocals which regularly stopped me in my tracks if I was trying to do anything else while music was playing. The fit and finish of the speaker is certainly in keeping with the price being asked and they really look the money. The veneer for the cabinets is of a high grade, well matched and professionally applied and the black painted components are similarly well finished. These speakers make a definite statement in the room and I really like them. They never failed to raise a comment (almost exclusively positive) from visitors to Hectors' house. I won't be replacing my Obelisks just yet; I find them more fun. But I'll miss the natural presentation and refinement of the Duevels, especially at high frequencies. With less power on tap these would be top of my shortlist. ▶+



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

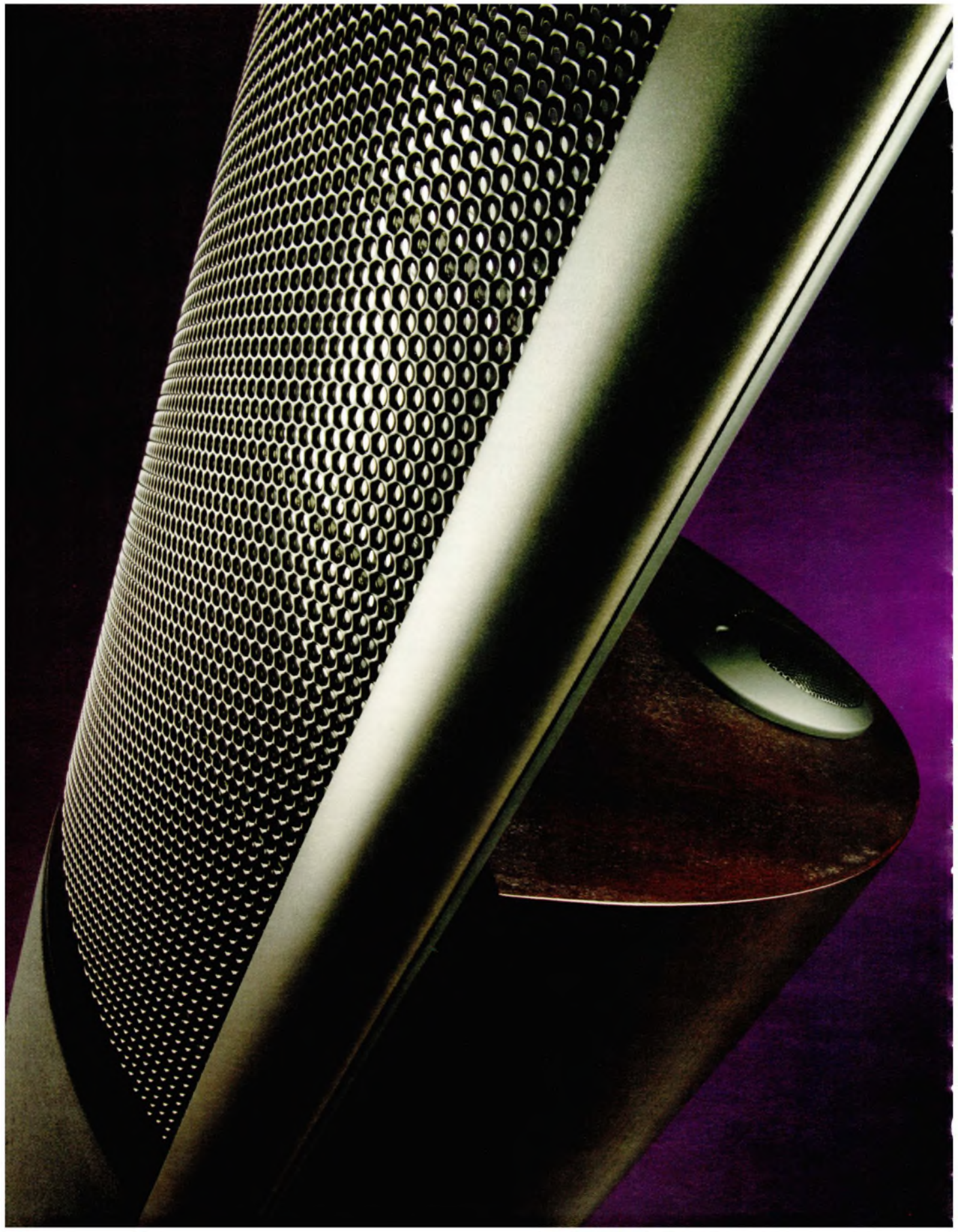
Type:	Two-way omni-directional loudspeaker
Power handling:	150W RMS
Sensitivity:	91dB
Impedance:	6 Ohms
Response:	40Hz - 20kHz
Drive units:	8.7 inch + 1.5 inch
Dimensions (WxHxD):	1040x280x280mm
Weight:	35Kg
Warranty:	5 years (transferable)
Price:	£3160, £3890 or £4160 depending on finish

UK Distributor:

Walrus Systems Ltd
Tel. (44)(0)20 7724 7224
E-mail. mail@walrus.co.uk
Net. www.walrus.co.uk

Manufacturer:

Net. www.cdKonzert.de



Martin-Logan Clarity Electrostatic Loudspeaker

by Alan Sircom

Martin-Logan is best known for huge electrostatic and hybrid speakers that sound wonderful but make too seriously bold a visual statement for many people. The £2,498 Clarity is the exception. Standing 'only' 1.35m tall and with a new more rounded look and a neatly narrow 26cm width, they retain the style of older M-L speakers but don't look quite so imposing.

The shrinking size is not the only change to the Martin-Logan design. This is very different to what Martin-Logan is best known for, in many respects. For example, this speaker is more 'hybrid' than most hybrid Logans, as it also features an upward-firing, rear mounted 25mm dome tweeter behind the electrostatic panel. Called Natural Ambience Compensation, this is designed to compensate for having an electrostatic panel that isn't the size of a refrigerator, by pumping treble upwards and outwards like an omnidirectional loudspeaker. Arguably, this helps reduce the high-frequency beaming effect of electrostatics (treble suffers in panels whenever you move from the optimum listening position), but some consider it some kind of 'home cinema conceit'. If you think similarly, it can be turned off by poking a pen or similar into the hole on the NAC's surround, leaving just bass speaker and electrostatic panel.

The panel itself has undergone

substantial change of late. It's a Generation 2 transducer (which is slowly trickling through Martin-Logan's range, from the Cinema i right up to the Ascent i), which features a diaphragm that has its conductive coating plasma bonded (in an oxygen-free argon chamber, no less, hopefully just like the one *The Hulk* got all his powers in) to the uber-thin sheet of something akin to cling-film. Using this argon chamber is suggested to keep the electrostatic charge extremely uniform across the diaphragm. This is claimed to spell the end of arcing, and in use even up to idiot-loud levels, the speaker never once even crackled.

Of course, a sheet of Mylar (or similar) flapping in the breeze will never work, so the Clarity sports ClearSpars, which suspend the diaphragm between the stator panels and have been improved to make the tensioning of the diaphragm more uniform. Then come the new MicroPerf stators themselves, which feature smaller and more numerous perforations, arranged in a tighter grid, than usual. These are said to increase 'optical clarity' as well as driving the panel more uniformly. Martin-Logan is catching on to multi-room operation, but using mains powered electrostatic panels in enclosed settings is less than ideal. So the Clarity feature DC energisers for the electrostatic panels. This means, you can run the Clarity using just one

mains plug and a connection from one speaker to the other. Of course, these speakers ideally require some distance from the rear wall, and how that relates to having a DC-powered energiser for in-wall mounting seems to be a bit contradictory.



The Clarity isn't the easiest speaker to set-up. Positioning is everything; despite using a curved panel, a foot here or there can make

the difference between good and great. Worse still, any serious lifting seems to reset the speaker's need to spend a day or so bedding in, which means the fine tuning process could take weeks instead of hours. The woofer also requires 30 hours of break in to sound like a woofer (before that, it sounds so thin you think you broke your speakers). They seem to work best half way between the traditional optimum position for electrostatics (1/3rd of the way along the length of the longest wall and at least 2m apart) and the best position for boxes (closer together and considerably closer to the rear wall), but individual tastes and room dynamics mean there is no quick fix Logan placement. Fortunately, once settled in, the speakers are very amplifier friendly (any decent pre/power combination with a healthy current delivery and at least 50Watts output will suffice), with a claimed 89dB sensitivity and six-ohm nominal impedance.



► In fairness to the Clarity, the positioning and ease of drive make it probably the most domestically-agreeable of all electrostatic speakers... and the overall appearance helps too. Praise must be heaped upon the manual writer, too. It is a paragon of, erm, clarity. It covers every possible detail surrounding installation, positioning and even fine tuning the placement.

One of the toughest issues facing any speaker manufacturer is getting the balance right between treble and bass. In most conventional 'cone and dome' speakers, this is generally a question of tailoring the crossover to suit the characteristics of the drive units. When one of those drive units is an electrostatic panel, the design criteria become very different indeed. You see, the mass of the drive unit isn't really a factor in an electrostatic panel, so the speed of the drive unit is not affected by having to accelerate the mass of a cone assembly. That can lead to serious discontinuities when trying to combine an electrostatic panel with a conventional woofer.

Martin-Logan has gone a long way to rectify this in the Clarity. Part of this is using an aluminium anodised 200mm bass cone, as aluminium drivers tend to have a faster transient attack than paper or plastic cones. (Oh God, batten down the hatches and prepare to repel postmen – Ed.) But, the rear ports will also act to both deepen and slow down the bass response, too, so there must be some more smarts than just a fast-moving speaker, especially as the

crossover point is at 450Hz, the sort of region that can be clearly audible if not properly sorted (Martin-Logan claim 500Hz to be the point where a speaker's crossover point becomes noticeable, but I would place this point much lower, at around 200Hz or so).

Martin-Logan has made the jump to joint high-end hi-fi and home cinema speaker maker with ease. The nouveaux M-L has managed to keep distinctly hi-fi speakers like the Prodigy, absolutely home cinema speakers like the Cinema i and inbetweens like the Clarity in the same catalogue without being 'dismissed' by either hi-fi or home cinema enthusiasts. And in some respects, this is a hi-fi speaker for home cinema enthusiasts and a home cinema speaker for hi-fi buffs: All at once.

Let's unpack that statement a little. Home cinema is all about excitement; as the name suggests, hi-fi is all about fidelity to the original sound. The Clarity speakers have feet in both camps. They can go loud and dynamic and exciting enough to keep the edge of the seat cinefile reaching for blockbuster after blockbuster on DVD, yet are also refined and subtle enough to satisfy the most aesthetically-charged Mozart lover looking for perfect reproduction of a genteel string quartet. And, no matter how I try, I cannot say definitively which side of the fence the Clarity prefers to sit on.

It's an expansive, wide and deep sound, beautifully clean and very much an open window on the music. Play something structurally dense like Delius' *Mass of Life* and each member of orchestra and choir have their own three dimensional space within the correctly-scaled soundstage. But it's definitely not some studio speaker

modified for home use; those individual soundstage images all combine to form a musical whole that has as much integrity and entertainment as a cheap pair of Mission speakers. (And that's a compliment? – Ed.)

Speed of attack keeps coming up on the notepad. This speaker really defines speed. The combination of

electrostatic panel and metallic bass driver mean the speaker has almost no lag to the leading edges. A drum kit is a fine indicator of how well the attack is dealt with across the full frequency range, and John Bonham's close mic'd kit on the BBC sessions is about the best you can get short of the dynamic but mindless *Sheffield Drum Record*. Here the bass drum and bass toms manage to keep up with snare and cymbals. It's a striking (pun sort of intended) sound, one that makes you think you are in the room with a drummer.

The NAC is an interesting extra, which is effectively inaudible when sitting in the sweet spot, but helps stretch that sweet spot for more listeners in the room. In theory, at least. Personally, I found the speaker to be more open and electrostatic with the NAC switched out, but more extended and slightly brighter with the NAC switched in. I hate to think of the NAC as the 'cinema switch', but it does leave me with that conclusion. However, it also manages to brighten up rock recordings, giving them that extra smidgen of headroom in the process.

The dynamic range of the speaker and its ultimate loudness threshold clash with the limitations of electro-static design somewhat, but even here the



▶ more musical dynamics win out. Ultimately, perhaps this dynamic range is part of the hybridisation process; bass sounds are possibly more emphatic than midrange and treble ones, but not substantially so; you are very much listening to one speaker, not a satellite and subwoofer sound.

The integration issue is key; if it doesn't do it well enough

then the speaker would be effectively untenable. Fortunately, the bass-mid integration is very good. I still maintain that you can hear a slight thickening in the lower mid-band, around the point where the panel and the cone interact. It's almost like the LS3/5a effect of making a piano sound better than a real piano; it's a sweetening of the lower middle registers of a voice and no bad thing – turning the tail end of Kiri Te Kanawa's voice into a modern-day Maria Callas. Other than that, there is no appreciable interaction problem and certainly none of the suck-outs, over-emphasis or character changes between bass and treble that have plagued hybrid electrostatic/box speakers of the past.

Some claim this speaker is not quite 'there' with rock music. I disagree. The speaker's impressive speed of attack and its easy dynamics makes it ideal for punchy, fast paced rock. It does lack the full-on dynamic power that a good cone and dome box speaker can sometimes provide

and the ultimate head-room of the speaker prevents it being used as a makeshift FA. But, the same criticisms could be applied to any electrostatic speaker and the ability of this speaker to delve into the stark precision of Kraftwerk's *Chrono* or the vocal histrionics of *The Eminem Show* more than make up for the inability to play Metallica until my ears bleed.

But there is something that comes across as truly magical on the Clarity; something so good, you can imagine it being composed for the speakers (were it not for the fact that the music was written hundreds of years before we even had recordings). Play early vocal music like Monteverdi's *Madrigals* and the sound envelops and transports you back to a time when the Renaissance was still a naughty young art movement. Suddenly all the things that are impressive about surround sound don't seem so impressive any more. Instead, half a dozen singers harmonising in the round to a piece of music that was written before Bach tempered his clavier make more surround sense with just two channels. All that ambience and space in those church

halls make this sort of music ideal for a speaker like the Clarity. Listen to Monteverdi, or Biber's *Mystery Sonatas* or the Gregorian Chants of Hildegard of Bingen and just feel those neck hairs rise. This is what hi-fi should do to the listener, and so rarely does these days.

Perhaps this is pandering to

the strengths of electrostatic designs, but who cares... when some-thing sounds this good, go for it.

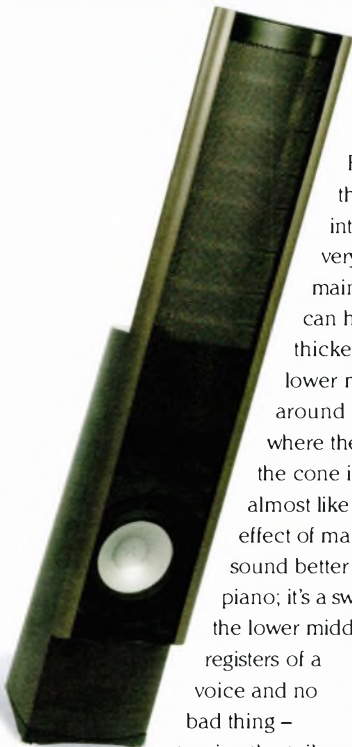
There are few speakers that live up to their name as well as the Clarity from Martin-Logan. The fast, dynamic and open sound is a model of clarity. Even the interaction between treble and bass are better than expected, especially as this is one of the cheapest hybrid electrostatic designs around at the moment. The NAC tweeter is a trifle suspect in a conventional hi-fi setting, but it does make electro-static sound more approachable for listeners not sitting in the sweet spot, while the speaker as a whole works just as well in home cinema as it does in hi-fi settings. All of which combine to make this hybrid combination something special. ➤+

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Hybrid floorstanding electrostatic loudspeaker with bass-reflex bass loading
Drive units:	660mm line source treble/midrange electrostatic panel 25mm soft dome upwards-firing tweeter 203mm aluminium cone bass driver
Crossover Frequency:	450Hz
Bandwidth:	46Hz-22kHz +/-3dB
Efficiency:	89dB claimed
Nominal impedance:	6ohms (minimum 1.1 ohm)
Dimensions (WxHxD):	259 x 1346 x 311mm
Weight:	14.1kg each
Finishes:	Natural Cherry/ White Bronze Trim Dark Mahogany/ White Bronze Trim Black/Silver Trim
Price	£2,498

UK Distributor:
Absolute Sounds
Tel. 0208 971 3909
Net. www.absolutesounds.com

Manufacturer:
Martin Logan
Net. www.martinlogan.com





Tube Technology Fusion CD64 Integrated CD player

by Jimmy Hughes

It's not every day an audio product changes your life. Thank God for that; life's complicated enough. Nevertheless, it's happened to me a few times - most recently, back in 2001 when I first heard Chord's DAC-64. The impression was overwhelming. CD finally came of age! At least that's how I saw it. It was as though the missing piece of the jigsaw finally fell into place, enabling CD to match good analogue for timing, subtlety of expression, vivid yet natural tone colour, and dynamic nuance.

Why mention Chord? Simple. Tube Technology's Fusion CD64 integrated CD player uses the same DAC-64 digital 'engine' incorporating Robert Watts' WTA digital filter. So it's twin brother to Chord's DAC. However, unlike Chord, Tube Tech have chosen to make it part of an integrated CD player. Making a single box unit brings several important advantages compared to a separate CD

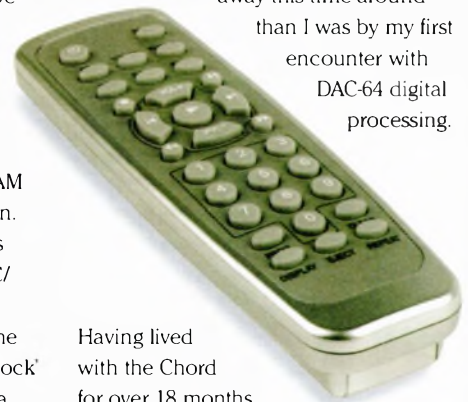
transport and DAC combination.

Aside from a more agreeable price (at £1980, the Fusion CD player costs less than Chord's DAC on its own) you avoid the jitter problems caused by transport and DAC being housed in separate boxes. Chord solved this potential fly in the sonic ointment by incorporating a RAM buffer, whereby the signal is delayed by either 1 second or 4 seconds, for extra processing. The audible effect of having no buffer, a 1 second delay, or the full 4 seconds, is very marked indeed.

So the Chord DAC's 4 second RAM buffer is dispensed with in the Fusion. However, it's included in Tube Tech's state-of-the-art Fulcrum two-box DAC/Transport, which offers even higher performance. Tube Tech also offer the option of a second digital cable to 'lock' DAC and Transport together - an idea Arcam pioneered back in the 1980s

with the Delta 170.3/Black Box 5 combination. The Fusion has this facility too, being usable as a DAC or Transport.

As you might imagine, listening to the Fusion was akin to meeting an old friend - or perhaps more accurately, the old friend's near identical twin brother. Inevitably perhaps, I was less blown away this time around than I was by my first encounter with DAC-64 digital processing.



Having lived with the Chord for over 18 months, I've got thoroughly used to it, and almost forgotten how 'ordinary' CD players sound.

The Fusion impressed immediately; crisp timing, superb fine detail, lots of presence, and impressive dynamics. Despite these outstanding qualities, there was nothing 'hi-fi' about the sound. The CD64 is excellent at shaping phrases and revealing subtle nuances of tone colour and dynamic inflection. It was similar to what I'd been used to with the Chord, yet different too; despite having the same digital 'engine' the Chord and Tube Tech products sound quite distinct tonally.

There's a gorgeous unexaggerated naturalness about the Fusion. Tonally, it produces a warm open balance that's smooth without being soft. It sounds lucid and incisive, while at the same time producing a marvellously fluid

Making the most of a difficult situation...

The main impetus for Tube Technology to update their original Fusion CD player came when Pacific Microsonics discontinued the HDCD PMD100 digital filter IC, then failed to launch its successor - the PMD200. Tube Tech felt the HDCD filter to be among the best of its type, and therefore finding a suitable alternative was no easy task. They eventually chose the WTA (Watts Time Aligned) filter from Pulse Array, and improved the DAC by using new FPGA's that permit software to be upgraded from an EPROM. This provides two major benefits; infinite upgradability and a superior quality 64bit filter/DAC combination. Tube Tech had actually

intended to implement the WTA filter at a future date, but their hand was forced by the discontinuance of Pacific Microsonics HDCD filter. Sonically, the replacement filter and DAC gives the new Fusion CD player greater impact and detail, compared to the earlier HDCD version, without sacrificing naturalness. To quote Tube Tech's technical literature 'The new digital engine for the Fusion uses three FPGA's; one as a 64bit 2048 times oversampling DAC; one as a 24bit (32-96kHz input rate) all digital receiver; and one as a WTA 64bitxFS, 1024 Tap digital filter. These FPGA devices utilise 200,000 gates each, and have a memory which is programmable by uploading software from an EPROM. This makes the Fusion futureproof - potentially compatible with SACD, DVD-A and DVD-D.

▷ beguiling quality of sound. The music sounds sharp and focused, yet at the same time wonderfully refined and relaxed. There's a lovely richness and depth which is often absent with CD. Yet there's no sense of edges being rounded off or de-focused.

Subjectively, Chord's DAC-64 gives a bigger bolder presentation. Its analogue outputs produce more level, subjectively making the music seem more assertive and dynamic. To compensate, when comparing the two, I increased the volume slightly for the Tube Tech. Yet the Chord always retained a certain extra something in terms of presence and impact.

Sonically, it had more 'drive'; greater immediacy. The top end was more obvious - noticeably sharper/brighter.

The Fusion produced a very subtle sophisticated musical presentation - the Chord was louder and more forward-sounding. The Fusion's treble felt silky-smooth and very sweet. Yet extended listening made it clear there was no lack of brilliance or immediacy - just a lack of chromium plating. One gets so used to the forward up-frontness of CD, it's almost a shock when it's gone. The Fusion's smoothness represents genuine refinement - not a lack of top-end detail.

I'm probably the Chord DAC-64's number-one fan. It's a product I rate very highly. Yet I would accept that (sometimes) it's a trifle hard-sounding and unyielding. Actually, it's very difficult for a product to combine refinement/assertiveness, and balance the two in equal measure. Producing lots of crisp detail and biting sharpness inevitably risks creating a sound that grows bright and forward in loud passages - especially on recordings mixed and equalised to produce added impact and presence.

It's a conundrum. When things don't sound quite right, do you judge a CD player (because of its exceptional detail and dynamic range) to be

showing up faults in a recording. Or is the recording highlighting faults in the CD player. The Chord DAC-64 is for the most part very natural sounding. But there is a hint of forwardness at times, creating tonal hardness on some material. It rarely bothers me personally, but I would accept that sometimes it's there.



And the Fusion? It's luxuriously smooth beautifully balanced presentation sounds extremely natural and truthful. Play a recording containing massed violins and there's a lovely woody mellow quality that's very true to life. For all that the sound has impact and detail, there's a beguiling sweetness and ease which is often absent with digital and CD. As I write this, I'm listening to a Teldec CD of late Mozart *string quartets* played by the Alban Berg quartet, and it sounds ravishing.

The mid-band is warm and detailed, while the upper frequencies are sweet and open. The original recordings actually emanate from 1970s analogue tapes, but the tonal balance (even on LP) always displayed a slightly dry, hard quality. However, played on the Fusion CD64, the sound is beautifully relaxed and open. Clarity is excellent, allowing detail to 'tell' effortlessly. The music has body

and presence, but doesn't sound the least bit overblown or inflated.

Unamplified human voice often shows up problems of tonal hardness and coloration on CD. But the Fusion helps voices (whether male or female) to sound wholly natural and believable, without that edgy forwardness that soon tires the ear. Many hi-fi systems reproduce unamplified voice with excessive hardness - almost

making it seem as though a PA system were being used - and CD players often contribute to the effect. But not Tube Technology's Fusion CD64. CD players usually paint in primary colours, and impress with cutting-edge immediacy and brilliance.

The Fusion is no slouch when it comes to intense vivid splashes of colour, but it's in the fine gradation of pastel shades and subtler hues that it really excels. There's more. The Fusion sounds exceptionally dimensional for a CD player. Something to do with having a true class A tube output stage no doubt! On suitable recordings you get a palpable sense of depth as well as width.

But it's not coloration or false warmth being added that creates this effect. Tube Tech's Zia Faruqi summed it up perfectly, saying his tube analogue output stage 'puts meat on the bone'. This, and the absence of hard, steely, chromium-plated brilliance, reveals the hidden naturalness of your recordings. Such qualities are vital for every sort of unamplified acoustic music, allowing you to experience clear natural results which sound close to real people playing live in a real acoustic..

