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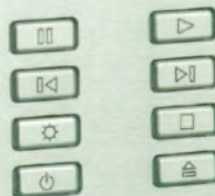
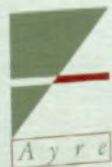
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Editorial

Whilst the benefits of both Hi-bit formats are slowly becoming apparent to established two-channel listeners, getting the best from these new technologies is still early in its learning curve. Factor in multi-channel and that curve steepens to precipitous proportions, its foot mired in the glutinous slime of preconceptions and pre-existing technology. If multi-channel music is to advance the state of the recorded art, then quality has to become a prime consideration. Discrete six-channel points the way, with its promise of purity and proper concern over the provision of identical channels. Unfortunately we are in danger of being diverted by the financial attractions of the existing home-theatre market. All those people with existing multi-channel systems – get them on board and the future (and financial security) of the format will be ensured. No matter that the Dolby 5.1 Movie standard has little or nothing to do with the high-quality reproduction of music. I for one have the gravest misgivings about the quality of anything that exists downstream from a Dolby chip.

As reader Adam Stanhope observes in his letter on page 15, discrete multi-channel requires a totally different approach if you want any chance of realising its potential. Well, in this issue we embark on our first tentative steps on the multi-channel music road. That involves us in both software and the machines that play it. Those also offer picture replay and we touch on that, but what we're really interested in is quality music. We may not have all (or even a few of) the answers yet, but then you've got to start somewhere.

Obituary

It is with enormous sadness that I have to report the passing of one of this industry's real gentleman. John Michell died on the 23rd of October after a long fight against illness. We'll carry a fuller appreciation of John's work in the next issue, but meanwhile our thoughts are with his family and friends, especially his daughter and son-in-law who are carrying on the tradition of excellence at Michell Engineering.



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

Call **Absolute Sounds** for full details.

FEATURED
Speaker_LAT 1

Upper_Showcase Processor
Lower_Showcase Cinema Amplifier

Far right_Krell FPB 750MCX Amplifier



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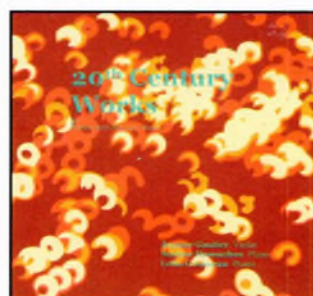
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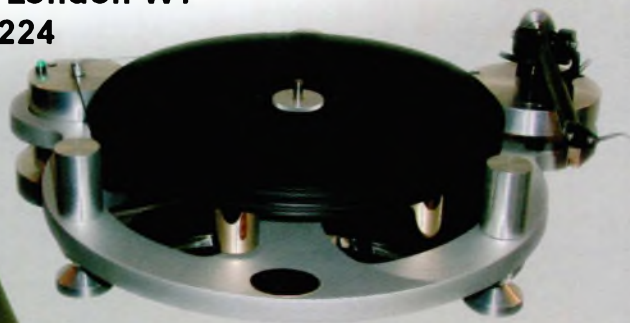


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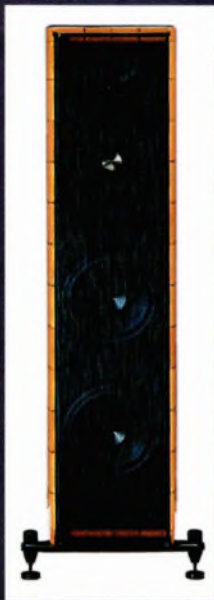


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Wilson Benesch

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Martin Logan

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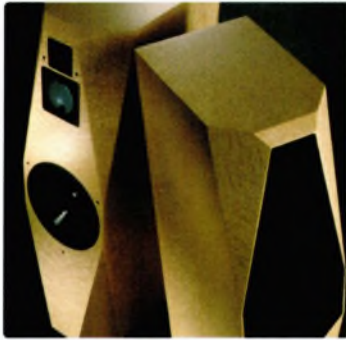
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Music Matters



by Alan Sircom

The bi-annual IFA (International Funausstellung) show in Berlin is not the sort of place to find the future of hi-fi. It's a vast maelstrom of TV sets from obscure Far Eastern brands, flight simulators and car stereo systems designed to stun animals at 20 paces; hardly the right vehicle for our delicate hi-fi sensibilities. OK, so it has brands like KEF, Meridian, MBL, Jamo, Denon and Pioneer on show, but few offer anything like a demonstration. But, look beneath the glitz and women in extremely short hot-pants (OK, look beyond the glitz) and you discover tomorrow's hi-fi like, even if we will not know what to call it.

Many years ago, the term 'hi-fi' used to mean something really special. It used to genuinely mean 'high fidelity'. Products that were classed as 'hi-fi' were a notch above those that merely reproduced musical sounds. You saved up a not-inconsiderable sum of money to purchase 'hi-fi' products and enjoyed them for many, many years. The products featured in this magazine are the latest iterations of the traditional 'hi-fi' ideal.

The rise of the truly dreadful stack systems and music centres changed all that. Bristling with knobs, dials, meters, equalisers and filters, these systems from the outset were classed as 'hi-fi' from the outset, and the traditional separates companies lacked the impetus and clout to challenge this successfully. Moreover, it was such a lucrative part of the industry, the big names had to follow suit and the words 'hi-fi' started appearing on everything. Nor was there much to challenge; the term 'high fidelity' is nebulous at best and you could suggest that anything that has more bandwidth than a telephone is, notionally at least, hi-fi.

Finally, though, the term 'hi-fi' is out, 'audiophile quality' is in. It appears that 'hi-fi' now fails to convey the multimedia audio/video experience anymore. 'Audiophile', while ostensibly limited to the audio side of the audio/video experience, now helps to bestow some seal of authority on two-inch high speakers, 5.1 channel DVD systems that scream at you, three watt amplifiers in PC speakers and bland-sounding CD portables.

Language cannot exist in a vacuum; it is as dynamic as the culture it exists within. Words change their meaning and gravitas and it's no bad thing for this to happen. Fifty years ago, the word 'gay' meant 'happy' not 'homosexual', five hundred years ago, the word 'naughty' was used to deal with the likes of Stalin, not the Carry On team and when David Farragut issued the command "Damn the torpedoes, full speed ahead" at the Battle of Mobile Bay in 1864, he was referring to what we now call naval mines, not the things U-Boat captains used to sink my grandfather.

Nevertheless, in each of the above cases there are words to fill in the gaps made by the changes. No such replacements exist for 'hi-fi' and 'audiophile'. Perhaps we need to reclaim 'hi-fi' from the cheap stereo systems. Magazines like Hi-Fi+ do just that, but we need to do more. It's good that 'hi-fi' means nothing to the new generation of AV buyers anymore, it returns hi-fi to its true original meaning, the quest for high-fidelity sound.

Whatever we call it, IFA also provided a showcase for one of the more interesting new developments in audio. Onkyo has created a PC-related music format that actually works. Called Net-Tune, the system is true network audio, comprising PC software and 'client' audio devices. The client devices include the Onkyo TX-NR900 AV receiver and dedicated NC-500 Net Client mini-systems (identical Net Clients are sold by Cyrus and Imerge; whether they are simply badge engineered or have their own unique differences remain to be seen) which includes a 2x 15Watt amplifier, AM/FM and Internet Radio connections.

The Net-Tune system is clever and relies on aftermarket PC technology. You load a CD into your PC's tray and load the music (as data files) into the Net-Tune server software. This can then be played over Ethernet connections to up to six Net-Tune clients. Unlike a regular music server (such as the Marantz XiVA product), you can expand your Net-Tune server dramatically, by adding another hard disc drive in your PC. You can also choose to compress or not to compress the musical data, listen to entirely different



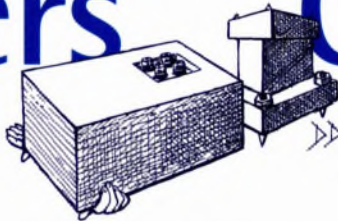
► tracks at each Client station and – as it uses Ethernet – the system can even be used with Wireless LAN (Local Area Network) devices, so no more traipsing cables around from one side of the house to another. There's even accompanying data (track names, album title) running alongside the audio streams.

Not only does this mean you can effectively have six identical CD collections in six different rooms, it also knocks digital radio into a cocked hat thanks to supporting internet radio. If you have a broadband PC connection and something like Windows Media Player or Real Audio, your PC becomes a gateway to music across the planet, and t here is something wonderful about listening to some Indie rock station from Oxford, Ohio in the middle of Oxford, Oxfordshire. Suddenly, you can have access to hundreds of stations, the quality of which (both programming and signal) is variable.

Is this true 'hi-fi' (in the traditional sense)? Well, perhaps. For the longest time, any form of audio involving a computer meant data-compression, MP3-style sound quality. Now, Onkyo and the rest have suddenly made uncompressed digital sound through your PC a real possibility. OK, the small client boxes may be more grounded in mini-system technology, but this is just the starting place. And the Onkyo TX-NR900 is a fully-fledged high performance AV receiver with Net-Tune capacity.

Who knows – perhaps soon, high-end stereo hi-fi amplifiers will start sporting RJ45 Ethernet connectors and sprouting Net-Tune technology. Regardless, the concept deserves to be taken seriously, not only as a piece of high technology, but also as an interesting variation on the multi-room theme – and one that, thanks to its optional use of Wireless LAN technology, you don't even need to drill through walls to install. ►+

Speakers Corner



by Paul Messenger

I'm not a fan of headphone listening myself, finding the whole experience a little claustrophobic, but 'cans' do have the singular advantage over loudspeakers of operating entirely independently of the listening room. The crucial point here is that when you're using speakers, you can only hear them in combination with the listening room.

Which is one reason why 2003 has seen several brands – Meridian, Tannoy, B&O and TAG to name three – using the increasing power of DSP (digital signal processing) to flatten out the main bass room mode ups and downs using digital-domain filtering.

Such a hi-tech approach will have both its strengths and its followers, no question, but it won't sit easily with analogue enthusiasts who rate simplicity a high priority. However, a recent encounter with the latest version of the Living Voice Auditorium loudspeaker suggests that a simpler and entirely analogue approach might go some way towards achieving a rather similar end.

When I reviewed the Auditorium in 1999, measurements showed a port tuned to around 38Hz. This gave a bass

alignment that integrated particularly well with the modal characteristics of my particular listening room, delivering a very well balanced and extended net response. Four years on, the Auditorium has undergone a number of changes, mostly for the better, but including re-tuning the port to around 50Hz. This is very close to a major mode in my listening room, so the overall room-and-speaker bass alignment was now much less smooth. With the earlier version my far-field in-room averaged traces stayed within +/-6dB down to 23Hz, whereas the current Auditorium required +/-9dB limits to achieve the same extension. One of the keys to achieving a smooth bass response would seem to be to ensure that the port tuning coincides with the natural troughs rather than the boosts created by room modes.

While it's true that not every speaker is a reflex-ported design, I'd still reckon that more than 95 per cent of the box loudspeakers to come my way are port-loaded devices. So just what is a port, how does it work, and why does (nearly) everyone use one? It's actually an acoustic ►

VALHALLA

"Special. Very special indeed. I was genuinely impressed by the SPMs, feeling that they established new standards in many important areas. The Valhallas have just rendered them obsolete as any sort of reference. 'Tis ruined that I am."

Roy Gregory Hi Fi + Issue 9

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► resonator, created because the mass of air contained within the port (usually a plastic tube) 'bounces' off the rather larger mass of air contained within the box, at and around a natural resonant frequency. The energy that triggers this resonance is that which comes off the rear of the main driver cone, which would be entirely wasted in a sealed-box system, so going for a port-loaded system is the loudspeaker designer's equivalent to a free lunch. (Especially so since the 'bouncing' action inverts the otherwise out-of-phase rearward cone radiation, so the port output ends up in phase with the front radiation of the driver.)

The bonus of the port is that you get an extra chunk of bass output. However, because a port is essentially a resonator, it only operates over a relatively narrow band, of maybe half an octave. In the classic textbooks, a port would be tuned to coincide with the natural resonance of the driver cone in the box volume, helping control that resonance, and hence minimise the cone excursion and improve power handling. Nowadays, that 'classic' scenario is rarely encountered, and the port tends to be used to improve the bass extension instead.

However, it's my belief that the port would be best employed in trying to 'smooth out' the net bass alignment, by making certain that its output is tuned away from the frequencies where the room modes are providing boost. Which sounds fine and dandy in theory, but throws up a few practical difficulties.

First, there needs to be some means of establishing the specific bass frequencies where room modes boost (or cut) the sound level. Secondly, there has to be a mechanism for adjusting the tuning of the port to avoid the boosted frequencies. Neither of these is particularly easy to accomplish, but neither is without precedent. Infinity has come up with one solution to identifying modes as part of the RABOS (Room-Adaptive Bass Optimisation System) which is used in models like the Prelude MTS. Infinity supplies a test CD and accurate sound level meter to accomplish this, and while the process is quite complex and time consuming, it is undoubtedly effective. An alternative strategy might be to calculate the room modes by using a relatively sophisticated computer program like CARA, though I haven't investigated this option myself.

As for adjusting the port tuning, this has certainly been done before. I can't recall any recent implementations, though I'm sure Wilson Audio did something along these lines some years back, supplying a set of different sized ports for the WATT, and I have distant memories of a subwoofer which changed its port tuning by rotating one 'sliced' section inside another to vary the effective length.

Although there are exceptions (like the moulded Flowports that B&W uses, for example), the majority

of the ports fitted to most speakers are simple moulded tubes, usually with ridges to make an interference fit into holes cut into the front or rear of the enclosure. Re-tuning the port is merely a matter of changing either its length or its diameter, hence changing the volume and therefore the mass of the air in the port. In many cases it therefore would be relatively easy to make alternative, differently tuned ports available.

Though not strictly relevant, it's worth pointing out that a number of brands nowadays supply bungs so that users can block (sometimes partly, more usually completely) the ports on their speakers. This can be helpful if the bass is excessive, which is often the case when speakers are placed close to a wall, but close-to-wall boost occurs in the 50-100Hz octave, whereas many (indeed, most) ports are tuned to below 50Hz.

The Hungarian Envoy

Most speakers mount their drive units on a flat, near vertical plank pointing towards the listeners, a layout and arrangement which seems, on balance, to give a good compromise between the sound that travels directly to the the listeners, and that which bounces off the room boundaries (walls, floor, ceiling etc.) en route.

Either side of that norm there are speakers like horns and dipoles (eg Quad, Tannoy, JBL) which reduce the ratio of room-reflected sound, and omni-directional designs which increase the room-reflected ratio (eg Mirage, Shahinian).

Dick Shahinian's unusual loudspeaker designs have built quite a cult reputation in Britain since Pear Audio started distributing them in the late 1980s. Following production difficulties, the speakers have been difficult to find for the last two or three years, and while all models are now available again, this shortage might be one reason why this Hungarian imitator has emerged.

Heed Audio's website (www.heedaudio.com) acknowledges an inspirational debt to Shahinian, and its Envoy certainly bears more than a passing resemblance to Shahinian's Arc. (Interestingly, the Arc itself is described as a refined reduction of the Citation 13 which Dick designed in 1970 when he was at Harman-Kardon.)

It's more than a decade since I heard an Arc, so can't comment of how the Envoy compares, but I certainly found this Hungarian speaker very entertaining indeed. It's a three-way design, with 155mm, 50mm and 25mm metal diaphragm drivers disposed around a small baffle set at 30 degrees to the horizontal, aiming more upwards than forwards.

The effect is quite different from a forward facing ►

► speaker, and quite captivating in its own way. The image might be less tightly focused than conventional speakers, but it still puts performers in the right places, and does a much better job than regular speakers of integrating the speakers and the room. And if the imaging loses a little of its precision as a result of greater room interaction, there's considerable compensation in the way the sound remains unusually consistent wherever you choose to sit.

I was genuinely surprised at how coherent and free from time-smear the Envoy sounded – a difficult trick for any three-way. It's a little weak in dynamic expression and tension, and the tonal balance is slightly bright with some

laid back tendencies. But it's close to neutral overall, and colorations are restricted to slight nasality and mid-bass 'thump'. And the whole thing is thoroughly entertaining in the way it manages to bring the performers right into the room.

My partner – a much sterner critic than myself – was particularly fond of the Envoys, and made some decidedly uncomplimentary comments when I eventually replaced them with more conventional forward-facing speakers. Indeed, there's such a persuasively natural quality here, I'm contemplating experimenting with tilting some regular stand-mounts backwards. ➤

Home Truths



by Jimmy Hughes

Alfred Brendel's fascinating book *The Veil of Order* contains an intriguing comment (p 47) regarding some LPs of music by Liszt and Brahms that pianist Wilhelm Kempff made for Decca in the early 1950s. For Brendel, these recordings (in the original LP pressings) really captured the way Kempff actually sounded 'in a most unbelievable way'. He went further, saying 'There is a three-dimensionality present that is utterly natural and corresponds to what he could actually do'.

I find this interesting for several reasons. The first is that a recording (in this case one in mono from the early LP era) can actually convey a convincing and authentic aural impression of how a particular artist sounded live. Not merely recreating the tonal quality of the instrument; but producing a vivid believable impression of how the artist in question played; how they sounded. It's intriguing that such qualities can be conveyed - sometimes in sound that's far from perfect in absolute hi-fi terms.

Kempff's Decca LPs are pretty rare; I've got just one - the second of two Brahms discs he recorded in the early 1950s. Hearing it again endorsed Alfred Brendel's high regard for the naturalness and musicality of Decca's sound. Alas, I never heard Kempff live. But he's one of my favourite pianists, and (on CD and/or vinyl) I've probably got just about everything he recorded for DG. Unfortunately, the DG engineers didn't always do justice to the warmth and subtlety

of his tone.

Not so his '50s Decca recordings. On a superficial level the sound is beautifully open and natural. The piano is nicely set back in a clear but spacious acoustic, and the instrument has plenty of air and space around it. But Brendel's words imply more; he's saying in effect that these recordings somehow capture the impression Kempff's playing created. The record gives an insight into 'what he [Kempff] could actually do'. His many subtle colourings and expressive dynamic inflections.

Another favourite pianist is Vladimir Horowitz. I find him fascinating on many levels; man, musician, pianist, technician, artist, interpreter. Over the years I've assiduously collected his recordings on vinyl and CD, and read several books about him - notably Harold Schonberg's excellent biography, and David Dubal's *Remembering Horowitz - 125 pianists recall a Legend*. Yet, sad to say, very few of the many records Horowitz made do him any sort of justice.

It's as though the Horowitz sound did not translate on to records. Most of his recordings emphasise the edgy percussive brilliance of his playing, not its subtle colourings and delicate nuances. Even some of his final DG recordings are flawed - though the best of them (the studio sessions that included Schumann's *Kreisleriana*, and that miraculous performance of the Schubert/Liszt *Standchen* (from

► *Horowitz at Home* DG 427 772-2, recorded in his New York apartment) are pretty good.

My Kempff/Decca LP features Brahms' pieces *Op 76* and *Op 119*, plus the two *Rhapsodies Op 79*. Kempff re-recorded most of these pieces for DG in stereo in the early '60s, but here the recordings (though very clear and articulate) sound tonally shallow and hard - characteristics that afflicted a number of Kempff's '60s DG recordings - the stereo Beethoven *sonatas* cycle for example. On DG, his tone has a slightly dry leaden quality compared to Decca's limpid filigree sound.

A large concert grand has always presented a huge challenge - both to record and reproduce. Dynamic range is massive; the transient attack of hammers hitting strings is frequently colossal. It's tempting to think that only since the advent of digital recording and CD has it been possible to reproduce the full scale and sonority of the instrument. And in some respects that's true. Yet Alfred Brendel believes some of the most truthful and faithful piano recordings were made in the days of shellac 78s.

In judging these recordings from the distant past, Brendel is not using hi-fi criteria. Rather, he's listening as a musician to pianists he either knew or heard live in recital, and judging the ability of the recording to impart the unique qualities (human and musical) of the pianist in question. What's strange is the way that flawed sonics do not necessarily get in the way of the music and its performance; sometimes, even quite primitive recordings can convey the message.

One of the most realistic and believable piano CDs in my collection emanates from a live recital given by Wilhelm Backhaus. Recorded June 28th 1969, it was actually Backhaus' last public performance - I believe he collapsed and died shortly after. On LP the recital was never issued in the UK. But I once saw an imported Teldec double album in one of the specialist London record shops during the early 1980s. I didn't buy it, and kicked myself afterwards.

Why didn't I buy it? Terrible confession; suspiciously, the finale of the Beethoven sonata *Op 31/3* was missing. Why? Had the Old Man collapsed halfway through? If so, I wanted to hear it! What was it Houdini said about no-one going to one of his shows hoping to see him die in the middle of a stunt, but that nevertheless everybody wanted to be present just in case it happened? I guess it's the musical equivalent of slowing down and gawping at motorway accidents...

Anyway, some 20 years later, I again saw Backhaus' last recital - now on a weird Italian imported Decca/Ermitage budget CD for a fiver. So (despite that missing Beethoven finale) I snapped it up immediately. The recording seems to emanate from radio tapes, and in hi-fi terms the sound is far from flawless. Yet, when I played the CD, I really felt myself there in the hall listening to Backhaus; hearing every note - every nuance - every detail. The impression of being at a live

recital was palpable.


How can something so wrong be so right? I think there are several reasons. The first is the complete lack of editing; Some wrong notes and fluffed entries that'd normally be tidied up are left in. So you feel that what you hear is real. Despite a daunting programme, Backhaus' playing is remarkably full-blooded and virile. His stamina is incredible. To play a challenging virtuoso work like Beethoven's Waldstein sonata live at the age of 80 is a feat of daring bordering on the insane.

But Backhaus did it! It's an amazing achievement given his advanced years. And the recording really conveys this. But only if you listen to the whole thing. Dip in it at some arbitrary point, and somehow the impression of liveness is diluted. It's as though there's an inner logic behind the playing (and choice of music) that only fully manifests itself when you start at the beginning. Sampling at different points somehow breaks the mood, destroying the feeling of living growing continuity.

From a technical standpoint the sound itself is not particularly ambitious; the piano tone is full and round, but dynamic extremes are somewhat compressed. The actual sound of the instrument is not glamourised; bass is a bit heavy and woolly, while the high treble lacks sparkle. The hall acoustic is rather cramped, and overall the piano tone lacks sweetness and bloom. Yet for all that, the sonic effect is uncannily real and believable - like a face without makeup; honest and naked.

Despite sonic flaws and limitations, you're never in any doubt as to exactly how Backhaus is playing. To paraphrase Alfred Brendel - you can tell what Backhaus is able to do; his touch, his tone, his way of making the instrument sound. Of course it's a recording you're listening to, not the Real Thing. Yet there's a sense of ones' eavesdropping on the performance; experiencing what the audience experienced. Yes, the playing is mesmerising; but it still falls to the recording (and system) to convey this quality.

There's a marvellous bit near the end. Backhaus performs the opening movement of Schumann's *Fantasiestucke Op 12*, but rather than going straight into the work, he plays a few arpeggios - as though warming his fingers up. Then, with barely a pause, he unexpectedly launches the Schumann - albeit so casually you almost don't realise it's started. It's a truly magical moment; one that still retains its spontaneity and surprise value even after repeated plays.

I find it very moving to think this was almost the last music Backhaus played; that tired and weary, his life ebbing away, he surrendered himself to Schumann's beautiful reverie. I never heard Backhaus live either. But this recording, I feel, faithfully conveys how he must've sounded in recital in his last years. It's a living breathing portrait of the pianist in old age. Truly A Lion in Winter. 



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Incoming!

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

Dear Sir,

I read Jimmy Hughes' article on the Townshend Audio Isolda DCT interconnect cables with some interest as I am considering upgrading my existing wiring loom. The article was very helpful until I had a good look at the associated picture - some of the cables illustrated are terminated with Neutrik connectors and some with Eichmann Bullet plugs. Jimmy mentions being given two sets of cables to try and I was wondering if each set was terminated differently... and, if so, whether Jimmy was in a position to say which termination option sounded better. I'm looking forward to the forthcoming review of the Townshend speaker cables, but, if in the meantime, there was a chance to address whether Eichman or Neutrik connectors sound better with this cable I'm sure it would be of interest to others as well as me. Thanks in advance...great magazine!

Yours faithfully,

Shaun Sheppard

Via e-mail.

Mea culpa, I'm afraid. The cables photographed are ones supplied to me rather than JMh – a simple case of expedience. Townshend normally fit the Neutrik plugs to their interconnects, feeling that they give the best balance of sound quality and mechanical integrity. However, like nearly everybody else they are aware of the startling sonic performance of the Bullet plugs, and offer them as an option. If they sound better why don't they fit them as standard? Because there's a question mark over their longevity and strain relief. Put simply, handle them roughly and you can break either the plug or its connection to the cable. Thus, although Townshend can fit Bullet plugs, they do so at the owner's risk – which means you pick up the tab if they break. So I guess the question is – do you feel lucky? Ed.

Dear Sir,

I run an old classical record business called Cherry Records and am always interested in RSF's articles. We generally have in stock many of the things he refers to and his articles sometimes make me pull out something I have never tried before!

Just a few comments in response to his piece about the use of 'rare' in the last issue. I think perhaps he is a little unfair in not balancing comments about the over-use of 'rare', by adding that most of the leading dealers do not actually over-use it. Perhaps I'm paranoid but I suspect that the message that gets across from the article is that the problem is a general one. My own experience is that the main culprits are those who sell on e-Bay. "If it's a wideband, it's rare" seems to be the rule there.

But the main point I want to make is that it really is darned difficult to know what's rare. There are one or two records, like the famous (and appalling) ASD 429 where distribution was known to have been limited. But, mostly, one has little to go on other than "how many copies have I seen in my time in the business?" By this criterion, my experience confirms yours: I've seen multiple copies of many 'rarities' and only ever one copy of many records that are never mentioned - for example, Britten's Coronation commemorative issue of the *Capriol Suite*, the first copy of which I saw yesterday. It's on LXT and worth, I estimate, £3).

Another factor is that when once a record is identified as 'rare' and priced accordingly, the other thousand copies tend to start coming out of the woodwork (like *Espana* on SXL some years ago). Again, e-Bay illustrates the point: something fetches a high price and for the next six weeks it's listed almost daily. It's a very difficult business selling old records. I intended it as a retirement project and find myself working harder than ever before! And, in seven years at it, I still can't manage to better an annual profit of \$5,000! No, I haven't missed a nought.

We have a stock of over 20,000 classical records and some fascinating equipment to play it on. If you or RSF feel like spending a day here, seeing how the business works (and seeing what 'rarities' you can find), you'd be very welcome. Keep up the interesting articles (you clearly know a Hell of a lot more about old records than I do!)

Regards,

Tony Whieldon

Cherry Records

Via e-mail



► Dear Sir,

If I may, I would like to raise an issue relating to your equipment reviews. The fact that you concentrate on generally outstanding products from manufacturers who are often little known is one of the virtues of your magazine which has greatly benefited readers like myself. However, I question whether you should entirely ignore the products of well known manufacturers such as Sony, Musical Fidelity, Phillips, Quad, etc, especially their high-end products. An example of such a product would be the Sony SCD-XA777ES SACD player, rated by the American magazine *Stereophile* as their digital front-end product of the year for 2002, measured against equipment by Accuphase, Boulder, Wadia and others with much more expensive price tags. (I might add that I don't believe you have ever reviewed any SACD player.) Whilst you may not agree with *Stereophile's* opinion, it does indicate that manufacturers like Sony produce equipment worthy of examination.

I do recognize that there is a plethora of high-end equipment out there, and there must be a limit to what you can cover, but I feel that the occasional review of the sort of product to which I refer might be helpful in putting some of your other reviews into context. I would certainly be interested in your views on this. I would further add that I would be surprised if a fair number of your readers don't own the odd product of at least one of the manufacturers I have mentioned.

Yours

Ron Kirkpatrick

Bruton

Via e-mail

There is more to a good product than simply good sound and there are certain companies that choose not to supply equipment for review or whose equipment we do not request due to issues of reliability, repeatability or service and support (I'm sure they'd say exactly the same of us!). In other cases, we request products and the manufacturer has had insufficient stock to meet existing demand. The last thing he wants or needs is another review. The Quad electrostatics are a good example of this.

However, as regards SACD, you'll see that in this issue we do break our duck. We've also taken a product from Philips, and exceptional it is too. The reason that we've been waiting before reviewing hi-bit hardware is that we wanted a reasonable range of software to be available.

Generally speaking, we are interested in reviewing interesting products, and unless we have reservations about the source, based on experience, we are happy to take them from anybody. We have no bias for or against small or large companies, although we are rather more approachable for new manufacturers than some magazines. We just want products to perform and review the ones that do. Ed.

Dear Sir,

Issue 24's examination of SACD made for a rollercoaster read: Two-channel SACD predominately good, multi-channel SACD the proverbial curates egg. I have spent the last six months trying to assemble a multi-channel SACD system based on 'audiophile principles'. From this perspective I found your views that such an exciting medium already seems to be drifting towards the sideline a touch disappointing. That said there are some really large obstacles that prevent its establishment as a bona fide audiophile medium.

The first is that the basics of SACD are so very different from its multi-channel sibling DVD-A. Anyone that uses a Home Cinema system as a base builds on wholly inappropriate foundations. One of the fundamentals of SACD is the use of five identical speakers. Home cinema based mixed bags of fronts, centres that are often designed to go only as low as 70hz and rears designed to give wide diffusion for 'effects' are not the platform SACD is optimised for.

The second destroyer of pure SACD is the ubiquitous AV processor. Laden with video switching and audio processing that is superfluous for SACD, these will throw a sack over the sound before it has even got to a power amp.

SACD needs a purist approach: an identical chain from the speakers through the cables, amps, equipment stands and mains right back to the source. Correct speaker placement is essential, with fronts at 30 degrees to the centre line and the rears at 110 degrees, with the listener bang in the middle.

Which brings us to the fundamental dilemma. Assuming most audiophiles spend what they can (and sometimes more) on their two channel kit they, face a 2.5 to 3 times increase in cost if they are to properly replicate their current two-channel system.

Now to come back to multi-channel SACD; audiophiles are left with two unacceptable options, downgrade their current system to afford five channels or stay with two. Or thirdly, save some cash and delve into the second hand market for matching amps and speakers. It is time consuming but it works! For the record I have opted for an already obsolete Marantz DV8300, the stunning and the excellent value for money Copland CVA 306 six-channel pre-amp. Power amps are Sugden A21aps, feeding a bespoke, five-channel active crossover and five SBLs. Interestingly I sold my extra SBL, (having bought 3 pairs) very quickly, so I am obviously not alone.

It is certainly an interesting time, I only hope that you the experts stay with multi-channel SACD a little longer and that the manufactures price their new equipment, particularly speakers and amps, to allow us all to hear it as it was designed to be listened to.

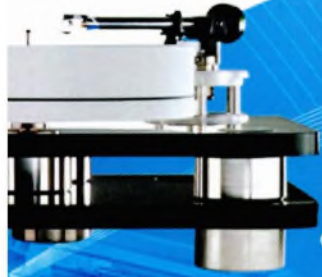
Kind regards

Adam Stanhope

Via e-mail.



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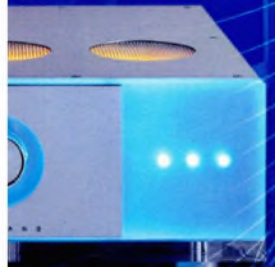
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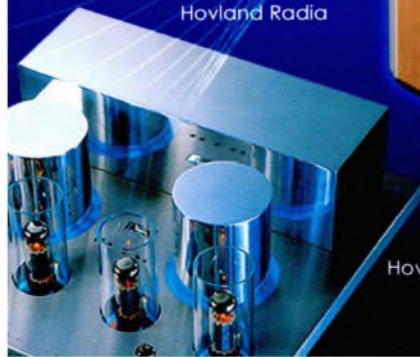
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Flying Visit...

An outsiders view of the 2003 London Hi-fi Show

by Scot Markwell

I want to start this time out with the note that what you will read here is not the usual Show Report that you may well have become used to. Instead of simply presenting a tedious and endless list of the equipment on display in the various rooms, I shall give you a more personal and impressionistic account of the Show as I saw and heard it. From a Yank and a first-time London Show-Goer no less.

Unexpectedly, I found the atmosphere of the whole affair rather different from that of its far larger and more commercial distant cousin, the CES. But whereas CES is, in many respects, all about speed, facelessness and corporate greed, with just a small portion of the activity and almost none of the promotion dedicated to High-End Audio (and video, as well), the London Show did a far better job of bringing distributors, and manufacturers together, all in the service of music. In many ways, this show was more akin to the annual Stereophile Home Entertainment Show, but without that one's blatant and horribly overt commercialism. Sure, there

is always some hype and the odd bit of useless rhetoric, and rumour suggests there was a period in the not-too-distant past when the London Show had reached a low point because of some political stupidity on the part of the organizers, but I know naught of this. I attended a peaceful gathering, spread over two hotels, that at once made me feel welcome as an outsider and as a journalist.

There was even some live music (courtesy of Nordost) by Eleanor McEvoy, the lovely Irish Lass whose recent album *Yola* has received rave reviews in the Hi Fi press. This was a sobering experience. With but an acoustic guitar or violin, a keyboard player and some simple miking, she managed to make all in the large room where she held her performances quickly realize that we have a long way to go in terms of capturing and recreating the

essence of real, live music. And this was not due to the amazing sonic reproduction of her PA system, which was quite ordinary and without much real bandwidth. What was mesmerizing was the emotional involvement she could develop (far better than any recording can do) and the dynamic contrasts and impact that her voice could generate. When I later played some of her recordings at home, it was almost amusing to note that I felt that, in some aspects, her voice was more "correctly" rendered by my Hi-Fi system than by her PA. But I could in no way approach the "live" quality that was the hallmark of her personal performances. (Damn good thing, too, or we would all be out of a job.) The object of this reminiscence is to make the point that real music in real time is the only true benchmark that we have to judge mechanical reproduction, and it was both appropriate and a boon to professionals and buffs alike that she played at this show. Kind of puts things in true perspective.

I wandered the corridors of the Renaissance and Le Meridian hotels for the three days of the show, meeting a number of audio folks for the first time and renewed a number of old acquaintances. For me, people are the most important thing about Hi-Fi, as they give us all of the equipment and recordings we so cherish. It is always interesting, and occasionally personally

fulfilling, to meet and get to know the wide variety of personalities in the audio world. That being said, I did, along the way, hear some really interesting and occasionally amazingly good sounds.

The Overkill Audio room, at the time I visited, had a particularly fetching system playing. It consisted of a set of their Ovation speakers fed by a whole chain of top-of-the-line Tom Evans kit, including the Groove Plus phono stage, the updated Vibe with its two-piece power



► supply, and the selfsame 30 wpc stereo Soul amplifier that I am due to shortly receive for review. CD playback was rather decent, but the real treat was to hear some LPs through this system. Now, I am quite familiar with all of the Tom Evans gear, as I have heard it strut its stuff both at home and at Harry Pearson's listening suites. Wide bandwidth, realistic dynamic contrasts, and an almost ghostly lack of any normal colorations make this stuff sound almost as if it not there. This was all expected. What was not expected were the Ovation loudspeakers. A formidably massive two-way system made up of two wildly-dissimilar (driver) technologies, the Ovations are the first speakers I have heard that successfully implement the Manger bending-wave driver. I remember the Audio Physic Medea a number of years ago, a design that used the physical arrangement of three drivers (one front, one on each side of the box, all at the same height) that Manger himself favors, and it, after much fiddling with placement and ancillary equipment, managed to sound pretty impressive, with reasonably low coloration. In contrast, the current top Manger offering, the Zerobox 103, does not satisfy (this listener), as it has an inherently plastic-y sound that overlays all program material above 200 Hz or so. Amazingly, the Ovation speakers, which feature a bass system patented by the Talon Loudspeaker Company called "Firebird", make use of only a single, forward-firing Manger driver for the musical spectrum from about 200 Hz up. In this application, the Manger sounded to me, in many respects, as fine as any transducer I have ever heard. Open, uncolored, extremely extended and as fast as greased

lightning. Some would be tempted to say it sounded something like an electrostatic system, but these things went beyond that moniker in many respects. Granted, the room was too square to fully realize the bass potential that I could discern, but I played enough stuff to know that here was something extraordinarily interesting here. I made my opinion clear to those in the room, and I have been threatened with the arrival of a pair of these 90 kg (apiece) monsters at the end of October, which should coincide nicely with the re-arrival of the Soul. I confess I am on the edge of my seat for this one.

The Audiocraft room was also quite impressive. Here they were playing the newest top offering from Amphion, the Krypton. Powered by Rogue Audio amplification (the Model 99 Magnum pre-amp and the behemoth 250 wpc Zeus valve amplifier), the system, again in an over-square and too-small room, sounded far, far better than it had any right to. I listened to a cut from a Peter, Paul, and Mary CD, which sounded very natural, with good dynamic contrasts and extremely low distortion. The vocals had a slight cupped-hands-around-the-mouth coloration, but it was negligible. When the last cut (a giant set of Chinese drums including a really big bass drum) was played, I have to confess I was literally dumbfounded. Here was a system playing a piece of music that I knew well, and I had never heard it reproduced better than in that tiny room. Except maybe for the big Sea Cliff system, where all parameters were optimized. The Amphion fellow muttered something about some bass correction via a level switch or some rot, but ►



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► the bottom line was that these were just incredibly well-balanced speakers. And they just loved the Rogue Audio gear. I had only had a couple of cursory experiences before with either Amphion or Rogue, but this demo convinced me that there's gold in them 'thar hills.

The beautifully presented Audiofreaks room was showing some fascinating equipment from the likes of c-j and Kuzma (including the Airline parallel tracking tonearm). The Premier 17LS Series 2 line-stage and Premier140 power amp were driving the new Avalon Ascendant loudspeakers. Sources were the Triplanar and Airline tonearms, mounted on Kuzma turntables, and the rare (but wonderful sounding) Harmonix Reimyo CDP-777 CD player, while the whole room was extensively treated with Acustica Applicata DAAD acoustic devices.

The sound was a model of open, neutral precision, a hallmark of the Avalon speakers. Historically I've not cottoned to the Avalons, admiring their strengths but craving greater dynamics. The Audiofreaks demo didn't change my mind, although it underlined the speakers' capabilities. This was heaven for those folks who swing this way, so it was no surprise that Mike Hobson of Classic Records chose this room for his press conference and demonstration. Not everyone likes it as loud or proud as I do!

Absolute Sounds were busy at Le Meridien with a couple of displays. I did not manage to get into the pure audio side, which featured a Wilson WATT-PUPPY VII

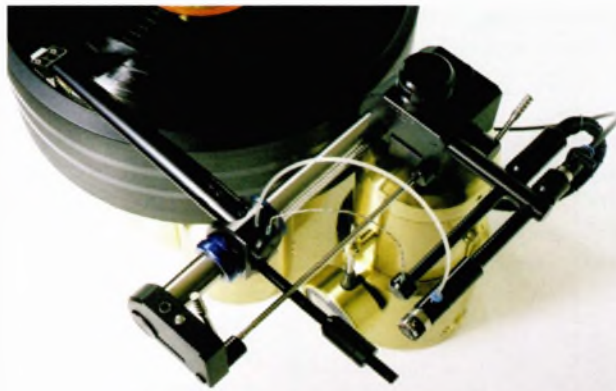


system that apparently impressed the Editor as the best sound he's heard from the VII's. Driven by Theta amps from the new Krell SACD player, the wide selection of real music they were playing obviously helped! But I did manage a demo on the A/V side, which featured Krell electronics and Sonus Faber speakers and a new prototype 3-chip DLP machine for video. In contrast, the pure musical selections were a little unimaginative and tired, but the scene from the movie Chicago was electrifying in both sight and sound. Which just proves the adage that your system is only as good as the program material you feed it.

In the same vein, the EAR room, presided over by none other than Tim de Paravichini himself, looked simply gorgeous with all of the equipment polished to a high gloss, but the sound was not the best.

A Stones CD that was playing sounded quite thin and compressed, with spitty, grainy highs and much compression. The low bass had gone missing entirely. Overall, the presentation through the Kharma Ceramique loudspeakers was semi-enjoyable but emasculated. I expect EAR gear to sound warm and inviting with a tremendous bass foundation and smooth, extended highs. I have heard

those speakers sound the same way, so I suppose the fault is once again with the program material. My question is simply: why pull down all of the hard work put into a room with poor musical material? I have found that every musical genre has recordings available that sound



▶ really excellent. Why not make use of some of them rather than play junk?

Quad had an absolutely enormous suite, with a retrospective sampling of much of their older gear "under glass", with a set of what looked like the latest ESL 989s playing music and sounding quite lovely. Ken Kessler was there promoting his new book on the history of the

marque, and everyone concerned seemed to be in a festive mood. I was a bit (pleasingly) slack-jawed at the class and grace of the exhibit, though I found the air in the room a little on the pompous side. I suppose that Quad is entitled to a bit of this, in that they do have an impeccable pedigree, but I always find it slightly disheartening to sense superior airs. After all, this is supposed to be about furthering music through technology, not glorifying one's own self-important deeds. Still, I was impressed with the history I saw in that room, and reckoned that I should stand it all with good grace.

The lovely Heike Becker was on hand, showing off the latest Audiovalve mono-bloc amplifiers, the Baldur 70s. Not pure class-A like their bigger brothers, the Bladders (Oh dear!), the 70s use the same 6AS7 triode output tubes (four per side) biased in class-AB push-pull for 70 watts per channel. With a damping factor of about 20, as I recall, they



drove the new Cabasse speakers in the room well, using digital sources and an Audiovalve Eklipse line-stage. I thought the sound ever-so-slightly hooded in the mid-band, but perhaps the speakers were not well-enough run in. In any event, I could hear the potential from the amps; I have listened extensively to the big Bladders, and they are magnificent. This is one to watch.



Speaking of Cabasse, I wandered over to their room and had a pleasant talk with Christophe Cabasse, he at the company reins. He was playing their newest A/V pod speakers and they sounded quite fine. I have to confess that some years ago I got a bad impression of Cabasse speakers when the then USA importer, Northstar Leading the Way, brought the gigantic Atlantis system to Sea Cliff. It did not sound well at all, no matter what we did, and in the end they were simply taken away. I think it was a case of too much speaker for the room, as well as not-the-best tuning of the speaker system overall. But the model that replaced it, the Adriatis II, is a stunning performer, especially of large-scale works, and the smaller models have always performed well. I would like to get a set of one of the newer models for official review.

Somewhat surprisingly, good sound issued forth from the Lowther/Magnavox France room down the hall, and I went to have a look ▶



Naim announced new versions of the Nait 5 and CD 5 (no external power supply option for either, but more power and a new volume control for the amp). Both units carry an i suffix and lower prices, and will run alongside the existing models. They also showed a prototype "party pack" of clip-on silver centre-sections for the otherwise black amps. I approve.



Ultimate Sonics offered a whole host of products from Edge Electronics, the highly rated US manufacturer. Heavily worked casework takes macho aesthetics to new heights.



trifle reedy and thin with the wrong amp, acquitted themselves well and played the tune, demonstrating particularly excellent bass extension and control. I have played that Eagles cut both on CD and LP many times and I was pleased at how close the sound in the room came to my mind's ear. Boy, would I love to have a go at their biggest amp, the 150 wpc Synergy DMA. The GT Audio room in Le Meridien featured a set of Avantgarde Trio horn speakers, usually a recipe for disaster at a show. But this set-up was tolerable. With Tron 300B amplification, digital by Lindeman,

▶ and a listen. Please understand that I am not, for the most part, a particular fan of Lowther speakers, as generally I find them, despite excellent dynamic response and a sense of real purity and low distortion, not my cup of tea. In most applications where you find the raw drivers used in another brand of speaker, save for the designs of Tommy Horning, they sound quite coloured through the mid-band, and have almost nothing in the way of real bass

or extended highs. However, the Lowther-badged "whole" speaker systems such as the Delphic or Bel Canto models they were playing in the room when I was there were different, in that they sounded like a reasonable facsimile of actual music. I did not have a chance to listen at length, but I certainly got the impression that there is at least one other company out there that can put these remarkable but persnickety drivers to the best use. Another tempting pursuit of a review is brewing here; I can just about smell it.

I have for some time been a fan of Tube Technology. I stopped in their room just as they were cueing up Hotel California from The Eagles *Hell Freezes Over* CD. Looked like they were using their Unisis integrated to power the latest JMLab Cobalt 826S speakers. The net effect was good indeed. The JMLab speakers, which can at times sound a

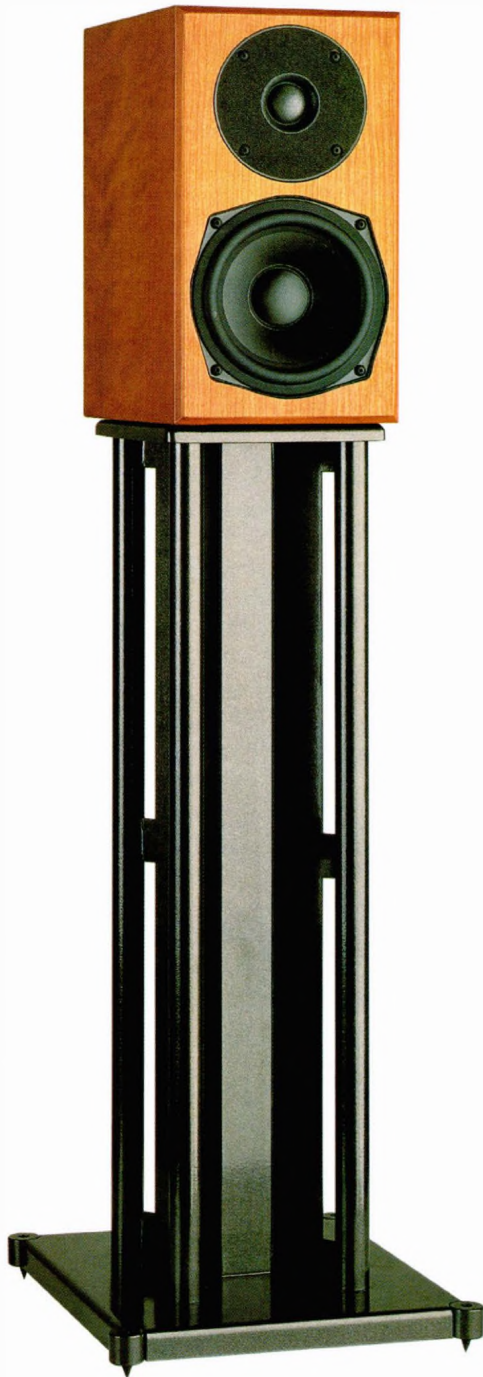
and a Platine Verdier turntable, the system was producing a lucid and enjoyable sound; Leonard Cohen on LP

sounded excellent. The bass was not up to the rest of the system, as the single pair of powered subs were not as well-integrated as they might have been. Common enough with AG systems, it was as much the small room as anything else, but the room still boogied well.

