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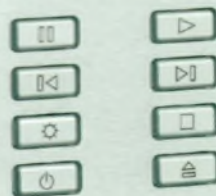
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Originality is becoming an endangered and under-rewarded attribute in hi-fi design. The ability to "think outside the box" and the benefits of doing so are becoming ever more tenuous in a market dominated by me-too products, leaping on whatever is perceived as the next passing bandwagon.

Yet, originality of thought and above all, variety in thought are essential to progress in our chosen field. There is no single answer or right way of doing things. Instead development and appreciation of the myriad aspects of reproducing recorded music is informed by the sheer variety of approaches applied to the problem.

In reporting and commenting on these various efforts the role of magazines should be positive and challenging. The variety of opinion and methodology is just as important as the variety of equipment and technology discussed. The last thing we can afford is a press that looks to follow rather than lead.

Various redesigns at Hi-Fi News have moved their governing aesthetic ever closer to Hi-Fi Plus, but it reached new heights with the cover of the March 2004 issue, which stretches flattery to the very limit. The problem is, if this is the cover what does it say about the contents? If this were a school report rather than an editorial it would have to conclude, "Should do better".



March 2000



March 2004

BELOW
FRESCO CENTER / REAR CHANNEL
MOSAIC LOUDSPEAKERS
GROTTO SUB WOOFER

LEFT
PRODIGY LOUDSPEAKER
BOTTOM
CLARITY LOUDSPEAKER



MARTIN LOGAN

ABSOLUTE SOUNDS' commitment to Martin Logan has been rewarded with a line of hybrid electrostatic speakers so comprehensive that it now encompasses every permutation of home theatre and audiophile performance, and a price band from entry-level to cutting edge. Because of their sheer beauty - both aural and visual - the Statement Evolution 2, Prodigy, Odyssey, Ascent i, Aeon i and Clarity have established hybrid electrostatic technology as the obvious choice for those who want state-of-the-art sound without suffering a profusion of ugly boxes.

All of the speakers are immediately recognisable as Martin Logan products because of the peerless, oft-imitated, room-friendly appearance, with the captivating see-through panels and furniture grade finish. Best of all, the sound is as clear as the panels themselves. This year, in recognition of its astonishing performance and sensible price, the Clarity - the 'baby' of the line - won the coveted EISA award, proving that the Martin Logan look and the sound are acknowledged across Europe.

For the new season, Martin Logan has applied its years of experience to even smaller, room-friendlier systems suitable for a wider range of applications, by launching a second hybrid technology called ATF. Martin Logan had already demonstrated its skills with home theatre applications with the Theater i and Cinema i centre-channel models, the Script i main and surround speakers, the awesome Descent self-powered subwoofer and its baby sister, the Depth.

Thanks to ATF, an even wider audience can savor the Martin Logan experience. The ultra-compact Fresco hybrids can be used horizontally or vertically, wall- or shelf-mounted above or to the sides of plasma or other flat-screen display, while the Mosaic and Montage floor-standing models have the look of a 'baby Clarity'. Even the subwoofer's size has been addressed: the new ATF designs work wonderfully with the Grotto, literally a miniature Depth!

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for the love of music...



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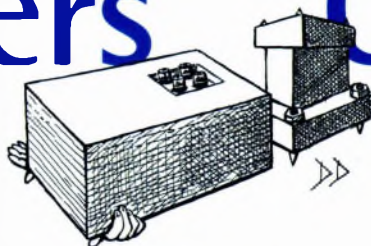
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Speakers Corner



by Paul Messenger

It might be difficult to believe this, but the British hi-fi press is held in great respect around the world for its honesty and integrity. Indeed, overseas brands are particularly keen to get their products reviewed here in Britain, more for the influence such reviews have on worldwide opinion than for any specific impact upon UK sales.

It's therefore been bothering me that our equipment reviews seem to be losing their critical edge, a situation that will inevitably erode our collective reputation, and that of British hi-fi itself by association. Manufacturers and distributors don't like having their products criticised in print – they play all sorts of games to try and pick the writer likely to give the most favourable review, and I could name several that give yours truly a deliberately wide berth.

Fortunately for me, these are very much the minority, and plenty of others seem happy enough to trust my judgement and probity. While I wouldn't claim to always get it right, and have my own preferences and prejudices like all reviewers, I believe it's vitally important to maintain a high standard of both positive and negative criticism, and am increasingly concerned at the tendency to hype more and more products as approaching perfection. And it's not just sonic criticisms that concern me.

I don't believe any hi-fi is close to perfect, and my confidence took a further blow at the beginning of the year when no fewer than six faulty review samples arrived over the course of just six weeks. Normally I'd reckon on being unlucky to get more than one crook review sample a year. And I still can't figure out any sort of pattern, apart from noting that none involved British companies, and all came from European mainland brands.

Two of the six – a pair of Avance Dana 670 AV speakers shipped direct from Denmark – had clearly been damaged in transit, because in both examples a choke had become detached from the crossover network, breaking the connections to the bass-only drivers. While it's likely enough that the packed speakers had been dropped at some point, one wonders whether Avance had taken

enough precautions to secure the choke in place, since a replacement pair arrived a few days later with no mishap.

Denmark was also the source of two Densen Beat tuners, both of which arrived with their own individual faults waiting to trap the unwary reviewer, and neither could be blamed on the shipping. The first was easy enough to spot, since only one of the channels was working. The second sample pulled a more subtle stunt, illuminating its stereo signal LED but staying resolutely monophonic – not always obvious with Radio 4, but easy enough to spot on Radio 3.

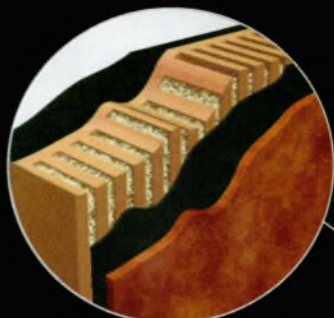
I might never have picked up the curious fault I encountered on a Vienna Bach speaker if it hadn't been for two key factors. The first is that speakers tend to come in pairs, so it's always possible to compare subjectively one with the other in mono mode. The second was the ability to use test gear to confirm any mismatch between the two samples. Having tried a couple of Vienna's other models previously, I wasn't surprised to discover that the Bachs had a decidedly laid back presence. The trouble is, on this occasion they also sounded downright dull.

The problem turned out to be a crossover fault on one of the pair, confirmed by a big difference in the impedance trace of each. There was still some treble output on the errant sample, which made the fault difficult to detect, but it was substantially reduced, so the net effect was obviously too dull. A new pair soon arrived, and the problem was solved: the Bachs still sounded laid back, but not dull.

The final failure was the unkindest cut of all. Over the past few weeks I've become very fond indeed of Burmester's costly but very classy 001 belt-drive CD player, so I was mortified when, one unhappy morning, it simply declined to recognise my discs. I gather that particular demo sample had been around the world several times, so I guess it had a good excuse to take a rest. UPS quickly delivered a replacement, which will continue giving me great pleasure until Roy nicks it off me for an upcoming review.



Euphonia

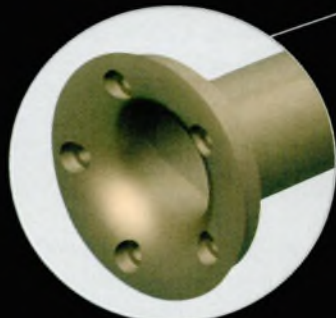


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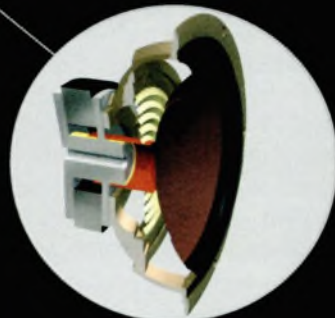
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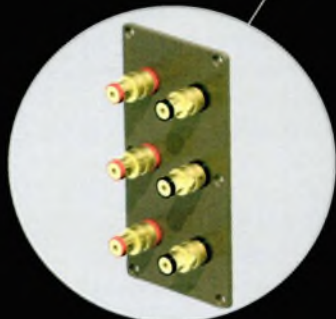
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Home Truths



by Jimmy Hughes

A friend was having a moan the other day. He'd just bought the latest recording of Richard Strauss' orchestral work *Aus Italien*, and the sound seemed terribly disappointing - thick, flat, congested. 'It seems to be an unlucky work' he groaned, 'every new recording seems to suffer from poor sound'. He's got a point; *Aus Italien* does seem to have been unlucky with recordings. But how is it possible for most of the major record companies to get it wrong so consistently? Is there another reason?

Could be. I think at least part of the problem lies with the composer. In my opinion, Richard Strauss scored his music in ways that aren't easy for most hi-fi systems to reproduce. That he mostly wrote for huge forces is only part of the problem; it's the dense saturated nature of his scores that makes them so demanding. Back in the days of LP, blockbuster orchestral tone poems like *Also Sprach Zarathustra* always seemed on the edge of breakup and distortion.

The massive climax (full orchestra, plus organ) that concluded side one (when the work was spread over two LP sides) used to make even the best pickups shudder! Often it felt as though the whole sound was on the verge of falling apart. In addition to pickups being unable to track such high levels of modulation, it also sounded as if the analogue tape used to make the original recording was close to saturation - there was that tell-tale grubby congested quality to the sound.

So it came as a surprise to encounter near identical problems when digital recording and compact disc came along. The first digital recordings on LP of *Also Sprach* (Ormandy/Philadelphia - EMI, and Ozawa/Boston - Philips) displayed a coarse-grained congested quality in climaxes surprisingly similar to earlier analogue recordings. When these performances came out on CD, the same characteristics were apparent - the expected benefits over LP were not really apparent. Now CD and digital have many limitations. But they have at least one major virtue; low peak level distortion. Agreed, the sharpness of digital sound could and sometimes did create harshness. But what I'm talking about goes beyond that. It's almost as though Strauss' scoring creates a sort of acoustic overload distortion effect. By demanding such

truly huge climaxes, the air in the hall doesn't simply vibrate - it shakes and groans! It's as though the dynamic extremes of a typical Strauss score calls for certain instruments (wind and brass especially) to be played too loudly. With every instrument there's a maximum volume level. Try to venture beyond, and tone quality suffers. It's the same with hi-fi systems; played too loudly, the sound coarsens and becomes edgy and congested. Strauss requires a big, full, highly-saturated sound, not simply a loud one. Only the best orchestras can meet the challenge.

How curious that the problems faced by hi-fi systems trying to reproduce this music should be so similar to those encountered by the orchestral musicians who have to play it. It's very difficult to produce a smooth rich opulent tone when playing triple forte. Likewise it's not easy to get big powerful hi-fi systems to play loud with finesse and refinement. Played badly, Strauss' music easily sounds noisy and hectoring. Of the late Romantics, his scores are the most demanding of all to play and reproduce. I don't know if air can be overloaded with sound (probably not), but your ears certainly can. Only if heard in a big hall with the listener sat a fair distance back can many of Strauss' massive climaxes be encompassed. What it must sound like if you're a musician playing in the orchestra hardly bears thinking about; performing a big work like the Alpine symphony, *Ein Heldenleben*, or *Also Sprach Zarathustra*, has to be an absolutely deafening experience.

I recently sat in the centre of an orchestra recording some Mozart. The sound was surprisingly loud; flutes especially were very brilliant and penetrating, and the effect could sometimes be painful when they had an exposed passage. But this was nothing really; just a chamber orchestra playing at middling dynamic levels - no heavy brass, no percussion. Imagine the combined effect of quadruple woodwind, eight horns, five trumpets, plus strings and a battery of percussion! I'm told Health and Safety officers are looking into the long-term health effects of sound pressure levels experienced by orchestral musicians. Apparently the levels of loudness experienced in big works frequently breach standards that would

be considered unacceptable in, say, an industrial environment. Something else I realised when sitting in the middle of an orchestra is how hard it is to hear players sat at a distance from you - you can only hear instruments close by.

Few doubt that Strauss was a master orchestrator. No less a figure than Gustav Mahler held him in the highest esteem, saying his music always sounded 'right'. Maybe the various changes that have taken place to the instruments of the orchestra during the last 100 or so years have contributed to the problem - modern instruments are definitely louder. Or maybe it's the fault of conductors who fail to balance the forces under their command with sensitivity and finesse.

The Strauss-Mahler comparison is interesting. Mahler frequently doubted his abilities as an orchestrator, and sometimes needed to revise instrumentation and dynamics after having heard one of his compositions live. Both men were outstanding conductors, but Mahler had greater professional experience. Although each wrote for large forces, Mahler's music for the most part sounds cleaner and more transparent than Strauss'. Consequently, it records better and is easier to reproduce. Take Mahler's fourth symphony, for example. Invariably it reproduces well on a good hi-fi system. Every strand can be heard

thanks to Mahler's open transparent textures, clean instrumental lines, pungent scoring, and brilliant detail. It's difficult to find a badly-engineered Mahler 4 on LP or CD. And the reasons for that are as much down to Mahler's expert scoring as they are to luck or competent engineering. The work records well because it sounds good to begin with.

Making a good sound 'live' is incredibly important. One famous Decca producer, greeted by an appallingly diffuse and wodge sound from the monitor speakers during a recording session, ventured forth into the hall to check microphone placement - only to realise the recording gear was accurately conveying the live sound of the orchestra! He thought perhaps the microphones were out of position; they weren't - conductor and orchestra were simply having an off day..

How often is equipment blamed for faults that are musical rather than technical? Determining the accuracy of recorded sound is difficult, if not impossible. Unless you actually attended the sessions, you're in no position to judge the truthfulness of a recording. Of course we all know what we like - how we think a piano or violin ought to sound - but this is not the same as knowing how it actually did sound at the time the recording was made.



Sound Affects



by Alan Sircom

Whether through old age or entropy, time takes its toll. Our hair thins and loses colour, our eyes dim, muscles sag and bones weaken. A grillion years from now, the sun will start running out of its own hydrogen stores and will then swell, collapse and ultimately blink out. Cars rust, bridges collapse, teacups shatter. The depressing thing is that nothing is exempt from this inevitable decrepitude... even hi-fi.

You spend a fortune on the latest hi-fi component, and it sounds wonderful. Years pass and the sound is

simply not as sublime anymore. The instinctual reaction is that hi-fi has progressed and sound from new kit has improved, and this is in the main true. Today's components are more transparent, more dynamic and have better rhythmic properties and soundstaging than their counterparts a decade ago. But, even in isolation, your system just seems tired. You visit shows and begin to think that your past purchase was somehow ill-starred or at least might have to re-sit the test of time.

Inside a product, components age and unfortunately ►

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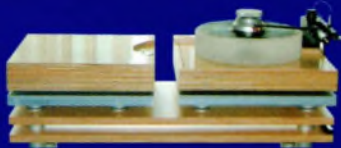
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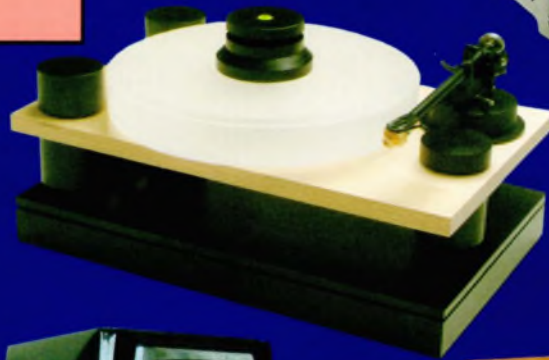
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Antique Sound Lab, Aurum Cantus, Black Orchid, Bright Star, Fab Audio
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▶ they do not all age at equal rates. As they age, they change their specifications slightly, but enough to throw the performance of the product out of kilter, especially in the case of bigger products with many discrete components. The changes are subtle, but usually mean the product slowly degrades with time, as it slowly but surely goes out of true. Over a 10 or 20 year life-span, the product will not fail due to component ageing (unless the ageing process gets too intense), but it will change the personality of the product in seemingly unpredictable ways. And don't even start me on the subject of cables!

This poses problems on two counts. Those who like to keep hold of their high-end hi-fi components with a mind to handing them down through the generations will find that the products don't live that long. Also, those who buy second-hand products should be wise to note that, unless refurbished or kept in aspic for a decade or more, they might not sound as good as they originally did.

There's a sense of perspective required here. A top-class pre-amplifier from the 1980s – even if every component was brought up to date – is unlikely to sound as good as today's finest products. Things have moved forwards over the last 20 years or more. But it will still sound good, probably out-classing the good or very good products of today. Strangely enough, those classic products that sounded wonderful but had a death wish might be the best bets in the second hand market. The classic Mark Levinson ML-2 mono power amp was well-known for its great sound and poor reliability; over the years. Surviving products will have seen most of the components changed and changed again, keeping the product as fresh as it ever was. Ironically, those products that are fabled for staying trouble free for the best part of half a century are the ones most likely to be stuffed with components well out of tolerance, and the sound they produce will be extremely different from the original.

There are a few companies that buck the trend; they reverse the ageing process. But, unlike all those oddly named potions that tap into the facelift zeitgeist, these really do work. Companies like Naim Audio take older products from its past, and compare them to current production, replacing (whenever practical) major components that time has not treated well. It's not that important to replace structural parts of a product – the casework of a 10 year old amplifier is unlikely to have degraded drastically, unless it has rusted away – but the key electronic components get a boost, when upgrades are applied to the product. So, you get a double whammy; the product gets upgraded to sound better, but also the components are replaced at the same time, improving the

sound in the process.

Of course, there are times when this is not possible; replacing a CD transport or LP motor that no longer exists is not going to happen. But, less specialised components can be readily replaced and the values of a resistor remain the same, even if the maker of the resistor has changed in the intervening years.

Point-to-point wiring – seen in classic valve amplifiers from the 1950s and 1960s – present both more and less of a challenge than PCB-based products. On the plus side, it makes replacing product for product extremely easy; just de-solder one component and replace it with one of an identical value. Unfortunately, it also means that unless the person replaces components with considerable care and attention, all manner of problems will occur. Reading the circuit won't help; we are now so used to seeing the topology of a circuit board, even the most thorough of engineers is now foxed by the three-dimensionality of a point-to-point circuit. These also seem to degrade quickly; faster than products on a PCB. So, if you re-component a product like a Leak Stereo 20, you may well have to repeat the process every 10-15 years. Whether this is due to the rapid ageing of the components, or because of oxidation of the solder joints, remains to be seen.

Inescapable obsolescence becomes a big problem in the early 1990s. Suddenly, more and more companies shifted to tiny surface-mounted components, flow soldered onto a board. Unpicking and replacing these is pretty much impossible for those without their own electronic engineering factory at their beck and call. Fortunately, the components appear to stay in tolerance for longer than conventional discrete resistors, capacitors and transistors. But when they begin to degrade and the product begins to fall out of spec, the disease is incurable and the prognosis bleak.