Paradoxically, it's also beneficial for processed electronic music. ▶



▶ A tonally hard/forward balance may (initially at least) seem impressive, but it quickly leads to listener fatigue. When the ear is battered by a welter of fast leading edges and disembodied transients, it eventually switches off in self-defence. By comparison, the Fusion with its friendly inviting presentation, draws you in to the music, subjectively allowing your ear/brain more time to assimilate and explore what's on offer.

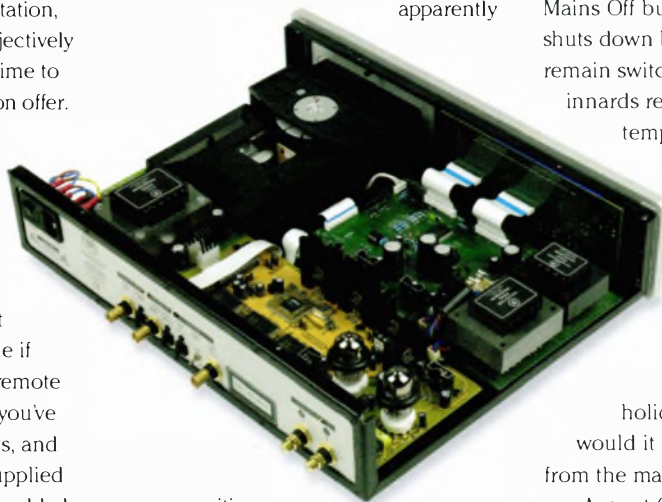
A quick glance at the Fusion CD64's front panel reveals it to be a simple basic player that's not over-complicated with gimmicky 'extras' and suchlike. Equally, it's not hair-shirt spartan so that only Play and Stop are available if you happen to misplace your remote handset! From the front panel you've Play, Pause, Stop, Next, Previous, and forward/reverse Search. The supplied remote handset provides a few added options, including Track Programming, a 0-9 keypad, and Display Off.

If you also had Tube Tech's Fusion HB70 integrated amplifier, you'd be able to increase or decrease volume levels and select different inputs from the same handset. It may be pure imagination, but there is a slight improvement in sound quality with the CD64's display switched off. The music sounds slightly cleaner and better focussed - as though the background were darker. Low-level separation increases slightly. Not a big difference, but certainly noticeable.

Moving to the rear panel, there's a few more sockets than you sometimes find on a CD player - but nothing excessive. Tube Tech offer the option of using the CD64 either as a transport or DAC, or as an integrated player. A fixed set of unbalanced analogue outputs should match virtually any amplifier, so (sonically) there's really no reason to connect up an external DAC - unless perhaps it's Tube Tech's state of the art Fulcrum!

The DAC side of the CD64 can accept sampling frequencies from

32kHz to 96kHz via either optical or BNC inputs. 2048 times over-sampling is employed, and the DAC uses 64bit/96kHz Pulse Array architecture. The high over-sampling rate WTA filter drastically reduces transient timing errors - errors the human ear is apparently



very sensitive to - resulting in a quality of sound from ordinary 44.1kHz 16bit CD that many (myself included) would previously have said was impossible.

Build quality is extremely impressive, and the player is nicely styled and impeccably finished in a classy slightly understated manner. Mechanically, there's a tiny tiny amount of transformer noise audible when you get right up close to the player, but this won't be noticeable during use even if (like me) you sit fairly nearby. You've a choice of silver or black, and all casework is brushed aluminum. At £1980 the Fusion isn't dirt-cheap, but arguably it's exceedingly good value.

Look at it like this. Buying a player like the CD64 effectively upgrades your entire CD collection. At a stroke, every disc you own is improved - from the best new recordings, to things taken from old/compromised source material. It's like trading-in your collection of 'standard' CDs for super discs. In my opinion, an ordinary CD played on the CD64

will nearly always sound better than an improved remastered edition of the same recording played on most standard CD players.

Incidentally, warm-up time is virtually non-existent - providing you leave the CD64 plugged in. When the Mains Off button is pressed, the player shuts down but the valve heaters remain switched on. So the player's innards remain at a fairly constant temperature. Doing this avoids straining the tubes, while at the same time not wearing them out by being fully powered-up at all times. Only if you were going away on holiday for a couple of weeks would it be sensible to unplug from the mains.

A great CD player in all respects then: one that's very hard to better at the price. If vivid, realistic, natural CD sound is your Holy Grail, then you may finally have found it with Tube Technology's Fusion CD64. ➤

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Integrated CD player with external digital inputs and valve output stage.
Inputs:	2x tos-link (clock) tos-link digital BNC digital
Outputs:	tos-link digital BNC digital 1 pr. RCA analogue
Chipset:	Pulse Array 64 bit
Sampling Frequency:	32-96kHz
Dimensions (WxHxD):	410x105x330mm
Weight:	11Kg
Finishes:	Black or silver
Price:	£1990

Manufacturer:
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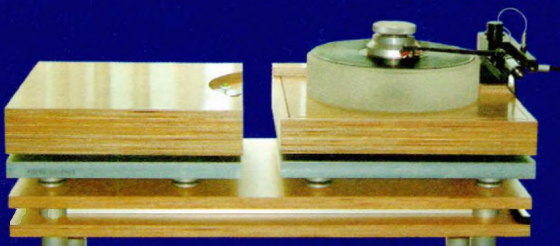
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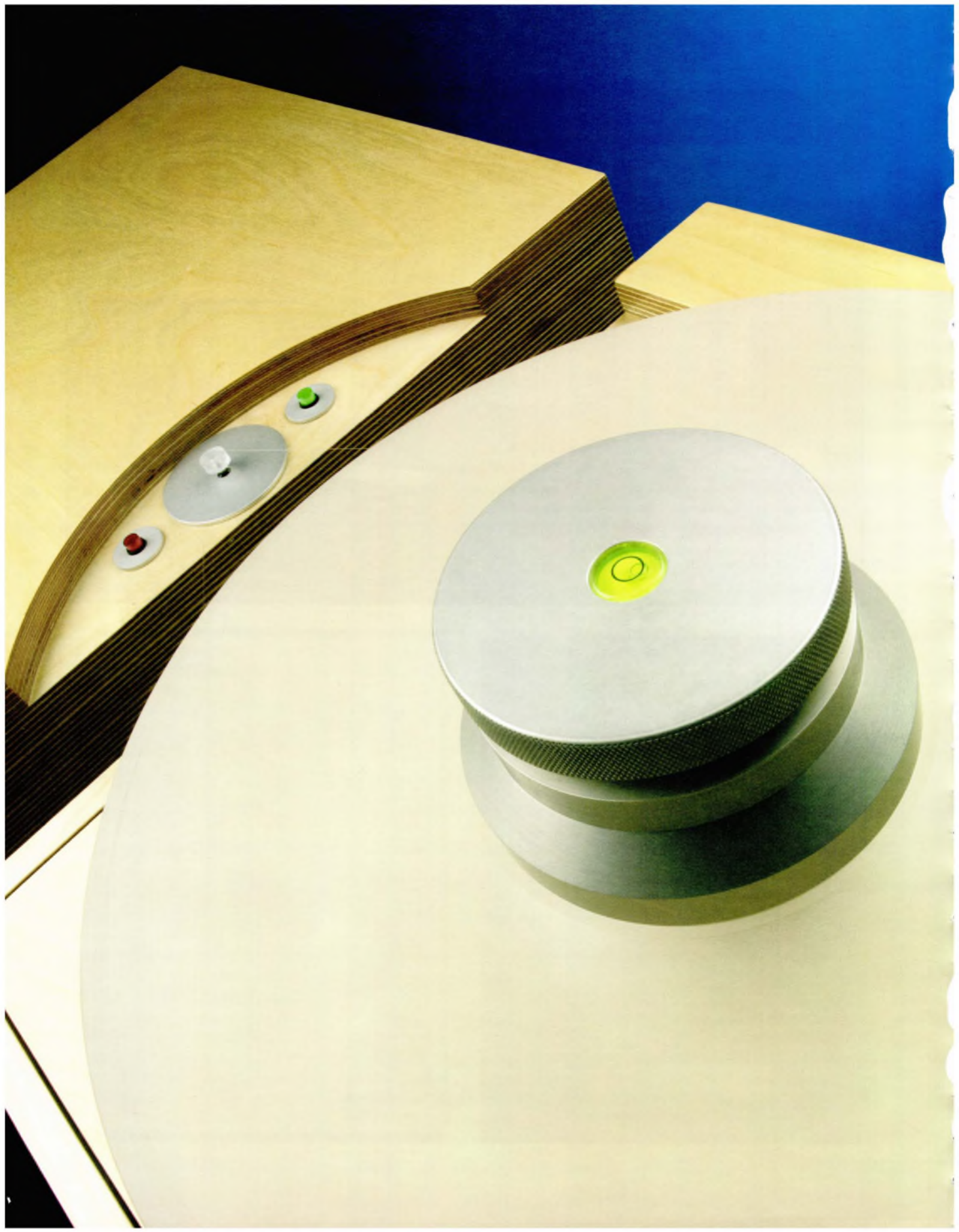
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The Nordic Concept Signature Turntable

by Roy Gregory

As with most things hi-fi, there's a list of approved parts when it comes to turntables. Just about any model on the market can be sketched out in terms of certain key ingredients. The Nordic concept is no different in this regard. Inverted, ceramic bearing and 80mm acrylic platter. Check. Battery power supply driving a 24 pole DC motor. Check. Mass damped and isolated motor assembly. Check. So far there are several turntables that meet those criteria (various Amazons for one, the Clearaudios for another, all but the batteries). But one look should tell you that despite the basic specification, the table of assembled ingredients, the Nordic Concept is distinctly different. Indeed, rather like the KEF Reference 207 speakers, any apparent similarity it bears to other products is more a function of available technology and the limited number of suppliers who can provide it than conscious imitation. Leave the plywood aside and it's a familiar recipe. Or so it might seem.

The Nordic Concept both looks and is very different. A twin chassis design, in its Signature form as reviewed, it redefines big, dwarfing even VPI's TNT-Hot Rod. Thankfully, the manufacturer offers a purpose built stand, which is just as well as short of a couple of the bigger A/V racks, I can't think of anything that could accommodate it. Each chassis is approximately equal in size. One supporting the main bearing, platter and arm, the other the motor and the batteries to drive it. Indeed, buy the smaller Reference version and that's your lot, along with a rather more manageable motor chassis around half the width of the Signature one. The difference between the two models?

Well, the Signature includes a phono-stage. And not just any phono-stage. This one is battery powered, like the turntable, and is based on Vitus Audio's standalone unit, a product that retails for €8995. Do the sums and you'll see that the phono option on the Nordic Concept turntable is something of a bargain, certainly monetarily even if nothing else.

They haven't taken the phono-stage to its logical extreme by placing it inside the platter section and direct coupling it to the arm like the Naim Pre-fix fitable to the LP12. You still need to run a conventional arm cable across to the motor chassis, but at least that keeps things universal, increasing the deck's compatibility with a wide range of tonearms. Which brings us to a couple of practical considerations. For such a large deck, and one that offers the stable platform ideal for parallel tracking tonearms, the armboard is far from generous. Indeed, the available space for mounting arms is further limited by various fittings on the underside. The tight dimensions don't help either, and the otherwise ideal JMW 12.5 tonearm could only just be mounted, hanging precariously over the rear corner of the deck. In fact, the smaller JMW 9.0 that normally lives on the Scout was a far happier fit,

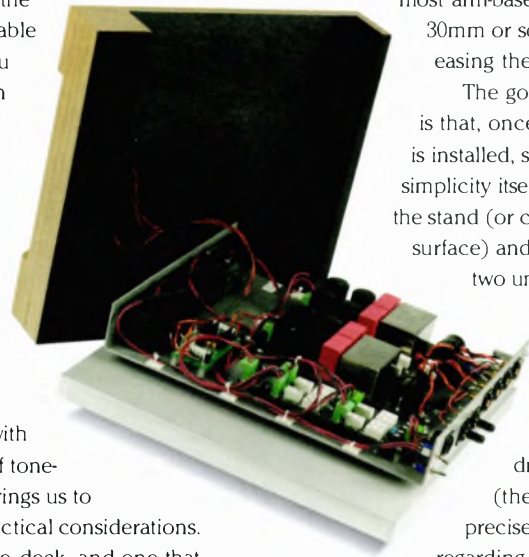
dimensionally if not in terms of price!

The other reason I reached for the JMWs was their generous height adjustment. Even so, the height differential between the top of the armboard and the platter surface is a full 70mm stretched them to their limit. The tall main column of the 9.0 just managed, but the 12.5 needed 35mm of spacers betwixt baseplate and armboard. Other arms would need even more. The manufacturer will supply mounting collars or plates to raise

most arm-bases to within 30mm or so, thus easing the problem.

The good news is that, once the arm is installed, set-up is simplicity itself. Level the stand (or chosen surface) and place the two units next to each other but 5cm apart. Install the fishing line drive belt (there are precise instructions regarding tension) and power up the batteries.

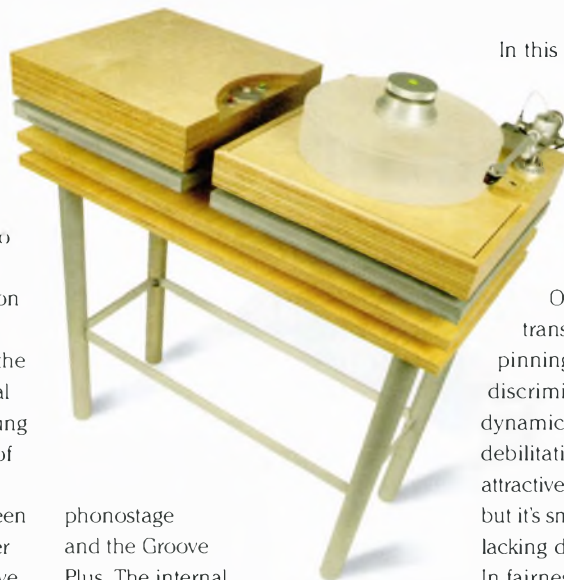
There's a manual switch to select charge or play, the latter totally isolated from the mains. The deck will run for around 48 hours once fully charged, and there's a forced charge option if that proves insufficient. Batteries don't have the best history in hi-fi when it comes to reliability, but these operated faultlessly throughout the review period. They are fed from a pair of external DC supplies that stay permanently



▶ connected. Both 33 and 45 are electronically selected via the small buttons that flank the tiny drive pulley and easily adjusted with trim pots on the rear of the motor unit. Once fixed, they stayed that way, and repeated checking with the Clearaudio 300Hz strobe revealed no drift.

Which brings us to the key question of isolation and the Nordic Concept's true claim to individuality. Protecting the fragile stylus/groove interface is critical to LP replay. Some have relied on sprung suspensions – but they pay the price of poor speed stability because of their poor control of the relationship between motor and platter. Others look to sheer physical mass – but you can never have enough of it. The Nordic Concept applies a new and patented approach, dubbed the Base Isolation system. The large slabs of aluminium that sit beneath the plywood plinths precisely balance their mass, connected to them by soft polymer bungs. The two masses damp vibration in each other, rather like the two halves of a balanced fly-wheel. Each stands on four compliantly mounted, turned and adjustable aluminium feet, making precise leveling easy, even if the stand isn't perfect or any sag occurs in the polymer. I ended up with the top-plates from the Nordic Concept stand positioned atop a finite element Pagode Reference stand, the twin chassis deck perched on top. With the stylus sat in a stationary groove and the volume at half mast, tap the armboard (gently!) and listen to the thump that comes out of the speakers. Now absolutely wallop the support. You'll be rewarded with a dull thud. It's a remarkably effective solution to the problem of isolation, dealing with both speed stability and intrusive energy, the twin devils of analogue replay. It's reflected in the player's performance, as we shall see.

I played the Nordic Concept through a variety of systems, both with its own



phonostage and the Groove Plus. The internal stage offers externally switchable gain for MM or MC cartridges, along with plug in loading resistors for the latter, connected through parallel phono sockets. Once again, it's a simple and effective solution to optimising phono playback, an ethos that runs through the heart of this 'table. Little more complex in use than a Rega 3, it's a fuss free yet genuinely high-end solution to analogue replay that conceals its complex solutions behind the simplest of user interfaces:



Simple to set up, simple to optimise, simple to keep that way. Arms were the previously mentioned JMWs, the 9.0 carrying a Dynavector DV-20X (in keeping with its modest price) while the 12.5 was used with Lyra Titan, Koetsu Black and Clearaudio Accurate pick-ups. The Nordic Concept Signature is really two products in one, so let's get the phono-stage out of the way first.

In this guise, the Vitus step-up combines several real strengths with some equally strong weaknesses. On the plus side you get superb tonal accuracy and an astonishing lack of grain, noise or electronic signature.

On the minus, it lacks separation, transparency, focus and underpinning all of the above, dynamic discrimination. It's this lack of micro-dynamic definition that I find most debilitating. Music is delivered with attractive weight, colour and presence, but it's smoothed out and rounded, lacking drama and expressive emphasis. In fairness, these failings are far more obvious when you make direct comparison to the Groove Plus, a unit that sets the standard in this regard, but even in isolation, the character and lack of authority is immediately obvious in the soft, slightly clogged nature of the sound. It's nice, it's certainly inoffensive, it contains much that's beautiful, but it's nowhere near the current state of the art. What's more, its character is uneven enough to make it very much one man's

meat – and another's poison. My advice is to listen for yourself, especially if you use a Moving-Magnet where power is less of an issue (something I didn't get a chance to try. If you like what it does it constitutes a versatile bargain. If not, there are plenty of alternatives.

The turntable on the other hand, is very much a state of the art contender. It shares the strengths of the phono-stage, but exhibits none of the weaknesses. Listen to the Nordic concept and you'll immediately notice its lack of mechanical noise. The sound is free of grain or any of the intrusive edge that so often mars even the most expensive conventional turntables. In this regard it is second only to air-bearing units, the silicon well of the Well Tempered ▶

► Reference and the magnetic levitation of the Verdier. I can only assume that this silence is a product of the grunge free power supply combined with the quality of the ceramic main bearing. What it brings to music is an enticing fluidity and sinuous grace. Playing the Nordic Concept through the Groove Plus underlined the sheer transparency of its performance, as well as the total lack of grain. In comparison, the Clearaudio Master Reference is slightly less fluid, making up for it with wider dynamics and slightly better separation. Which is where we enter the realms of personal preference. The Clearaudio is more dramatic (doubtless helped by the Insider Reference), the Nordic Concept is sweeter and slightly more relaxed.

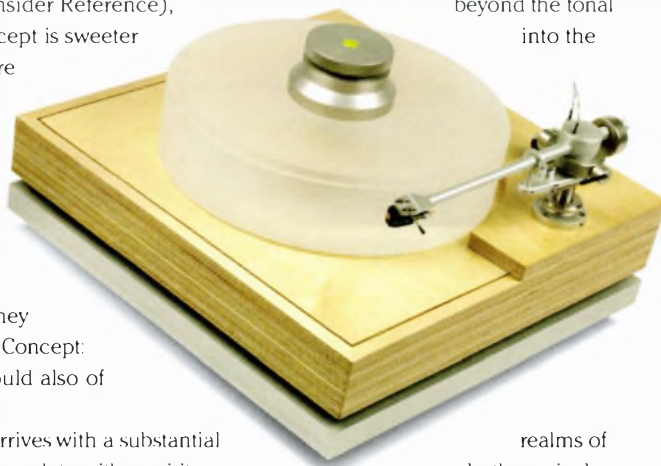
Those who find the Master Reference too stark will breathe a sigh of relief when they hear the Nordic Concept: the converse could also of course be true.

The player arrives with a substantial record-weight, complete with a spirit level sunk in its top. Use it! It's essential to getting the correct tonal and dynamic balance. Without it, you'll suffer the mid-bass hollow that afflicts nearly all pure acrylic platters, boosting clarity at the expense of weight, presence and dynamic power. Don't go there: this player delivers all the clarity you need without resorting to artificial enhancements. Weight in place it's wonderfully even: warm yet mobile, solid yet with no extraneous flab. The restored mid-bass in turn fleshes out mid-range harmonics and restores the music's sense of life and presence.

I settled for most of my listening, on the Lyra Titan, whose pace, space and dynamic definition dovetailed perfectly with the Nordic Concept's fluid timing

and natural tonal balance. But that merely reflects my preferences. This turntable seems to have the same happy knack as the Triplanar tonearm: the ability to bring the best out of whichever cartridge you use. The Accurate was all sparkling dynamics and total transparency, the Koetsu more powerful and full of drive. For me, the Titan offered the better overall balance, but you might well disagree.

Key in this equation was the 'tables deep, even bass. It suffered none of the clogging, rounding or lack of definition that effects so many turntables. Instead, the evenness in the deck's performance extended beyond the tonal into the



realms of both musical energy and transparency.

On large scale works (the Colin Davis *Tosca* springs to mind) there was no problem hearing down to the lower registers, no matter how crowded. Differentiation of bass instruments, their spectral balance and character, was superb and this refusal to fudge the lowest frequencies pays dividends further up the range. The Nordic Concept is an exceptionally honest deck: it'll get the best out of your arm and cartridge, but it'll do nothing to disguise the nature of recordings. If you want lush and romantic, this isn't it – even with the Koetsu up front. What it does deliver is the music that's on the record and the way it's being played, without fear, favour or undue emphasis.

At its best, the Nordic Concept turntable competes with the best there is, whilst being individual enough to carve its own niche: close to the big Clearaudio in terms of clarity, less stark in presentation. This is no me-too product, but balances and exploits complex technological ingredients to achieve a simple and practical solution to vinyl replay. That's if you ignore its dimensions! Me, I'd reduce that problem by opting out of the phono-stage. I'd go for a passive parallel tracker or a uni-pivot (although I'll admit to curiosity regarding a match with the Triplanar) and I'd mount my favourite cartridge. Then I'd sit back and enjoy my records, confident that I could ignore the turntable and simply let it do its job – superbly. ➤

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Battery driven record player with built-in phono option
Speeds:	33 and 45, electronically selected and user adjustable
Finishes:	Finnish birch ply, others to order
Dimensions (WxHxD)	
Including Phono-Stage:	925 x 270 x 430mm
Excluding Phono-Stage:	700 x 270 x 430mm
Weight (Signature):	60kg
Stand:	Yes (optional)
Lid:	None
Input Sensitivity:	MM and MC
Loading:	User adjustable with external plugs

Prices

Signature (inc. Phono):	£9250
Reference (excl. Phono):	£6300
Stand:	£1350

UK Distributor:

Absolute Analogue
Tel/Fax: (44)(0)20 8459 8113
E-mail: Absolute_Analogue@email.msn.com
Net: www.absoluteanalogue.co.uk

Manufacturer:

A Better Life Audio Group
Net: www.klubben.net



NAIM CDS3 CD Player

by Chris Thomas

As everyone now knows, the Naim sound has changed. There has been a quiet revolution happening down in Salisbury for a while now as, bit by bit, new ranges of equipment have been released without fuss or huge fanfare, to a solid customer base already convinced by what they have been hearing for almost the past 30 years. Being such a successful company though has obviously meant that they have a small but dedicated group of detractors prepared to criticise and generally demean their products for being too crude or too harsh or not having been hewn from a block of solid aluminium and some, I suspect, for simply not being American. And even from within the camp there have been the inevitable band of die-hards, including some customers and dealers who think that the latest equipment is not as good as the older gear. The new SL2 speaker that I reviewed a couple of issues ago is actually thought of by some to be inferior to the SBL which I find a mite surprising as I found that the SL2 goes places musically and with a subtlety of tonal and rhythmic expression that the SBL could never manage. But hi-fi is a broad church so it seems a natural fact of life that when a company is this successful its products attract much debate and the occasional colourful nutter, because the love of music, which is what lead many of us to want a decent system in the first place, is a passionate thing indeed.

As the new Naim ranges have been released so I have listened and admired them, but it wasn't until I heard the SL2 with the new NAC 252

pre and the NAP 300 power amplifier (all Fraim mounted) that the changes to the way that Naim equipment now makes music really hit me. I was using my trusty CDS2 at the time and very much enjoying the experience when, almost out of the blue, the CDS3 arrived. Having owned the original CDS for many years before getting the superior second version about 5 years ago



I was generally expecting the 3 to show the same levels of improvement and musical refinement. But I was wrong. Where the CDS2 was an evolutionary product, the CDS3 is nothing short of revolutionary and when you slot it into a system comprising the new Naim electronics and speakers you understand more completely than ever where Naim are coming from these days. But the CDS3 is more than that and like the company's other players really can be incorporated into suitable non-Naim systems far more successfully than any of their other electronics that I can remember.