I found my friend Jozefina Kraulcova holding forth on the merits of her latest ▶



Chord Electronics finally produced a transport, the Blu, to match the DAC 64. Extremely cute, the top-loading unit is predictably overbuilt.



Mite

A micro-monitor, which offers an aesthetic design as uncompromised as that of any other Totem product, all of which are known as much for their beauty as well as their sound. Beyond visual aesthetics, the Totem Mite offers spectacular sound-staging abilities and a seductive musical sense. Like all Totem products, it offers value for money despite its size. Its dimensions are not a liability but a contributing factor to one of its killer advantages: gigantic imaging and sound staging. Vocal and choral works will astound you. Discover a micro-monitor with precise focus, realism and defined bass information that extends well beyond anything you could reasonably expect. Designed for the music lover whose priority is not only huge dynamic contrasts, but also sheer musical involvement, the Mite will fulfil and surprise you. Discover its ability to encapsulate music and transmit its theme and spirit.

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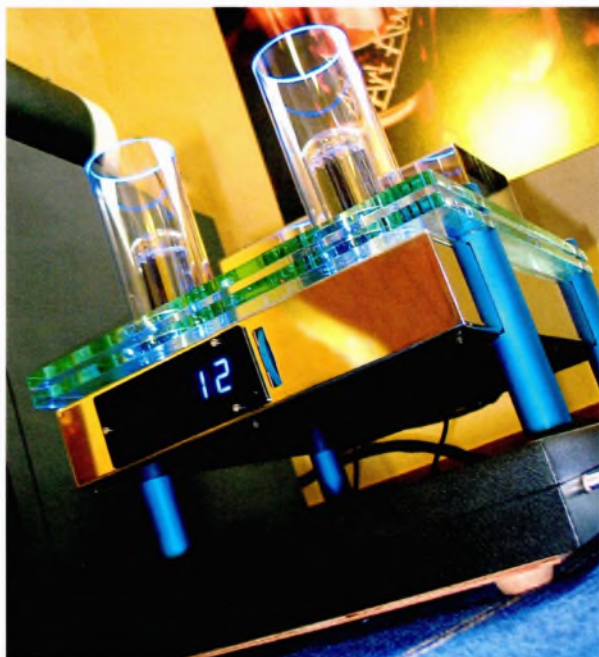
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▶ Ayon/Tesla valves in the Art Audio Room, along with Tom Willis, that company's designer. They were playing his latest creation, the Carissa 845 SET, with a set of Avantgarde Duos doing the speaker honors. This system sounded pretty damn nice; I think that the far easier setup of the Duos (or Unos, for that matter) makes them preferable in most instances to the Trios, which are only truly at home in much larger rooms. I have been listening to Ayon KT88 and 300B valves at home in different amps and I have to say that they are truly excellent; much better than the current Chinese offerings and more refined than the Russian. The Carissa, ironically, uses an 845, which Ayon do not make at this time, but who knows what the future may bring?

Last but by no means least I managed a quick listen to some of the new Eben loudspeakers from Denmark. The redoubtable Lars Christiansen of Nordost fame was doing the demonstration to a fare-thee-well, and in the end I was most impressed by the smallest of the bunch, the X-Centric (a stand-mounted two-way with the same centrally placed, in-house built ribbon tweeter that graces the whole range) that sounded much bigger and more potent than it had any



Stop Press

Vecteur electronics are once again available in the UK. Their baby CD player and integrated amp sounded excellent, driving a pair of small Magnaplanars. Sound by Design (www.soundbyd.com) distribute.



Audiofreaks displayed a first from conrad-johnson – a solid-state amp worthy of the Premier appellation. The new Premier 350 is large, golden fronted and priced at £8000, while the normally phlegmatic designers are really quite excited about its performance.

right to. I shall definitely be having a long, hard look at this company and its products.

My show experience was capped off by a lovely dinner with the Editor and some friends at Rules, London's oldest restaurant, where we all took part in a serious chomptest that would have scared the game away, had it still been alive. At the end of it all, I was winded and beat, but happy I went and looking forward to doing it again.

Shortly after I made it back to New York, I was fortunate to attend a Carnegie Hall concert by the Kirov Orchestra, conducted by Valery Gergiev. The program was the full score of Prokofiev's *Romeo and Juliet*, and it was an eye-opening experience. You know, it never fails: just when you think you have heard some really good kit, the kind that makes you think you have discovered a new level of reproduction, you go and hear the real thing, and all the walls come crashing down. I am not taking anything from what I heard in London, mind you, but the almost unbearable magnificence of what I heard the Kirov do that afternoon in Manhattan made me realize, just as when I listened to Eleanor McEvoy at the Renaissance, that we all have a long, long way to go. But the destination is surely worth the long and tortuous journey. ▶+

Hard-disc storage for music? How about the Audio ReQuest Tera-960, a unit that measures its capacity in Tera-bytes. That's sufficient for around 1800 uncompressed CDs!

Russ Andrews finally showed his long awaited electronics. RA insides inside Samuel Johnson casework looks like an exciting match-up.



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Too Much Of A Good Thing?

Why multi-channel represents the future for high-fidelity (and why there's a way to go yet).

by Alvin Gold

Alvin is one of the established names in UK hi-fi journalism, and has been writing regarding things audio for longer than I've been reading about them. He is also an early convert to the potential of multi-channel recording, particularly for classical music – whilst freely admitting that the reality is all too often rather underwhelming. I invited him here to offer his thoughts on the subject. Ed

A little over twenty years ago the audio industry went through what amounted to a cosmic upheaval, when compact disc was introduced to an ambivalent market. The advantages offered by CD over records and other analogue sources were ergonomic – small size, resistance to wear in normal use, and the ability to cope with a level of mechanical mishandling that would have defeated vinyl records. The sound quality advantage of CD has been

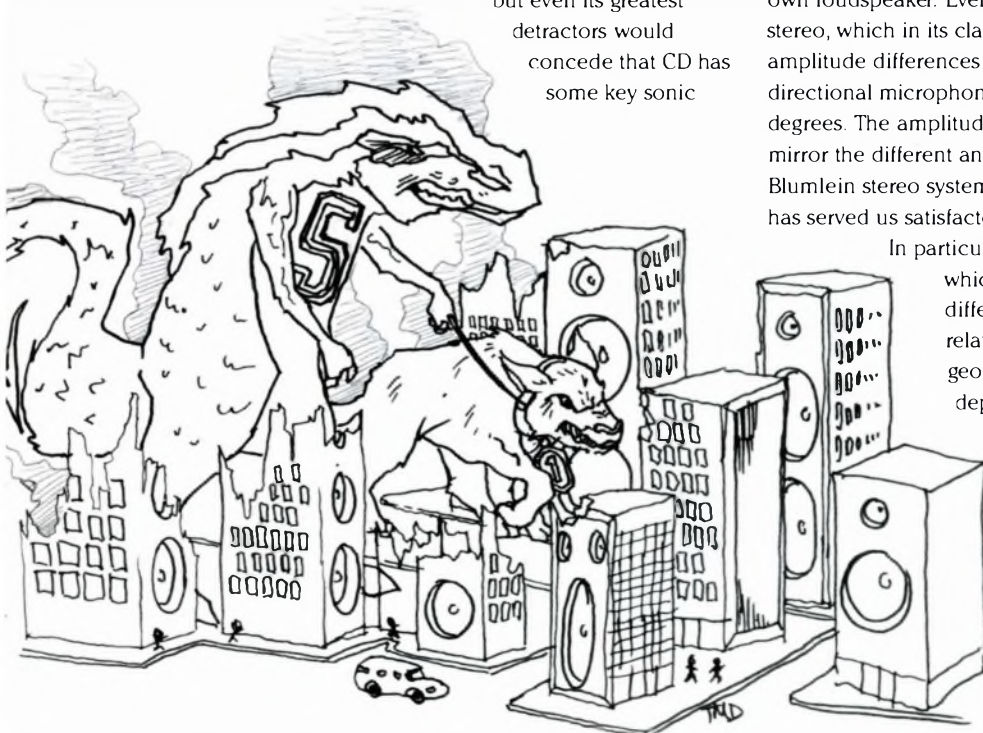
disputed from the outset, but even its greatest detractors would concede that CD has some key sonic

advantages over earlier techniques related to background and impulsive noise resistance, frequency response linearity, distortion residuals and so on. What is disputed is whether these benefits necessarily translate into better, more musical sound.

Right now we're in the middle of a second, potentially much more significant revolution, one that could not have happened at all had it not been for the technological underpinning of compact disc and its enabling technologies. The problem is that this new development has worrying parallels with a much earlier upheaval. One that promised a sea change in the reproduction of audio, but which in the end fizzled out ignominiously - quadraphonics.

The reality is that there is nothing sacrosanct about two-channel stereo. In fact it is more or less a historical accident. Early attempts to improve monaural sound involved arrays of microphones, each connected through an amplifier to its own loudspeaker. Eventually we ended up with two channel stereo, which in its classic Blumlein implementation uses amplitude differences as heard by two closely positioned directional microphones whose main axes cross at 90 degrees. The amplitude difference on the two channels mirror the different angular directions of the sound sources. Blumlein stereo system works rather well on the whole and has served us satisfactorily for half a century, but it has limits.

In particular it takes no account of phase effects which in real life combine with amplitude differences and other effects, for example related to head masking and ear pinnae geometry, in a complex frequency dependent way to give the brain the cues it needs to reconstruct a three dimensional soundfield. Two channel stereo only hints at what is possible when creating realistic soundfields. and in any case tends to fall apart when you introduce spurious phase and amplitude errors, which can be done by something as trivial ►



▶ as sitting off the centreline between the two speakers. One symptom of this is the way that the stereo image collapses into the nearest speaker. In the cinema, where the goal is matching the action on screen to the directionality of the sound for the whole audience, not just those sitting on the favoured centre line, two speaker stereo is simply not good enough.

Historically, it has been the film industry that has set the agenda for what happens in the home. The film industry has long understood the need to steer sounds to match the action on screen, and stereo in films has always taken four channels as its starting point – three or more laterally spaced across the screen, plus a surround channel. In the home, the dominance of twin-channel stereo was predicated mainly on pragmatism, the pragmatism that says that people don't want their living rooms stuffed full of loudspeakers, and the pragmatism that says that vinyl records can only readily accommodate two channels of sound.

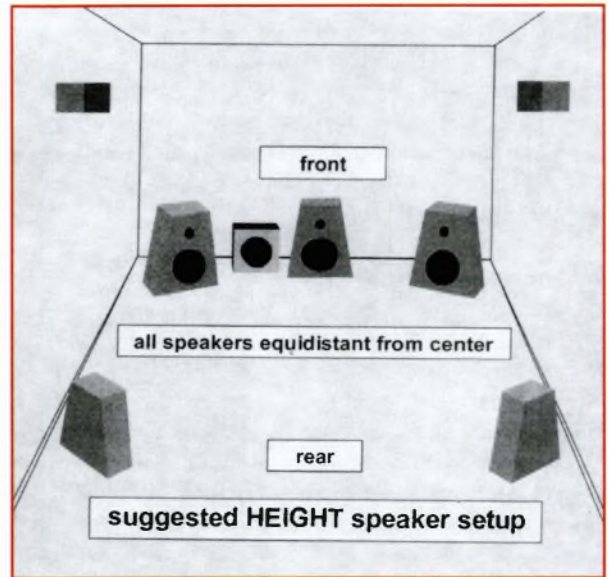
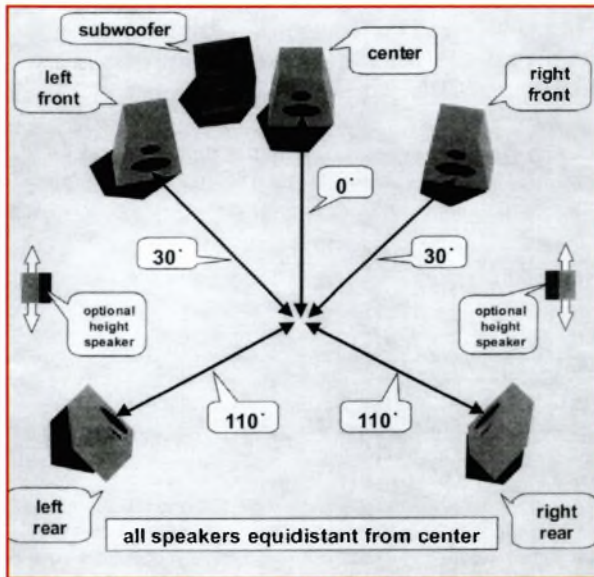
The industry learned a hard lesson when it tried to ignore this fact by introducing quadraphonic systems back in the '70s. There were three main versions and some minor ones (eg Ambisonics), but what they all had in common was a degree of backwards compatibility with stereo. Most of those formats employed an X type array in which the four speakers were positioned at the ends of the two arms of an imaginary X, with the listener at the crossing point. That Quadraphonics didn't succeed commercially is a simple fact of history, and anyone with any technical competence will give you many reasons why, not the least of which is the poor surround sound performance intrinsic to hardware formats as deficient in phase performance (and in other respects) as record players. But there were other reasons for its abject failure. First was the lack of industry agreement that saw three mutually incompatible formats - SQ, QS and CD4 - being launched head to head by commercial companies with axes to grind. Another was that there was no real agreement about the technical model for multi-channel sound, what it was intended to do for the listener, and how these requirements would be realised by a four speaker matrix.

Quadraphonics threatened to kill the very idea of multi-channel sound in the home for good, but the rise of video, and the availability of films on VHS tape with stereo soundtracks carrying Dolby Surround coding, seeded the next revolution. This time there was a single format that was policed by a respected outsider, Dolby Laboratories, who had already made a name with their noise reduction system. The original Dolby Surround replay matrix involved a simple four speaker array little superior to SQ and the rest a decade earlier, but there was already a fast expanding range of film based material to play, and the same imperative long understood in the commercial cinema to match the spatial elements of the sound to the picture on screen. Soon Dolby

Surround replay was handed over to Dolby Pro Logic decoders, which added a fully steered centre channel and logic sensing to enhance channel separation. The modern era of multi-channel audio had arrived. Film was soon followed by music, which at first was recorded using the same Dolby and soon DTS data reduced codecs used for film sound on DVD-Video discs. Lately however multi-channel music has been introduced on the back of the two high resolution discrete multi-channel disc formats, DVD-Audio and SACD.

Of course there are problems. On one level, as an industry we appear to have learned nothing from the Quadraphonics debacle, with not just two mutually incompatible formats – SACD and DVD-A – but a host of others on the fringes, all based on the DVD-Video base standard, and with sound from Dolby Digital and DTS in 5.1 and 6.1 EX and ES variants. There's even a dark horse in the shape of DTS 96:24, which is tailor made as a pop video disc format. It needn't concern us here that DVD-A, in many ways is the most attractive of the protagonists, apparently has a smell of death about it. As a statement of the obvious, however, it appears to be going absolutely nowhere, fast, with a dire music release schedule punctuated by a succession of big name geriatric hit albums from the '70s and '80s – Queen, Mike Oldfield and the like - as its main life blood. Its great rival, SACD, lacks support for video information to accompany the sound in its current form (as it happens video is included in the core format specifications, but it has not yet been implemented), but there is a vibrant and rapidly growing catalogue of mainly classical releases. This you may recall is exactly how the CD market established itself two decades ago. Nevertheless, cynics could reasonably object that we're shaping up for a replay of the old Quadraphonics style format wars of the '70s, with disc and coding formats designed to bolster the licensing streams of the major electronics multinationals involved.

This does not entitle us as audiophiles to turn our backs on what is happening. In my view, we have already passed the point of no return. My esteemed colleague Paul Messenger wrote in the trade magazine *British Audio Journal* of his personal belief that 'vinyl is the new 'high band' format, and that we don't really need (or perhaps don't particularly want) either SACD or DVD-Audio'. He went on to complain that he doesn't want to be 'in the middle of the action. I like the music in front, just as I am used to'. Let's examine this. There may be a case to be made for being in the middle of the action with certain material. A celebrated example was the strikingly effective 10.2 channel demonstration given at CES about three years ago in which a theatre production took place around the audience in a darkened auditorium. But there are more ▶



The Sony/Telare suggested arrangement for 6 channel SACD replay. Note the five identical and equidistant main speakers and optional "height" speakers. The spartan appearance of the room is closer to reality than most hi-bit manufacturers would have you believe, at least if quality is an issue.

► mundane examples of the value of multi-channel sound without stretching to this rather impractical extreme. I only have to think back to a live concert I attended some years ago, where I sat immersed in a sea of sound from the audience before the musicians even entered the auditorium, generating a sense of involvement and presence quite unlike anything generated by records or CDs. It was this experience that first convinced me that multi-channel was the way to go. When the music started, the main component of the sound, the first arrival sounds, came from the front, but the reverberant soundfield is truly three dimensional, and I would argue absolutely essential to the illusion of properly reproduced music. This is hard enough to achieve using a whole room full of speakers, but it is impossible through two, which presents a pale, diminished, shrunken facsimile of the original. And this is what we hold up as our gold standard, our paradigm for excellence in musical reproduction?

Broadly speaking surround sound speaker disposition is more or less fixed at five channels - left, centre, right, left rear and right rear, with the option of a sub-woofer to handle low frequency sounds redirected from other channels when using limited bandwidth satellites. There are some variations, for example a height channel (eg. Sacred Feast from Gaudeamus, a choral recording made in a cathedral), while the Opus 3 label favours omitting the centre and the LFE channels altogether. One point of departure from home cinema practice is that a home cinema sub-woofer is normally intended to handle the powerful low frequency effects – explosions and the like – even when full bandwidth

satellites are used.

And the effects of multi-channel recording with music? Electronic music abides by its own rules, which will always be the subject of whim and fashion. But at least when talking about the main thrust of acoustic material, classical or otherwise, the desired effect is almost always a firmly front-biased soundstage which is rather like two speaker stereo, but with the rear channels turned high enough to pull the sound free of the front speakers, in the process adding depth and three-dimensionality to the illusion. It is absolutely not about sitting in the middle of the action. One other point: Crucially, with a standard five-channel array, the front soundstage stays firmly locked in place even for off axis listeners.

Much is made by the hardware manufacturers about how to balance the sound of all speakers for time arrival and level so that the sound is optimum when a multi-channel recording is played. But this is to ignore the human factor, the variables in the recording and mastering processes that may well and often do result in a sound mix from the back channels that is far too rich. It sometimes seems that unless the contribution of the rear channels is very obvious indeed, they are not paying their way. This more than anything else is responsible for the complaints about performers cropping up all around the listener. So is there a way around this?

Of course there is, but here the picture begins to look rather murky due to the difference in the way speaker management is handled by DVD-A and SACD. With both formats, the digital signal off disc usually undergoes D/A ►

► conversion in the player to maintain the integrity of the digital code. But DVD-A players generally have only relatively crude speaker management, and SACD players are worse, apparently because the chips that understand DSD are not capable of manipulating the data, for example to apply high pass filtering or time delays, with the ease that is taken for granted in the world of PCM.

There are a few cases, mostly attributable to Pioneer and to Denon, where a properly protected (encrypted) interface has been implemented allowing D/A conversion after appropriate bass management in the amplifier, just upstream of the volume control and power amplifier. Although the same sequence of events is followed by SACD, a similar problem arises. DSD cannot be operated on directly by the current generation of processors used in multi-channel amplifiers. The only exception to this rule at the time of writing is the Pioneer VSA-AX5 receiver, which is uniquely capable of processing the native DSD data that is passed across the iLink interface, and to generate an analogue output directly from it. But even the VSA-AX5 must convert DSD to PCM before it can apply bass management, and inevitably this is not an aurally transparent process.

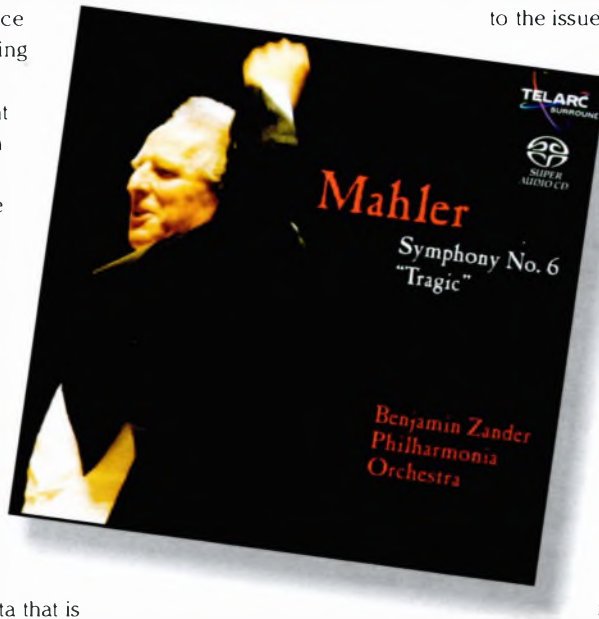
This technological jungle is confusing and discouraging to say the least, as well as being responsible for, or contributing to, the variable results experienced with multi-channel recordings. The preferred solution, which is spelt out in an insert you'll find in most multi-channel SACD releases, is to follow the ITU recommendations, which places five identical full range loudspeakers on the circumference of a circle with the listening seat in the centre. The left and right speakers subtend a 30 degree angle from the centreline, and the surrounds 110 degrees. The arrangement makes a lot of sense as it places the left and right speakers more or less where they would be in a stereo system, and the surrounds much further forward than you'll often find, which counters a common problem: an audible hole in the image at the sides of the room. By contrast, the lack of coverage immediately behind the listener doesn't seem to matter much in practice. The ITU arrangement also eliminates the need for differential time delays due to different distances from the speakers. Last

but not least the ITU arrangement can double up for home cinema systems. (Unfortunately, whilst long on simplicity and short on DSP, which are both good things, the ITU recommendations are almost impossible to achieve under normal domestic conditions. Just do the sums for your own listening room. Short on practicality too, then. Ed.)

I am aware that at the end of this feature, there are probably more loose ends and open questions than there were at the beginning. So be it. There are more angles

to the issues raised by multi-channel audio

than there are to a protractor, and I hope that if nothing else will at least have made the point that there are few absolutes, few blacks and whites here. But my experience, albeit with only a minority of recordings at present, but a growing one, is that multi-channel recording technique can help cut through a presentation style attributable to two-channel stereo that may be familiar and enjoyable, but which ultimately has little to do with the aims of high fidelity: the closest approach to the original. In my experience, a good multi-channel recording reproduced well can provide a uniquely compelling listening experience.



Four multi-channel recordings that work:

Mahler
Symphony No 6 'Tragic'
Benjamin Zander (conductor),
Philharmonia Orchestra
 Telarc SACD-60586-C (3-disc set)
 Hybrid multi-channel SACD/CD (dual layer)
 & CD discussion disc

It is still early days for SACD, and there are few examples of top-flight alternatives of the same work available in the format. Here is an exception. The Michael Tilson Thomas recording of the 6th with the San Francisco Orchestra on their house label is excellent as a reading and as a recording, but this version, with Benjamin Zander conducting the Philharmonia, is better still. It is arguably the finest recorded 6th in any format, notwithstanding some distinguished major label competition. ►

▶ Sold for the price of a single full price disc, this 3-disc set includes alternative versions of the finale on the second disc, with the original three hammer blows, or the later reduced version with two hammer blows, which was Mahler's superstitious reaction to events in his daily life. It also includes a genuinely informative and entertaining 80 minute illustrated discussion CD. Musically speaking, the reading is broadly measured without being slow, and impassioned without descending into sentimentality. The playing is of the highest order, with the augmented orchestra playing as one. This is a sensational recording too. Every detail is crystal clear within an overall presentation that has tremendous weight and power, enclosed in a broad, deep but firmly front-focussed soundstage. An important, standard-setting release, and in my view unmissable.

Saint-Saëns
Concerto for Cello and
Orchestra No 1, Op. 33.

Tchaikovsky
Andante Cantabile &
Variations on a Rococo
Theme Op. 33.

Bruch
Kol Nidrei Op. 47.

Pieter Wispelwey
 (cello), *Daniel Sepec*
 (leader), *Deutsche*
Kammerphilharmonie Bremen
 Channel Classics CCS SA 16501
 Hybrid multi-channel/stereo
 SACD (dual layer)

An enjoyable, rather mellow programme for cello and orchestra contains works from the mainstream romantic repertoire. Pieter Wispelwey gives a beautifully measured account of the four works, with the attractive Saint Saens *Concerto* taking centre stage. The Tchaikovsky *Andante* is satisfyingly elegiac, and the *Variations* are suavely handled, with characteristically perfect intonation and with responsive and sensitive playing throughout, even in the more animated sections (*Variation 7* for example) that can sound untidy or hurried in lesser hands. But it is the short and solemn final work on the disc, the

Bruch *Kol Nidrei*, that is the standout on this disc. The recording is as attractive as the music, but is unlikely to pacify those who consider SACD too distant to connect properly. Imagery is a little amorphous, and the image wanders around to the back too much for comfort unless the channels settings are tweaked, which helps restore normality.

Olivier Messiaen
Turangalila Symphony

Jean-Yves Thibaudet (piano), *Takashi Harada*
 (ondes martenot), *Riccardo Chailly* (conductor),
Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra

Decca 470 627-2

Hybrid multi-channel SACD/CD (dual layer)

Here is a work that has been treated well by the gramophone in its day, and this is the first and only version available to date on high resolution, multi-channel disc. It was a front runner even in stereo (the recording dates from the early '90s), but the advantages of multi-channel reproduction place this version at the top of the heap, for this listener at least. The demonic whistling of the infernal ondes martenot is perhaps a little muted, but the recording overall is a stunner, which really grips in the best Decca tradition, nowhere more so than in the 5th movement (*Joie du sang des étoiles*), which is tackled by the orchestra as though possessed. This performance is stunning from first to last, Chailly allowing the orchestra its head while

ensuring that the astonishing wealth of detail in the complex score is allowed full expression. The recording is first class too, the multi-channel mix helping separate out, as well as adding



▶ depth and layering to the illusion. A great score, reading and performance. What more could you ask?

Mahler
Das Lied von der Erde
Violeta Urmana
(mezzo soprano),
Michael Schade (tenor),
Pierre Boulez (conductor),
Wiener Philharmoniker
 Deutsche Grammophon
 471 635-2
 Hybrid multi-channel
 SACD/CD (dual layer)

This intensely personal work receives a stunning performance in this release, part of a complete Mahler cycle, one that treads the fine line between expressiveness and introspection with



alongside) the finest recorded version available. ▶+

great insight and beautiful phrasing from Boulez and the Vienna Philharmonic. The soloists, and mezzo Violeta Urmana in *Der Abschied* (the Farewell) in particular, are a joy, and the recording involves the listener in living, breathing but believable space with real warmth and grace, and realistic perspectives. This is an intelligent and passionate reading of one of the 20th century's greatest works, and is almost certainly (in common with the Zander/Mahler 6 reviewed

And Now For Something Completely Different...

Alan Sircom discusses the current state of popular music on hi-bit formats.

In a way, the classical music enthusiasts have got a far easier life than the rock or jazz recording aficionado. Classical music's focus is on the music first, the performance second; so, if there isn't a recording of a piece of music that will make the transition into surround sound, commission a new one, leaving the older recording sometimes still available as a classic re-issue in stereo or even mono. In contrast, rock, pop and jazz bestow as much importance on the performance as the music, so with very few exceptions you are stuck with making the best of the original master tapes. Re-record *Kind of Blue* with different musicians and you get cover versions, many of which can be spelled 'abomination'.

If the master tape was mono – or the recording was

cut direct to mono vinyl – any form of surroundification is post-production artifice and will likely undermine the qualities of the original recording. DVD-Audio loses a philosophical battle here. From the outset, DVD-Audio has made surround sound the principle selling point of the format. This means any recording without a master tape of at least four channels has to remain in the original stereo or mono, and is going to be a hard sell in the DVD-Audio domain. By releasing SACDs in stereo as well as multi-channel, the format is perceived as going for better sound, not more. In fact, this is as much PR guff as any perceptible quality upgrade from SACD. But it's a neat angle.

In fact, the surround sound/better sound fight



► appears borne out by the music released. DVD-Audio releases begin around the time of multi-track analogue master tapes (from the mid-1960s), continue through the quadraphonic days. SACD recordings, because they include a notionally 'strong' stereo following, include two-channel only recordings from the late 1950s and early 1960s. Both formats effectively skip much of the 1980s (digital recording techniques of the time make this a fallow field for either format), but spring back with recordings from the mid-1990s to the present. This does give a skewed and self-reinforcing perception of what makes the typical DVD-Audio/SACD buyer. With a catalogue predominantly filled with classic albums from the 1960s and 1970s (plus a few newer recordings), it could be viewed that the typical buyer is a late-40s/early 50s male who spent his formative years listening to Chicago, Pink Floyd and Yes albums, and now listens to the likes of Eric Clapton, while his

kids surreptitiously play the occasional blast of Missy Elliot or Linkin Park. This is changing – The Flaming Lips challenge that perception – but to date, the DVD-Audio and SACD catalogues both read like a copy of *Melody Maker*, circa 1973.

This is being rather dismissive, in fairness. Most of the recordings re-released on SACD and DVD-Audio are classics that people will choose to own and play time and time again; it's hard to make the same claim of anything that has yet to stand the test of time. Take Randy Newman's *Little Criminals* (Warner DVD-Audio) for example. This is a keeper, the one Randy Newman disc practically everyone of a generation has. It's a finely crafted, cynically ironic slice of late 1970's American life (most people remember it for the wonderful *Short People*, and the controversy it entailed). The sound is slightly muted vocally and the dynamics of the band

are soft and laid back, but the sound of that ever-driving piano never stops, the bass lines are tight and deep and you find the surround is more sophisticated than overt. This should be top of the list of every DVD-Audio owner.

Unlike DVD-Audio, SACD began life as a distinctly audiophile format, and many of the recordings reflect just that. Disregarding early Sonys, Telarc and Heads Up in particular have produced a stream of ►



▶ audiophile recordings from the likes of Doc Powell, John Pizzarelli and Al Di Meola; all smoochy guitar recordings that show off exactly what multi-channel SACD can do, yet are musically stuck in a strange world where Chet Baker records are outlawed for being too close to punk rock. There is no denying these are some of the best recorded multi-channel SACDs money can buy, and you will be tempted to invest in one – go for *Flesh on Flesh* by Al Di Meola (Telarc hybrid SACD), as it is the most musically challenging – just to show off, but unless your tastes lie firmly in salon jazz, this adds nothing to making SACD mainstream.

But things began to change for SACD with the ABKCO releases of old Rolling Stones LPs, of which *Let It Bleed* (ABKCO hybrid SACD) is arguably the best. With tracks like 'Midnight Rambler', 'Gimmie Shelter' and 'You Can't Always Get What You Want', it's probably the most complete Stones recording of their early-middle period. The stereo SACD sound is like walking into the recording studio compared to the CD layer (which is very good, in and of itself). But the intellectual change in direction for SACD was perhaps greater than the disc itself. It means single inventory on the shelves of HMV and it means re-issues can be something more than just a cynical rehash of old material.

There has been an outpouring of Bob Dylan recordings on SACD of late, and these too are recordings that only benefit the collector. Practically everything His Bobness made, from the early folk days, through the angst-ridden country-inspired 1970s right up to his god-squad years, has been re-issued and – where possible – mixed into 5.1 channel sound. Although those who dislike Dylan

will claim that anything more than two channels is too much, these are intelligent, well crafted remixes and might actually make Dylan fans switch to SACD, his fan base being that loyal. I chose three from the pantheon of the Dylanography; the classic *Blonde on Blonde* from 1966, the acutely painful divorce proceedings that are *Blood*

on the Tracks from 1974 and the more politicised follow-up *Desire* from 1975 (all Columbia hybrid SACD).

Interestingly, the earlier recordings are in multi-channel; *Desire* is in stereo whether CD or SACD is engaged. It certainly seems like *Desire* was either the master tape with the least potential or the least remastered of the three, as it sounds jumbled and indistinct, with no substantial improvement to recommend

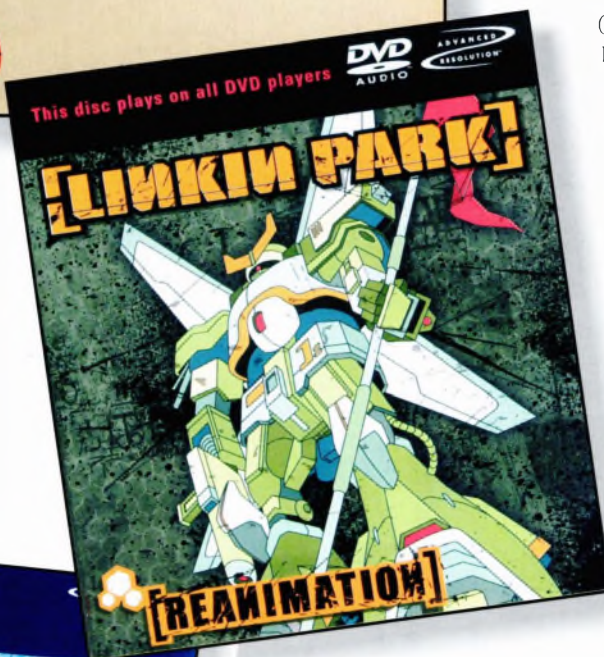
playing SACD over CD. The other two (more commonly recognised as classic Dylan recordings) are masterful, making you finally able to hear every last word of Dylan's lyrical poetry distinctly articulated in his strange back of the throat vocal style. This can be too overt at times; you don't want to be too close to Dylan when he's 'Tangled Up

In Blue' or 'Sad Eyed Lady of the Lowlands'... it's too remorseful and painful. Dylan, is an acquired taste and few are going to be swayed by hearing 'I Want You' in multi-channel over stereo, but it's an intelligent remix and does put you in touch with you Bobby side better than the two channel sound.

Whiny complaint-rock Kermit soundalikes are surprisingly commonplace in new formats. If Dylan occupies the SACD high-ground, then Neil Young



▶ has a similar place in DVD-Audio. Neil Young has always been a promoter of audiophile-friendly formats (his recordings are always released on vinyl as well as CD, and he was one of the first major artistes to support HDCD) and the classic *Harvest* album and the more recent live *Road Rock* cut (both Reprise DVD-Audio) have been given the 5.1 treatment. *Harvest* is one of the closest-sounding multi-channel recordings on DVD-Audio, as it puts you right in the path of the poignant voice and plaintive guitar strumming of Canada's most dour ex-hippy. *Road Rock* is an entirely different, more Crazy Horse-related experience. Play this and crank it up for feedback and distortion across all three front channels, and cheering from behind. Excellent!



If it's loud you want, *Reanimation* from Linkin Park (Warner DVD-Audio) is the one to go for, not least because the band are approximately 30 years younger than almost anyone else on DVD-Audio (if you want more classic shouty stuff, *Welcome to My Nightmare* by Alice Cooper is also available). It's an excellent modern

recording from 2002, full of piss and vinegar (in all the right ways). It also has some very intelligent use of surround and is exactly the sort of thing you should play to clear your palette after a couple of Joni Mitchell albums. *FRGT/10* especially is a powerful, driving slice of rap. Buy it, play it loud, skateboard round the room. DVD-Audio so far dominates

the release of modern music, although SACD releases do include material from the likes of Mariah Carey, Celine Dion and Sting (I'm sure these artistes produce some wonderful work – regrettably, my own vitriol would choke me were I to attempt reviewing anything from these people). The best example of new (well newish) material on DVD-Audio must be Missy Elliot... *so addictive* (Elektra DVD-Audio). It has all those musical breaks and almost glottal stops that made *Get Ur Freak On* a major hit in 2001. And it's beautifully recorded, with the sort of surround sound that makes you wonder why you didn't switch to surround years ago.

Choosing back catalogue carefully is an arduous task. If you simply run through the biggest hits of the time, you can end up with music that is essentially unlistenable today. Thankfully, those plundering the



▶ back catalogue are being more intelligent than that (there's no *Frampton Comes Alive* or *Saturday Night Fever* on nu-formats... yet). The closest to being questionably left in the past is *Fragile* by Yes (Elektra DVD-Audio).

The vegetable-rights-in-space kings of early prog rock may have been the soundtrack to the sixth-form years of a generation, and the recording is extremely accurate despite a 31-year gap in the space-time continuum, but those intervening years have made this sound oh so dated, pompous and pretentious. This isn't helped by what seems like a quadraphonic soundtrack with a different instrument in every channel on each track. Still, it is a part of my history and if it's a part of yours, it's worth investing in... it'll take you back to swatting up for your Physics 'A' level. Incidentally, a recent Yes album – *Magnification* from 2001 (Rhino/Yes DVD-Audio) is also available; it's the most critically acclaimed Yes record in almost two decades and replaces keyboards with an orchestra (they've probably run out of classically-minded keyboard players). It's a better recording than *Fragile* (a good production too, despite occasionally losing Steve Howe's guitar in the melee), entertaining and remarkably fresh considering it features the classic Anderson/Howe/Squire/White line-up. You don't even have to be a 32nd Level Yes acolyte (with Ward-Off Rapper spells) to place this on your wish list; it's a real hidden gem.

Pink Floyd's *The Dark Side of the Moon* (EMI hybrid SACD) is a different kettle of mashed tofu to *Fragile*. Despite being recorded 30 years ago, the years haven't ravaged this multi-platinum disc at all and the recording

just shines, whether played through a CD player in two channel or the full 5.1 channel SACD nine yards. The recording quality is fresh and precise, vocals are articulate and clearly defined, and the surround is dealt with reasonably subtly. Of course, the clocks in 'Time' and cash registers in 'Money' are scattered around

the room, but the band stays firmly locked to the front three channels.

In fact, most people will have heard *Dark Side of the Moon* in surround sound at the time, but it's nice to hear it in real surround without the aid of recreational pharmaceuticals and listening while lying face down giggling and watching the stars.

Foreigner's eponymous first album (Atlantic DVD-Audio) zings us back to 1977 and everything about the disc (even down to the old Atlantic flag LP label replicated on the DVD itself) takes you back, including thin sounding sibilant vocals and that taut, lightweight drum sound that seemed to be all the rage at the time. Although a classic slice of rock history and a big theme, big sounding recording, tracks like 'Starrider' have dated horribly and surround sound only serves to highlight the

age of the recording. It must be something to do with Minimoog synths and 21st Century music carriers, they don't mix well.

Of course the pivotal late-1970s rock albums were the Eagles' *Hotel California* (Elektra DVD-Audio) and Fleetwood Mac's *Rumours* (Warner DVD-Audio). And both pass into the 21st Century perfectly, with the sort of multi-channel recordings that will make them



▶ demonstration discs for the format. Both have the slightly light tom-tom drum sound of the late 1970s, but the subtle yet effective use of surround in both draws you into the recording instead of ducking to avoid the sonic front-back exchange. This invites difficult questions; if the next generation of demonstration-quality recordings are *Rumours*, *Hotel California* and *Dark Side of the Moon*, what does that say about the music business? Regardless, these classic rock albums of the 1970s still work today and the switch to DVD-Audio only adds to their mystique.

Not all classic demonstration albums make the grade, however. Donald Fagen's *The Nightfly* (Warner DVD-Audio) was the demo LP disc to use through much of the 1980s (until Dire Straits, Tracy Chapman and Jennifer Warnes took over). The musician's musician crafted eight masterpiece tracks with all the perfect recording quality honed from years working down the Steely Dan mines. The music is still without parallel, but the transfer to multi-channel shows why there are so few recordings from the 1980s in the catalogue. It's thin, bright, up-front, toppy, brash... you get the picture. All the things vinyl fans used to lay at the door of CD apply here. In contrast, *Kamakiriad* (Reprise DVD-Audio), though arguably not as musically perfect as *The Nightfly*, fares much better. It's still got some of that glassy digital recording quality that may effectively deny us a decade of music on new formats, but is far less brash than its older brother.

But this isn't going to turn into a session of Dan bashing. Steely Dan's most recent release – *Everything*

Must Go (Reprise DVD-Audio) – is a beautiful transfer to multi-channel. If the album itself is no match for the classic Dan tracks and in some places seems like Becker and Fagen are going through the motions (once you get to 'GodWhacker', the disc picks up considerably), the sound is in the demonstration class. And even

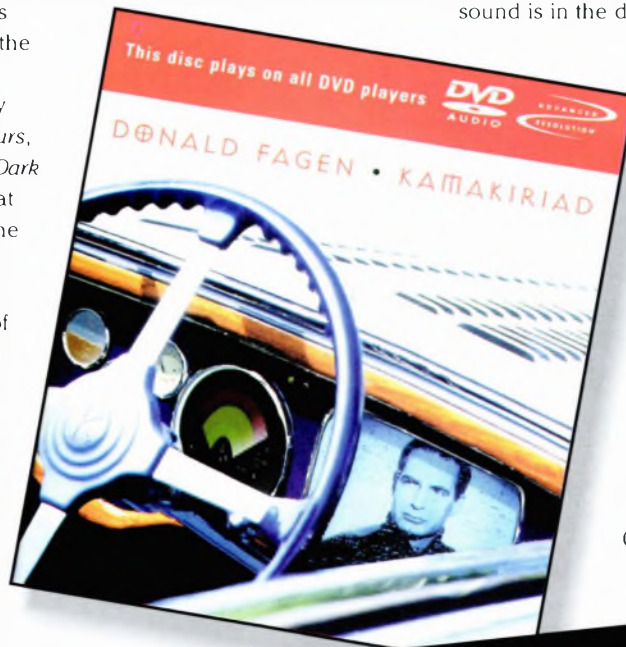
mediocre Dan is still light-years ahead of most groups.

The new formats are not simply rock oriented, though. *Sinatra at the Sands* (Reprise DVD-Audio) is a wonderful live recording from 1966, mixing Sinatra with Count Basie and Orchestra. It's tight (and shows just how much Robbie Williams still has to learn as an entertainer) and the recording (from a four-track master) is sharp enough to catch the odd bum note from the Don. The sound is a little tapered at the frequency extremes and the Copa Room sounds like a small

night club instead of a 1,000 seat venue. Nevertheless, it's a top-notch recording from true masters of the art.

Similarly Grover Washington's *Winelight* (Elektra DVD-Audio) from 1980 is a jazz classic, one that every hi-fi buff of the early 1980s owned and showed off with. It hasn't lost one iota of that demo quality and – if the music is a bit smooth for today's more gruff tastes – it's still very

satisfying listening. Remember though, we have Grover Washington to blame for Kenny G, so don't like *Winelight* too much. More or less being the whole jazz-country-folk fusion movement, Pat Metheny Group's *Imaginary Day* (Warner DVD-Audio) sits on the opposite end of the jazz spectrum. This 1997 release ▶





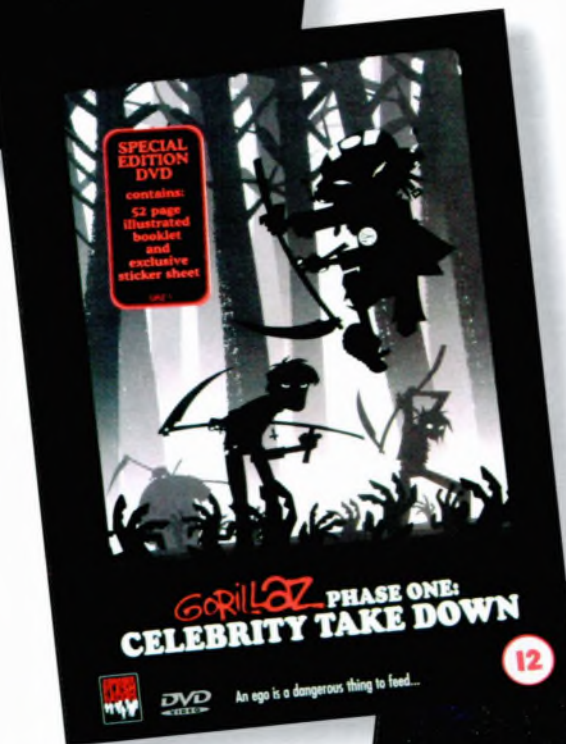
▶ is one of the group's best, along with *We Live Here*. If you are into subtle, yet technically sublime guitar playing, this is a worthwhile, well recorded addition to the collection. It is also one of the most musically diverse jazz recordings around.

Even DVD-Video isn't without the odd musical moment, although the majority of music on DVD-Video is restricted to either collections of MTV-friendly videos or live concert material. But there are gems to be found, like Gorillaz *Phase One: Celebrity Take Down* (Parlophone DVD-Video). This collection of promotional videos, storyboard and 'animatics' only features the five best tracks from the band's first album, and may prove hard to find as it's more than a year old in a fast-changing market, but the disc shows just what is possible of the DVD-Video format. Different menu screens, interactive games, interviews, mixes, videos and easter eggs pepper the disc and you may well spend weeks simply playing with the disc and only incidentally watching the cartoon videos. It is also an entirely text-free menu system; it's all done by cartoon graphics – and it works. It's on a completely different galaxy to the likes of SACD and DVD-Audio recordings, but it has a place and is the

perfect antidote to too much Norah Jones.

There's so much more, we've barely scratched the surface. What about DTS re-issues on DVD, of artistes like Frank Zappa and Graham Nash? What about the country funk of Mofro? The mega-platinum sounds of Chicago? The decorative sounds of The Coors? They all have a place, but not here. With hundreds of disc available, any round-up has to be highly selective and a personal choice.

Just one question remains; which is better SACD or DVD-Audio? It's in fact an entirely bonkers question, akin to asking whether broccoli is better than carrots or if dark blue or light blue is the better tie colour. The simple fact is, some records will never make it to SACD and some will never appear on DVD-Audio. To ally to just one format is to deny yourself a rich slice of music. On a purely audiophile standing, SACD seems the less 'processed' sounding, but this only becomes really noticeable when comparing something like Randy Newman with Bob Dylan. So, buy yourself a universal player (or, better still, a SACD and a DVD-Audio player), go multi-channel and enjoy yourself. ➤





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Rotel RDV-1060

by Alan Sircom

Rotel has a richly deserved reputation from the great old days of inexpensive hi-fi. The company made (and patently still makes) products from relatively prosaic CD and amplifier circuits, but they deliver the musical goods because Rotel builds them right. All Rotel's best products were made to last, with comparatively massive transformers and over-spec'd build quality.