It's strange but in PC systems we are used to a short life expectancy. Today's equivalent of HAL will seem as old fashioned as a traction engine in three years. We are starting to apply the same logic to TV systems, realising that today's state of the art plasma TV or DVD player will be effectively redundant (and probably not functional) in five to 10 years time. Yet, when it comes to hi-fi, we demand three score years and ten... almost. Maybe the iPod generation will look at hardware differently in time (they already look at software in a different light; the notion of an album is blurred by the playlist, and it's not uncommon for an iPodder to lay down a diverse genre-busting compilation for the morning commute). Whether anyone over 35 will countenance changing their hi-fi equipment and software every three to five years remains to be seen; it's now a fast moving world, just remember to keep your hi-fi up to date, even if it's out of date. ▶+



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We're quite sad to notice

that a lot of our fellow retailers seem to have forsaken the ways of true two channel high fidelity and been seduced down the path of multi-channel surround sound systems. Sure, the films might be good, but the sonic merits of these digitally-processed many-speakered marvels can be summarised on the back of a postage stamp (not that we'll be seeing those for much longer the way things are going). Meanwhile, truly decent sounding audiophile gear is blossoming, especially in the current climate of revival of the Vinyl LP.



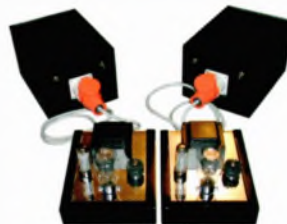
The Shanling CD player is a superb example of the quality coming out of China nowadays.



From our old friends, EAR, comes the beautiful 864 MM/MC phono preamp



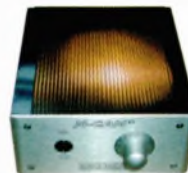
Stax, legendary headphone manufacturers, present their valve driven Omega electrostatic 'phones



The Klimo Beltaine monoblocks, from Germany, with outboard power supplies are about as purist audiophile as it gets!



Aha! Bit misleading this one - The Sonneteer Byron CD - fabulous sound, and not a tube in sight!



The famous Musical Fidelity X-CAN valve headphone amp, now in v3 form

Benefits of dealing with Walrus (apart from the very best sounding gear) -We don't believe in "hard sell", you decide in your own time. In-house service on many items, sometimes while you wait. We understand audiophile equipment, especially vinyl playing and valve amps inside out, and have many years experience to draw on. Big accessory range. Interest Free Credit on many lines, subject to approval. And so on, and on ...

Walrus has never, ever, dreamt of being seduced by all this multi-channel nonsense, we prefer to leave that to others. Of course we like a good film as much as anyone, but we love realistically reproduced music much more. And as the ultimate, most engaging reproduction usually comes from vinyl sources amplified by a decent valve amp, this is what we unashamedly do. An ever increasing number of satisfied customers thankfully agree and tell us we are cutting edge in audio reproduction. Funny old world, eh?

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air tangent amazon amphion amplifon apollo furniture argento audible illusions audio physic audiovalve breuer dynamic brinkmann cabasse cartridge man cawsey chord electronics clearaudio clearcover decca london dnm duevel dynavektor ear yoshino ecosse es lab final lab graham sree hadcock heart incognito infinity jbl k2 klimo korato lavardin lorcraft lyra michell engineering morch musical fidelity neat acoustics nordost nottingham analogue opus 3 origin live ortofon papworth pluto rega turntables ringmat roksan shun mook shanling shelter sme sonneteer spendor stax sugden sumiko tci cables tivoli audio tom evans townshend audio transfiguration trichord trigon van den hul voodoo wireworld xio



Incoming!

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

Dear Sir,

Just a quickie regarding the Nordost power chord review: was the Russ Andrews Powerblock referred to the newer tent-shaped design, and did it include the usual superclamp spike-suppression? Thanks for a very helpful and detailed review: one Vishnu here already, another on the way!

Jayne Lee Wilson

Via. e-mail

The Powerblock used (and approved by Nordost) is the tent shaped one, but without the parallel filtering option. I did compare it to my own, filtered version and found the supplied unit preferable with the Nordost leads (although not the Kimbers!). Ed.

Dear Sir,

Re. the Nordost Competition - Is there any chance of printing some of the short listed entries? In case you're suspicious... yes I did enter, and no I am not assuming that I'm on that list - fairly obviously, I would benefit very little from reading my own meanderings now that the cables have gone!!!

I ask simply because I enjoyed the winning article, in particular the author's pivotal link to John Cage's 4' 33 (I wish I'd thought of that!) and because it's often refreshing to hear from other 'real world' users.

A (controversial?) aside - you have NEVER reviewed anything by Musical Fidelity. Very odd given the plaudits elsewhere, and because I know that some of your reviewers have used or praised their products. I am not a devotee myself and do not currently own anything of theirs. However, the Nu-Vista CD player and / or Nu-Vista 300 power amp were surely worth a review. I guess it must be some 'old score' settling - quite a lot of that in your business it would seem! Surely if you can get along with Ricardo of Absolute Sounds then you can get along with anyone...

Yours faithfully,

Chris Lubwama

Via e.mail.

I'd love to use some of the short listed entries, and still hope to. The problem is simple - pressure of space. Rest assured that I'll

renew my efforts.

Regarding the products selected for review, you need to consider the following:

1. We tend to review what WE consider to be the most interesting products.

2. Not all companies offer us their products for review.

3. There are more issues to consider than just the sound quality of the sample that arrives for review. We also like to be confident regarding product consistency, back-up and reliability.

I'd also point out that MF are far from the only high-profile company whose current products are absent from our pages. Ed.

Dear Sir,

Have you lost the plot?

I think I have just about bought every issue of Hi-fi+ magazine for the last year or two but on reading this month's issue (29), I can't help thinking that you seem to be losing it just a little. It is nice to read reviews about equipment which I could possibly buy, but this month you seemed to have reviewed a shed full of equipment which 99% of your readers could never hope to buy namely:-

Blue Pearl Audio JEM turntable - £48000

Vitus Audio Statement series line and phone-stages - £8600/\$9800

Reimyo CDP-777 CD player - £9500

Ferguson Hill FH001 loudspeakers - \$7943

Alon Lotus Elite SE loudspeaker - \$8000

The Roksan TMS 2 record player - \$7500

Who on earth can afford to buy any of the above?

I certainly can't and I think I have probably spent about £5000 on upgrading my equipment in the last 12 months

Tony Thomas

Via. e-mail

The price distribution of products reviewed in the magazine is sometimes beyond our control, effected as it is by availability of units, especially the rare ones. Also, whilst we do try and include as much sub-£1000 equipment as possible, truly worthwhile budget equipment is remarkably thin on the ground. Hopefully this issue will help to redress the balance somewhat. Ed.

► Dear Sir,

I read with interest your companion history to the Kuzma Airline review. I know it is not in your purview to write about do-it-yourself projects but I'd be remiss, given the design-centered focus of "An Unattainable Goal..." if I failed to point out an unmentioned, extremely successful design that you may not know about.

An engineer at Bruel & Kjaer named Poul Ladegaard published his design in a Scandinavian DIY magazine a number of years ago. Using commonly available materials, it features a "v"-shaped air bearing. I have built an example of this arm. It works extremely well and is mostly free from the tweaky fussiness of some of the other air-bearing designs. As a design example, it is very important and I am shocked that no one has tried to build these arms for sale.

Mr. Ladegaard's original article, translated into English and with illustrations, may be found at:
<http://www.waiko.com/roscoe/airbearingarm.html>

Having built this arm, I made a web page of tips for constructors. My turntable page is at:
<http://home.earthlink.net/~jeremyepstein/teres.html> and the "Ladegaard FAQ" page links from it here:
<http://home.earthlink.net/~jeremyepstein/ladegaardfaq.html>

A quick look at the design will suffice to show that this simple solution provides a way around many of the pitfalls of other designs, and its simplicity is impressive both for its elegance and for the ease of construction which it affords.

I am not surprised you found the Kuzma as pleasing as you did. Your description of the sonic benefits of the arm sounded very familiar to me.

There is no turning back after using a good linear tracker. I remember when I first started listening to CD's, how they raised the bar for turntables in two important ways: they had superior pitch stability over typical turntables, and their sound was perfectly consistent at every point in the program material. Linear tracking tonearms, when implemented well, as you pointed out in your text, give almost nothing away to digital on this last point, and the improvement over pivoted arms is quite striking.

I hope you find the information on the Ladegaard design interesting. Thank you for your excellent article.

Jeremy Epstein

Via. e-mail

Dear Sir,

Having just returned from the Bristol Hi-Fi show I thought I'd jot down a couple of words in response to your columnist L.S. Webster's views on Hi-Fi shows in general.

There were hundreds of people at the show, and I only heard about three or four discussing technicalities, and all of these appeared to be people connected with the trade. Such conversations were usually heard against a background of

excellent music, and were in their way amusing, thought provoking and, I would say, almost a necessary part of the proceedings.

I heard two gentlemen briefly discussing the power supplies of some Kondo amplifiers, which were working with an SME turntable, a Kondo CD player and Living Voice Avatar speakers, reproducing some terrific music. And when I say terrific, I mean really and truly fantastic. I heard some Beethoven chamber music, via CD, which was able to enthrall and shock, and make time disappear. And then I heard some jazz, via the SME, where players took brilliant solos against a wonderfully sustained rhythmic background.

It's because there are such focused people about, at all levels of hi-fi, that I was able, for the price of seven pounds, to sit and listen to some of the absolute best music reproduction available on this planet. What planet is LSW on again? Good Lord, what have people got to pay to ride around in a tacky old stretch limo for an hour? Let alone a Rolls Royce, or a Lamborghini. If I could be chauffeur driven in a selection of these cars, for seven quid, for seven hours (that's how long I was at the show), I think I'd give it a go, just for the satisfaction of curiosity. After all, I read descriptions of listening tests every month, and my own hi-fi, augmented by a reasonable imagination, indicates that the writers are telling me about experiences that really exist. I go to the show, and I find that it's true. I don't know why Ms. Webster can't get to hear any decent stuff at these shows.

The interest in how hi-fi works is a side issue, but I think it is safe to say that no such knowledge is ever wasted. Though I know to my cost that a little knowledge can be, er, not enough. At the very least, on hearing wonderful sounds in the room, it can also be interesting to note the incredible engineering skills required to get there. And it can't hurt one's faith in mankind.

Possibly such shows, as opposed to musical reproduction per se, are more of a man thing though. I used to always invite my wife to accompany me to a show, but she just won't.. Hi-fi shows aren't her thing, but she is perfectly happy to inherit my old Exposure amp, Arcam 5 CD, Lecson DVD and Castle Howard speakers for the TV room, where she watches movies and plays the occasional Pogues or M People *Greatest Hits*. Massages and Jacuzzis at hi-fi shows can't buy her. She goes to the gym with a Walkman. Makes sense doesn't it.

On the other hand, my daughter, who likewise has no interest in the shows, is pleased to inherit my even older Cyrus I, and Pioneer turntable (with Rega RB100 cartridge) for her growing second hand vinyl collection, and practice her dancing, or do her homework.

Another experience which I would certainly recommend to Ms. Webster, is the Meridian room; in many ways the equal and opposite of the Living Voice room. I heard some marvelous opera; top notch Clapton/BB King; and enjoyed an absorbing few minutes of the film *Seabiscuit*, which I will ►

▶ certainly go and see. It would be very, very interesting icing on the cake, if Meridian would include a top flight analog piece in their show.

But if those two rooms were, in my opinion, offering the best sounds at the show, may I also direct Ms. Webster to the ground floor, where it was quite a feat for Tube Technology to make me stop and consider the potential of their system: set up as it was in a main walkway, quietly exuding Robber Ford.

If your correspondent is lonely for fellow females (oxymoron?) at hi-fi shows, I can report that at Bristol there were plenty of women. I almost purchased, then and there, a subscription to a magazine from one very vivacious and friendly female. And this was after being warmly welcomed at the entrance. Later on I was offered some nut clusters by a cheerful hostess. It's all there if you'll but take notice. But it's about hi-fi.

I hope that I have redressed the balance here. If you want to listen to equipment from around a thousand pounds, to a hundred times that and more; get some ideas of what you might want to audition further; or simply check out tremendous musical systems, then a hi-fi show is the place to be.

My final suggestion for LSW is that, rather than try to accompany someone to a show, and all the hassle that may entail, consider going alone. Take it at your own pace. Make a list of things you want to check out. Treat it like you're wearing headphones.

Yours faithfully,

Mark Wilson

Dear Sir,

In Mr. Foster's review of Mercury Living Presence reissues. He uses test pressings. Test pressings are about as good as you can get for an LP. It is inherently the lowest stamper number. I have compared test pressings to the standard pressings. And they are easily better. This review tells me little of what I can expect from these reissues.

Sincerely,

Paul New York City USA
by e.mail

RSF responds:

Paul thank you for your e-mail. I think we will have to agree to disagree. "Test pressings are" not "about as good as you can get for an LP" Here's why:

Firstly they are made for one reason only: For the producer of the record to determine if there are any faults in the lacquer.

Secondly, the process, once the test pressings are accepted, require that the pressman goes back to his presses and then spends the next 20 or 30 or so test pressings dialing in the right temperature for the presses. The variables in temperature can be anywhere from 275 to 325 degrees larenheit (and if you don't think this can effect the sound...you might want to

think again).

Thirdly, after the pressman determines that he's happy with his product, samples are taken to the quality control lab to determine weight, measurement and concentricity... amongst other things. If these tests are successful, and ONLY if they are successful, will the labeling and actual production begin.

Test pressings are truly not the holy-grail or the 'best-of-the-best' as many think. Having spoken to more than one manufacturer of records (for a variety of labels) they all gave me the same story. Give me number 50 off the main production line any day of the week.

As a follow up, I received my set of MLP issues from Speakers Corner and as Kai Seeman indicated, the actual production version does better the test pressing.

I hope this explains my comments.

Richard Foster

Dear Sir,

I just saw Issue Number 28 on the rack at a local shop.

The cover is absolutely gorgeous!

But now I have just seen 29 on your site.

It is gorgeous as well. Great job!

Sincerely,

Mathew Livingston

Via. e-mail

Dear Sir,

I just received Issue Number 29. Thank you.

As always, I anxiously removed the magazine from its unmolested plastic wrapper, only to discover that its cover has been vandalised! It would appear that a child, or perhaps an eye/hand coordination-impaired adult, played fast and loose with some black, orange, and maroon felt-tip markers and effed-up the logo. They didn't even stay within the lines! Since the wrapper was still virginal, I can only assume that this vandalism had to occur somewhere in your offices. The responsible individual(s) should be severely reprimanded about the head and shoulders. How 'bout, say, forty lashes with a Valhalla interconnect? heh heh

Seriously though, I have enjoyed the issue (with the notable exception of the cover). Your mag is beautifully presented, and I am tempted to don a pair of surgical gloves so as to preclude putting a shine on the wonderful matte finish of its paper.

Now if only you would hire a proofreader to reduce/ eliminate typos, grammatical errors, and misspelled words. Or at least enable the "Spellchecker" feature of your word processors!

Best regards,

Jim Philpot

Via. e-mail





A visit to KJ West One is likely to exceed all your expectations.

Here, you'll discover an incomparable array of sound equipment on permanent demonstration. Many components represent the current state-of-the-art while others offer truly exceptional value for money.

Grounded in a love of music, we like to think we can offer sensitive expertise as well as all the facilities you'll need to complete your search for a system of musical purity, dynamism and authenticity.

To audition any of these components, as well as others too new to list here, please call in or, better still, make an appointment for a personal demonstration.

Most items can be made available at our branches. You can also phone or email info@kjwestone.com to arrange a demonstration of high-end equipment in your own home.

Because we take your interest seriously we'll go out of our way to demonstrate it.



■ ARCAM

Diva A65 Int
Diva A80 Int
Diva A90 Int
Diva CD73
Diva CD82
Diva CD93
Diva T61
Diva DT81
Diva AVR200
Diva DV88
FMJ A32 Int
FMJ CD33 CD
FMJ DV27A DVD
FMJ DT26 Dig Tuner
FMJ 7.7 ch power
FMJ AV8 Pre Amp processor

■ AUDIO ANALOGUE

Puccini Int
Puccini SE Int
Bellini Pre
Donizetti Power
Maestro Int
Maestro CD
Paganini CD

■ AUDIONET

SAM V2 amp
ART CD

■ AUDIO RESEARCH

CD3 CD Player
PH3SE Phono Stage
SP16 Pre
LS25 Pre
VSi Int
V555 Power
VS110 Power
VT100III Power
VT200II Power
Ref Phono
Ref 2 MkII Pre

■ BOSE

Lifestyle Systems
28, 35, 40 and 50
System 321

■ COPLAND

CDA822 CD Player
CSA29 Integrated
CTA305 Pre
CVA306 VT Multi Ch.Pre
CTA520 Power (2 ch)
CVA535 Power (5ch)

■ CYRUS

DVD6
CD6
DVD8
CDB
Cyrus 6 int
Cyrus 8 int
AV8 Dig 5.1 pre
Pre X
Mono X
FM X
Smart Power
Q Power
PSX-R
Quattro

■ DYNAUDIO

Audience 42
Audience 52
Audience 52 SE
Audience 62
Audience 72
Contour 1.8

■ GRAAF

GM20 OTL Power
GM13.5B II Pre

■ HARBETH

HL-P3ES
HL-Compact 7ES-2
Monitor 30

■ KEF

Q1, Q3 & Q5

■ KRELL

KAV 280CD
KAV400xi Integrated
KAV280P Pre
KAV2250 Power (2ch)
SACD Standard
Showcase DVD
Showcase processor
KPS28C CD
KPS255C Pre/CD
KCT Pre
FPB400cx
FPB700cx

■ LINN

Classik CD/Tuner/Amp
Classik Movie
AVS103 A/V pre
5125 5ch power
Tunebox
2250 2ch power
Ikemi CD
Genki CD
Wakanda pre
Kalektor Pre
Pekin Tuner
LK140 Power
LK85 power
Espesk Speakers
Ninka Spks
Katan Spks
Kan Spks
Ekwal Centre Spk

■ MARTIN LOGAN

Clarity
Aeoni
Ascenti
CLS IIz
Odyssey
Pradigy
Script
Depth & Descent (subs)

■ McINTOSH

C2200 Pre valve
MC2102 Power valve
C42 Pre s.s
MX134 Pre/processor
MC402 Power s.s
MA6900 int
MVP842 DVD/CD
LS320
LS340
LS360

■ MERIDIAN

G07 CD
G08 CD
G51 Stereo receiver
G01 Pre
G02 Pre
G56 Power
G57 Power
G68 Processor
DSP 5000
DSP 7000
G98H DVD-A Player

■ MICHELL

TechnoDec
Gyro 'SE'

■ OPERA

SP2
Super Pavarotti MKII

■ PATHOS

New Classic One
Logos
TT
Inpol 2
In control
In Power

■ PIONEER

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PDP-434HDE H/def plasma
VSA-AX10S AV rec
VSA-AX5IS AV rec
DV868BAV-5 HDMI dvr a SACD
DV668BAV-5 HDMI DVD a SACD

■ PROAC

Tablette 2000
Studio 125
Response One SC
Response D15
Response D25
Future One

■ PRIMARE

D30-2 CD
D20 CD
A30.1 Integrated
A20 Int

■ QUAD

99 CD-P
99 Pre
99 Power
909 Power
QC24 Valve Pre
Q1140 Valve mono
ESL988
ESL989
Model 111
Model 121
Model 221

■ SHANLING

CD-T100

■ SME

Model 10A
Model 20/2A

■ SONUS FABER

Musica
Concertina Home
Concerto Home
Grand Piano Home
Wall
Sala home
Gravis
Cremona
Cremona Auditor
Cremona Centre
Cremona Sub
Amati Homage
Guarneri Homage
Stradavarius Homage

■ SPENDOR

S3, S6, S8, S9 & SRS

■ TRIANGLE

Titus 202
Celsius 202

■ UNISON

Unico P int amp
Unico CD player
S2K S/E valve int

■ WILSON AUDIO

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Highlights from the 2004 Las Vegas CES

by Roy Gregory

It is difficult to appreciate the sheer scale of the winter CES without witnessing it first hand. It fills the best part of three hotels (including the offshoot T.H.E Show) and that's just the hi-fi element. Then there's the scores of independent suites taken in yet more hotels by firms looking for greater privacy or exclusivity. The main Convention Centre also houses exhibits from many of the major electronics manufacturers. Four days to see everything? Not a chance, which probably explains the unusual level of cooperation you get between the bemused and shell-shocked members of the press.