I have to say that it looks fantastic (which is not an adjective usually used to describe Naim cosmetics) and is possibly the most attractive of all the new-case Naim products. The transport is now centrally mounted under a damped acrylic lid, the line of which

continues across the top of the player to the back of the case. The front panel buttons are now much nicer to use, the display is as clear as always and the feeling that Naim have taken as great care with the aesthetics as the electronics is inescapable. Outputs are Naim's usual 5-pin din socket which I would recommend with Naim amplification, plus a pair of phono sockets which is likely the way to go with just about anything else. These are electronically selected via the front panel where you can choose to activate either or both of them. They

have stuck with the Phillips transport (this one is the latest generation CD10 version) and the puck method of securing the disc and have, quite rightly, in my opinion, included HDCD decoding

that comes into play whenever a suitable disc is spun up. As usual the D to A conversion is done very close to the transport itself. Designer Roy George has often told me of the problems associated with having the converter in a separate box even when, in the earlier years of CD, conventional wisdom suggested the opposite. And the whole unit is powered by an XPS2 outboard power supply, still connected by a Burndy lead, but a newer and much better version. For those with a CDS2 I can strongly recommend this new black cable, which is entirely compatible with the older player, as a very worthwhile upgrade for a few hundred pounds. The XPS2 can also be used to power the CDX2 player, which could eventually be upgraded to a CDS3 head unit,



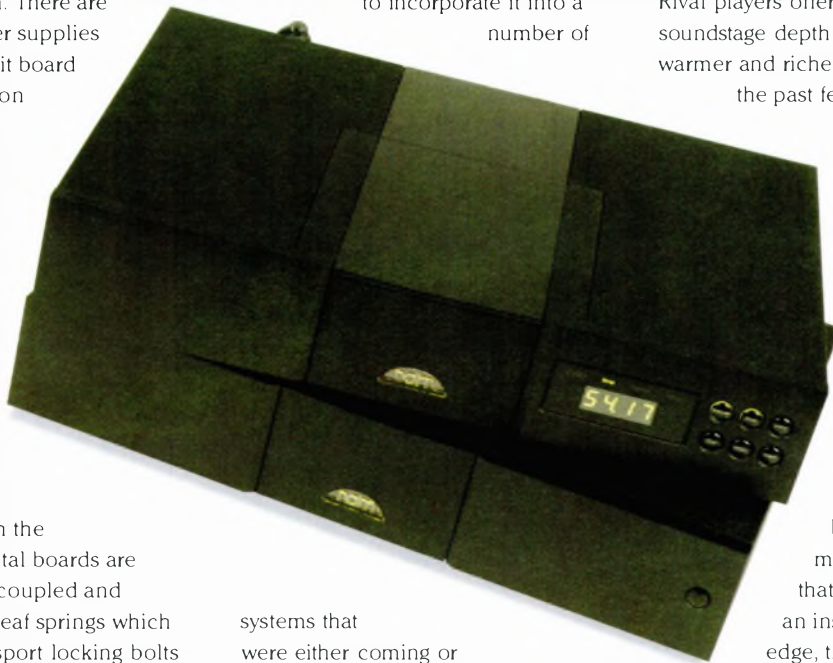
▶ thus offering a useful upgrade path.

Power and its regulation have, since their early days, played a massive part in Naim's design philosophy and this is illustrated by the sheer number of supplies and regulators employed by the CDS3/XPS2 combination. There are 26 regulated power supplies on the main circuit board alone, a further 4 on the servo board and 14 on the analogue board while the XPS2 has 6 separately regulated outputs. This, as Naim claim, leaves all critical circuitry triple regulated. Internally, the transport and both the analogue and digital boards are independently decoupled and suspended using leaf springs which means more transport locking bolts to detach before use. It was supplied with a fairly standard but efficient plastic remote unit that thankfully does have a numeric keyboard and can control a Naim preamplifier as well but I believe a new and more expansive version of the Flash remote is on the way.

After unpacking and installing the player I was expecting to have a lengthy wait of several days before it settled down and began to give its best so, as per usual, I spun up a disc to see that it was working, intending to leave it on repeat for a decent while. But from the opening bars of music the sheer density of the sound right across an enormously extended bandwidth had me transfixed. This is not that thick, congealed density that flavours the sound of so much equipment but a broad and totally transparent type that brought a huge range of tonal

colour, instrumental detail and depth with it. I sat and listened to the disc from beginning to end. This was no enhanced CDS2.

As the days and weeks passed, so the player continued to improve as is to be expected and I was able to incorporate it into a number of



systems that were either coming or going at the time. These included the all-Naim SL2 system I mentioned above, the Tom Evans Vibe with Pulse power supply (review soon), the Spectral 12/100S, Jeff Rowland 101, Nagra VPA valve power amplifiers and both the Revel Gems and the lovely little Sonus Faber Cremona, all hooked together, where appropriate, with Nordost Valhalla cabling. An interesting line-up I think you'll agree and with very different virtues, but not once did the CDS3 sound anything but the perfect musical partner to any of the above. It has such an immaculate tonal balance that it just seems to fit, regardless of the particular balance of the system you build around it. Where both of the earlier versions scored heavily over their competitors

was in their unshakable ability to latch onto the rhythmic elements of the music and show you the tempo. They had an unmistakable foot-tapping drive and feeling of musical progression to them that, once you get used to it, is hard to find anywhere else. Rival players offer more in terms of soundstage depth and are generally warmer and richer tonally but, over the past few years, I have tried

without success, to find a player that offered both the rhythmic and dynamic attributes of my CDS2 plus that real-world sense of the instrument itself, up until now, without success.

One of the biggest improvements is in the way that the CDS3 treats an instrument's leading edge, that precise place where the note starts. Like the SL2 speaker, the new Naim player exhibits far greater control at this critical point of the musical proceedings. In comparison the CDS2 now seems a little hurried and a tad compressed at this instant. But the 3 latches onto a note and controls it throughout the duration of the sustain to its eventual release while maintaining a really vivid sense of pure tonal colour the whole while. And it can do this regardless of the instrument in question and at whatever energy level. It is equally at home playing the most complex percussive arrangements, as it is with a solo clarinet and it never gets ruffled or overwhelmed tonally or rhythmically, whatever you throw at it. ▶

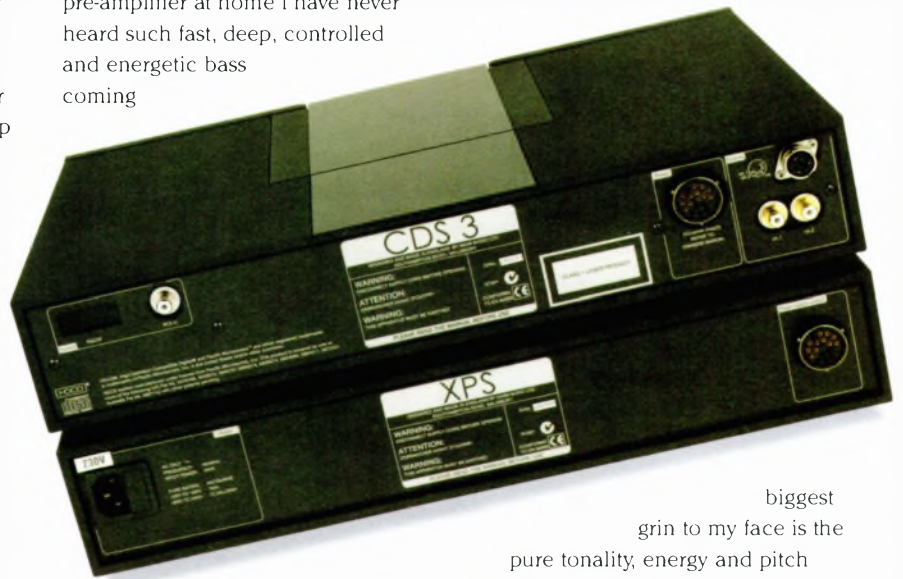


▶ I have a special love of vintage acoustic guitars that, while they don't have the sheer tonal brilliance or sustain of modern instruments, often have a far more complex and colourful character. Apart from physically playing better, they are warmer, richer, and more intimate and speak with a distinct, individual voice. The use of this particular tonal palette is one of the great things about Gillian Welch and her partner David Rawlings. For me and this is a personal thing, their sound is conjured by the relationship of these older guitars and her fantastically expressive vocals. And I have never been so entranced listening to their album *Time (The Revelator)* as I was with the CDS3. The sheer, stark atmosphere the combination produces stands before you and this just instantly transports me to the American south of the past, a land and time I never knew but which exists in my imagination through music. The CDS3 is the first CD player I have heard which really opened up the atmosphere of this album and made me think about it in a different way and that is exactly what I crave from top hi-fi. I could hear and see Rawlings not only playing the instruments but also doing so in a bygone style. And the way in which the short, woody sustain of the guitar so perfectly fits Gillian's vocal range and expression is only enhanced by the superb sense of tonal balance. This and the fact that the CDS3 has such a realistic portrayal of depth. Yes, depth from a Naim CD player. Not artificial mile-deep soundstages but realistic three dimensional images of superb proportion, scale and weight which only enhance the feeling of intimacy and togetherness that this



music is all about.

With music of a more complex and rhythmic nature the CDS3 goes where the 2 never could. It hinted at it, but the new player's sheer strength, instrumental separation, power and more importantly pure resolution, is in a different league altogether. Apart from when I had the Connoisseur pre-amplifier at home I have never heard such fast, deep, controlled and energetic bass coming



out of my Gems, which are responsive enough to allow the CDS3 to really strut its stuff. Does it have the speed, pace and timing of its predecessor? Actually, despite the fact that it doesn't have such an explosive leading edge performance I think it is much better in all of these areas. It is blindingly fast when it needs to be but, like all truly great hi-fi, doesn't sound it or draw your ear immediately. It is so bang-on tempo-wise that you automatically accept it and take it for granted. It simply does not seem like an issue until you think about and start to listen to this facet of its performance. But it has a delicacy and quite amazing lightness of touch and as such it never feels forced or as if it is snatching at the beat. Tempos and rhythms just

unroll in a totally natural way and it illuminates small polyrhythmic aspects of music with an ease and clarity that I have never previously heard from CD.

But, apart from this new sense of realistic depth and layering of the sound, the thing that CDS1 and 2 users are likely to notice above all else and that which has bought the

biggest grin to my face is the pure tonality, energy and pitch coherence that makes the older players seem bleached and slightly mean in comparison, particularly in the midband. Listen to a piano for instance and the sheer colour of the harmonic development around each and every chord or note or the uncompressed sense of freedom and articulation as the hammer strikes the string. Listen to the weight of each hand on the keys and the subtle changes in volume and note character that great musicians are able to produce. The result is that the CDS3 seems far more pitch coherent and it made me realise that CD players quite often make a poor job at describing small pitch changes of say, a semitone and our ears fill in the rest because we feel and can anticipate the change.

What can I say about the CDS3? It is simply the best CD player I have ever heard and I think Naim are ▶

▶ to be congratulated. Personally I doubted that the new player would be able to address all the shortcomings of the previous models so completely and successfully. In fact the CDS3 shows limitations in the

CDS2's performance that I didn't realise it had. But in doing so Naim have produced a CD player that really should be heard by anybody in the market for such a device in this price range whether they have a Naim

system or not. To overlook it just because of prior experiences or prejudices justified or not, would be a serious mistake. Credit where it is due, this is a great CD player. I just can't let it go back. ▶+

Take Two

by Roy Gregory

As the person with a resident Wadia 861 (itself awaiting an imminent upgrade) and with nary a Naim component to clutter my hi-fi CV, it fell to me to see just how far the new CDS3 has come. The short answer is a long, long way.

I can only endorse CT's comments regarding the fit, finish and presentation of this player. But I'd go further. Forget the best looking Naim tag, I think that this is one of the nicest looking CD players I've ever come across. It might lack the panache of the early Micromega players, or the obvious Gallic flair of the Metronome Kalista but it more than makes up for it with clean lines and a solid seriousness that just oozes purpose and compact competence. Think Marvin to the Metronome's Sugar Ray. And if the looks don't grab you, just wait until you get to play with the beautifully weighted lid, silently gliding home on its perfectly damped hinges. There's a real sense of understated class here. In terms of aesthetics, this is a player that would be perfectly at home in the most august company. Who ever thought I'd be saying that about a Naim?

But it's not just your aesthetic preconceptions that will be challenged.

From first listen you'll be aware that there's something special about this player. There's a fluidity and grace to its rhythmic touch. Where previous Naim players could sound chopped, forced, even mechanical at times, the CDS3 is all sinuous, undulating

side of 10K, but this price point is the one worth fighting over, because this is the one where people actually spend money. My personal benchmark has been the Wadia 861, ever since I reviewed it back in Issue 4, withstanding all comers with aplomb to a sufficient extent to separate a significant sum of cash from my limited funds in order to render its residence permanent.

It's a decision I've never regretted for an instant, and the arrival of the Naim hasn't changed that. The contrast is, however, fascinating.

Where the Naim is full of drive, purpose and presence, the Wadia offers a more considered and precisely sculpted performance, with better resolution at low frequencies. That of course doesn't necessarily make for better music, and that's what makes the comparison so interesting. Play the raw, up-front pub-rock of The Evinrudes *Drive Me Home* and the sheer energy of the Naim's presentation, the weight, propulsive quality and pace of its bass hurtles the music along on a roller coaster ride, with Sherry's vocals perched right there in the lead car. And like all great roller coasters, the ▶



purpose. Couple that to a phenomenal sense of sheer musical energy and the result is music that's full of purpose and power. It makes for a compelling listening experience.

But the real question is how that musical equation matches up to the other offerings up there in the hi-fi stratosphere. Yes, I know that there are plenty of players costing the other

► impression of teetering on the brink is a fantasy concealing control, the real momentum coming from the thundering train of cars following behind. The CDS3 gets the dangerous, slightly manic edge to what is actually a carefully honed performance just right. You just know that you had to be there to experience this music.

The Wadia offers a more contained, and certainly a more defined version of events. Its all there, indeed there's rather more separation and information than you get with the Naim. What's muted (not eliminated) is the edge of the seat drama. It's very good indeed, but if you really want to be out there then it's the lid of the Naim you'll be lifting.

Play a classical disc and the roles reverse. The Starker/Dvorak *Cello concerto* on Mercury is the perfect example. The Naim's purpose and power is impressive on this sweeping, romantic work, but the Wadia presses its advantage in terms of refinement definition and separation. Its soundstage is wider, deeper and better proportioned, instruments better separated tonally and spatially, while the overall sense of control embodies Dorati's baton, bringing heightened dramatic and dynamic contrasts. In comparison, the Naim sounds as though it's accentuating the broader sweeps of the score at the expense of its inner complexity. It's a visceral and emotional experience. But then so too is the Wadia, and it adds a cerebral element into the mix.

These are the extremes. Play anything from the middle ground and it's swings and roundabouts. The power, energy and purpose of the Naim brings its own attraction to music, as does the poise and dynamic precision of the Wadia. You pay your money and take your choice, but what is clear is that the Naim is up there with the established

contenders. Direct comparisons tend to exaggerate differences. The ones here are real enough, but their relevance lies in the slant they place on the music. As I write this, the infectious African rhythms of Pape and Cheikh are working through the room, rocking my body. The Naim's fluid delivery is backed up by that deep seated sense of momentum, making the music impossible to ignore. Think the undulating surface

of a smooth, wide but fast flowing river. Now think about the latent power in the flow that's propelling that river and you get some idea of what I'm talking about. The CDS3 is about energy – on tap.

Plug the new Naim into classic, wide bandwidth components and you won't be disappointed. Even the Tom Evans components failed to hint at missing foundations or a lack of air. Only the truly exceptional Wadia conjures any additional detail, the Naim easily holding its own against the Classé SACD machine. The overall balance of the CDS3 is excellent, both tonally and in terms of tripping the rhythmic tightrope. It adds a little warmth at lower frequencies that make for a richness and slight roundness that's not at all unwelcome. It also adds to that wonderful sense of solid presence that the player delivers.

With the CDS3 Naim have taken another step on their new path. If the NAC552 signaled their serious intent, and the NAP300 hints at future greatness, the CD player delivers on the promise. Like the products that presaged its arrival, it redefines what Naim products are capable of, how they can be used, where they're going to work. CT commented that he can't see a system context in which the

CDS3 wouldn't deliver. I know exactly what he means. It has such a grounded sense of total authority and command that it simply grabs the system from the front-end and bends it to its will. It's a powerful and impressive performer that demands a similar level of commitment from its ancillaries, bringing the best from them in the process.

How does it stack up against the established high-end competition? The NAC552 could hold its own; the CDS3 teaches the others a thing or two. At a time when digital disc replay seems to be heading for the ever more sterile wastelands typified by the likes of dCS, the Naim's sheer enthusiasm is like a blast of fresh air. Tired of CDs that sound a little tired? Hey guys, it's time for a wake-up call. ►+



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

CDS3

Type:	2 box CD player
Transport:	Phillips CD 10
Outputs:	5 pin din and 2 x phono sockets
Output Level:	2.0V at 1kHz
Output impedance:	50 Ohms maximum
Dimensions (HxWxD):	87x432x314 mm
Price:	£4750

XPS2

Type:	Power supply. With 6 individually regulated low-noise outputs
Connection:	Burndy multi-pin
Dimensions:	As player
Finishes:	Any, as long as it's black.
Price:	£2300

Manufacturer:

Naim Audio.
Tel (44)(0) 1722 332266
Net. www.naim-audio.com

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- Paul Szabadq, Stereo Times, Dec 2002

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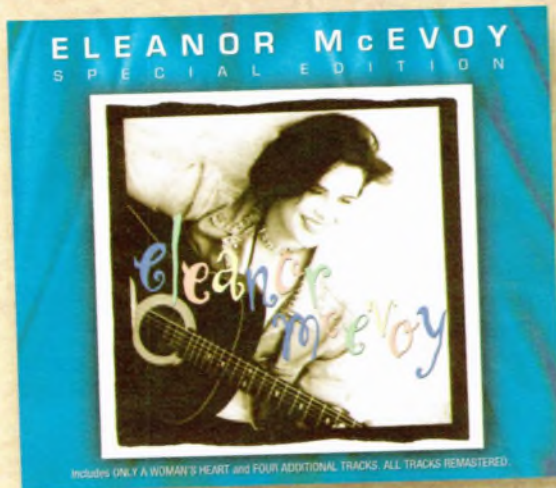
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A1

ANTENNA

A2

MAGNUM
dynalot

analog FM TUNER

92.8



POWER
OFF

SIGNAL
OFF

The Magnum Dynalab MD102t Valve Tuner

by Alan Sircom

It's bloody typical; that balmy, the midst of that record-breaking August heatwave is the perfect time to review a tuner with perma-triodes! You see, the triode output stage for the £2,695 Magnum Dynalab MD102t has the tubes in standby mode whenever mains is connected. There isn't even a main on/off switch; the only way to switch off the tuner totally (and thereby power down the triodes) is to turn off the mains at the wall socket.

In fairness, these triodes do not run that hot in standby mode, but when you get beyond about 35 degrees C, anything that raises the ambient temperature is sworn at. Those with strong eco-chummy sensitivities might balk at the number of whales destroyed in the ozone layer by leaving a pair of 6922 double triodes burning away constantly. The rest of us will just have to suck up a slightly augmented 'leccy bill.

The 't' suffix of the MD102 is, in essence, a £500 option on the standard, entirely solid state, MD102. It's not the only option; £400 on top of the basic price of the MD102 or MD102t buys you a remote control that can access the tuning without leaving the sofa. It also allows five station presets stored in its memory, without having potentially sonically degrading presets in the tuner itself. And then there's the choice of finishes; as well as a decent shade of black with gold lettering, it's possible to buy the MD102t in gold with black lettering, or even silver with black lettering. But be warned that it's likely that the distributor, Branko Bozic of Audiofreaks, will try to talk you out of this last one – though no one knows why).

The valve output stage isn't the

only special feature of the MD102t. One of the big reasons why Magnum Dynalab is the radiophile's choice is that it is one of the last companies to produce its own front end. The tuner head part makes or breaks the sound and performance of a tuner – and most companies use cheap OEM phase locked loop tuner heads. Ultimately, no matter how good the components in the rest of the tuner, this is a bit like using an el-cheapo cartridge in a £10,000 turntable. Every tuner that made a profound impact upon the high-end community – from the old Marantz 10B and Leak Troughline right up to the late, lamented Naim NAT 01 and 02, Linn Kremlin, Day-Sequerra and Onix tuners – have sported custom-designed tuner heads. The downside to this custom produced front end is



the prohibitive cost. Magnum

Dynalab's five-stage tuning front end is entirely custom made and must be one of the last tuners to do so. In the process, this means the method of holding onto a radio signal is now a combination of heavily-shielded toroidal transformer and stabilised power supplies.

Audiophile credentials abound throughout the MD102t. The alloy casework is entirely non-magnetic. It features Black Gate capacitors, Burr-Brown op amps, MIT capacitors in key

stages of the signal path and – where appropriate – Kimber Hyper-Pure copper wiring. Even the circuit board is above average and extremely thick. In fact, the most hard-core of tweakers would have a tough time up-rating the MD102t. You could upgrade the MD102t a notch by fitting Pearl Coolers around the pair of tubes; these would extend the life and reduce microphony of the already remarkably un-microphonic Amperex

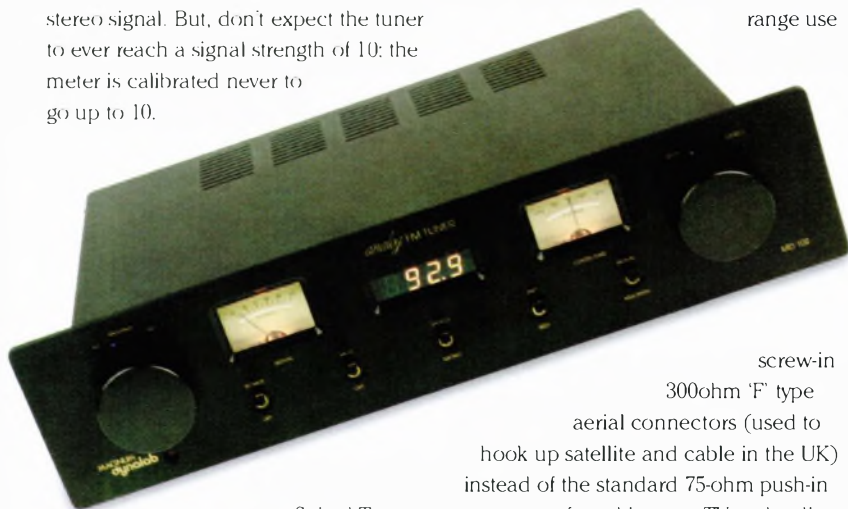
"Bugle Boy"
6922s. Pearl

Coolers are fitted to the output stage of the more up-market MD106 (with its fancy 'magic eye' tuning aid).

The front panel is a radio enthusiast's dream. Forget presets, you get two big dials, five toggle switches, two needle meters and a central LED frequency display. The big right dial is all you get for tuning, but you also get a toggle switch to adjust the Intermediate Frequency bandwidth, a mono-stereo switch and whether the left-hand meter registers signal strength or multipath interference.

The IF bandwidth setting is useful when the nearby pirate radio station starts blurring out over the Sunday afternoon Radio Four play. Dropping the toggle into BW2 places the tuner into its 'narrow' bandwidth setting; sonically not as good as the 'wide' BW1 setting, but better at rejecting adjacent channel interference. If the signal is really poor, though, you can also drop into mono mode, which helps lose a lot of interference compared to the stereo sound.

▶ When using the left-hand meter in signal mode, the higher the signal the better, when in multipath; the lower the better. Flipping between the two – while also checking the right hand 'centre tune' meter – can produce the ultimate stereo signal. But, don't expect the tuner to ever reach a signal strength of 10: the meter is calibrated never to go up to 10.



Spinal Tap fans will never accept this, but the rest of us will be happy not to need to repair the meter every six months or so.

The 'mute' button doesn't do what most 'mute' buttons do. It places a limit on the tuner, overlooking the weaker signals while tuning. This means that while tuning the MD102t from station to station, there's no more hiss and noise. Just silence. In its default setting, the MD102t has this mute setting switched in.