The £800 RDV-1060 is one such product, albeit now at a higher price point. On paper, the specifications are good, but relatively unexceptional at the price, but the execution of those specifications marks this player out as something really special.

Not that the specification sheet is basic. The player is a DVD-Audio/Video player of very good quality. It includes support for DVD-A, DVD-V, CD, CD-R, CD-RW, Video and Super Video CD and MP3-encoded recordings on CD media. Fitting the player with a 12-bit Video DAC, allied to a FAL/NTSC Progressive Scan video output (for suitably equipped monitors and projectors) is also a mark of quality, for picture reproduction. Similarly, the on-board Crystal 24-bit/192kHz audio DACs feeding Analogue Devices op-amps are a prerequisite for decent six-channel audio connection required for DVD-A replay. Naturally, it's Region Two replay as standard, but that can be fixed to play American discs (if you know the right people).

But it's the build that really stands out. The player is solid; this black box feels like it could be made out of flight recorders. Nothing flexes, it has the sort of solidity that both belies its price and feels like it could be used in hand-to-hand combat. Well, almost – the DVD tray is the standard issue black plastic

affair and the handset isn't much better. These feel quite cheap and tacky. However, those rack-mount handles help a lot to reinforce both the physical presence of the player, and its rigidity. If you stick with the standard black finish, it looks quite dated, but paradoxically the black and silver version looks bang up to date. Especially the blue LED display above the centre-mounted DVD tray; the two-deck display looks very 'now' and is extremely informative, although the dimmer switch for this display should be on the remote or the front panel and not a part of the on-screen menu system. That gets kind of annoying.

Beneath the casework, it's Rotel all the way. It uses what the company describes as 'balanced design', which means it comes with an extremely high quality (for the money) isolated linear power supply and good components (like those Analogue Devices op-amps) throughout.

There is also a bonus, uncommon in DVD players, let alone DVD players for this sort of price tag. The player sports a trio of remote control trigger inputs, two mini-jacks and one RJ45 input for a PC-style controller. This makes the player far more Crestron friendly than most at the price, and multi-room hideaway fans will no longer need to use one of those infra red repeaters that never quite stick to the panel properly. The rest of the back panel is standard issue, with S-Video, composite video and component/progressive video outputs, six-channel and two-channel analogue audio and both coaxial and Toslink optical digital outputs. Only one Scart

socket, though; these days, two Scart sockets (one to pass signals from other products, one to output the DVD – and other source – information) is considered standard issue. However, even this may have an audio benefit, by not having stray video signals running through the player, the sound will sound slightly better.

There is a PAL/NTSC switch designed to determine whether the player speaks FAL or NTSC as a native. This is surprisingly useful if you move around the world, as the player will otherwise try and convert NTSC signals to FAL instead



of the other way round. For the rest of us, though, this is about as useful as a chocolate fireguard and this is a fit and forget switch.

There's a lot of watching and listening when assessing any DVD-Audio/Video player. It's also easy to dismiss video performance in an audio magazine. But remember this is a DVD player: whether it's a corker on the audio side or not is immaterial if it produces a terrible picture. It simply will not sell in numbers large enough to sustain it. Fortunately, the Rotel does a great job at the movies. I lack the requisite technology to parse progressive scan pictures for now

▶ (it's still a very new issue in the UK) but the basic DVD picture was extremely precise and focussed, even on the rudimentary composite video setting. Its colourful, vibrant picture is vivid and fresh, but not overt and Technicolor in approach, and as such copes with the muted flesh-tones in *Solaris* and the comic book colour of *Spider-Man* with equal aplomb. But its strongest picture suit is that it is exceptionally detailed and dynamic, with fantastic black levels, which make it ideal for both conventional TV and projection use. Unlike the Pioneers of this world, the RDV-1060 doesn't offer a wealth of picture tweaks and trick play functions (it will only fast forward at up to 8x normal speed for example), but instead the basic picture is good enough to cover most bases with the minimum of picture modification. In fact, the only real criticism of the Rotel is the lurid green Rotel splash screen that you have to see whenever you load or unload a disc.

Replaying Dolby Digital and DTS through both digital and six-channel analogue outputs turned in a good performance, too. There is a sense of cohesiveness from speaker to speaker which places the listener right in the thick of the action, yet the RDV-1060s vocal articulation was never once overawed by the surround. Once again, the atmospheric *Solaris* highlighted all that is good about Rotel's cinema sound. George Clooney's slightly mumbled chocolate Kentucky-bred tones are easy to understand, yet he doesn't seem divorced from the whirrs and hums of the spaceship. The ethereal

score also flowed with the sort of litheness and grace that's hard to muster from a compressed, balls-out format like Dolby Digital.

So Rotel clearly pass the DVD-Video test with flying colours – but how does it do with DVD-Audio discs? Surprisingly well.



Good enough, in fact to question whether SACD is the more audiophile of the two formats and more than good enough to make you wonder if a universal player really is the right answer. Like many audiophiles, I suffer from intractable snobbishness at times; DVD-Audio may have Meridian credibility in its favour,



but the majority of DVD-Audio players leave the music sounding artificial compared to SACD (of course, until someone comes out with a recording on all formats, this remains impossible to determine accurately), even if DVD-Audio generally sounds more bass-heavy and rhythmic. The Rotel retains the good things of previous DVD-Audio

players and strips away that artificial layer. Suddenly, the transparency issues about DVD-Audio recording do seem false and not worth worrying about.

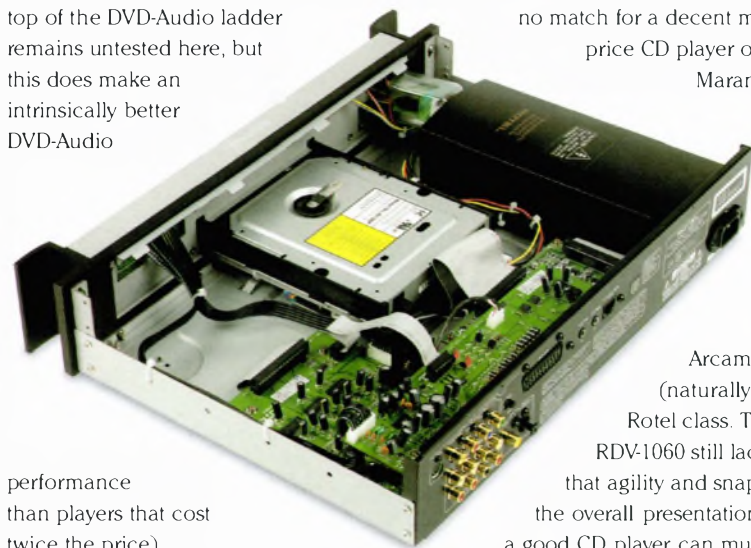
A year ago, I'd have been able to play the entire canon of DVD-Audio recordings in an afternoon or so, but now there are hundreds of them. I went through several favourites – and a few newcomers – and each time that little bit more came off the disc.

Sinatra at the Sands was an interesting insight into big Frank's singing voice. This classic recording from 1966 has all the right elements; Sinatra, the Count Basie Orchestra, Vegas, 'I've Got You Under My Skin'. Yet, for all that, there are occasional flat notes that simply don't slip through the CD

version. Despite (or perhaps because of) those bum notes, the recording is so well handled, you get that time machine effect and you feel like you should be wearing a skinny tuxedo and drinking Whiskey Sours (any excuse). The tux and the stiff drink aren't so important in playing Chicago or Doors records, but the same recording quality stands. *L.A. Woman* is probably one of about six recordings on DVD-Audio I know really well, and once again the RDV-1060 raised the bar. The obligatory 'Riders on the Storm' is filled out larger than ever before and that rolling thunder at the start takes on big, scary run for cover proportions. Then, when the band kick in a few seconds later, soundstaging seems better defined and the really poor spring echo effect used on Jim Morrison's voice in the second verse appears truly dreadful, yet doesn't ▶

► undermine the performance.

More modern classical recordings show just how majestic the RDV-1060 really is. Harnoncourt's version of the Bach *St. Matthew Passion* is multi-channel bliss and could convert hard-boiled atheists into fully paid up God-botherers in seconds. Choral works are always exciting and impressive through multi-channel systems (simply because our hearing is so well attuned to differentiating human voices), but this fights the multi-channel cause better than many. Even poor recordings get a fighting chance through the RDV-1060; Donald Fagen's *The Nightly* is too toppy and disappointing in multi-channel; it still sounds brash and hard, here, but the edges are not so patently obvious, compared to most other DVD-Audio players (in fairness, the very top of the DVD-Audio ladder remains untested here, but this does make an intrinsically better DVD-Audio



performance than players that cost twice the price).

The big question arises when making the final step – if this player were to replace an existing CD player, would there be tears? Here, the answer isn't so clear cut, and it depends on what you were used to listening to. Given the generally poor performance of DVD players – especially those not resorting to dual-laser mechanisms – this player deals with CD like a native. It has some sense of timing, the dynamics are not squashed and the overall sound no longer reminds people

of a bad tribute band playing through blankets while on Mogadon. It even has some soundstaging, generally considered impossible from the wall of sludge that is CD replay, DVD style. Instead, the RDV-1060 makes a lively, detailed and fast-paced sound that has plenty of bottom end dynamic grunt backed up with an open midrange and a treble that begins to extend into the bat-eared regions. All sorts of discs came out to play (a good sign in and of itself), including Beethoven and Mahler symphonies, Monteverdi madrigals, classic 50's Cannonball Adderley jazz, Lambchop, and Metallica and it made a fair fist of almost everything placed in the platter.

Let's put this into some kind of CD-playing perspective though. It makes a surprisingly good CD sound, but is still no match for a decent mid-price CD player of the

Marantz,

Arcam or (naturally)

Rotel class. The RDV-1060 still lacks that agility and snap to the overall presentation that a good CD player can muster.

It's not a big failing, though, and something that is best highlighted in comparison, so those who sell off the CD player first may will not notice it.

This leaves the true audiophile with a dilemma on his or her hands. Although this makes a better job at CD replay than any other DVD player in its price range, if you invested in a decent CD player (costing £400 or more) within the last seven or eight years or so, it will likely present a difficult challenge for the Rotel RDV-1060 to

overcome. But this is also better at DVD-Audio replay than any player at double the price and deserves to be used and loved by audio buffs. Perhaps we are too spoiled by the idea of convergence – we were content to play LPs on a record player and CDs on a CD player; why should we ditch our existing CD players if they sound superior at playing CD, just to keep up with the endless march of progress? Maybe this is an additional source component and tomorrow's audiophile will have this player (and possibly the Philips DVD963SA SACD player) taking up shelf space alongside an already well-established CD player. It's worth making that shelf space for the RDV-1060, though; you'll start buying mondo DVD-Audios when you do.



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Disc Replay Capability:	DVD-Video, DVD-Audio, Video CD, SVCD, CD Audio, CD-R, CD-RW MP3, JPEG, DVD-I+RW
Video Outputs:	Component Video (Progressive Scan) Composite Video, S-Video, RGB (via Scart)
Audio Outputs:	Digital Coaxial, Optical, Stereo Audio six channel audio outputs 1x SCART Output, Component/Progressive Scan Video, Composite Video, S-Video Stereo Audio
Remote Triggers:	RS232/RJ45 link 2x mini-jack remote links
Dimensions:	432x92x336mm
Weight:	5.1Kg
Price:	£800

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THX SURR

The Pioneer DV-757Ai Multi-standard Disc Player and VSA-AX10i-S Multi-channel Amplifier

by Jason Kennedy

In an era when most mainstream brands are making smaller and sleeker components it's encouraging to come across a genuine behemoth. Of course for a seven-channel processor and power amp it's hardly enormous, but it does weigh more than I prefer to lump about and it only just fits into a conventional hi-fi rack. In fact although it fits into an Alphason rack it wasn't very happy with the eighth inch of ventilation above and eventually had to usurp the turntable on the top shelf to stop the fans from churning.

The VSA-AX10i-S is very much an all singing, all dancing brute of a multi-channel amplifier with bells and whistles of pretty well every fashionable flavour onboard. Inevitably new processing algorithms will happen along, and at least one has since this amp's introduction (Dolby DPLiix), but all the popular processes are available and if you're only in it for the music then you might wonder why you need them at all. From a purist point of view you don't, but from an entertainment angle there is something to be said for the better variations on turning two-channel material into surround. Dolby DPLII for instance, was created by Jim Fosgate specifically to enjoy his vinyl in surround. You can even buy the FAP VI tube processor he built for the job from Fosgate Audionics if you want to go the whole hog, as long as the \$13,000 price tag isn't a problem!

The VSA-AX10i-S is one of those



products whose features list would take several pages to describe. But as it's first and foremost a home cinema product I'll kick off with the more important features in that ballpark. Most impressive is its video converter which can take any form of video signal, such as composite or S-video and upgrade it to the superior component variety. If you're one of the lucky few with a projector or plasma screen you'll be able to really take advantage of this. It also allows independent video switching, so you can flick between sources without affecting the sound. A largely US oriented plus is the high definition 720P picture quality spec incorporated into THX Ultra2, which as well as offering the usual cinematic processing now includes settings for seven channel music.

As well as Pioneer's own two to multichannel algorithms, of which there are plenty, it has Dolby Pro-Logic II Music and DTS Neo 6 Music, which offer quite tolerable variations on the theme of turning your regular CDs into surround material.

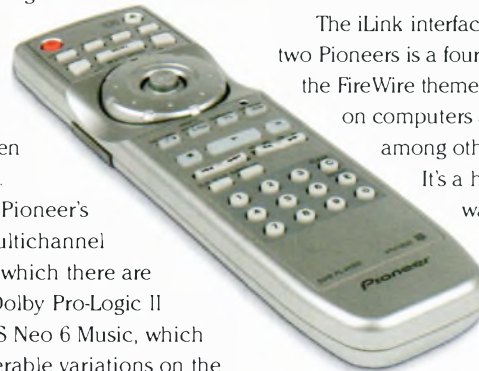
DVD-Audio and SACD, sources are well catered for with a 7.1 channel set of analogue inputs. Not that you are encouraged to take this route with the amp if you have the DV-757Ai universal disc player which is supplied with an

iLink cable (hence the i in its suffix) which effectively replaces the six or eight analogue connections. Note that no music discs have been produced with more than six channels so the eight-channel option is solely for movies with information for rear surround channels. As these signals are traditionally delivered by a coaxial digital cable, the surround back analogue in and outs look vestigial already.

The IEEE 1394 Firewire or iLink multi-channel digital connection is this combo's main claim to fame, a few other brands such as Denon and Meridian have proprietary digital connection systems but this is claimed to be an industry standard that will be used across the board. This so long as it's not eclipsed by HDMI, a sort of 21st century SCART connection for audio and video that's also on the rise.

The iLink interface used by these two Pioneers is a four-pin variation on the FireWire theme that you will find on computers and camcorders among other digital gadgets.

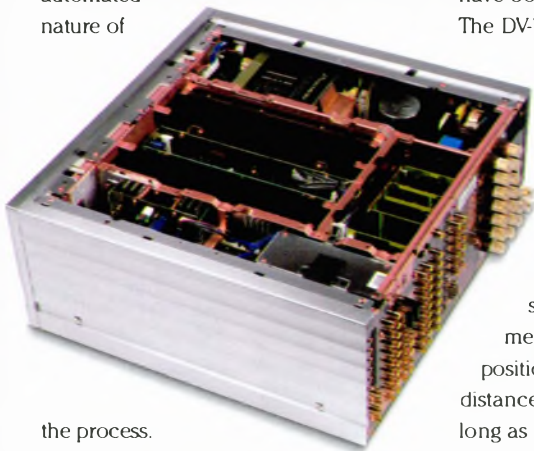
It's a high speed, two way link that is more than capable of transmitting six channels of 24-bit/96k or two of 24-bit/192k data, not forgetting the 1-bit/2.8224Mhz rate of DSD (for SACD). There is a caveat with the latter, which is that the AX10i converts this DSD signal to 24-bit/88.2kHz at the input so you don't get the very best from SACD with this particular iLink iteration. You can of course



▶ take the signal from the analogue inputs directly through the amp so that it merely acts as an analogue amplifier rather than a processor.

It's fair to ask why would you not want to do this with DVD-A as well. After all it seems like the purist approach. But there are several good reasons to use iLink with both formats. For a start the converters in the amplifier are much higher spec devices than those in most players, and equally importantly you can take advantage of the set up facilities available with the amp which are much broader than any player can offer. They're absolutely critical to optimising any successful surround sound music system.

The AX10i set up process is a doddle thanks to the supplied microphone and automated nature of



the process. Just hook up your speakers and set the amp analysing, but either leave the room just after you press start or get out the ear defenders, the noise is nasty. Still it doesn't merely set delays it figures out how many, where and which channels there are and calibrates accordingly. No more SPL meters and test tones - I hope that one day all multi-channel amps will be like this. It also has as a room EQ option which will either set all speakers flat or take the front channels as the norm and match the rears.

The DV-757Ai universal player is currently the top Pioneer source with an iLink connection, but a new range topper, the £1,200 DV-868AVi, was shown in

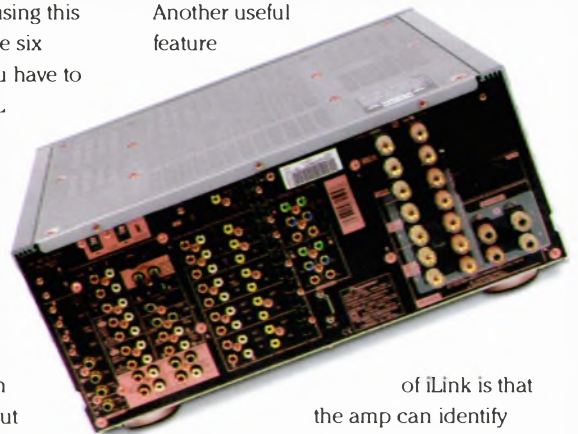


pre-production form at the recent London Hi-Fi Show. It will have both iLink and HDMI outputs. The DV-757Ai has standard audio and video connections of all contemporary flavours and offers a pretty comprehensive range of features for setting up both sound and picture. Of course when using this player in analogue six channel mode you have to set it up using an SPL meter at the listening position. You can set distances to speakers so long as the main left and right channels are equidistant and you can select which channels you have in the system, the AX10 does all this on its own by sending specific noises out to its microphone, loud noises that remind one of the music of Aphex Twin at his extreme moments. The player's 86 page manual is pretty comprehensive but the on screen display makes set up pretty straightforward and you don't often have to RTFM (read the f***ing manual). Which

is not something that the uninitiated will find with the AX10 whose 112 page booklet contains explanations of the multifarious processing options and some useful tips that cover nearly all your problems! For instance it took a while for me to figure out how to use the iLink connection and I still haven't found a button on the remote to allow switchover.

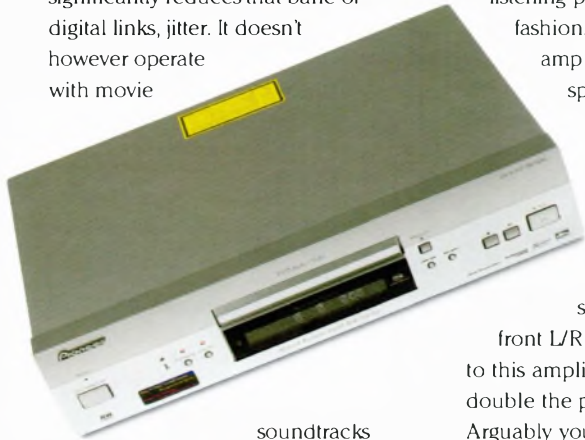
The remote has a manual of its own and perhaps I should have consulted that more closely, but you can get the system to do most things without too much head scratching.

The AX10i's remote is a touch screen type with interfaces for each of the source types you are likely to use, and if you don't have compatible Pioneer sources you can teach the remote to operate third party components. With the DV-757Ai iLinked in you get an even greater degree of interaction whereby selecting the player via the amp will initiate play. Another useful feature



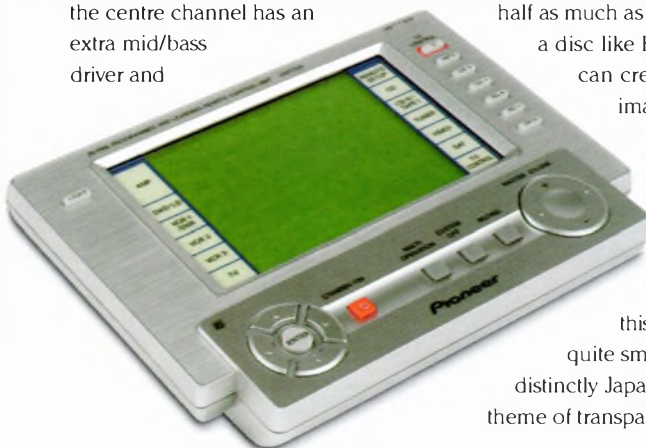
of iLink is that the amp can identify the nature of the disc in the player, so if you stick a DTS disc in it selects the appropriate decoder, usually you have to select the decoder required yourself. With DVD-A discs it even tells you the sampling rate of the bitstream, so long as it's greater than 48kHz that is. If nothing is showing in the display ▶

▶ you know that the sampling rate is unspectacular, but it's a sensitive way of doing so. With high resolution discs the iLink's bi-directionality is used to clock link player and amplifier which significantly reduces that bane of digital links, jitter. It doesn't however operate with movie



soundtracks because of the potential for lip sync errors that adjustments to the timing might make, even though you can tweak the sound delay in 5millisecond steps to take account of different screen types. They seem to have thought of everything. Yet they thought of one more thing for the more recent AX-5I receiver which is DSD direct: This a way of avoiding the conversion of DSD to PCM with the iLink connection.

For the most part I used these two Pioneers in a 5.0 system using a Cyrus CLS50/CLS50C multichannel speaker system, about £1,200 worth of two-way bookshelf speakers that are almost identical. The variation being that the centre channel has an extra mid/bass driver and



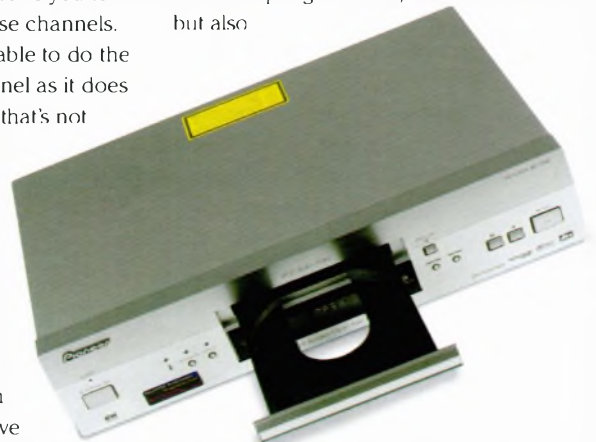
lies on its side in a slimmer enclosure. These were hooked up with Electrofluidics Monolith cable at the front and some lovely deep purple Furukawa for the rears, the latter placed behind the listening position in music oriented fashion. You can't actually set the amp up to have back surround speakers alone, you have to set them as left and right surround, the back setting being essentially for cinematic purposes. As I didn't want 7 channels I used the spare outputs to bi-amp the front L/R channels, a facility specific to this amplifier which allows you to double the power for these channels. Arguably you should be able to do the same for the centre channel as it does so much of the work but that's not an option.

Sticking David Bowie's latest SACD release, *Heathen*, into the tray results in a highly expansive and atmospheric sound. The sheer amount of drive units in a surround system means that you can achieve higher listening levels without discomfort, if the amplifier's up to the job and this one is. Having said that, it's not a stupidly powerful sounding amp; you get more grunt from a 'decent' 150 watt stereo amp, but they cost at least half as much as the AX10i in total. With

a disc like *Heathen* the Pioneer can create a holographic image of the voice that is surprisingly real, the instrumentation produces a soundfield that has real electricity.

The character of this system is essentially quite smooth and relaxed, a distinctly Japanese variation on the theme of transparency that lets plenty

through but in a style that contrasts with the warts and all approach favoured by many in the UK. That's not to say that it's bland or colourless, but neither is it particularly dynamic. You hear plenty of the character in those recordings which vary significantly but it's hard to get away from the fact that the AX10i is a processor based design. There's always a slight hint of the synthetic when listening via that processing and despite the on paper advantages of iLink I generally preferred the direct throughput where the processing is bypassed and you are essentially only listening to the analogue part of the amp. This is more clearly the case with SACD, probably because of the downsampling involved, but also

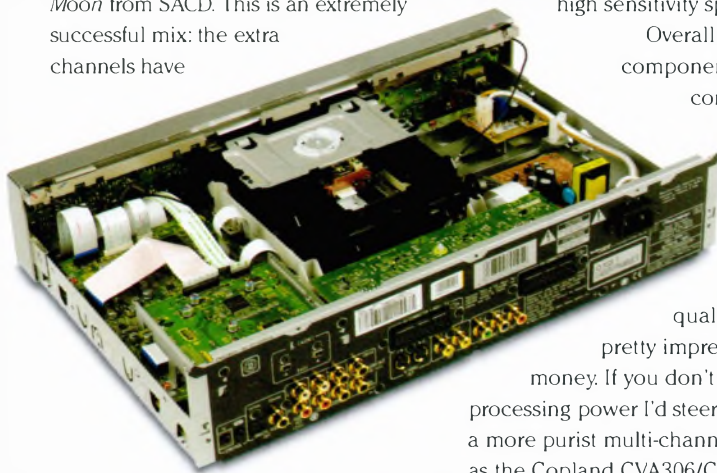


perhaps because this format is the more analogue flavoured of the two hi-res alternatives (at least with the discs I've got). The McCoy Tyner SACD on Telarc for instance is on the one hand quite a soft recording but on the other has a naturalism and presence that is extremely engaging and real. The sound escapes the confines of the speakers and despite the strange placement of instruments (some behind you) produces a convincing performance with no sense of strain.

The Frank Zappa DVD-A *Halloween* places the listener in a strange void between band and audience, albeit with some instruments placed in the audience, it would seem that the art of multi-channel mixing may take ▶

▶ a while to mature. The atmosphere of this live recording is undeniably powerful and the resolution of low level details, shouts from the crowd etc, highly convincing. This is a bit of a bass heavy recording but you are left in no doubt about the quality of playing and composition. But listening to almost the whole thing at reasonable level via iLink can be a fatiguing experience. Whether this is due to the recording or the processing introduced by the amp is hard to tell but I'm willing to give the electronics the benefit of the doubt.

Swapping in a pair of ATC SCM35s for the front L/R channels introduced a bit more transparency and bass extension to proceedings, delivering up a fine rendition of *Dark Side of the Moon* from SACD. This is an extremely successful mix: the extra channels have



been used to place effects and the snippets of speech that get lost on the stereo version, so much so that they occasionally make you jump. A genuine enhancement on the original.

Using the Pioneers in the more familiar surroundings of stereo Living Voice Avatar OBX-R speakers I was

impressed with the level of transparency and resolution on offer. There's still a hint of smoothing but you can hear right into the mix and low level detail is well served. Comparing the AX10i with hard core stereo amplifiers didn't undermine the impression. Okay, there is a shortfall in dynamics and bass extension, but it puts up a good fight. Given that this is just one aspect of the package there is no reason

for the Pioneer to be embarrassed. In fact it made a better impression in some respects than it does in surround - maybe it likes the easier load presented by (only) two high sensitivity speakers.

Overall both these components offer a considerable array of features and back them up with sound quality that is pretty impressive for the money. If you don't want the processing power I'd steer you toward a more purist multi-channel amp such as the Copland CVA306/CVA535 pairing (£3,748). But if you live in the real world and the listening room is also the living room and the telly den then this Pioneer combo has all the angles covered. It delivers highly engaging music and movies in two and multi-channel form and it does all the tricky set up stuff for you. Every home should have one!

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Features
AX10i-S
Power: 2x150 watts/6ohms Front Left + Right channels can be bi-amped in 5.1 systems
Connections: 8-channel line inputs and pre-amp line outputs
 8 assignable digital inputs (4 electrical, 4 optical)
 2 optical digital outputs
Video in/outputs: Composite, component, S-video, RGB SCART
Features: THX Ultra2 post-processing
 MCACC auto calibration system
 DTS 5.1/ES 6.1
 Neo 6 formats, plus DTS 96/24 decoding
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 SACD/MP3
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 Legato Link Conversion PRO and Hi-Bit
 Hi-bit Conversion (2ch)
 Legato Link Conversion PRO
Digital Outputs: Dolby Digital, DTS (DVD), MPEG Audio, Linear PCM (optional down-sampling)
Video outputs: SCART, RGB, Component, S-Video
Audio Outputs: iLINK (IEEE1394), DTS (2ch Down mix), 5.1-Channel
Digital Outputs: Electrical, Optical
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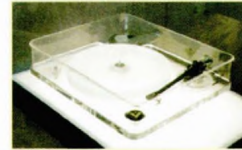
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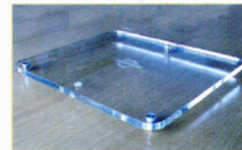
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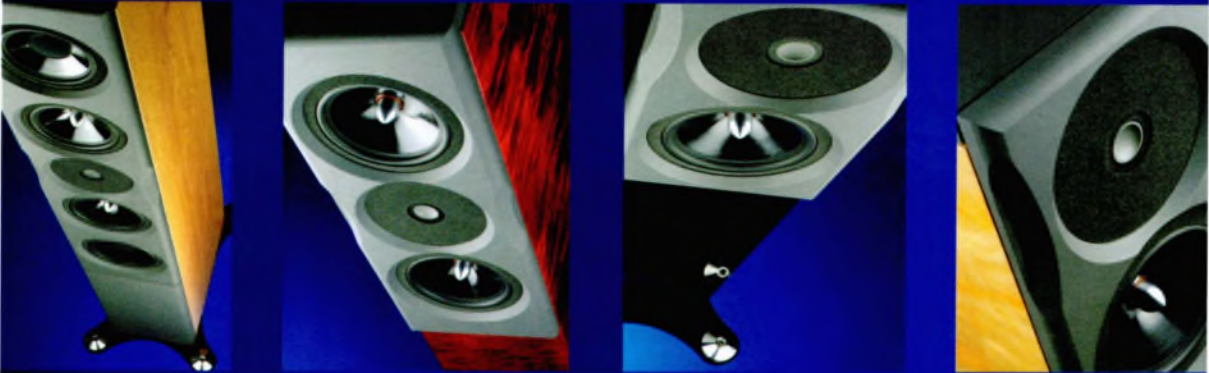
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Classé Audio Omega SACD Player

by Roy Gregory

If you think back to the dawn of the digital age and the emergence of the first CD players, you might remember how impressively chunky and solid those early machines were. Indeed, a few mental gymnastics using the price of those players and relating it to the universal retail price index (well, okay, the Linn LP12) shows an uncannily consistent 20% premium for the cost of Sony's SACD1 over and above the ticket on an LP12/Lingo. But if you think that the SACD1 was a solid piece of kit, well on a par with its ancestors for mechanical overkill, wait until you lay hands on Classé's derivative Omega. This takes mechanical integrity to blockhouse levels. Thank God they had the common sense to add a little visual relief with the contrasting black and silver case-work. Along the way they also added an equally impressive external power supply. This is one big machine, but if it exceeds the Sony in terms of structural solidity and number of boxes, you certainly pay for it. The Omega tips the financial scales at just a shade under £12K. This is a serious player in every sense.

Internally, the engineering matches the exterior: solid and overdone. The transport is the Sony top-loader, used in the SACD1, with the same brass puck. It hides under a heavy-duty sliding lid, which is different to, but equally as hesitant as Sony's version. If the lid strikes you as slow, don't go any further. The transport takes an absolute age to read the disc, decide what it is and settle down to the business of letting you actually play music.

When it comes to that, the Classé does things its own way too. It uses totally separate chains to replay SACD and CD discs, each with its own optimised laser tuned to the ideal frequency for the two different formats. The two streams only combine in the final stage of digital analogue conversion, all of which is carried out by a bank of Crystal CS4397 dual converter chips, except for HDCD which gets its own Pacific Microsonics PMD-200. One pair of DACs is used to provide the balanced output from each channel, the final pair handling single-ended signals. A Crystal CS8420 sample rate converter, engaged by the SRC button on the remote handset, allows up-sampling of 44.1 KHz signals to 24bit/96KHz. Slow roll-off filtering (12dB per octave) is used in place of traditional brick-wall filters, offering a compromise between frequency response and time-domain performance. All logic functions are carried out via optical isolators in order to prevent noise. Digital outputs provided (not DSD obviously) number AES/EBU, single-ended RCA/phono and an AT&T glass optical connector. There are also two inputs, one RCA/phono and the other Tos-link, to allow decoding of external sources.

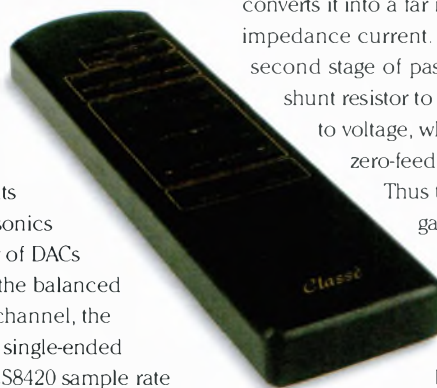
The analogue section is hardly less impressive, with no fewer than three separate stages driving the output

socketry. The first stage analogue filter is another 12dB per octave passive design, again intended to limit the deleterious effects of steep-slope solutions. The second filter-stage acts as a voltage to current converter, but does so in an unusual way. It takes the low-impedance output current from the first stage and converts it into a far more robust, high-impedance current. It then uses the second stage of passive filtering as a shunt resistor to convert the current to voltage, which in turn drives a zero-feedback output buffer.

Thus there's no voltage gain or feedback in the entire output stage. The fully complementary circuitry provides both balanced and single-ended outputs.

It'll come as no surprise to learn that the separate power supply contains separate, substantial mains transformers for the analogue and digital sections, as well as pre-regulation of the DC supplied to the main chassis. Once in the player proper, it goes through another two or three stages of regulation before finally reaching its destination.

The remote control is a necessary evil. Heavy and poorly labeled it's the only way to access the majority of functions necessary to drive the player. The same criticism could be leveled at both the Wadia 861 and Metronome Kalista, except that both these machines don't suffer from the operational sloth that afflicts both the Sony transport and its display. I'd happily forego the Omega taking forever just to scroll through the contents of the disc for a display that would actually tell me what was going on. To compound the problem, the acceptance angle is "Audiophile Standard" which means about



▶ 45 degrees either side of straight-ahead: More of a control then, less of a remote.

Look at that little lot and what you have is a serious attempt to build the ultimate two-channel machine, promising optimum replay of both CD and SACD, without one compromising the other. What you'll also notice is the lack of discrete surround outputs or DVD compatibility. By ignoring the multi-media, multi-standard market, Classé have taken a calculated gamble. On the one hand, dispensing with the surround options and the hardware demands that go with them, they can build a better sounding player. On the other, they risk alienating the very early-adopters who'll be committing to the new hi-bit digital formats. Personally, I think it's a pretty shrewd move, going for the dedicated two-channel market. At least it avoids unwarranted competition from the multi-channel brigade, whose multi-standard demands and moving targets muddy the waters as well as the sound.

I've been lucky enough to have the Omega at home for a lot longer than many review products,



having first borrowed it for the Issue 24 Gabriel cross-format comparisons. In that time it's been used in a wide variety of systems, but it wasn't until the arrival of the Gryphon that I was able to incorporate it into its natural environment, a fully complementary balanced system. As regular readers will know, I'm normally a single-ended

kind of guy, at least when it comes to cables. However, the one exception that I make to that rule is where fully complementary circuits are involved. The Levinson Reference components sound better balanced and so do the Gryphons.



And so does the Classé Omega when you connect it to the Gryphons. The benefits of balanced connection over single-ended connection to either the Gryphon or The Vibe were such that I'd seriously question using this machine in any other context. Of course, Classé's own Omega amplifiers would fit the bill perfectly. Meanwhile, assume that all comments regarding sonic performance relate to the Omega, connected balanced to the Gryphon, 'cos that's the way it sounded at its best.

Listening to the Omega SACD player is a confusing business at the best of times. Not only does it offer both balanced and single-ended outputs, but it'll play SACD, CD and the CD layer of hybrid discs. That's a lot of options. However, the field is narrowed considerably when it comes to cross-format software, even though SACD is significantly better off in this regard than DVD-A. During its stay the Classé got used to play all sorts of discs, but for the purposes of direct comparison there are a couple that are particularly useful. Dave Alvin's *Blackjack David* is available as a hybrid SACD from Mo-Fi and in an HDCD original, in which format it

sounds excellent. Likewise, *Steamin'* with the Miles Davis Quartet is available in a host of issues, the relevant ones here being the JVC XRCD and Mo-Fi's hybrid SACD. Two discs from Mobile Fidelity? They are consistently the best sounding of the SACDs that I have, at least those derived from older tapes. For DSD

recordings, look no further than Eleanor McEvoy's *Yola*. One thing became very apparent very quickly. When it comes to the Classé playing hybrid discs, its SACD performance absolutely buries the CD layer. The 44.1 version sounds thin through the mid and turgid at the bottom, robbing music of pace, presence and impact. Dave Alvin's driving energy on 'Abilene' is diluted and dissipated, robbing the track of its essential contrast between upbeat music and downbeat lyrics. The result is dreary and fails to communicate either urgency or desperation. Switch to the SACD layer and it's like a different track on a different system, such is the dramatic change in the physical presence, drive and sheer purpose



of the track. The solidity and substance of instruments, their shape, body and position brings the recording to vivid life, the detail, natural warmth and inflection of the vocals communicates more convincingly and much more directly.

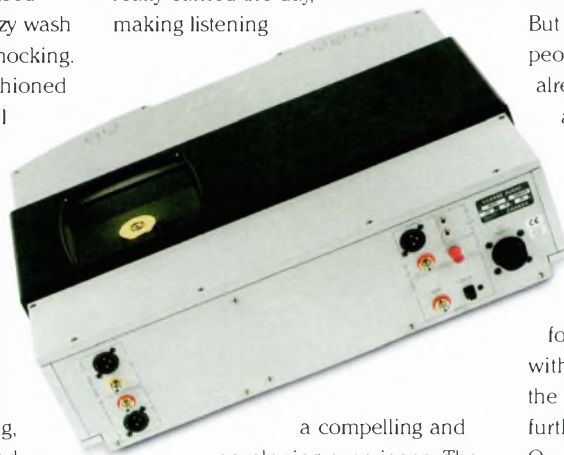
It's a chasm in class that's mirrored on *Steamin'*. Right from the opening ▶

► bars of the opening track, Red Garland's piano speaks with greater authority and purpose, defining the framework for the other musicians. Philly Joe Jones' drums are quicker, more solid and his stickwork far more subtle as he pushes and prompts the rhythm. The increased definition on the cymbals (a fuzzy wash on the XRCD) is actually quite shocking. But the kicker is Miles' horn, cushioned in its own space and air, a model of restrained intimacy as he works and caresses the familiar theme. And this from a 1956 mono tape!

Playing either the hybrid CD layer or the original CD issues and comparing against the Wadia 861 underlines the Classé's failings as a CD player. The Wadia is far more convincing, rhythmically and tonally balanced, interesting and informative. Interestingly, the hybrid layer on the Dave Alvin disc sounds better than the HDCD original, when played on the Classé, but close comparisons across other discs and platforms suggests that the success of hybrid layers is still prey to the vagaries of mastering as much as the technology itself. However, the bottom line here is that the Omega can't hold its own as a CD player. The Wadia 861 and Naim CDS3 both better it in every respect. Engaging the SRC up-sampling merely makes matters worse, adding detail at the expense of what little body and rhythmic integrity it possesses. So, not a conspicuous success, even as a stop-gap player for CDs.

But it's not all bad news. As disappointing as the performance may be on CD, it's scintillating on SACD. It's no exaggeration to equate the difference between the two to the visual gap between television and the cinema. It's not just the scale, it's the vivid colours, depth and presence of the performance. Comparisons between the Omega and the Metronome Kalista/Wadia 861 set-up, the best CD player I've used at home, show the SACD replay showing a small

but consistent advantage over the earlier format, irrespective of disc or version chosen. The CD player retains a slight advantage in terms of pace and separation, but the presence, colour, energy and natural weight of the Omega really carried the day, making listening



a compelling and enveloping experience. The new Tilson Thomas Mahler cycle with the San Francisco Symphony Orchestra is a perfect example of the player's strengths: The wide dynamic swings demanded by the music are easily accommodated by the format's headroom and the power available from the Gryphon system. The silent background, stability of the stage and deft touch with instrumental character and detail are stunning in the quiet passages yet remain entirely intact through crescendos. It's a sweeping, majestic performance that manages to encompass Mahler, Miles and Dave Alvin with equal grace and power. Playing SACDs through the Gryphons, this has been consistently the best digital replay that's graced my system, shading even the Metronome/Wadia experience.

That one sentence embodies both the Omega's glory and its tragedy: As an advocate for the new format it is hard to ignore its potent display of SACD's virtues. But – and it's a big but – those virtues only show themselves on the relatively small number of titles available, and in the context of a fully complementary set-up. Used single-ended the better CD players will still show it a clean

pair of heels. Use it to play CD and it will get itself buried.

Yet still, it's hard not to be impressed by what I've heard and enjoyed when this player performs at its best. If only it did a better job on CD. If only fully balanced systems were the norm... But now that I come to think of it – most people shopping in this price range will already have a decent CD transport, and a lot of them might well have the necessary hardware too, so perhaps all isn't lost. Classé took a gamble with this player by excluding multi-channel options. I think they were right. I reckon they might be right about the market for it too. As it stands, audiophiles with deep pockets and a desire for the best in digital replay need look no further. For the rest of us, the Classé Omega delivers timely proof of the potential performance to be had from SACD. If you think it's just a gimmick then think again...



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	SACD player with separate PSU
Digital Inputs:	1 x SPDIF (RCA) 1 x TosLink
Digital Outputs:	1 x SPDIF (RCA) 1 x AES/BU (xLR) 1 x AT&T Glass Optical (No DSD digital output)
Analogue Outputs:	1 x Balanced (XLR) 1 x Un-balanced (RCA)
Output Level:	2.5V
Dimensions (WxHxD) –	
Main Chassis:	483x137x380mm
PSU:	240x95x380mm
Weight –	
Main Chassis:	23Kg
PSU:	4.5Kg

UK Distributor:

B&T Loudspeakers
Tel. (44)(0)1903 750750
Net. www.bwspeakers.com

Manufacturer:

Classé Audio
www.classeaudio.com

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STOP
PLAY
PAUSE
REPEAT
SKIP
NEXT

AUDIO DIRECT

OPEN/CLOSE

OPEN

PROGRESSIVE SCAN



Philips DVD963SA Digital Disc Player

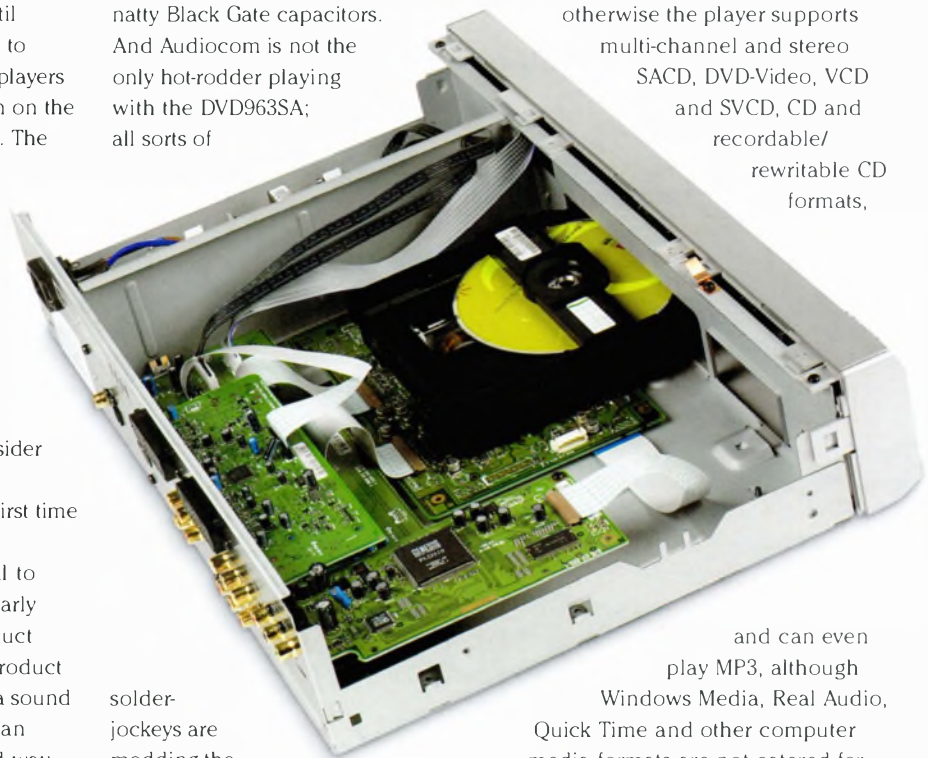
by Alan Sircom

There are some times when you just gotta spark a revolution – just ask Chairman Mao. Despite being co-inventor of the SACD format, Philips really hasn't capitalised on that invention in the same way that the other co-inventor, Sony, has. Until very recently, ask an audiophile to name a manufacturer of SACD players and Philips would be way down on the list, if the brand even registered. The \$400 Philips DVD963SA changes all that. It pushes the Philips name to the forefront of SACD playback.

This is a player with extreme audiophile and video enthusiast credentials and has the performance to back those credentials up. All at the sort of price an audiophile would consider not too harsh to pay for an interconnect cable. It's not the first time Philips has made a product that has the potential to redraw a market. Back in the early 1990s, Philips launched a product called the CD450, a Bitstream product that was capable of producing a sound that was considerably better than anything in its price range, and way beyond. Those who realised the potential of the CD450 still swear by them, but the hi-fi industry was still reeling from the impact of the Pioneer A-400 amplifier at the time, so – despite some outstanding reviews – ranks were closed and the CD450 went almost unnoticed.