Now, like most shows you get a whole host of products and companies that fit the here today, gone tomorrow label like it was printed especially for them. With easy access to the entire Pacific rim, the fringe element take on a truly frightening and international nature. Try to cover the whole sprawling morass with a conventional show report and a simple list of the various exhibits would consume the entire magazine. Here then are the edited highlights, selected as much for their future relevance and long-term importance as for their immediate appeal. That and the fact that I found them interesting in or of themselves.

conrad-johnson ACT2 Line-Stage

Few products have received the universal acclaim and respect accorded c-j's limited edition ART line-stage. The twin chassis, remote control unit



became an overnight benchmark for high-end reviewers, and still stands astride the market despite being unavailable to buy for nearly three years now. All of which makes the arrival of its replacement, the single-chassis ACT2 a matter of significant interest and importance. Expect it to be available later this spring, when it promises to build further on the superb standards established by c-j's recent products. However, don't expect it to be cheap.

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

Hovland HP200 Pre-Amp

Keeping to their stately one product per year release schedule,

Hovland announced the new HP200 pre-amplifier. Following closely the format of the established HP100, the 200 incorporates styling to match our favourite RADIA power amp as well as the all-important

remote control. However, there's more to the new unit than simply a pretty face and in-built laziness option. Further circuit and component refinements deliver sonic improvements too. Expect a full review soon.

Tel. Sounds Of Music Net.

www.hovlandcompany.com



ELP Laser Turntable

With \$20 million in development costs behind it, the legendary laser turntable has finally surfaced as a genuine, living, breathing, actually for sale product. In fact, it's no fewer than three products. Looking for ▶



Thorens

On the subject of 12" replay systems, Thorens were back at the show in force, a welcome sight after the company's unfortunate demise. With seven models on offer, stretching from \$500 to \$2200, there's something for everyone, although those of you

seeking nostalgia best look elsewhere. The designs are all new, and there's not a suspended sub-chassis in sight. The new, up-market 800 series adopt heavy-weight sandwich construction and Rega derived tonearms incorporating VTA adjustment collars.

However, perhaps the best news is the renewed availability of spares for older decks, especially drive-belts. No UK distributor has been appointed as yet, but expect one soon. In the

meantime, you can contact Thorens at:

E-mail: info@thorens.ch

Net: www.thorens.com

Wadia 921 Decoding Computer

Wadia showed (and played) their new 921, three box decoding system, with styling based on the now defunct Power-DAC project. Offering all the facilities you've come to expect from Wadia (along with the traditional paucity of controls) a central unit is used to command two remotely sited DACs, in this case each driving a mono-block power amp. Claimed to offer a significant upgrade over the existing 27/270 combination, these new units should challenge the state of the art (as well as established price barriers)!

The newly rationalised 861 series now offers three models: The 861SE,

861 and 861 Basic. The latter, lacking the various digital inputs and switching capabilities of its more expensive brethren at some considerable saving, looks like a real bargain. Hopefully we'll be looking at both it and the SE upgrade in the next issue.

Tel: Musical Design Company

Net: www.wadia.com

Reimyo Electronics

When AS reviewed the Reimyo CDP-777 CD player in Issue 29 he was sufficiently impressed to seriously whet my appetite. So much so that I've



arranged a second listen and made a special effort to seek the company out at CES. I wasn't disappointed. The sound of the system in their room (fully treated with Harmonix devices, naturally) was enchantingly enticing – lush yet lifelike, with tremendous speed and clarity. Of course, the CD player was only one part of the equation – and in this instance, only a transport at that. It was accompanied by the DAP-777 DAC, ALS-777 power line conditioner, CAT-777 tube pre-amp and a FAT-777 single-ended 300B power amp. There was none of the slightly mechanical heaviness that I've come to associate with the Western Electric 300B, and the system's deft agility was marvelously entertaining. I'll also admit a soft spot for the pure '70's styling of the pre-amp, reminiscent of the Kondo electronics, in comparison to which it looks like a bargain. The internal

▶ all the world like a laser disc player (you remember those – big, silver 12" discs etc.) the basic LT-1LRC plays at 33 or 45 RPM, outputs a MM level phono signal and will set you back \$10500 plus tax, plus shipping from Japan. There's also a line-level output option, but it must be specified at the time of order. Another \$2800 dollars adds 78, while the top of the range LT-2XRC weighs in at \$14300 and will play discs of any diameter between 7" and 12". The basic design has been in full production since 1997 and there are over 1000 units in the field.

So it's safe to assume that the technology actually works. With zero physical contact with the record, variable speed and user variable reading height on the laser to avoid existing groove damage, the ELP offers significant theoretical benefits, especially for the archivist. However, any, and I mean any, surface contamination is read as noise, which makes wet cleaning of records an essential rather than simply desirable process. It was impossible at the show to gauge the sonic quality of the system, but it certainly played and operated faultlessly, including the remote control functions and CD-like track skip facility. One is promised for review so we'll report further once we have some hands on experience. Meanwhile, for those with huge collections of irreplaceable vinyl and shellac, you can contact ELP at:

Tel: (81)48 883 8502

Net: www.laserturntable.com

▶ details are too complex to even scratch the surface of here, but following the positive experience of both the CD player and the show, we'll be encouraging the company to submit the amps for review even though only the CD player is currently imported. Whilst the market for 7W amplifiers is already over crowded, there aren't many 7W amps that sound like this. One of the best sounds at the show.

Tel. Audiofreaks
(44)(0)20 8948 4153
Net. www.combak.net

FAL Flat Driver Loudspeakers As if to further emphasise the aesthetic differences between the Japanese and Western high-ends, Sibatech were seeking distribution for the FAL speakers systems. These use a specially developed full-range, flat-diaphragm driver offered in two different configurations. The smaller Supreme-S system is a comparatively conventional floorstanding tower with a claimed bandwidth of 40Hz to 23kHz when used with the optional Heil derived high-frequency unit. What wasn't conventional at all was the set-up with the two speakers facing each other across the room. Stereo scale and focus was astonishing, with weight enough to add credibility to that 40Hz figure.

Lurking at the back of the room was the enormous Ai system, each using three larger FAL drivers and a tweeter to generate full-range sound from a faceted open baffle array. Once again, the drivers were pointing almost directly at each other, but added impressive extra life and air to the performance of their smaller brothers; All that with 94dB+ efficiency. If you like music to breathe then these are for you.

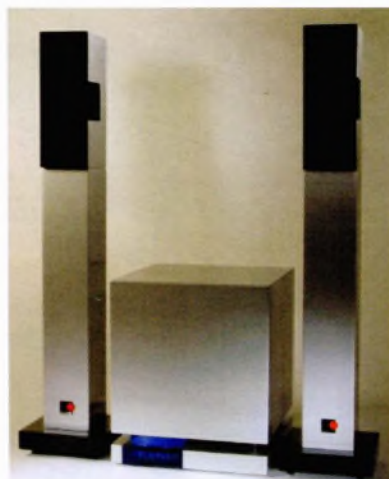
Anybody thinking that the book on driver design is closed bar a bit of refinement and a few new materials

need look no further than Japan for proof of the error of their ways, where fascination with different driver technologies and bass loadings remains undimmed, with occasionally spectacular results.

Sibatech, Inc.
Net. www.sibatech.co.jp

Element

A new name to me, Element had filled a small bedroom with innovative, beautifully engineered and eminently



practical products. So no surprise to find that the man behind the name is none other than Demian Martin, one of the high-end's most respected and versatile designers.

The e8 is a small, symmetrical cabinet that can be placed horizontally or vertically. It employs a novel, wide dispersion ribbon tweeter flanked by a pair of small sandwich coned drivers. Fancy crossover technology maintains waveform and transient integrity, while bandwidth extends down to 80Hz where low frequencies

are provided by the LFX sub. This employs a sophisticated development of the isobaric principle. But, the air volume is far larger than normal, while each driver has its own amplifier allowing further compensation for non-linearities in the enclosed air mass. Given that Mr Martin designed the Entec subs, its unobtrusively excellent performance comes as no surprise.

Then there were the Handshake units, clever little automated boxes that enable a system to switch between a high-quality stereo amp and the five channel output of a typical AV receiver: two distinct systems driving the same speakers. Nice.

But the most enticing product on show (and active demonstration) was a rather neat mains "conditioner" that concentrated on current flow rather than voltage waveform. The effects were clearly audible without any apparent downside and whilst this was an expensive item it heralds a genuinely novel approach to mains quality and perhaps helps to suggest just why mains cables are as influential as they are.



For those who find the idea of all this affordable esoterica disturbing (and the e8 speaker system is genuinely affordable – especially for the performance on offer) rest assured that Mr Martin's

more extreme tendencies haven't been idle. The e100 speaker system is just as big and over the top as you could wish – as is the \$100K price-tag. The rest of the range however, definitely deserves a UK importer.

Element
Tel. (+1)510 728 9188
Net. www.element.us.com

► Stereovox Cables

Another old-boy doing good, Stereovox supremo Chris Sommovigo is the man who brought you the highly regarded Illuminati digital interconnect. Stereovox is his new baby, a clean sheet cable concept that embraces his parallel company Xhadov, who manufacture impedance constant connectors to his design. The cables themselves employ oval section solid conductors, encased in proprietary PTFE-based Gossamer dielectrics and helically-wound shields.

The Reference series cables (LSP-600 speaker, BAL-600 balanced interconnect and SEI-600 single-ended interconnect cables) are not cheap although they are exquisitely finished and



terminated

with the finest connectors I've ever come across. For example, the interconnects cost \$2500 per meter pair. However they have now been joined by the HDSE single-ended interconnect at \$400 per meter pair, and HDLS speaker cable at \$1000 for a 2.5M pair. Both share the superb standards of construction and bespoke terminations found on the Reference series, the plugs being simplified and in some ways even more attractive. There's even a hook-up wire. UK distribution has been fixed but not announced, so expect an early review. Stereovox

Tel. (+1) 305 858 7777

Net. www.stereovox.com

TAD Model 1 Loudspeaker

Which brings me to what has to have been the technological high-point of the show. Once upon a time there was a little known subsidiary of Pioneer called TAD. They earned their living creating drive-units for the pro-market, destined for high-quality studio installations. And what drivers they were. Horribly labour intensive to hand-build and ruinously expensive, they are amongst the finest and most exquisitely constructed drivers available. Then they decided to turn their attention to the domestic market. The dream brief to construct a no holds barred audiophile product landed in the lap of Andy Jones, onetime acolyte of none other than Laurie Fincham at KEF.

The end result is mightily impressive and mighty expensive, although not as expensive as you might think. The Model 1 has a boat shaped cabinet, vertically laminated from a stack of pre-cut and irregularly shaped plywood slices. In the front you'll find two 250mm bass-drivers and a 200mm mid-bass unit. All three use massive motors and sophisticated sandwich materials for their cones. All three are built to the supreme standards we've come to expect from TAD. However, they pale into insignificance against the astonishing engineering achievement that covers the rest of the range.

Drawing on 25 years experience in the creation of vapour deposited beryllium drivers they have designed and built a coincident unit, combining a 165mm cone and 30mm dome, both formed from pure beryllium! Think UNI-Q but fabricated in this year's wonder metal. The motor and basket are beautiful, as you'd expect, while the entire driver is mounted in a massive cast aluminium labyrinth that absorbs the rear wave, isolates the driver from stored cabinet

energy and provides a smooth baffle extension to further aid its exceptional dispersion.



The numbers make equally interesting reading, with 25Hz extension in room, 90dB efficiency, 8 Ohm load (minimum 3.4) and an all-up weight of 130 Kgs each for a relatively compact 1380mm height. Factor in Japanese flagship levels of fit and finish and you have a speaker that actually starts to look cheap at the \$45000 asking price, especially when compared to the competition. The company is already back ordered and struggling to meet demand so don't expect them to reach these shores too soon. But rest assured, this is one that we'll be watching very carefully indeed.

TAD Home Audio

Tel. (+1)909 865 9204

Net. www.TADaudio.com

Madison Fielding Flagstone Loudspeakers

I can't complete this show report without mentioning Madison Fielding, a company who were demonstrating their wares on the balcony OUTSIDE their room! Step through the sliding door and look for the speakers amongst the lavish foliage – which is exactly the point. The company manufacture all-weather loudspeakers disguised as ►



▶ fully functional planters. They offer two three-way models, each featuring a downward firing woofer, along with an indoor/outdoor compensation switch. The larger, Flagstone model runs a 10" Audax bass unit for 40Hz extension at 89dB efficiency. The fibreglass enclosures weigh in at 50lbs a throw, without organic compost or resident greenery. I haven't discovered whether watering tweaks the sound or not.

Now, lest you think this is a joke, Madison Fielding were lobbying hard for "Best Sound At Show" votes and I'd say they were a serious contender. Whether that says more about their products or the sound in the other rooms at the St Tropez I'm not too sure. For those of a more classical bent here's always the Marc Anthony, built into a faux Doric column. These boys are definitely serious about outdoor sound, so if you are too, contact them at:

Tel. (+1)914 939 8500

Net. www.planterspeakers.com

Best Sound At Show

So what were the best sounds I heard at the show? Two rooms really stood out, and neither should have been a surprise given recent reviewing experience. One was Ayre Acoustics who were using their familiar CX-7 CD player, K-5X/V-5X pre-power amps and

the new P-5X phono-stage to drive the demanding Avalon Eidolon Diamond speakers via their own interconnect cables. The sound was big, coherent and fluid, yet full of subtle nuance and space. Despite the relaxed presentation it was dynamic too. Impressive given that this is one of the most critical, demanding and power hungry speakers I've ever heard.

If the Ayre room was all about breathy intimacy then Alon were relying on sheer scale and musical authority. They were driving their new Proteus speakers with a serious high-end system consisting of the Lector Strumenti Audio CDP-7T, the new Precision VII turntable carrying a Triplanar (which seemed to be everywhere!) and Miyabi cartridge.

Amplification was c-j's seminal ART driving HP's favourite ASL Hurricane mono-blocks while wiring was a mix of Pranawire, Soundstrings and Acarian. Hanging on the end of this were a pair of large (but not unmanageably so) composite cabinets. The top cabinet contains a pair of 110mm laminate cone midrange drivers flanking a pair of magnesium/ aluminium alloy domes, all on an open baffle, and a pair of 200mm composite carbon coned mid-bass drivers, each in its own sealed chamber. The separate, mechanically decoupled bass cabinet contains four more of the 200mm drivers, firing sideways. Finally, there's a further bass driver, firing upwards in an open baffle behind the main array. ▶

Audio Perfectionist Journal

CES is a great place to meet our fellow members of the press, normally wearing their familiar hats. However, every so often such meetings throw up a surprise. This year a particularly pleasant one was the Audio Perfectionist Journal. A quarterly newsletter/magazine, totally devoid of advertising and running to 52 close packed black and white pages (well, there's a bit of spot colour) APJ is entirely the work of two writers, Richard Hardesty and Shane Buettner (who also writes for TAS). And that's the point. Each issue focuses, in depth, on a single subject. There are technical discussions of relevant theory, interviews and then a dozen or so product reviews, with every product compared in the context of the two writer's systems. Unfortunately, they both use LP12 front-ends and Vandersteen speakers where more variety would be a good thing, but the approach is extremely interesting nonetheless. The writing is serious without taking itself too seriously, the coverage what I'd describe as sensible high-end. The current issue (No. 10)



concentrates on pre-amps and includes products such as the Rogue Audio 99 and Ayre K-5X as well as exotica like the VTL 7.5. There are interviews with Charlie Hansen and Luke Manley, as well as an in depth discussion of

amplification issues and features as well as their implications. There's also some nice first principal explanations which work without being patronising. Paper and print quality is good for the US, while design and layout is refreshingly clean and honest. Overall it's an excellent read and quite the best US based magazine I've come across. It's not cheap at \$98 per quarter plus \$20 overseas shipping but with the US dollar teetering up around the 1.90 mark there's never been a better time to take the plunge and broaden your horizons. If these guys can maintain the standard then future issues will be well worth reading.

Tel. (+1) 714 968 9405

Net. www.audioperfectionist.com

► So that's 11 drivers per side! However, as Alon point out, there are only three different types at work, and all employ AlNiCo magnets. The crossover is tri-wireable and housed in a separate enclosure. The end result is an imposing 190lb column, five and a half feet high and two feet deep at the bottom, but only nine and a half inches wide. Efficiency is 88dB.