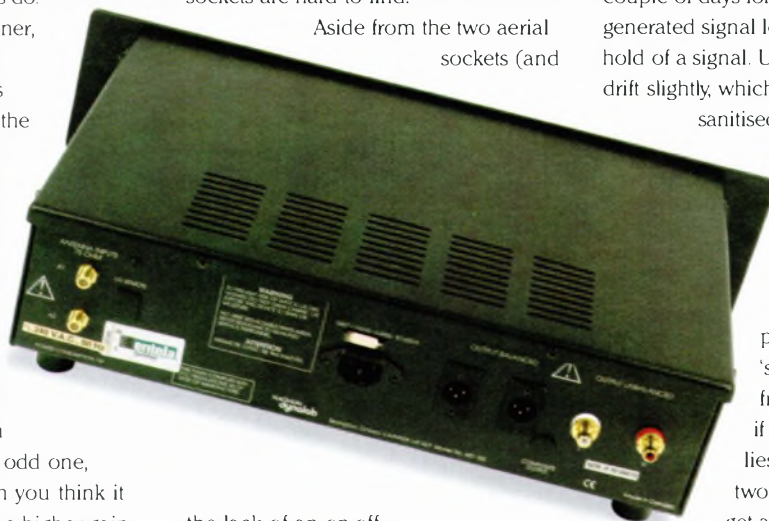
The provision for switching between aerials (that large dial on the left hand side) is an odd one, but entirely logical when you think it through. You might want a higher gain aerial with a narrow acceptance angle for the stations you listen to 95% of the time and one of those Antiference Allrounder aerials for general listening. Or you may want one fixed mounted aerial and one on a rotator. Or, perhaps

you just like the idea of owning an aerial farm on your roof and want people to think you are a local branch of GCHQ. Whatever, the two aerial option is a good one. Just remember that the Magnum

Dynalab range use

screw-in 300ohm 'F' type aerial connectors (used to hook up satellite and cable in the UK) instead of the standard 75-ohm push-in connector found in most TV and radio settings. A good aerial installer can provide a suitable connector and fit it inside of five minutes, or you can use a 300ohm to 75ohm Balun transformer, but it means off-the-shelf coaxial aerial sockets are hard to find.

Aside from the two aerial sockets (and



the lack of an on-off switch by the IEC socket), the rear panel of the MD102t sports a pair of high-quality WBT gold plated phono sockets for single-ended operation and a pair of equally top-notch Neutrik XLR sockets for balanced output.

There's a hidden extra to the Magnum Dynalab system. You can use it with the excellent £95 ST2 whip aerial. A bit like an old-fashioned 54inch high car aerial, The Wave, single-element dipole antenna is ideal for eliminating multipath interference, from signals bouncing off buildings. This is why, although the ST2 will never have the gain of something like a roof-mounted Ron Smith Galaxy 17, it does perform wonders in a built-up area, and many will trade a bit of hiss for a lot less spitch and sibilance (the over-emphasis and spittyness of 's' sounds). Although it's classed as an indoor aerial, the ST2 is discrete and good enough to sit outside, bolted to a wall (you may want to weatherproof the aerial with liberal amounts of Vaseline – and that will make you an interesting local talking point). It also has the advantage of connecting using a 300ohm F type connector, so there's no need for a Balun transformer in the chain.

The tuner takes a good 48 hours to really come on song. That's not just hi-fi sensibilities; when first used it takes a couple of days for that power supply generated signal lock to really grab hold of a signal. Until then, signals can drift slightly, which is unheard of in this sanitised, phase locked loop world we live in.

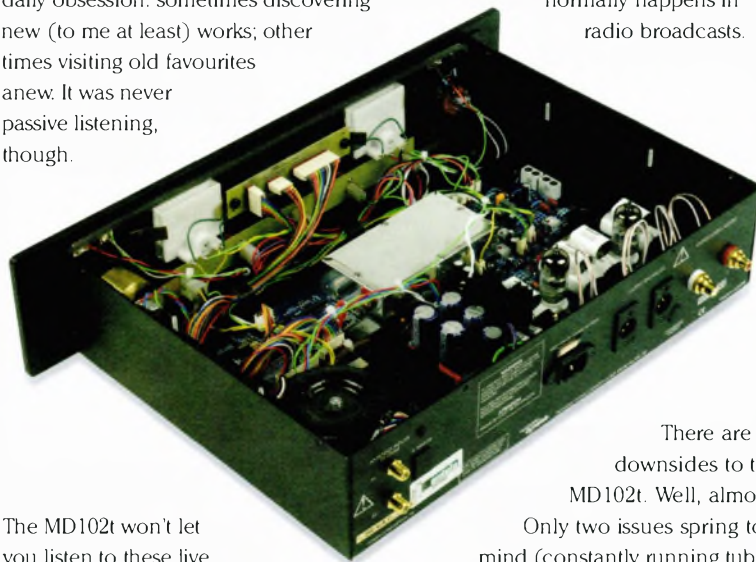
And that is why the Magnum Dynalab is so damn good.

A modern digital FM tuner works by tuning precisely to distinct 'steps' across the frequency range and if the station frequency lies somewhere between two steps – tough, you get a slightly out of tune, but precisely locked, signal.

The analogue tuner head of the MD102t allows you to tune to your favourite station with the sort of precision a digital tuner can never achieve, and the tuner sounds all the better for it. ▶

► Just how good? Suddenly, compression seems to be less of an issue than it seems through PLL tuners. Even the most heavy-handed of Optimod compression is not as noticeable when precisely tuned. But when the compression is cut away, something really magical happens.

Sweltering heat takes its toll on the listener, but there is an upside to the timing of the review; you get to listen to The Proms; live feeds of Radio Three which will justify the expense of the MD102t within about a nanosecond. It became a nightly occasion, and a daily obsession: sometimes discovering new (to me at least) works; other times visiting old favourites anew. It was never passive listening, though.



The MD102t won't let you listen to these live recordings passively; you are drawn into the passion and the fire of the music, or repelled by the performance. New works leave you hungry for more or flat and uninspired. Before long, you start muttering about last night's prom to people in coffee shops, strange looks notwithstanding.

Quite by chance, a track from the new Kraftwerk *Tour De France Soundtracks* CD was being played on a local indie station, while it was still fresh in my memory from being played through my own CD set up. While my own polycarbonate spinner isn't exactly in Wadia territory, it's distinctly better than the sort of ruggedised CD players used in radio studios. Except this time

that professional CD player sounded more 'analogue' through the radio than I expected it to sound. The MD102t isn't playing music with rose-tinted spectacles, but it is digging up every last ounce of quality from a radio station.

The addition of the valves adds a smoothness to the sound. They also seem to give aid to the soundstage depth of the MD102t. Whilst wide, if not exceptionally so, soundstage is wonderfully deep space and draws the listener in to the best of radio. Strangely, it even has some solidity to the overall sound; something that never normally happens in radio broadcasts.

There are no downsides to the MD102t. Well, almost. Only two issues spring to mind (constantly running tubes notwithstanding). First is that, despite being the best tuner you can buy under £2,700, it's still some way from the performance of the top of the line MD108; I heard this briefly while picking up the MD102t from the distributor and that particular tuner is so good you can almost hear what colour shoelaces the DJ is wearing. The other downside is that this tuner spontaneously grows tuner enthusiasts in exactly the same way flats in London spontaneously grow Australians. Somehow, a tuner buff will discover you have one of the world's best tuners in your system and then one will turn up on the doorstep. Soon, more will follow, like zombies with signal strength meters. I know this from

direct experience. I have a friend who is a real radio die-hard and I casually mentioned that I had this tuner in for review. He came round to listen to a Prom... and cried. A day later, he asked if he could come back and bring friends. My advice; buy one of these and never mention it to anyone; you never know who's a closet tuner geek.

Radio is often the poor relation of hi-fi. This is different... and as far removed from regular 'digital FM' tuners as a VPI is from a Technics DJ turntable. And it makes absolute mincemeat of DAB. Who needs presets when you can have valves and dials? Buy this and discover why all-analogue radio still matters. ▶+

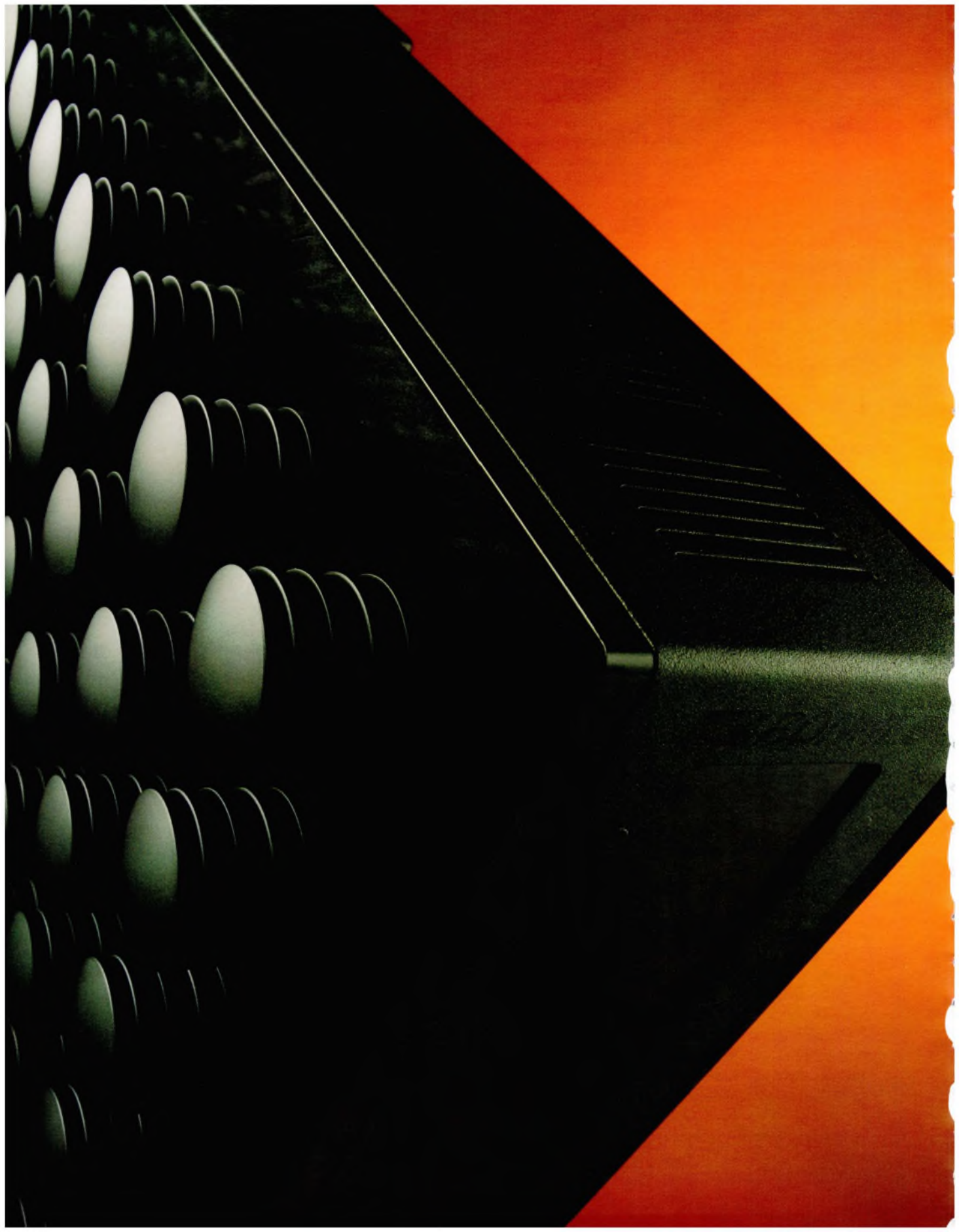
TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	All-analogue FM tuner
Inputs:	2x 300ohm F-type connectors
Outputs:	1x pair single ended: 1.0V 1x pair balanced: 2.2V
Signal/Noise ratio:	80dB
THD mono/Stereo (MD102):	0.10%
THD (tube output stage):	1.8%
Stereo separation:	50dB
Audio Frequency response (+/- 1dB):	15Hz-17kHz
Dimensions (HxWxD):	114 x 483 x 381mm
Weight:	7.1kg
Price:	£2,695

Magnum Dynalab ST-2	
Type:	Vertical omnidirectional FM antenna Half wave design
Output:	1x 300ohm F-type connector
Length:	1.37m
Price:	£95

UK Distributor:
Audiofreaks
Tel: 020 8948 4153
E-mail: info@audiofreaks.co.uk

Manufacturer:
Magnum Dynalab Ltd
www.magnumdynalab.com



The Bonnec Timpano Pre-amplifier and Alto Power Amplifier

by Chris Binns

Daring to be different?

Not since the days of using a Lecson AC 1 and AP3 have I used a solid state amplifier that has provoked so many comments about its appearance. Regarding the Bonnec, these have ranged from the mildly derogatory – ‘it looks like a bomb’ - to compliments likening it to a piece of modern architecture and applauding it for being refreshingly different. Me? I am firmly in the latter camp; apart from anything else it makes a change from the rather mundane black and silver boxes that I see so many of, and that has to be a good thing. The Alto power amplifier is not just about being a dramatic visual statement. Its most striking feature, the multitude of turrets, or knobs, that grace the side panels are a case of form following function. They deliver extensive heat sinking to increase the amplifiers thermal capacity, and thus allow the electronics to run relatively cool, which being a class AB design they do, most of the time.

The partnering pre-amplifier, the Timpano, is almost the opposite in terms of its aesthetics: indeed it is an exercise in minimalism. Quite conventional in shape it presents a simple front to the world, with a single rotary control and one push button. The rest of the panel is taken up by an elegant and clear display, which can be programmed to switch off a few seconds after receiving the last command. Together, they form a very attractive and interesting looking combination that stands out from the crowd, and I was interested to see whether the performance matched

up to the looks.

The Alto power amp is rated at a nominal 95 Watts into 8 Ohms with 190 available into four; Bonnec claim a high degree of load tolerance so awkward loudspeakers should not present a problem. The front panel is featureless save for a couple of LEDs that indicate the status of each channel. Normally green, they will turn red under a fault condition. The easily accessible connections on the rear



allow unbalanced input only, along with three sets of 4mm sockets (not binding posts) for loudspeaker output, while the power switch can be overridden by a DC remote signal to activate the unit.

Internally, the left and right amplifiers ‘hinge down’ on the heat sinks to provide access, each main board having two plug in encapsulated modules which are quite heavy and held in place only by the connecting pins. I know this because the amplifier

didn’t work when it first arrived, due to one of the modules being disconnected; there really should be some additional anchoring to prevent this. Common to both channels is a large 940 VA mains transformer at the rear of the unit that feeds no less than 12 regulators. Generally construction quality, although not the tidiest I have seen, is good, with high quality components used throughout.

The Timpano pre-amp is (unusually these days) fully equipped for phono use, although it can be supplied as a line only unit for £1500 less.

If that seems like a lot of money for a phono stage, a quick look inside the unit should convince you otherwise; there are more high quality electronics on this board than in the majority of stand alone units I have seen. With both moving coil and moving magnet cartridges catered for, input loading and sensitivity is adjustable by the changing of internal resistors; your dealer should be able to do this if you cannot. All in all, it seems as if Bonnec take vinyl pretty seriously. The rest of the pre-amp is to a similarly high standard, with four toroidal transformers feeding the multitude (22!) regulators. All functions of the unit are overseen by two microprocessors, and signal switching is carried out by means of high quality relays. Remote control is available, and although no handset is supplied, it is RC5 compatible so will work with a range of units. The two controllers I tried would only operate the volume and mute functions however. The digital control circuitry is switched off unless a command is being undertaken, which

▶ minimises any form of corruption through the power supplies. The Timpano is reasonably well equipped with four line and two tape inputs, plus the MM/MC phono options, while three outputs are provided, these have a low impedance of 15 Ohms which makes them suitable for driving long interconnects if necessary.



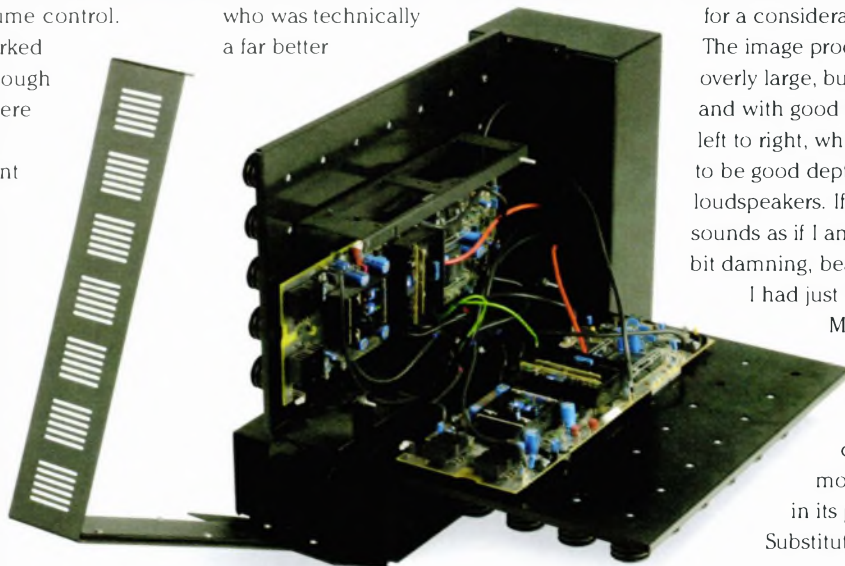
With just the two controls, operation is straightforward; but takes a little getting used to. Accessing a menu is achieved by pushing the button, while the rotary control goes through the options, which apart from input selection are record out, balance, stereo/mono and finally display on/off. Once the set up on the appropriate input has been carried out, the rotary knob reverts to volume control. In practice it all worked very effectively, although it is a shame that there is no individual sensitivity adjustment for the line inputs.

The sound of the Bonnac is characterised by a very firm, deep bass, more or less what you would expect from a competent solid-state amplifier. All well and good, but what

really sets it apart from the mainstream is its capabilities with rhythm and timing, and a willingness to lay down the groove where necessary. Whenever I have played guitar in a band I have always had the attitude that no matter

how well I play, or how

good the singer is, unless the bass player is working with the drummer to create an effective foundation then nobody will notice. A dance band I played in had one of the best drummers I have ever worked with – he had the intelligence of a demented liver fluke, but when he played, it was from the hip and the heart. And there would be not a single person sitting down. In situations where he couldn't make a gig ('cos he'd walked into a wall or something), we had a stand in drummer who was technically a far better



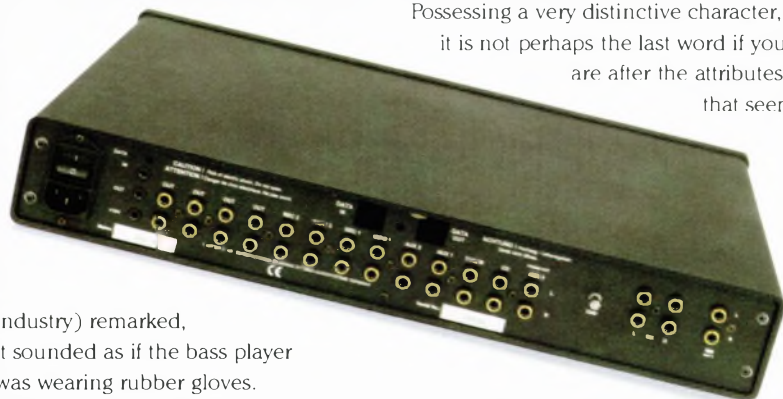
player, and had all the fancy fills and technique – but no one would get up and dance.

The Bonnac is in every way the good drummer. Particularly noticeable with vinyl, music was infused with an enthusiasm that really got your foot tapping, in much the same way that the older Linn/Naim systems used to. The Bonnac proved to be a bit of a Godsend while I was using the JM Labs Utopia loudspeakers, where its definition and taughtness really came into their own by controlling the rather generous bass response in my room. If any loudspeaker was going to show up shortcomings at the bottom end, this was it. With this well established foundation to work on, the mid range and top fitted in very comfortably. Again, very dynamic and immediate in its delivery, it did tend toward being a bit dry, and although I could not pinpoint it, vocals lacked some 'liquidity', while it seemed as if by being a bit forward there was no room left in the window to allow much of the background information, such as ambience to come through. Easy going? No, the Bonnac always gave you the impression that it just wanted to get on with things, and I admit that my foot was beginning to ache where it had been tapping away for a considerable time.

The image produced was not overly large, but very precise and with good definition from left to right, while there seemed to be good depth behind the loudspeakers. If all of this sounds as if I am being a little bit damning, bear in mind that

I had just been using the MacIntosh C2200 pre-amp for quite some time, which could not be more different in its presentation. Substituting it for the

▶ Timpani, the character of the sound changed dramatically. All of the apparent dryness had gone, while the soundstage became much bigger, but at the same time there was a considerable lack of impact to the sound, and much of the snap had gone; as a friend of mine (who works in the recording



industry) remarked, it sounded as if the bass player was wearing rubber gloves.

With the Timpano once again back in place, one or two things regarding the system came to light. The phono input really is rather good, its performance confirmed by feeding the Pass Labs phono stage that I have been using for a while into a line input. It sounded rather heavy and smudged by comparison, and using the low output Helikon SL confirmed that the Bonnec is very quiet. The pre-amp also responded well to some additional support under it, my feeling was that it sounded a good bit more open and 'airy' with the use of isolation cones: some RDC ones that were at hand seemed to do the trick.

Meanwhile, the Alto power amplifier sounds considerably more powerful than its 95 Watts would suggest, in part I suspect because it is a genuinely dynamic performer. Responsible for many of the spectacular sessions I had with the Nova Utopia, its use with the Primary monitors verified the manufacturer's claims regarding its load tolerance.

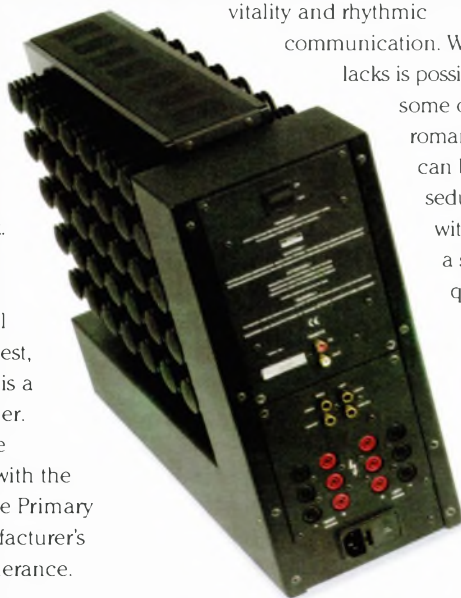
The Alto never lost its grip under pretty demanding conditions, even at pretty high listening levels, although it did get pretty hot... But drums and percussion were hurled out of the loudspeakers with dynamics and precision that was genuinely exciting, particularly with vinyl.

I like the Bonnec combination. Possessing a very distinctive character, it is not perhaps the last word if you are after the attributes that seem

to come easily to some valve amplifiers; there are other products in this sort of price range that do those things better. But then they probably have the timing capabilities of a bath sponge... and little of the coherence that enables the Bonnec to do its job so well. Its strengths seem to lie more naturally with rock music, where it endows performances with a great sense of vitality and rhythmic

communication. What it

lacks is possibly some of the romance that can be so seductive with, say, a string quartet.



But then again... I had originally thought that the Alto was being let down by the Timpano in some ways, but further use and a bit of experimentation has convinced me otherwise, as the two complement each other very well. In particular, performance via the phono stage is impressive, and the latter looks like pretty good value when you consider the price of a top notch stand alone unit. The Alto is a very capable amplifier. It happens to be good looking, and unlike the Lecson, doesn't blow up. A welcome addition to the marketplace



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Timpano pre-amplifier

Line inputs:	four
Input sensitivity:	200mV
Input impedance:	10K Ohms
	MC input
	250µV or 500 µV
Input impedance:	130 Ohms (adjustable)
	MM input
Input impedance:	47 K Ohms
Input sensitivity:	2 mV
Output level:	10 Volts peak
Output impedance:	15 Ohms
Dimensions (WxDxH):	450x350x70mm
Weight:	14Kg
Price:	£3000 Line only
	£4500 inc. phono

Alto power amplifier

Power output:	95 Watts / 8 Ohms
	190 Watts / 4 Ohms
Input sensitivity:	1 Volt
Input impedance:	6.8 K Ohms
Dimensions (WxDxH):	163x480x380mm
Weight:	26Kg
Price:	£4500

UK Distributor:

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Net. www.uphonic.co.uk

Manufacturer:

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Ayre Acoustics K-5x Pre-amplifier and V-5x power amplifier

by Jason Kennedy

If audio components had star signs would you have to get one that was sympathetic with your own? I've heard of more far fetched reasons for selecting components, but I've not come across an amplifier which uses planetary symbols to identify its inputs. The Ayre K-5x is a new pre-amplifier from an electronics company which features stars and planets where one would expect to find legends like CD, tuner and the partner baffling classic, aux. The five symbols on the front of the K-5x are even less useful to those unfamiliar with the system's set up but at least they are attractive and a whole lot more memorable than the numbers adopted in some quarters. Little badges featuring matching star, planet and shooting stars to stick on the front of your record player, CD player and tuner might help though.