Such a fate will not befall the DVD963SA. The online hi-fi community has already got the measure of the

player. What's more, hi-fi hot rodders of note Audiocom take the good basic performance of the DVD963SA and reclock it, optionally feed the new Superclock with its own PSU and finally stuff key parts of the circuit with natty Black Gate capacitors. And Audiocom is not the only hot-rodder playing with the DVD963SA; all sorts of



solder-jockeys are modding the player. We have not had chance to hear a modded version yet, but given that the full set of Audiocom modifications cost more than the player itself, it shows that the basic DVD963SA is really worth experimenting with.

The word 'basic' seems entirely ill cast when it comes to the DVD963SA. The player is stuffed with the sort of audiophile and video enthusiast

goodies that would have been impossible to purchase only a couple of years ago. Of course DVD-Audio and DVD-RW are missing from the line-up (Philips has interests in both SACD and DVD-RW rivals), but otherwise the player supports multi-channel and stereo SACD, DVD-Video, VCD and SVCD, CD and recordable/rewritable CD formats,

and can even play MP3, although Windows Media, Real Audio, Quick Time and other computer media formats are not catered for. It's a dual laser player, with 192kHz, 24-bit up-sampling DACs and an Audio Direct mode that switches out the video processing – all good for hi-fi cred. There are also SACD-specific useful additions, like the choice of stereo and multichannel set-up and bass management settings that pass the bass through the main speakers instead of insisting on a subwoofer channel. In fairness, this is

▶ common to SACD players, but it means you do not have to play SACDs through a home cinema system – unlike what the man in the pub will tell you.

The addition of a Faroudja DCDi interpolator chip is a nice luxury inclusion at the price. When hooked to suitably-equipped projectors or monitors through the component video outputs, the DVD963SA plays pictures in progressive scan instead of the more commonplace interlaced screen format. In the simplest terms, this means the picture is displayed frame-by-frame instead of line-by-line, making the picture more cinematic (as a cinema picture is displayed one frame at a time). Faroudja's interpolator includes a raft of useful picture tweaks (for progressive scan only) to allow the user to accurately match picture to screen.

It certainly appears well built. The profusion of el cheapo Chinese built DVD players has meant that anything with a disc tray that costs more than £100 demands the sort of build quality top-flight

players used to command. This feels heavy and, aside from a bit of flexing on the sides of the base plate, is solidly constructed. The rear panel is well populated with all the right

brings a vibrancy to colours and a depth to pictures that is normally only found on players costing twice as much. This comes through not simply with the run of the mill shiny demonstration DVDs like *Spider-Man*, but with the dark moodiness of *The Godfather* too.



connections, including above-average phono sockets for the stereo outputs, a pair of Scart sockets for video use and both co-axial and optical digital outputs.

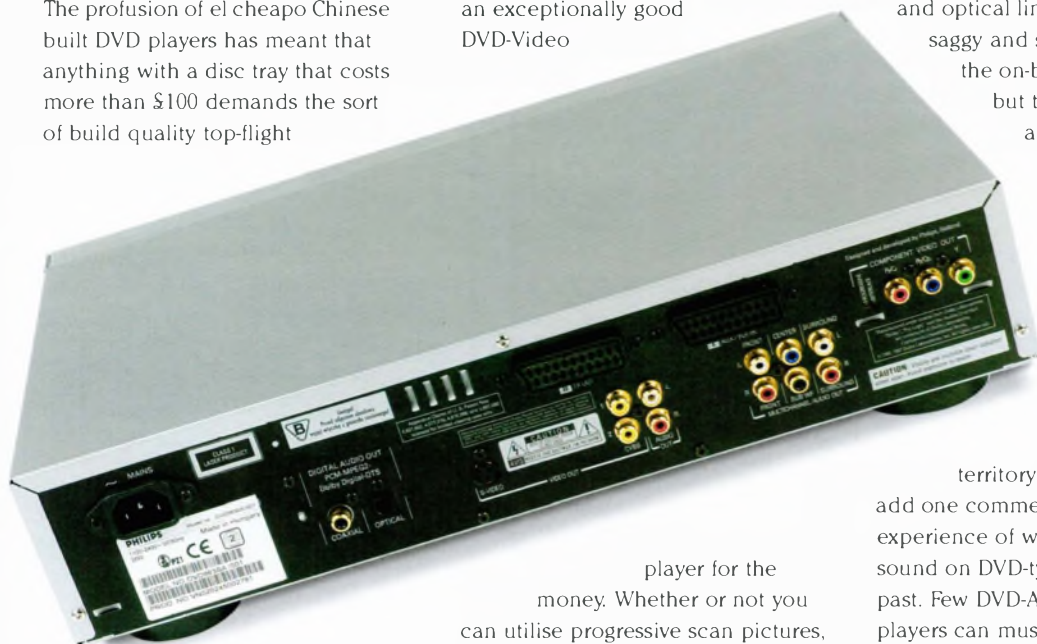
Getting the home cinema aspect out of the way first, this is an exceptionally good DVD-Video

What's more, the digital audio sound, whether through the on-board processing or through the digital audio outs, is well above average. The co-axial and optical links do sound a bit saggy and slow compared to the on-board processing,

but this is not uncommon among DVD players.

Our Beloved Leader has already wrangled successfully with the CD performance in the second part of this review, so it's not worth going over the same

territory twice. However, I'll add one comment, based on more experience of wading through CD sound on DVD-type players in the past. Few DVD-Audio/Video or SACD players can muster a decent CD sound, short of looking at



player for the money. Whether or not you can utilise progressive scan pictures, the 108MHz, 13-bit Video DAC really

► Meridian money. In most cases, the CD performance is little short of dreadful, either sounding so bright it will peel paint at 50 paces, or so dull it can be used as anaesthetic in minor surgery. This is the exception, and starts to bring CD performance back to the level it was approaching before DVD came along and ruined the whole caboodle. Let's face it, anything that can confidently cope with a messy remix of *Planet Rock* by Afrika Bambaata & the Soulsonic Force back-to-back with Mozart's *Requiem* and the pained, delicate voice of Chet Baker in one session has got a lot going for it.

But it's SACD that really entices. It's the raison d'être of SACD players after all. And, with classical releases appearing regularly with wonderful new

multi-channel recordings and back-issues of classic releases in über-stereo, suddenly SACD becomes a viable force to be reckoned with. And this is the perfect vehicle to exploit those recordings.

The overall sound is extremely honest to the recording, given the low price tag. It has a remarkable ability to open up the sound of the speaker boxes, like only the very

best products can. I fed the player a wealth of mostly rock and jazz recordings, but also some classical works, most of which are the sort already owned on LP and CD (the re-issue game is nothing if not consistent; Miles Davis, Glenn Gould and Pink Floyd will sell, whatever the format). At each turn, the Philips player produced a sound that delivered a rich, accurate tonal balance and more detail than ever. Perhaps sometimes, this detail was at the expense of the dynamic range,

is the only consistent evidence

that this isn't a £2,000 player. The intelligently-remastered *Dark Side of the Moon* shows where this player scores highly. On 'Money', the sounds effects are all assigned a different speaker around the room (fortunately, when the band kicks in, the surround sound is far less overt), but the sense of three-dimensionality and sound-staging never once pin-points the position of the speakers. Instead,

you have a smooth, contiguous soundstage enveloping you, with a cash register a couple of metres behind your left ear. Moving over to the stereo SACD of Bob Dylan's *Desire*, you can actually understand every word His Bobness whines into the microphone in 'Hurricane' (a first on all formats), although the tinny guitar and close-mic'd violin and drums still sound dreadful, like they always did. The little Philips is good – but it ain't that good!

In winding up this review, I did a bit of online research and found a private review site. Most people had high praise for the DVD963SA, but one criticism seemed off-beam. The person felt that there was

not a great demonstrable difference between the sound of SACD and the sound of CD on this player. At first, I dismissed

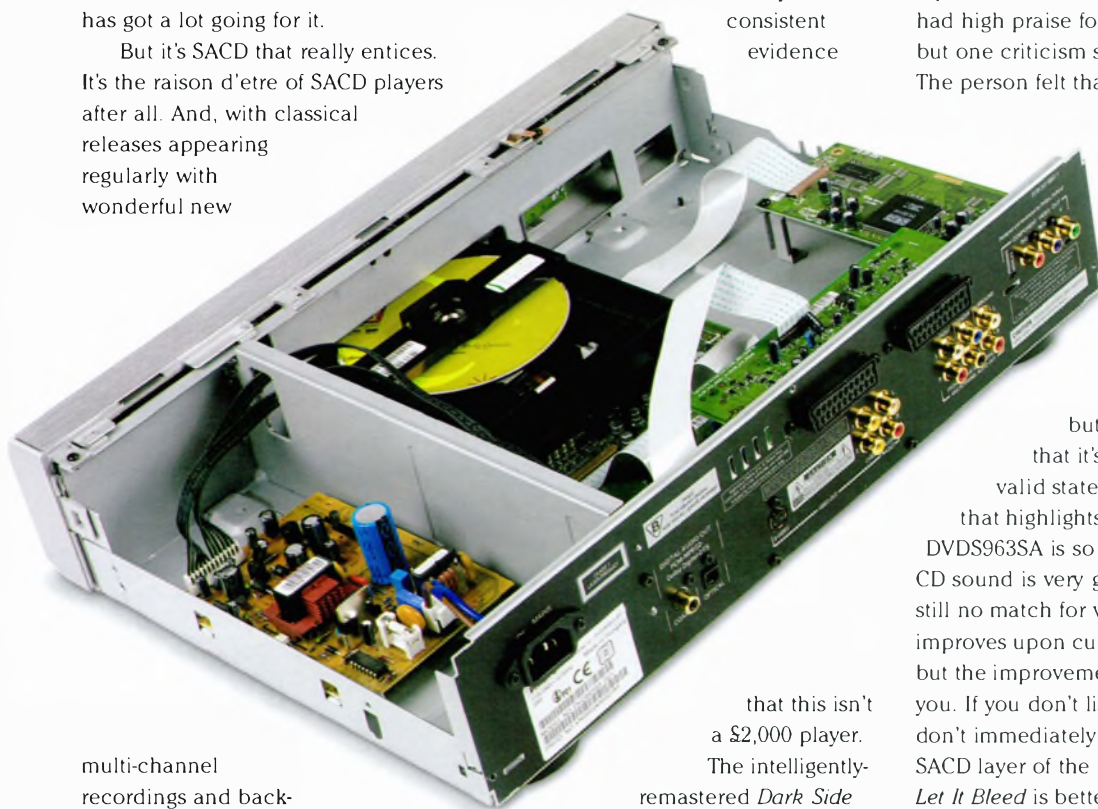
this out of hand,

but then realised

that it's actually a very valid statement... and one

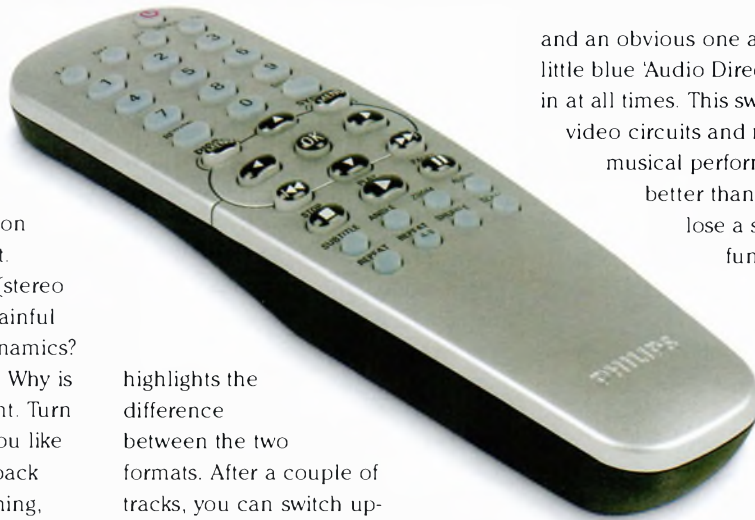
that highlights just why the

DVDS963SA is so good. Current CD sound is very good (although still no match for vinyl); SACD improves upon current CD sound, but the improvement sneaks up on you. If you don't listen critically, you don't immediately notice that the SACD layer of the Rolling Stones' *Let It Bleed* is better than the CD layer; you just listen longer and play it louder than before. Around about four tracks into the SACD, you begin to listen critically, and listen to a record you might have played 100s of times like it was brand new. The DVD963SA does very little to get in the way of that process, and precious few SACD players, regardless of price, pull



▶ that feat off. It's almost as if the improvements sneak up on you, instead of presenting themselves as blatantly obvious, and a sure sign of the company putting some care and attention into the design of the product.

Moving back from SACD (stereo or multichannel) to CD is a painful process. Where are all the dynamics? What happened to the detail? Why is the sound so dry? Here's a hint. Turn off the up-sampling, even if you like the process, when dropping back from SACD to CD. The smoothing, flattening effect of up-sampling just



highlights the difference between the two formats. After a couple of tracks, you can switch up-sampling back on again. Another tip,

and an obvious one at that; leave the little blue 'Audio Direct' button kicked in at all times. This switches off the video circuits and makes the musical performance even better than ever. You do lose a small amount of functionality, not being able to read the on-screen displays. But, it's worth the discomfort. So, what are the flaws? ▶

Take Two...

or should that be Take That!

by Roy Gregory

It might seem obvious, but the first thing that any multi-standard player must do is play each separate format successfully. The problem is that that is exactly where most of them have fallen down. It's no good offering stellar SACD performance (which, considering its price the DVD963SA certainly does) if the player bails on its backward compatibility by delivering lack luster CD playback. AS has commented on the Philips' multi-channel sound as well as its stereo performance, but how will it stand up to immersion in a totally two-channel environment where its primary function would be as a CD player?

The PR for this player suggests that it's something rather special, even going so far as to conjure up the ghost (albeit in hushed tones) of Pioneer's legendary A400 amplifier, the last true giant killer to stalk the land. So, not feeling particularly charitable, I started by plugging the DVD963SA straight into the system alongside the Metronome and Wadia players. That's £400 of multi-standard plays around £20000

of dedicated CD. Now I'm not going to tell you that the Philips wiped the floor with the Kalista/861 combination, or that it even came close. It didn't. But it wasn't totally embarrassed. Oh no – not by any means. A little crude and lacking in detail and resolution to be sure, but not at all bad: Certainly good enough to get the old antennae twitching.

Leaving the rest of the system in place I reintroduced an air of reality by inserting Rega's £1200 Jupiter, which has remained my favourite player at around this price since its introduction. With the Jupiter run over night to make sure it was warm I settling down to listen on a rather more level playing field. Popping the Reiner *Scheherazade* in the tray I relaxed into the familiar presentation. Very nice, but swapping to the Philips was something of a shock. Suddenly there was a wider and deeper stage, with much greater scale and presence. There was more transparency and focus too, with a far better range of tonal colours. Suddenly the Jupiter sounded rather small and grey. But what about rhythm and structure, the all-important musical structure. Plenty of players beat the Rega in terms of clarity or detail only to get the really important things wrong: Well, not the little Philips. In common with some other SACD players replaying CD there's a hint of weight low down that can round or slow bass notes, but here it's almost

imperceptible. The Jupiter enjoys its usual, sure footed pitch integrity at low frequencies while the Philips, lacking the obvious clarity, actually delivers a richer and more complex sound but one that still reveals the pitch of notes and the shape of tunes. Play the XRCD of *Waltz For Debby* and it's swings and roundabouts, the Rega making the parallel themes and their repetition and development slightly clearer, the Philips sounding far more like real instruments in real space – and far more rooted. How so I hear you ask? Well, there's more to musical reproduction than just the sense of the performance. The Rega has reigned supreme on the basis that it's the only affordable player that makes any kind of sense at all. Well, the Philips matches it in that regard, but the additional harmonic and spatial information, the lack of the Rega's leading edge emphasis, makes the shape and structure of music more complex and thus less obvious. It's all there, it just doesn't hit you on the nose. Those descending bass runs that open the title track are a great example. The Rega maps out their pitch and spacing perfectly; the Philips adds far more information about the shape of each note and the way in which it's been plucked. The overall shape and structure of the line is still there, but now it's got clothes on. Playing difficult discs the Philips comes to the fore, with the likes of Stewboss and Slobberbone handled with ease: full of energy, drive and intent.

► The remote control is not of the first water. It isn't the most ergonomic handset around (no backlighting and the lack of an eject function is an odd omission) and doesn't flood the room with IR signals, so the player needs to be in line-of-sight with the controller. There is also a slight, but noticeable difference between the stereo analogue outputs and the front left and right multi-channel outputs when played in two-channel mode. The multi-channel output places emphasis on the top end, where the stereo outputs do the same to the bottom octaves, whether played with a stereo SACD or CD. This doesn't

become an issue when played in full SACD multi-channel sound, as the sheer surroundicity of the performance carries away any tonal difference between the two. You might want to experiment between the two outputs in a stereo-only system, as you may prefer or your system may better suit one sound over the other.

Let's get this clear. This is not a Wadia for SACD. It doesn't render all of the high end disc-spinning community outmoded at a stroke, nor will it inspire people to hand in their top SACD or CD players (this is a mistake made by some who criticise the DVD963SA,

comparing it to products in the \$2,000+ price band). What this offers is in essence what the Pioneer A-400 amplifier and the Michell Iso phono stage offered all those years ago – it gives you an insight into high-end sound, without the fuss and price true high-end entails. To criticise it for not being high-end misses the point, like rubbishing *Jerry Springer – The Opera* for not being a 'true' opera. The DVD963SA is designed to combine top-notch CD, DVD-Video and SACD performance in a single chassis, and do so without including a four-figure price tag. It achieves that goal perfectly. ►+

The mediocre recordings and choppy rhythms don't confuse the player, which manages to keep control without holding on too tight. The excellent tonal palette keeps things separate and interesting in even the densest mixes, and it's interesting that the gap between the Philips and the Wadia is far narrower than the one between the expensive player and the Jupiter.

All of which begs the question, is the Philips a better player than the Rega? On sonic grounds, replaying CD, the answer is that it's comparable. There are those who'll prefer it: there are those who will opt for the starker and more explicit presentation of the Jupiter. I for one, having experienced the lush colours, scale and transparency of the Philips find the Rega surprisingly disappointing: Surprising because that doesn't normally happen, even when returning to it from really expensive machines. Now factor in the price difference and it's hard to ignore the Philips, even if you don't want SACD and DVD replay. But one word of caution: just as AS commands, always, always use it switched to Audio Direct. This switches off the surround circuitry. The difference it makes to CD replay is enormous, elevating it from the "merely competent" to the "worth getting excited about" that I've just described. That little switch delivers whole vistas of space, transparency and colour as a horrible gray murk simply drops away.

The name of this player says it all. Philips is better known these days for TVs than hi-fi. This player is part of their Matchline series of integrated TV and electronics. Even its name starts with DVD, the SA suffix added almost as an afterthought. Don't let any of these things put you off. This is a truly remarkable player. Its rich, detailed yet transparent sound is way beyond anything at the asking price and simply gets even better with SACD. Indeed, it is one of the nicest sounding SACD players that I've heard at any price. Not the best necessarily, but certainly one of the most musically rewarding. It also has outputs for discrete six-channel sound and all the necessary connections to replay films on your telly. The only thing missing is DVD-A, and at this price you can afford a separate player for that! Sticking with two-channel but want to play DVDs? Buy the Philips DVD963SA. Worried about which way to jump on the new formats? Don't be – just buy the Philips DVD963SA. Kids nagging you for a surround system? You know what I'm going to say. Indeed, just like the Pioneer A400, it's worth having one around in case your main system's player goes down. Buy one while you can as bargains like this have a nasty habit of having short shelf lives. The DVD963SA once again proves that, when they put their mind to it, the majors can still pull Harvey out of a top-hat. And how!

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Transport:	dual laser pick-up
Disc Replay Capability:	SACD-Stereo, SACD multichannel, DVD-Video, Video CD, SVCD, CD Audio, CD-R, CD-RW MP3-CD
Video Outputs:	Component Video (Progressive Scan) Composite Video, S-Video, RGB (via Scart)
Audio Outputs:	Digital Coaxial, Optical, Stereo Audio six channel audio outputs 2x SCART Output, Component/Progressive Scan Video, Composite Video, Stereo Audio
CD up-sampling:	to 192kHz/24bit
Dimensions (WxHxD):	435x101x315mm
Weight:	4.6Kg
Price:	£400
Manufacturer:	Philips Customer Care Tel. 0870 900 9070 Net. www.philips.co.uk

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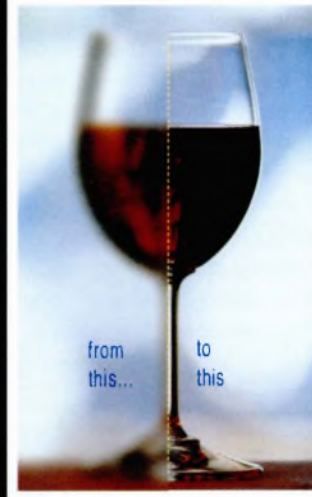
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The Metronome Technologie Kalista CD Transport

by Roy Gregory

How is it, that with vinyl's last rights long read and the format written off and into history by record labels and major technology manufacturers alike, LPs are enjoying a rude resurgence and the best replay we've ever enjoyed? Sure, it's small scale compared to sales of digital formats, or the sales explosion that represents DVD-V, driven by movies and computer games as well as music videos. But it's out there, it's growing and it's not going away.

Who in their right mind would spend well into five figures on a CD transport? The format's obsolete: outmoded and outperformed by the newer, hi-bit digital formats. So that'll be the same customers who're still buying expensive turntables then. And as if to underline that point, Metronome Technologie's Kalista CD transport looks more like a turntable than a CD player has any right to.

Sit the Kalista next to the (similarly priced) Clearaudio Master Reference record player and the similarities in construction and materials are impossible to miss. The structure of the transport is based around two slabs of 20mm clear Perspex. These are cut into roughly equilateral triangles with their edges curved inwards, which both looks pretty and helps prevent the creation of dominant resonant frequencies within the plates. The two sheets of Perspex are held apart by circular towers in each corner, two front, one rear. Made from solid stainless steel 80mm in diameter, each one comes in three parts that screw together to tightly clamp the Perspex. On the bottom of each tower

there's a steel cone that locates into a large, dimpled Delrin foot. These space the player from its supporting surface.

The transport itself is mounted in a large, stainless steel drum, damped by internally loading it with Corian. This screws into a triangular slab of aluminium 40mm thick and orientated so that its front corner sticks out between the



player's front feet. This carries the sloping display and the basic control buttons. A machined void in the aluminium slab contains the digital output board and this connects to the terminals on the rear edge: AES/EBU, co-axial phono, 75 Ohm BNC and glass AT&T optical. There's also a switch that allows the user to select 44.1 or a 96K up-sampled digital output. The transport drum is held between the Perspex slabs, enclosed by the triangular aluminium slab below and a circular aluminium



plate bolted to its top: Any rattles are eliminated by a pair of large rubber O rings that sit between the aluminium plates and the

Perspex, keeping things nice and tight. The transport proper (a Philips CDM12 Pro) is mounted in free air, sunk in the top of the drum. It's also heavily modified, the most obvious evidence of this being the composite spindle that caps a completely redesigned drive shaft. The disc is placed on the spindle and held there by a stainless steel and Perspex puck. The whole assembly also electrically grounds the disc helping counter the effects of static. Although the Statmat still works, its benefit is significantly reduced. A turret at the back of the top-plate contains a blue LED that tells the player when you place a disc on the spindle but that also bathes the laser track with blue light reflected from the sloped surface of the clamp. First discovered by YBA this is claimed to improve reading accuracy and, as we shall see, this machine lifts more information and makes better use of it than any other in my experience.

Metronome have clearly spent a great deal of time and effort on the isolation of the transport from structural vibration. Anybody who doubts this needs only try to pick the Kalista up. Compact it might be, but it's also extraordinarily dense, with the sort of inertia more commonly associated with power amps. However that obsession doesn't extend to airborne energy, and leaving the disc literally spinning in the wind, whilst undeniably attractive does also leave it particularly vulnerable in this respect. Playing the system loud (and I do mean loud) produced a discernable loss of fine detail and transparency, a loss that wasn't

► mirrored in the performance of the Wadia 861, with its enclosed and tightly sealed transport compartment. I sited the Kalista in place of the Clearaudio Master Reference, carefully positioned in a room null, thus minimising the impact of any airborne vibration. Nevertheless, I could



detect the effect and I'd counsel extreme care in positioning the player, especially in a system with serious bass extension.

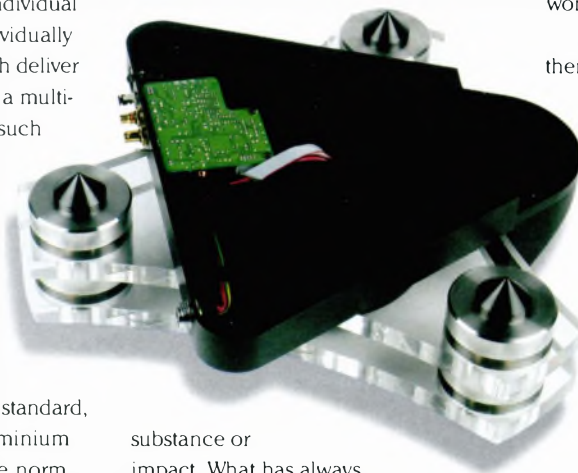
The second part of the equation is the external power supply. A slim, full-width chassis with a nicely contoured front panel that offers the master power switch and display on/off control. Inside you'll find no fewer than five individual transformers feeding eight individually regulated power supplies which deliver DC voltage to the transport via a multi-pin umbilical. Having gone to such extremes to isolate the transport from mechanical energy, Metronome have expended equal effort on eliminating the intrusive grunge and grain that infests the mains.

Finally, there's the remote. What at first seems like a fairly standard, hewn from solid, brick of aluminium is actually a lot better than the norm. Okay, so it's still heavy enough to double as an offensive weapon, or induce RSI in those with delicate wrists, but it has the tremendous benefit of actually being functional! Not only are the necessary functions clearly laid out and labeled, but the action of the buttons is crisp and

positive, while the acceptance angle is the widest I've ever enjoyed. Full marks then, and those from a listener who generally uses remotes to add ballast to the stored packaging.

I used the Metronome transport to feed the digital inputs of the Wadia 861, capable of accepting both 44.1 and 96K signals. The rest of the system comprised the Vibe/Pulse line-stage and Hovland RADIA amplifier driving the Audioplan Kontrast IIII speakers with Nordost Valhalla cables, or the Gryphon system, either via the Sonata line stage or directly from the Wadia's outputs to the Cantata Q controller. For comparison, of course, I could feed the Wadia from its own transport, still the best sounding digital source I've had at home long term.

Until now: The Kalista offered a clear advantage in terms of focus, detail and transparency, normally the very areas in which the Wadia excels. More surprisingly still, it delivered these benefits with no loss of presence,



substance or impact. What has always kept the 861 at the top of my digital listening list is its ability to graft both physical substance and superb resolution onto a natural sense of flow and rhythmic progression. It's one of only a hand full of players that can combine digital strengths with analogue

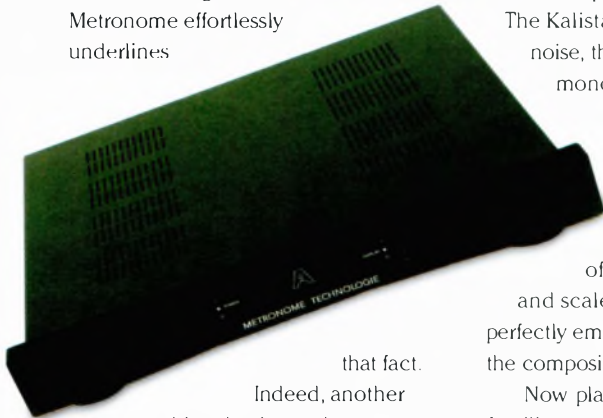
levels of musical involvement. Of course, in using the Metronome transport you're still getting the benefit of the Wadia's stellar DAC, but even with its remote location and the interconnect in between, the performance benefits are both obvious and worthwhile. And whilst an 861 is an expensive option as a DAC, Wadia offer stand-alone decoders along with other suppliers like Theta and dCS. Whichever route you opt for, the Kalista will deliver the quality signal you need for front-rank digital replay.

That special combination of stability and physical presence along with astonishing delicacy and deft precision is what elevates the Kalista well above the norm. Playing the recent Lyrinx hybrid SACD of the Mozart *String Quintets*, the shape, tone and character of the Cello are all superb, but what lifts the whole listening experience is the sheersensitivity of the playing, so crucial to proper balance with the other players and their smaller instruments. The Metronome gets it absolutely spot-on, leaving you in no doubt as to the skill and expression, tempered with restraint, that contributes so much to these wonderful readings.

These are attributes that lend themselves perfectly to the piano. It matters not whether its Ellington or Byron Janis, the transport's uncanny ability to convey not just the weight of notes but the precision of their pace and placement opens up a whole new layer of meaning in a performance. The excellent Naxos disc of Shostakovich *Piano Concertos* (Naxos 8.553126) is a case in point. Now, Michael Houston accompanied by the New Zealand Symphony Orchestra might not set you all aquiver with anticipation, but like a lot of the Naxos recordings there's a lovely freshness to the playing, a lack of pompous airs and graces. Just listen to *Piano Concerto No. 2 in F Major, Opus 102*. The opening theme is almost achingly beautiful in its souring, ►

► fragile delicacy, the Kalista wringing every last drop of emotional power from this apparently simple melody – one that subtly pulls you in and wraps you in its folds. The sweeping strings that accompany it are perfectly poised, held each time you think the piano is going to stutter to a halt, only for it to develop and extend its theme, transposing and darkening what started out as airy and spacious. It's a tour de force of compositional restraint (a word that keeps occurring in my notes) that's in stark contrast to the almost jokey theme that subsequently develops, and one that underlines exactly why orchestras have conductors. That might seem like a trite comment but consider how often your system really makes you aware of the controlling baton that directs the performance. Now think about the last time you sat in front of a live orchestra and just how obvious the conductor's influence is.

You don't go to classical concerts? Think of the foundation provided by a good rhythm section. It truly is the foundation of great music and the Metronome effortlessly underlines



that fact. Indeed, another thing that instantly separates this machine from every other player I've used (save possibly the Levinson 30.5 and 31.6 combination) is its ability to both stand aside from the music and unerringly fasten on the fundamentals of the performance, regardless of musical genre. Whether it's a Chopin *Trio* or

Gillian Welch, Kraftwerk or Talking Heads, the Metronome makes music and makes sense of that music.

When I get a really good piece of equipment for review, one of the prime indicators is the way it sends me scurrying for more and more discs,



deeper and deeper into the record collection. The acid test is how it brings up the old and familiar with a fresh vitality and a new perspective. I have finally managed to lay my hands on a copy of the legendary (in this house at least) Camilla Wicks Sibelius *violin concerto*, courtesy of RSF. It's a performance that's haunted me since I first heard it, of a piece that has likewise captivated me over the years.

The Kalista cuts right through the noise, the limited bandwidth of this mono recording to the heart of the playing. There's a lilting delicacy to Camilla's bowing that transforms to a fiery authority on demand. It's the power of these contrasts, the speed and scale of the transition that so perfectly embodies the fire and ice of the composition.

Now play the Heifetz on RCA, as familiar a war-horse as I can think of. Hendl might be no Reiner, but this is still the Chicago in their pomp. Heifetz' legendary power is well to the fore, the purity of his tone and technique flawless, yet the easy grace, the almost contemptuous way in which he traverses the most complex and jagged phrases

actually diminishes the very contrasts that make the Wicks performance so direct and dramatic. I always knew that I preferred the Wicks (and the Haendel) to the Heifetz, but now I understand why. That's the level of insight provided by the Metronome.

Much of the music I've been listening to on the Kalista has been classical, if only because that's where most CD players fail so obviously and miserably. The Metronome transport has been a revelation.

But don't get the idea that it only works on classical or acoustic recordings. Everything from studio rock (and you don't get much rockier than Ramstein's *Mutter*) to the Scando dub-jazz of *Tosca* is treated with equal aplomb. It doesn't matter what you throw on the spindle, the Kalista leans hard on its musical capabilities confident in their ability to triumph over the densest and most processed mix. Give it something simple and the life and air it breathes into the performance could have been stolen from your lungs. It really is that good – and CD can be too, given a player like this to read the discs. ►+

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Top-loading CD transport
Digital Outputs:	AES/EBU, BNC, 75 Ω CoAxial, AT&T Optical
Display Off:	Yes
Weights -	
Transport:	49Kg
Power Supply:	10Kg
Dimensions (WxHxD) -	
Transport:	450x180x450mm
Power Supply:	450x70x375mm
Price:	£15350

UK Distributor:

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Wadia

Wadia 302 Integrated CD Player

by Chris Thomas

The new Wadia 302 supersedes the 301 reviewed by CB back in issue 18, though it remains as big and awkward to site. It's not so much the width as the depth of the player that made it unsuitable for the standard glass shelving of the Naim Frain. The three screw-in coned feet and supplied surface protectors mandated an oversized glass sheet to accommodate this rather old fashioned looking player as I simply could not lay my hands on anything deep enough in standard form that would allow it the solid base it really needs. And even then it will only fit atop the Frain. But it was certainly worth it in the end, as my first real encounter with Wadia products, like many relationships, began shakily then, as we began to understand each others quirks, ended in harmony, if not total adoration.

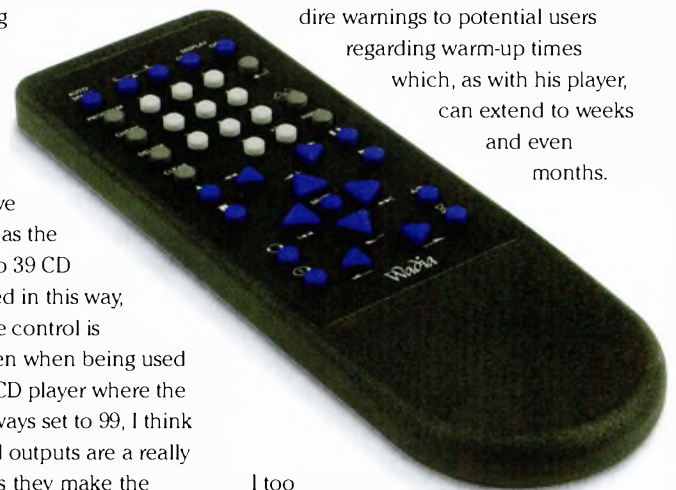
Internally the W 302 shows many improvements, the most major of which is probably the new Phillips VAE 1250 transport. There is also a new LED based display which is now entirely in blue with just the transport function indicators in red. This can be switched off altogether, illuminating briefly only when the output level or transport functions are operated. Also still present is Wadia's own Digimaster 3.1 filter system with Direct Connect control of volume performed entirely in the digital domain. When used in conjunction with the two rear mounted dip switches that fix the players output to one of four different levels, or eight if you take into account the variation between balanced and unbalanced operation, this increases the Wadia's versatility enormously. Think of it as a CD player coupled with a pre-amplifier of limited inputs. I say limited because, although connecting its outputs directly to a power amplifier is encouraged by

Wadia, the 302 will only accept digital signals from other source components. But, if you use CD as your only source then it sounds a great idea doesn't it? And the savings on pre-amplifier and cables will certainly run into thousands so you should end up with a better system for less money. One of the problems is that volume attenuation in the digital domain results in a reduction in resolution and Wadia recommend that the best results will always be attained when the volume is operating in the last third of its range (66 to 99 on the readout). That's why they fit the dip switches, allowing you to match the output to the sensitivity of your power amp. This is not the first time I have encountered this as the Mark Levinson No 39 CD player can be used in this way, though its volume control is analogue. But even when being used as a stand-alone CD player where the output level is always set to 99, I think the different fixed outputs are a really useful addition as they make the machine so much easier to match with any pre-amplifier. With the Tom Evans Vibe/Pulse line stage for instance, which has so much gain that with the high output Naim CDS 3 providing the signal it is impossible to use any more than the first two notches of the volume control for low level listening thus necessitating in-line attenuators, it proved a real boon.

This is a pretty solidly constructed device made from bolted sheets of aluminium but the disc tray clattered in and out and this review sample could

be heard hunting for a disc when none was present. It has a solid and comprehensive numeric remote, though if it is intended to be hand held it must have been designed for Chuck Berry whose hand I developed a perverse fascination with after I once shook it at the Marquee club about a hundred years ago. Chuck's hand was freaky. It consumed my not-inconsiderable mitt quite comfortably and I assume it must have been from decades of playing interminable twelve bar chords with all that painful stretching. But I digress.

RG is our resident expert on Wadia as he owns an 861 himself and issues dire warnings to potential users regarding warm-up times which, as with his player, can extend to weeks and even months.



I too underwent the Wadia effect when I began listening, despite the fact that the machine had been left on repeat for a week before I even connected it to a system. It sounded slow, soft, bloated, and very thick in the mid-band and completely underwhelming whether I used it with or without pre-amplifier - and it remained this way for days. Never offensive you understand but rather unengaging and flat. It went on for so long in fact that I was seriously beginning to

► doubt if it would ever start to perform. And then a glimmer of hope as, bit by bit (excuse the pun) it began to grow in bandwidth and focus. It also began to exhibit a lighter touch and as the mid-band started losing that clogged congealed quality it started to pick up pace as well. It has been running for a month or so

digital audio technology. It was as though all that thickness was actually instrumental and vocal detail and information that hadn't quite been resolved yet. But now it was all falling into sharper and

energies of the instruments just occupy their own space and are unaffected by each other's presence. Now this sense of natural separation and the ability to follow a single note all the way through to its eventual release is something that The Vibe/Pulse excels at so I was beginning to wonder just how much influence this was having on the sound.

Reason dictates that removing the pre-amplifier should bring about an improvement so I did a direct comparison by doing just that. It was good, but not as good as before. There might, just might have been a little more drive to the sound but that special ingredient, while not exactly gone, was certainly diminished.

But let's not forget that Tom Evans line stage, especially with its power supply is an absolute top performer. You would expect it to make a difference. I would say that with the vast majority of pre-amplifiers up to around the £3-3.5K level the direct driving of the power amplifier with the 302 would be at least as good if not better.

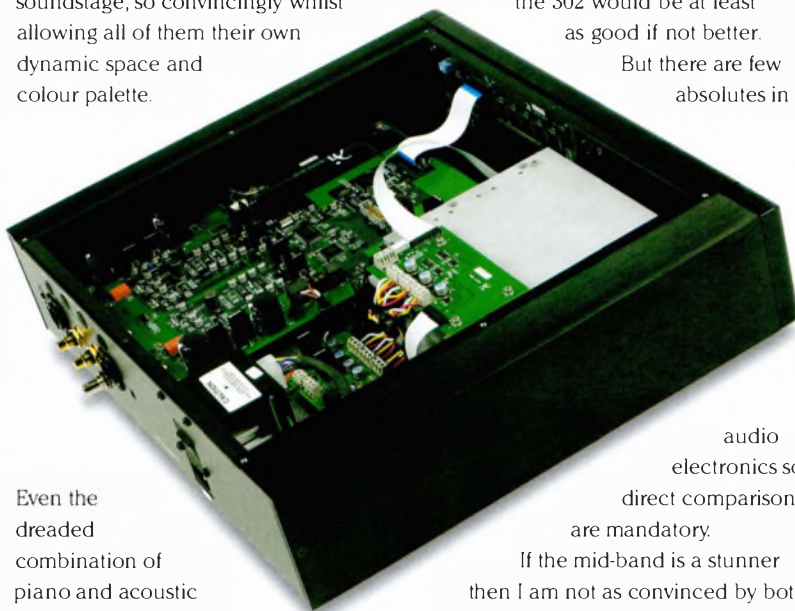
But there are few absolutes in

more deliberate focus.

And there was certainly lots of it. So much so that I was quite taken by its ability to hold several instruments together in time, but separately in the soundstage, so convincingly whilst allowing all of them their own dynamic space and colour palette.

now and really is sounding a little better sorted every time I use it, though for how long this will go on is anybody's guess. It does throw up plenty of issues regarding demonstrations, either in a dealer's listening room or especially at home where you won't be able to scratch the surface of its potential from a cold start in a few days. A wise dealer will have a ready-baked version for audition 24-7.

All of my initial listening was done using the 302 via the Vibe line stage with its external Pulse power supply driving either a Roland 101 or Aloia ST 15.01 power amplifiers. Speakers were the Revel Gems while Nordost Valhalla hooked it all together. Straight away your ear is drawn to the size and scale of the sound. Its big, but in a lazy low impact sort of way. Once the mid-band had shed its syrupy quality I could hear that it was quite intricately detailed but this is not the kind of crystalline resolution that I was expecting from Wadia, a company at the forefront of



Even the dreaded combination of piano and acoustic guitar sounded almost as good as I have heard from CD and certainly the best in this price range. The two different note shapes, tonal development, scale and

audio electronics so direct comparisons are mandatory.

If the mid-band is a stunner then I am not as convinced by both the frequency extremes. There is a slight lack of focus that leaves me wondering if the Wadia is in total control. I doubt many speakers would be as ruthless as the Gems but there is certainly ►

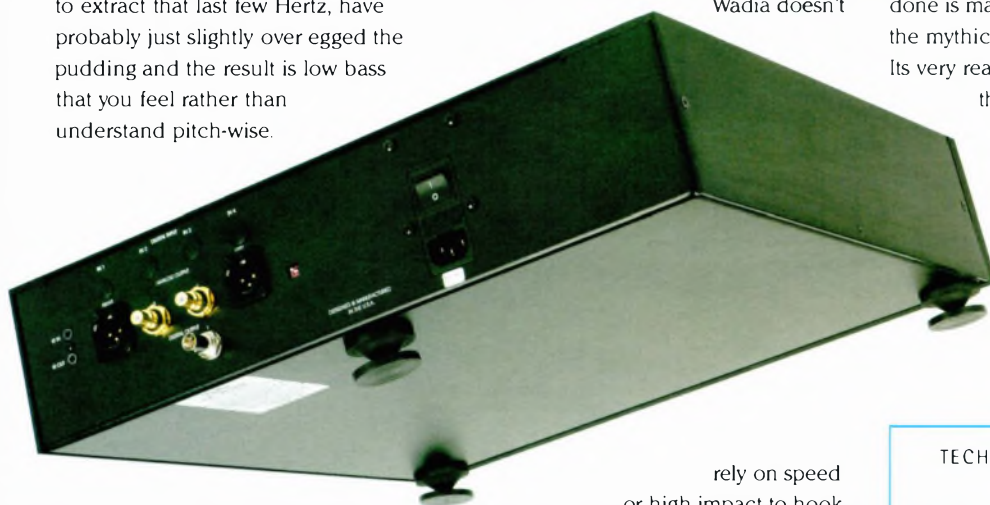
▶ a lack of edge and texture that you will notice whenever a decent drummer is working the cymbals. It never gets offensive, harsh or brittle as it used to in the dark old days of digital but these days it often manifests itself as a slight mushiness and that's what we have here. Similarly, while the bass performance is generally good, Wadia, in seeking to extract that last few Hertz, have probably just slightly over egged the pudding and the result is low bass that you feel rather than understand pitch-wise.

than another, but it is strange how different pieces of equipment subconsciously encourage you toward a certain flavour of sound and I found myself playing a lot of acoustic music just for the sheer clarity and expressive nature of the instruments themselves. It is often the very small things that grab you about a product and this

Wadia doesn't

This is the category that the Wadia 302 falls into. Like the idiot judges on Pop Idol, I have to say that for me it doesn't quite have that Wow factor, and again, like those four sad people I am unable to relate exactly what that really means. It's good, indeed it's very good – but it's not my cup of tea. Which doesn't mean it won't be yours. What the 302 has done is make me determined to hear the mythical 861 as soon as possible. Its very real attributes place it there or

thereabouts with the best players in its price bracket. Only a serious listen will decide which option is best for you: just make sure that the 302 is well warmed up! ▶+



After the closeness of the CDS3, the 302 offers you a seat a fair few rows back in the auditorium where you can view the whole musical picture rather than see and feel the musicians up close and personal. I rather grew to like the broadness and depth of the soundstage and as the resolution slowly began to gain focus I got used to the overall speed of the player that, by Naim CDS 3 standards, lacks a bit of edge and pace. It is however well in time with itself from top to bottom. It's just that every piece of music that I played seemed as if it was running just a few b.p.m.'s slower than I was used to. But it does bring a feeling of relaxation to the whole experience that on certain music is a boon. The Wadia always seems to have time and free space on its hands to light up a small passage or section that you may have not really noticed or studied before. Its lush, slightly generous and warm tonality doesn't necessarily make it more suitable for one kind of music

rely on speed or high impact to hook you into the music. Instead it brings an almost quiet authority and a certain real-world stability, both of the instrument/voice's character and of its location in the mix. Once the 302's useable bandwidth is in place and it begins to sound relaxed but not loose and much more focussed, then the slight criticisms really don't seem to matter any more. And this less than hyper approach does seem to allow the Wadia the time and space to unravel the rhythmic as well as the tonal complexities of the music. Even if it lacks that powerful sense of drive and musical progression that some players like those from Naim have, or that certain lightness of rhythmic touch that the Ayre CX-7 is so notable for, it strikes a balance somewhere between and never really puts a foot wrong.

When you get a lot of quality products passing through your life it's inevitable that some you will love, while for some you will have total respect without necessarily wanting to own.

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Single box Integrated CD player
Transport:	Phillips VAE 1250
Decoding Software:	DigiMaster 3.1 re-sampling
Output Voltage:	Variable
Analogue Outputs:	RCA or Balanced
Digital input:	1x AT&T glass-optic, 2xS/PDIF (BNC), 1x Toslink
Digital outputs:	1xS/PDIF (BNC)
Dimensions (WxHxD):	437x119x406mm (with tiptoe feet)
Weight:	9kg
Finishes:	Black or Silver
Price:	£3650

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Roy Gregory

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conrad-johnson Premier 140 Power Amp

by Roy Gregory

Reader Health Warning: This reviewer never got to hear a pair of c-j's Premier 8s in the comfort of his own home.

So what? You might well ask. After all, the product under consideration here is hardly in Prem 8 territory. Not in terms of money, nor in terms of topology. The long-term flagship is also no more, so what does it matter anyway?