Image scale is lifesize, dynamics are full range and bass goes down to 20Hz, which makes for impressive

scale and impact. Yet the absolute authority of the presentation is a solid foundation for the superb low-level detail and coherence. Micro-dynamics are incredibly lifelike and tonal range convincingly natural. But, boy, when the music demands power or the grand gesture you don't get much grander than this. At \$45000 this level of carry you off musical involvement doesn't come cheap (or with limited domestic impact) but the Proteus does an awful lot of

what the Exotica Grand Reference does (as well as a few things besides, I suspect) at rather less than half the price and physical imposition, so at least things are moving in the right direction.

Ayre Acoustics, Inc.
Tel. (+1)303 442 7301
Net. www.ayre.com

Alon by Acarian
Tel. (+1)631 265 9577

Net. www.alonbyacarian.com ►

Not In My Backyard...

The marginalisation of multi-channel music

by Alan Sircom

This year's Las Vegas CES show was the perfect arbiter of how people view multi-channel. The vast 34 acre show covers everything with a mains lead or batteries, but this isn't a round-up of all the latest network audio devices, PDA watches or even three-chip DLP projectors. No, instead this is a sniff into the zeitgeist, whether multi-channel music really has a place in the hearts and minds of hi-fi buffs the world over.

Certainly, if you take a cursory look around a hi-fi show, DVD-Audio and SACD are hugely successful. All the ground floor traders selling 180g vinyl and audiophile CDs have superb stocks of all manner of multi-channel music. If you want to pick up a copy of practically any multi-channel music disc, this is the best place to buy that isn't a faceless internet or mail order trader.

But a closer look shows a flaw in the logic. Those traders selling recordings aren't actually demonstrating or playing them, at least not to the sort of level that befits the improvement over CD these discs supposedly offer.

Although they claim sales of these new multi-channel discs are buoyant, it's still basically an untested market. These traders - online, mail-order and in the foyer of any hi-fi show - do a very good job, but none of them have the sort of stock levels of the average medium sized HMV store. What's more, outside of a handful of primo music superstores in the best locations, DVD-Audio and SACD barely registers on the music store radar.

There are exceptions, of course. Recent re-issues of early Rolling Stones and Bob Dylan as well as Pink Floyd's *Dark Side of the Moon* are all hybrid SACD/CD issues and are sold as single inventory recordings in HMV, Virgin and specialist stores up and down the land. These bump up sales of multi-channel recordings, but the majority of these discs are not played as SACDs; they are purchased as top-notch CDs (and the sound on CD often reflects this, as they are generally excellent).

Let's shift back to the CES, though. Well, sort of. Forget the main show; it's full of sound and fury, signifying

nothing. Despite bold attempts by high-end names like Focal/JMLab, there's no way the delicate nuances of a decent multi-channel audio system can be experienced, when it has to sit in an open-plan stand and compete with Britney-wannabes screaming into PA systems about the benefits of the latest wireless Ethernet doodad. Instead, a trip to the Alexis Park speciality spin-off is in order. This dedicated high-end hi-fi arm of the show is in an entirely different part of Vegas, in a show not unlike the traditional hotel room demonstration event we are used to in Heathrow, Bristol and the like. The only differences are that it's several times the size of the Heathrow show, and that the connecting corridors are open to the elements (in this case, a pleasing winter breeze offsetting the desert sun). This makes it all the more personable - imagine the centre piece of the Bristol show being an inviting-looking swimming pool and a marquee or two.

Of course, Alexis Park is predominantly a hi-fi show; a traditional, stereo-first hi-fi show. ►

▶ As a consequence, walking into hi-fi rooms and discussing multi-channel music was, in many cases, akin to showing people your leprosy scars. The Home Americans are far too polite to actually show me the door, but the glazed expression one got from most was a strong indicator, saying "there's nothing here for you".

Like any modern hi-fi show, however, there are multi-channel rooms to go along with the stereo only rooms. But most of these multi-channel rooms were more obsessed with DVD-Video performance, and multi-channel music was little more than an adjunct to that. And in many cases that relegates two channel CD music to being little more than a subset of a subset. Think of it this way; when was the last time you walked into a multi-channel demonstration where they weren't playing a DVD-Video of some description? In multi-channel room after multi-channel room, whenever someone asked to hear music on multi-channel, *Chicago* (the musical, not the 70's super-group), Norah Jones - *Live in New Orleans*, Roger Waters *The Wall - Live in Berlin* or *Hell Freezes Over* by The Eagles were pulled out. All of these are superb recordings, but all are DVD-Video recordings with the music on Dolby or DTS multi-channel. Whenever anyone asked about multi-channel music on SACD or DVD-Audio, the demonstrator usually scabbled around for a copy of Hotel California or one of the many Steely Dan recordings on DVD-A. They also had a selection of 'audiophile' recordings on SACD and DVD-A. Very occasionally, a demonstrator had a copy of a disc that a non-audiophile would have heard of, but these were very much in the minority. Given that the current crop of SACD recordings include hybrid re-issues of John Coltrane's, Roxy

Music's and Michael Jackson's finest, and the latest crop of DVD-Audio discs includes classics from The Beach Boys, REM and Queen, along with more modern (and possibly not so Alexis Park friendly) recordings from bands like The Flaming Lips, that's not exactly encouraging. In particular, I'm surprised that no-one latched onto the 2002 release of Elvis's 30 #1 Hits on DVD-Audio, given that the CES coincides with Elvis's birthday and the



town is filled with Elvii of extremely variable quality.

Most rooms were extremely reluctant to relinquish the grip the plasma screen had over the system, and preferred to play DVD-Videos instead. As suggested before, there were some extremely fine examples of the multi-channel art, especially demonstrations from Integra Research, Accuphase, Burmester and MacIntosh. But these were every inch the multi-media demonstration, with the system laid out for home cinema as the primary point of call. Of these, around \$50,000 worth of Accuphase system (with a similarly priced Wisdom Audio

Neo speaker system) performed the best as a music and video delivery system, but even this lacked DVD-Audio replay as standard and a Marantz model was pressed into service here.

But what of the pure audio multi-channel sound? There were those going deeper, leaving the conventional concepts of what multi-channel offers and challenging accepted practice. Or you could stay with conventional hi-fi technology; McCormack's universal player, processor and amplifiers played through Wilson Sophia/Watch Centre/Watch Dog sub-woofer speaker system was one of the few actually demonstrating with predominantly 5.1 music instead of DVD-Videos and making a very fine sound in the process. But even this, with a multi-channel pre-amplifier and permanently driven plasma screen, still didn't quite sing both hi-fi and home cinema evenly.

Then there's the PS Audio approach; this is far less conventional. Instead of a 5.1, 6.1 or 7.1 system, this is a 5.5 system, with a sub-woofer for every channel, including centre and rear channels all featuring the surprisingly inexpensive Rocket Loudspeakers AV123. That's less than \$4,000 worth of speakers and five \$600 subwoofers partnered with a home-made bass management system, a prototype of PS Audio's HCA-7 power amplifier and a multi-channel upgrade board for the PCA-2. And, of course a P1000 power supply, given PS Audio's predilections. This was very much a work in progress, but also very interesting. This was one of the few companies not scared of playing multi-channel music alongside DVD-Video. It had its flaws - it was more 'slam' than 'finesse' - but showed a lot of promise and also showed that at least some people are prepared to experiment ▶

▶ with the basic parameters of multi-channel sound.

If there's a problem with multi-channel audio, perhaps it exists in the processor. This means potentially wonderful new products from Classe like the prototype \$15,000 SSP-900 processor may represent the state of the multi-media art, but still not quite make the grade compared to the best stereo systems costing a lot less. This is borne out by the one system that did pass muster both in stereo and multi-channel audio.

This was one of the most interesting set-ups as well as one of the best sounding. The Muse room had all the right elements. First, while it did have a plasma screen, surprisingly it was turned off when music was being played. Secondly, there was no centre channel speaker, just a pair of Avalon Ascendants to the front and a pair of Avalon NP home cinema floorstanders at the rear. Perhaps most importantly, though, was the configuration of the electronics. A Muse Model Eleven universal player was connected (via its built-in decoder) to a pair of Model Three Signature stereo pre-amplifiers, sync'd together and both sporting upgraded display and power supply systems. These were then connected by balanced connections to a pair of Muse Model One Hundred Sixty stereo power amps. There was no video switching - and in fact the video signal never got within two feet of the pre-amplifiers. There was no centre speaker or sub-woofer (the internal processor in the Model Eleven was set up not to need these), but instead gave the sort of multi-channel music performance that was as natural as two channel.

When quizzed on the lack of centre channel, Muse's Chief Designer

Kevin Halverson said "a fifth channel would be better on the ceiling! We did some tests a while back and you'd be surprised how important height information really is." Of all the multi-channel systems in Vegas, this was the only one that was worth listening to for any length of time. Of course, compared to the huge and impressive demonstrations from names with more perceived glitz, the Muse room was rarely visited, while lesser, more



expensive products from famous names were packed out.

Muse aside, it seems there's an intellectual stumbling block between two-channel and multi-channel sound. If there's a two channel set-up, no-one would expect to see a plasma screen sitting between the two speakers; if there are more than two speakers, no-one would expect NOT to see a plasma screen. Despite the fact that much of multi-channel audio can be handled without a screen (or at least a small monitor to navigate the menus), there is always a big screen centre stage, and the system's flexibility is stressed. This is all very laudable, but being uber-fi as it perhaps should be. Why is it we are perfectly capable of staring into nothingness when in front of a two channel system, but must see a screen in multi-channel? Why does no-one close their eyes when experiencing the full

5.1 musical drama (even when the only onscreen element is little more than a slide show)?

So, we learn several things from Las Vegas: There's no such thing as an elegant drunk, especially after a three Martini breakfast; It's rude to point at rubber Nazi hookers, when they are on their break; Processors and video switching do for music what tax evasion and syphilis did for Al Capone and only one multi-

channel system out of hundreds really sounds good. How do we make a good case for multi-channel music from all this? We don't. Simply put, the whole multi-channel music world, as a concept, seems to have some serious issues entailed. Most hi-fi enthusiasts have assumed that multi-channel audio would jump from the coat-tails of home cinema and become a distinctly

separate entity - that simply hasn't happened, and it looks likely that it won't ever happen. Part of the problem is the software - live recordings on DVD-A and SACD are wonderful, drawing the listener into the live venue, but the musician in every corner effect didn't work in the 1970s and seems unlikely to attract listeners today. Ultimately, though, the hi-fi companies have been so swayed by home cinema that they seem to have forgotten their musical roots. Let's hope this year someone has the balls to demonstrate multi-channel music, without the picture. Who knows, people might actually want to listen to their SACDs, not watch them. And perhaps there are demonstration music discs that aren't DVD-Videos. It's time to reach for the off button on the plasma monitor, guys!



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River Deep, Mountain High... The Hi-Fi+ demonstration at the Manchester Show

by Roy Gregory

Another Manchester Show, time for another of our programmed demonstrations. Last time it was format wars and a comparison of SACD, DVD-A, CD and LP, not forgetting the surround sound options offered by the first two of those. This time we focussed on another issue raised by the new, hi-bit digital formats, and once again we tried to demonstrate the implications for existing formats too. What we set out to demonstrate were the benefits of adding a sub-woofer and super-tweeters to a system – any system. The whole point of running these demonstrations is that they should be universal in nature rather than specific to any particular product or equipment. I also feel that they should be representative of the magazine's current views and tastes – meaning the systems we use should be built from the products that we rate and rely on.

The system we put together was chosen with some care. We needed to be able to play SACD, CD and LP while keeping things manageable. Choice for the digital front-end was simple - the Krell SACD Standard, reviewed in Issue 28, given a Product Of The Year award, and the first of the audiophile machines to do an equally impressive job with both SACD and CD. LP? What better than giving readers the opportunity to



hear the astonishing Blue Pearl JEM turntable, reviewed in the issue available at the show; We paired it with two more award winners – the Triplanar tonearm and Lyra Titan cartridge. Pre-amplification was provided by the Tom Evans Groove Plus phono-stage and Vibe/Pulse line-stage. Cabling was Nordost's Valhalla throughout (including mains leads) and supports were from Voodoo Isolation, with their air suspension rack or platforms under all the electronics.

Which brings us to the choice

of amplification and speakers. I really wanted to show that the effects we were demonstrating were consistent regardless of the system being used – even in a system which looked like a sub and super-tweeters would have little room and less signal to play with. To that end I chose the Rogue Audio M150s, valve mono-blocks currently under review (and everybody knows that valve amps have no bandwidth) to drive the monster Amphion Xenon loudspeakers. The specification on these beasts cites –3dB points at 30Hz and 25kHz. Hardly in need of much help then! Or so you might think.

We started the demonstration by playing a couple of tracks off SACD just to get listeners familiar with the system. The first was Eleanor McEvoy's solo voice and piano track 'Last Seen October 9th', a natural, acoustic recording recorded and mastered direct from DSD. For contrast we then played 'Give It Up' by Talk Talk, representative of exactly the kind of re-issue material now appearing on the hi-bit formats.

Having established the basic character of the system it was time to start ringing the changes. The track I chose for this came as

▶ something of a surprise to most people. It was from a recent Mo-Fi release, the 1956 recording *Steamin' With The Miles Davis Quintet*. So that's mono then, with not a lot below 60Hz and little or nothing above 14k! And we were adding a sub and super-tweeters? Well, the whole point was to force people to listen to the mid-range, rather than the extreme top or bottom, because that's where the real musical impact occurs. First we played the track au naturelle, then with the Townshend Maximum super-tweeters hooked up, then with the monster KEF PSW5000 sub and then with both together. That meant listening to the opening bars of 'Surrey With A Fringe On Top' four times per demo

Playlist

SACD

Eleanor McEvoy – *Yola*
Tr. 8 – Last Seen October 9th

Talk Talk – *Colour Of Spring*
Tr. 6 – Give It Up

Steamin' With The Miles Davis Quartet –
Mobile Fidelity UDSACD 2019
Tr.1 – Surrey With The Fringe On Top

Roxy Music – *Avalon*
Tr.3 – Avalon

Aimee Mann – *Lost In Space* –
Mobile Fidelity UDSACD 2021
Tr.3 – Lost In Space

Vinyl

Heifetz – Tchaikovsky *Violin Concerto*
Classic Records/RCA LSC 2129 45 RPM
Side 2 – First Movement, *Allegro Moderato*

Peter Gabriel – *PG3*
Classic Records 200g Re-issue
Side 2 – Tr.4 Biko

CD
Joe Jackson – *Volume 4*
Tr.4 – Chrome

Melos Quartet – *Debussy/Ravel String Quartets*
Tr.7 – *String Quartet in F Major, tres lent*



(with seven demos a day). Well, it did the job. Adding the supertweeters brought increased transparency, attack, focus and clarity. Adding the sub delivered warmth, space and pace, allowing music to breathe far more naturally. But it was the two together that really delivered the musical goods, elevating hi-fi (albeit pretty good hi-fi) into a believable,

expressive musical performance; Better balance, better timing and far more direct and communicative.

Now this is a high-risk strategy. The effect of super-tweeters, rolled in above the main

speakers' natural extension is easy to miss. Likewise, taking an 18Hz capable sub-woofer into a hotel room could be construed as a recipe for disaster. The fact that it worked at all is impressive, That it worked so well is little short of a miracle and testament to the quality of the room. Of course, there'll always be those who don't hear what you're trying to demonstrate as well as those who prefer the original system, but judging from the enthusiastic feedback we got at the show and since, the dissenters were very much in the minority.

Having demonstrated the effect with a recording that relied on a sort of extended mid-band and little more, we moved on to something a little larger in scale and far more complex: Roxy Music's 'Avalon', demonstrating the benefits in a wider musical context. ▶



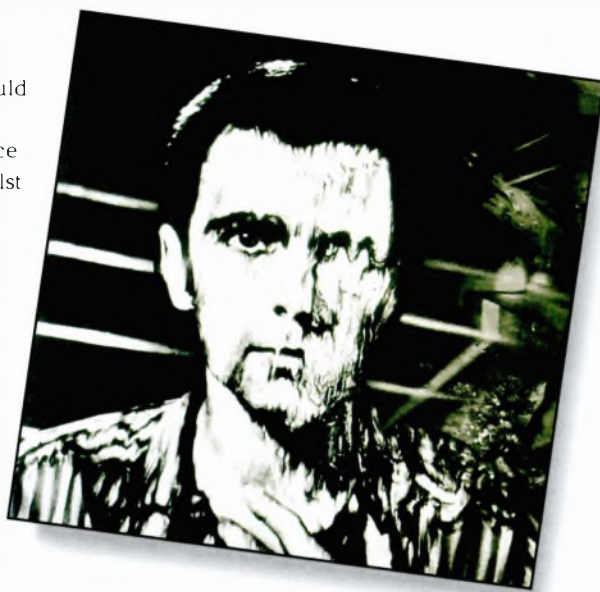
► From now on we only ever used the sub and super-tweeters in tandem, demonstrating in each case the system with and without their contribution.

Having said that, you should hear the benefits on SACD. To demonstrate their fundamental nature we moved on to LP and CD. In fact, for me, playing the Heifetz Tchaikovsky *Violin Concerto* on the Blue Pearl (another early tape, although this time in stereo) delivered the biggest difference of all, perhaps because of the sheer panache, the bold arrogance of the maestro's playing. But even Joe Jackson and the Melos Quartet on CD (the latter on the DGG Galleria budget label)

another astonishing transformation.

What lessons should we draw from this experience? In essence it's pretty simple. Whilst super-tweeters and sub-woofers are, in and of themselves, good things, to really realise their benefits you need to balance their contributions at both ends of the system. Used in tandem the benefits are absolutely fundamental to a system's performance.

Bear in mind also that the benefits are



using excellent (and pricey) individual components; much more basic examples would work just as well at home if you

lavished a little care on them. Just imagine what you might achieve with the kit we were using in your own system! A tantalising prospect that's well worthy of further investigation.

It remains only to thank all those manufacturers who lent us equipment for the show, and especially Martin Easton of Blue Pearl and Chris Tuck of KEF who gave up their time to answer questions.

And not forgetting CB, our reluctant DJ, a man who

is allergic to jazz but had to cue and listen to that Miles Davis track 56 times by my count; Dedication well above and beyond the call of duty.



showed just how beneficial wide-bandwidth reproduction really is. We closed with another track from vinyl, Peter Gabriel's emotive 'Biko', the space around the African chorus and the individual voices within it, the complexity and texture of the opening drum

directly proportional to the care and attention devoted to set-up. Ideal positioning of both the tweeters and the woofer would significantly enhance performance. We were

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Internal Activity

A beginner's guide to Interactive loudspeakers

by Roy Gregory

As soon as loudspeaker designers wanted to use more than one drive unit (pretty much essential if you want to achieve decent bandwidth, especially at high frequencies) they were confronted with using some sort of network to combine them. These networks match the output levels and also tailor the interface between the drivers. Unfortunately, they can only do this by subtractive means, removing output from the more efficient units until they match the least efficient one, trimming the frequency response to achieve a smooth junction. Unfortunate because subtractive in concept, they also proved musically subtractive in practice, robbing the performance of life and detail and the speaker of efficiency.