Ayre is a ten year old company run by Charles Hansen in Boulder, Colorado - a place where luxurious aluminium casework is the norm or so it would seem if you look at the Ayre components and then think of the brand named after the city - there must be a great metalworker there. Prior to founding Ayre, Hansen designed loudspeakers for Avalon Acoustics such as the original Eclipse, but he's moved on since then and his goal with this company is to make high-end electronics that don't have silly price tags. Hence the brand's range topping K-1x pre-amp comes in at just over \$7,000, which while hardly bargain basement stuff is not excessive for what sounds like a pretty stunning product,

with a glorious phono stage and carved from solid style build.

The new K-5x/V-5x pre/power amplifier combo weighs in at just under £7,000 the pair, and shares some of the most luxurious casework I've seen in a good while. You could argue that if Hansen had really wanted to make affordable high-end he could have gone for less extravagant casework, but I suspect that in many parts of the world if a component doesn't look high-end it won't be considered that way, however



good it sounds. It's a tribute to products like the Groove phono stage that it has made its mark so well despite a rather self-effacing appearance. With the Ayres you get beautifully machined insets for switches, lights and knobs and a machined plate for every surface. It's the sort of finish that makes even Chord products look almost ordinary.

Inside the K-5x pre-amp you will find fully balanced, zero feedback circuitry, both being key features of Ayre's design philosophy. Ayre's first power amp the V-3 also featured choke input filtering and measured much as you would expect to find with a tube amp. The balanced aspect runs so deep that single-ended inputs are restricted to a grand total of two plus a tape output. XLR balanced

inputs add a further two to the roster to give you a rather limiting four inputs. Unless you have at least one balanced output equipped source component this makes the K-5x rather difficult to incorporate into most systems. One way round this is to convert the balanced inputs with XLR to phono adapters which Ayre, among others, can supply.

This obsession with balanced interconnection has yet to take hold in the UK but on the North American high-end scene I get the impression that you'd be laughed out of the club if you tried to sell a single-ended only component. The advantages of

the approach are not always obvious though. I'll grant that the plugs and sockets are far superior and don't make nasty noises through the system when you pull them out, but unless you have yards of interconnect there don't seem to be any sonic benefits. In fact it would seem that the opposite is the case. RCA phono plugs actually seem to sound better when connecting single ended components. Balanced connection does of course have its advantages when it comes to fully complementary components, especially if they're separated by more than a few metres where the noise abating aspect of the topology comes in handy.

The distributor also lent me the Ayre CX-7 CD player. As you may have read in the last issue the CX-7 is an excellent CD player and it's not hard to see why I was encouraged to use it.

Getting back to the K-5x pre-amp, despite a dearth of SE inputs it does have both SE and balanced outputs ▶

▶ for the power amp and a "Theater" mode for use with surround sound processors, which is basically a fixed level in/output which effectively bypasses the pre-amp and allows the power amp to drive two of the channels in a 5.1 system. If you want to combine stereo and



multichannel systems this is one of the best approaches available. Volume is adjusted by a proprietary balanced control with FET switches and metal film resistors, output level is displayed on a big blue LED display and a compact remote is supplied to adjust level, change input, extinguish the display and mute as required. The microprocessor which handles all these features is shut down at all times except when responding to your whims, so it effectively 'sleeps' in order to minimise signal contamination.

Only the selected input is grounded so unselected inputs are effectively disconnected when not in use, which will nullify any potential cross-talk.

The V5x power amplifier is a substantial 25kg block with some of the most unusual speaker terminals I've come across. Basically they are a means of holding both positive and negative terminals of the cable with one clamp, a system that's designed expressly for the spade lugs preferred in the US. I had to use adapters in order

to terminate my 4mm banana plug equipped Townshend DCT cables. (These are the same posts used on the Avalon Ascendants and will accept 4mm plugs at right angles. Ed.) Inputs are switchable between phono and XLR and there are also balanced outputs for use in bi- and tri-amplified systems or with sub-woofers. Power output is specified at 150 watts a side at eight ohms, with a doubling into four ohms. Which is not a claim that many amp makers are prepared to make. For the purpose of attempting to keep wheat and chaff in neat little piles I didn't just put both amps in place of my normal Bryston BP25/Gamut D200 combo but took things one at a time, substituting the preamplifier first. Once I had established that the source Eikos CD player was plugged into the crescent moon rather than Saturn input things got rather entertaining. Bobby Hughes' scando-latino vibes expanded in scale and took on a life and



energy that made the Bryston's approach seem positively repressive. It should of course be remembered that the venerable Bryston costs half as much as this silver beauty and thus some improvement was expected. But the scale and presence delivered exceeded expectations and

negated any chance of the Bryston getting in on the act until the Ayres had left the building.

The K-5x has a full bodied sound that revels in tonal colour, shape and texture, very valve like in fact with the same tendency to increase scale. The scale seems entirely natural, it's a bit like you are hearing the harmonics in all their glory as opposed to the merely the fundamentals. It's not as though the picture has been expanded but more like there's greater resolution of spatially related information. The hubble-bubble toking intro to the Peace Orchestra's magnificent *Domination* sounds as if it were recorded in an aircraft hangar with this pre-amp. It always reveals reverb but the scale here seems to be in another league. It made me wonder whether combining Ayre electronics with the Totem Forest speakers reviewed last month would be too much. They are also unusually transparent to reverb, unfortunately they were no longer around otherwise it would have been interesting to see if I could have broken into the fifth dimension with the right Hawkwind track!

Adding the V5x power amp in place of the Gamut D200 (Mk3) added more space again to the proceedings, the soundstage expanding in width by a substantial margin and certainly increasing both up and back, though not to the same extent.

Low-level resolution seemed to improve once the two units were paired up and dynamics certainly didn't suffer. There was a slight reduction in bass grunt, the Gamut's extra 50 watts and slightly tighter approach delivering greater impact, but it was not a difficult transition as both power amps are clearly excellent but have strengths in slightly different areas. Timing for instance is very good with the Ayres, the groove picking up in a subtle ▶

▶ but distinct fashion when something suitably rhythmic came along. The sound is also unusually natural for a transistor pairing with instruments rendered with convincing tonal colour and body.

The brand new nature of this pairing meant that it was not fully run in and I suspect will not get to that point till way after the deadline.



As a result the sound I got with my Living Voice Avatar OBX-Rs was slightly forward of neutral and didn't encourage high level listening, more's the pity. It lent them a lively, even loud, balance that I'm told calms with time - two or three hundred hours of use are required before they are fully on song.

Further listening revealed a quite uncanny ability to spread sound either side of the speakers, this effect is almost like the Q-Sound phase manipulation used on some albums (Madonna's *Greatest Hits* being the only one that comes to mind!). It's as if you're getting surround sound from two speakers, yet if there's a strong central image that remains where it should be and doesn't seem stretched. The soundscape is very much cinemascopic, this would make a great 2.0 home cinema system.

Moving on to the voice of youth, or Eminem as he's better known, this was slightly more aggressive than usual but full of detail and energy, a presentation made all the more persuasive by the

distinctly quiet background. It seems a little odd that the noise floor on such a disc should be notable but this is no two bit recording and responds well to increases in dynamic and signal to noise range.

Just to test the tubeworthiness of the K-5x preamp I put it up against my Border Patrol prototype, a comparison which made the transistorised unit sound marginally less transparent, fuller and a shade less natural. But it was surprisingly close for something so sophisticated. I also brought in a pair of B&W CDM9 NTs to give the power amp something slightly less easy to wrestle with. This brought about a greater sense of control and precision to the proceedings and clearly didn't give the V-5x any cause for concern. The pairing delivering greater bass depth albeit less engaging music.

The arrival of the Ayre CD player improved matters rhythmic rather nicely and proved



itself to be extremely effective at delivering the musical message.

I haven't been able to immerse myself in Radiohead's latest offering (*Hail to the Thief*) largely because it has failed to inspire with previous equipment, but the Ayre partnership made a remarkable job of revealing what the band were trying to do. The superb low level resolve bringing out all the subtle strands and building them up into a gripping musical experience with

nearly as much power as the band's opus *OK Computer*.

This is clearly a first class pair of amplifiers: build quality is exemplary and better than most achieve even at twice this price. But more importantly the scale and presence that it reveals is transporting. This combined with a sweet sense of timing makes for a very compelling experience and one which I'll have trouble forgetting - and that's not the sort of trouble I often suffer with!



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Ayre K-5x	
Type:	Remote operated pre-amplifier
Inputs:	2 balanced, 2 single ended
Input impedance:	20 kOhm (per phase)
Maximum Input Level:	4V - unbalanced inputs, 8V - balanced inputs
Frequency Response:	DC - 200 kHz
Maximum Gain:	4dB - unbalanced outputs, 10dB - balanced outputs
Dimensions (HxWxD):	44 x 12 x 35cm
Weight:	11.5 kg
Price:	£2950
Ayre V-5x	
Type:	Stereo power amplifier
Power Output:	150 watts per channel/ 8 ohms, 300 watts per channel/4 ohms
Gain:	26 dB
Input Impedance:	100 kOhm (per phase)
Frequency Response:	DC - 200 kHz
Dimensions (HxWxD):	18 x 46 x 41cm
Weight:	25 kg
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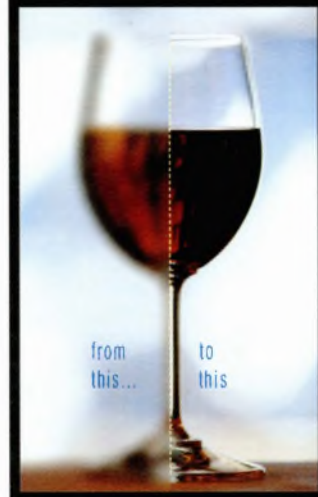
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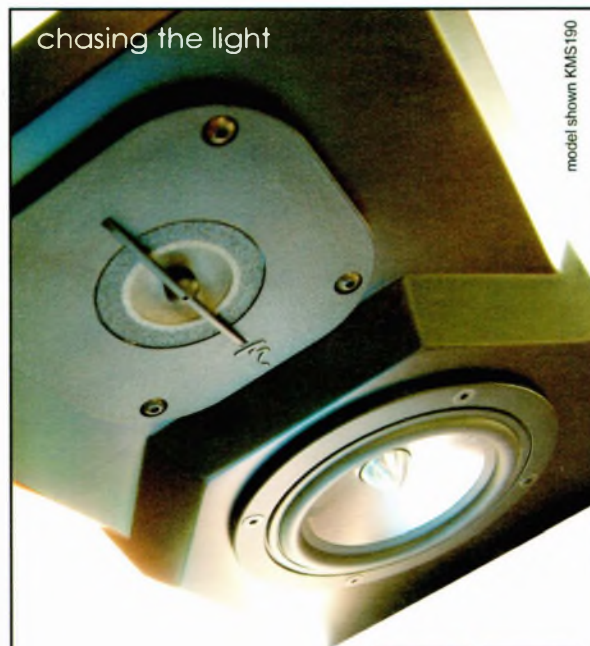
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Turntable Optimization

by Scott Markwell

I am not going to sit here and pen yet another turntable primer for the great unwashed that have yet to put needle to vinyl. That has been done countless times and I don't think that I could really do it any better. What I am going to do is discuss how most of us can, despite whatever we may already have done to/with our record-playing kit, coax yet another layer of performance from the rusty bits and creaking belts that make up our various LP-spinning apparatuses. I do not claim to be the Last Word in turntable setup, nor have I laid hands on every single model out there. However, I have been around more than a few designs, both conventional and rather exotic, and any number in-between. So what you get here will be, for better or for worse, the general benefit of my experience gleaned from setting up tables for the last 10-15 years.

There are quite a few variations on a similar theme amongst the various well-known turntable brands currently in production, and any number more among tables whose origins these days tend to be a bit murky. There are also a fair number of older 'tables in the field that are still running well and merely need a little TLC to get right. But there are certain common considerations that they all, without exception, share. Some things I will discuss will seem absurdly simple and obvious, but I will address them anyway. Others may be a bit more involved or perhaps minor; please bear in mind that playing back LPs is a rather arcane combination of art and science, and sometimes it is not easy to see where one starts and the other lets off. Please also remember that

I am rather intensely focused on those things that I have found help me. If I miss something that you consider to be the Sacred Cow of setup, please do take pen and paper and write the Editor a letter. I neither claim perfection nor a closed mind. So if you have a helpful hint that I have managed to miss, do not sit on your (laurel) plinths; share it with us all!

The most important thing to me, when considering either a new turntable or simply improving on the old, is the kit's mounting platform or table. With rare exception, almost all LP turntables are susceptible to acoustic feedback, or breakthrough, in one form or another. At times this may appear as a subtle or non-invasive thing, while in the worst case it is an uncontrollable howling, at times making playback at anywhere near realistic levels impossible. Some tables such as the Linn Sondek, some SOTA models, the older Philips 'tables, and several others including Oracle and the older Ariston and AR designs, use a sprung sub-chassis or other floating platform to try and make the problem of proper mounting and isolation a non-issue. They do this by isolating the arm and cartridge bits, along with the platter and bearing, from spurious vibrations from the outside world. The efficacy of these designs is mixed. Some, such as the SOTA, Philips, and Ariston, use spring rates to suspend the arm and platter that seem to take a cue from bobble-head dolls; once excited, they tend to keep bouncing for a bit. Once they stop they tend to be rather effective in isolating the record, but at the price of solidity during cueing and the susceptibility

to secondary oscillation caused by footfalls and the like. Tables such as the Linn Sondek are sprung like this except more sensibly, in that gentle handling of the arm and the table, or simply walking up to the table, does not result in the whole affair looking as it was bobbing on the ocean. Other designs, such as some of those from VPI, Revolver, Rega and any number of smaller manufacturers, use a plinth and chassis that is not really properly suspended at all; everything depends on the mounting surface.

It is to these more stiff designs that I direct my firmest attention as regards proper mounting of the turntable system, though it is my experience that virtually ANY turntable's performance may be substantially improved by taking the time to properly isolate and level it. Interestingly, as most of you will know, some SOTA models, as well as the Linn Sondek and other suspended-subchassis designs, sound truly excellent set up on a decent card table or other less-than-massive yet reasonably rigid surface. The infamous Forsell Air-Bearing turntable of yesteryear always sounded its considerable best sitting upon a flimsy Ikea table that you in turn placed upon your shelf or rack. Air suspension made that one actually sound bad. Go figure.

Never mind all of that VTA and overhang rot you may have heard of; if you do not have truly superior isolation from footfalls and music-induced acoustic breakthrough, all of the little adjustments and tweaks on this Earth will not help you past the point of mediocrity in LP play-back. What you are



▶ Looking for here is to be able to pick a record you know to have a dead-quiet background (along with some low-frequency noise or music) and be able to definitively tell where one stops and the other starts.



I use, for instance, the Classic re-pressing of *The Royal Ballet Gala*, which has a rather wicked and loud subway rolling through on several tracks, and tape splices that cut off the noise abruptly. You know you have good enough isolation when you can play this record loudly enough to be obtrusive and clearly hear the subway; when the train ends with the end of the cut or with a tape splice, if you can easily and disturbingly discern the change from unholy thunder to deathly quiet, your turntable isolation system is functioning well. If you can hear audible rumble on that record you may well have a bearing noise problem. Few quality tables today have audible bearing rumble, however, so this is not likely to be a big issue. Now do that same test whilst jumping up and down in front of the kit. I'm actually not kidding.

Fine, you say, but how does one get such isolation in a common dwelling? How expensive is all of this? Well, the good news is two-fold: You can get great isolation both easily and inexpensively. I will describe one do-it-yourself method that lends itself to dozens of permutations. There are many more ways to skin this particular varmint;

I just happen to like air suspension the best. To this end, either build or buy a box with a top measuring in the neighborhood of 45 x 60 cm. or larger, depending on your player's size.

This is large enough to seat a big table and still have a bit of room left for a brush, stylus gauge, etc.

The top platform that fits over the box and holds the turntable should be reasonably dense and rigid.

Some like wood, solid or ply, others Corian. Whatever you may have access to, as long as it is not flimsy. I like Italian marble myself. Once it is all done up you can play with cones and feet under the turntable proper to your heart's content.

The tricky bit comes with what you put in the box. You want to have three air bladders in there: two in front and one centered in the rear. This makes for easy leveling and great load capacity. I suggest using small inner tubes such as for a lawn tractor, wheelbarrow, or

the like. Simply lay them in the box, attach rubber automotive-type vacuum line hoses to the tubes' inlets, then fasten the hoses' other ends to the three tire valve stems you have installed in the three holes you drilled in the center front of the box. Put the top piece on the box, place your turntable rig on the top, pump up the bladders with a bicycle tire pump till the platform is floating and level (I find the inexpensive levels from a hardware store that are about 20 cm long to be ideal for this), and you are done. An alternative to using inner tubes in the box is sand, which works well if you have a sprung SME, Linn, or SOTA, for instance, but it is harder to get level and makes for a super-heavy box that implies an extreme lack of portability. I should mention at this juncture that there are, for those either more well-heeled or who prefer not to sully their hands with vile physical labour, fine air platforms and racks commercially available from the folks at Bright Star, Arcici, Sounds of Silence, Townshend, Voodoo and others. An alternative to an air platform is to build a shelf on a vertical wall in your room, with the

attachments going right into the framing studs (if you have that kind of wall construction). This also works well if your floor is wobbly but the walls are solid.

OK, now that you have a playing platform that should be pretty stable and unperturbed by seismic activity in the room, you need to make sure that this platform is as dead-level as you can make it. (The exception to this is if you have certain straight-line tracking tables like the Clearaudios or the Air Tangents, which need a slight down-hill cant to track across a record correctly. The book says to slant the pickup rail assembly, but I say that you are smarter to keep the rail and the record parallel and slant the platform slightly. A bit more maintenance to keep it perfect is ▶



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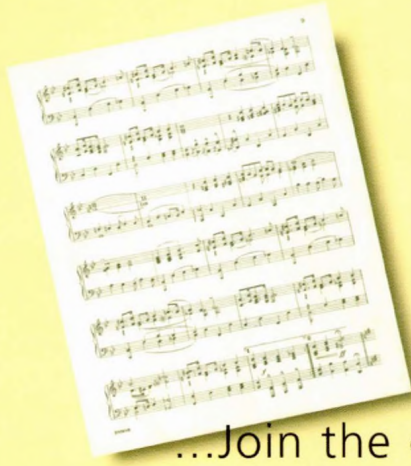
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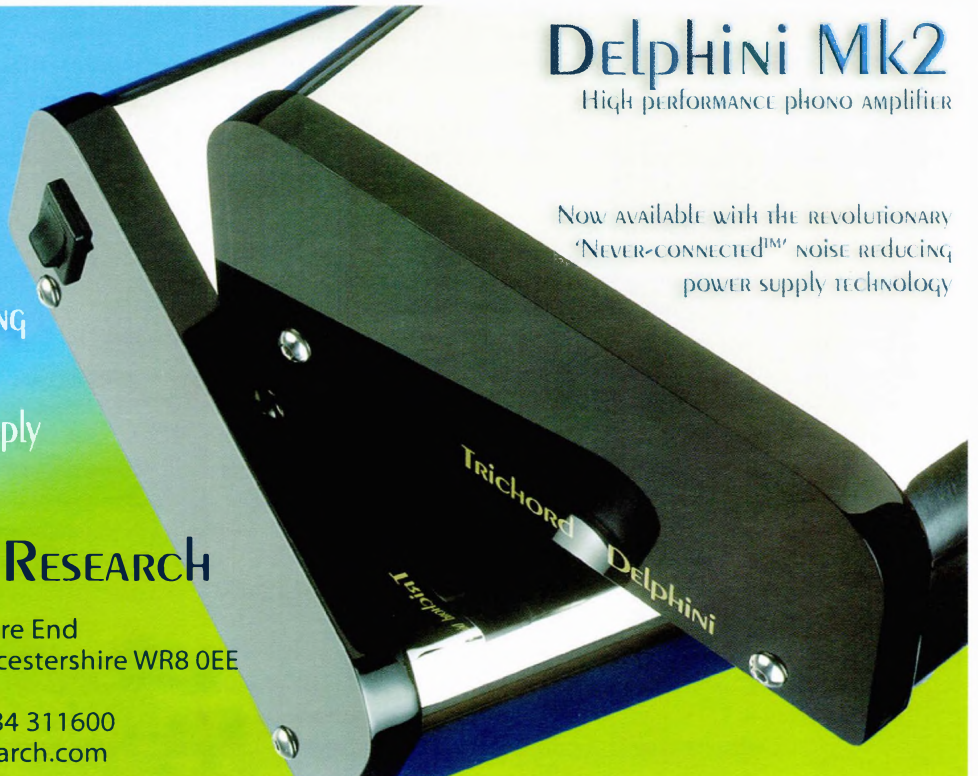
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► involved, but it is worth the effort). This will allow you to set up your arm so that it operates in a balanced fashion in both vertical and horizontal planes. Once you are isolated and balanced, then you can start to fuss with your arm's setup and the fine points of cartridge installation.

The big three of cartridge set up are tracking force, Vertical Tracking Angle (VTA), and azimuth. For the pickup arm/cartridge interface you need to worry about cartridge offset and overhang. I'm assuming the arm has been properly mated to the table. I will not go into that aspect of things, as it is reasonable to presume that portion of the table's assembly has been finalized by a qualified person. Plus there are just way too many variations. To the cartridge mounting, then. So many people are daunted by this part of vinyl playback that I fear it is all too often improperly done. Now, I will confess to some trepidation when handling things such as \$12,000 Koetsus and the like, as one slip spells (financial) disaster. So one can legitimately feel some nervousness at such a level. For the most part, though, the more slowed-down, relaxed, and less anxious about breaking the cartridge you are, the less the likelihood that you will slip and bugger the stylus/cantilever assembly.

Many arms come with protractors of one sort or another, and these can be good, especially if they are exactly tailored for that model. However, for most unipivot and gimbal-bearing arms, a simple protractor such as the trusty aluminium Denessen, now made and sold by Clearaudio in a clear Lexan style, is all that you need to get the basic geometry just right. Again, remember there are many permutations to the basic procedure I am outlining, but the basics are

always the same: You want to get the cartridge hanging on the end of the arm in the correct spot, both in distance from the pivot point, as well as angled on the arm correctly so as to play a record with the least possible amount of tracking error. The way to do this with a Denessen (a simple two-piece device) or the like



is to place the small inscribed plate that come with the unit over the spindle. Then take the arm of the protractor and sit it in the groove in the plate. Fiddle with it till the loose end of the arm's pointer is exactly over the centerpoint of your bearing assembly. Then use masking tape to secure the plate that is around the spindle. Make sure the platter is pinned down somehow so that it cannot move, either – a small wedge under the side is the easiest method. Remove the protractor's arm and set it aside. What you have now on the platter is a geometrically correct crosshatch pattern on the plate with a pinprick in the center that is where the stylus should sit. The idea now is to, by loosening the cartridge on the arm and fiddling and then re-tightening, get the stylus to sit in the hole with the cartridge body around it parallel and perpendicular to the opposing crosshatches.

After that is done you are ready to set the tracking pressure. Here I want to tell you a little story about tracking force: Conventional wisdom often seems to say that the lightest possible tracking is to be

preferred, virtually at all costs. I say this is rubbish. The thing to do is to begin with the manufacturer's suggestions and listen to how it tracks. If it does not do well enough, then simply add pressure by halves of a tenth of a gram or less till the thing tracks correctly, assuming you have a really good tracking pressure device such as the Clearaudio Exact or Cartridgeman.

I usually just dab the end of the arm with little stabs of Mortite till tracking is good, then see what the pressure is with a gauge, remove the clay-like Mortite, and adjust the arm's weight for the desired pressure. With all but the poorest trackers, of which there are blessedly few these days, this procedure will work without flaw. Just be sensible and take care not to get too heavy, as you do not want to collapse the stylus assembly and void your warranty. It is also rubbish that a slightly higher pressure causes undo record wear. The worst thing for a record is to have a needle flying around the grooves lopping off high frequencies and skipping because of not enough downforce. Modern styli will not appreciably wear your records during your lifetime.

Straight trackers all vary a bit on exact procedure, but the basic thing you want to do with all of them is to use a gauge (usually supplied) to make sure you have a reference line between the base of the arm and the center spindle. You have to fiddle with the arm and cartridge so that when you push the arm down its track, the needle

▶ stays right on the gauge's line. Then do your pressure testing as with the pivoted arm.