Well, c-j are being very bullish about their latest tube amp. Stereo chassis or not, moderate price or not (given the power output), they are quietly whispering that the demise of the 8s has been significantly eased by the arrival of the new 140. Cheaper they admit, but more manageable – and better. The problem is that I'm in no position to verify that claim. But neither have I any reason to disbelieve it. I have had the Premier 140 at home for some time and I can confidently report that it's the best c-j amp I've had the pleasure of using – by some margin.

Over the years I've played with a few of conrad and johnson's creations, tube and solid-state. I've enjoyed them all, admiring their understated sense of balance, their generous, open perspectives and welcome warmth. There's nothing forced or hectoring about a c-j amp. They wrap you in music rather than firing it at you and it makes long term listening an involving and rewarding experience. But what should be their greatest strength can become an Achilles heel in the dealer's showroom. Compare a c-j amp to other, more

demonstrative brands and they can sound a little reserved, a little safe, a little steady. Not necessarily a recipe to impress in the short term and suggestive of a lack of immediacy and dynamic authority. Listen longer and you discover that it's got more to do with a mid-hall balance and perspective than anything else, but there's the rub: you've got to listen longer.

Well, the Premier 140 changes all that, and does so without losing any of



c-j's traditional strengths.

You want presence and immediacy; you've got it. You want power; you've got that too.

Many years ago I bought myself a pair of Magneplanar MG1bs and needed an amp to drive them. Along with the speakers I took home a Krell KSA 50 and an Audio Research D70, two of the most highly regarded amps of the time. Well, two of the most highly regarded amps that I could actually afford. Oh, and at the dealer's insistence I also took a Beard P100. Not bad for someone living in a fourth floor flat! And I cursed that

damned Beard. I reckon it weighed as much as the other two put together – well, maybe it just seemed like it. But when it was time to return the unwanted amps after the weekend, it was the Beard that stayed. Why? Because for all the detail and control of the Krell, the sweetness and light of the D70, the Beard had sheer, unbridled power. It grabbed the sluggish Maggies by the scruff of the neck and never let go. It's a lesson I never forgot, and it was recently underlined by the Premier 140.

There's nothing quite like the sense of real, honest to God power. It's not to do with the number of Watts, more the way they arrive. But eight 6550s doing the pushing can't hurt. c-j break with tradition by depositing them fore and aft on a single large chassis, driver tubes and phase splitter to the right, transformers concealed beneath the housing to the left. Around the back you'll find a pair of single-ended RCA inputs and a single pair of 4mm binding posts per channel. Nothing fancy, just solid hardware. No big, gold numbers with flashy labels and multiple sets for bi or even tri-wiring. Just what you need and no more. Nice to know that some things never change.

The other thing that hasn't changed is the simple and effective biasing arrangement with its trim-pots and LEDs mounted in the top-plate. Fixed bias is pretty much obligatory when you're talking this much power. This is the most elegant way to set and monitor it. ►

▶ You also get a super sensible, although less than elegant, valve cover that at least complements the sloping extension on the front panel, just in case you get concerned about naked glowing bottles in your living space. The IEC input allows you to play with power leads and that's about your lot. Oh, apart from the fact that you can have any colour you like as long as it's gold. Like I said, some things never change.

I used the Premier 140 with both the Clearaudio Master Reference and the Nordic Concept/JMW 12.5/Lyra Titan record players, using the Groove Plus to amplify their outputs to useable level. Line-stages were the Vibe/Pulse and Hovland HP100 while cabling was Nordost Valhalla throughout. Speakers included the Avalon Ascendant, Clearlight Diamond Symphony and Audioplan Kontrast IIIi. Silver discs were played on the Wadia 861, although the amp's capabilities made so much of analogue's superiority that CD took a distinctly back seat for the duration of its stay. Whatever the accompanying equipment the amp was happy to deliver, proving both load tolerant and unconcerned by the driving line-stage. It's fulsome, generous character and powerful delivery were neither diluted nor undermined, the Vibe proving a particularly satisfying partner, the 140 able to make full use of the line-stage's extension at both ends of the spectrum.

I recently acquired a rather nice French pressing of the Colin Davis *Tosca* (Philips 6700 108) which has resulted in close comparisons with the various English and Japanese 180g versions I also own. Listening with the 140 tells you as much about the amp as it does about the recordings. The French

pressing is (as far as I can tell) the earliest, and certainly sounds the best. What's more impressive is the way the c-j delivers the evidence. Despite being a multi-miked and sessioned recording (rather than a live performance) the producers went to considerable lengths to create the ambience, continuity and impression of the stage action. The singers perform from the centre of the orchestra, with

dramatise the character of Cavaradossi as well as presage the arrival of Ingvor Wixell's Scarpia. It also makes perfect sense of the lighter, Baritone voice chosen for the opera's nemesis. It's easy to portray Scarpia as a comic-book villain and making him a bass would be the aural equivalent of a black cape and twirly moustache. Wixell manages to convey the complexity of the character while the 140 allows you to appreciate his artistry. It's a question of subtle tonal shading and micro-dynamic control, the ingredients that let you hear the way a performer is working their voice.

It's key to the c-j's quality and appeal – the ability to deliver both subtlety and scale.

The other thing you need to really do *Tosca* justice is control of pace.

So much of the drama depends on a sense of menace that the precise emergence of the terraced climaxes need to build with perfect control or the effect is diluted. Too fast and they sound simply bombastic: too slow and they lack atmosphere. Ironically, it's a harder trick to pull-off than far faster and apparently more complex, certainly more obvious rhythmic demands. The c-j delivers astonishing depth and power to underpin the action, and does so with an uncanny poise and sense of the dramatic. At the same time it allows the lighter, almost jaunty love theme to co-exist in counterpoint, floating free of the dark undercurrents, yet threatened and soon to be enmeshed. It's a compelling performance and I love it.

Of course, Puccini Operas are not exactly top of the pops these days, but it doesn't alter the test they present to a system. The range of scale, the combination of the dramatic and complex musical demands cuts right to the heart of the issue of



everybody being distantly miked. Just listen to the opening passage for confirmation. The explosive avalanche of sound that creates the tension and drama of the fugitive Angelotti's entrance has a wonderful breadth and coherence to it, while the escapee's furtive progress across the stage and frantic search for the key that promises safety is almost graphic in its clarity. The depth of the space, the location of his bolt-hole at the rear, is beautifully captured, as is the height and terracing of the orchestra.

Individual voices are presented with their own character and pitch intact. There's no confusion of Bass and Baritone, while the young Carreras (and not so young Montserrat Caballe) vibrate with power and control. The amp never buckles, either on sustained high notes, or those full orchestral detonations that

► communication. It's also exactly the test that so many powerful amps stumble over. Impressive? Yes. Big? Yes. Involving and communicative? Hardly. Only a select few do it all and c-j's Premier 140 joins that select group. The kicker is that it can do small and intimate too.

The astonishing dynamic power that characterises Janis Ian's *Breaking Silence* plays straight into the c-j's strong suit. The solid, power and presence of the



instrumentation is impressive indeed, yet the fragility and expression in the vocal is retained intact. It's this that speaks to you, reinforced by the power of the playing: Exactly as it should be. Moving onto things more delicate still, Dusty's transition from fragile to in control of 'The Look Of Love' is perfection, while I have to digress and mention the superb presentation of the cymbal work on this track, certainly amongst the most natural I've heard. Indeed, given the information to work with, the 140's top-end is a model of sweetness and definition. Devoid of hardness, it suffers none of the rounding or smoothing that are all too often resorted to. It offers air and delicacy coupled to power on demand. The slow smooch of 'Hanging Out' (*Basie Jam* Pablo 2310 718) is wonderfully even-handed, from the depth, power and tonality of Ray Brown's bass to the

penetration and precise dynamic shaping of Harry Edison's trumpet. The brass sound, especially the overtones, is spot on, whether its trombone, the saxes or trumpet. It squeaks without ever cutting which is just what it should do. And lest we pass over the glorious mid-band, just listen to the complexity and attack of Irving Ashby's guitar and the Count's laid back piano.

But I've saved the best for last. Just one word: Ella. That voice dives right in and wallows in the 140's performance. Control, presence, tone, power and phrasing, the lady just comes alive. It doesn't matter whether

we're talking scat or the straight-ahead style of the *Songbooks*, the connie-j delivers. Sit back and enjoy 'Fascinatin' Rhythm', it's sinuous sophistication living up to its name. The carefully crafted arrangement starts to prod, but Ella refuses to be hurried, keeping to, dominating the pace and progress of the song. When she finally steps aside to allow the band to fill the instrumental interlude it's like a release. It adds to the glorious sense of restraint, especially when she reimposes her authority with such effortless grace for the closing verse. The total confidence of her performance has never seemed so stately. It's a model of natural warmth without artificial sweeteners, of weight and power with no loss of definition – and no loss of music either. The same way Ella bends the band to her will,

this amp takes its considerable merits and bends them to the sense in the performance. In either case it's clear whose the boss.

The Premier 140 is, by some margin, the finest conrad-johnson amp it's been my pleasure to enjoy. As I said initially, I've never had the Premier 8s at home, but then I've also never heard the immediacy and dynamic control from them that I've reveled in with the 140. Being at the top of the c-j tree pretty much guarantees a seat at the top-table, but rest assured that this is no case of trading on reputation alone. By turns confident, authoritative, intimate and charming, the Premier 140 is one of the finest amps available today. Don't confuse it with past experience, this is a whole new ball-game. ➤

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Ultra-linear valve power-amp
Valve Complement:	1x 6922 input valve 2x 6N30 phase splitters 8x 6550A output tubes
Frequency Response:	20Hz – 20kHz (±0.1dB @10W)
Input Impedance:	100 kOhms
Input sensitivity:	1.1V to rated o/p
Rated Output:	140 Watts/Ch into 4 Ohms (also available connected for 8 or 16 Ohms)
Dimensions (WxHxD):	482x204x482mm
Weight:	40kg
Price:	£7000

UK Distributor:

Audiofreaks
Tel. (44)(0)20 8948 4153
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Net. www.audiofreaks.co.uk

Manufacturer:

conrad-johnson inc.
Net. www.conradjohnson.com



Tom Evans Audio Design

The Pulse

Tom Evans Audio Design Vibe Line Stage with Pulse Power Supply (and The Groove Plus)

by Chris Thomas

Just over a year ago I had an unforgettable encounter with the Connoisseur Definitions 4.0 line stage that RG sent over to forever rearrange my notion of what is actually possible from an audio system. That couple of weeks changed my life in some ways, as every piece of expensive audio I have heard before or since was mentally rearranged into a personal new order of achievement, performance and desirability. By some bizarre coincidence this happened at exactly the same time as a friend imported a Spectral DMC 30 preamplifier from somewhere in Europe (they were unavailable in the UK at the time) and knowing I was a big fan and customer of the Californian company dropped it by to blow my socks off. Inevitably I thought it would be fun to compare the two products as, after all, there was no review to be considered and the DMC 30 was the next logical upgrade awaiting me on the path to Spectral heaven. That notion took all of ten bars of music to dispel as the Connoisseur not only bettered the Spectral but did so from a great height. Some readjustment as to the future of my own system was clearly in order, but a few weeks later RG did it to me again. Now, he doesn't often send equipment over but when he does

it is always something special. Not necessarily expensive, but always special. This time Tom Evans' Vibe line stage arrived. This little black Perspex box was just shockingly good and I dragged my friend back again with his £8.5K investment for another go. It was a lot closer call this time but we both

As for my friend? Well he just scratched his head, thought of his bank balance and said, "How much did you say this cost?" So, imagine my sense of anticipation when, a couple of months ago I met up with Tom Evans down in Bath to pick up a Vibe, only this time with the new Pulse power supply.

For those unfamiliar with The Vibe I would refer you to Roy's review in issue 19. Not that there is much to physically describe at all. At a time when pre-amplifiers generally are getting more electronically complicated The Vibe is refreshingly minimalist and does away with what Tom would no doubt consider

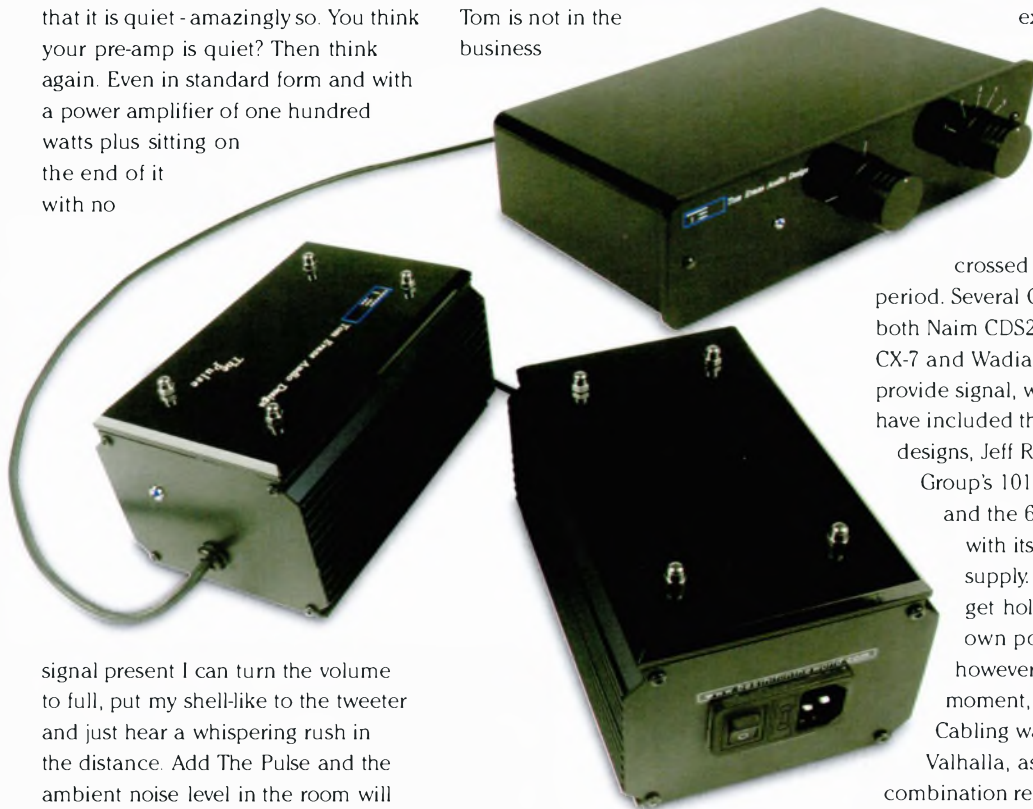
the superfluous. Its only function is to sound good so there is no remote control, illuminated displays, balanced in or out options or even a balance control. Instead there are five line inputs (all RCA phono) a tape loop and a pair of outputs. It is all housed in a smart Perspex box that features only two pleasingly shaped Delrin knobs for volume and input selection. These come with rubber o-rings fitted but, as with the first example I tried, these seem to be a tad too small for the job and corrode and crack before falling off altogether. After periodically finding them on the floor I decided to remove them completely and wait for Tom to come up with a better version (or at least a better fit) in the near future. ▶



agreed that the Vibe made the Spectral sound very electronic and processed. You could quite easily hear the American amplifier working and imposing its own way of doing things by gripping and shaping the sound and sharply etching the detail, where the Vibe just seemed like an open tap that let the music flow. To someone like myself who spends a lot of their time listening to live instruments there was an ease and sense of natural resonance about the Vibe that was unmatched by the admittedly more spectacular Spectral.

▶ The power supply that comes with the standard Vibe is a small moulded-block that outwardly looks like the type used to power any number of small electronic devices. However, the Vibe does of course contain Lithos regulation circuits of the same type as those used in The Groove phono stage. I don't pretend to understand the secrets and technical attributes of Lithos circuitry but what I can say is that it is quiet - amazingly so. You think your pre-amp is quiet? Then think again. Even in standard form and with a power amplifier of one hundred watts plus sitting on the end of it with no

their own shelf. The only indication that they are powered comes from the same small blue light as fitted to The Vibe itself. The Pulse takes the place of the original block power supply and uses the same multi-pin connector though the length of the lead thankfully allows The Vibe to be sited on a separate shelf. There is a socket for mains and an on/off switch and that's about it. No fuss, no fanfare, Tom is not in the business



signal present I can turn the volume to full, put my shell-like to the tweeter and just hear a whispering rush in the distance. Add The Pulse and the ambient noise level in the room will almost certainly be louder than anything the tweeter is passing and it is this blackness and virtually undetectable noise floor that I believe is the foundation of the unique way in which the Vibe/Pulse goes about its business.

The Pulse consists of two identical metal/Perspex sized boxes, each finned and even more minimalist than the pre-amplifier. One carries the transformer while the other one provides a hefty dose of Lithos regulation. They are joined by a short captive lead so they will need to sit next to each other on

of drawing attention to his products through anything but their performance. Let's face it, no-one is going to buy The Vibe and The Pulse purely for their looks, clean and functional as they may be, and to a public used to associating weight and a sense of metallic overkill in the build department with value, well it bucks that trend too. It constantly reminds me of the late 70's when, having explored the world of multi-knobbed and buttoned Oriental amplification for a few years, I bought

my first serious pre/power amplifier and all of my friends said how light it was and why didn't it have any tone controls and how could it possibly cost so much money. It was the Naim NAC 12.

Tom warned me that it may well take several weeks before it really began to give of its best but it sounded pretty good out of the box to me, I must say, and has improved at an exponential rate since then. I have had it for a good two months so far and I have tried it with just about every amplifier and source component that has

crossed my path over that period. Several CD players, including both Naim CDS2 and CDS 3, the Ayre CX-7 and Wadia 302 were used to provide signal, while power amplifiers have included the Nagra VPA valve designs, Jeff Rowland Design

Group's 101, Spectral DMA 100S and the 60 watt Aloia ST 15.01 with its own inductive power supply. I really wanted to get hold of one of Tom's own power amplifiers, however supply is short at the moment, but watch this space.

Cabling was exclusively Nordost Valhalla, as the Vibe/Pulse combination really needs no fleshing out or leaning down at all. Speakers were Revel Gems and the excellent Sonus Faber Cremona Auditor. I even used it extensively for monitoring purposes, to play back some live acoustic recordings I had made straight onto a pro DAT machine.

You cannot really discuss any of Tom's electronics without going on and on about the all-pervading blackness of the background against which the music is set. It is the very base upon which the sound it built and is a large part of the reason that the resolution is down to such fine ▶

► levels. One of the real world situations that confront the owner of the Vibe/Pulse is finding good enough ancillaries to use with it. I kid you not, there are relatively few CD players that can operate at the same resolution levels as this. After all, it cannot invent musical detail and this is one of the reasons why I believe many potential customers will be vinyl lovers and will more than likely have a Groove phono stage already. Roy tells me that the combination of the two is quite wonderful and I can well believe him.

Even without the Pulse the Vibe is good enough to be compared with any sub £10K pre out there. It may be a little lean but its bandwidth, speed and sheer wealth of

straight through to the back of the mix. Instruments have a breadth and correctness of scale that allows you to examine them and their individual characteristics in detail. The music even starts and stops quicker. Multi-track recordings have seldom sounded so naked to me before and you can easily hear individual effects and the levels of digital reverb applied even as the instrument or voice is decaying to blackness.

Not surprisingly the bandwidth is enhanced too. I'm not saying that it goes any higher or lower frequency-wise,

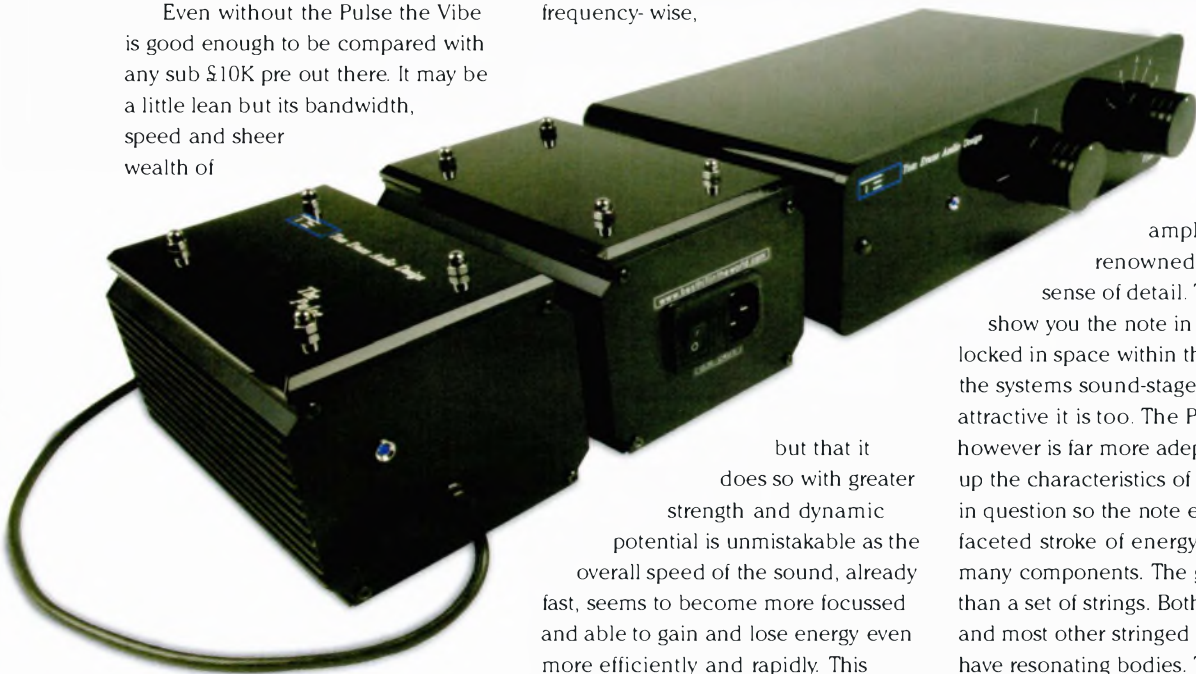
like you have one foot in the mix already yet I couldn't describe the Vibe/Pulse as forward or in your face. It's that old inky black background again, against which the musicians stand out in such stark relief that the sheer power and presence of both instrumentation and the human voice in whatever combination is superbly controlled and exists in such a natural space that the rhythmic fluency seems entirely unforced. I say, "controlled" but I wouldn't want to give the impression that the music is held in a vice-like grip or that the sound is

over etched in any way. The Pulse/Vibe is, to me, the opposite of so many

amplifiers that are renowned for their fine sense of detail. They will

show you the note in perfect pitch, locked in space within the bounds of the systems sound-stage. And very attractive it is too. The Pulse/Vibe however is far more adept at opening up the characteristics of the instrument in question so the note exists as a multi-faceted stroke of energy made from many components. The guitar is more than a set of strings. Both it, the violin and most other stringed instruments have resonating bodies. The note is made by energising the string and all such instruments have their own natural reverberation characteristics. The drum skin is tautly stretched over a shell; the human voice comes from a body and not just a mouth. All of these things are within the Pulse/Vibe's capabilities if and it's a big if, you have a system that has speed, tonality and resolving power right across the bandwidth.

This excellent line-stage and power supply is not a panacea that will turn ordinary systems into great ones and in fact of all the power amplifiers



unforced musical detail make it irresistible at the price. But add the Pulse and you are talking of an entirely different level of performance altogether. Along with even blacker backgrounds the Vibe gets a shot of adrenalin that energises it even further. The leanness gives way to a whole lot more weight and presence and the tonality moves towards full Technicolor. The soundstage becomes fuller and gains depth. This presentation will always bring you closer to the music but with the Pulse you can look

but that it does so with greater strength and dynamic potential is unmistakable as the overall speed of the sound, already fast, seems to become more focussed and able to gain and lose energy even more efficiently and rapidly. This certainly contributes to a really special sense of rhythmic focus. It is different to both the older Naim and the Spectral amplifiers (two of the best amps tempo-wise out there) in the way that it unravels rhythmic complexities. With Tom's design the ear is not drawn toward the beat so much as the momentum of the piece as a whole. Like all great pieces of audio equipment it just never seems like an issue until you start to listen and concentrate on the way the music gets from A to B. The closeness of the soundstage tends to make you feel

▶ I tried only the Spectral impressed me as really being good enough to begin to show what this combination is capable of. But I think there is some way to go yet and clearly I must hear Tom's own power amplifier with it in the very near future. I think I've only really scratched the surface of its potential. But what potential.



The Groove Plus

– phono gets a Pulse

by Roy Gregory

Of course, as soon as we heard tell of the Pulse power supply for the Vibe line-stage, the first question was "Will it fit the Groove?" Well, the answer is sort of yes and no. You can't simply plug the Pulse into the back of the Groove (the four pin connector won't fit the IEC input, no matter how hard you try), however, the hardware can be adapted, hence the difference in nomenclature. The problem lies in the difference in voltages handled by the ICs. The sub milli-volt signals received by the Groove make the impedance match between the outboard Lithos 6 circuitry of the Pulse and the onboard Lithos 5 regulators of the Groove absolutely critical: too critical to allow for the cable used in the Pulse. As a result, the Groove Plus locates the Lithos 6 inside the phono-stage's casework itself. This necessitates a change of socketry on the rear of the case and a trip back to South Wales. But you can rest assured

that the results are well worth the temporary absence of vinyl replay. The improvement is little short of shocking.

The break between Groove and Groove Plus was such that I imposed on the publisher's patience by intercepting his standard Groove en route for modification, for purposes of direct comparison. It was left to cook

for a week, ensuring that it was fully defrosted and the listening duly commenced. I put Janis Ian's *Breaking Silence* on the Master Reference, dropped the nicely warmed up Insider Reference into the lead-in groove and settled back to enjoy the familiar sound of the standard Groove: crisp, clear separation and dynamics, combined with a wonderful sense of life and musical flow. I played the whole side before returning once more to the opening track 'Walking On Sacred Ground', just to refresh my memory before switching to the Plus. Cables swapped, I once again settled the Insider onto the record.

It took all of one note to appreciate the magnitude of the difference.

The deep, descending bass notes that open the song had a solidity, a preciseness of pitch, shape and texture that was astonishing for its naturalness in the room. The percussion clicks were crisp, locked in time and space and with their own distinct tonality. Each instrument wasn't just separate,

it occupied its own volume, with a body, character and presence in the soundstage and the room. This is the key to the chasm in performance between the Groove and the Groove Plus. The power supply makes instruments more solid but above all, more natural. I repeat the word I just used: it brings the music presence. Just listen to the direct, natural immediacy and communication of Janis Ian's voice and you'll know exactly what I mean. Reviewers love to tell you that Ella was standing right in front of



them, that Dinah did it just for them or that Dusty looked and that they loved it. Well I'm not going to offer Janis a cup of tea, but the leap of imagination to place her right in front of me was so short as to be virtually unnecessary. No, she wasn't actually there, but it didn't take much to ignore that fact.

What's going on? Well, it all starts with the background. The Plus modification adds a larger transformer, increased smoothing caps and an extra layer of Lithos regulation between the standard unit's internal Lithos 5 daughter boards and the mains. Add that to the rejection ratio of the ICs themselves and you end up with four layers of isolation, allowing the manufacturer's claim of a -180dB ▶

▶ noise-floor to take on an air of almost reality. Whether that's fact or not is actually irrelevant, what's impossible to ignore is that the Groove Plus projects music from a blacker background than any phono-stage I've ever used. Indeed, it's so dramatic in this regard that it imposes this under-silence and blackness on whichever system you couple it to the front of. The Vibe/Pulse combination makes for the most startling combination, sharing as it does the same attributes, but the Groove

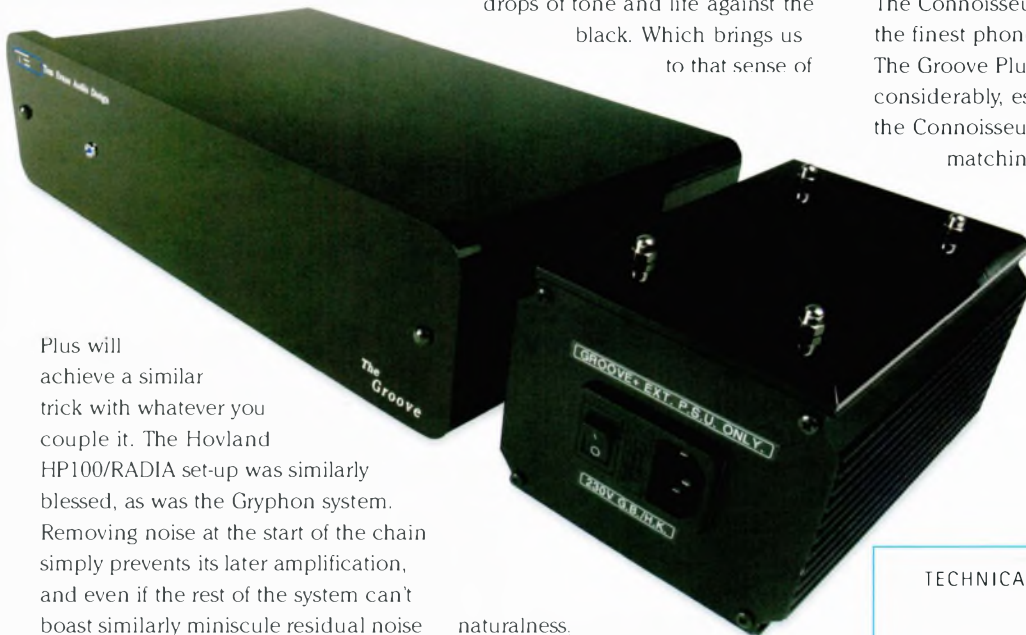
breathes life into every note, every instrument, every performance that passes through the Groove Plus.

The dynamic range of instruments also grows, rooted on the foundation of that silence, propelled with a verve and energy that brings a vibrance to and a cushion of disturbed air around each and every one. Hence the plucked, complex yet solid presence of the bass notes on the Janis Ian opening, each pitch perfect yet pellucid in character and shape, drops of tone and life against the black. Which brings us to that sense of

the system scales dynamic demands, a total lack of strain in response to crescendos, or the subtleties of vocal inflexion. With the Groove Plus records live – and they mean it.

It matters not how many records you play, the results remain the same. From the first note you hear to the last, each will be its own little revelation. The bowing of violin or cello, the strike of stick on drum, the catch in a voice or finger tips against strings: all are captured and caressed rather than imprisoned. The Connoisseur is without doubt the finest phono-stage I've heard. The Groove Plus narrows the gap considerably, especially if (and like the Connoisseur) you use it with its matching line-stage. The

musical journey that started with the Iso has come full circle. The Pulse finishes what the Groove began. ➤



Plus will achieve a similar trick with whatever you couple it. The Hovland HP100/RADIA set-up was similarly blessed, as was the Gryphon system. Removing noise at the start of the chain simply prevents its later amplification, and even if the rest of the system can't boast similarly miniscule residual noise levels (as the HP100 certainly can't) the Groove Plus will still deliver a significant benefit.

But the real significance isn't in the blackness of the background itself, but in the contrast it provides for instrumental detail and dynamics. The lack of noise and grain allows the subtlest of details to emerge, the individual colour and harmonics of an instrument, the precise timing and leading-edge of a note or breath. It is the fleshing out of the music with these micro-dynamic details, hung on the precise temporal structure already provided by the standard Groove's superb musical architecture that

naturalness, because the really impressive thing about the Groove Plus is not just the dynamic range, discrimination, definition or delineation, but the fact that those dynamics are so natural. They make notes and lyrics a solid presence without them ever being earthbound or leaden. Their weight comes from their internal energy, enjoying the same fundamental concentration which brings such clarity and pitch security to live music. There's a natural drive and propulsion to them which has nothing to do with the chopped "rhythm and timing" approach to hi-fi reproduction. Instead you get ease as

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Prices:

The Vibe Line-Stage:	£2700
The Pulse Power Supply:	£2000
The Groove Phono-Stage:	£1800
The Groove Plus:	£3500
Plus Upgrade To Standard Groove:	£2000

Manufacturer:

Tom Evans Audio Design
Tel. (44)(0)1443-833570

International Distributor:

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The Gryphon Cantata Loudspeaker

by Roy Gregory

Regardless of approach, there's one great imponderable in loudspeaker design. Whether you're working with sealed boxes or ported enclosures, dipolar panels or horn loading, sooner or later your creation will find its way into a room, and that room is the one thing you have absolutely no control over, particularly when it comes to low frequency performance. Indeed, the requirements of good mid-band performance and decent bass extension are so completely contradictory that it's remarkable that loudspeakers work as well in the real world as they do.

This isn't exactly news, and accounts for the current fascination with (increasingly successful)

sub-woofer design and the (as yet musically unsuccessful) DSP correction of low frequencies. It's a topic that PM touches on in his column this month, musing on the practicalities of adjustable porting for loudspeakers. So far, each and every solution to the issue of room interfacing, be it the Alison wall-proximity designs, the various applications of DSP ranging from Meridian to Infinity and B&O, or the direct/reflected sound of the Bose 901, has thrown at least one musical baby out with the bath-water. Instead, careful positioning and a fortunate match have generally delivered the best results, with the serious caveat that the lower you go the harder it gets to get it right. And the bigger the speaker gets as well.

Now Gryphon have taken a new look at an old idea, addressing some of the historical shortcomings along the way. One of the great advantages of active drive in a loudspeaker (or sub-woofer) is that you compensate

electrically for the mechanical limitations of your driver/cabinet combination. It's the reason that Meridian have always managed to extract such wide bandwidth from their modestly dimensioned interactive designs, from the M2 onwards. Various people over the years have applied electrical correction of low frequencies to otherwise passive designs in an effort to extend their low-frequency performance. Bose did it with the 901, but perhaps the best known incarnation was KEF's Qube equalisers, supplied with the Reference Series 15 or so years ago. These set a small, active bass contour between the pre and power amps, allowing the user to tailor the low frequency extension. It's an elegant solution, but it's also fraught with problems,

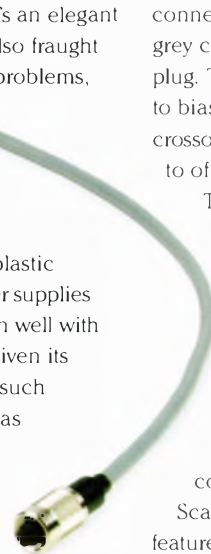
the chief one being the quality of the electronics themselves. The small boxes with their plastic controls and wall-wart power supplies were never going to go down well with the audiophile audience. Given its position in the system, any such equaliser needs to be built as well as the line-stage that's feeding it.

Well, with the Cantata, Gryphon have adopted exactly the same overall approach, except that they have engineered their Q Controller to exactly the same standards as their £8000 Sonata pre-amp. As well as quality components, power supply and casework, you get fully balanced or single-ended connection, and an array of front panel switches. These allow you to mute or bypass the unit as well as allowing you to select

one of three factory set bass contours. There's also a fourth switch to allow a custom contour to be fitted, user specified but built by Gryphon.

The purpose of the contours is to match the low frequency characteristics of the speaker to those of the room, its roll-off to the room's inherent low frequency gain. They should extend the system's bass resonance point from around 57Hz to around a rather healthy 35Hz, especially given the relatively slim enclosure used. In so doing you alter the speaker's Q, hence the terminology: what you're actually trying to do is align the Q of the speaker with the Q of the room. There's one other peculiarity with the Cantata. The Q Controller is also connected to each speaker by a thin, grey cable attached with a multi-pin plug. This carries 28V DC that is used to bias the capacitors in the speaker's crossover, long held in some quarters to offer significant sonic advantages.

The speaker itself is of relatively modest dimensions, employing two 125mm fibre-glass coned bass-mid drivers, tilted and symmetrically deposited around the centrally located, 25mm doped fabric tweeter. The drivers were developed specifically for the Cantata in conjunction with a well-known Scandinavian manufacturer. All feature substantial motor assemblies, the tweeter's being oil cooled. The cabinet is massively braced, and considerable care has gone into the contouring of the baffle and driver surrounds. The tweeter is mounted on the back of its own carefully sculpted sub-baffle, itself carved from a solid, 1Kg block of aluminium. The crossover is hardwired and constructed from hand-built components. The air-cored inductors, wound from copper foil and wax



▶ impregnated are the work of Steen Duelund, as are the stacked foil capacitors, potted in epoxy to resist mechanical interference.

The speaker cabinet is mounted to the leading edge of the dedicated aerofoil section stand. This has dimpled aluminium side panels, coupled to extruded alloy leading and trailing edges that provide a textural contrast to the solid methacrylate end plates that top and tail the whole assembly. The stand contains the crossover, isolating it from the mechanical interference of the drive-units. The speaker cabinet is part wrapped in Nappa hide, part with brushed and anodised aluminium panels. The black finish sent for review is standard, but there are a host of colour and material options for a slightly less monolithic appearance.

The base plate of the Cantata carries an inset panel that mounts a single pair of solid copper binding posts and a small, multi-pin connector for the Q controller. The rear edge is cut away to accept the solid aluminium cross member and its two hard rubber feet. The front edge is tapped to take a single composite cone, designed to level the speaker and act as a mechanical ground for the cabinet. The front tip of the baseplate also contains a recessed red LED that gives you muted confirmation of the status of the active circuitry.

Along with the Cantatas, Gryphon also supplied their Sonata line-stage and massive Antileon power-amp, as well as a complete set of cables. It's an imposing set-up when it's all stacked together. I ran the Cantatas in the context of this complete system, but also with the Hovland HP100/RADIA

combination. Sources were the Classe Omega SACD, Wadia 861 and the Clearaudio Master Reference/Groove record player. Set-up instructions

for the speakers are extremely precise as regards positioning, the final outcome agreeing almost exactly with my generally preferred location, and once level they were toed in to point directly at the listener.

What can I tell you about the Cantatas' sound? Well, that's an interesting question, and not just because of the variables inherent in their design. Indeed, the Q Controller is simplicity itself in operation, and the correct setting was immediately apparent. If you need

help deciding which setting suits your room then you've probably already spent too much on hi-fi! What's more, experiments with and without

the Q Controller in the system, as well as with its own Bypass switch quickly established its wholly positive influence.

If there was any loss of information, transparency or fine detail with it in circuit then I couldn't detect it. The upside of using it was a dramatic increase in dimensionality, freedom in the bass, general presence and focus.

It was if the whole performance suddenly locked together and hit the

groove. Both the band and the music took on a new sense of substance and purpose. Gryphon certainly seem to have maximised the benefits of their chosen approach whilst avoiding the major pitfalls that have marred past attempts. Having said that, the Cantata isn't exactly cheap and the Q Controller presumably represents a significant proportion of the cost. But then, if a job's worth doing, it's worth doing well, and the results literally speak for themselves.

The other slightly contentious element in the Cantata is the biasing of its crossover capacitors. Once again the case is easily proved – simply disconnect the cables. Do so and the speaker will sound initially quicker and more transparent, if a little leaner. But reconnect the bias cables and the gain in substance, colour and image coherence is too significant to miss. Once again, Gryphon seem to have got their sums right.

So, given that the technology works,

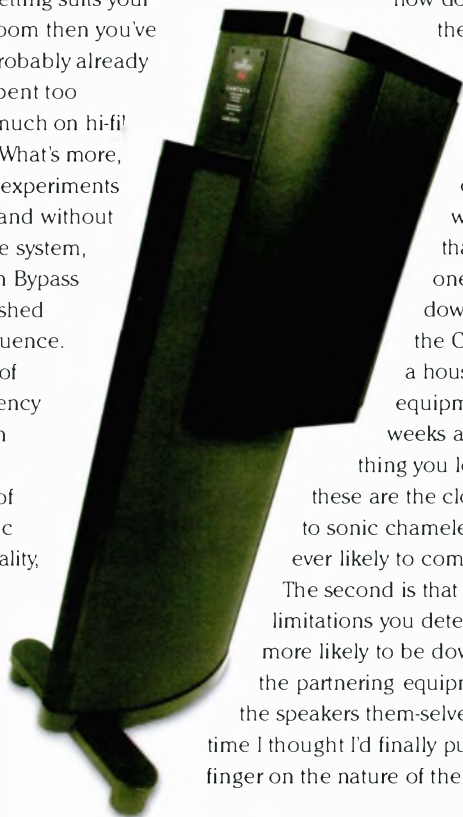
how does it leave the speaker

sounding?

In the best tradition of high-quality, compact two-way speakers, that's a hard one to pin down. Play with the Cantatas and a house full of equipment for a few weeks and the first

thing you learn is that these are the closest thing to sonic chameleons you're ever likely to come across.

The second is that whatever limitations you detect are more likely to be down to the partnering equipment than the speakers themselves. Every time I thought I'd finally put my finger on the nature of the beast, ▶



▶ a change of ancillary whisked it away before my very ears. Frustrated? A little. Impressed? Mightily!

What I can tell you is two things. Firstly, these speakers flat out disappear. Feed them right and they throw a wide, deep soundstage, extending back from a line through their baffles. It's coherent, seamless and nothing comes from or draws attention



to the speakers themselves.

The hotseat is pretty hot, but that's in every sense of the word, and if you want believable stereo perspectives, then look no further than the Cantata. It does what mini-monitors do best, even if it is a little on the large side for that product category.

The second thing I can tell you about is the bass.

Q Controller or not, the Cantata is still actually a pretty compact design, the cabinet being around the height of JMLabs Mini Utopia, but quite a bit slimmer. With the best will in the world, and even with the sheer unbridled power of the Antileon doing the kicking, you won't get really subterranean bass out of them. Having said that, they do do a remarkable job of sounding bigger than they are. Why? Partly because of the huge soundstage they throw, which is in turn in part

down to the useful extra extension they enjoy, and partly because of the sheer substance they lend to music. Serious drum hits have real body and attack, voices are solid, dimensional things, not disembodied wraiths. The active biasing of the crossover certainly helps in this regard, but the whole is definitely greater than the sum of the parts.

The bass itself is reasonably deep and solid, but it's the tactile and textural qualities that impress. Walking bass lines are perfectly spaced and pitch secure, especially when driven from Gryphon's own Sonata line-stage. The timp rolls that wind down the opening passage of the *Gladiator OST* are locked precisely in place, the cushion of air above the tensioned skins perfectly captured in time and space. Drive the Cantatas from the complete Gryphon system and the separation, transparency, substance



and impact are breathtaking. The downside is a cuppiness to vocals and trumpet, a darkness or lack of overall air. Use the Hovlands and you're rewarded with grace and agility, air, poise and wide-open soundstaging. You get more colour too, but you lose those astonishing dynamics and the incredible layering that the Gryphon system delivers. Interestingly, whilst the

bass lost absolute definition in comparison to the Gryphon electronics, it retained all its character and pitch security, which speaks well of the speakers' low frequency damping.

And there's the rub. The Cantatas deliver superb stereo, musical presence and real quality from the mid-bass on up. Beyond that they sound rather more like what you hang them on the end of than what they are themselves. I'm intrigued and impressed by turns, and if I can hang on to them a little longer I intend to give them a run out with the Tom Evans electronics, amplification that plays directly to their strengths. In the meantime, the Gryphons Cantatas can stand happily shoulder to shoulder on the performance high-ground carved out by the Wilson System 7. Transparent, beautifully textured and with imaging to reach out and hug, they're a class act in every sense. Listen to these if you really want to know what your system is doing: Listen to them if you want reach out and touch music at home.



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Two-way sealed box with integral stand and active Q compensation.
Drive Units -	
Tweeter:	25mm doped fabric dome
Bass-mid:	2x 125mm fibre-glass cone
Bandwidth:	20Hz - 20kHz (in room)
Efficiency:	90dB
Impedance:	3.4 Ohms min, 7.8 Ohms max.
Dimensions (WxHxD):	
Cantata:	380 x 1180 x 430mm
Q Controller:	480 x 140 x 380mm
Weights -	
Cantata:	75kg each
Q Controller:	13kg
System Price:	£12300

Manufacturer:
Gryphon Audio Designs
Denmark
Tel. (45)(0)8689 1200
Net. www.gryphon-audio.com



Graves Audio Koronglay Loudspeaker and Merlin Integrated Amplifier

by Paul Messenger

The name Graves Audio will be as new to Hi-Fi's readership as it was to yours truly a month or two back. It comes from one Brian Graves, an Essex man made good who has long had a passion for classic British hi-fi engineering, and has decided it's time to make these delights available at relatively affordable prices.

To which end he has put together a package that combines a pair of Lowther-driven horn loudspeakers with a single-ended triode amplifier. The speaker pair and the amp alone carry a \$1,999 price-tag each, but a hefty discount is available if the amp and speakers are purchased together. The complete amp/speaker combo costs \$3,500, and a set of speaker cables is thrown in for good measure.

Both of these components has its own special qualities, and this review will examine their respective performances individually and in combination. Separately, each can be accused of being pretty extreme, but the crucial factor is that their specific extremisms should be complementary.

Let's start off by examining the Koronglay speakers. Love the name – very droll; very Estuary. I also like the pricetag, which is a lot less than that usually found on Lowther-driven horns.

Personally, I quite like zany looking horns, like the Beauhorn B2.2, the Ferguson Hill or Avantgarde designs. But not everyone wants their speakers to look quite so outlandish, or to make such bold style statements. In contrast the Koronglay looks just like any conventional floorstanding box loudspeaker, giving no clue to its unusual modus operandum, and I suspect many potential purchasers will welcome this fact.

Indeed, its regular rectilinear

enclosure is made by the same company that builds enclosures for PMC, and the Koronglay does bear a strong resemblance to that company's FB1 and OB1 floorstanders, from the high class matt-finished real wood veneer right down to the shaped and black-painted MDF plinth. The latter provides secure accommodation for chunky 8mm spikes, ensuring good floor-coupling and extending the footprint to aid overall stability.

Although it looks just like a regular loudspeaker, the Koronglay's internals differ dramatically from the norm. Using a single full-range Lowther driver ensures a very different set of compromises from usual, as does the horn-loading which is just applied to the rear of the driver here, though the two elements are actually inextricably linked.

In very simplistic terms, a horn does to an audio signal what a lens does to light – it focuses it into a beam, and magnifies it at the same time. It also acts as an 'acoustic transformer', the air within the horn dramatically improving the transfer of energy from the relatively heavy cone to the ultra-light air molecules, and hence the conversion efficiency. At the same time, the air contained within the horn acts as a fluid that physically damps and controls the movement of the driver cone. And because a horn allows very little cone movement, the voice-coil length can be closely matched to the length of the magnetic gap, maximising the overall motor efficiency.