The simplest form of passive crossover, as such networks are known, occurs in a two-way speaker where a tweeter is trimmed to match a mid-bass unit that is simply run wide-open and unmodified. Listening to such a set-up, inevitable rough edges and discontinuities included, underlines the benefits of such direct

coupling between a drive-unit and the amplifier. So much so that the approach once championed for cost reasons in budget speakers, is now making a return to the high-end, seen in products like the Reference 3A DeCapo and Wilson Benesch Arc. The problem is that placing electrical components between the amplifier and the motor-units that its trying to drive is rather like playing snooker on the long rest; it robs you of control, subtlety and finesse. Factor in the almost obsessional pursuit of flat frequency response that emerged in the mid-eighties and you end up with progressively more and more complex cross-over networks, featuring ever steeper slopes (together with phase problems that would make Salvador Dali wince). Whatever the benefits of ruler flat response, they were easily overshadowed by the musical costs they imposed. The more complex the cross-over the greater the potential for damage. No wonder we're seeing a return to simpler networks in response to the stultifying

musical sterility that was in danger of becoming the hi-fi norm.

But there is an alternative: active drive. We've already seen the benefits of direct coupling the amplifier to its drive-unit. Why not extend the concept so that each driver is direct coupled to its own amplifier? It's easy to dismiss this approach as a sledgehammer to crack a nut, but examine it further and the elegance and potential benefits quickly emerge. Consider the following:

You still need some sort of dividing network to feed the appropriate frequencies to each amplifier, but by doing this with active circuitry placed between the pre-amplifier and the power amps you can make all your level adjustment and frequency shaping additive rather than subtractive, thus retaining the inherent musical energy in the signal. What's more, by building in an inverse electrical response to the low-frequency driver's mechanical roll-off, you can extend bass response way beyond the normal limits of a given driver/enclosure combination. And, not only can you get better ►

▶ and deeper bass, you can if you choose, allow the listener a whole range of complex room compensation adjustments. Promising the answer to two of every speaker designer's biggest problems (the cabinet size/bandwidth trade-off and the vagaries of in room response) should have ensured the success of the active approach. But wait, 'cos there's more.

Close coupling the amplifiers and drive units requires dedicated electronics, a situation that offers the opportunity to precisely tailor each amplifier to the efficiency and (more importantly) the electrical demands of the motor unit it's connected to. So, no more over-specified power supplies to deal with the schizophrenic impedance characteristics of the assorted different drive units employed by all the different loudspeaker manufacturers on the market. Instead, the amplification can be purpose built to deal with a known configuration, cutting down on the wasteful and costly incorporation of unnecessary potential, as well as building in a significant safety element.

Indeed, so attractive is the promise of active operation that by the mid-80s, many if not most of the leading UK brands were offering active systems, either within their range or in conjunction with other manufacturers. Thus, Naim offered active crossovers for use with Linn and later, their own speakers (and still do). Nytech and even A&R Cambridge offered packages for ARC speaker systems, while the short-lived Wharfedale Option 1 and Option 2 loudspeakers incorporated Quad amplification. Nightingale offered a single brand solution, but the company that really took the bull by the horns was Boothroyd-Stuart Meridian.

One of the problems with active

drive is the cost and complexity of all the additional amplification. It's bulky, and it's expensive and it involves a lot of extra cables. Meridian surmised that to properly realise the potential of active systems while making them cost effective and domestically advantageous (rather than the opposite) the obvious step was to physically incorporate a dedicated electronics package into the speaker cabinet. Not only do you banish all the extra boxes but you save the considerable cost of their casework, as well as eliminating the domestic and sonic impact of all that extra cable. At last you could really close couple the amps and drivers, and do it in a previously impossibly small and elegant cabinet, fed from your pre-amp by a single line-level interconnect. When it was first introduced the Meridian 101/ M2 pre-amp/speaker system redefined the domestic impact and implications of a near full-range hi-fi system. CB looks at the later M20 on page 98. Take a look and you'll see what I mean.

Of course, the active approach, like any speaker design path, is not without pitfalls and compromises. Keep the electronics outside the box and you end up with an expensive and unwieldy mess, put them inside and you expose them to assault from the mechanical energy generated by the drive units. Also, you're actually replacing the (admittedly nasty) passive network with an additional stage of amplification. The active crossover has to be built and perform to the same standards as the pre-amp, and we know how hard it is to get those right. Finally, there's the whole issue of presenting the unvarnished truth – and we all know that the truth can hurt. Their very nature means that component choice in subtractive, passive crossovers is critical to the overall voicing of a speaker. Which is a nice way of saying that you can pick crossover components that

remove, temper or simply obscure some of the harsher realities of amplification and drive units. Consider just how crude a moving-coil driver really is and you'll see that it's not necessarily desirable to be exposed to its more excessive tendencies. Active systems do have a tendency or potential to sound brutally revealing. Get them wrong and it can be painful. More recent iterations have tended to incorporate DSP to help shape the output as well as the room interface, but this simply blunts the edges, leaving the music sounding processed. A case of one step forwards and two steps back if ever there was one.

In some respects, it's a shame for Meridian that the M2 pre-dated CD by such a margin, otherwise the attraction of true three-box systems might have proved irresistible. As it was, by the time digital sources finally gained hi-fi credibility, interactive speakers (as Meridian dubbed their approach) were slightly old-hat. Well, at least as far as full-range systems go. They still persevere with the DSP series active speakers which are gaining new momentum from the home theatre market where their compact dimensions and simple cabling are a real boon in 5.1 systems.

Sub-woofers are another matter: Powered subs are by definition interactive and trade heavily on the dimensional and bandwidth benefits the approach allows. And just as 5.1 systems benefit from the simple wiring that a self contained unit delivers, the one box solution is equally attractive in recording studios where interactive designs have long been popular. even more so now that engineers are faced with multi-channel mixing. Indeed, a recent visit to Real World studios revealed that Peter Gabriel's principle engineer is still using an elderly pair of Meridian's diminutive M3s as his main mixing monitors!





ATC Active 20 Loudspeaker System

by Roy Gregory

ATC have an even longer history in the pro field than PMC, and enjoy a peerless reputation. Active monitors have been a key element in their product range almost since day one and continue to be their preferred option. However, as with most things loudspeaker, ATC have firm views on the way things should be done and active operation is no exception.

The Active 20 is a substantial 20 litre cabinet, around twice the volume of the AML1. It's also extremely heavy, each one weighing in at around 27kg. Factor in the rounded corners of its carefully sculpted shape and you end up with an imposing lump you think twice about moving around. The glossy, smooth finish is also a dead giveaway, this being one of ATC's "cross-over" (my words not theirs) products, designed to be rather more domestically acceptable than the rather bluff exteriors of their previous designs. There's also a "utility" version of the 20, the SCM20 ASL, intended for pro and outside broadcast use, although don't go thinking it's the same thing in a more cheaply finished box. When I say utility I mean it wouldn't look out of place strapped to the back of a Hummer in downtown Baghdad.

The cabinet of the Active 20 is built around a set of massive aluminium extrusions. These make up the front cheeks as well as the curved element that fills out the speaker's boat back. MDF panels are then bonded in place to create the sides, top, bottom and baffle,

with extra, cosmetic caps doubling up on the ends. The rear section forms a deep and thermally efficient heat-sink for the internal electronics package that's bolted directly to it.



The rear of the contoured MDF top-plate is pierced by three large diameter holes that act as flues for this rear chimney, while contrasting cosmetic grilles make a visually successful feature of the vents that add interest to what might otherwise be something of a shapeless blob. There's something of the muscle-car

about those grilles, a feeling that somehow suits the lurking potential of the Active 20s. Just don't hook your fingers under them to pick the speakers up; you'll feel the unsupported section of the top-plate flex somewhat alarmingly under the influence of gravity.

Internally, the ATC is hardly less substantial than its blockhouse exterior. The company's in-house specified 25mm soft-dome tweeter has a massive double magnet motor that is claimed to provide useful output to 25kHz. This is married to a 150mm bass/mid driver. Now bass units have always been an ATC speciality, as have three-way speaker designs. The unit in the Active 20 maintains the tradition, its short, edge-wound voice coil operating in the long gap of the huge (177mm diameter) motor assembly. This is one unit that has to be mounted to the baffle from behind!

Somewhat confusingly, ATC refer to the 75mm dust cap in the centre of the cone as a "mid-range dome", perhaps clinging to the last vestige of the three-way approach they ultimately prefer. Either way, it's a simple one-piece driver, so don't go thinking that it involves a coincident arrangement or any such thing.

The drive-units are fed by a similarly substantial electronics package, delivering 140 Watts to the bass unit and another 50 to the tweeter, crossing over at a pretty conventional 2.8kHz. The sealed enclosure delivers -2dB points at 70Hz and 17kHz, with -6dB reached at 45Hz and 22K. Maximum ▶

▶ continuous SPL is a worrying 108dB – enough even for hardened head-bangers. There are no user adjustable parameters or contour switches. Indeed, user interface is confined to plugging in the IEC mains lead and balanced interconnect and flicking the on-off switch. The Active 20 is about as no-nonsense as an active speaker can be.

the better match. The 20 litre volume and tapered cabinet mean that the Active 20s have a largish frontal area, and whilst the curved edges reduce the visual impact, there's no escaping the fact that they look a little uncomfortable perched on spindly stands. Aesthetically at least, a multi-pillar support might well work rather better, providing a more balanced visual pairing with the large cabinet, as well as making the whole edifice more stable. Garrick can of course oblige, building stands to order when it comes to the number, height and even shape of the pillars.

Once again, the numbers here are instructive (maybe pro companies take a little more care with their measurements – maybe they actually tell the truth?). The Active 20s go plenty loud, which is probably just as well, because for the size of the cabinet they don't have a hugely deep bass. But, whilst they start to roll early, they do it pretty gently. It's tight too, which lets you push the speakers back closer to the wall than you might expect. I ended up with them about 18" out, which is some four or five inches closer than I expected. It might not sound much, but it makes the difference between a convincing foundation to music and something that really only suggests it. Toe-in is absolutely critical too; too little and there's a hole in the middle, too much and the image gets muddled and congested, robbing the picture of much of its insight. But don't worry, the ATCs are more than sufficiently

explicit to make sure that you'll know when you go too far!

In fact, explicit is a good word to describe most aspects of the performance of the ATCs. Play something familiar on them and it's not so much that you'll hear things you never heard before (they're far from the most detailed speakers I've heard), rather that you'll be more aware of how things fit together. Instrumental identity and character, the part it's playing in the great scheme of things, seems far more obvious. Playing Eleanor McEvoy's latest album, *Early Hours*, the Irish-ness apparent with other speakers and systems was suddenly centre stage; not so much an influence as a central pillar. Before, you noticed it; Now, you couldn't miss it. That's what I mean when I say explicit.

How does the Active 20 do this? Well, it's a combination of clear delineation of spatial information and a very, very flat response. On the one hand, images are precisely located in space, occasionally disconcertingly so. On one occasion I found myself listening to a perfectly deployed and spaced drum kit, with the singer's voice coming right from the middle of it! Now that's hardly ATC's fault, but you need to be aware that not everything these speakers tell you will be an aid to musical enjoyment. But it's easier

to forgive when you can hear the manipulated sense of (multi-channel) acoustic on Eleanor's 'Ave Maria' even though you're only listening to two channels. That, or the spatial



Features that might upset hi-fi sensibilities are the fixed grille and recessed front baffle. While it's possible to remove the perforated metal grille by unbolting the bottom plate, it's not intended that you do so, as the relatively unfinished surface of the baffle demonstrates. The deep shoulders of the front extrusions might be expected to severely compromise imaging, however, as we shall see, point the cabinets directly at the listener and this isn't the case.

I used the ATCs on both the IF Designs RSS stand and the Garricks, ultimately, slightly preferring the latter in the context of this particular speaker, where the smooth substance they offered seemed to work rather well. Likewise, the Chord Chameleon proved

contribution of the instrumental placement to the slow tempo arrangement of 'Memphis, Tennessee'. In fact, you could find examples, positive or negative, enough to describe these speakers, on just about any album you choose. Because the fact is that few if any albums are entirely good or bad, and that's exactly what the ATCs deal in - facts.

When I said that they are flat, I didn't mean ruler flat in terms of frequency response (although they sound pretty good in that respect). What I meant is that their response is evenhanded



and without any obvious emphasis. They impose little or nothing of themselves on the recording, at least in the additive sense. Their contribution is entirely consistent. But saying that nothing is added is not the same as saying that nothing is taken away, and there is a lack of character to performances as a whole that stands in stark contrast to the abundant character within them.

Back to facts, I guess.

Indeed, the Active 20 is all about facts, to the extent that it becomes almost matter of fact itself. Which, depending on your point of view, is no bad thing. Let's use another example from *Early Hours*. 'Days Roll By' is a rollicking slice of straight ahead rock, delivered with gusto. The ATCs tell you exactly who is playing and what they're doing; Brian Connor's piano part is wonderfully explicit, its rock'n'roll roots clear to hear. The choppy rhythm guitar is insistent, the drumming quick and incisive. Despite the busy, almost

congested mix you can hear

exactly what's going on.

What you don't get, is the kick in the seat of the pants, the physical impact of the rhythmic pause and up-shift that heralds the chorus. And that's what will decide whether this speaker is for you or not.

The Active 20 never fails to inform. If you want a speaker system that allows access to the process and contents of the recording then you need look no further. If you want the music to reach out and grab you then you'll need to look elsewhere. Or, to put it another way, they'll give you access to the music rather than the music access to you. But then, the company has built its reputation on studio monitors and what I'm describing here sounds like the very model of a modern Major Gener... sorry, monitor. ATC stress the common voicing and performance elements that bind their entire range, as well as the consistency between individual examples of each product. It makes mixing and matching the different speakers a credible and trouble-free option which is vital in today's studio (and becoming so in today's domestic, multi-channel set-ups).

There has been a long (and some would say glorious) tradition of using studio monitors in a domestic environment – often with the assumption of superior accuracy. But it's important to remember that importing a highly evolved species from one context to another brings baggage as well as benefits. Drive a Formula 1 car on the road and you'll see what I mean – quite apart from the lack of indicators. Use a bona fide studio monitor and the price you pay for consistency, reliability and indestructibility becomes just one of the intangibles. ATC represent the doyen of British monitor manufacturers. If your agenda is the same as theirs then buy with absolute confidence. But, be aware of what you're buying. Even dressed in civvies, the Active 20 is an uncompromising housemate.



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Two-way active speaker system
Bass Loading:	Sealed Box
Drive Units:	25mm soft-dome tweeter 150mm pulp-cone bass/mid
Bandwidth:	70Hz – 17kHz ±2dB 45Hz – 22kHz ±6dB
Crossover:	2.8K Max Continuous
SPL:	108dBA
Amplifiers:	140W LF 50W HF
User Controls:	None
Weight:	27kg ea.
Dimensions (WxHxD):	285x470x395mm
Finishes:	Grey/Black Others to order
Price:	£2650pr

Manufacturer:

Loudspeaker Technology Ltd
Tel. (44)(0)1285 760561
Net. www.atc.gb.net



The PMC AML1 Active Loudspeaker System

by Roy Gregory

The AML1 active monitors might be small, but PMC would certainly claim that they're perfectly formed, especially if the three-year development period is anything to go by. In fact, as soon as you scratch the (very pretty) surface of the AML1 you quickly realise that there's far more here than meets the eye. One look at the spec sheet will tell you that all is not what it seems, and two key numbers certainly stand out, demanding further explanation: A -3dB point of 33Hz and a crossover at 1.4kHz !

The first thing you need to know about the little PMC is, that despite appearances and its diminutive dimensions, this is actually a transmission line enclosure, a design path that dictates just about everything else in the mix. Folded into the compact cabinet (and remember that there's two channels of power amplification and an active crossover in there too) is a five and a half foot line, loading the 6.5'' in-house designed and built woofer. The distinctive flat diaphragm is dictated by the demands of the transmission line loading. The unit has to drive that five and a half foot column of air in the line, an arrangement that creates serious pressure differential between

the air in front of the driver and the air behind it. This demands an exceptionally rigid diaphragm if it isn't to be physically distorted.



PMC use a quarter-inch thick carbon/Nomex honeycomb, mounted on the front of an almost impossibly large

motor assembly. The massive magnets are close to the diameter of the basket itself, their field further focused by the shielding can that allows the AML1s to be used close to TV monitors.

The rigidity of the moving element in the AML1's bass driver

doesn't come free of charge, the downside being much higher mass.

That's something of a double-edged sword.

On the one hand it pushes the driver's fundamental resonance lower, but on the other it limits its usefulness at higher frequencies. Hence that astonishingly low 1.4kHz crossover point (3kHz is nearer the average). But PMC have been making transmission lines for quite a while now and they've learnt a thing or two along the way. Take a look at that tweeter. Its huge 34mm dome easily stretches down to meet the output from the bass unit, while the combination of the large radiating area and the enormous motor assembly mean that it'll play really, really loud without distress. The problem with large diameter domes is poor dispersion at higher frequencies, a flaw that PMC have tackled with a perforated dispersion plate that's actually quite fragile, even if it looks like it's there to protect the tweeter.

The electronics package is



It also needs plenty of power.

▶ entirely built by PMC, but is directly derived from the Bryston amplifiers that the company distributes in this country. It's an important association; far too many pro monitor designs are sonically compromised by relying on sub-standard monolithic chip or mos-fet amplification. PMC have effectively miniturised a 100W Bryston 3B channel for the bass and an 80W 2B channel for the tweeter. There's also the best part of a 10B active crossover in there. Along the way, the circuitry has lost all its generic electrolytic capacitors, replaced with OSCONs, and is still built from discrete components throughout. And lest you think the changes constitute a compromise, think again. Most of these developments will find their way back into the Bryston donor units.

Again, packing all those electronics into such a small space is not without its problems. The various elements require careful shielding, while the heat is dispersed with an extremely efficient chimney heat-sink. A flap at the rear of the cabinet hides the bass and treble equalisation controls and a bypass switch that takes them out of circuit. Unlike most active speakers the AML1 dispenses with electronic equalisation to extend its bass response. Instead, there's optional equalisation after the crossover that provides for both bass and treble tilt along with a variable bass roll-off should conditions demand. There's also a level control to match sensitivity to the driving line-stage.