Now that you are isolated, level, and have the cartridge installed correctly, you are ready to play, right? Not quite. Since you have already taken care of one of the Big Three cartridge adjustments by finding the right tracking force, pretty much all that is left is to optimize the cartridge's VTA and azimuth alignment. Assuming you can do this on your arm. Many arms, especially the more inexpensive ones, simply cannot adjust these last two parameters, as their bearing assemblies are fixed for vertical adjustment, and the headshells on the end of the arms are fixed, as well.

Some arms, such as the Rega, can be adjusted for VTA by shimming up the bearing post for a particular cartridge, but are not easily changed about for use with different cartridges. The bottom line is this: If you can adjust VTA and azimuth, do so according to the instructions that came with your arm. Whatever the arm's design, you want to accomplish the same things here: You want to make the vertical rear area of the cartridge approximately perpendicular to the record's surface. And you want the stylus riding in the groove (as seen from the front, looking back) on an even keel, so that channel cross-talk and tracing distortion are minimized. This is best done with a cartridge analyzing machine, but those are rather scarce. I like to place the stylus on a small, thin mirror that I have laid on the platter and look at how it sits. If it is leaning one way or another I adjust until it appears perfectly vertical. This is not very scientific, I know, but you can get really close and play with it, if you like, later in fine-tuning mode.

Now you are pretty well set. If on playing you want to finely adjust the

cartridge's tonal balance, you can move the back of the cartridge up and down with the VTA adjustment. Generally, lower VTA means more and looser bass and duller highs. Higher VTA tends to tighten up the sound and lean the bass. Too far will result in a shrill, thin sound. Listen to the timing too, it just locks in when you're spot on. Azimuth is harder to describe, but effects image focus and transparency. If it is way off you will get a channel imbalance. Graham make a neat little do-dad that inverts one channel and combines it with t'other. All you do then is play a mono record and adjust for minimum volume. Finally, check the overhang again, as adjusting VTA will also effect that.



If this all seems just a bit much, and something that has more validity to you as reading material rather than actual action stuff, consider this: There is a strong reason we reviewing types fixate so anally on such minute tweaking and adjusting of LP turntables such as I have only begun to describe above. The reason is that (assuming you have at least tolerable hearing) you can all hear each and every one of these adjustments/optimizations clearly and with little effort; the end sound of a full



bevy of phono playback kit is easily and obviously affected by each and every tweak. If you are at all serious about LP playback, I guarantee you that you can improve the performance of your rig by

carefully assessing your situation and then attending to each step I have outlined above. You may not be able to do them all, but just getting better isolation and making it all level will work wonders. Tracking improves, delineation of bass sounds and pitch definition in the lower registers increases dramatically, dimensionality can almost be fine-tuned once you are good at realizing what little fiddling thing does what in your rig. You will be better able to enjoy the finer attributes of your best-sounding albums; conversely, you will also be able to more readily hear the

warts on many others. Accuracy and low coloration are the Devil's playthings: You need to be careful what you wish for...

The bottom line is that (some degree of) turntable optimization is within the reach of virtually every vinyl-lover out there. And think about it a moment: if LPs really were that inferior to digital mediums and ancient and old-fashioned and unstylish, why are we in the middle of an era of the very, very, best phono reproduction that the world has ever seen? Because it bloody works! ➤

Townshend Audio Isolda DCT interconnect

by Jimmy Hughes

It's not often you put something in your system and, from almost the very first note, think - that sounds absolutely right. Yet that's pretty much what happened when I tried a set of Isolda DCT interconnects from Townshend Audio. One gets so used to cables adding their own signature to the sound, it comes as quite a surprise to find one that sounds totally neutral.

DCT stands for Deep Cryogenic Treatment. And, according to Townshend Audio, this explains the cable's extraordinary cleanness and neutrality. Prior to being hand-assembled, the cable is slowly cooled to -190C and kept there for a few hours before being gradually baked to +190C. It's then allowed to cool slowly back to room temperature.

DCT is said to improve the lattice structure of copper, eliminating internal stresses and tiny dislocations. A cable with a pronounced crystalline structure has in effect many thousands of junction points which can create a muddy grainy sound. But care is needed after DCT, otherwise the surface of the conductor will suffer from microscopic fractures.

For this reason, it's advisable to handle the cable as little as possible, and not to bend it sharply. Excessive handling 'work hardens' the copper, causing sound quality to deteriorate. So this is not perhaps a cable to choose if you're constantly plugging things in and out! The makers claim zero burn-in time, but say Isolda DCT improves after being left undisturbed for one or two days.

As indicated earlier, the first thing

that impressed sonically was the sheer sense of rightness and neutrality. There was no apparent emphasis at any frequency; the sound was neither warm nor cool, nor was the tonal balance bright or dull. I had two review samples, and used the first with Audiolab's 8000PPA phono stage, replacing an old Chord Solid cable.



I've had the Chord cable a good few years now, and find it produces a slightly 'dark' tonal balance - something I like very much with LP. Replacing it with Isolda DCT gave a sharper more open tonal balance - not entirely unexpected. But more significant was the lack of grunge and grain in the upper mid-range and treble: the extraordinarily clean overall presentation.

The sound had a naturalness that was both attractive and convincing. The music sounded fresh and energetic, with no apparent coloration. Being a

shielded cable, the Chord has a slightly closed-in sound. Although covered, Isolda DCT has an air dielectric of about 95%, and being unshielded it sounds a lot more open. Clarity was excellent, as were detail and dynamics.

I confess to using a right old mix of cables in my system, among them Kimber, Goertz, and Verdie. I've mixed-n-matched to create a pleasing balance, ending up with a particular combination after much experimentation. Sometimes its not good

to use the same kind of cable throughout - if the cable has a 'signature', it tends to be emphasised the more you use.

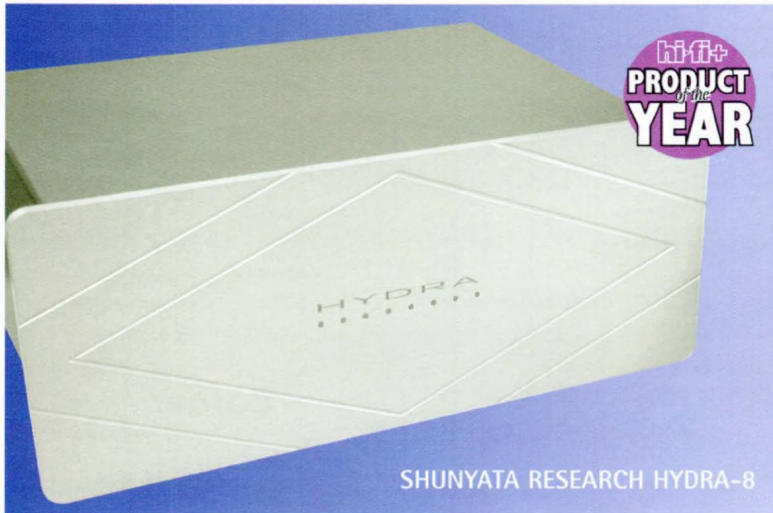
That's partly the reason I've preferred to use different types of cable at home. However, I feel you could safely use Isolda DCT comprehensively. Because it has little or no 'signature' to speak of, you won't suffer tonal problems.

Indeed, quite the opposite: the more you have in your system, the fresher and more natural things should sound.

Having been mightily impressed with Isolda DCT interconnects I now can't wait to try the speaker cable! ➤

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Kathryn Williams

A Fashionable English Folk Tale?

by Reuben Parry

They are the A & R man's worst nightmare. "Folk Singers"! Mention them and the big label Marketing Department engine splutters to a stall. Even Eliza Carthy, the hugely talented daughter of Martin Carthy, while acknowledged to be a rare genre-bending siren, is one who continues to develop and redefine the boundaries for modern British folk music from within a comfortable safe haven on the independent Topic Records label. Home for a more timeless singer like Kate Rusby, whose own songs echo those traditional English verses she covers so well, is the anonymity of the South Yorkshire, Penistone-based Pure Records. In the high street shops their CDs are often confined to a badly lit basement or tucked away in the corner rack and if in a moment of weakness you, for example, happen to innocently ask a pale-skinned assistant for a copy of Rusby's *Sleepless* expect an undisguised blank look. They don't know and they don't really care. This brings me to a "folkie" that they may just have heard of, Kathryn Williams. Her colourful and deeply attractive musical palette pushes the commercial envelope to its furthest point with an accessible brand of folk-pop that has belatedly drawn the attention of one of the majors through an exclusive licensing deal at East West/Warner Music.

It was the surprise nomination of her *Little Black Numbers* album for that prestigious Mercury Music Award back in 2000 which has most definitely bolstered the career of this shy and unpretentious Liverpool-born singer songwriter. Though while in the final analysis she lost out to Badly Drawn Boy's winning *Hour Of Bewilderbeast* all the incumbent publicity that even an almost unheard of nominee receives helped to sell over 40,000 copies of the CD. Wider recognition outside of the eclectic clubs and bars circuit followed, but it is publicity without celebrity that most suits this modest woman who appeared to be racked by nerves during a BBC 2 pre-award

documentary. However, this discomfort was worth it. An East West record deal was put on the table and the down-to-earth Williams ploughed those proceeds into bricks and mortar.

The first priority was that roof over her head - a real banker in such an ephemeral business. It kind of typifies the frank, solid and no nonsense acoustic gems she continues to pen with some regularity.

The flow of recorded music however began back in 1998 when Kathryn set up her own label, Caw Records, and delivered the mini album, *Tobac*. A year later and another album release, *Dog Leap Stairs*, saw Williams gain a much wider critical appreciation as the NME and Times journalists amongst many others waxed lyrical on her emotionally

satisfying songs that are pierced through with a jaw-dropping degree of beauty. This was quite a testament for a ten-track CD that was put together on the proverbial shoestring. It's quite clear from the opening 'Leazes Park' to the closing live track 'Madmen and Maniacs', that her fluid and gently meandering vocal style for this disc suits a lucid and quite handsome voice which effortlessly betrays fragility, tenderness or the stronger emotions that smoulder within most relationships. There are also times when the sublime nature of these arrangements shines through in all its glory. Here the close miking of Kathryn's voice and the captivating acoustic images cast by her guitar are totally beguiling in a recording that sometimes steps well beyond its humble roots. The musical scoring and careful writing for cello, double bass, flugel horn or glockenspiel (both here and on her later albums) shows the depth of texture she achieves when laying down a song. There is more than a palette knife-like precision to their construction and the music here noticeably draws thirstily upon her Newcastle art college background and a short-lived bohemian career as a painter. You can



▶ almost smell the turpentine in songs such as 'Dog Without Wings'; 'We Dug A Hole' and 'Mirrorball' which possess strong visual characteristics throughout their lyrical and musical brushstrokes.

Of course it was the remarkably consistent and confident performances on *Little Black Numbers* that was to propel Kathryn's craft firmly forward into centre stage.

It is an album which effectively highlights her strengths as a singer-songwriter: One who continues to share common ground with the likes of a Carole King, Nick Drake or Nina Simone - all of whom are named as being among her influences. For example, warmth in the performance of 'We Dug A Hole' is conveyed through melodic and softly rhythmic cadences carried by cello, bass, flute and layered vocals. They disarm you to a point where as an audience we are simply not prepared for the candid and lyrical dissection of a relationship which follows when she utters the lines "You said clichés come from the truth. Of beauty that every one feels they can own. Is then truth, being rubbed out or watered down. We dug a hole, to keep everything out of view. We dug a hole, hoped it was big enough." This is a sophisticated, intelligent and charming mix of mellow pop music and some lightly veiled folk idioms. All of which are lovingly presented through Dave Maughan's transparent, rich and natural sounding engineering solutions.

Last year's third album, *Old Low Light*, not only proved that Kathryn could sustain these high standards but on occasions shows that it is still possible to improve upon those charming, atmospheric and delicately framed vignettes she writes. Another dozen sparse acoustic-based tracks fleshed out with her trademark string arrangements and a stronger underlining role for piano and drums again picks over the ordinary and succeeds in making even mundane events like the trip home from a wedding 'Tradition' or an early morning conversation '3am Phonecall' memorable. While their languid rhythms may lull you it's her pithy and sometimes abruptly short songs dripping with

honesty like 'Swimmer' at two minutes and forty one seconds or the darker and more predatory 'Wolf' at just over three and half minutes which propel you forward with a conscious linguistic snap. Staying with the same band of Laura Reid (cello and keyboards), Alex Tustin (drums), Jonny Bridgwood (double bass) and David Scott (classical guitar) gives *Old Low Light* a great sense of synergy. It's good

to have them here because on signing with a big label the backing band is often one of the first casualties. They have an almost empathic knack of providing a perfect instrumental tint or hue at the very moment when you really savouring the beautifully delivered and catchy Williams lyrics of a song about broken love like 'White, Blue And Red'. Unlike many of her contemporaries Kathryn carries off all these images without

a trace of the melodramatic, hair tearing or tortured personas favoured by her peers. This is just yet another distinctive and refreshingly individual aspect to these albums. The good news does not stop here; as all three recordings are readily available as numbered limited edition LPs. *Old Low Light* as a double album, while *Little Black Numbers* and *Dog Leap Stairs* have been pressed

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Record Reviews

How To Read Them















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

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

The reviewers are identified by their initials.

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



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



Kraftwerk

Tour de France – Soundtracks

EMI 591 708 2  

Tour de France – Soundtracks marks an important stage in Kraftwerk's career. It is their first full album for twelve years, the first since Karl Bartos' departure, and the first to contain music played entirely on software instruments and recorded on laptop computers.

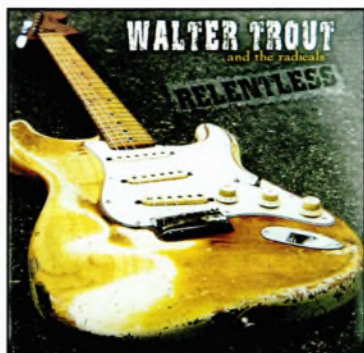
The way in which Ralf Hütter and Florian Schneider have chosen to mark this occasion seems odd at first. The original 'Tour de France' single appeared in 1983, when the duo intended to devote an LP to the subject of cycling. But it was not until the centenary of the race that they had the opportunity to return to the concept.

The result is not a classic album. With techno, house and ambient now well-defined genres, it would be difficult for any new Kraftwerk release to have the same impact as *Computer World*. However, *Tour de France – Soundtracks* carries echoes of past glory and sounds to intrigue loyal robots everywhere.

The new, five-part 'Tour de France' piece succeeds in evoking a sense of wide open space rushing by at high speed, with the 'Chrono' jitterbug being the highlight of the opening section, while the languid vocoder sections of 'La Forme' compare well with 'Endless Endless'. 'Elektra Kardiogramm', with its dark reverbs and atonal organ swirls, could also have been recorded for *Trans Europe Express*, and the new album is closer to *TEE* than anything else.

RC





Walter Trout

Relentless

RUF Records RUF1083 (CD)

In a recent BBC poll Walter Trout was voted number six out of the top twenty guitarists of all time. Had he pulled just a few more votes he'd have been rubbing shoulders with household names like Hendrix and Page.

Walter isn't an overnight sensation though, he's been plying his trade for the best part of 35 years now, regularly playing upwards of 200 gigs a year. He's honed his guitar licks playing alongside blues giants like John Lee Hooker, Big Mama Thornton and John Mayall, and since going solo has amassed a formidable back catalogue. *Relentless* is Walter's latest album, 14 brand new songs full of rich, passionate vocals and searing guitar playing. With this release he chose to record it live in front of a rabid crowd at the Paradiso Club in Amsterdam.

Trout likes to move outside of traditional blues stylings, often ripping into songs on a Hendrix vibe ('Chatroom Girl') or crunching out a riff that would grace any Free or Led Zeppelin album ('Helping Hand' and the glorious 'Collingwood'). He's a great blues player though, quite capable of producing a tender solo of immaculate timing and phrasing or exploding into an intense fury, as he does quite brilliantly on the chugging boogie of album highlight 'My Heart Is True'. Great playing? He's in the form of his life.

AH



Thea Gilmore

Avalanche

Hungry Dog Records YRGNUHA1 (CD)

Hot on the heels of a top forty CD single, 'Juliet', (it's number 6 in the independent chart as I write) comes Thea's fifth genre bending album, *Avalanche*. At the tender age of twenty-three she possesses deeper insight, sharper wit and a greater willingness to open out her heart in a poetic expression of the tensions which exist within it than most highly regarded singer-songwriters twice her years. Thea's words are unstoppable. Like an avalanche they just keep on coming until their powerful delivery and the sheer ice-wall weight of their conviction overcomes you. She appraises and eloquently despatches the sexual, ideological, philosophical and religious demons which in one form or another shape, inhibit or even imprison each and every one of us. The beautifully sung lyrical connections in lines like 'In bloody monochrome that's where I'll call my home' (Pirate Moon), or 'Well they sold you back your outrage in a neat little shrink-wrap' taken from the title track are resonant images that grate, twist or jar against our expectations. Twelve transparent mixes such as that for 'You accessorise with bruises on your cheek' (Juliet) reinforces both the barbed observations and softer musings with their instrumental textures in this her most sophisticated production to date.

RP



The Waifs

Up All Night

Jarrah Records WAIFSCD005 (CD)

The Waifs are a trio from Albany, Western Australia who are beginning to take the Folk/Americana arena by storm. They recently played to packed tents at the Cambridge Folk Festival. None other than Bob Dylan was so impressed when they opened some Oz dates for him that he asked them to accompany him on his U.S. tour.

Like their good friends The Be Good Tanyas, The Waifs have three excellent singers; Sisters Vikki and Donna Simpson and Joshua Cunningham, who also happens to be an absolute whiz on acoustic guitar and dobro (witness his blistering fretwork on 'Since I've Been Around').

All of *Up All Nights* 12 tracks are written by the three band members and the line up is fleshed out with Ben Franks on bass and David Macdonald behind the drum kit. The song writing is of an incredibly high standard, the lyrics are thoughtful, the harmonies utterly delicious and the playing to a standard I haven't heard since Emmylou Harris unleashed her hot band on us way back in Elite Hotel days. One of the sisters (I'm not sure which) has a Southern American drawl to her voice, making her sound like Lucinda Williams 'Little Sister'.

For comparisons, think The McGarrigles meets The Be Good Tanyas meets The Indigo Girls. Quite breathtaking.

AH





Rick Vito

Band – Box – Boogie

Hypertension Hyp 3221

There is no doubt that if you're a serious record buyer, somewhere in your collection you will have an album featuring Rick Vito's amazing guitar playing. You might have Bonnie Raitt's *Green Light*, Fleetwood Mac's *Tango In The Night*, *Lawyers In Love* by Jackson Browne or Bob Seger's *Like a Rock*. As well as featuring on many more classic albums Vito has toured with all the giants and is held in the highest esteem by his fellow musicians, not just for his guitar prowess but also his production skills and the ability to write a class tune. Only recently he picked up a WC Handy Award for best blues song, the rocking 'It's 2 am', by up and coming star Shemekia Copeland.

Rick's last album *Crazy Cool* was a fine affair, all swampy blues and rootsy rock with plenty of his trademark fiery slide playing, but this time around he's opted for a more swinging approach. He's not the first artist to go with that jumpin' Jack jive groove – Brian Setzer reinvented his career with his big band album *The Dirty Boogie* a few years back. *Band – Box – Boogie* comes with a batch of class Vito compositions and a song by Big Town Playboys front man Mike Sanchez, and it's that band's rock n' rollin' jumpin' jive that this fine album most closely resembles.

AH



Tony Joe White

Snakey

Munich Records MRCD 241

The message, thumped out from the Louisiana wet lands with the passion of an evangelical preacher in his pulpit, is clear: "This album has something for everyone: some rock, some ballads, some blues, and a whole lot of swamp". So says the acknowledged king of 'swamp rock', and who am I to disagree? All ten songs here are TJW originals that have the distinctive smell of soaking vegetation, a sense of stifling humidity and the sweat of honest toil about them. The evocatively titled 'Bayou Bleus', 'Living Off The Land' and 'Taste Like Chicken' (with its tale of Diamondback stew) are all languidly delivered in a resonant and unmistakably lugubrious vocal thread whose passage is as stately and unconcerned as that of a grand-daddy cat fish swimming in his muddy pond. Booming bass lines from Marc Cohen's drum kit and Tony Joe's swamp box and whomper stomper back it all up with a rich and spicy instrumental score. Throw together themes about migrant workers, homesickness, past loves and the comedy of the vegetarian's dance in 'The Organic Shuffle' and you have another classic helping of Cajun fare.

RP

Supplier: Cherished Record Co. 01579 363603



Kid Loco

A grand love story

East West/Yellow Productions 3984-208052

Kid Loco make seriously relaxed music. They can be loosely defined as part of the same French dance movement that brought Daft Punk to the public attention in the late 90's, but they bear little in relation musically.

With an ear for fine samples, Kid Loco layer old school beats with smooth bass and drop in some vintage material to bind the whole thing together. The effect is very much like the finest Fun Lovin' Criminals, but without any of the urgency. Indeed, the album is almost catatonically laid-back. This is music to wind down to.

What makes the record so intriguing is its Gallic sense of style. Just as DJ Shadow is always perfectly right-on, Kid Loco manages to effortlessly project a sense of class into the proceedings. Coming in somewhere between funk and soul, the album is sensual and sexual, whilst never breaking into a sweat.

If there could be any criticism of the album it might be that it is, perhaps, a little too relaxed, that it might border on the bland. It's certainly true that the record lacks any discernable hooks, but the tracks are an even mix of singles and experimentation, with enough solid material to justify the albums length.

MC





Gillian Welch

Soul Journey

Acony 50466 6868 2 

Frighteningly heartfelt, soulful and authentic, Welch's latest release again evocatively harks back to those hard dust bowl days of the 1930s and the 1940s in a simplicity and spirituality heard through her storytelling. Adding Mark Ambrose (acoustic guitar), Jim Boquist (bass guitar), Ketcham Secor (fiddle) and Greg Leisz (dobro) to the line up does little to diminish the intimate sounding and "pared to nothing" quality of this music. Whether it's in arrangements of traditional country blues songs like 'I Had A Real Good Mother And Father' and 'Make Me A Pallet On Your Floor', or with a self-penned and deftly handled tale of a beauty queen gone to bad on 'Look At Miss Ohio', you can feel every shattered dream and each second of unfulfilled potential. Gillian's most intensely powerful moments though are still reserved for tracks where it's just her and an acoustic guitar—the instrument which best complements the tragic, sharp featured vocal thread of 'One Monkey' and 'One Little Song'. These are haunting lyrical, melodic and emotionally bare timber-framed structures that are splintered and cracked by her dry-eyed reflections on life's hardships.

RP

Supplier: Cherished Record Co. 01579 363603

RECORDING
MUSIC



Super Furry Animals

Phantom Power

Epic 512375 2 

It's been four years since the super furry animals declared they were going on "pop strike" after their attempt at smashing into the charts failed pitifully. Sure enough, after *Guerilla* they released the obscure and brooding, welsh language album, *Mwng*. But after the pop-genius of their last album *Rings around the world*, SFA have returned again with *Phantom Power* and its safe to say it's back to business as usual.

Phantom Power is the Super Furry Animals moving closer to *Guerilla* than ever, with upbeat and slightly unhinged pop singles, dripping with full orchestral production. All the influences you would expect to find are there: Phil Spector, The Beatles and 70s psychedelic pop, to name but a few.

At their best SFA can produce superb music, laden with hooks, but deeper and more experimental than most. At their worst they produce heavy, incomprehensible mush. Luckily then, this album is clear and bright. Like their old label mates The Boo Radleys, SFA produce perfect pop simply as a by-product of trying to innovate. It would seem the ideas come first, and then somehow the hooks just find their way in later. It's pure, and by the SFA standards, accessible, genius.

MC

RECORDING
MUSIC



Jackson Browne

The Naked Ride Home

Elektra 7559-62793-2 

An exceptional and much covered songwriter, Browne has never backed away from creating the kind of music that reflects a strong social conscience, those firmly held political beliefs or the emotional upheavals of a well-publicised personal life. He continued to bare all for last years new studio album with another ten typically well crafted, melodic and lyrical songs. All the jaundiced perspectives and moments of piercing clarity that have earned him such a devoted following are present and it places this album alongside his best work. Targets of his ire and desire include a thinly veiled criticism of bankrupt U.S. foreign policy in the DC of "...the cowboy mogul" (Casino Nation) and the persuasive and enriching experience of spending your life with the right person (Never stop). Superb breaks and hooks from Jeff Young and Kevin McCormick (who join JB on guitars). Cunning keyboards courtesy of Jeff Young and Mauricio Lewak's rapid sticks together with a guest spot from slide man Keb Mo in 'For Taking The Trouble' are just as engaging as JB's smart word play.