Add in the fact that Lowther's drivers have always used the most powerful magnets available, and all these factors come together to create a net sensitivity that's seriously and dramatically higher than regular 'direct radiating' loudspeakers. Even a relatively modest and compact horn like the Koronglay gets around 100dB on my sensitivity rating – that's about 10dB above the direct-radiator average, the more so because it's a genuine, easy-to-drive 8 Ohm load.

That in turn means you can get away with an amplifier of just one-tenth the power of that required to achieve

similar loudness from an 'average' speaker. Which is where the option to use an ultra-simple, low power, single-ended triode amplifier comes in.

These might only offer a handful of watts of output power – but with this speaker you'll only need a handful.

All Lowther drivers use similar, undamped paper 'double cone' diaphragms, though they do vary somewhat in the magnet structures. The Koronglay uses an EX2 driver – modest by Lowther standards but still extreme by any other – and GA modifies it slightly with a small foam strip under the edge of the inner cone. This is loaded by the horn, which consists of a small chamber behind the driver, then the 'throat', followed by the expanding horn that dips down towards the floor before travelling back up and exiting



► towards the top of the rear panel.

I've measured quite a few Lowther-driven horn speakers down the years, and the Koronglay – a little to my surprise I must admit – looks superior to most in two crucial respects. First, it has rather more bass extension than most of its ilk. Place it quite close to a wall or corner, and although it's still far from a weighty powerhouse, it's no longer essential to start looking for and trying to integrate a sub-woofer. Secondly, while it's still not exactly a smoothie, in the sweet and gentle sense of the word, it does actually deliver an overall in-room balance that stays within respectable +/-5dB limits from 40Hz right up to 13kHz.

For a 100dB/W full-range horn speaker, that's a truly remarkable achievement. There are some peaks and troughs along the way, to be sure – the upper bass octave (100-200Hz) is weak, there's a further dip centred on 400Hz, and things become rather uneven above 2.2kHz. But the essential balance here is very much on the money, and few excuses need be made.

The Koronglay's partnering amplifier is christened Merlin – not directly in memory of King Arthur's legendary guru, but rather in honour of the famous Rolls Royce aero engine that powered the Spitfire. Merlin is rated at just 10W per channel, so is really best suited to high sensitivity horn speakers. As a result, Graves Audio has also developed a push-pull variation on the same theme, known as the Griffon and offering a rather healthier 2x30W output, for use with a wider range of speakers.

Merlin follows the minimalist audiophile valve stereotype pretty closely. There's no remote control operation of any kind, nor any channel balance adjustment or mono switch for that matter. The front panel has just four

chunky knobs, providing on/off, volume, record in/out selection and input selection. The unit supplied had five line inputs and one tape output, but the plan is to provide an optional outboard phono stage, which will take its power from the main amplifier but sit close to the turntable, connecting back at line level to an amplifier input.

With an output stage using six small EL84s strapped as triodes and

operating in a paralleled triplet mode, Merlin incorporates a number of classic 'audiophile' features.

It's built into very solid steel casework, silver finished, tensioned by its sprung curved top, and damped by wooden sections (natural or black) front and rear. Internally, rubber bushes mechanically isolate the valve mounting plates.

A 300VA transformer provides ample power reserves, smoothed by a large polypropylene capacitor and with a valve-rectified HT. Bias is fixed and regulated, and DC heaters are used throughout. Signal paths are kept deliberately short, with the minimum of components and just the line-driver and output stages. No feedback is used.

Although both the speakers and the amp worked well enough as individual items, there was no denying that the two seemed particularly well suited to each other – not just in the power/sensitivity matching consideration discussed earlier, which is purely logical and therefore pretty much goes without saying, but also in the way the characters of the two components seemed to complement each other beautifully.

In isolation, the Koronglay could benefit from a rather warmer and richer balance. The sound is a little 'cold', so that the tonal colours of instruments like cellos are a little under-developed, and bass guitars could do with a bit more impetus and 'punch'. There's not a great deal of sheer weight here either, which is hardly surprising, so the concert hall ambience of a live recording or transmission lacks some conviction.

But if those are the down sides, the sheer simplicity of the single-driver approach ensures superb time-coherence and leading-edge definition, while the high sensitivity adds splendid dynamic contrasts and expression, almost as though the speaker was acting as a magnifying glass onto the performance. This can sometimes seem like an exaggeration, bringing an 'edginess' to some recordings which is not always comfortable. But while the Koronglay won't disguise the inadequacies in some examples of commercial recording practice, taken over a wide range of

different material and sources it seems clear

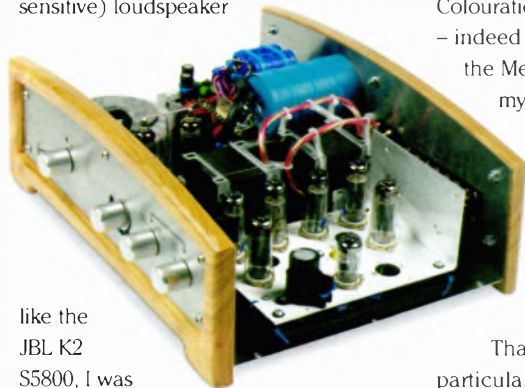
enough that this speaker is actually rather more real and more realistic in its dynamic expression than more conventional models.

Furthermore, while the macro-dynamics are portrayed with sometimes unsuspected vividness, it's the micro-dynamics that are arguably this speaker's greatest strength. Acoustic instruments in particular have texture as well as tonality, especially in the character of a bow drawn across strings, and this speaker was exceptionally convincing in the way it portrayed such fine detail – and indeed in the way it supplies information regarding ►



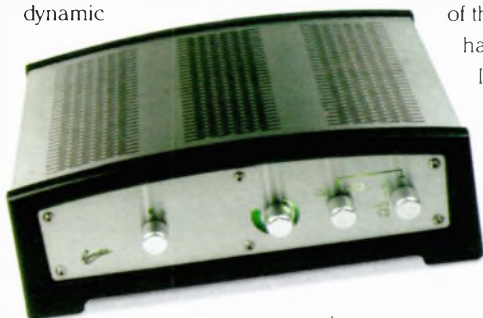
▶ the number of violins playing in an orchestra, for example.

Merlin is not the most precise amplifier I've heard. Used with a seriously wideband (though still very sensitive) loudspeaker



like the JBL K2 S5800, I was conscious that definition and control became progressively weaker as one moved towards the top and bottom of the audio band. It also tended to weaken somewhat as one wound up the volume: this amp seems at its best with very low level fine detail, which is as it should be.

However, the midband is where most of the musical action is concentrated, it's the midband where valve amps really shine, and this is where the Merlin's strengths really lie. Like the Koronglay loudspeaker, there's a wonderful freedom from time-smear here, combined with outstanding dynamic



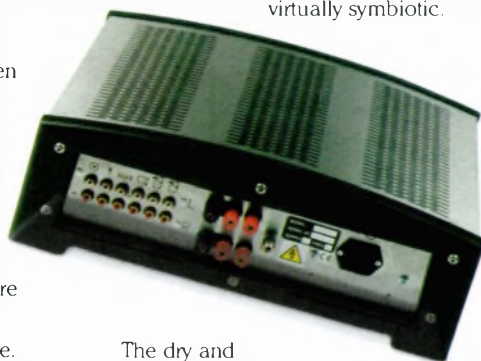
expression, and a 'hear through' transparency and delicacy that no solid-state amplifier seems able to match.

Even the best solid-state amps seem to add a degree of nasality and congestion to speech from the radio.

The Orelle CA/SP100 combo, for example (reviewed elsewhere in this issue), is very good in this respect, yet doesn't quite match the clean midrange clarity of the valve design. Colouration simply seemed less obvious – indeed virtually inaudible – when the Merlin was inserted between my Magnum Dynalab tuner and a pair of B&W 703s.

Combining the Merlin with the pair of Koronglays immediately brought to mind that old cliché about the whole being much more than the sum of the parts.

That rather understates this particular case, as these components go beyond being merely complementary, to the point where the relationship is virtually symbiotic.



The dry and tightly controlled bass end of the speakers seems a perfect match with the rather fat and loose bottom end of the amplifier, giving a net result that has an attractive all round warmth.

In a rather different but no less complementary way, the basic sweetness and gentleness of the valve top end sits very well alongside the rather uneven and occasionally aggressive top end of the speakers.

The whole combination comes together to give a sweet and well-balanced overall sound, highlighted by stunning midband dynamics and transient definition. This brings a captivating realism to voices, highlighting the specific accents of different individuals, and an unusual delicacy to

acoustic instruments that is totally seductive and involving, sometimes bordering on the uncanny.

The one area where the combination might be rather less satisfactory concerns the lack of balance adjustment. The volume control is claimed to be closely toleranced within 1dB, which might well be the case over the majority of its working range, but because these speakers have a very high sensitivity, late night CD listening requires the volume to be set near its very lowest point, and here our example showed a significant and rather unsatisfactory balance shift. Hopefully this anomaly is an early-sample foible that will be sorted in regular production.

That minor criticism aside, this Graves Audio combination is a very neat and discreet package that makes the uniquely enjoyable delights of single-ended valve and horn operation available at a relatively affordable price. Although I did miss the convenience of remote control operation, I can't argue with the sheer magic that this combo brings to my various hi-fi sources. ▶

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Graves Audio Koronglay horn-loaded loudspeaker
 Frequency response: 40Hz-13kHz ±5dB
 Sensitivity (measured): 100dB/2.83V
 Impedance: 8 Ohms
 Dimensions (WxHxD) : 250x1090x360mm
 Price: £2,000/pair

Graves Audio Merlin single-ended triode integrated valve amplifier
 Valve Complement: 2x EY84
 6x EL84
 1x 6N1P or 6DJ8
 Sensitivity (Line): 270mV
 Power Output: 2x 10W
 Frequency response: 20Hz - 50kHz (-3dB)
 Dimensions (WxHxD): 430x160x340mm
 Price: £2,000

Combined Price: £3,500

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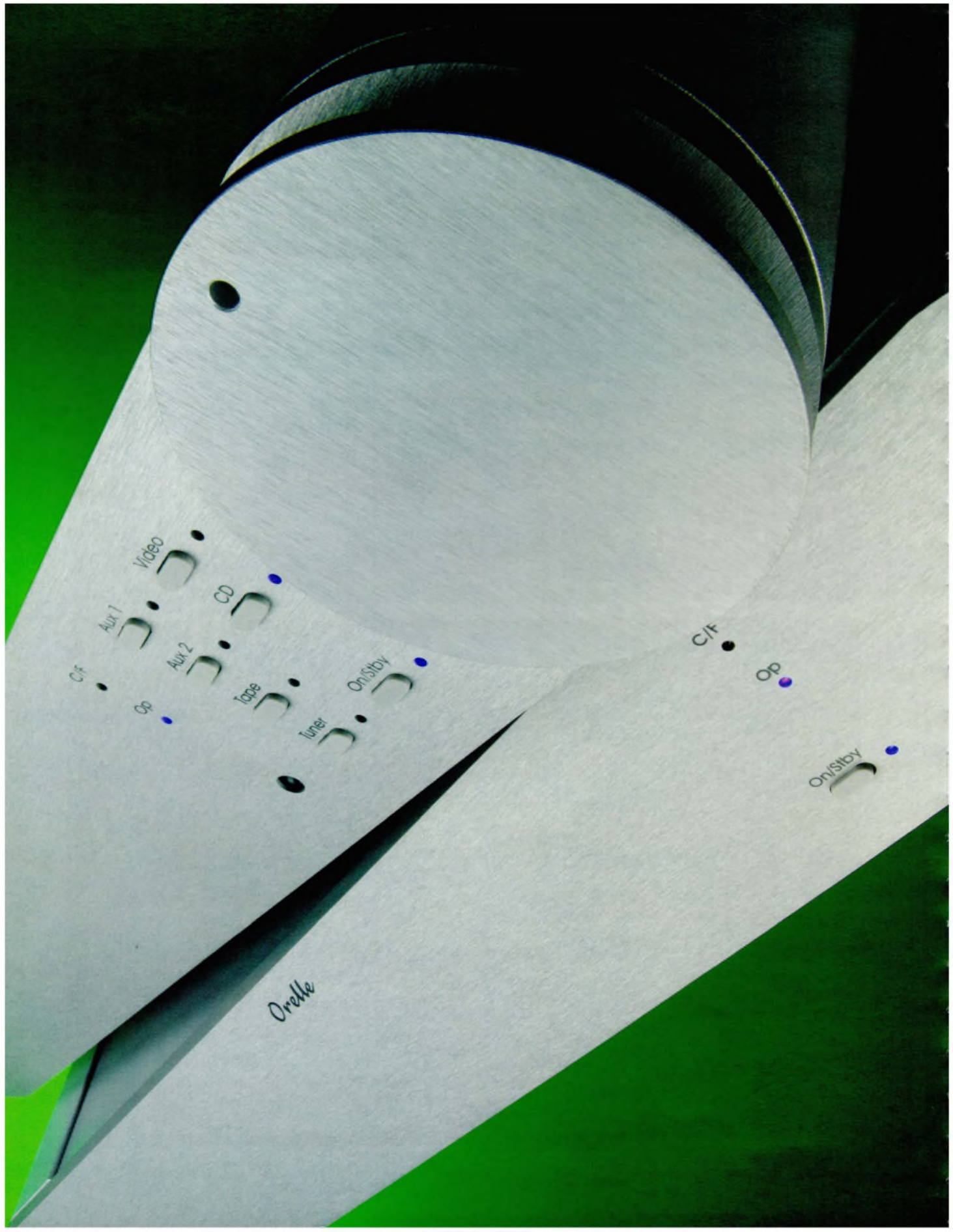
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Orelle CA100 Pre-amplifier and SP100 Power Amplifier

by Paul Messenger

Founded in 1989, Orelle is one of those smaller specialist British hi-fi brands that richly deserves to grow larger. I never reviewed the brand's earlier generations of electronics, but took them for enough of a spin to realise they had plenty to offer. However, I did cover the brand's excellent Swing loudspeaker back in 1999, and found it a real honey.

I've also briefly tried the XTC components, which are more costly electronics from the same designer, and liked them very much indeed, so didn't take much persuading when the designer in question, one Chris Bryant, offered to bring down his 'new generation' Orelles.

We went for a pint and a hot pot down at The Gate Inn, giving the electronics a chance to warm up for an hour or so while Chris explained where the design was coming from. On our return, it took only a couple minutes to realise that these components were definitely special, and would be well worth reviewing.

Arguments over the relative merits of valve and solid state (transistor) amplification have divided hi-fi enthusiasts for decades. Every time I spend time with one, I want a bit of the other, so as to speak. Go from a valve to a transistor amp, for example, and you'll miss the wonderful midrange clarity, delicacy and lucid transparency of the valve design, but enjoy the extra drive, weight and purpose that solid state brings to the bass end of things.

It's a dilemma that I reckon faces and frustrates many enthusiasts, Chris included. While his electronic designs stay firmly within the solid state tradition, he admits he was deeply shocked when

confronted by the extraordinary lucidity of a single-ended thermionic Cary amp a few years back. That experience caused him to re-think his approach to solid-state circuit design, and these new Orelles unashamedly adopt circuit techniques which were common practice during the early days of valve amps.

The intention, of course, is to try and get the best of both worlds, and to my ears at least this £2,000 pre-power amp combo goes quite a long way towards



achieving that goal. Before going deeper down that particular road, however, let's examine the components themselves in a little more detail.

These follow current stereotypes by partnering two matching slimline full-width silverfinished units, one a simple 'straight line' pre-amplifier, blessed with the convenience of full remote control over volume and input selection, the other a featureless stereo power amp that packs a very healthy 100W output into 8 Ohms.

However, in a world of frequently

identikit componentry, Orelle has brought in Danish industrial designer Kristian Gundarson to provide these units with a very distinctive look. He has come up with a 'wraparound' effect, forming the two ends into complete semicircles, and combining the right hand end of the pre-amp with an unusually large circular volume knob of the same diameter as the ends.

The end result has exceptionally clean lines as well as good practicality. The larger a knob, the easier it is to make small adjustments of course – though I once frightened myself by catching it inadvertently with an elbow and accidentally turning the volume way up, fortunately without causing any damage.

The super-clean pre-amp lines include a cluster of little buttons and indicator LEDs to provide input selection and confirmation, with legends rather too small and/or obscure for easy identification. The rear carries the inputs and outputs on the usual collection of phono sockets, plus a binding post for the optional phono stage. The latter caters for higher output (eg moving magnet) cartridges only at this time, and costs an extra £67.97; a low output (moving-coil) version is currently in preparation.

I love the remote handset! It's a seriously cute little affair, just two-thirds the size of a credit card (33x85mm), only 6mm thick, and weighs next to nothing. Although the button labels aren't too easy to read under dim room lighting, it does everything that's needed, and to my mind provides an object lesson in simple functionality to the costly, clumsy and pretentious heavyweights that some brands

▶ seem to feel obliged to provide.

The casework for both units combines very rigid extruded aluminium sides with a light alloy chassis, in such a way as to channel and dissipate any vibrational energy. Avoiding ferrous materials (ie steel) throughout ensures minimal electromagnetic coupling between power supply transformers and circuitry, while still maintaining good RF (radio frequency) shielding.

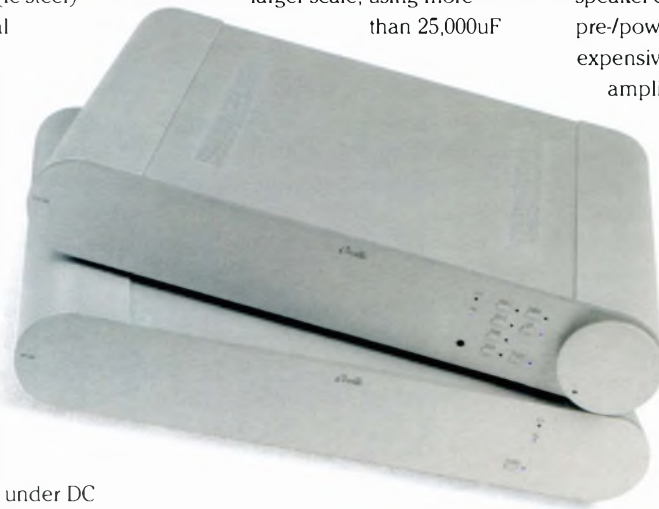
The circuitry of the CA100 has evolved from the XTC PRE-1, and is claimed to offer superior performance in every respect. Discrete transistors are used in a class A configuration, using balanced split rail supplies, under DC servo control that allows the output to be DC coupled. A special power supply transformer was developed for the analogue section, coupled via an ultra fast diode bridge to capacitors made in the UK for Orelle. Every analogue stage uses discrete zener-referenced balanced transistor regulators, to control voltages accurately without negative feedback.

Critical components are placed close together to keep signal path lengths short. Every stage is powered by separate regulated supplies, arranged in series to reduce noise still further, and particular attention has been paid to the critical layout of the earthing arrangements.

The remote control microprocessor switches into a low noise mode when it's not receiving a signal, so as not to interfere with the audio signals. It's fed from an entirely separate supply with its own transformer. There is no headphone provision here, as the designer believes including one is bound to compromise the power supply and grounding arrangements.

Based substantially on the SA100evo integrated amp, the SP100 power amp

has a larger and more advanced power supply, plus superior cooling arrangements to permit higher power output. The power supplies follow similar principles to those described for the pre-amplifier on an appropriately larger scale, using more than 25,000uF



capacitance. The input circuitry has zero feedback zener-regulated supplies

The SP100 features a symmetric pre-driver circuit prior to intelligent integrated output and driver transistors with special temperature sensing. Exceptionally fast thermal compensation ensures very accurate bias current. Gold plated twinned binding post terminals assist bi-wiring, and acoustically transparent protection circuitry watches out for speaker short circuits, excess current demand, and thermal overload.

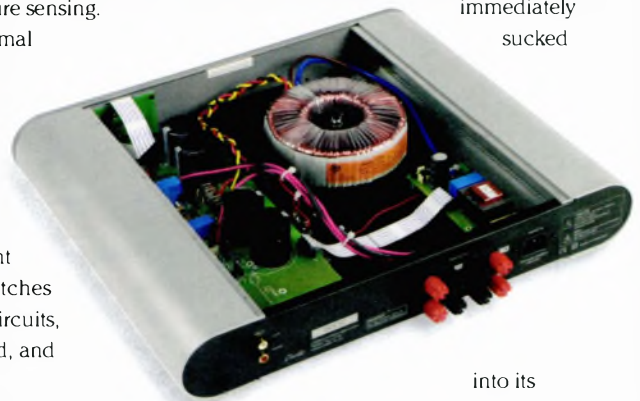
Connecting up posed no problems, the only minor operational difficulty being that the layout of input selector buttons on the handset and the fascia don't quite correspond, which proved a little confusing. I really like the extra large volume control, which makes it very easy to make the fine adjustments needed for listening late at night with high sensitivity speakers, for example.

If the designer's intention was to capture something of the flavour of valve amps in this entirely solid state amplifier, I have to admit he's succeeded admirably. With a pair of Focal-JMLab Alto Utopia Bes connected to the speaker cables, I substituted the Orelle pre-/power combo for the (vastly more expensive) Naim NAC552/NAP500 amplification I regularly use, and

was immediately conscious of considerable extra midband transparency and more obvious depth perspectives – in a somewhat similar manner to the way the character of the sound changes when I substitute a valve amplifier.

If you change the amplification of a system, it doesn't affect the perceived balance, in the way that substituting speakers usually does, for example. Rather the attention tends to be re-focused onto a different aspect of the sound. With the Orelle,

I found myself immediately sucked



into its magnificent midrange, which was altogether more obvious than its other characteristics.

There's a real sense of 'rightness' about the way this amplifier organises the midband, delivering instruments in proper perspective with one another, set in an entirely believable acoustic space (where appropriate), and showing great subtlety in tonality and dynamic

shading. I particularly enjoyed a Prom of Mozart's *Symphony No 40 in G minor* by the Swedish Radio Symphony Orchestra. This is a relatively small scale work for an acoustic as large as the Royal Albert Hall, but the BBC's classy miking and mixing made for a very convincing and entertaining performance, the Orelle amplification ensuring that both the performers and the auditorium played their part in a vivid and believable musical experience.

The Orelle doesn't exactly sound 'valve like' – there isn't quite the warmth and liquidity, the lush romanticism that seems the normal accompaniment to thermionic devices. But it doesn't sound much like your typical transistorised offering either. I'm not going to go quite so far as to suggest it combines the best of both worlds, because that's not quite what I hear. But it does combine some of the better qualities of both, in an all round mix that I'm sure will have considerable and widespread appeal.

And it's not just in the midrange where this amplifier excels. It delivers outstanding bass too, with considerable and sometimes quite surprising weight, depth, authority and analysis.

There's no unwanted 'heaviness' here, mind you. The bottom end times quite beautifully, sounding crisp, clean, firm and entirely free from unwanted exaggerations, so that it provides a proper foundation without introducing any clutter to obscure information further up the band.

With a pair of Triangle Naias (from the new Stratos range) at the end of the system, I slipped Mari Boine's 'eallin' into the CD player. I was well impressed, not only by the way the 'live' atmosphere of this recording came across, but also the way Mari's vast range of vocal styles were accommodated, from the close-up intimacy used on some tracks to her

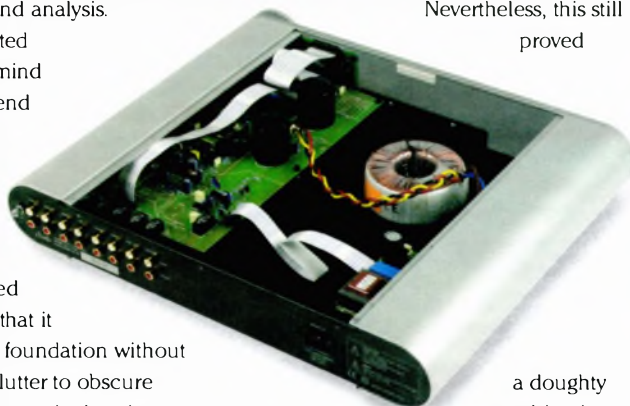
variations on the throat singing theme. The heavy percussion work on this disc was also handled with convincing aplomb, always staying dry and controlled, yet delivering immense transient power. These speakers have a horn-loaded tweeter that gives a rather 'hot' upper treble, and therefore proved a particularly good match for the Orelle amps, which are just a little too restrained at the extreme top end.

I started exploring other favourite live albums, such as Hot Tuna's *Live at Sweetwater Two*, Christy Moore's *Live at the Point* and the Grateful Dead's *Reckoning*. All three of these recordings use primarily acoustic instruments, and their subtle dynamic expression and tonal shading seemed particularly well reproduced by the Orelles' delicious midband.

A pair of horn-loaded Lowther-driven speakers (Graves Audio Koronglays) provided further confirmation of the Orelles' fine midband expression, though they don't have quite the same transparency and sweetness as GA's own single-ended

valve amp (codenamed Merlin).

Nevertheless, this still proved




a doughy combination, with superb pace

and timing, and great dynamic control.

The bottom line is that this new Orelle pre-/power amp combo is amongst the most interesting amps around, due to the unusual way it combines sonic characteristics that are normally mutually exclusive. Limited top end resolution is the only real clue to its

sub-high-end pricetag, since the bass and midband are about as good as it gets, with fine stereo imaging and a wide dynamic range.

If you love the magic midband of valve amps, but can't bring yourself to cope with their vicissitudes (such as waste heat), and/or like the idea of oodles of power, combined with fast solid-state bass, check out this pre-/power combo. And if £2,000 is too much to consider, many of the same ideas and components will be found in Orelle's £1,200 SA100evo integrated amplifier. 

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Orelle CA100 Stereo Pre-amplifier

Output level max: 3V RMS at 1kHz

Sensitivity: 200mV

Frequency response: 10Hz-20kHz +/-0.1dB

S/N ratio: >-90dB (A-weighted)

THD+N: <-0.1% (10 Hz - 20 kHz.

0.77V)

Output impedance: 680 Ohms

Input impedance: >18 kOhms

Dimensions (WxHxD): 440x70x358mm

Weight (gross): 7.0kg

Finish: Silver

Price: £1,000

Orelle SP100 Stereo Power Amplifier

Power output (8 Ohms, both channels):

2x 100W RMS

Power output (4 Ohms, one channel):

200W RMS

Frequency response: 20Hz-20kHz +/-0.5dB

S/N ratio: >-100dB (A-weighted)

THD+N: <-80dB @ 1kHz

(2.83V 8 Ohms)

Sensitivity: 840mV for full power

Dimensions (WxHxD): 440x70x358mm

Weight (gross): 9.0kg

Finish: Silver

Price: £1,000

Manufacturer:

Orelle

Tel: 0208 991 9200

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The Rega RB-250, RB-300 and RB-600 Tonearms

by Jimmy Hughes

There's always a tendency in life to equate performance with price. And while it's generally true to say you get what you pay for, and that quality never comes cheap, there are exceptions to the rule. Rega tonearms for example. When it was originally launched, the Rega RB-300 created a genuine stir. It offered performance and design comparable with arms costing at least two or three times the price. Indeed, as a piece of technology, it was among the first 'one-piece' tonearms on the market.

Pretty soon the RB-300 was being partnered with exotic turntables and cartridges. True, it sounded slightly disappointing on the Linn LP-12 - perhaps because its relatively thin, flexible arm cable did not provide the control necessary to stop the Linn suspension from moving laterally. But on turntables like the Pink Triangle and Roksan Xerxes it performed superbly, making the overall package a lot more affordable. At last it was possible to economise without compromising performance.

Yet, although the RB-300 is nowadays very much an accepted product, one still hears whispers that really it's not suitable for high class moving-coil pickups and that it shouldn't be thought of as a truly top-class tonearm. Speaking as someone who's regularly used RB-300s with cartridges costing in excess of £1000, I find this hard to understand; Certainly, on a purely

physical level, the arm functions very happily with expensive moving coil cartridges.

The arm bearings seem to cope with the demands made, and there's never any sense of the RB-300 having to struggle. Some MC cartridges put out a lot of mechanical energy, transferring considerable vibration to the arm and its bearings. If this isn't handled effectively the result can be a coarse congested sound that lacks transparency and ease. Climaxes take on a 'loud' hectoring quality, as though excessive resonance was ruining performance.

The RB-300 avoids these pitfalls, retaining excellent poise and control. Nevertheless, are there any weak areas? Now that Rega have

introduced the more expensive RB-600 and RB-1000 models, the implication is that the RB-300 (good as it is) falls short in certain respects. And what of the 'stripped' RB-250? I've heard it said more than once that the RB-250 actually sounds better than the RB-300 - something to do with it not having the spring-loaded tracking weight adjustment.

So the brief here is to listen to the various Rega arms, one against another. Let's find out if there's any truth in the folk tales? Let's find out whether Rega's reputation for value-engineering

their products is reflected by the performance of the tonearms? And while we're about it, let's find out if they really are comfortable supporting exotic moving-coils?

Actually, although I'd used both the RB-250 and RB-300 on many occasions, I don't think

I had ever compared the two arms directly. Fitting the RB-250 with a Transfiguration Spirit

moving coil cartridge and mounting it on an Avid Volvere Sequel, I was intrigued to see how well such an inexpensive arm performed when teamed with such expensive partners. It's sheer madness - but would it work? First impressions were of a sharp clean sound of great immediacy.

The high treble was very sharp and detailed. Transients had crisp attack, and the sound had plenty of immediacy. Alas, such top-end brilliance was not matched by the mid-band and bass. On a purely physical/mechanical level, the RB-250 appeared to handle the Spirit without difficulty. The stylus seemed to seat in the groove



► securely, and overall the reproduction felt solid and secure. Surface noise was low, despite the sharp top-end.

The downside? A lack of richness and weight at middle and low frequencies. Put simply, the sound was thin. It wasn't purely a tonal thing - though that was certainly part of the problem. By 'thin', I mean the sound lacked presence and three-dimensionality. Instead of expanding and projecting out from the speakers, the music sounded a touch 'flat' and boxed in. Musically, there seemed to be a lack of vibrance and energy - an absence of flair and individuality.

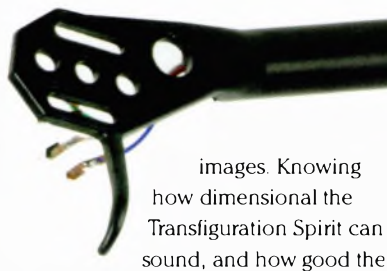
Climaxes grew loud, but somehow failed to blossom and expand; there wasn't much sense of voices and instruments detaching themselves in space and creating vivid holographic three-dimensional

more open and dimensional. Voices and instruments seemed to hang in space, creating a vivid impression of width and depth. In some ways, the RB-250 had sounded akin to a very good CD player; clean and precise, but constrained. The RB-300 had an openness that sounded very natural and truthful. The sharpness was still there, but now the sound had body and weight.

Bass was firmer and deeper, but more to the point there seemed to be a better balance between high and low frequencies. The RB-300 seemed just as sharp as the RB-250, but produced a fuller more rounded presentation. Detail was excellent, and stereo separation was subjectively enhanced. In terms of soundstaging, the RB-250 seemed to focus things towards the centre,

review RB-250, however, came fitted with a very thin cable that looked pretty insubstantial. Actually, thin cables aren't necessarily a bad thing (didn't I write an article about this once?). I nevertheless wonder if the RB-250's cable is adversely affecting the final sound.

Moving up a notch to the RB-600 brought more of the same. Sonically, it's essentially a more sophisticated version of the RB-300, giving increased smoothness, control, and fine detail. There's a lovely openness to the high treble and mid-band, while lower frequencies sound more solid and powerful. Dimensionality is improved, increasing the



images. Knowing how dimensional the Transfiguration Spirit can sound, and how good the Avid Volvere Sequel is at creating impressive holographic soundstaging, the blame had to lie with the tonearm. This was later proved by the superior performance of Rega's more expensive variants.

The RB-250 wasn't bad; it just didn't enable the cartridge and turntable to reveal anything like their full potential. While it seems physically able to handle high quality pickups like the Transfiguration Spirit in terms of tracking and overall control, musically it failed to reveal the special qualities of this remarkable cartridge. Because of this, I'd say the RB-250 is not a good match for expensive high quality MC cartridges.

Going over to the RB-300, there was an immediate improvement in clarity and separation. Suddenly, the sound was

reducing lateral spread.

The RB-300 produced greater width and spread.

As previously mentioned, I'd heard people say they thought the RB-250 sounded better than the RB-300. But, on the basis of this comparison, I'd have to disagree totally. The RB-250 is a very good arm, and excellent value. But it's not special enough to partner an expensive moving coil cartridge with top-flight turntable and show such items at anything like their best. The extra cost of the RB-300 is more than justified by the sonic improvement it creates.

The arm cable fitted to the RB-300 has often been criticised; it's simply a cheap OEM lead - nothing fancy or exotic. If memory serves me correctly, the early .B-250s shared a similar looking cable with the RB-300. The

sense of spatial width and depth. It's quite hard to describe in just a few words, but there's increased air and space around voices and instruments.

On one particular '70s pop album (I'm too embarrassed to say what it was!) the overall sound improved in areas like tonality, detail, and clarity. At the same time, there was much greater difference between individual tracks. With the RB-250, the various songs on this album had a 'sameness' about them - a lack of variation and individuality. On the RB-600 (and to a lesser degree the RB-300) one noticed far greater subtlety and finesse; there was far more of a distinct character to each track.

What I find fascinating is the way a fairly average nondescript (crap) pop album is somehow magically transformed into something that holds the attention and engages the

► senses. The music's no better; it still sucks. But, somehow your interest is held because everything sounds more real and human. You can sense the way a lyric's being shaped; the magical way percussion creates a shimmering backdrop; the interplay between instruments; the way the performers build a climax.

Of course all these things were there before. But you had to search for them - you had to listen hard to glean what was going on. With better equipment, listening becomes easier - the music comes to you, rather than you having to go to it. After spending time with CD, it's always a sobering experience to go back to vinyl and hear its lovely openness and crisp unforced clarity and detail. I marvel at the way the sound projects its vivid three dimensionality and holographic breadth and width.

As soon as the RB-600 started to play it was apparent **that the music** sounded smoother

and more sophisticated. There was a greater feeling of ease and increased refinement. At the same time, the sound was definitely sharper and more crisply focused. Although the overall impression was of a smoother more sophisticated sound, transients had noticeably crisper attack, and every-thing seemed more sharply registered.

I know some people worry about the spring loaded tracking weight adjustment on the RB-300/600 and recommend turning the dial to maximum (3g) to un-tension the spring. It's felt the spring is (or might be!) excited by vibration from the cartridge. There may be something in this, but I can't say it struck me as significant. I tried turning the tracking

force dial to maximum, and (using Cartridge Man stylus scales) repositioned the counterweight for correct downforce. Any change? Hardly. To be honest, I couldn't hear any bloody difference one way or t'other! So, if only for convenience, I'd always use the arm as Rega intended - employing the spring dial to set tracking weight.

Other arms use the spring to apply a downforce. This naturally increases as you raise the playing weight. Not so Rega. Their spring works in reverse, pushing the arm up when set to zero. This has the effect of 'lightening' the arm by 3g or thereabouts - making it possible for the counterweight to sit closer to the fulcrum - thus reducing effective mass. With the Rega arrangement, as you increase the 'downforce', you actually decrease the tension of the spring. It's a brilliant piece of lateral thinking.

Conclusions? Well, if you've got a Rega RB-250, stick to medium quality mm cartridges and turntables. Don't be tempted to partner an arm like this with a top-flight turntable and cartridge. There's simply no point. While the result won't be terrible you just won't get your full money's worth. Far better to spend a little extra and get an RB-300. This produces audibly better sound, as already outlined.

The RB-300 offers outstanding value for money, giving a real taste of high-end arm performance at a budget price. It's not perfect, but most of the important essentials are right. Good as the RB-300 is, the RB-600 remains quite a bit better. It offers a more sophisticated presentation. Being at once sharper and more precisely focused, while at the same time

smoother and more refined. It has a lovely airy openness and solidity too.

The RB-600 is weighty and full-sounding, yet rhythmically nimble and highly detailed. With deep solid bass, a beautifully liquid mid-band, and a crisp refined treble, it gives LPs a master-tape like firmness and ease that's very engaging. These benefits occur because of improved cabling and superior quality bearings. So, if you can stretch that little bit further, the RB-600 is the arm to go for.

Of course Rega make an even more expensive and exotic arm; the RB-1000. Could this improve still further on the very accomplished RB-600? And if so, could the improvement

possibly justify the considerable difference in price? We'll be finding out in the next issue. ►✚



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Enclosed bearing tonearms
Effective Length:	237mm
Diameter Of Mounting Hole:	24-25mm
Prices - RB 250:	£124
RB 300:	£188
RB 600:	£358

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

Building On Success...

what's under the skin of a Rega tonearm

by Chris Binns

The evergreen Rega RB-300 tone arm will, if memory serves me correctly, be approaching its 20th birthday very soon. At the time of its introduction, it quickly proved itself by offering a performance that was way beyond the asking price of about £90, and in many ways provided a considerable kick up the backside for the competition. Indeed, many turntable manufacturers simply gave up the struggle to produce their own tone arm when Rega started supplying the less expensive RB-250 as an OEM product. A testament to its enduring success, countless thousands have been sold over the years, while the basic design and components have served the company well in spawning various derivatives from the aforementioned 250 to the refined and highly capable 1000. The 300 has also been subject to more than its fair share of modifications tweaks and rebuilds – but that is another story.

Things could have turned out differently, however. The original design concept for a single piece cast arm tube (common to all the models, and one of the more obvious reasons for the arms high performance) was considered impossible to make by the various companies that were approached. Rega's tenacity and 'you don't know until you try...' attitude paid off, and although the reject rate was high to begin with, they finally got what they wanted.

Somewhat amusingly, they also got an award from an obscure American journal for the casting work, which when it arrived was accompanied by a letter congratulating them - and saying

that they still could not understand how they got the process to work! The final product was a typical example of Rega's rather idiosyncratic approach to an engineering challenge, the result being a simple, elegant solution to the problem.

While there are clear similarities between the various models, founded on the common use of the arm-tube casting and the plastic housing that supports the armrest and bias slider, there are also distinct differences, involving wiring, bearings and counterweights. Let's begin with the RB-300, the arm that got the whole thing started. Here, the arm cradle is constructed from the same non-magnetic stainless steel as the bearings themselves. The ball races are specially selected by Rega's supplier to the company's specification. Basically ABEC 5 they are further selected for noise (or rumble), the method of measurement employed once you get beyond ABEC 7. This is because Rega feel that this is actually the critical consideration when it comes to sonic performance. Indeed, they take inordinate care when it comes to selecting both the bearings themselves and setting them up for minimum friction, but more of that later. The counterweight is machined from the same stainless steel, while two internal grooves in its post-hole accept rubber O-rings that decouple it from the aluminium arm stub. Arm-cable is a fairly unprepossessing moulded figure 8 affair complete with moulded plugs. It's something Rega receive constant criticism for, but they're quick to point out (somewhat defensively) that it

performs much better than the cheesy looks might suggest.

The other thing that separates the more expensive arms from the RB-250 is the clever implementation of the dynamic balance system for tracking force. JMH has covered this in some detail so I won't add anything save to observe that it first appeared on the 300.

The RB-250 is a simplified model aimed at reducing the cost compared to the 300. The bearing assemblies used in the RB250 are graded between those used for OEM production arms and those that go on to Rega's own turntables. Gone are the specially selected bearings, the stainless steel housing (replaced with brass) and the decoupled counterweight. This now uses a sprung nub that engages a course thread in the plastic arm stub. Tracking force is now gravity set, the coloured plastic spot on the edge of the counter-weight acting as a (very) rough guide. The cable is even thinner, while the horizontal bearing is of larger diameter and correspondingly higher friction than the one fitted to the 300.

The 600 uses a polished and lacquered arm-tube in order to reduce the effective mass slightly. Arm cable is now a thicker and higher quality Klotz lead, although the internal wiring remains the same. The smaller counterweight is machined from Tungsten, making it denser so that it sits closer to the bearings. But the real difference is the bearings themselves, which are hand selected for tolerance by Rega. From a hundred sets of RB-300 bearings, only the best 20% will make it into RB-600s (for the RB-1000 it's more like one in a hundred – if

▶ they're lucky).

So much for the external and mechanical differences: What is not quite so obvious is the time and care invested in the production of each arm. Every unit is hand built with a degree of dexterity and skill that is quite extraordinary. While to some extent this can be learned, it takes a special kind of individual to put the arms together with the pre-requisite care and efficiency. The team who do this have had years of experience, and make it look so easy... As if to highlight this I was invited to have a go at putting together and tensioning a bearing, and strangely my attempts only served to make me feel like the proverbial bull in a china shop. The specially developed jigs helped, but when you require finished tolerances for vertical and horizontal friction of less than 20mg, precision adjustment is essential. And those friction values include the internal cabling, specifically chosen for its extreme flexibility, a factor

all too often overlooked when re-wiring the arms.

Even soldering of the arm leads, a process with which I am not entirely unfamiliar, requires a degree of precision that is out of reach for most. Actually witnessing the processes that go in to making an arm left me with a new found respect, which I shall remember every time I am inclined to be a little heavy handed when mounting a cartridge.

It is the skill and experience that goes into building the arms that helps explain Rega's resistance to the idea of modifying them. Given the price to which the arms are built, they're happy to accept that there may well be better cabling available, but the problem is that fitting it means disassembling the tonearm. Given that without the correct tools and jigs it's almost impossible to reconstruct the bearings or dress the cables to the correct tolerances, they feel that the loss of performance will more than undermine any potential

benefit. As to replacing the bearings themselves, why bother? Who buys more arm bearings than Rega, who then further select them. It's an argument with an undeniable logic, reinforced by the number of repairs Rega are forced to undertake on "modified" arms.

What is even harder to understand is that the company is perfectly happy to train people to assemble the arms as well as supplying the necessary jigs. So far, only Michell Engineering have taken them up on the offer. They fit the Incognito wiring loom, a modification which we feel is potentially worthwhile – indeed the only re-wire that we'd consider. Well, now you know where to get it done.

There's one other area that those with itchy fingers (and deep wallets) can explore without upsetting the arm's operation, and that's counterweights. JMH will be looking at those in the next issue.



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finite elemente Pagode HDO3 Master Reference Rack

by Roy Gregory

A decent hi-fi support needs to sound good. It also needs to look good, be adjustable and large enough to accommodate a wide range of equipment. It needs to sound good. It needs to fit into the domestic environment, be finished to furniture standards and in a range of finishes. It also needs to sound good, or rather, ideally, not sound at all. And therein lies the problem. All too often, sonically acceptable solutions are anything but domestically pleasing. Let's be honest, it takes more than a lick of coloured paint to turn steel tubes and sheets of glass into a thing of beauty. And that's assuming that they're sonically acceptable in the first place. Fortunately, we've come a little further than the assumption that as long as it's rigid and it's got spikes then it'll deliver the sonic goods. Indeed, these days even spikes are considered suspect, depending on how you use them of course.

The fact that listeners are switching on to the significance of equipment supports, questioning the entrenched wisdom of decades and finally opening their wallets in sympathy with their concerns, has resulted in turn in a dramatic increase in the sophistication of the support solutions on offer. New materials, new technology and new approaches. Where once we had only steel and MDF, with glass seeming the height of sophistication, we now have aluminium in every conceivable

extruded shape, modular construction, multi-layer damping, mixed material construction and even air suspension. But the real advance has been in the adoption of non-resonant construction



and materials, with welded metal frames and to a lesser extent, glass shelves consigned to the dustbin of history.

Recently I examined a pair of contrasting racks, the diminutive Quadraspire Reference and the finite elemente Pagode Signature. Both shared organic shelving combined with aluminium uprights. Both offered adjustable spacing and both in their own way sounded excellent, clearly

underlining just how far we've come. Having enjoyed the Pagode so much, I was intrigued by the prospect of its bigger and even more sophisticated brother, the HD (High Definition) Master Reference.

Obviously, there are common themes here, and the Master Reference and Signature share basic constructional features. Both are based around a solid maple frame that supports extruded aluminium uprights, tied together at the top by further solid maple cross-members. Both also enjoy a standard of fit and finish that you don't normally find outside of seriously expensive furniture stores, one that's almost entirely alien to the hi-fi industry. But whereas the Signature rack uses a single pair of uprights, the Master Reference employs two pairs, allowing deeper shelves to be used. These shelves are fixed by horizontal cones that are screwed and locked into dimples in the uprights. It's a unique approach and one that allows relatively simple adjustment of shelf spacing. The surprisingly heavy solid maple shelves are supported by spikes that locate into the maple frames, surrounded by rubber damping grommets that prevent the horizontal surface sliding and contacting the surrounding frame.

But the really clever bit is tucked away out of sight. Look at the picture and you'll see that the space frame that supports each shelf has two pairs of steel bosses located next to the pairs that accept the shelf's feet. These are located in wells in the framework, ►

▶ and consist of a solid drum with a thin rod protruding from its center. These rods act as resonators, dispersing energy at key frequencies. By varying the length of the rods, so you alter the frequency at which they resonate. The nearest thing I can think of is the small weight and leaf spring assemblies used by Naim to control the mechanical behaviour of their speaker cabinets. As the accompanying picture shows, finite elements provide these resonators in no fewer than six discrete values. These they mix and match within a rack, depending on the number of shelves and the position they occupy. To the extent that quite often, if you add an additional shelf at a later date then you'll also end up changing the resonators in at least one of the existing shelves too.

The precise frequencies used for each shelf are the result of research carried out at the University of Dortmund. They relate to the anticipated weight of the individual components and the load as a whole, as well as the structure of the shelves themselves.

The base element employs exactly the same construction as the other shelves, but its hardwood frame is deeper, allowing for fixing of the uprights, and four M8 spikes to allow for leveling. It's also available as a separate unit to act as an amp stand (the HDO9 and HD10), and shelf dimensions are such that all but the biggest units will be happily accommodated, even in the context of a rack. Certainly, the enormous Gryphon Antileon fitted with no problem, as did my often problem-atic Jadis JA30s, albeit sideways. The floating area offered is 465mm deep by 515mm wide, although the all important space between the uprights, all too often a limiting factor, stretches to 635mm.

If that isn't big enough, then the company offer 750mm and 1120mm wide versions as well. That lot should take just about anything that I know of, while the adjustable spacing means that even awkward customers like the tall Theta amps or Levinson No 33Hs can be racked if you insist. The shelf units are even available in black (if you must) with special wood finishes possible – just don't expect them to be quick or cheap.