All of which, I think you'll agree, is a lot to cram into a cabinet that's

only 40cms tall. PMC manufacture the AML1's carcass from a combination of 18 and 20mm Medite, a superior and more consistent brand of MDF. Its small dimensions and the full width walls of the folded line, which effectively constitute four major braces within its diminutive internal volume, create a dense and incredibly rigid structure.



The beautifully sculptured front panel is replaceable and available in blue or grey as standard, with other colours to order. As well as hiding all the mounting hardware it smooths the dispersion from the bass driver and gently horn loads the tweeter. The bottom plate is tapped to accept a matching stand, although I chose to use the superb IF Designs Signature

model. Connections are limited to an IEC input socket for power, and a balanced XLR for signal. Apart from a power switch, that's your lot.

Of course, single-ended inputs are almost unheard of in the studio world, and given that you'll almost certainly be running the AML1s on long leads, they're no great loss. However, it does mean that you need a source with balanced outputs. I ran the PMCs either directly from the Wadia 861SE with its digital volume control, or from a Bryston BP25 pre-amp, useful with analogue sources. The overall effect is one of compact confidence, the tough paint finish and carefully executed relief lines contributing to an air of no-nonsense quality. Which is just as well, given that a pair of AML1s will set you back all but £3700. Well, they certainly look the part, and bearing in mind that that price includes your power amplification, it's actually not unreasonable, especially once you've got over the initial gulp and "How much?" response.

Mind you, that "How much?" might just as easily be applied to the astonishing bass performance of the AML1. It's not just quantity but quality as well, and all from a tiny cabinet. Indeed, the depth and weight of the low frequencies available from the little PMC are sufficient to get it into trouble if you don't take sufficient care. Which brings us to set-up, I guess. I placed the AML1s slightly further back than normal in my listening room, and fed them with a set of long Chord Co. Cobra leads. Now, generally speaking, balanced connection should minimise the influence ▶

▶ of the cable used, but don't assume that that means it doesn't matter. Trying the Cobra, the more expensive Chameleon and a set of microphone cables courtesy of CB, the PMCs demonstrated a strong preference for the cheaper Chord cable. This was in line with Chord's recommendations so seems like a consistent state of affairs.

I preferred the sound of the speakers with the EQ in bypass position. Switching it in, even with the controls set flat, robbed the sound of some transparency, immediacy and attack, rounding it off. Having said that, in CB's room, which has a mid-bass hump that tends to help small speakers, the AMLIs sounded a shade over rich and a little fruity, a tendency that was easily corrected with a touch of bass tilt. So whilst I preferred the sound 'flat' the EQ provided is subtle enough to be useful and significantly enhances the versatility of the speaker. No bad thing given the appeal of such a design for small spaces where the prodigious extension could all too easily become an embarrassment.

Overall, the sound of the AMLIs comes as something of a surprise. There's none of the astringent leanness that afflicts so many monitors, justified in the pursuit of accuracy. Straight from switch on, there's a welcoming sense of rightness to the music, an unexpected sense of generosity. Now some of that is down to the bass extension, which delivers a healthy sense of balance, but it also reflects the voicing of the speaker itself. At the risk of offending PMC I have to say that this is one of the least

obviously accurate monitors I've heard. It's also one of the most enjoyable. It in no way dismantles the performance or recording. You can hear exactly what's going on, but instruments and musical strands always remain part of a coherent musical whole. The substance, direction and intent of the performance are



never in doubt. The energy, timing and pace are equally explicit.

All of which helps to explain the popularity of the AML1 as an outside broadcast monitor, where a single set of speakers has to deliver the entire performance, one regard in which the little PMC never disappoints. Overall integrity is where the AML1 scores big. Its weaknesses lie in the slightly uneven treble response.

It's not the most refined and gets nowhere near the air, texture or subtlety of the bass. Cymbal work can sound a little exposed and obvious and there's a slightly jangly quality that can add an edge to vocals, most notably on the superb Talking Heads re-masters where it chimes with the already edgy quality of the early Byrne vocals. It's easy to point a finger at the size of the dome tweeter and the efforts to extend its response, but I believe that's premature. The effects are certainly inherent to the speaker but I can't help feeling that the Cobra is contributing to them if not exactly aggravating them. The problem is that its surefooted agility across the rest of the range, its leading edge integrity and crisp attack dovetails so seamlessly with the rest of the range that the pluses easily outweigh the minuses. Even if one of those minuses coincides with and exposes a weakness in the speaker.

This is not a huge problem and by its very nature it is revealed more on some recordings than others. Even then it seldom irritates. Given more time I'd play with a few more cables and I'm sure that a better match than the Cobras would emerge. But experience with the smoother Chameleon demonstrated all too clearly that any artificial rounding in the mid-band is ruthlessly exposed by the speaker and quickly undermines the life and energy that makes it so appealing. Bottom line? I'd happily use the Cobras until I found something better, and they ▶

▷ certainly haven't reduced my enjoyment of music one iota. As with any speaker, the PMC involves compromise and those compromises will be audible. Thankfully, in this case you can hear them but they really don't intrude. The chosen balance of virtues is a brave one given the intended use of the speaker for monitoring, putting musical integrity ahead of ruler flat response. It certainly deserves to succeed.

Acoustic material sounds spectacular on the AML1s, helped by their effortless sense of scale. The new Eleanor McEvoy disc was all sweetness and space, clearly demonstrating the quality of the recording. Orchestral music thrived on the bass texture and air, the unburstable dynamic range available. And whilst you can play the PMCs quietly, in which mode they retain impressive dynamic range and immediacy (as the active theory suggests they should) their sheer musical enthusiasm encourages you to play them loud while their lack of strain fools you into thinking they're not as loud as they actually are! A recently arrived Peggy Lee disc was wonderfully seductive at low levels. Stop the disc, increase the level, wait a minute or two to allow your ears to forget/adjust and start again. Exactly the same intimate, solid presence and seductive immediacy, but now at the other end of the volume range. This consistency, regardless of level or musical programme is a rare quality. It further underlines that whilst these speakers might not have the tedious, featureless flatness



claimed by many monitors their evenhandedness is in quite a different and far more important realm. Those who find monitors altogether too matter of fact take note – whilst the PMCs will doubtless perform that function admirably, I quickly forgot the label and simply got on with

enjoying the music.

These compact, active speakers are an unusual take on the formula. Having said that, direct coupling the driving amplifier to a transmission line overcomes so many of the potential problems with this method of bass loading that it's a wonder that I haven't come across the solution before. Those theoretical benefits are fully realised in the superb low frequency performance of the AML1. Representing a £2000 speaker and £1700 of power amp, I can think of no passive combination that remotely approaches the low-end quality or extension on offer. Factor in the size, the unburstable levels produced and the sheer musical enjoyment generated and the PMCs make a powerful argument for inclusion on domestic system shortlists and I'll be extremely sorry to see them go. I've been intrigued by the concept, impressed by the execution and entertained by their enthusiasm. I suspect that all that's required to conquer the hearts of middle-England is a nice wood finish... ▷+

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Active two-way transmission line	-6dB, -3dB, +1.5dB, +3dB. Knee at 500Hz)
Drivers:	34mm soft-dome tweeter 165mm Cabon Fibre/ Nomex flat diaphragm	HF tilt (@10kHz, -5dB, -2.5dB, +2.5dB. Knee at 1kHz)
Bandwidth:	33Hz – 22kHz ±3dB	Weight: 16kg ea.
Crossover:	1.4kHz	Dimensions (WxHxD): 200x400x316mm
Maximum SPL:	116dBA	Finishes: Grey/Black or Blue/Black Others to order
Transmission Line Length:	1.7M	Price: £3700pr
Amplifiers:	100W LF BOW HF	Manufacturer: The Professional Monitor Company Ltd
User Controls:	LF roll-off (-3dB @ 50Hz, 80Hz, 90Hz) LF tilt (@30Hz, -9dB,	Tel. (44)(0)870 4441044 Net. www.pmc-speakers.com

Going Active

by Chris Binns

While the subject of the 'great divide' between professional equipment and hi-fi could justify pages of interesting debate, with limited space I would offer just a couple of facts to put things in perspective. Recording studios and their engineers exist to do a job, where artistic and creative considerations are increasingly governed by the budget. Thus the equipment involved is a tool, a means to an end. Hi-fi is used to listen to the result of this work, and is (or should be) a recreational thing that is there for enjoyment with no time constraints; studio engineers rarely listen to music for pleasure. With a number of hi-fi speakers being used in the studio to represent 'what the punters hear at home', can it work the other way, i.e. is a good small studio monitor suitable as a domestic product?

Both ATC and PMC have significant heritage in professional monitoring, and while the models reviewed here are designed primarily for that purpose, the companies have had considerable success with models in the domestic market. RG has been listening to them from the viewpoint of their use as a domestic loudspeaker, and in theory at least a product that is specified to accurately reflect what is happening at the

recording stage should be effective further down the line for listening to music. But what an engineer needs to hear does not always translate into comfortable or enjoyable listening in the home. I spent a couple of days using both models with my recording engineer's hat on to analyse recordings that I was familiar with, and thus present a slightly different viewpoint as to how these products shape up.

The PMC is compact enough to be used as a nearfield monitor, occupying a position on top of or just behind a mixing desk. Listening at close range, the AML1 took a little bit of getting used to, partly I suspect as a result of the unusually low crossover frequency, which once you become accustomed to it highlights the fact that the more usual frequency for a two way of around 2.5 to 3 KHz is slap bang in the middle of a particularly sensitive area. Spoken voice and vocals had a directness about them that was usefully informative, although I felt there was a degree of sibilance with the treble response which was inclined to be a little uneven and occasionally ragged. The bass was truly impressive, (it comes as no surprise to me that the main driver is manufactured by Volt, and that David Lyth has been involved in

development of the AML1) and I suspect to some degree redefines what is achievable from a 6" driver in a small enclosure. Especially if one believes the manufacturers claim that there is no equalisation applied to the bottom end. Speaking of which, it would prove excessive in a small control room or against a wall (a strong possibility in today's smaller hard disc editing suites or audio visual monitoring) and the switchable EQ comes into its own. Engaging it does muddy the sound a little bit, but it provides really sensible and useful control over the bass that allows considerable flexibility in different situations, while the HF tilt can ameliorate aggressive or bright recordings.

The AML1 performed well at low levels, continuing to offer plenty of detail while not losing out at the frequency extremes. It also went very loud without losing control or compressing the musical signal, managing to sound like a much bigger monitor for most of the time, which is a desirable achievement. The combination of the excellent Bryston sourced amplification (an area which is usually a major let down with active monitors) with some serious loudspeaker engineering has yielded some interesting results. While the



▶ PMC is not the most refined of monitors I have used, and does suffer some mild colouration compared to other loudspeakers, it makes up for this by being incredibly enthusiastic and thus enjoyable. Which for me is an important consideration when listening to

similar market in professional use, it is considerably larger and thus is less suited to nearfield monitoring. I suspect the intended application is for the midfield, behind the mixing desk. Apart from the cabinet volume, it has a lot in common with the PMC, and is not short of quality engineering, certainly in terms of

a studio monitor should, capable of high levels without stress, and reasonable extension at both ends. What lies in between is 'flat', with no accentuation of any part of the audio spectrum; spoken voice is neutral, even by BBC standards – it doesn't have any of that richness I associate with say the Spendor BC1. As such, it is accurate and uncoloured, which should be a prerogative of any loudspeaker that carries the monitor tag, and provided a clear and concise window on many recordings with which

I am familiar. What it lacked was an ability to convey any sense of life and expression to music, which made it difficult to maintain any interest in what was going on. More specifically, what I felt was missing was any sense of musical dynamics, regardless of listening levels, and ultimately I found the ATCs rather boring and frustrating to listen to. This flatness sounded almost as if the speaker was reticent to let the music go, which incidentally, is not a criticism that I could aim at ATC's passive monitors on the occasions when I have used them.

There are engineers that I know who take an academic and sometimes impartial approach to their work, and would strongly argue that getting involved in music that they are working on might adversely effect their technical judgement; in this respect the Active 20's are an ideal tool for them. For me, I like to work with a system that allows more opportunity to get inside the music, one which encourages listening and evaluation in a more creative and artistic way. While I respect the ATC's performance from a technical point of view, they would not be my first choice for speakers to listen recreationally. ➤



the same (sometimes pretty crap) piece of music over and over again for several hours at a time. Those looking for a small box that really can fill a room should take a serious look at the AML 1.

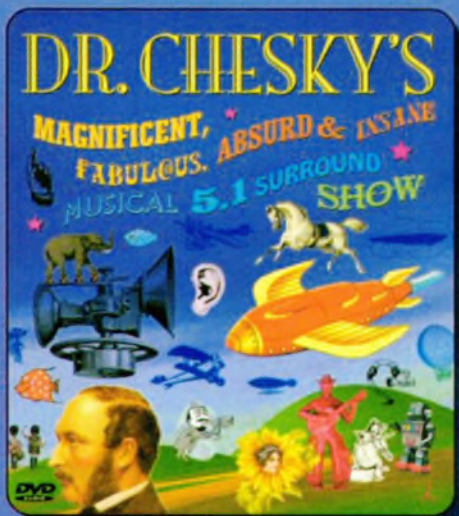
While the ATC Active 20 would, on paper at least be aiming for a

the drive units which are impressive to say the least. In terms of their performance however, they are very different. In many ways, the ATC's sound much more like you'd think

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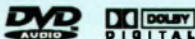
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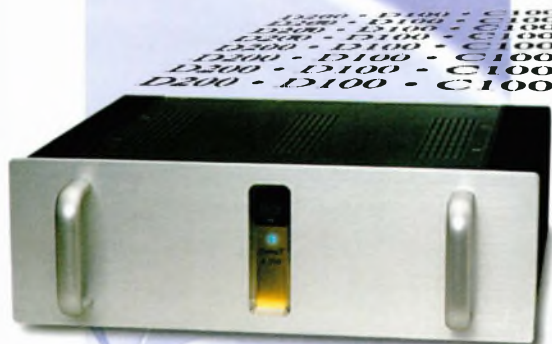


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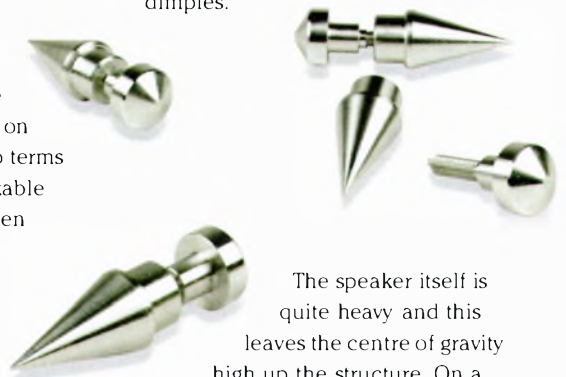
by Chris Thomas

Every so often I get to hear something different and unusually challenging. The sort of product which both confirms that preconceptions are dangerously mind narrowing and which challenges the status quo. The Eben X-Centric from Denmark is such a product in that it goes about its business in such a different way and presents a picture of music and its many threads that many of us, thoroughly used to more conventional loudspeakers, would find distinctly at odds with our usual mindset. One of the most interesting things about this job is using your experience to wring the best possible sound from each and every component that comes your way. Sometimes you can practically throw a system together and it sounds great immediately and then, as you understand its requirements, you can spend some time fine-tuning and refining it. Or, and I'm thinking particularly of the Gallo sub/sat system here, you need to listen very carefully to what the system is doing, decide what is wrong and try to find a way around it. The Gallo's can be made to sound good but it takes thought, dedication, time and effort and yet so many people make sweeping and quite stupid statements about how bad they are after they have heard the set-up in a shop or show where it is highly unlikely, to say the least, that they will have been installed with anything like the degree of care and precision they require.

Likewise the Eben speakers, which first came to our attention back in issue No 28 where both CB and RG got to the bottom of what they were all about. Personally, I found the whole review fascinating and was therefore delighted when Roy offered me the chance to spend some time with the smaller stand mounted X-Centric, though I wasn't quite prepared for the perspective shift that would be required on my part before I really got to terms with just what these remarkable speakers are capable of when employed in the right way. In fact, after I had spent an initial afternoon and evening listening to them, I rang Roy and told him that I was not feeling comfortable with them and perhaps I was not the man for this particular review. As usual he found the whole thing rather amusing and gave me the impression that I was walking a path that he had already trodden some months before. He ran through his own experiences with the larger X-3's, acknowledged that they were a different proposition and made a few suggestions, the main one of which was to stick with it. Well I'm glad I did, as six weeks later my feelings about them could hardly be more different.

The X-Centric is a smaller stand mount version of the X-3. If you imagine the larger speaker minus its three

bottom drivers you'll be pretty close. It sits on a tall slim-line aluminium stand that is left hollow and unfilled and therefore rings like a bell when you strike it. The stand base looks too small to offer a really stable platform and the speakers sit atop it decoupled by four small rubbery dimples.



The speaker itself is quite heavy and this leaves the centre of gravity high up the structure. On a wooden floor it is actually quite difficult to attain a satisfyingly rigid installation and this is in part due to one of the most baffling spike arrangements I have ever come across. When screwed in tightly the solid and substantial spikes are no problem. However, as soon as you try to unscrew one of them to take up any slight rocking, the spike becomes loose on its thread and wobbles about all over the place, as there is no method that I can determine of locking it securely in place. This really needs swift attention. In fact a much better solution, especially for a hard floor, is likely to be the ColdRay system of cups and balls. These arrived ▶

▶ just before the end of this review so I have not had enough time as yet to really evaluate their sonic impact but by next issue I will have had more experience with them and will slide a comment or two into the Audio Smorgasbord.

So, in situ, the X-Centric never really feels as



immobile or solid as you might expect or like it to be. The dimensions of the stand's top-plate seem too small in comparison to the footprint of the cabinet. They're distinctly at odds with other stand mounts where the dimensions of the large top-plate matches the base of the speaker (like the JMLabs Micro Utopia) which is often securely bolted to the stand (like the Sonus Faber Cremona Auditor or the Revel Gems). And there are no guidelines or indications as to where the stand should meet the speakers. You just have to judge that for yourself.

Much of what CB wrote about the X-3's technical specification applies to the X-Centric as the two speakers share similar drive units.

Raidho, who build the Ebens, developed the tweeter that is used throughout the X series. Designated the FTT75 this is an unusual driver. It looks like a ribbon unit but is better described as being Planar and designer Michael Borresen has managed to lighten the diaphragm considerably by etching a voice coil onto an extremely low mass material which sits in a field created by an array of neodymium magnets. This gives the tweeter the advantage of being driven across its whole surface from 3.5KHz to beyond 50KHz though I must say that, at first listen, you would never guess that the high-end response of the tweeter was anything exceptional.