RP

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RECORDING
MUSIC



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Cassandra Wilson

Belly Of The Sun

Blue Note 7243 5 35072 2 0

Cassie Wilson started out as a folk blues artist but after studying with Alvin Fielder and Earl Turbinton in the 1980s she emerged as a jazz singer. Her smoky vocals have in middle age ripened, darkened and thickened with an attractive molasses-like quality. For *Belly Of The Sun* she employs all her expansive, versatile and innovative vocal resources in a return to her Mississippi roots for what is a blues-based album. While her previous releases have freely travelled between funk, swing, rap and even touches of the psychedelic, the musical arrangements heard here are more often indebted to African and Latin influences, especially in their scoring for percussion. A combination of "ethnic" jazz and blues spread over sixty minutes and thirteen tracks is quite compelling, yet Wilson is still most effective (even to the point of brilliance) in those straight blues tracks like 'Darkness On The Delta' and the terrific cover of Jimmy Webb's 'Wichita Lineman'. Nice supporting instrumental resolution and a close microphone position for Cassie's worldly wise reflection bolsters this CD's claims to be in your collection.

RP



Ana Popovic

Comfort To The Soul

RUF Records RUF 1081

Now here's something you don't hear every day of the week – a female Yugoslav blues guitarist! Ana Popovic was born in Belgrade in 1976 and gained an early interest in the blues from her father, a guitarist and avid record collector who always had musicians in the house jamming along to old blues albums.

Popovic named her first band Hush and recorded her debut album in Yugoslavia in 1999, but her big break came when she went to watch Bernard Allison in Germany and he called her up on stage to jam with him. After the gig he asked for a tape of her first album, handed it to Thomas Ruf and the rest, as they say, is history.

Comfort For The Soul is Ana's second release for RUF, following hard on the heels of the excellent *Hush* (RUF 1063). She plays with dazzling virtuosity and sings in a voice not far removed from Chrissie Hynde, albeit with a charming eastern European lilt. She fuses elements of funk, soul and jazz into her blues playing, never better demonstrated than on the quite beautiful instrumental 'Navajo Moon'. She's also a fine songwriter, penning five of *Comfort For The Soul's* 11 sparkling tracks. She has the talent, the looks and the voice to take the music world by storm. Watch out for her.

AH



Badly Drawn Boy

The Hour Of Bewilderbeast

Twisted Nerve XL Recordings TNXL LP 133

Bolton-born Damon Gough is a whimsical looking but eminently talented musician whose abilities extend well beyond songwriting, production and vocal credits to include string arrangements, harps, keyboards and all manner of guitar playing. He simply puts the "V" back into "versatile" and this album, released in 2000, although it pre-dates a stylistically varied *Have You Fed The Fish* and that heavily touted *About A Boy* soundtrack, lacks absolutely nothing by comparison. *Bewilderbeast* is an equally strong and tuneful, well-crafted and wryly observed eighteen track LP: One which often contrasts amusing and self deprecating moments like 'I've been pissing in the wind...I chanced a foolish grin and dribbled on my chin (Pissing In The Wind) with that sharply etched lyrical pathos found in 'Faith pours from your walls, drowning your calls...I've tried to hear you, your not near' (The Shining). Other songs such as 'Blistered Heart' and 'Magic In The Air' unerringly manage to combine these disparate but similarly touching episodes within their structure. For indie fans there's also an intriguing degree of instrumental cover on display as Gough enlists the support of band members from Alfie, Mum & Dad and the Doves.

RP

Supplier: www.vivante.co.uk





Lucinda Williams

World Without Tears

Lost Highway 170 355-2  

Louisiana born Lucinda Williams is a singer songwriter who casually mixes country blues and rock'n' roll songs while clothing their arousing themes of love and lust, obsession, devotion and addiction with a knowing and husky sounding voice that is well suited to teasing out her trembling emotional undercurrents. Lyrically, the language she employs to craft, develop and manipulate the sentiment lying behind these images is sometimes stark, at others gorgeously poetic, but always evocative. In Ventura, a brooding and reflective song about post-break up self-indulgence, she vividly purges herself of those feelings through the act of leaning "...over the toilet bowl and throw up my confession, cleanse my soul of this hidden obsession". This feisty fifty-year old then supports these and many other memorable lines with terrific arrangements for bass, stand up bass, mandolin and the electric guitar of Doug Pettibone. She is also conscious that an actual experience of intense pain and musicians singing about it are not necessarily one and the same thing. 'Real Live Fingers And Broken Guitar Strings' picks at this idea and there's definitely more than a hint of irony beneath its surface. A lovely and suitably robust recording, which has real presence and depth, reveals all these nuances. For analogue addicts the LP release has two additional tracks.

RP

Supplier: Cherished Record Co. 01579 363603



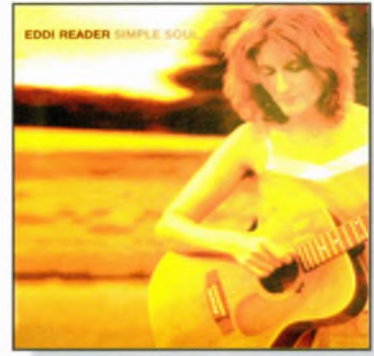
Toni Lynn Washington

Been So Long

Northern Blues NBM0016 

Toni Lynn has been a performer for over four decades now. Like many classic R n' B singers she started her career singing in church choirs. But she knew her chosen path was to get up on stage and perform in front of a crowd, something she first did as an underage teenager, blowing musicians and audiences away with her precocious talent. Her last three releases have thrust her back in the limelight and she has been nominated an incredible five times for the W.C Handy 'Female Blues And Soul Artist Of The Year' award. This debut album for Northern Blues finds her linking up with producer and guitarist extraordinaire Duke Robillard, Ex-Fabulous Thunderbird and a great solo artist in his own right. He coaxes blinding performances out of Toni Lynn and her band across 13 tracks, and together they create a toxic blend of blues shuffles, smoky late night jazz and down home soul. 'Everyday Will Be Like A Holiday' is an album highlight, a smouldering, sensual soul number and a perfect vehicle for Toni Lynn's husky pipes. Listen in awe as she wrings every last drop of emotion out of a great song. She is major league; a potent mix of great soul singers like Ann Peebles and Mavis Staples, and earthier blues belters like Etta James and Bessie Smith, and this is her best album yet.

AH



Eddi Reader

Simple Soul

Rough Trade Records rtradeed 011 

Eddi Reader has, since her chart topping days with Fairground Attraction, been one of those rare, real performers in the British popular music scene: an astute, pragmatic and powerful singer songwriter who possesses a beautifully tender and meltingly low key voice. *Simple Soul* is an eleven-track, mostly acoustic album full of instinctive and largely self-penned or collaborative material that occasionally still delicately and metaphorically touches upon the oppressive and violent Glasgow suburbs of her youth through the presence of that threatening image outside the door in 'Wolves'. The romantic undercurrents elsewhere in songs like 'I felt A Soul Move Through Me', 'Eden' and 'The Wanting Kind' hint at earlier troubled times and are tempered by Reader's redemptive sentiments. Resonant and slightly unsavoury lines such as "And the loneliest sound of all is the sound of love through a stranger's wall" (Footsteps Fall) offer up a striking contrast to the rich ebb and flow of those full-bodied and lovingly reproduced vocal cadences. The instrumental blend of layered dobro, steel pedal and acoustic guitars spreads warmly throughout a truly translucent and wonderfully well defined mid-range to further highlight a tension that exists between those compositional and thematic textures.

RP





Counting Crows

Hard Candy

Geffen Records 493 560-2

Occasionally the peroxide blonde-like folk roots still show through the organic guitar based California sound which has successfully traversed the Atlantic, carried on the quality in the words and music crafted by Adam F. Duritz. It's echoes are most often heard in the lush scoring for horns and strings on 'Miami' and 'Butterfly In Reverse' where a sense of impermanence, misunderstanding and uncertainty are ever present themes. Elsewhere, the title track sums up Duritz's handle on women and relationships in general. In the beginning there's that sweet tasting lover's dance but at some point you're gonna break teeth on a nugget of absence, solitude or those fragile and sometimes irrational thoughts and petty jealousies which plague his imagination. The whole process, though, becomes addictive and he yearns through these songs for more love, more girls and more bittersweet pleasure. The cityscapes of L.A., San Francisco, Miami, London and Barcelona provide suitably insincere backdrops to his carnality, especially "American girls, all feathers and cream" who "Come into bed so edible" ('American Girls'). Plenty of alpha male material here for the amateur 'trick cyclist's' to psychoanalyse.

RP

Supplier: Cherished Record Co. 01579 363603



Brassy

Got it made

Wiiija Records WIJCD1111

Brassy

Getting Wise

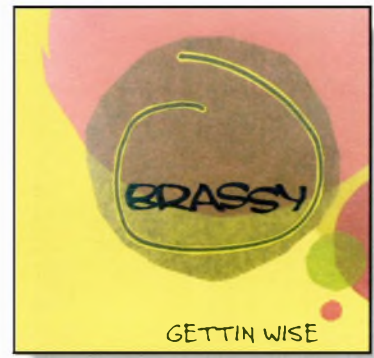
Wiiija Records WIJCD1131

It would be wrong to consider Brassy's new release, *Getting Wise*, without also, at the same time, considering their debut album. Lets get this clear right from the start, their new album is so bland as to make it completely worthless, however, I wouldn't ever want this fact to prevent you from buying *Got it made*, which is nothing short of a modern classic.

Brassy are a transatlantic four-piece who produce a musical hybrid, combining short, punchy guitar riffs, aggressive drum samples and slickly aloof New York vocals. Always a dangerous line to tread, Brassy toured their material to perfection for their first album and then cut a fat-free, super-tight record. *Got it made* is the kind of album that makes you want to strut round the room pointing with both hands.

So what went wrong with *Getting wise*?

At first it seems alright, the guitars are heavier, the beats more solid, but otherwise the formula is the same. But therein lies the problem. The album treads no new ground over the first. Instead of attempting to re-create former glories, the record ends up a carbon copy of



their debut. Without sufficiently inspired material the album stops sounding well integrated and fast paced, and starts to become seriously repetitive. On *Got it made* the vocals were sharp and spiky, now they seem lazy and tired. What the album fails to recreate are the little pearls of excellence in their debut. The sparks of genius and imagination that provided the lustre, that made *Got it made* more than just a pale attempt at genre-fusion are missing. On top of that, *Getting wise* can sound slightly stodgy: Straddling rock and funk is all very well, so long as the record carries no extra weight. *Got it made* proves this perfectly, borrowing only what it needs from each genre, and sounding fresh and vital for it. So *Getting wise* may be new, but it's worth avoiding. *Got it made* on the other hand is just great. Clipped and claustrophobic it's an album with attitude. Mixing digital material with warm analogue instruments makes the album sound fantastic. Floor shaking bass, crisp snares and surprisingly well recorded vocals combine to make a record that deserves good reproduction. Perhaps I am too harsh on Brassy, but even so, if you want to give them a try, search out their debut album first.

MC

Got it made



Getting Wise





The History Man

by Richard S. Foster

The French school of piano is a world I began exploring approximately five years ago. Some advice I was given at the time I always pass on to others: "Buy the cheapest form of the product you're exploring and see if you like what you hear. The sound will only get better with the originals." It was a simple two CD set from French EMI (7243 5 69473 2 0) that was the beginning of a journey I still travel today. I am now hopelessly and totally lost forever in this world. It has turned out to be an area of Classical Music that has given me the greatest joy. Believe me when I say it slightly nudges out my huge fondness for all great strings, and that is saying a lot! The EMI set contained works by Bach, Beethoven and a live Mozart *Piano concerto* with Wilhelm Furtwängler. It also offered my first exposure to Yvonne Lefébure, a name unknown to most modern day lovers of classical music, even devotees of the piano. The main reason for this obscurity is that she spent most of her career teaching.

That Lefébure CD was so captivating I could not believe what I was hearing. The first work on the disc is Liszt's transcription of the *Prélude and fugue in A minor*, BWV 543. There is clarity, cleanliness and a lack of additional interpretative variants by previous artists I'd never heard before. It was as if I was hearing this music for the first time. Her fingering technique was something I was just not used to hearing; strong, delicate, precise - playing from another world. Yes, I know this all sounds crazy, but you must hear her play.

Yvonne Lefébure did not make many recordings in the LP era. By the time microgroove records arrived she was already 51. She was born June 29, 1899. Her father, a financier, was co-founder of 'La Voix de son Maitre' (HMV France). She recorded less than half a dozen 10" EPs, while the Mozart with Furtwängler was taped in the late 1940's and issued by the Furtwängler Society.

Along with another of my favorite artists, Magda

Tagliaferro, she was a direct student of Alfred Cortot. Now, the world of French pianism is a complex and murky one. Rather than wade right in I'll refer you to someone who knows a lot more than me: Charles Timbrell and his glorious book *French Pianism, A Historical Perspective* (ISBN 1 - 57467 -045 -X). It's a stunning achievement based around interviews with approximately 75 pianists, conducted in the 1980's and 1990's.

They supply an invaluable insight into the evolution of this culture. Sadly far too many of the interviewees are no longer with us. Yvonne was interviewed twice. Of the half dozen or so records she made, I've managed to go into debt for four of them. I was able to secure everything that is in the 2-CD set (3 EPs and 1 LP) - two on La Voix de son Maitre (the Bach and the Beethoven *sonatas*), Beethoven's *Diabelli Variations on Ducretet-Thomson* and the Mozart *Piano Concerto K466* issued by the Furtwängler

Society. Originals from the Furtwängler society are almost impossible to find as there were very few made. However, they were re-released by Unicorn and these are readily available from many of the international record dealers I've mentioned in other articles.

This last example aside, you've got to be slightly mad to pursue these discs, so hard are they to find. I only look for the remaining early issues because you just never know. The FBLP issues (La Voix de son Maitre) are impossibly expensive. A "good plus" copy of the Bach recording recently sold for in excess of \$1500. I've not seen the Beethoven *sonatas (opus 50 and 51-109 and 116)* for sale in any condition since I purchased mine - very luckily - approximately four years ago. These were never reissued to my knowledge and were only made for the French market. Pressed in the early 1950's it's easy to understand why so few copies have survived. Ten inch recordings took a special beating, much more so than their twelve inch counterparts.



There is a set of ten records on the French 'FY' label, obtainable occasionally through one of the great French record dealers, Rémi Vimard of Analog-Collector. Visit him at <http://www.analog-collector.com> and see what he may have available. These recordings were done toward the end of her career (my copy is autographed and dated 1984). These records include a wide range of repertoire including Bach, Debussy, Fauré, Schubert, Schumann, Beethoven (sonatas and also another performance of the *Diabelli Variations*), Dukas, Emmanuel and of course Maurice Ravel. Seek them out, they are wonderful, but be warned that they generally cost around €75 each.

Perhaps I am saving the best for last. It's that Coup d'Archet guy again, Glenn Armstrong. Shortly before he moved into the world of subscription series, he released two stunning Yvonne Lefébure recordings. Not only are the performances simply sublime, the packaging is, as you'd expect, a work of art. Have a look for yourself at <http://www.coupdarchet.com>.

Coup 008 contains works by Ravel: *Piano concerto in G major* from 1959 and a gorgeous *Le Tombeau de Couperin* from 1955. This was the period when Lefébure was at the height of her powers and the music making is just glorious. I believe this to be one of the finest Ravel *Concerto in G's* now on record: It certainly rivals (actually betters) that great EMI recording of Arturo Benedetti Michelangeli and Ettore Gracis conducting the Philharmonia EMI ASD 255, the benchmark recording for almost 40 years.

Coup 009 gives us a wonderful selection of Beethoven works: *Sonata No. 1 in F minor, Op. 2 No. 1; Sonata No. 32 in C minor, Op. 111* as well as *Eight Bagatelles - Op. 33 No. 3,*

Op. 119, Nos. 4, 9, 1, 2, 5, 3, 11. These were all recorded in July of 1961 and give us further insight into Lefébure's depth and skill.

Let me finish this article by quoting the liner notes from one of the FY records, written by Rémy Stricker, who captures her essence perfectly:

"To enclose the likeness of Yvonne Lefébure in a few lines of print, you may just as well try to draw a portrait after an ever unquiet model. As tantalizing as it would be to watch her from the upper gallery of too vast a hall, a diminutive silhouette in front of her large black piano, and to be unable to hear how she makes it by turns roar, whisper, or sing in incredibly human tones.

To listen to her between concerts we have discs - but only a few. She began as a little wunderkind, but soon ceased playing whatever good score she came across without asking questions... She has since asked them all, and dislodged and dispelled all the

difficulties, even those it seemed almost impossible to dispel, and achieved the same noble mastery we have learned to admire in a Casals, a Cortot, a Furtwängler, - her friends, and her peers.

A famous teacher, she is never a more pitilessly exacting one than when teaching herself: Her oft pronounced principle: 'Nothing is ever perfect, but every thing is always perfectible.' And her style, and her method of being tirelessly active and controlled, and yet carried away, carried beyond, find their definition in a saying of Dukas's, 'One has to know a lot - and then to make one's music with what one doesn't know...'"





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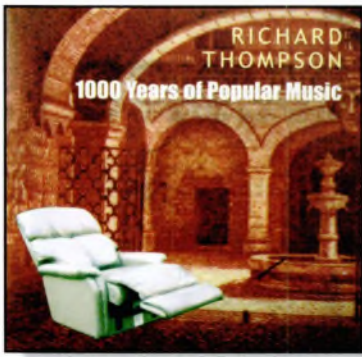
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Richard Thompson

1000 Years of Popular Music

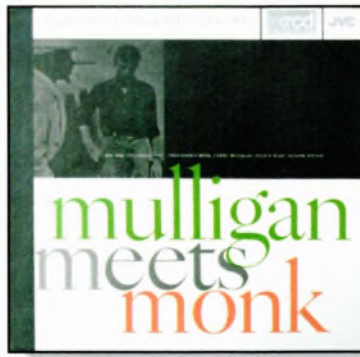
Beeswing BSW003 

Hot on the heels of his superb mainstream release *The Old Kit Bag*, this live set is only available care of the web or at Thompson's gigs. The concept stems from Thompson's literal interpretation of a request from Playboy magazine to submit a list of the 10 greatest songs of the Millennium. He duly called their bluff and submitted a real thousand-year selection. Needless to say it wasn't published but from it was born the concept for a concert that he's performed occasionally over the last couple of years and has finally been captured here.

Accompanied by Michael Jerome, percussion, and Judith Owen, vocals, this is a total delight from start to finish. Kicking off with 'Summer is Icumen In' and taking in songs as diverse as 'Shenandoah', and Gilbert & Sullivan's 'There Is Beauty', it doesn't stop there. How about 'Drinking Wine Spo-dee-o-dee'. Throw in a version of Prince's 'Kiss' (can't be done on acoustic guitar? Oh yes it can!), and even Abba's 'Money' and no one could possibly feel short-changed. Thompson's understated virtuosity is evident as he brings this ludicrously varied selection to life with just his acoustic guitar, Jerome's driving percussion and Owens occasional vocal support to bring each and every one of these 22 numbers to life. This is the next best thing to being one of the lucky souls who've enjoyed this set live.


DD

Supplier: www.richardthompson-music.com



Gerry Mulligan & Thelonius Monk

Mulligan Meets Monk

JVC XRCD 0032-2 

Not the most likely of pairings, Monk being a key and highly individualistic member of the bop school with his angular choppy rhythms, and Mulligan exemplifying cool jazz with his warm toned, relaxed baritone. The set works surprisingly well though. Inevitably kicking off with 'Round Midnight' Monk contributes restrained and very sympathetic piano to Mulligan's sax. The pair take a superbly laid back approach extending the number to over eight minutes not a second of which is wasted. They work just as well on faster paced stuff like 'Rhythm-a-ting' and 'Decidedly' with Monk giving plenty of space for Mulligan to stretch out in some great solo's. This issue features three bonus tracks, 'Decidedly (take 5)', 'Straight no Chaser' (take 1), and 'I Mean You' (take 2). The former is definitely the best version and missed out on the original album simply because during the recording the new-fangled stereo equipment failed, leaving take 4 as the version on the original stereo release. Produced by Orrin Keepnews and recorded in New York in 1957, JVC have done a great job with this. It's decidedly hard left (Monk), centre (Wilber Ware, bass & Shadow Wilson, drums) and right (Mulligan), but the instruments are full-bodied, with the nuances of each performer's playing well captured. This is a highly enjoyable set and a very welcome issue on XRCD.

DD

Supplier: www.vivante.co.uk



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Echoes Of A Friend

JVC XRCD24 VICJ 61038 

Tyner, a superb composer and arranger is one of the most influential pianists in jazz, coming to prominence for his work with the classic Coltrane Quartet in the first half of the 'sixties. He later moved on to become a leader, recording a number of releases for Blue Note before his most fruitful period, recording for Milestone through the '70's. He later returned to the re-launched Blue Note in the late 'eighties to record more fine albums. Originally released on Milestone this solo album was recorded in Japan in '72, and is Tyner's tribute to his colleague and friend John Coltrane. The album takes in three of Trane's most memorable numbers: his own 'Naima', and 'Promise', and perhaps Trane's best known interpretation, his version of Rodgers and Hammerstein's 'My Favourite Things'. Also featured are two Tyner originals the 17-minute 'The Discovery', and 'Folks'. The beauty and intensity of playing throughout is a revelation, from 'Naima', which Tyner opens with delicate chords recalling a classical piece before revealing the melody and launching into a demonstration of true virtuosity and jazz chops. And so it goes throughout the album. There's not a weak track. His take on possibly my favourite Trane number 'My Favourite Things' is particularly strong. The recording is outstanding; weighty and dynamic, capturing every nuance of Tyner's playing throughout this intense and extraordinary session.

DD

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Art Pepper

Landscape - Live in Tokyo '79

JVC XRCD24 VICJ 61035-1 **XR**

From Pepper's latter years, his powers were undiminished at the time of this recording. Supported and inspired by a superbly integrated rhythm section comprising George Cables (piano), Tony Dumas (bass), and Billy Higgins (drums), Pepper and the band were clearly on top form for this session. The opener 'True Blues' is a stormer: Propelled by Dumas' bass with Pepper's fluid alto seemingly filling every available space, there are fine solos here from Cables and Dumas too. The following number 'Sometime' sees Pepper take to clarinet begging the question as to why he didn't play it more (also check out his clarinet on 'Blues In The Night' from his excellent album 'Winter Moon'). The sole ballad of the set and my favourite track here is Pepper's take on the familiar standard 'Over The Rainbow'. He makes this his own from the first notes with an unaccompanied intro before the band joins him in a wonderfully laid-back reading that delivers 11 minutes of pure joy and brings a fresh shine to this chestnut. The set also takes in Pepper's title track, 'Avalon' and closes with a frenetic 'Straight Life' where Pepper seems barely to pause for breath as the notes cascade from his alto, the entire band drive this number like an F1 car, check out Higgin's percussion for one, leaving you exhausted and very satisfied at it's close. This is an outstanding and very well recorded set and is strongly recommended.

DD

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Salena Jones

My Love

JVC XRCD24 VICJ 61034 **XR**

Recorded by JVC in Japan in '81, this is a difficult album to classify – sitting somewhere between pop and soul with just a hint of jazz chops – the one thing that can't be argued with is the quality of musicianship on this release: Eric Gale and Cornell Dupree on guitars, Steve Gadd on drums, this is top-quality session work. Jones has a fine, slightly husky voice and contributes strong versions of Bill Withers' 'Everyday', McCartney's 'My Love' and Stevie Wonder's 'Lately' amongst others of a similar ilk. The standout tracks for me are her version of 'Teach Me Tonight', and 'Everyday' these bring much more of the soul singer to the fore and Jones squeezes more emotion from the lyrics than elsewhere. Just about every number is slow or mid-paced and it's most definitely a late night set. The band's playing is of course superb, Gale's guitar filling in with tasty licks throughout and as ever crisp, powerful percussion from Gadd. It'd just be nice to have a few rough edges here and there, but I guess this set is about restraint and precision and for that it can't be faulted.

The recording is exemplary, tight, deep bass, fluid, rich toned guitar licks and Jones' stage front and 'in the room'. A Bailey's to the Armagnac I'd normally prefer, but tasty all the same.

DD

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John Moulder & Ken Hall

Spirit Talk

Naimcd071 **CD**

This is the debut album from this duo, pairing the unusual combination of guitar (Moulder) and vibraphone (Hall). Recorded live without editing in St Gregory the Great Church, Chicago, the set takes in classics like 'Autumn Leaves', along with Chick Corea's 'La Fiesta' and 'Spain', Keith Jarrett's 'Memories of Tomorrow' a couple of Steve Swallow numbers, and even 'Stella by Starlight'. Four self-composed pieces are also featured.