So much for the theory, how does it work in practice?



Having been suitably impressed by the holistic, organic and powerful presentation of the Signature, I wondered just how the Master Reference would improve on it. I needn't have worried. The Signature majors on the shape and broad sweep of the music, giving the instruments substance and a sense of togetherness, at the expense of some inner detail. It puts music first, where some racks major on detail, pulling

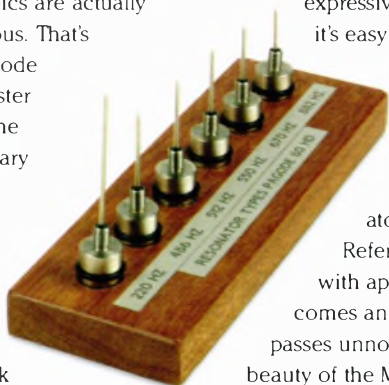
proceedings apart in the process. Well, the Master Reference builds on the performance of its cheaper brother, delivering the same sense of musical integration, but adding greater detail, instrumental colour and dynamic range. Along with the greater tonal differentiation of instruments comes better separation and greater transparency, yet all within the context of a coherent musical whole. The sheer power and stability that underpins completely over the top orchestration like the *Gladiator* OST brings poise and natural grace to proceedings, eliminating the edgy strain that can sound

exciting yet tiring at the same time.

The Master Reference racks allow equipment its full range of dynamic expression at both ends of the spectrum. So whether you're talking the opening brass tutti of Mahler's *Third* or the more intimate vocal control of Gillian Welch, the musician's intent is preserved intact. You need louder, you'll get it. Which might seem an odd thing to say about a rack, but dynamic range and energy distribution is exactly what they effect.

Think back to the steel and glass constructs of the past. They injected bands of energy into proceedings, giving an impression of pace and dynamics. They robbed music of its coherence and colour, they robbed it of weight and harmonic complexity. Moving away from that construction allows music to sound more natural, whether it's to a wood composite structure like an RDC rack or an air suspended one like the Voodoo or Townshend. More natural because it restores the evenness of the energy envelope, allowing each instrument ▶

▶ its own energy spectrum. The lack of peaks might sound initially unimpressive, but what you quickly realise is that dynamics are actually wider, just less obvious. That's about where the Pagode Signature is. The Master Reference extends the performance boundary pretty dramatically. Rather than the scaled dynamics of a rack like the Signature, the Master Reference retains the trademark even handedness but breathes real life into proceedings through its lack of dynamic constraint. I'm playing *Everybody Digs Bill Evans* as I write this, and the discrimination in the weight and pressure of the piano notes is breathtaking. Try as I might my



attention keeps wandering to those apparently aimless musical doodles, drawn by their shape and the expressive playing. It's a disc it's easy to get wrong: One where the gap between LP and CD is unforgivingly great, yet the Wadia, perched atop the Master Reference struts its stuff with aplomb. The music comes and comes, the system passes unnoticed. That's the beauty of the Master Reference. In its ultimate incarnation finite element's Pagode stand nears the hi-fi ideal. It allows equipment to perform at its best, while simultaneously delivering the looks, finish and versatility to meet the equally important domestic and practical

demands. In the context of a serious hi-fi system its price might seem excessive until you compare it to the cost of the equipment it supports and its sonic contribution. Then it becomes a no-brainer.

At last, a rack that should be seen and won't be heard! ▶+

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The Mel Audio Casaq 11 Integrated Amplifier revisited

by Simon Groome

Back in Issue 23, CT reviewed Mel Audio's distinctive looking and beautifully crafted Casaq 11 integrated amplifier with slightly mixed feelings. Due to the inability of the amplifier to achieve total harmony with his system, he felt that the Casaq 11 would be better suited to a smaller room, with more efficient speakers. With an output of 21 watts/channel this would seem a sensible route to take (despite Mel Audio's opinion that it has ample reserves of power for most situations) and so the amp came my way.

Driving my much more efficient, modified Snell J1Is, the Casaq 11

certainly exhibited enough power and drive in my small listening room, and large scale works could be played at tremendously loud levels that had me worrying about any relationship with the neighbours. However loud things got, the amp never lost its poise and everything remained perfectly stable. The dramatic sections of superbly recorded soundtracks like *Titanic* (Sony SK 63213) and *Dances with Wolves* (Epic ZK 66817) were handled with aplomb, exhibiting enormous amounts of bass that could literally shake the room, even though the speakers will not reproduce the very lowest

frequencies. The amp also has the ability to resolve tremendous amounts of detail, with the smallest of nuances emerging from the speakers, even during the most complicated musical extracts. In fact, recordings could be laid bare, with poorly produced discs exposed for what they were, warts and all, especially in regard to sound-staging, where better engineering allowed the performance to become an accurate three-dimensional rendition of the recording event while others appeared comparatively flat. But when it was good it was very, very good. ▶

▶ But that's a double-edged sword. Disappointingly, merely good rather than perfect recordings often exhibited a certain lack of musical structure and togetherness. In the Végő Quartet's superb presentation of Bartók's *String Quartet No. 4* (Auvidis/Valois V 4809), the fourth movement *Allegretto pizzicato* revealed a lack of this performance's tremendous rhythm and timing, while more up-tempo music exhibited the same lack of rhythmic cohesion, with music from Radiohead and Madonna simply stripped down to their constituent parts. As a reviewer I could find this a rather helpful tool, but as a music lover I often missed the musical structure in a composition and the associated rapport of the players during a great performance.

qualities and musical textures, with violins and acoustic guitars sounding sublime. The upper registers were handled well, although the amplifier lacked a little extension at the very highest frequencies.

majority of my time with the amp. I have never experienced such problems before, even with less than silent valve amps. Perhaps the speakers were just too efficient!

Favouring detail and dynamics over musical architecture, potential purchasers need to be sure the Casaq's capabilities match



CT had experienced a problem with the Casaq 11 being susceptible to interference through the mains, and that was also the case here,

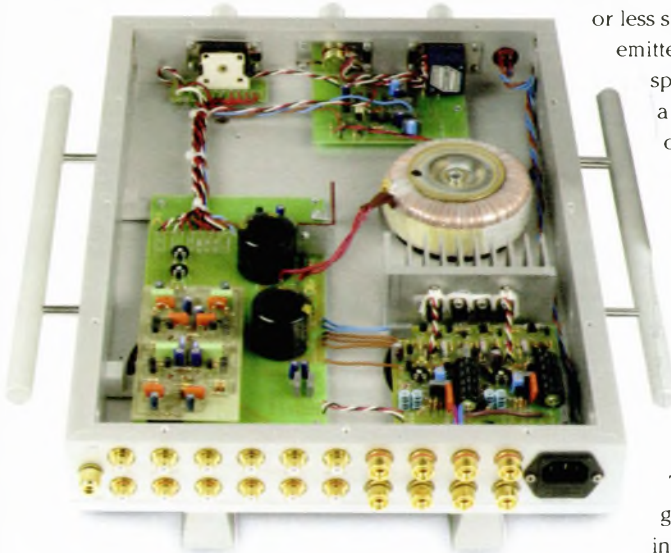
with a resounding clunk or less significant pop emitted through the speakers every time a light switch or other electrical appliance was turned on.

There was also an annoying and constant hum from the speakers, even with all sources disconnected.

This simply got worse if I increased the volume, despite the

their musical needs and aspirations.

Personally I found the lack of structural integrity that emerged on less than perfect discs worrisome, in much the same way as CT, and must conclude that it's inherent to the amplifier's performance rather than provoked by the system context. How it effects you only you could decide. However, and despite the manufacturer's claims to the contrary, I feel this is a relatively niche product with few consumer's systems and circumstances suiting this amplifier perfectly. You might conclude that it would possibly suit someone with an older, low powered valve amp wanting more muscle, but a Border Patrol power supply would be a better, and more cost effective way forward. Indeed, I feel that detail, transparency and resolution are the Casaq's strengths: that's what it should be bought for. If that's what you crave then seek out the Casaq, but any purchase should follow a careful home audition.



There was also an occasional tendency on some older, analogue recordings for the bass to thicken the deeper it went, although the amplifier's excellent midband could bring out some beautiful tonal

most careful set-up and cable dressing. The problem was so bad when used in conjunction with a phono-stage (my usually silent MicroGroove Plus) that I left my beloved vinyl well alone for the



The Russ Andrews Powerpak II Power Supply

by Roy Gregory

Surprise hi-fi success of the last two years has to be the Tivoli Radio. Decidedly retro in more than just appearance, the lack of pre-sets, digital tuning or a second speaker has failed to deter a host of purchasers impressed by the superb sound quality. Well, either that or the range of colours on offer...

Either way, Tivoli have tried to capitalise on the legion of loyal owners by offering extra speakers and even a CD player, all built into similarly styled cabinets. But nothing's hit the mark in quite the same way as the original radio. Which leaves the hi-fi aficionado itching to upgrade his new toy with a bit of a problem. But never fear, Russ Andrews is here, with something we should all be able to understand: an external power supply.

Dubbed the Powerpak II, it's actually a universal DC supply that can be configured by Russ Andrews for anything from three to 12V, making it usable with a whole host of different portable components, or anything else that needs a decent DC feed. It starts life as a small switch mode unit (in which form RA sell it for £39.95 as the Powerpak I). The Powerpak II adds higher quality caps and a decent length woven Kimber lead to carry the power to the Tivoli.

I know, it's not my favorite technology either, but if you can suspend your skepticism for long

enough to listen you might find your prejudice undermined. Either that or this is the exception that proves the rule. It certainly improves the sound of the Tivoli anyway. Perhaps it's the metre and a half of

Adding the Powerpak II to the Tivoli delivers much better textural and tonal quality. Listening to the afternoon play on Radio Four, voices have far more character and individuality, while the flow and rhythm of both speech and music improves noticeably. There's more drama and

more meaning, and whilst it might sound like a strange thing to say with a mono radio, much better separation. Dynamics don't seem any wider, but they are better differentiated and defined, especially at lower levels. In fact, the changes are entirely positive, and at an asking price of £59.95, well worthwhile. Of course, the Tivoli is a bit of a star in standard trim, but if you get the itch to improve on what you've already got then here's a surefire way. Once you've heard the benefits you'll not be going back. ▶+



lead that allows you to keep the Powerpak II away from what it's driving, but the effect was wholly beneficial and I couldn't detect adverse effects elsewhere either, although I didn't try it on the same ring as the main system uses.

Price: £59.95

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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.

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Renee Austin

Sweet Talk

Blind Pig BPCD5087 

When Blind Pig sign an artist they very rarely pick a dud and Renee Austin, a five octave singer from Austin, Texas, is no exception. Austin is an artist capable of covering so many musical bases and she does it with a purr, a growl, a sexy moan and a throaty roar that constantly delights the listener. She's also a damn fine songwriter, penning seven of *Sweet Talk's* 11 tracks.

However, no matter how good a singer/songwriter you are, you need a band to hang it all together; no problem here, the musicians she has at her disposal bring each and every song to life with dynamic and exhilarating playing.

On opener 'Not Alone' she puts that five octave range to good use, ripping the song up and coming on all Tina Turner (before Tina sold out to the charts). She duets with Delbert McLinton on the punchy mid-paced rocker 'Pretend we never met', throws in shades of Peggy Lee on jazz number 'Fool Moon', whips up a funky storm on the throbbing 'Pour The Sugar Slowly' and even manages a pulsating romp through Gospel with 'Bottom of a Heart'. If you add in some dirty slide driven blues ('Bitter Water') and a little Stax style soul ('Unravelling'), what you end up with is one of this year's finest albums.


AH

RECORDING 
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The Cooper Temple Clause

Kick up the fire, and let the flames break loose

Morning Records MORNING36 

Their debut album was always slightly disappointing. Having promised great things, with incendiary singles and self-confident statements, *See This Through and Leave* failed to deliver. It was always slightly pedestrian.

With *Kick up the fire...* they have certainly avoided making the same mistake. This is the Cooper Temple Clause 'doing a Radiohead'. There may be singles here, but now the album is filled mainly with musical experimentation and electronic burbling. But the Coopers were always destined for this kind of thing. With a greater variation of pace and dynamic the album creates a much fuller picture, dripping with dark paranoia. When it does kick out, it does it in an uncontrolled riot of noise driven by sub-bass and samples.

Whilst Radiohead have become willfully obscure, The Cooper Temple Clause have become creatively progressive. If *Kick up the fire...* misses the mark then it is only because it set itself such a high target. That it succeeds at all is highly commendable. Maybe this album won't set the world alight, but it represents a band that are growing and developing, rather than spiraling pointlessly inward.

MC

RECORDING
MUSIC



Eddi Reader

Sings The Songs Of Robert Burns

Rough Trade Records RTRADEC097 

Placing the songs of that immortal Scot, Robert Burns within a modern folk setting and underpinning them with evocative arrangements for the Royal Scottish National Orchestra string players is a daring and unexpected enterprise. A fascinating one, however, which views those gorgeously poetic Eighteenth Century pastoral images of the Ayrshire countryside through a prism created from out of Eddi Reader's own gritty urban experiences during a troubled upbringing in the tenements of Glasgow. It is a revealing cultural counterpoint to a beautifully researched (and annotated) album of eleven songs including the traditional 'Winter It Is Past' and 'Ae Fond Kiss', an affectionate tale of fidelity in 'John Anderson My Jo' and the earthy romance of 'Brose And Butter'. I think the subversive edge is carefully developed. You can hear it through the discordant guitar scoring on tracks like 'Charlie Is My Darling', or in the way 'Ye Jacobites' is for much of its duration pared back to nothing more than Colin Reid's guitar and Reader's exquisite voice. The quiet, almost unnoticed yet delicate introduction of the strings here adds a bittersweet quality to its melancholia. Overall, this is a beguiling, elegantly crafted and intelligent musical homage that deserves every success on both sides of the border.


RP

RECORDING
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Holly Lerski

Life is Beautiful

Sanctuary Records : SANCD153 

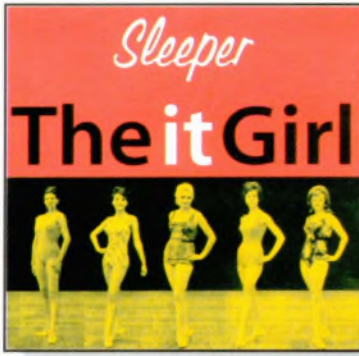
After recording two albums with her band Angelou, (garnering great reviews, a cult following and an unwanted 'Folk Band' tag along the way) Holly Lerski decided to record the next album under her own name. With her new band in tow, Holly set off to record at a classic analogue studio in Denmark where she had every intention of completing the album. Unfortunately the budget ran out after a week and with only a handful of songs completed things looked ominously bleak until drummer Cath Evans contacted a friend in Manchester who loaned the band his flat to finish the album off. That friend was Martin Reblski of The Doves and the band put his flat to good use, recording guitars in the bathroom, double bass in the kitchen and vocals in the hall!

The end product is *Life is Beautiful* – what you might call a soundtrack for the summer. It has a lovely breezy feel to it with lots of jangly acoustic and electric guitars, Dusty Springfield-ish vocals and some beautiful songs, notably the dreamy ballad 'Firefly' and the deeply sensuous 'Tiger Falls'. Wogan has been playing the album a lot on his Radio 2 show – let's hope he can do for Holly what he did for Eva Cassidy.

AH

RECORDING
MUSIC





Sleeper

The it Girl

Indolent Records SLEPCD012 (1996)

Why would I review Sleeper? Long thought of as Britpop also-rans and the very source of the term "Sleeper-bloke" they seem the essence of mediocrity. That is, of course, precisely why you should re-evaluate their finest record. Their debut album *Smart* was rightly described as derivative, and their final album *Pleased to meet you* was the vain effort of Louise Wener to salvage a dying band. But in-between, *The it Girl* was a small nugget overlooked in a crowded musical scene. *The it Girl* is an album that keeps finding its way onto my hi-fi. It catches the band at a crucial point: their technical skill had grown to compensate for any lack of passion, just before all emotion was finally stripped out by changes in their line up. Wener's soft, husky voice charges the songs with sexual suggestion, and the strength of those songs reflected the bands growing individual identity. And so they created a record I just keep coming back to. Perhaps you never bought it at the time, or perhaps you forgot you owned it. Either way, it's well worth dusting off.

MC



Kings Of Leon

Youth & Young Manhood

Handmewdown Records HMD 27

The Kings of Leon: Caleb, Jared and Nathan Followill and their cousin Matthew are Tennessee natives whose brand of rocking rootsy alternative blues has at times that raucous and raw punk-like freshness about it. In 'Joe's Head' and 'Spiral Staircase', where Caleb's lazy, rasping, messy, screeching yet expressive vocals pierce your consciousness with the corrosive intensity of acid, it is exciting edge-of-your-seat counter-culture genius. Elsewhere in 'Trani' they show in this unlikely homage to a transvestite just how subversive these lads who grew up on the road with an evangelist father can be. Other gems include 'California Waiting', a breathlessly tender song and the rollicking anthem, 'Holy Roller Novocaine'. There is also a hidden eleventh track, 'Talahina Sky', which kicks in some minutes after the 'Novocaine' with a surprising and tenderly observed tone that suggests there's an even greater level of unpretentious diversity to come from these guys in the future. Ethan John's production that sharpens the delivery of vocals, bass, drums and guitar provides an essential part in driving a healthy wedge into our modern blues preconceptions. Essential listening material.

RP



Rosanne Cash

Rules of Travel

Capitol Records 7243 B 37757 2 9

Along with Emmylou, Linda and Nanci, Rosanne Cash (the daughter of the late great Johnny Cash and his first wife Vivian Liberto) was in the vanguard of a late 1980s 'new country' revival. They have broadened this genre's appeal, freeing it from the predictable sterility of "Hicksville" by straddling the boundaries between folk, pop and country music. Rosanne's songs have always placed a great deal of emphasis on the personal and to that end earlier albums like *Interiors* and *The Wheel* are noted for their reflections upon the breakdown of her marriage and its ensuing emotional fall out. *Rules of Travel*, the honest and pensive appraisal of the choices and directions that can be followed in life, opens a window to an equally enthralling view. Harmonising with Sheryl Crow for an opening 'Beautiful Pain' she muses over the exquisite combination of hurt and pleasure which being a martyr in love can bring. While the title-track advice on second chances suggests how to re-ignite the feelings of love when a heart has previously been bent and broken. Touchingly, Johnny joins Rosanne on 'September When It Comes', in this classic use of seasonal images and lengthening shadows to give consideration of a life. All eleven stunningly arranged and recorded songs offer profound emotional insights such as these.

RP






Bert Jansch

Toy Balloon

Cooking Vinyl Cook CD 136 

Edge of a Dream

Sanctuary Records SANCD 136 

Since his eponymous debut LP in 1965 for the Transatlantic record label the Glasgow-born ex-Pentangle stalwart Bert Jansch has been a pillar of the British folk music community. Influential with a capital "I" would be an understatement. The brilliantly innovative acoustic guitar playing gained him a fearsome reputation amongst his peers, while the hauntingly evocative song writing and a distinctive, unexpectedly versatile but dependably strong voice have earned him the appreciation and loyalty of many fans even through those years blighted by alcoholism. His international standing was more recently renewed in the mid-1990s with a release that took many by surprise: *When The Circus Comes To Town* is an atmospheric album whose ardour, vision and soul have rightly seen it compared to those pivotal recordings made three decades earlier. These are qualities that easily permeate their way through

both *Toy Balloon* (1998) and last year's *Edge of Dreams*. On both albums, I was quite simply knocked over by the quality of guitar playing which can in the space of a few chords sing with joy or weep in deepest sorrow. This applies equally to the music clothing those Jansch originals; his choice of covers and any of those beautifully arranged traditional songs. The slightest shift of emphasis, in weight or tone, so delicately worked out for Jackson C. Frank's 'Carnival' and also heard in the scoring of 'She Moved Through the Fair' or even on his own 'Paper Houses' and 'Betts Dance' (which are all to be found on *Toy Balloon*) leaves you gasping at their incandescent charm. His fingers feather the guitar strings and there's an easy fluidity to the fretwork which simply beguiles the listener with its tonal modulations, inflexions and lavish timbres. These tease out each and every emotional undercurrent from the lyrics of love, loss or betrayal. The intuitively perfect sense of timing, and this goes for his playing of straight-laced folk tunes, as well as a bluesy 'Waitin' Et Wonderin' and the funky 'How It All Came Down', is masterful. Meanwhile, Pee Wee Ellis's saxophone, the pedal steel of B.J. Cole and harmonica and steel guitars of Johnny Hodge infuse and embolden these tracks with differing colours. Another stellar line up for *Edge of a Dream* has Bernard Butler's punchy electric guitar trading spots with a precocious Adam Jansch (bass guitar) and of course the incomparable Bert Jansch

acoustic breaks. Makoto Sakamoto (Butler's wicked stick man) provides the rhythmic centre on four tracks including a tingling arrangement of 'I Cannot Keep From Crying' and on the more typical folk blues material like 'Walking This Road' where Jansch muses over that lonely and well-trodden path that lies ahead of these journeymen. Haunting Hope Sandoval vocals on 'All This Remains' and a rock ballad style in the title track continues to apply a modern popular feel to this music. One that still manages to comfortably fit in alongside those wonderful Dave Swarbrick (violin) and Ralph

McTell (harmonica) interludes. Swarbrick weaves his magic in a pithy 'Sweet Death' and for the jam session with Jansch on 'Gypsy Dave'. McTell's lips mourn for the dead on a carefully etched song about the events at the World Trade Centre 'Bright Sunny Morning' which tempers the horror, outrage and grief with slight ironic touches and a quietly questioning tone that will unsettle some through its honesty. The recording throughout has clarity, dynamics and a fully developed sound that recreates those surreal images of the blue sky, flames and waves of dust rolling over the Manhattan skyline with piercing intensity. Instrumental and vocal threads have their distinctive personality traits brought to the fore and this helps to convey a sense of the tactile and naturally flowing musical accent that complements the lyrical grip Jansch has on these proceedings.

RP

Toy Balloon

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Edge Of A Dream

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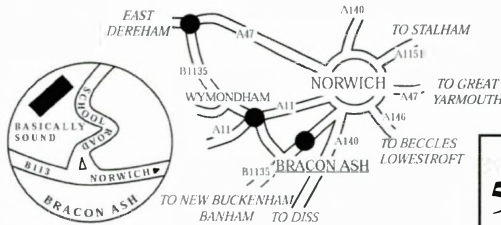


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Kraftwerk

- Rise of the Machines

by Richard Clews

To be a Kraftwerk fan requires immense patience and understanding. This is a band who have released only three albums in the last twenty years. It is hardly surprising that whenever this mysterious German quartet release anything there are ready buyers. The origin of this devotion lies within a series of groundbreaking 'robot pop' albums, in particular those from *Autobahn* in 1974 to *Computer World* in 1981. Without these records, the nature and scope of today's electronic pop music would be very different.

The latest album, *Tour de France Soundtracks*, prompts an examination of the Kraftwerk back catalogue. For anyone seeking out the earlier albums, there is good news and bad news. The bad news is that the CDs prior to 1991's *The Mix* sound cold (remasters are still some way off). The good news is that the vinyl sounds fine, so second-hand LPs are a decent buy.

Kraftwerk is the lifelong project of Ralf Hütter and Florian Schneider. The pair met in 1968 in an improvisation class at Düsseldorf Conservatory, where Hütter was studying electric organ while Schneider concentrated on flute. At that time, synthesizers were only just becoming commercially available (at horrendous prices), and electronic music was based around tape manipulation. The master of this technique, Karlheinz Stockhausen, acted as a figurehead to music students of Hütter and Schneider's generation: "It was a common practice here, at a fairly young age, to go and hear Stockhausen", Hütter told *Keyboard* magazine. "The art scene and the music scene, especially electronic music, were quite accessible, there were several radio shows of

strange electronic music. So we had access to all of that, it was part of our upbringing, our education. We always considered ourselves the second generation of electronic explorers, after Stockhausen."

It took a few years for Hütter and Schneider, augmented by various instrumentalists, to find a direction for their music. Several line-ups came and went over the early LPs *Tone Float* (RCA SF8111, recorded under the name Organisation), *Kraftwerk 1* (Philips 6305058) and *Kraftwerk 2* (Philips 63051117). Drummer Klaus Dinger and guitarist Michael Rother left to form Neu!, another pivotal German band, and were replaced by Wolfgang Flür and Klaus Roeder shortly before the release of *Ralf and Florian* (Philips 6305231) in 1973.

Aside from *Tone Float*, which fell victim to the late

Sixties improvisational disease, all of the early work contained elements of the later Kraftwerk sound. *Ralf and Florian* is the most accessible, containing the live favourite 'Ananas Symphonie'. Unfortunately (or fortunately, if you happen to be reading this by the light of a valve amp), none of these albums have been legally released on CD and are therefore little known to many Kraftwerk fans. It may be that Hütter and Schneider would prefer this to remain the case, as in a purely artistic sense they distract people from the 'purity' of Kraftwerk's later incarnation.

Kraftwerk made a big step forward with the success of the following LP, *Autobahn* (EMI CDP7461532). The inspiration for it was straightforward, as Schneider explained: "Several years ago we were on tour, and it



▶ happened that we came off the Autobahn after a long ride and when we came in to play we had this speed in our music. Our hearts were still beating fast so the whole rhythm became very fast." With assistance from legendary engineer/producer Conny Plank, the band immortalised the road network originally designed to speed Hitler's armies across the Reich. This was a controversial move – aside from the autobahn's Nazi heritage, it also enraged the environmental movement. The band members themselves were the antithesis of right-wing barbarians, but the publicity value of apparently flirting with the 'forbidden' aspects of the German psyche seems to have been noted for later use.

Autobahn was a great achievement, the first true electronic pop album. The 22 minute title piece, which received heavy radio play as an edited single, fused

facile level, the organ riffs on 'Kometenmelodie 2' were classic West Coast pop.

The Kraftwerk line-up which promoted *Autobahn* in the States remained in place for 15 years. Roeder had already been replaced by classical percussionist Karl Bartos. Bartos' drumming, keyboard skills and songwriting ability were a crucial addition. At the same time, guided by artist friend Emil Schult, Kraftwerk adopted the clean-cut image that has remained the basis of their visual presentation.

For *Autobahn*'s successor, *Radio-Activity* (EMI CDP7464742), Kraftwerk tried to combine their earlier avant-garde experiments with shorter, more rhythmic songs. Combined with the cold subject matter - atomic power and radio broadcasts - this formula gave the album less commercial appeal. Yet there are clear signs that

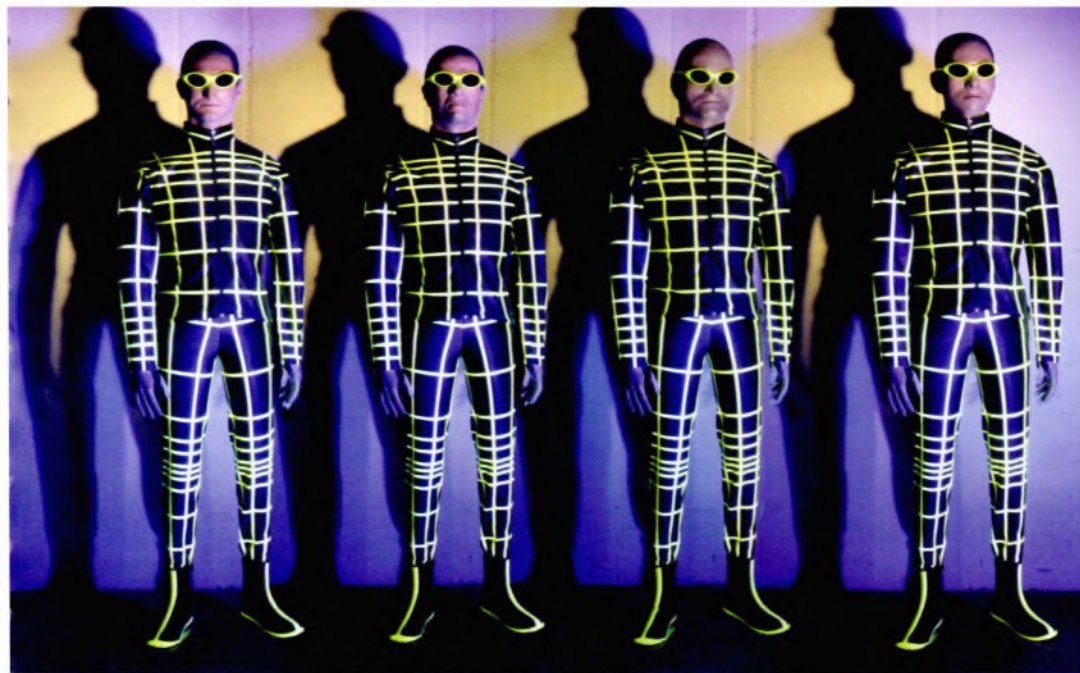
Hütter and Schneider's songwriting talents were getting sharper, as well as their production skills (they had parted from Conny Plank by this stage and were recording in their own studio, Kling Klang). The eerie vocorded voices and choir sounds gave the music a sombre, funereal quality, not dissimilar from Wendy Carlos' *Clockwork Orange* score.

Kraftwerk have never left their experimental roots behind, but from 1977's *Trans-Europe Express* (EMI 5816852) onwards, they have

repetitive Philip Glass style sequences with folk and classical melodies. The result is a light and optimistic piece of music - not really a true depiction of driving on the autobahn or anywhere else for that matter, but a sincere attempt to convey the exhilaration and freedom of travel. The only major band to try something similar had been The Beach Boys, and for a while Kraftwerk were dubbed 'the Beach Boys from Düsseldorf'. Bizarre as it may seem, there were in fact many similarities between the two bands. A fascination with vocal sounds, love of nature and freedom, and the striving to present a unified group image were common factors. On a more

tended to employ atonal or arrhythmic elements in segments, rather than use them as the basis for complete songs. *Trans-Europe Express* represented another progression, with electronic percussion playing a much larger role. The band's custom-built sequencers, coupled with the synthesized drum sounds, gave the album a momentum lacking from previous work.

At a time when Kraftwerk were singing about the joys of cross-border rail travel, the music press was fixated on the turf war between prog rock and punk. The four quietly spoken Germans picked their way through the rubble unnoticed, but the punk imagery of alienation ▶



▶ and class struggle made a connection with a new concept which the band were exploring: the man machine. It was a short step from the 'Showroom Dummies' of *Trans-Europe Express* to 'The Robots' on *The Man Machine* (EMI 5816862). As the ultimate working class underdogs, robots and other machines had found no-one to articulate their 'feelings' and stand up for their rights, until now. "Technology is no enemy to

us", explained Schneider. "We use technology as it is. We also like nature but you cannot say that technology is any better or worse than nature. You have to accept all of these things as they are in the world today".

The mild controversy over *Autobahn's* subject might have played a role in Kraftwerk's choice of imagery for *The Man Machine*:

blood red shirts, black ties, black trousers and short haircuts. Exchange red for brown, and the band could have fitted in perfectly with the 'robots' of the Third Reich. But the band undercut the paramilitary style with a healthy dose of camp humour. With their hands on their hips and wearing red lipstick, the quartet could just have easily passed as gay fashion designers. Imagery aside, *The Man Machine* is the perfect electro-pop record. The band captured the retro-futurist spirit of Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*, and at the same time with 'The Robots' created a European version of James Brown's precision funk. They also, inadvertently, had recorded a number one single. 'The Model' was used as the B-side to a single taken from their next LP, 1981's *Computer World* (EMI CDP7460402). As a shorter and snappier song than the A-side, 'Computer Love', it received more airplay in the UK and climbed to the top of the charts.

Computer World was an extension of the man machine

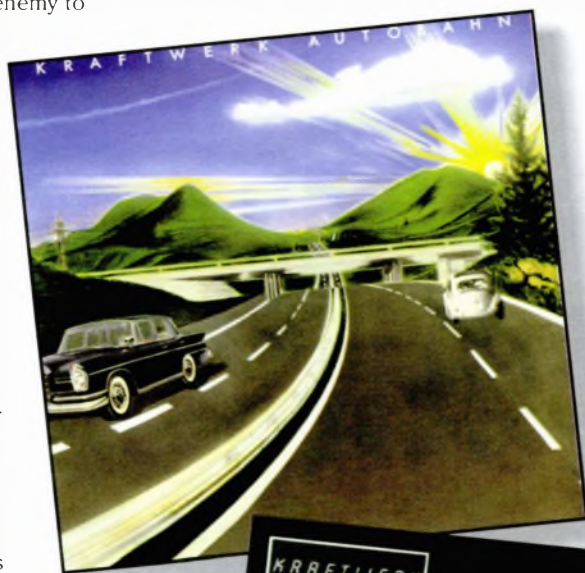
concept, taking into account the broader impact of technology. As Hütter explained at the time, 'A lot of very control-orientated people have been using computers in order to store other people's data and take advantage of that. It made us very upset, and we were concerned about working with computers more creatively or productively,

and not leaving it to these kind of people who are only into compensating their lack of love or lack of acknowledgement."

While *Computer World* arrived in the midst of Numanoids and New Romantics, it is totally different from the other synthesizer music of that era. It is, without doubt, Kraftwerk's most innovative record and today still sounds like the work of musicians from a more advanced civilisation. Yet only a few years later, the band felt they were in danger of losing their technological edge. Herbie Hancock's 'Rockit', Michael Jackson's 'Billie Jean' and Trevor Horn's lush productions showed that the rest of the music world had woken up to

the potential of sequencers and drum machines. Being on the same level as everyone else was unacceptable to Kraftwerk, and so they completely re-recorded the album they had been working on, *Techno Pop*, and released it in late 1986 as *Electric Café* (EMI CDEM1546). This time round, Kraftwerk arguably made several tactical errors. For one thing,

they had left a five-year gap between albums and recorded less than 40 minutes of new music. They also decided not to tour, as the single 'Musique Non Stop' had failed to score high in the charts. This was a great disappointment, not least because the album did contain some excellent new music – not as groundbreaking as previous releases, but still far ahead of the game in terms of rhythm programming and the use of effects. ▶



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The Jimmy Guiffre 3

The Easy Way

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Guiffre created what he liked to call 'Folk-Jazz' and whilst this is not a simple concept to pin down the easy, the rolling feel of this album goes some way to explaining what he meant. Joined by Jim Hall (guitar) and Ray Brown (bass), Guiffre's sax leads the way through this unchallenging album. Unerringly easy on the ear, with musicians of this calibre it's fortunately never 'easy listening'. The quality of musicianship keeps things well on the right side of somnambulant.

The self-penned title track features some exquisite playing from Guiffre. The whole set is taken at a gentle pace, lots of walkin' bass from Brown, and muted chords from Hall as in their version of 'Come Rain or Come Shine' to take but one example. The pace picks up a little with 'Ray's Time' which as the title suggests gives Brown the chance to spread his wings, which he does with his customary ease, inciting Guiffre to a little more passion. The result is the standout track of this short set.

Whilst not up their with Guiffre's very best, for me that'd be *The Jimmy Guiffre 3* or maybe *Western Suite*, this is a very enjoyable and well recorded set. An exemplary Speakers Corner pressing too.

DD

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Lars Erstrand Trio Et Quartet with Guests

The "Complete" Songs

Opus 3 CD 22014



Vibraphone player Lars Erstrand, like a number of jazzmen, maintain that a song is not really complete without the verse that leads up to the main tune, even when performing instrumentals of them.

This album includes eleven such "complete" songs, mainly from "The Great Swing Era", including such classics as 'S Wonderful, a wonderfully swinging Tea For Two and On The Sunny Side Of The Street, and honours such greats as Benny Goodman and George Shearing. While the whole group can really swing, it is the young pianist Jan Lundgren who seems the mainstay of the ensemble, exhibiting enthusiasm throughout. Along with Erstrand, who is always at his talented best, superb bass player Hans Beckenroth makes up the central trio. Drummer Leif "Gus" Dahlberg plays with great sensitivity, making up the quartet. There are also excellent contributions from guests, guitarist Bertil Fernqvist, Lars Törnqvist on cornet, and saxophonist Antti Sarpila, from Finland, who performs with great style on three tracks. With each player caught with a superb natural presence whether listening in stereo or to the four-channel recording, revealing wonderful details in the music, this Opus 3 SACD should not be missed.

SG

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RECORDING
MUSIC



Antonio Forcione

Touch Wood

Naim naimcd 069



The album sleeve contains this quote from Forcione: "This album reflects some of the many influences I have absorbed over the years. Recording it, with my friends and fellow musicians, was a great experience, all the chemistry was there. buon ascolto!" That Forcione and all the musicians involved have had a great time is evident, and in doing so they have helped him deliver his best album to date. From the lightning paced solo 'Touchwood' that opens the album, through 'Tarantella' where superb, gutsy cello from Jenny Adejayan helps drive this number relentlessly ahead, to gentle heart-tugging vocals like Sabina Sciubba's duet in 'Mirror Mirror', this is a truly outstanding set. 'Alhambra' is so drenched in Spanish feel that it's almost a surprise to view an English winter through the living room windows as the number finishes. All but two of the 12 numbers are Forcione compositions, Piazzolla's 'Tango Suite/ Libertango' and Giorgio Serci's 'Watercolour' round out the set. Such is the strength of musicianship here that it's impossible for me to single out a favourite track. Every one is superbly played and is steeped in atmosphere and in the obvious enjoyment of the musicians. The recording is amongst naim's very best, which is high praise indeed. As an added bonus you get a CDROM of 'Alhambra'.

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Exile

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I was recently invited to a concert by Atzmon at the Watermill. Expecting an evening of atonal jazz I was a little trepidatious, but what the hell – a nice venue, a few drinks, a summers evening in the company of good friends – it couldn't be all bad. I was right about all the side issues but horribly wrong about the music. What a great band this is. It was one of the most enjoyable gigs I've ever attended, with a combination of extraordinary passion and great musicianship lifting the whole experience several levels above my expectations. This album whilst it can never capture the full power of the live experience does get pretty close. Mixing Arab and Israeli tunes there's a deeply felt political thread throughout the album dedicated as a prayer for the world to acknowledge the Palestinians right to return to their homeland. Just listen to the heartfelt vocals from Reem Kelani on the opening 'Dal'ouna On The Return' or to the tight and punchy playing of the band in 'Ouz'. This is an outstanding set by a very fine band who really have something to say. If you have the chance to catch them live grab it, whether you do or not this is a very fine and strongly recommended set.

DD



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I've been a committed Hicks fan from his very first recordings back in the early seventies and my life would be empty indeed without my treasured copies of *Striking It Rich* and *Last Train to Hicksville*. Never having had the chance to see Hicks since his prime it was with a little trepidation that I made my way to the Borderline recently. I needn't have worried – Hicks is older, bigger but otherwise unchanged. Accompanied by a fine band he delivered a roof raising set that had every drop of his old sparkle and caustic wit. This live set features a huge cast of Hicks friends and alumni including the original Hot Licks. It suffers a little in the opening numbers from the size of the crowd onstage, but soon settles down to a more select band and really starts jumping when he's joined by the members of the original band with Page's violin to the fore. If you haven't heard him before he's not easy to describe: an acoustic, jazzy cabaret with a large twist of wry humour and a great deal of fine songwriting. This set, especially since it includes a DVD of the complete concert with two extra numbers over the CD, serves as a perfect introduction to one of the great under sung musical heroes.

DD



Bob Barnard & The Swedish Jazz Kings featuring Roy Williams –

A Tribute To Young Louis

Opus 3 CD 22013 

While Opus 3 have been re-issuing multi-channel SACDs, derived from their simply recorded original analogue tapes, Jan-Eric Persson has now embarked on releasing new four-channel SACDs recorded with an added "surround" microphone. Neither the centre or sub-woofer channels are utilised, but this does not seem to matter when the engineering is done properly, although when played only in stereo it lacks some of the wondrous three-dimensional effect that this label is so famous for. Having said that, this disc is nowhere near sounding flat and will still put most recordings to shame in this department.

While the recording and label are purely Swedish, musically it is rather international, representing the early career of the great Louis Armstrong. Performed by Australian cornet player supreme, Bob Barnard, he's backed by the Swedish Jazz Kings, an excellent group of the most amazing traditional jazz interpreters who can always be counted on to make things swing. One of Britain's top trombonists, Roy Williams is featured, on seven of the twelve tracks. Most of the music comes from the 1924 to 1929 period, when Armstrong had his Hot Five and Hot Seven bands, and with such great tunes, performed with such style, how could this release not succeed?

SG

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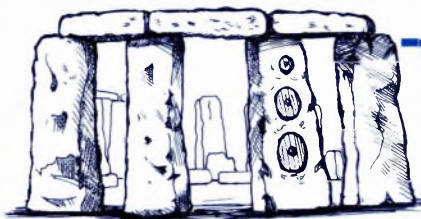
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The History Man

by Richard S. Foster

Speakers Corner embark on re-issuing the Mercuries

I love music. It's what got me into audio. For so many years I was an equipment junkie. Then one day I realized, for me, the equipment was simply a delivery mechanism for the music. And I can't get enough music. My tastes have broadened, grown in many areas, shrunk in others. But through it all, there is nothing that excites me more than great music, extremely well recorded and produced, that I can take home and play anytime.

It was the early 1980's when Sid Marks - a writer for *the Absolute Sound*, a magazine that already recognized the fine qualities of the US Mercury Living Presence Series - began his landmark reviews of the Mercury Living Presence Catalog. It would take approximately five years - the end of the summer of 1988 - for his final recommendations (summing up as he called it) to appear. I remember a group of my friends and I couldn't wait to get our hands on those issues of TAS back then where we immediately went right to the "Marks Barks" article in the music section to see what goodies were to be uncovered. (Sid Marks' columns began titled, "From the Record Vault" but I've always preferred Marks Barks.)

Let me go on the record right now stating that every UK AMS or French Magie du Son original Mercury Living Presence issue, pales in comparison to its US counterpart. The US records, in the right pressings, are hands down superior to any other country's efforts. For whatever reasons

the UK issues are softened (dynamically), and have been given by EMI what I would call 'a taste for their own market'. The French Magie du Son, just don't have the dynamic swing and musciality of the US issues. They seem a little flat sounding.

The US Mercury records are a very difficult breed to understand. The complexity of labels and matrix variations and that horrible phrase, "Vendor: Mercury Records

Corporation" all add up to a long,

difficult road to travel until you have it mastered. A brief history then: "Vendor" recordings are always brighter sounding than their non-vendor counterpart. Add to this mystery (because no one, not even Wilma Cozart Fine nor Harold Lawrence has ever been able to comment about what and where these records came from) that certain recordings, late in the catalogue, only appear as "Vendor" pressings. The vinyl on vendor pressings (this phrase appears on the label, not on the jacket) is usually thinner with a sharp edge. Hence, the feeling there

was some third party pressing these records, with maybe a different vinyl formulation or some such. We just don't know. This is the only situation I've come across in which records with identical stamper numbers, but one having "Vendor" printed on the label, sound totally different. The non-Vendor copy is always far more natural sounding.

Then there are the complexities of the stamper information. This alone is enough to drive one to



▶ substance abuse. Also, there is a large contingent that feel these recordings are too bright. Well . . . I'm here to tell you they are not. At least 98.5% are NOT too bright . . . the problem is, simply put, your playback equipment isn't good enough. And nobody likes to hear that! I've learned first hand, as my system has gotten better over the years, that these records also have gotten better - sounding more natural and less bright. You cannot compare the sound of Mercury's to ANY other company's records. They are in a league of their own. They were the only company that stuck to three omni directional mikes and although they may have their flaws, these are very special records from a very unique company. I strongly believe many of these are some of the finest recordings ever created. Robert Fine, Wilma Cozart Fine and their team were unbelievably talented, innovative individuals. Their legacy stands on its own in the annals of recorded history.

A few years ago, Classic Records re-issued six Mercury titles. They received mixed reviews, and I for one was disappointed by all but the *Firebird**.

The classical re-issues I have liked over the years have come from Testament, DCC (the US Everest issues), the few releases from ARS out of Germany



This is my first review of a re-issue in these pages and I'd like to spell out my ground rules. I don't particularly care if a record is better or worse than the original (although rest assured that I will comment on that fact regardless). My main concern is whether, after spending my money, will I want to play this record over and over and over . . . does the record have playability? Is it musical? There is nothing worse for

(all three of these companies are no longer producing vinyl). I've enjoyed the few I've heard from Cisco, but I'm not a fan of the King Super-Analogue issues (a generalization). I've liked the handful of recordings I've heard post Decca from Speaker's Corner. (Admittedly I have not heard all the Decca's, but the early releases I was not fond of.) I enjoyed several of their Deutsche Grammophon reissues as well as many of their Westminster issues.

Well, times have changed and we are now on the threshold of what I consider one of the most exciting ranges ever to be offered to the re-issue market. If what I've heard contained in the first three releases is any indication of what the folks at Speakers Corner have in store for us, I can assure you that you better get your credit cards ready.

What's coming in their first release is *The Living Presence of 20th Century Music* in a box set of three records:

**SR-90278 - Alban Berg
Wozzeck (Three excerpts) and a suite from Lulu**

*Recorded June 1961 at Watford Town Hall, London
by C. Robert Fine and Robert Eberenz.*

Production: Wilma Cozart

**SR-90282 - Gunther Schuller
Seven Studies on Themes of Paul Klee(1959)
Paul Fetler: Contrasts for Orchestra (1958)**

*Recorded April 1960 in Northrup Auditorium, Minneapolis,
Minnesota, USA by C. Robert Fine and Robert Eberenz.*

Production: Wilma Cozart

**SR-90316 - Vienna 1908 - 1914
Arnold Schoenberg: Five Pieces for Orchestra, Op. 16
Anton Webern: Five Pieces for Orchestra, Op. 10
Alban Berg: Three Pieces for Orchestra, Op. 6**

*Recorded July 1962 at Watford Town Hall, London,
by C. Robert Fine and Robert Eberenz.*

Production: Wilma Cozart

Part of the difficulty in doing direct comparisons between these re-issues and the originals is that two of the three releases on original Mercury, were ▶

a consumer then to spend their \$30 for a reissue, clean it, put it on their turntable, and then place it on their shelf . . . never to be listened to again because it's too bright or some other such problem. Oh, and before I forget . . . yes, at all times, and for each record, when making comparisons I adjusted for the differences in VTA and VTF as Seemann has issued these in wonderful 180 gram vinyl.

recorded on 35mm film, not analogue tape. What Kai Seemann of Speakers Corner used were the actual two track mix downs to analogue tape by Robert Fine. And believe me, from what I heard, the tapes are phenomenal. Yes, there is a difference in the sound of the (film) original and the (tape) re-issue. I first noted this when reviewing the US Everests a number of years ago. Steve Hoffman, then of DCC did a really cool thing when he remastered these. Some of the Everests were from analogue tape and some were from 35MM film. In a couple of cases there were problems with the film on one of the sides of the LP so he used the analogue tapes. What I'm saying is that DCC may have issued side one of a particular album from 35MM film and side two from analogue tape. This provided me with a GREAT way to make comparisons between the tape, the film and the originals. In a nutshell, it allowed me great insight into the differences between re-issues that may have been done from film vs. analogue tape.