Coupling and integrating this rather different and interesting unit to moving coil drivers was, I suspect, a real challenge and Raidho finally settled on units from

Audiotechnology, a company founded by the man who created Scanspeak and Dynaudio. At first glance the two polypropylene units look as if they come from Dynaudio, with their slot venting around the dust caps, but here they find themselves mounted either side of the tweeter in a classic time-aligned D'Appolito arrangement. But the tweeter mounting is what draws the attention as it sits secured to the cabinet at the business end of a pre-formed horn fabricated from a highly damped, injection moulded polymer. In common with CB's experiences with the X-3's this had grown loose, presumably from prodding inquisitive hands, and had a tendency to either fall off

completely or become slightly dislodged giving me the chance to hear them without its influence. Now this critical little piece is absolutely vital as it loads the tweeter enabling the superb and unusual integration of the drivers. Eben assure me that production models will suffer no such problems and that the moulding is now secured in place. Internally they are wired with Nordost monofilament cable and connections are for single terminations, though bi-wired cables are easily accommodated in the usual manner. There is also a large 70mm rear facing port.



As I mentioned before, I had real problems adjusting to the balance of this speaker. The main challenge for me, and I suspect anyone else who has spent the last twenty years listening primarily to conventional moving-coil driver designs, is that the shape of the sound at first seems all wrong. Not only does the horn loading give the tweeter a slightly ▶

▶ enclosed colouration (CB called it “cupped” and this is probably the best description) but it seems to be coming from a different place in the soundstage. Taking a visual analogy for a moment, where the usual picture is of the high frequencies sitting atop the bass and mid, here they seem embedded in the overall picture and this initially seems to rob the high frequencies of air and extension. It took me a while to really get used to this balance and presentation (as it did a number of friends who heard the Ebens) but, once I had experimented with the positioning and got to trust the speaker, it began to sound more and more natural to me, and now I have difficulty hearing the overall integration as anything other than entirely correct.

The large rear port means that the X-Centric is not fond of being sited too close to a rear wall and although the tweeter has exemplary dispersion horizontally it seems to me that it is rather less expansive vertically. This means that it is important to sit at the right height so your head is as close to being at tweeter level as possible. Use them with a succession of inferior amplifiers, sources or even cabling and you will get the impression that the X-Centrics are overly fussy and demand only the most expensive in partnering equipment. But you’d be wrong. They just need quality equipment and as their tremendous performance with the superb little Pathos Classic One integrated amplifier shows, it doesn’t need to be expensive. Correctly utilised they are pussycats and not remotely hyper-balanced or excessively fussy. They can and will accurately reflect the rest of your system, so don’t blame them for all ills. They will

seriously examine the system’s potential in all areas. They do the big things really well. Bandwidth for instance is excellent and the bass has a real sense of presence and scale to it with the extension versus control equation just about right. Music as a whole seems to have an effortless feeling of dynamics.



Add this to the fact there seem to be no cabinet effects to add bloom or drag the speaker back rhythmically, and that the drivers are probably the fastest moving coil designs you have ever heard, and it’s not hard to see why they are uncannily good when it comes to tempo and timing issues.

But what sets them apart is the

way they illuminate and resolve small dynamic shifts with their extraordinary sensitivity to micro dynamics. They are one of the very few speakers I have heard that have both the resolution and the coherence to allow you to take that extra step into the music and appreciate what makes an orchestra, band or soloist, truly great. Detail

is a term that probably

means different things to different people but this

speaker comes

as close to satisfying most expectations as I’ve heard. Where listening to some high-end, high-resolution systems can often seem like undertaking a forensic examination, the Ebens always seems firmly on the side of the music and bring into focus the sense of the instrument in terms of its scale and the various physical energies used to play it. Likewise with vocals, where small shadings and variations of tone, volume and inflection can impart such expressiveness and meaning to a song. And this, coupled with their tremendously stable and realistic sound-staging, is probably one of the reasons why I enjoyed listening to live recordings so much on them. Here the sense of the



▶ real warts and all event is laid bare and you get a satisfying view of both the performance and the event. Multi-track recordings sound just what they are, a bunch of hyper processed tracks mixed together and quite often it is, I have to say, a disappointing experience. Not always though, as there are good and bad studio multi-track recordings: It's just that, if they are poor, this Eben shows them in a naked and unflattering light.


Involvement is the word for the X-Centric's performance. After a period of acclimatisation they pull you straight into the music every time you hear them. Tonally they are extremely good though not beyond criticism. They are obviously always subservient to the source, cabling and amplification but they are among the very few speakers that are able to illustrate an instrument's colour, dynamic range, character



and the techniques used to energise it quite so starkly and without any notable sense of hi-fi induced artifice. Even people used to real high-end goodies will notice how acoustic instruments seem so unprocessed and natural and that vocals and particularly harmonies have such clarity and separation.

But, even for those who place rhythmic integrity high on the list of must haves and who own one of those systems famous for being on-the-beat I suspect there will be a number of surprises in store. Between the high hat, snare and bass drum that most people hear as the guardians of tempo, lies a whole world of subtlety where great players feel at home and at liberty to play on and between the beat. It's where they live and where they do their best and most creative work. And it is here, where subtlety of phrasing is king, that all sorts of fascinating musical threads are created and it's here also that many would say the Eben X-Centrics are at their best.

There's no doubt in my mind that the Eben X-Centric is a great loudspeaker, even with its foibles. It's great because it can make a listening session a really memorable event and a learning experience as

well. But it is also somewhat ruthless and does not sugar coat the music either tonally or spatially. Don't expect this speaker to create holographic walk-in soundstages as a matter of course. Play a couple of your favourite discs and one will leave you amazed at what you are hearing while another could quite easily be a total disappointment. Personally I find them a breath of fresh air and I'd like to hang onto them for a while longer. Partly because I really need to investigate their potential with the ColdRay feet and partly to try them with a few more amplifiers - but mainly because I just like listening to them. So this story isn't over yet. In fact, I think it's going to run and run... 

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Stand mounted, rear ported loudspeaker
Drive Units:	1x Raidho planar tweeter 2x 155mm polypropylene mid/bass
Bandwidth:	50Hz - 50KHz ±3dB
Sensitivity:	90dB
Impedance:	5 ohm
Crossover:	3500Hz
Dimensions (WxHxD):	500x180x350mm
Weight:	25Kg
Finishes:	Grey as standard, other colours to order.
Prices -	
Speakers:	£5000
Stands:	£400

Manufacturer:

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KEF Reference Model 201 Loudspeaker

by Roy Gregory

Having reviewed KEF's mighty Reference Model 207 (and even mightier PSW5000 sub-woofer) and found them both physically and musically imposing, it makes sense to turn to the smallest speaker in the range. You see, as imposing as the 207s are, their price-tag is equally imposing, especially when the sub-woofer is added into the equation. Imposing enough to put them beyond the reach of most mere mortals, financially if not domestically. The question then becomes, can you achieve a taste of the flagship combination if you shop further down the range (or live in less than palatial accommodation)?

Enter then the Model 201, the baby of KEF's Reference range. Having said that, for a baby it's still on the large side, measuring 557mm high and 402mm and weighing in at close to 15kg each. But, anyone who has seen the 207 is going to recognise the family resemblance: same boat back cabinet, same domed mid-range enclosure, same chromed bullet holding the super-tweeter. Then there's the UNI-Q driver with its flat surround and the occluded reflex port. The genetic markers run pretty deep, but to assume that this is simply a little 207 misses a few distinct differences. For starters, the UNI-Q driver in the flagship is housed in its own, isolated, cast aluminium enclosure, optimally shaped to dissipate the driver's rear radiation. In the lesser models, the 201 included, the mid-range driver enjoys a similar aluminium casting across the critical upper arc, but the lower two thirds of its enclosure is a separate section

within the MDF cabinetry.

The 207 employs a dedicated lower-mid driver, linking to the two, individually ported bass drivers. Clearly that arrangement is out of the question in a much smaller speaker. Having said that, the 201 still constitutes a genuine four-way design: Not bad in the sort of enclosure volume more normally associated with a straight forward two-way. So KEF are scoring big for technological content, but in a world where complexity is often considered the root of all evil, that can be a double edged sword. To answer the charge, KEF must justify their investment in high-tech solutions in terms of musical benefits.

The phase and time-domain benefits of coincident drivers are well-known and generally accepted (although I enjoyed an amusing debate with one chap who thought that a UNI-Q driver represented a method of horn loading a tweeter – but then he also thought that high-frequencies would be scattered and dispersed off of the surface of the mid-range cone). However, the really clever part about the UNI-Q is the way that the mid-range cone acts to impedance match the tweeter's output to the room. The result is far wider dispersion than you normally get

from a typical 25mm dome. Dispersion in fact, that matches the dispersion of the mid-range driver at the critical crossover frequency. What many people don't appreciate is that when you hear the crossover in a speaker more often than not it's the difference in dispersion between the two drivers that tips the ear. This simple byproduct of the UNI-Q design is what delivers the superbly seamless broad mid-band that the KEF Reference designs have enjoyed from the 105-3 onwards. But it goes further than that in the 201. The mid/treble crossover might occur at 2.7kHz, right in the middle of the ear's

most sensitive range, but the bass leg cuts in at a still obvious 400Hz, especially when the energy spectrum of the low-frequencies has such a critical influence over the pace, life and drive of music. By using a 165mm bass unit that matches the diameter and flare of the UNI-Q,

KEF extend the coherent dispersion characteristics of their drivers all the way from the -3dB point at 58Hz all the way up to 15kHz, where the super-tweeter takes over. Even then, the careful shaping of the casting that covers the UNI-Q and supports the super-tweeter, along with the tiny frontal area of the super-tweeter housing, ensures minimal disturbance of that driver's output.

The almost universally adopted boat-shaped cabinet with its heavy



▶ bracing and curved edges needs little comment. Nor does the careful flaring of the front facing port. Round the back, there are terminals for tri-wiring (or tri-amping) the speaker, which are fitted with the most practical bridges I've yet come across. Unfortunately, their sonic performance is less impressive than their appearance and ease of use.



I replaced them, to excellent effect, with short straps of Chord Odyssey. The top of the terminal block carries a small extra "terminal" with a socket positioned either side. By unscrewing this and replacing it one of the spare spaces you can apply bass cut or lift, allowing a sensible degree of room compensation, although my well behaved room allowed me to run the 201s flat without problems.

KEF's matching stands arrived sand filled, saving me the bother (you won't be so lucky), and with a superb

arrangement when it comes to spiking them. The company finally seems to have learnt its lesson here after years of sub-standard floor coupling. The 201 stands are fitted with beefy spikes that can be adjusted from above and then locked in place with neat, chromed locking caps. All we need now is a spirit level in the top of the stand (or speaker, like the 207) and we'll be well away. The stand attaches to the speaker with three screws, making for an extremely solid and stable structure.

In terms of system compatibility, on paper the 201s possess a nominal 8 Ohm load (with a minimum at 3.2 Ohms) and 88dB sensitivity, so whilst they're not super demanding, they're way beyond the likes of single-ended triodes. In practice, and in common with a lot of small speakers, the 201s actually thrive on power. They'll deliver with a good 50W valve amp, but the more power you give them the more they like it, and that goes for bi- and tri-amping as well, but more on that later. I relied on the Rogue Audio M150 monos or the Bonnac power amp for most of my listening (my RADIA being away with Mr Thomas at the time).

The comparison between the two amps was instructive. The Bonnac was all control and crisp, unflustered organisation, good texture in the bass and even, unforced detail. In fact, the very model of the competent, powerful solid-state amp that it is. Switch to the Rogues and you have a far more ebullient, dynamic, larger scale and ultimately, a more engaging presentation. The valve amps are full of presence and cut the speakers loose, offering an unfettered and unconcerned view of the musical event. The Bonnac sounds rather

constrained and almost puritan after the Rogues. But at the same time there's no denying its stability and control. I ended up doing most of my listening with the M150's driven by the excellent conrad-johnson Premier 17LS2, although I can understand the appeal of the solid-state alternative.

But the real point here is just how clearly the KEFs delineate the attributes of their partnering equipment. The system sounds like the driving electronics (an unusual attribute in a speaker and one that I normally only associate with the likes of the Avalons). The Reference 201s are a genuinely low distortion transducer, yet they achieve that goal without crushing the life out of the music. They are also incredibly coherent,



the smoothness of their top to bottom balance being the key to their lack of identifiable character. There are no lumps or ▶

▶ bumps that superimpose themselves on the music.

The other thing they do is disappear. Listening to the two different amplification set-ups I was repeatedly struck by just how independent the soundstage was. The Jackie Leven track 'Defending Ancient Springs' from the album of the same name, opens with an industrial soundscape. All the cacophony of a shipyard issues forth but the little KEFs take it in their stride. The shouts of workers, the strike of hammers, the erratic fizzing of an arc welder, all are separate and clearly defined, the words articulate the clash of tools natural and readily identified.

The ship whistles are sonorous and surprisingly visceral, while their movement is also convincing. It's a synthetic effect but that doesn't stop it being convincingly atmospheric. Or providing an effective opening pitch for the thrashy purposeful drive of the opening guitar riff.

The coherent independence of the stereo image is one of the KEFs' real strengths but it's also one that's

easy to miss, simply because it is so natural and unforced. This isn't the sort of spot-lit hyper reality of so many mini-monitors, the cavernous walk-in arena applied to every record played. This is a more subtle and realistic perspective that actually reflects the nature and content of the music and recording. It's

not so much a case of creating a huge acoustic space as total separation from the means of production.

Whatever's on the recording is reproduced, free of constraint from the speakers.

Like everything else it reflects the driving amplifier, so that the Bonnac lacks the expansive dimensions or depth of the Rogue, but in both cases the music exists in its own plane, unimpeded by the speaker cabinets and drivers.

That lack of obstruction extends to instruments and voices, let them generate sound within their own energy envelope and at their own pace. So, back to Jackie and we find the beautifully measured and phrased vocal in perfect counterpoint to the frenetic, edgy urgency of the guitar. It's equally impressive on piano phrasing and the balance between left and right hands. The touch, delicacy and texture on upright bass is impressive indeed. What is beyond their scope is the power and weight of the full orchestral climax. The impression is surprisingly convincing in isolation, but lacks the sheer effortless scale

and grounded breath of the real thing (or a full range system). It doesn't detract from one's enjoyment; indeed, there's a vicarious thrill in witnessing just how much you do get out of the 201s. You know, the sort that has you reaching for the *Gladiator* soundtrack. But what's far more important is how naturally the bass output integrates with the mid-range, a key consideration in maximising its musical potential.

So, just like the monster 207s, the 201s major on seamless integration of their complex driver line-up. Much more so than the paper spec would suggest. This is one book that you shouldn't judge by the cover. However, what the specs do hint at is



the speakers' need for a wake up call. Like a lot of small, and especially like a lot of relatively complex speakers, the 201 has a dynamic threshold. That means that you need to reach a certain level before the sound opens up and starts to breathe. Up till then it can sound a bit flat and small. Perhaps that's why I prefer the Rogues; they sound louder. It's not a power thing, or a volume ▶

► thing. Rather it's a power delivery thing, with the valve mono's doing what valve amps do best, which is make the most of the available boot, in this case applying it particularly firmly to the KEF posterior. In many ways this is what really separates the 201 from the far more easy going 207. Factor in the larger speaker's extra bandwidth and efficiency and you see where its added transparency comes from. Which is what you'd expect given the difference in price.

However, the 201s are not without an upgrade path. More dynamic range? More bandwidth? Both can be had – at a price. If you remember, I mentioned before the attractive possibility of bi-amping the little KEF. Then there's always the option of adding a sub-woofer, both steps that can be taken (and paid for) later. Towards the end of the review period I had the opportunity to add a second Bonnac to the equation. It was an imperfect arrangement but was still sufficient to hint at greatness. How imperfect? Well, cable constraints limited me to a simple horizontal bi-amping set-up, rather than my preferred vertical disposition. However, even within these constraints, the benefits were obvious. More dynamic range, more presence, better separation and a greater sense of life were all immediately apparent. In my experience, switching to a vertical set-up would simply extend these further still, making for some fairly spectacular results. But, getting the best out of bi-amping the 201s takes a little care and attention to detail. Firstly, you should split the speaker at the treble cross-over, not the more usual bass leg. That means you use one amplifier channel to drive the bass and mid-range, another to drive the two treble legs. Something nasty happening at very high frequencies giving the amplifier conniptions? I don't know, but the speakers sound

very much happier this way.

The physical arrangement of the bass-mid wiring is also critical. You must replace the existing jumpers with something better, preferably short lengths of whatever speaker cable you're running from the amps to the crossover. (It goes without saying that you should run the same cable for both the bass-mid and the treble legs!) You should also wire the connection diagonally, meaning that you connect the red wire to the mid-range terminal and the black one to the bass. Trust me, it works. Do all these things and you should be rewarded with excellent results. so impressive in fact, that it begs the question whether it might be worth bi-amping from the start, simply using a pair of cheaper amplifiers. Will the swings outweigh the qualitative roundabouts? I don't know the answer to that one but methinks I should maybe investigate...

When it comes to sub-woofers – that's an option I didn't get to try. When I do then I reckon that KEF's PSW4000 would be a good starting point. This bears the same relationship to the monster PSW5000 that the 201 does to the 207: Which makes it both more affordable and a hell of a lot easier to accommodate. A 300mm driver and a 500 Watt amplifier delivers 25Hz extension and 110db maximum SPL, which looks like a perfect match, and it's pretty with it. What I'd expect from the combination is the increased fluidity and transparency that you get from the 207 with its wider band-width. If I can achieve that whilst retaining the 201's coherence then clover's where I'll be.

So the book remains very firmly open on the subject of the KEF Reference Model 201. I need to look at the questions of bi-amplification and external bass augmentation before nailing this one down.