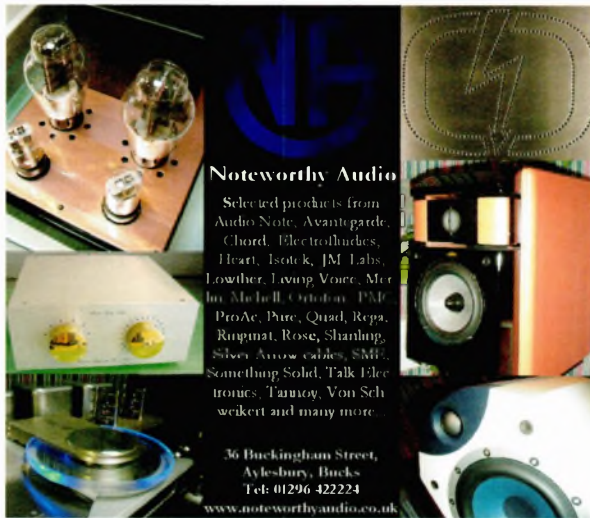
I have to confess that the prospect of a guitar and vibraphone recording didn't exactly set me on fire; on paper at least this risked a deep delve into 'elevator' territory. Fortunately I couldn't have been more wrong. Moulder has played with the likes of Lyle Mays and Eddie Harris, and Hall has trained with Gary Burton, and it shows. Just listen to their take on Corea's classic 'La Fiesta': the empathy between them is evident, the playing superb and for me their version runs a very close second to the original. Both take solo's with Moulder's version of Corea's 'Spain' forming an appropriate display of virtuosity to close the set.

The whole album is very enjoyable, lyrical, absorbing and just a damn fine experience that I suspect I shall return to many times. It's superbly recorded too. Ken Christianson has captured a warm, natural acoustic with real 'in the room' presence. Recommended.

DD

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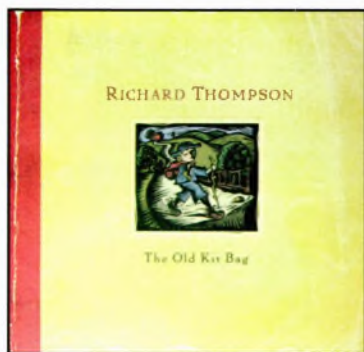


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The Old Kit Bag

Richard Thompson

Diverse Records DIV 004DLP 

Following on from the album *Mock Tudor*, which I reviewed in one of our earliest issues, comes *The Old Kit Bag*. That original review was of the CD, and although the record company then released the album on double vinyl with a couple of extra tracks, to be honest the LP version of the album was disappointing in terms of pressing quality. Diverse Records thought the same as me, and when *The Old Kit Bag* was released they managed to obtain the rights to release it on vinyl, on the grounds that they would do a much better job, and boy were they right.

Let the stylus drop into the lead in groove and you are greeted with a perfectly silent surface before the first notes of 'Gesthemene' strike forth from the speakers. This is a great recording done justice by the pressing; without a doubt another triumph from Diverse Records. The sound is vibrant and dynamic, and totally suited to this outstanding album.

For those of you who are unaware of Richard Thompson, he is one of England's best kept musical secrets. A guitarist of rare technique and passion, and a songwriter par excellence, each of his albums is a finely crafted slice of folk tinged rock. It has to be said however, that his singing voice is an acquired taste. Personally I think he is one of our finest singers, balancing

passion and intensity in equal measure, and whilst I know of many who do not agree, it's certainly one you should sample.

Last time I raved about *Mock Tudor*, citing it as one of Thompson's finest albums. But I believe that with *The Old Kit Bag* he has managed to surpass even that. Many of the songs within deal with love lost, and all the possible ways that comes about, through jealousy 'Jealous Words', or through being jailed 'A Love You Can't Survive'. On 'Pearly Jim' Thompson has managed to find one of the best rock riffs I have heard in years, and this track will rattle through your brain long after you have lifted the stylus from the run-out groove. Other favourites include the jangly 'One Door Opens' and 'She Said It Was Destiny' with its pure pop chorus.

Once again Diverse Records have shown that they have what it takes, both in choosing the music for release on their label, and in producing such a fine result. Well done, and more please.

DA

Supplier: www.diverserecords.com


Tel: 01633 263526

RECORDING
MUSIC



Ron Sexsmith

Cobblestone Runway

Diverse Records DIV 005 LP 

Cobblestone Runway is the sixth outing for a baby faced Ronald Eldon Sexsmith. His knowing and deeply intuitive love songs frequently have a pastoral setting that dramatically contrasts with the sharp and wryly observed word craft that lies beneath songs like 'Disappearing Act', 'Former Glory' or 'Heart's Desire'. His light, airy, almost lazy voice when delivers insightful moments such as "You believed in the words/In all that they meant/Oh, but love is not some popular song/Filled with empty sentiment"; a delicacy, which extends to the supporting Sexsmith acoustic and electric guitar licks. Elsewhere the instrumental layers are provided by Martin Terefe (bass, synthesizers, marimbas) Glen Scott (fender rhodes, upright piano) Claes Bjorklund (synth bass, funk guitar) and Christer Jansson (drums and percussion). However, the recording taped at Electric Earth East, London is no bumpy ride. It has a pleasantly open, nicely detailed and warm sound that suits Ron Sexsmith's deliberate yet fluid approach to those puncture wounds in the heart that love always seems to leave behind. This is sensitive material sympathetically handled, and the beautiful visions of summer's dying embers or the sun striving to break through a grey cloud filled sky are images which suggest that the serene side of folk rock is also safe in these hands.

RP

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RECORDING
MUSIC





Mozart/Witt

Symphony No.35/Symphony in C

Nee/NHFO & Schweiger/BRO

Cisco Music CLP 7001 **180g**

In an attack minded and carefree reading of Mozart's "Haffner" *Symphony* Thomas Nee and his New Hampshire Festival Orchestra players breeze through this symphony with exciting and rarely heard tempi. The *Allegro Con Spirito* and closing *Presto* are taken at breakneck speeds and its hard not to be carried along by their enthusiasm here. The price you pay for this wild ride is a degree of technical imperfection. Traditionalists will probably hate this spontaneous 1976 reading but when taken at face value it proves there is a time and a place for emotional abandon in performances of this work. This comes as a real contrast to the more familiar stately and reverential styles of a Boult, Jochum or Karajan. Witt's *Symphony in C 'Jena'* is an unusual and quite derivative coupling, one which draws deeply upon the works of Beethoven and Haydn throughout its structure and themes. However, this is still an elegant and dramatic piece that the Brussels Radio Orchestra musicians under Hans Schweiger's spirited direction perform with respect. The transfer of these 1958 masters for this first release on vinyl is capably handled, but because of their age there is some audible tape hiss.

RP

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Dvorak/Glazounov

Violin Concertos

Steinberg/Pittsburgh SO/Milstein

Cisco Music/Capitol SP 8382 **180g** **1**

The audiophile reissue labels have largely favoured the spectacular Ricci and Heifetz LPs made by Decca and RCA, placing them ahead of Nathan Milstein's virtuoso performances on Capitol. This re-master starts to redress that imbalance. Milstein's Slavic roots contribute to a lyrical reading of the *Dvorak Concerto*, while Glazounov's continuous single movement work (also in A minor) is sympathetically handled, notably in a richly melancholic and technically demanding closing rondo where the main theme is reintroduced in all its rhythmic and melodic guises. His playing here is blessed with greatness, the bow work is scintillating and he beautifully teases out the composer's lush romanticism. A recording, which has plenty of detail and warmth, also delivers an enviable degree of tonal realism that extends from the violin right across the instrumental ranks. The musicianship under Steinberg's stewardship is impeccable too. A crisp and efficient interpretation of the *Dvorak Concerto* by this soloist could never be described as a completely gripping and whole-hearted one but although it might lack charm at times it does make up for it with its literal "no nonsense" (notes on the page) approach. I am now optimistically looking forward to reissues of Milstein's Tchaikovsky and Mendelssohn/Bruch LPs.

RP

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Britten/Dohnanyi

Young Person's Guide, Variations On A Nursery Tune

Slatkin/Concert Arts SO/VictorAller

Cisco Music/Capitol SP 8373 **180g** **1**

Do not be over critical where the Concert Arts Symphony Orchestra's musicianship is concerned. I'd describe them as competent rather than spectacular players. However, they do perform with a tremendous enthusiasm, especially in the *Young Person's Guide To The Orchestra* and this is a big plus. Britten does of course signal some serious artistic intentions through his use of an underlying Purcell theme, but what I have always liked best is the joy and sheer delight to be had from the shapes, colours and expressive instrumental ranges in this piece. Here it's the uninhibited and entertaining rank and file that gets my approval ahead of those technical, note perfect, slaves. Compositionally the score bleeds colour and a brilliant recording delivers this by the palette load. Midrange strings have body, warmth and bite. The horns are plump and resonant, while the woodwinds are seasoned but still agile. Drum rolls (bass and snare) are crisp and the wallops have an enjoyable sense of scale even though they don't quite plumb the deepest depths. Dohnanyi's ironic *Variations On A Nursery Tune*, is a wonderful counterpoint which deliberately drips huge dollops of self-importance. This filler is full of comic anti-climax and pastiche.

RP

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John Coltrane: *Ballads*

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If you think Coltrane was, as the cliché goes, solely a 'sheets of sound' merchant, then *Ballads* will come as a real surprise. Coltrane plays with a delicacy and warmth that is hard to credit. He sticks close to the melodies and his solos when they occur are short and sweet.

Ballads is a beautiful album consisting of very well known pop and show tunes like *Nancy (with the Smiling Face)*, *All or Nothing at All*, *What's New* and *You Don't Know What Love is*. Think you don't like jazz? Hear *Ballads* and you'll change your mind. Slip on the album and prepared to fall in love with the music all over again.
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Seldom Scene...

Rare, one channel, but worth it all the same!

by Richard S Foster

Records can become rare for a variety of reasons, including, but not limited to: recall by the manufacturer (perhaps a licensing disagreement or production fault), poor distribution, small quantities produced by smaller, independent record labels, poor sales (perhaps aided by poor reviews), not enough interest in the artists at the time of release and so on. Once the record has been made and then deleted, it's over-gone-finished. I find it a fascinating point there are more rare records in the short mono era - say approximately 10 years - than in all the stereo era records combined over the next 30 years.

Of course today, used records command prices based upon the demand for them by collectors. That is a simple fact. Let's look at some of the records desired by collectors and try and judge whether we think they're worth all the buzzes that maybe attributed to them. Of all the major conductors, perhaps none get higher prices on the used marketplace than Wilhelm Furtwängler. His performances of Beethoven with the Vienna Philharmonic, his famous *9th Symphony* performance with the Bayreuth Festival Orchestra are, in my opinion, all outstanding. These records were made and sold in large quantities . . . but they were also played, played often. Sometimes finding "mint" record and jacket from 50 years ago is a bit of a trick. This, coupled with the continued strong demand for Furtwängler's work, sometimes puts extreme prices for some of his output. Here is a simple case of a conductor whose work is highly regarded, long after his death and demand for his original recordings have not ceased. Furtwängler's Beethoven cycle requires the collector to look to the three main European markets to collect original pressings:

England, Germany and France. Unfortunately, nothing in his repertoire saw the true stereo era.

There are certain performances of Hans Knappertsbusch on early Decca stereo that are scarce and command very high prices in the collector's market. His *Great Scenes from Wagner* with George London on SXL 2068 can go for several hundred dollars. The logic behind this has always eluded me - perhaps it's the completest collectors at work. Other Knappertsbusch recordings in the early Decca catalogue also command strong currency in the used market—none of these have been to my liking and I find the cult status given to Hans at the twilight of his career a little too much for me. His

tempi are slow and he's just not very imaginative. These are some of the 'holes' in my Decca collection. I just can't see spending the money for music I find not very well performed just for the sake of checking a number off my master list.

On the other side of the Atlantic there is one record that comes to mind that was not mentioned in part one of these articles. It's the (in)famous 1S-1S LSC 2436 *Pines and Fountains of Rome* with Fritz Reiner

conducting the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, produced for RCA Living Stereo by Richard Mohr and engineered by the great Lewis Layton. This is one of those recall items. They just cut the record a little too "hot" and immediately there were complaints from retailers and buyers alike about the 'needle jumping out of the groove'. RCA recalled all the LPs they could, remastered the record just a little 'cooler' and that was that. Here's a case of a particular stamper number going for as much as 15 times the price of regular copy. In its heyday, I have seen 1S/1S



► copies hitting the \$1000 plateau. Is it worth it? Well, that's a call I will let you decide. I will give you some further information however to help you decide the answer for yourself. When my dear friend Sid Marks was finishing up his reviews of the RCA catalogue, he stated, "To hear all of this as it should be heard, there has never been anything quite like the 1S-1S pressing (though up to 5S-5S still allows for greatness). Regrettably, after receiving many complaints from original buyers about their styli jumping out of the grooves, RCA proceeded to dynamically squeeze all of their subsequent pressings." I have to agree it's sonically quite thrilling and in my opinion there is no one, not even Toscanini that betters

Reiner in this performance. There are many, many things to love about this reading and if you ever hear a 1S/1S on a large, full range system, it's an experience you will never forget. The third movement, 'The Pines of Janiculum', leads us to the thrilling March into Rome via the Appian Way. There is an organ that comes into play as this movement begins. It is very clear and gives one a feeling of foreboding of events to come. Also clearly audible in the cymbal climax toward the very end of the last movement in 'The Pines of the Appian Way', you can hear that Layton cut this too hot and the tape is over modulated and just shuts down. A fascinating effect. This is one of my favorites and should be sought out by anyone who likes this music. You would be surprised that 1S copies can be found in the used marketplace because many people offering some of these records for sale, especially on the internet, do not check the stamper numbers or know the significance of this piece.

One cannot talk about rarity without mentioning the four stereo EMI SAX issues of the Maria Callas operas: *The Barber of Seville*, *Medea* (actually a Mercury Living Presence recording), *La Gioconda* and *Norma*. These of course were all done toward the end of her performing career and Callas is one of those artists people have

divided opinions on. Mine are favorable and I would suggest for those unfamiliar with her work, to perhaps look to some of her remastered EMI compact disc recordings to see if the original LPs are worth seeking out. It's just a smarter way to determine whether you want to invest several hundred pounds in each of her stereo operas. By the way, as I mentioned above, *Medea* was actually recorded by the Fine, Piros, Cozart team for Mercury with their famous three microphone technique. The original is actually the US Mercury, which may sell on the used market for as much as \$75-100. It is what I call, an ear bleeder. It is almost unlistenable.

Fortunately, EMI, as they did with all the Mercury recordings, lowered the modulation and gave them the "EMI house sound treatment." This is one time it works. The result is that the UK issue is highly sought after and the price is upwards of \$600 for a nice set. For those who are reading between the lines . . . you are correct, I find almost ALL the US Mercury Living Presence issues far superior to their UK counterparts. (But that is a topic for another time.)

It's fascinating

to me that some of the most

expensive records are of soloists: Janos Starker, Zara Nelsova, Ginette Neveu, Johanna Martzy, Gioconda de Vito, Max Rostal, Leonid Kogan and Ida Haendel to name but a few. There are more records of course that are valuable, but not to the extent that these artists command in the English catalogues. For the most part, their reputations have grown dramatically after they stopped performing and I think is mostly well deserved.

In my opinion, the Grande Dame of the violin, whose records are very highly sought after, is of course, Johanna Martzy. I'd like to save the discussion of female violinists for another time; believe me I am fully aware of Camilla Wicks (someone I know loves her Sibelius), Michelle Auclair, Lola Bobesco and let's not get me started into the French soloists camp – again at a later date. I've mentioned Neveu above because of her involvement with EMI, but I'll save ►



▶ her for another time too.

There are ONLY twelve commercial recordings Martzy ever made. Four of these were for Deutsche Grammophon and the other eight were for EMI. There was another record never released by EMI that was released only on the Japanese reissue label Lexington, when they were reissuing her entire commercial output. They apparently found the tapes in the EMI vaults. LEXC 1013 contains two performances, a Mendelssohn *Violin Concerto* and the Mozart 3rd (K216) both with Wolfgang Sawallisch and the Philharmonia. These are great performances. I'm a big Martzy fan and there is no one who has done a better job (for me) than she with her Bach *Sonatas and Partitas*: EMI 33CX 1286/8. Unfortunately today, mint sets of these issues now command more than £3500 . . . and rising. Martzy also performed in two recordings for The Eppsteiner concert series in Germany. These were organized by Dr. Jorgen Schmidt-Voigt who was the managing director of the Eppstein hospital. He was also a music lover and amateur violinist. Many of the famous musical artists of the day were patients of Schmidt-Voigt. When he invited them to do charity concerts to help raise money for the hospital and for the health of the patients, they all gladly came. He was a great doctor and this is how they showed their respect for him. There were ONLY 500 copies of these records made. They were pressed by Deutsche Grammophon and have DGG special products numbers on them. Most of these records were sold to those who attended the concert at the hospital-and gave a donation - or they were given to very close friends. The recordings were made by Schmidt-Voigt himself with his amateur equipment and with surprising success. Not only do you hear the wonderful ambience of the hall that was used, but that "live" feeling from the audience. In one recording, there is the only live performance by Martzy of a Bach *sonata*. The record was made in 1966 and has recently sold for approximately £2000. One of the most fascinating points to make is that Martzy's playing is almost ALWAYS absolutely perfect. In the Bach on this record she missed a couple of



notes. When asked if she wanted to correct them, she said, "No, I want the public to know that I am only human." She also performs with an accompaniment, a Handel sonata. For what it's worth, in addition to Martzy, there is also a piece by Professor Enrico Mainardi, the great Italian cellist.

My friend Jürg Schopper has the final piece of the

Martzy puzzle on his website:

<http://www.schopper.ch> (search under Martzy).

There sits the ONLY known stereo recording she ever made. This was done for another Eppsteiner concert. When he told me about this recording I began to get heart palpitations as the collector in me began to go a little on the wacko side. I had to own this. Here's a prime case of just because it's rare, does that make it good? Jürg visited Toronto about three years ago and brought the record with him. I advised him that it was going to stay in Toronto and he'd better be prepared for a fight. He just laughed. Well he arrived and we spent a really great week together doing not too much, just listening, talking and more listening. The second day

after he was somewhat

over his jet lag I couldn't stand it any more and said, "Where is the Martzy?". Well out it came and it looked beautiful. Martzy in true stereo... I was on the verge of perspiring all over the LP before I could get it on my VPI.

I almost died. This turned out to be one of the worst sounding recordings I've ever had the displeasure of listening to. This time, instead of

beautiful string tone, we heard horrible screech tone. It was outrageously bad. The recorded sound was like someone raking their fingernail back and forth across a chalk blackboard. There was absolutely no way anyone could tell who was playing the violin - not to mention how horrible the sound was. Now I know why he laughed. The LP went back to Switzerland and I at least had the opportunity to hear it. It was so awful I wouldn't even make a CD-R of it because, again, there was no way of determining who was playing. And before you ask, yes, it's the rarest Martzy - but not the most expensive. I think he's now come up with a second copy and if you hurry, you may get lucky enough to own one.

▶ The only other artist in the EMI Classical catalogues to come near Johanna (for rare and expensive recordings) is the also wonderful Ida Haendel. There are only three recordings when she was young and relatively unknown that were recorded for EMI: CLP 1021, a lovely encore recording with the great Gerald Moore at the piano; CLP 1032, the Brahms *Violin Concerto, Op. 77* with Sergui Celibidache conducting the London Symphony Orchestra. The last record being the 10" DLP 1190 where she performs the Tchaikovsky *Violin Concerto, Op. 35* with Leon Goossens and the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra. Here's another case in point where rare is good. The encore record commands upwards of £1500 and the others float around half that figure. CLP and its 10" counterpart DLP were not necessarily EMI's top of the line series and were saved for 'secondary artists' or reissues of some 78's in the popular world. (I've got some great Duke Ellington issues on DLP that are to die for). These records never were made in large quantity, so we have an issue of a collectible artist that did not see wide circulation in the marketplace. The compensating factor was that when issued, these items were at a lower price point and that is why we can find any of them today. Ms. Haendel later returned to EMI in the 1970's and made about six concerto/recital recordings and an appearance as the solo violinist in the Previn *Swan Lake* production.

Before I move out of the world of the violin in the English collectible market, I must mention two CLP issues of the complete Schubert *Sonatinas* with Max Rostal's violin and Colin Horsley at the

piano. These two LPs, CLP 1112/3, in my opinion, are average performances. I think Martzy (yes I'm biased) does a better job, but in the end, it's still Schubert. The Rostal/Horsley team made a third recording for EMI, one I especially like, CLP 1124. It contains Schumann's *Sonata in A minor, Op. 105*; a gorgeous Debussy *Sonata in G minor* and a fine Stravinsky *Duo Concertante*. I can't tell you the current value of this record as it's extremely rare. A sale of the two Schubert's recently sold for more than £2000. Worth it? Not to me, but obviously to the collectors who were bidding on these items. So here's an instance where rare is worth much, but not for the music.

Last but certainly not least is the great Russian violinist Leonid Kogan.

He made many recordings for Columbia in the mono days. However, quite simply put, Kogan performed, in stereo (including one recording with his wife Elizabeth Gilels—yes, Emil Gilels the pianist's sister) five recordings: The Brahms *Violin Concerto*, Lalo's *Symphonie*

Espagnole, Tchaikovsky's *Violin Concerto*, Beethoven's *Violin Concerto* and the Gilels recital for two violins. They're all wonderful performances and they are truly worth owning. The problem is that they're all out of reach in their original issues, in some cases, like the Beethoven, entry level is in the £1000 range. Look for his work in the reissue bins or go for the compact discs if they've even been issued. Kogan is one of the great violinists and you should know his work.

All the Janos Starker recordings for EMI except one are in mono (the exception of course is ▶



▶ EMI SAX 2263, the Dvořák *Cello Concerto* and Fauré's *Elegie for Cello and Orchestra* with Walter Suskind and the Philharmonia). The mono issues contain highly regarded performances. Although his first solo appearances were for the American Period label (these records were released on Nixa and then Saga in the UK), he never finished a complete Bach *Cello Suite* cycle. This he did for Walter Legge on EMI Columbia's as 33CX 1515, 1656 and 1745. These are lovely performances and the prices are rising accordingly. Another UK issue that's beginning to skyrocket in price is his encore's record: 33CX 1700, A 'cello recital with Gerald Moore. Perhaps his most famous Bach *Cello Suites* cycle is for Mercury in their Living Presence series and many consider these to be his definitive interpretations. Gold label promotional copies of this set are now creeping over the \$1000 mark. Try and find a set! Most of Starker's early 1950's and 1960's output is beginning to command good money on the collector's market. The depth of his performing catalogue is not all that deep as he spent most of his career teaching. I had the pleasure of meeting him about a dozen years ago and as any groupie, I brought along some jackets in hopes he would autograph them. He was extremely gracious and stopped in his tracks when I handed him a cover of an old Mercury mono when he was the cellist with a group called the Roth String Quartet. He looked at the album and looked at me (figuring that I was no where near old enough to have purchased this new). He said, "Where you get this?" I stated that I had bought it on the used collector's market. He looked at the jacket and commented with a big grin, "They all dead but Starker!" It was one of those moments you just had to be there. For what it's worth, although his performances are getting expensive in their original issues,



I think one of his finest complete sets of the cello suites is on RCA Red Seal compact disc as 09026 61436, performed in the mid 1990's.

Earlier on I spent much time talking about collectible violinists. Let me advise you of another 'cellist I think needs no introduction, Pierre Fournier. A portion of his English recorded output was for Decca, however he did do some wonderful stereo work on EMI SAX as well as a couple of mono jewels. These two stunning recordings only available in mono, I consider 'must haves'. One is 33CX 1606 entitled *The Cellist's Hour* with the other being 33CX 1644 *Cello Encores*, both with Gerald Moore

at the piano. The prices have not yet started to rise on these (mostly because they aren't readily found). Do look out for them. Your rewards will be some of the finest playing ever heard with sound to match.

Just to make you crazy in your pursuit of the rare and wonderful, I'll finish off with one of the hardest violoncello records in the English catalogue to find. I first mentioned my feelings about Zara Nelsova in my second article on mono

recordings (Issue 23, page 137). I think she's marvelous. I recently went off the deep end and purchased her most elusive recording: Decca LXT 5252 which contains, Kodály's *Sonata for Unaccompanied Cello, Opus 8*; Reger, *Suite No. 2 for Unaccompanied Cello* and JS Bach's *Bourrés I and II* from *Suite No. 3 in C major*. A July 1956 release in mono only, it contains fantastic performances. Here's a case of

an LP containing repertoire that's not all that popular and therefore not going over too well with the buying public. Find it if you can because it contains great music, wonderful playing and fabulous Decca FFRR sound. ▶

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