SR90278 (the Berg) is one of the very first Mercury 35MM film recordings. My copy is so early that there is a paper banner across the front which says, "NEW! THIS IS AN ORIGINAL 35-MM. MAGNETIC FILM RECORDING," and the banner looks like a piece of film ... complete with sprockets holes on both sides of the banner! As is usual with the Mercury's there are a few paragraphs on the back of the jacket under the heading "Hi-Fi Facts" [you know ... just like you see on every new compact disc release!]

Let me confuse you all a little further. I have the earliest possible dark maroon, proper stamper number records, for each of these three releases. I'm also a Mercury "promo label" collector. I have found that in every case comparing a production record to a promotional label record, the promo record is superior as regards information. I have promo's of the SR90282 (broadcast promo) and of 90316(broadcast promo... BUT... it's also a vendor). I also have a non-vendor of SR90316 which is about as rare as rare can be for a Mercury. Almost every person I know who owns this

record owns a vendor copy. My vendor promo has the same stamper numbers as my non-vendor production release. The vendor promo is brighter and does give more information. However, the non-vendor is my preferred listening copy. Are we confused yet?

SR 90282 (the Schuller) is an all-analogue tape issue so it was easy to do direct comparisons.

So what do these records sound like? In a phrase, wonderfully realistic and musically rewarding. Seemaan is to be strongly congratulated for having his team give us an outstanding facsimile of the real deal.

In today's, very depressed Mercury marketplace, if you could find a copy of the Vienna disc (let alone a non-vendor copy, HAHHAHA) you would be looking at \$150+. The Schuller is more than that and the Berg is at least half a hundred. Of course there is no telling that you're going to get a "MINT" copy even though that's what you think you are paying for.

If I were to pick apart the comparisons, I'd have to say that of course there are differences in the sound of the two 35MM recordings. I've personally always preferred the



(SR90316) to *Wozzeck* musically, and

maybe those prejudices are so deep in my psyche that I'm being biased. *Vienna* is an absolute mind-blowing production by Speakers Corner, something I am sure will be on many a turntable at the next CES.

I would like to try and explain the "sound" of 35MM film vs. analogue tape. If you are lucky enough to own a stone-cold mint 35MM film recording, what you will hear is incredible clarity. The background noise - and this ONLY applies to absolute MINT records - is non-existent. What you hear with MINT copies of records recorded with analogue tape, is of course the addition of tape hiss and maybe just the slightest loss of crystal (and I do mean crystal) clarity. The only way one would know this is if you had several copies of the same record available and had the opportunity to A-B-C them all together.

► Mercury's, especially early issues with the Eastman Rochester Orchestra and some of the early, but wonderful Frederick Fennell recordings, have tape hiss that in today's world of 'black background' would bother some people. The great thing about tape hiss is that it is always, on whatever record you're listening to, at the same frequency and your mind and ear have a way of tuning this hiss out of the picture.

Although the Schuller/Fetler affair was a very interesting comparison, I'd like to bring you back for a second to the SR90316 *Vienna 1908-1914* recording.

If you review a couple of paragraphs earlier regarding the different copies of this record I own, I'd like to explain further the 35MM film vs.

analogue tape issues. My white label promo copy is absolutely stone cold mint. It truly has dead quiet surfaces. My regular issue, non-vendor copy is probably in the mint minus category. It, unfortunately, has a bit of surface noise (that almost sounds like tape hiss). In my comparison there was no doubt that the sonic wonder and winner (albeit a tad bright) was the white label promo. This particular copy is just glorious. Dead silent surfaces and the exciting music of Schoenberg's *Five Pieces For Orchestra, Op. 16*,

are sonic masterpieces. This is very enjoyable Schoenberg! Now when I put my non-vendor copy on the table I was immediately struck with the difference in sound between the white label promo and this regular issue. Yes, the white label promo is, as I said earlier, superior, but for the first time I heard some surface noise on my non-vendor copy. Now this has never bothered me and I still find this issue more moderate in the highs and is my preferred pleasure-listening copy. The Speakers Corner 90316 is pretty darn close to this copy. It is a fantastic re-issue considering it came from the two track mix down (yes, of course by Robert Fine himself). As they say on the internet YMMV - Your Mileage May Vary. But I will say this again: Speakers Corner has definitely done us a great big favour. A fabulous production of this elusive and expensive recording.

The most fascinating comparison was the Schuller.

Analogue tape to analogue tape . . . and for the re-issue, tape that is 43 years old! I preferred the re-issue, but let me qualify that. On a large system, capable of producing realistic sound pressure levels of live music, the original does have more depth and perhaps a bit more dynamic punch. It's also a bit brighter. Harmonically and tonally the re-issue is just excellent. Given the choice, on my more moderate rig, I'd prefer the re-issue. There, I've said it . . . and I'm sure my friends in New York will be waiting with bated breathe to try and prove me wrong. Sorry guys, you're in for a big surprise. Given the prices asked for perfect copies of the originals, in the correct pressing vintages, the Speakers Corner productions are a bargain with a capital "B".

I must tell you that I had to use test

pressings to review these issues.

Production hadn't started yet and it's been my experiences that test pressings are not the best way to review releases. Things can change. But if truth be told, and I've spent some time doing my homework in this area, the changes are almost always for the better. The last thing I'm going to say about these three recordings is that you'd better get yours. I'm certainly going to get mine, and I can't wait for what may be around the corner. Here's a little want list:



- SR 3-9016 Bach *Suites for unaccompanied violoncello* with Janos Starker
- SR 90153 Respighi, *The Birds*
- SR 90172 Copland's *Rodeo*
The Stravinsky Ballets
- SR 90235 Liszt *Hungarian Dances*
- SR 90313 The Ravel/Paray Record
- SR 90256 Ballet for Band
- And... A Box Set With All The Single
Starker Releases

I'll stop now. This should keep them busy for at least the next two years.

Thank you Speakers Corner, thank you. Absolute Highest Recommendation!



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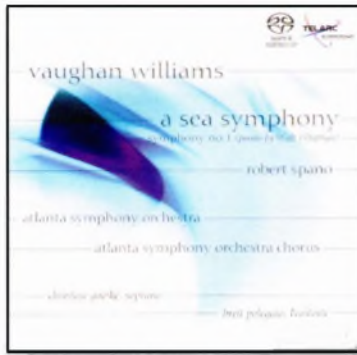


Ludwig Van Beethoven.
Piano concerto No 4 (chamber version)
Symphony No 2 (as Piano Trio).
The Orch. Revolutionnaire et
Romantique. Robert Levin (fortepiano)

DG/Archiv Blue 474 224-2

Although it's well known that several of Mozart's *piano concertos* were arranged for chamber forces, I hadn't realised that Beethoven himself had been involved in re-writing his *fourth piano concerto* for piano and string quartet. Although he entrusted the arrangement to someone else, he did extensively alter the solo part, giving the piano greater prominence. And while I still prefer the simpler original, Beethoven's florid additions make for interesting listening. With solo strings the, 'orchestral' part sounds very intimate and expressive - for example, the strings' answer to the piano introduction - though speaking personally, I hate the way Levin plays the beautiful opening chord as an arpeggio. Aside from that, the performance is impressive; by turns delicate and demonic - sensitive and seismic. Every Beethoven lover should hear it. The piano trio arrangement of the second symphony has been recorded before, and in its chamber guise one gets a better sense of the music's high spirits and unbridled fun. Levin and co play the work for all it's worth, and the result is very engaging. Rhythms are crisply sprung, and the bright lean sonorities of period instruments ensure the music has plenty of snap and bite.

JMH



Vaughan Williams
A Sea Symphony
Goerke/Polegato/Atlanta
Symphony O. and Chorus/Spano

Telarc SACD-60588

This may be the first contemporary recording by an American conductor with an American orchestra of any Vaughan Williams symphony, but the results are not unsympathetic to the music's traditional background. Vaughan Williams' *First Symphony* emerged from the long tradition of English choral music and, along with the *Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis*, it cemented the composer's distinctive style. While Robert Spano drives the music forward in an acutely powerful way, this is not an unreasonable tactic and strengthens any excitement and exposes the unmistakable impression of the sea's grandeur and magnitude, although there are infrequent stylistic inconsistencies that establish disruptions to the music's relaxed flow. The soloists are excellent, but it is the choir's precision and tonal beauty that seats this performance closest to the composer's character. The crystal-clear sound complements Spano's interpretive ideas, with its colourful and vibrant tones, and revealing the work's huge dynamics. The integration of chorus, soloists and orchestra is superb, and with such a creative yet considerate performance of *A Sea Symphony*, this release is recommended, although it does not eclipse Boult's classic interpretation for EMI.

SG

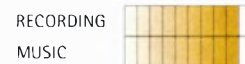


Felix Mendelssohn
A Midsummer Night's Dream
Overture 'The Hebrides' Op 26
Orchestre des Champs Elysees
Philippe Herreweghe

Harmonia Mundi HMC 901502

Although originally released back in 1994, this beautiful performance of Mendelssohn's wonderful score still sounds impressively natural and realistic. Harmonia Mundi have a special knack when it comes to making recordings that sound open and sweet while retaining impact and detail. Here, the orchestra is nicely set back in a clear spacious acoustic, allowing even the loudest passages to expand with no sense of tonal hardness. The vocal numbers demonstrate this beautifully, combining richness and depth with impressive lucidity and detail. The sound is full-blooded and dynamic, yet at the same time delicate and subtly refined, making you fully appreciate the composer's skilful and imaginative orchestration. Herreweghe is perhaps better known for his performances of earlier music, but he directs an idiomatic account of Mendelssohn's magical score, capturing its Fairy lightness to perfection. Tempi are on the fast side, but the playing is light and airy creating a quicksilver mood. Some short linking passages are omitted, otherwise the music is presented complete.

JMH



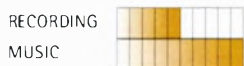


Rimsky-Korsakov – Scheherazade
Borodin – In The Steppes Of
Central Asia
Balakirev – Islamey
Kirov Orchestra/Gergiev

Philips 470 618-2 SA-D

The rich and menacing snarl of the opening bars of this performance of Rimsky-Korsakov's *Symphonic Suite after A Thousand and One Nights* is totally characteristic of Valeri Gergiev's direction on this recording. It is full of boldness and fervour, with Gergiev taking an obviously dramatic view of this celebrated work. The sea swells with an obvious intensity beneath Sinbad's ship, the Kalendar Prince's adventures are brought to life, and there is a definite erotic tension between the young prince and princess. The two other works are entirely apt, with the virtuosity of the Kirov Orchestra and the solo violinist, Sergei Levitin, tremendous throughout, evoking the mood of each piece splendidly. Philip's engineering is also full-bodied and warm, although the sound is a little heavy at times, lacking some of the bite of the original CD, and the soundstage lacks depth. In fact the recording does not sound entirely natural, conferring a feeling that the sound has been manipulated to increase the music's drive and vigour. Despite this, these great performances earn a firm recommendation, especially as we now have a *Scheherazade* performance that ranks alongside those of Beecham and Reiner.

SG



Igor Stravinsky
Minatures. Tango; Suites 1+2;
Octet; Concerto in D; Concertino;
Ragtime, Scherzo a la Russe.
Orpheus Chamber Orchestra

DG 453 458-2 CD

With their combination of brilliance and precision, the Orpheus Chamber orchestra prove to be an ideal ensemble for Stravinsky. Their playing is impressively refined and rhythmically alert, with crisp attack and accurate ensemble. Difficult works like the *Concerto in D for string orchestra* are played with fabulous precision, allowing the listener to appreciate Stravinsky's clever shifts of metre and tricky syncopations. Yet for all the brilliance of the playing, the performances are very musical. There's never any sense of the players using the music to showcase their own virtuosity. Indeed, the playing is often notable for its subtlety and finesse - for example, the almost understated account of *Tango* which opens the disc. Of course this makes the more extrovert moments stand out in greater relief, emphasising the huge range of contrasts in the music. The recording is wonderfully crisp and immediate, yet at the same time very smooth and refined. Stravinsky had a wonderful ear for sonority, and the combination of razor-sharp ensemble playing, meticulous musical balance, and a highly detailed recording creates some impressive sounds.

JMH



Grieg
In Autumn/Piano Concerto/
Symphony in C minor
Ogawa/Bergen Philharmonic
Orchestra/Ruud

BIS-SACD-1191 SA-D

Despite later revisions to both *In Autumn* and the *Piano Concerto* (which Grieg was continually updating until the last year of his life), these works come from the period 1863-8. The composer did not revise the *Symphony in C minor* because, in 1867, he heard Svendsen's *First Symphony* and decided to withhold his own work. It was bequeathed to Bergen Library on the understanding that it would never be performed, although he thought enough of the inner movements to publish them in piano-duet form. These wishes were respected until 1981, when a photocopy of the autographed score was smuggled out to be performed on Moscow radio, negating any need to continue Grieg's ban. The *Symphony* may not be his most characterful composition, but the *Piano Concerto* is, and can still seem astoundingly fresh even when the performance does not rate as highly as Noriko Ogawa's charming and elegant interpretation. She is ably backed by Ole Kristian Ruud and the Bergen Philharmonic Orchestra and the engineering is detailed, with only the slightest hint of brightness, revealing a fairly natural acoustic, all making an enjoyable disc that may just miss being the first choice for these works.

SG





Antonin Dvorak Slavonic Dances Op 46 and Op72

Vienna Philharmonic
Rafael Kubelik

Decca Legends 468 495-2 

Recorded in March 1955, these lively zestful performances of Dvorak's *Slavonic Dances* count among Decca's earliest stereo sessions with the Vienna Philharmonic. The sound is certainly very good for the period - clean, sharp, and very open and immediate - especially the Op72 set, which sound slightly cleaner than Op 46. Stereophonically, however, the soundstage is not very widely-separated. Many early stereo recordings have exaggerated left/right separation, as though to emphasise the benefits of twin-channel reproduction. Here the effect is more subtle, the orchestra being centrally placed in a bright and lively acoustic. Unusually for Decca, the sessions were held in the Musikverein rather than the Sofiensaal. The balance is close rather than spacious, but clarity is good and there's plenty of detail. Kubelik takes the *Dances* quickly, emphasising their drive and rhythmic brilliance. The orchestral playing is crisp and full of life, and the performances have an exciting idiomatic Czech feel to them. Although Kubelik's much later Bavarian RSO set on DG is probably a safer bet, sonically and musically, this early Decca recording impresses too with its winning combination of youthful zest and excitement.

JMH

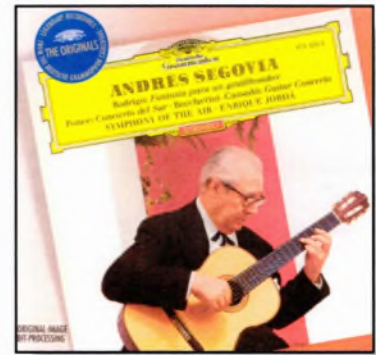
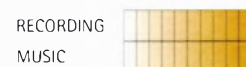


La Folia Jordi Savall/Rolf Lislevand/Micheal Behringer/Arianna Savall/Bruno Coeset/Pedro Estevan/Adela González-Campa


Alia Vox AVSA 9805 

I know of no artist who can transform the academic into genuinely entertaining music as well as Jordi Savall. His performances of early music are totally accessible, with tremendous rhythmic qualities, and this disc is no exception. Taking its title from the folia (loosely translated as "folly" or "insanity") whose structure has its origins in Portuguese dance, it presents a myriad of variations on its theme that span a period of two centuries. While most have a foundation based on a four chord progression, this is simply a source of improvisation, a talent for which Savall has an enviable reputation, and which is abundantly displayed here. While the Corelli and Marais works are relatively well known, they are more prominent here among earlier pieces by the likes of Ortiz, Enzina and Cabezón, with Savall enthusiastically developing the Iberian atmosphere to intensify its magnificent ostentation. Percussionist extraordinaire, Pedro Estevan is prominent throughout, and creates, aided by the group's natural talent for timing, a magnificent rhythmic extravaganza. With superb engineering that reveals every nuance and timbre of each instrument, appearing within a natural soundstage, this release is a complete winner and possibly the most enjoyable SACD to date.

SG



Joaquin Rodrigo - Fantasia para un gentilhombre Manuel Ponce - Concierto del Sur Andres Segovia/Symphony of the Air/Jorda

DG The Originals 474 425-2 

I thought I knew the DG catalogue well, but I never knew Segovia recorded for the yellow label! How strange, given Segovia's legendary reputation, for these recordings to have been out of circulation for so long. The CD booklet illustrates original LP sleeves, so the recordings must be genuine DG, albeit possibly licenced? Apparently Segovia never played Rodrigo's *Concierto de Aranjuez* out of deference to Regino Sainz de la Maza, the guitarist for whom Rodrigo wrote the work. He pressed Rodrigo to write something for him, and the result was the *Fantasia para un Gentilhombre* - completed in 1954. Segovia's performance is finely shaded and beautifully characterised. The recording (taped in New York in 1958) places the orchestra at a distance, allowing one to hear the guitar part with startling clarity. It's not an ideal balance, but it does mean you can hear every nuance from the soloist. It's a tribute to the cleanness of Segovia's playing and accuracy of intonation that it survives such X-Ray treatment. The playing is cultured and refined, with an aristocratic poise and elegance. The sound itself (balance issues aside) is very good; crisp, sharp, open, and very detailed, with low tape noise. A real collector's item!

JMH





José Marín
Tonos Humanos
 Montserrat Figueras/Rolf
 Lislevand/Arianna Savall/Pedro
 Estevan/Adele González-Campa

Alia Vox AVSA 9802 (SACD)

This disc is one of the first batch of hybrid SACDs from the consistently superb label Alia Vox. Musically it consists of a number of fragrant, secular songs (*Tonos Humanos*) penned by the 17th Century Spanish composer José Marín, who's exotic rhythms, evocative melodies and erotically charged texts, mostly dealing with the heady mixture of despair and ecstasy of love, lust and jealousy, make for a wonderful combination. Soprano Montserrat Figueras infuses these spicy songs with sparkling vitality, dramatising them further with her improvisational abilities, especially in *Sepan todos que muero*, while adding colour through her colloquialism. Rolf Lislevand's guitar accompaniment is always enchanting and flavoured by the backing of castanets, hand clapping and timbrels, conveying this early music with an unmistakable and timeless Iberian provenance and accurately recreating the sounds of Madrid's royal court. While the recording, originally released about five years ago on CD and taken from 96 kHz/20-bit tapes, is relatively unenhanced, the natural-sounding acoustic and the natural timbres of the instruments are so well produced as to only further the standing of this format and gain this gorgeous release a firm recommendation.

SG

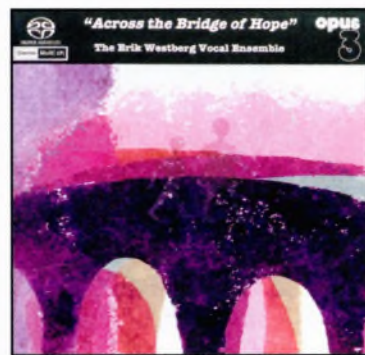


Robert Schumann
Symphonies 1 - 4
Overture, Scherzo and Finale
 Dresden Staatskapelle
 Wolfgang Sawallisch

EMI 7243 5 67768-2 (CD)

Given their near legendary status as performances, it's surprising to learn that Sawallisch's EMI set of the Schumann *symphonies* almost happened by accident. Apparently, EMI planned to record Wagner's *Rienzi*, but difficulties with the star singers led to the project being postponed. To fill the vacant sessions EMI agreed to let Sawallisch tape the Schumann *symphonies* instead. I bought the LPs when they came out back in 1973, and was mightily impressed with the combination of passion and clarity Sawallisch brought to the music. In particular, the performance of the fourth symphony stood out for its incredible power and energy - I'd never heard the linking passage that leads to the finale played with such fire! When the finale begins it's like a dam bursting. Coming back to Sawallisch's set, one notices how scrupulously musical everything sounds. The playing is vital and alive, but the conductor takes no liberties with the scores. The recording sets the orchestra in a spacious acoustic, but clarity is good and the sound has a glowing richness that suits Schumann perfectly. The new remastering has given the sound extra weight and cleanness, so that heavy climaxes seem less dense and congested.

JMH



The Erik Westberg Vocal Ensemble

Across The Bridge Of Hope

Opus 3 CD 22012 (SACD)

The Erik Westberg Vocal Ensemble hail from the far north of Sweden, and this is their second recording for the label (the first being the wonderful *Musica Sacra* CD 19506 - see issue 11 - or SACD 19516). While that release contained pieces of sacred chorale music dating back to medieval times, this new venture is far more contemporary, with all works being by Swedish composers, including a couple that include the improvised chant of the Sami culture of Lapland known as yoiks. Again the sixteen voices create a particularly spiritual listening experience that is a perfect antidote to the stresses of modern living. Gone are the improvised saxophone and organ of *Musica Sacra*, but the various forms of percussion remain on some tracks - this time performed in total sympathy and with great virtuosity by Anders Åstrand, who also composed *Touch and Bogattelle*, and his ensemble. Also, appearing on three tracks is a Swedish key-fiddle (similar to a hurdy-gurdy). Despite being Jan-Eric Persson's first true venture into multi-channel recording, the sound vividly creates the acoustics of the Church of the Nederluleå, meaning that this beautiful release can only add to the eminent reputations of both label and performers alike.

SG

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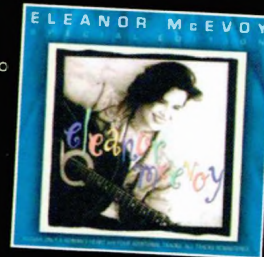
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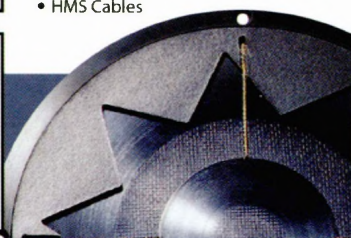


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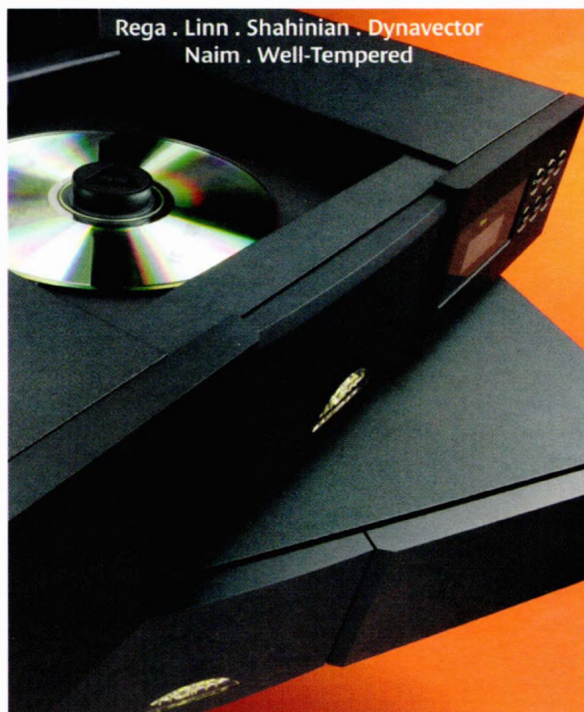
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The Violins of Cremona Homage to Fritz Kreisler

Accardo / Manzini
Fone

SACD 003 

Salvatore Accardo's long association with the Cremona music festival has ensured his place as one of the town's favourite sons. So who better to handle five of their exquisitely crafted Amati, Stradivarius and Guarneri instruments which were borrowed from The Violin Room at the Cremona Town Hall for this mouth-watering Fritz Kreisler recital disc. This eighteen-track collection includes old favourites like his arrangements of the Brahms *Hungarian Dance*, Schubert *Impromptu*, Gluck *Melodie* and Dvorak *Song My Mother Taught Me*. Brilliant compositions, elegant transcriptions, deft and delightfully fluid scores. Laura Manzini's piano of course has an important supporting role, but her sympathetic underpinning of these rich tonal textures is not the real focus for our attention. That is reserved for Accardo, whose captivating approach, invention, virtuosity and disarming style shows he has a beautifully balanced and complete command of these pieces—one that never trivialises even the most familiar melodies. Again, the Nagra analogue source and those precisely placed Neumann U47 and M49 microphones have captured the essence of these instruments and the skill, compositional colour and moments of undisguised Kreisler cheek. Another fascinating and superbly presented SACD from an often-overlooked audiophile label.

RP

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Chausson - 12 Songs

Poem de l'amour et de la mer /
Duparc
Doneux / RTBCO/Souzay/Baldwin

Testament SBT 1208 

These stunning and incandescent Gallic performances of the Chausson *Poem* and Duparc *Songs* which date from the 1970s should not be overlooked. The baritone, Gerard Souzay, is a powerful interpreter and musically persuasive advocate for these French pieces. Those already acquainted with the *Poem* will probably be more familiar with the performances by Victoria de los Angeles or Dame Janet Baker. However, this rich, deeply sensuous and searching Souzay rendition charts the emergent, lingering and reflective aspects of love with an enviably warmth that lacks nothing by comparison. Moreover, he is beautifully (no, make that, tenderly) supported by Edgard Doneux and his Belgium chamber players. For the *Twelve Songs* (Duparc's entire output for voice) Souzay is joined by his old sparring partner the pianist Dalton Baldwin. Theirs was an empathic musical relationship. Here this synergy is revealed through the intricate detail and discrete or keenly observed moments that develop from the expression of wide-ranging themes and emotions. The *Songs* roam across romance, melancholia, fulfilment, sorrow and, in *La vie antérieure*, embrace feelings that drip with the kind of pathos which can only be forged by piano and voice. Delectable dueting lovingly recreated on this transfer.

RP

Supplier: www.vivante.co.uk



Ravel
La Valse, Bolero, Pavane, Rapsodie
Espagnole, Daphnis et Chloe
Suite No.2.
Skrowaczewski / Minnesota Orch.

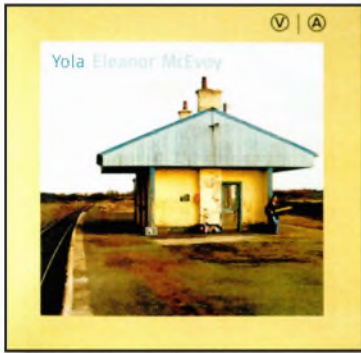
Mobile Fidelity MFSL 4002 

Under Stanislaw Skrowaczewski's direction the Minnesota players give a wonderfully balanced performance of these familiar orchestral pieces. Authoritative and unrelenting in the *Bolero*, delicate and melancholic for the *Pavone pour une Infante defunte*, yet brooding, mysterious and keenly rhythmic in a *Rapsodie Espagnole* that sways twist and twirls with an unmistakable ethnicity. *La Valse* is magical and drama-filled, while the *Daphnis et Chloe Suite No.2* (although not quite as sumptuous as their handling of Ravel's *Suite No.1*) conveys a sensuous, piquant and spine-tingling immediacy that misses none of the subtle shapes or textures which colourfully permeate every aspect of this music. A resonant, fully ripened hall acoustic really suits the impressionistic atmosphere conjured from within these scores and its vibrant, dynamic and cavernous qualities allow instruments to breathe freely across their ranges. The SACD transfer of those original Turnabout / Vox four-track analogue tapes is an exemplary one which not only draws out the tiniest and seemingly most inconsequential of tonal details but then recreates this music with accuracy, and complete assurance.

RP


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Eleanor McEvoy

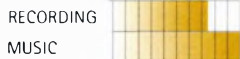
Yola

Vivante / Alto VA 302 

In the past year I have written many hundreds of words in appreciation of Eleanor's emotionally supercharged and heart rending lyricism and too few praising the "quiet man" alongside her, Brian Connor. He is a quick-witted and amazingly gifted classically trained jazz pianist whose dry sense of humour is delivered with that same understated yet perfectly timed degree of acuteness or gravity of tone which is reserved for the Steinway and keyboard accompaniment heard on this LP. His playing on my favourite song 'The Rain Falls' not only mimics the inclement Wexford weather but it critically develops the emotional delicacy. He also provides musical steeliness towards the end of this track when confident, firm and resounding strokes underpin the message about moving on. This empathic musical relationship is pivotal to the album's greatness. If you don't believe me then just listen to their subtle and beautifully woven exchanges in 'Did I Hurt You?', 'Last Seen October 9th' and the stunning 'I Hear You Breathing In'. The shades and shifts in tone together with the effort-less interaction between the performers are nicely presented. But this warm sounding transfer to vinyl is cut at a slightly lower level so your system may have to work a touch harder in resolving all the minute details taken from the SACD.


RP

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John Coltrane Quartet

Ballads

Speakers Corner Impulse StereoAS-32  

Rather like the abstract painter proving that he can draw proper pictures, *Ballads* was John Coltrane's right of Jazz passage. A collection of eight standards, ranging from 'You Don't Know What Love Is' to 'Nancy (With A Laughing Face)' provide the playground for Coltrane's talent, ably backed by Jones, Garrison and Tyner in support. For someone with a reputation as an angry young man, he plays with astonishing sensitivity and perfect poise. The themes are caressed, the backing impeccable, but it's the sinuous lines of 'Trane's sax that hold the ear and centre stage (even if the recording places him way left). All but one of these tunes was recorded in a single take, and that after a bare half hours rehearsal, the band arriving at the studio never having played the songs before. The results are superb: fresh, vibrant and full of character. Recorded by Rudy Van Gelder on September the 18th, 1962, the sound is sweet, open and immediate. 'Trane's horn is slightly oversized and solidly in the left hand speaker, with piano, bass and drums set back in an arc across the rest of the stage. It's hardly classical stereo but what it lacks in dimensionality the recording more than makes up in sheer musicality. Relaxed yet compelling and beautifully re-pressed by Speakers Corner, buy this one now!

RG



Brahms
Violin Sonatas 1, 2 & 3, Scherzo

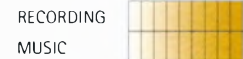
Accardo / Canino
Fone

SACD 008 

Idyllic Mountain scenery and the warmth of those summer holidays spent in Carinzia and Hofstetten inspired the three Brahms *Violin Sonatas* written between 1886 and 1888. Melodic, lyrical, serene and good tempered in nature, these are all expressively phrased works which often allow the piano (an instrument that Brahms wrote for particularly well) to have many exuberant virtuoso moments especially in the *D Minor OP.108 Sonata*. This is not to Salvatore Accardo's disadvantage because his violin is frequently given wonderful opportunities of its own. In the instrumental exchanges, Bruno Canino's piano and the stunning violin interventions compliment one another when drawing out the last ounce of intimacy from these *Sonatas*, founded upon the precepts of a romantic classical tradition. The filler is a youthful *Scherzo in C Minor*, which while it lacks maturity, does exhibit ingenuity, freedom and occasional masterly flourishes. Those original analogue master tapes employed for these recordings made at the Santa Cecilia in Rome have been lovingly transferred to SACD. It reproduces with great clarity and tonal accuracy those gorgeous wooden sound box and vibrant string textures as well as some sonorous keyboard notes that are surely the by-product of this disc's analogue/valve origins. Rare treats indeed.

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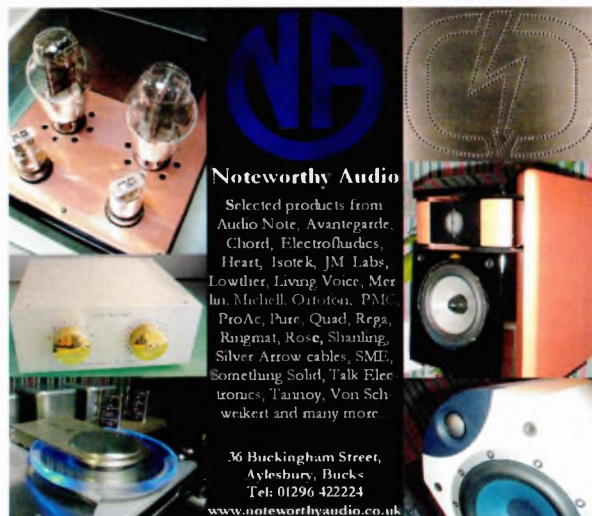
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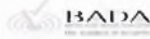
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Gold Indeed...

by Richard S Foster

During the fourth quarter of 2002, Glenn Armstrong released the first set of records in his historically important *L'Archet d'Or* subscription series (See issue 24). When I say historically important, I do not use the words lightly. These records, preceded by the last *Coup d'Archet* releases, brought to our attention a school of classical musicianship that had long remained in the realm of the wealthy specialist. Indeed, having been bitten by this highly infectious bug myself, Armstrong's latest releases have proven both a relief to my bank balance and a further revelation to me.

When I first ventured into the mysterious world of French recordings it was as though I had to relearn everything I had previously held to be true. Of course in retrospect, it seems absurd to me that it could be possible for say, a Russian to be able to understand French music better than a French player, but there it is. I don't think I would be wrong in saying that many of us (most of us?) have been guilty in this, our prejudices encouraged by faceless publicists in the major record companies. The thought that Heifetz was once considered the paragon of violinistic expression, today, is beyond me.

The ocean of music, classical or otherwise, is wide and deep with talent. To believe that the only good musicians are from this or that country or belong to this or that school is not only to limit one's understanding but also one's pleasures. Believe me. I do not believe in limiting my pleasure! Over the last few years I have had the opportunity

to listen, with the help of several of my European friends, to artists from Spain and Italy in addition to my penchant for the French. I have heard many excellent performances

by musicians who never developed a reputation outside their own country – an 'International Career' if you will. This is a discussion I look forward to pursuing another time, but my point is not to dismiss an artist you have never heard of, on a label you have never heard of, just because... you get the picture. You may just be in for the surprise of your life.

Anyway, it's that time of year again, and Armstrong is about to unveil his second collection. Needless to say, I have been chomping at the bit

to hear it. You will not believe what treasures lie in wait. Only one artist is featured here who appeared in the first series, the fabulous Jeanne Gautier, violinist extraordinaire. While *L'Ad'Or* included the great Norwegian-American Camilla Wicks, *L'Ad'Or II* is profoundly and solidly French. Two of the new faces are Marcelle Meyer, well known for her highly collectable releases for Les Discophiles Français in the fifties, and Maurice Maréchal, the most renowned and respected of all French violoncellists. However, the artist who will prove the greatest surprise is one of my all time favourites, the pianist Agnelle Bundervoët, a player of truly the most extraordinary talent.

So here, without further ado, is the line-up for *L'Archet d'Or Series Two* with one or two comments from yours truly.



► **OR V - Marcelle Meyer**

Mozart

Sonata in B flat major K 498a

Fantasy in C minor K 396

rec 11.05.53

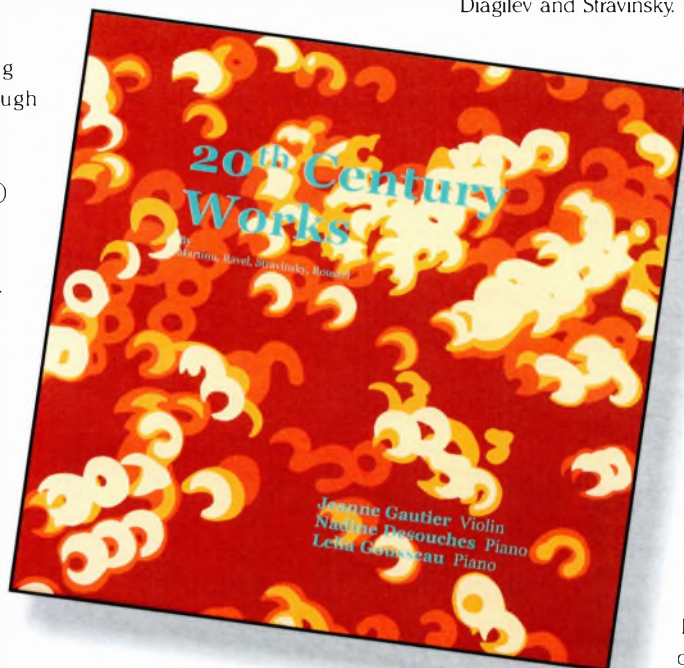
Sonata in F major K332

rec 11.05.55

Adagio in B minor K 540

rec 27.10.56

Mozart's *sonatas* are among my favourite works. Although the majority were written while he was still young (wasn't he always young?) they display the simple profundity that characterises all his work. My two all time favourite interpreters of these delightful pieces are Lily Kraus and Clara Haskil. One really does need a light touch for Mozart and these ladies knew him inside out. To my mind, no one else ever came close. (There is a performance by Lazare Levy, the great teacher and pedagogue of *K330* and *K331* on a super-ultra rare 10" Ductretet- Thomson that explains much to me regarding the origin of the 'simple - add nothing' technique for playing Mozart). Meyer has acquired a 'bad rap' for not playing Mozart to the same level as her other repertoire. Some have said that she didn't understand Mozart and played him like Beethoven, with too much gravity. She performed a 'not bad' little *K331* on a Discophiles 7" EP and on another Les Discophiles release, she performs two of the Mozart *piano concertos* (No. 20 *K.466* and No. 23 *K. 488*), the Orchestra conducted by Maurice Hewitt. I think everyone was having a bad day during those sessions. Heavy handed was Ms. Meyer and I'm very surprised this record was even released. Even the orchestra is not up to snuff. A classic example of a hard to find, rare recording not containing a fine performance (oops, that's another article). I don't know how Armstrong found the pieces on this record or what kind of necromancy he is into, but he has proven to me that Meyer can play Mozart. And well. Although *K498A* is not one of my 'desert island' *sonatas*, she does a fine job. Meyer really shines on the little Fantasy



and by the end of side two (a dream!) I was left wondering. Why? How? I can only presume that she figured she had made enough records and really ought to leave something for Lili and Clara. Apart from her achievements with Discophile Français, Marcelle Meyer should best be remembered for her major role in Twentieth Century French piano music through her close relationship with the 'Groups des Six', Ravel, Debussy, Satie, and the Ballet Russes of

Diagilev and Stravinsky. Meyer was in short, their

muse. EMI issued, in their

Les Introuvables

series, three Meyer

box sets with a total

of fifteen compact

discs. These are now

collectibles in the

used CD market, but

if you want to hear

more of Meyer, this is

about as affordable as

you're going to find.

There are four French

EMI late 1970's double

record sets [EMI

French Reference series]

containing music by

Chabrier and others;

Rameau; Couperin; and

Ravel. Marcelle Meyer is

one special artist.

OR VI - Jeanne Gautier -

20th Century Works

Ariette - Martinu

Berceuse sur le Nom de Fauré - Ravel

Scherzo (from The Firebird)

Berceuse (from The Firebird)

rec 01.01.56

Prélude et Ronde des Princesses (from The Firebird)

Chanson de Paracha (Russian Maiden's Song) 3-6

Stravinsky/Dushkin

Ballad (from The Fairy's Kiss) Stravinsky/Gautier

rec 24.07.56

Jeanne Gautier - violin

Nadine Désouches - piano

Albert Roussel

Sonata Number 2 opus 28 for Violin and Piano

rec 13.04.57

Jeanne Gautier - violin

Lelia Gousseau - piano



► Moving on to the Gautier recording, I can tell you I was stunned. I do not own any of the music from side one except the Ravel *Berceuse*, so this was a whole new experience. This and the Martinu caught my attention, but the Stravinsky transcriptions are absolutely gorgeous. The *Ballad* from *The Fairies Kiss* is Gautier's own, worked on with Stravinsky himself. This record alone is worth the price of admission. Side two holds the greatest *Roussel No 2* I have ever heard. Although my favourite has always been with another great French violinist, Pierre Doukan - on Erato LDE3119 mono only - the Gautier performance offers so much more insight. (By the way, should you find a mint copy of this Erato, the cost would be as much as the four records in this feature!) I wish I could tell you something of Gautier, but there is nothing in the books and at the time of writing this review Armstrong is keeping what he has to himself. (I'll remember this Glenn!) He tells me there will be inserts with notes and photographs with each of these records on their release, and for those who have subscribed to *L'Ad'OI*, an insert for the Camilla Wicks disc!



**OR VII - Maurice Maréchal
Brahms and Beethoven Cello Sonatas**

*Brahms 'Cello Sonata No 1 in E minor, opus 38
rec 13.10.59*

*Beethoven 'Cello Sonata No 2 in G minor,
opus 5 No 2
rec 01.01.58*

**Maurice Maréchal – cello
Cécile Ousset – piano**

Maréchal and Ousset give us a very warm, tender and sensitive reading of Brahms *First Cello Sonata*. The tempi are perfect and the recording is solidly balanced, neither

instrument dominating the proceedings. It is a grand and captivating affair, which manages to combine great drama with great intimacy. You really will feel quite windswept by the time its last notes fade! With the Beethoven we are treated once again to a close, personal interpretation that offered me a very new perspective of this oft-recorded work. Maréchal's playing has a gentle nobility, and a sense of barely suppressed power that is totally enthralling.

There is no doubt that his understanding of these works is complete and he makes them live in a way I have never heard before. It's great to have a Maréchal record in my collection, they are SO rare, and the only record I had ever heard featured Ginette Doyen playing what seemed to be a forty foot piano! This was for Pathé and you could buy subscriptions for the next five years of *L'Ad'OI* for the price of that one horrible record. Maréchal had already reached legendary status

during the first part of the century and was considered by his peers 'the Jacques Thibaud of the cello'. In 1917 he was the dedicatee of Debussy's *Cello Sonata*, and in 1922 with Hélène Jourdan-Morhange gave the world premier performance of Ravel's *Duo for Violin and Cello*. This is a tremendous record, full of life, all the more remarkable for the old boy being 67 years old at the time of recording!

**OR VIII - Agnelle Bundervoët
Ravel and Debussy**

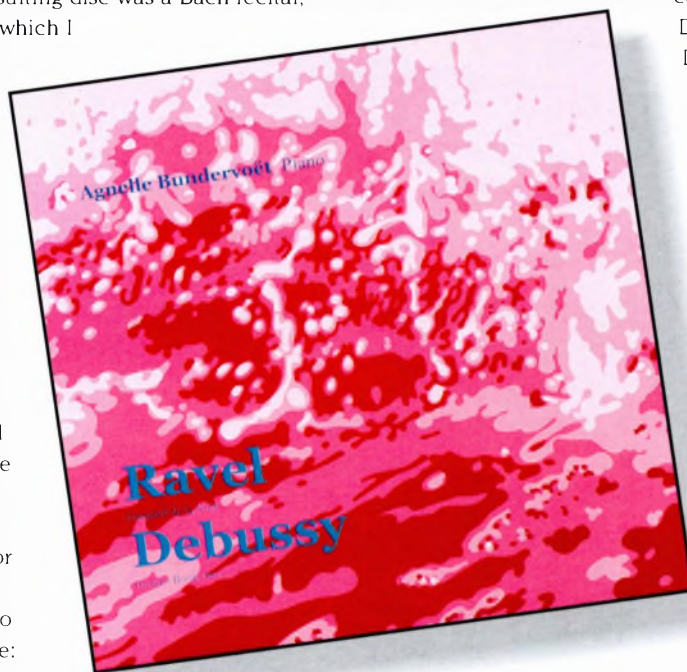
*Ravel - Gaspard de la Nuit
rec. 10.11.59*

*Debussy - Images Book One
rec. 09.01.60*

It's as if, for me anyway, the best is saved for last. Agnelle Bundervoët is a pianist I am completely over ►

► the top about. I have three of her four commercial recordings. By the time she was in her early thirties she had already developed a considerable following and her recitals were always rapturously received. After one of them, a critic who never had anything good to say about anyone raved about her, and arranged to meet her. He introduced himself as a director of the French label, Ducretet-Thomson and expressed his deep admiration. "Well", says she, 'why don't you make a recording of me?' The resulting disc was a Bach recital, an extraordinary record, which I am very proud to have in my collection. She never received a penny from the record, but was awarded a 'Grande Prix du Disque'. Late in the fifties, she made three more records with French Decca. They featured Liszt, Brahms and Schumann recitals. However, in 1956 she had already decided to devote her time to teaching and her family. She taught at the Paris Conservatoire for thirty years.

I believe this record to be of extreme importance: Not because it is un-issued repertoire by a highly collectible artist; not because it is one of the most beautiful records I have ever heard; but because it fills in a very important space in the colouring book of French pianism. Born in 1922, at the age of ten Bundervoët was receiving private lessons from Lazare-Levy at the Paris Conservatoire and continued to study under him until he was removed by the Vichy government in 1940. Moreover, when in 1942 she asked him to write her a piece for her first public recital, he accepted with his *Themes et Variations*. For the uninitiated, Lazare-Levy was a leviathan of the piano who looms large over the development of French



piano music of the first half of the 20th century. Okay, that's enough for now.

Bundervoët's *Gaspard* is, in a word, ravishing. It is like nothing I have ever heard and it has left me speechless – which, those who know me will agree, is saying something. It's just the best I have heard - even my beloved Martha Argerich isn't in this league. Debussy's *Images*. I found myself scratching around

for performances I could compare this to. Ferber on Ducretet... Michelangeli on DGG... Beroff? A pointless exercise. Nothing compares to this issue. The playing is delicate, and like the Ravel, totally captivating. As Armstrong promised 'the most sublime and poetic I have ever heard'. And now he tells me that next year's set will have her playing Ravel's *Le Tombeau de Couperin* and *Valses Nobles et Sentimental!* (The bastard! I want it now!) I am afraid lack of space allows me only one word

about the hand printed jackets designed yet again by Armstrong. Amazing.

To say that L'Archet d'Or is musically rewarding would be a gross understatement. This series is a revelation. The sound quality is outstanding and I will never tire of listening to these performances. No-one who considers himself a serious music lover should be without this. Armstrong has outdone himself. Again. Highest recommendation. When I say "Highest recommendation" it is meant from the heart. Do pursue this series, it's musically important and I want it to continue...for all of us.

Price: £300

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