However, rest assured that as it stands the KEF represents an astonishingly accomplished and satisfying speaker. That it also offers the opportunity to grow its performance is a significant bonus, and believe me when I say that I wouldn't be taking the trouble unless both the standalone performance and the increased potential being promised were well beyond the ordinary. The 201 is an excellent speaker in its own right. Don't hold the fact that it can excel still further against it. I could happily live with the Rogue M150/KEF 201 combination, and for now, that is all she wrote. ►✚

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Four-way reflex loaded
Drive Units:	1x 19mm titanium dome SHF 1x 25mm titanium dome HF 1x 165mm MF 1x 165mm LF
Bandwidth:	58Hz – 55kHz ±3dB
Crossovers:	400Hz, 2.7kHz, 15kHz
Sensitivity:	88dB
Impedance:	8 Ohms (3.2 minimum)
Maximum SPL:	110 dB
Magnetic Shielding:	Yes
Dimensions (WxHxD):	248x557x402mm
Weight:	14.8kg
Finishes:	Black Ash, Maple or Cherry
Prices –	
Model 201:	£2000
Stand:	£300

Manufacturer:
KEF Audio (UK) Ltd
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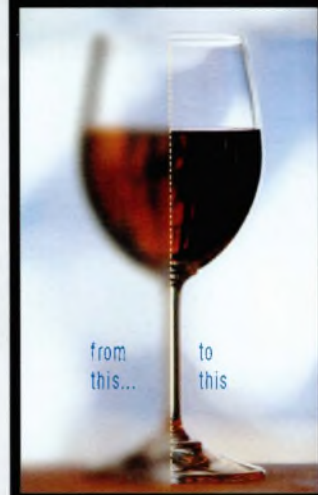
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Leema Xen Satellite and SPLX 10 Sub-Woofer System

by Paul Messenger

"What we really want is electrostatic wallpaper", a friend told me nearly thirty years ago. I'm still hopeful, but in the meantime the passage of time has seen a steady shrinking in the size of the regular moving-coil loudspeakers that make up the marketplace, which of course is a reflection of consumer demand. I'm rather fond of large loudspeakers myself, but have to acknowledge that this is not exactly a popular stance. The majority of people would much prefer to buy invisible speakers, were such available – or at least models that are as discreet as possible.

Sub-miniature speakers (ie less than 7-litres enclosed volume) are nothing new – hi-fi historians can point to the tiny little Goodmans Maxim, which goes back some forty years, and one can single out a number of subsequent classics, like the Videotone Minimax II, the BBC LS3/5A and the Acoustic Energy AE1.

One could name more, of course, and maybe it's pure coincidence, but the last two mentioned both had their roots in the pro audio sector, prior to building a cult reputation on the hi-fi scene – a path that Leema Acoustics would dearly like to follow. Leema was founded in 1998, by two respected and experienced pro audio engineers, Lee Taylor and Mallory Nicholls. And while I'm sure that they're very happy selling this tiny little Xen speaker for £999 per pair, one reason they chose to develop it was to help accommodate the numerous extra channels now required for monitoring multi-channel mixes.

The (second) coming of surround sound has exerted even greater downward pressure on loudspeaker bulk than the arrival of stereo did nearly

fifty years ago, so it's logical enough that the Xen looks even smaller than an LS3/5A or AE1. I say looks, because the front baffle is very small indeed here, measuring just 14x22cm, whereas the enclosure is a deeper-than-one-might-expect 20cm, and is made from relatively thin (1.6mm) metal, so the 5-litre internal volume is perhaps larger than the external dimensions imply.

I actually reviewed a pair of Xens (for another hi-fi magazine) back in Summer 2003. I was sufficiently impressed by the little



Leemas alone to want to try them with the matching sub-woofer accompaniment, the SPLX 10. Even though the Xens are capable of delivering a surprising quantity and depth of bass considering their size (for reasons that I'll get onto in due course), bass output is obviously not going to be their strong point. So some extra assistance through the bottom couple of octaves or so is clearly likely to be well worthwhile.

One could describe this as a

sub/sat combo, though that's an over simplification, if only because the Xens alone are capable of operating over a reasonable bandwidth, and for stereo replay the sub-woofer augments rather than takes over the bass output. The coming of DVD sources for music and movies has created a de facto 5.1-channel surround sound alternative to 2-channel stereo, and this usually takes a rather different route. With 5.1 replay, all the bass can be fed to the subwoofer(s), while the signals fed to the five 'satellite' speakers have usually had the bass frequencies filtered off, so the speakers can be physically small yet also have decent sensitivity and power handling.

The Xen's steel enclosure might be thin, but it's braced by a substantial bolt between the two sides, and damped too, and the end result seems impressively stiff and inert. The front panel is made from 25mm thick MDF, attractively decorated by two-tone veneer work. The drivers are flush-mounted, while the outside edge of the baffle and the inside edges of the ports are nicely chamfered. No fewer than 32 bolts are used to fix the front and (metal) back panel to the wrap (16 for each!). The 100mm cast frame Seas bass/mid driver has an 80mm diameter cone, while the tweeter is a 28mm Vifa soft fabric dome device. The twin ports have foam damping inserts, and the twin terminal pairs feed an audiophile grade network with air-cored inductors and Solen capacitors.

The SPLX 10 sub-woofer costs a not inconsequential £999, but it is very attractive looking, with real wood veneer all round (apart from the face that has the amplification and electronics).

The sealed 18-litre enclosure is



▶ constructed from 25mm MDF, and the whole thing feels immensely hefty, in part because of the massive magnet behind that 250mm driver, and in part because of the powerful 250W amplifier and the attendant power supply used to drive it.



The driver is actually hidden from view behind an extra, veneered panel, fitted to spacers and embossed with a large Leema logo. The company calls this a “pressure zone” design, and it allows the sub-woofer to be used horizontally or vertically. Flexible electronics include variable roll-off frequency and phase controls, and separate speaker and low-level inputs. There’s also the option to add a second, passive sub called an X10DA alongside the SPLX 10, sharing the latter’s power amplifier. This makes good sense from the point of view of achieving even room drive, although I didn’t receive one to play with.

The original pair of Xens I reviewed went missing subsequently while in transit, so Lee lent me his personal pair, which at least ensured that they’d be well run in. However, it turned out that there was a significant difference between the two pairs, related to the low frequency damping, and this showed up in the measured performance as well as the sound quality.

This second pair turned out to be less tightly damped at low frequencies: where the impedance trace of both pairs were essentially the same down to 70Hz: below that point the first samples had virtually eliminated the lower (30Hz) peak of the reflex

double-bump. That reduced low frequency damping was then echoed in the far-field room-averaged response traces, which again showed significant differences at low frequencies, the later samples delivering several decibels more output below 80Hz, even though the samples looked more or less identical above that point.

One might assume that the extra bass output would be welcome, and that’s probably on balance true if one was just using the Xens as a stereo pair. However, whereas the original pair showed bass output tailing off gently and progressively below 200Hz, the second samples tend to stage something of a recovery in the mid-bass, and this made it rather more tricky to achieve good integration with the sub-woofer.

Getting decent bass out of sub-miniature speakers is not easy, though it’s surprising how much can be achieved nonetheless. The simple fact that two spaced speakers are operating essentially in unison adds a worthwhile bass bonus, while the designer can pull down the midband sensitivity in order

not to overwhelm what bass there is. (The Xen is down at around 84dB/W, which puts it amongst the lowest sensitivity I’ve measured for dynamic speakers, although the impedance is refreshingly benign, staying above 6 Ohms throughout.)

Reflex port loading (tuned to around 53Hz here) also adds extra bass more or less for free, while close-to-wall positioning supplies a similar bonus.

Besides wall proximity, the room itself and its various modes adds further acoustic amplification through the bass region. Put all those various factors into the mix, and even a pair of speakers this small can deliver decent practical in-room bass down to around 50Hz.

One bonus that comes from adding a subwoofer to a pair of sub-miniatures is that it’s no longer necessary to use wall reinforcement for the main speakers. These can now be placed out in free space, giving a smoother midband with lower coloration in consequence.

One of the Xen’s biggest strengths is its exceptionally smooth and



well-judged mid-band and treble – which is one reason why it’s best sited on open stands in free space if possible. Even under far-field, in-room conditions, the averaged response trace held within quite remarkable +/-2dB limits from 200Hz up to 7kHz – tighter limits than any other example I’ve encountered in ▶

► fifteen years of regular speaker reviewing. Indeed, from 200Hz upwards the Xen is not only very well balanced, it's also remarkably smooth, and the 3kHz crossover point is so seamless it's entirely invisible on the overall trace.

This is a little unusual. Most speakers show a slight dip in the presence zone, which can make voices sound a little 'shut in', but also helps avoid any tendency to sound aggressive, especially when the system is turned up loud. The little Xen's, however, always make voices sound beautifully open, but can become a little 'hard' at higher levels or with problematic material.

There's a brilliant freedom from 'boxiness' here, which is maybe no great surprise since there's very little box to cause such an effect. More than most, this speaker seems to behave like a 'point source', giving impressive sonic consistency on- and off-axis, and setting up a very stable, almost holographic, stereo soundstage. Just wander around the room while they're playing, and the musicians seem quite happy staying in their appointed places.

Less impressive is the way dynamics seem a little constrained. Voices lack some expressiveness, while music doesn't quite generate the sort of dynamic tension that one finds with large, high sensitivity speakers. Subtle musical textures, such as those created by massed orchestral strings, also seem slightly impoverished, without quite the harmonic richness found elsewhere.

Adding the SPLX 10 sub-woofer to the mix proved quite, though not wholly, successful. Certainly the extra bass it supplied was both effective and welcome, and there was no doubting the ability of this particular sub-woofer to deliver bass that is exceptionally clean, punchy and free from overhang.

However, one problem I regularly find with sub-woofers is that they tend to overlap with the speakers that they're supplementing. There tends to be too much net bass output in the overlap

region, giving an excess of mid-bass rather than deep bass, and this tends to emphasise thump at the expense of weight and scale, sonically speaking.

That was true of the SPLX 10, which suffered from one fundamental problem under our in-room conditions – whatever the setting of the filter, output at 50Hz was at least 7dB stronger than that at 20Hz. Bass variations can be a function of the room more than the sub-woofer, to be sure, but there are sub-woofers out there which can deliver more relative output at 20Hz, and roll-off earlier than this example under similar room conditions.


Because the sub-woofer carries on operating to at least 70Hz, it proved quite tricky to achieve good integration between the Xens and the SPLX 10. Best results occurred with the Xens well clear of walls, and with no little help from the test gear (very useful in getting the phase match right!). Satisfactory performance was eventually achieved, and the trio delivered a notably crisp and clean, full bandwidth sound. However, there was always a



slight tendency to produce too much 'thump', and more ultimate weight would have been appreciated.

The little Xen is an excellent micro-monitor, notable for its exceptionally smooth, clean and open sound. Some might find it a little too cool and

forward, according to taste, but the freedom from boxiness is delightful, and the speaker responds well to placing close to a wall for some bass reinforcement.

The SPLX 10 sub-woofer has some excellent qualities, matching the Xens with its crisp clean clarity, and adding worthwhile extra warmth and weight. But good integration proved quite tricky to achieve, and greater low bass would also have been appreciated. Ultimately, results will vary in different rooms so if the Xens appeal, then the combination is well worth trying. 

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Xen	
Type:	2-Way sub-miniature loudspeaker
Drivers:	25mm soft-dome tweeter with ferro-fluid cooling 100mm polypropylene cone
Power handling:	50 - 100W recommended amplifier power
Impedance:	6 Ohms specified; measured: 8 Ohms nominal; 6 Ohms minimum
Sensitivity:	85dB/2.83V (measured)
Bandwidth:	-3dB @58Hz (claimed)
Crossover Frequency:	3kHz (acoustic)
Dimensions (WxHxD):	140x220x210mm
Weight:	5kg
Price:	£999/pair

SPLX 10	
Type:	Powered subwoofer
Power:	250W RMS/4 Ohms -6dB Point Below 20Hz in-room (claimed)
Low Pass Filter:	40 - 160Hz (claimed)
Driver:	240mm with 30mm linear excursion
Dimensions (WxHxD):	290 x 300 x 430mm
Weight:	23kg
Price:	£999

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conrad-johnson
Premier 17LS2

The conrad-johnson Premier 17LS2 Line-Stage

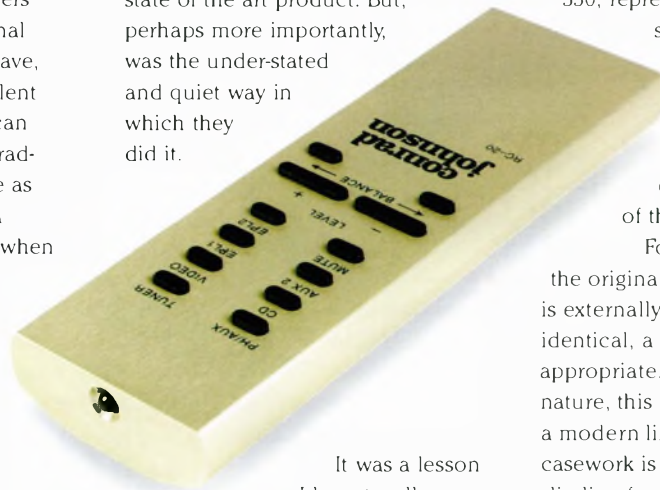
by Roy Gregory

Some companies shout about their achievements while others are happy to go about their business in an altogether quieter fashion. Some companies promote novel, high-tech solutions whilst others have trodden a more traditional path. And both approaches have, in their time, produced excellent product. Yet of all the American high-end manufacturers, conrad-johnson has always struck me as the most conservative (with a small c, naturally) especially when it comes to marketing their excellence. It's almost as if they're prepared to let the grapevine do the work, secure in their confidence that ultimately, quality will out.

The company marked their 20th anniversary with the unexpected launch of a limited-edition, two-box line-amp that was at once sophisticated in execution and simple in concept. The ART (for that's what it was called) redefined the performance of line-stages, and in many ways still does, providing the benchmark against which all other attempts are measured (although c-j have just shown a new flagship at this January's CES). Of course, the ART subsequently spawned more affordable versions of its circuitry and approach; namely the half-priced Premier 16LS and quarter-priced Premier 17LS, bringing a taste of its performance to a wider public. Now we have the Premier 17LS2, a revised and updated version

of the original model, but that's not why I started this story with the ART.

What the ART demonstrated for me was the ability of conrad-johnson to design and produce a genuinely state of the art product. But, perhaps more importantly, was the under-stated and quiet way in which they did it.



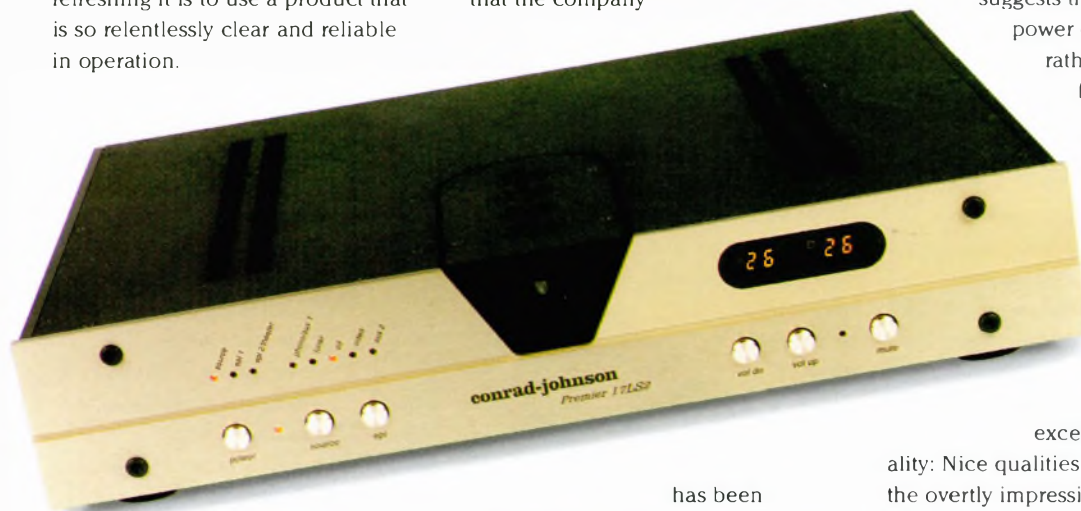
It was a lesson I learnt well, so that when Bill Conrad quietly espoused the view that the Premier 140 was a better (and much cheaper) amp than the well regarded Premier 8A monos, I took it seriously rather than dismissing it as mere hyperbole. Experience was to prove him right. Which makes the “best amp we’ve ever built” solid-state Premier 350 an enticing proposition indeed. It also means that the price-tag for serious performance is plummeting. Yet, externally, an amp like the Premier 140 offers little obvious evidence of ground-breaking development. Instead, its excellence is the product of steady refinement and evolution rather than revolution. Even the 350 is the final realisation of Conrad’s original solid-state concept

(albeit some twenty years down the road!).

But even with evolution, you get occasional, generational steps. I believe these amps, the 140 and 350, represent just such a step, and so too does the Premier 17LS2, sharing as it does, some of the components and technology that have elevated the performance of the power-amps.

For those unfamiliar with the original 17, to which the LS2 is externally at least, essentially identical, a brief resume seems appropriate. Despite its thermionic nature, this is the very model of a modern line-stage. The neat casework is rather deeper than the slimline front-panel would lead you to expect, and is beautifully executed, with not a sharp or rough edge in sight. The four Sovtek 6922 valves are located in a central well that interrupts the fascia, bringing a welcome sense of style and individuality. They are accessed via a small top-plate, meaning that you don’t have to dismantle the entire case just to install or replace the tubes. You get five line inputs, two loops (one with unity gain for use with an A/V processor) and two sets of main outputs, all single-ended. All functions can be operated from the comprehensive remote control (which enjoys a really wide acceptance angle) but most importantly, mute and balance. Everything except balance

► is also duplicated on the front-panel, which gives a clearly legible numerical readout of left and right channel volume levels. Along with “conservative” I’ve also always had c-j down as “sensible”, and whilst that might not be the sexiest of qualities you have no idea how refreshing it is to use a product that is so relentlessly clear and reliable in operation.



Lest we undermine the Premier 17’s audiophile credentials with all this common-sense, perhaps it’s time to point out that c-j take mechanical isolation very seriously indeed – to the extent of suspending the main circuit board, necessitating the removal of transit screws before listening. Likewise, you have the option of installing the supplied tube-damper rings, of which more later. That just about covers installation, apart from observing that the unit is powered via an IEC mains socket, allowing you to experiment with power cords, something I did to good effect – so no surprise there then! The only other thing to remember is that the 17, like all c-j pre-amps, reverses absolute phase so you need to correct for this at the speaker inputs. And yes it does sound better that way.

In its LS2 form, the 17 gains the two-tone brushed and milled fascia that has featured on c-j’s recent

products. Otherwise, the changes are all internal. Most important is the change to the new CJD teflon capacitors in place of the high quality polystyrenes used before. Incorporating the sonically superior but mechanically difficult teflon into a capacitor design is something that the company

has been doggedly pursuing for several years, and they’ve finally succeeded. The Sovtek tubes are also new and there are significant changes in the power supply. New devices for the final DC regulation have dropped the power supply’s impedance by a factor of four, while the bandwidth of the first stage input regulation has also been improved. Even though this first stage of regulation is shielded from the active circuits by subsequent tiers of dedicated left and right channel regulation, improvements are still audible. To this end, all the first stage resistors have also been upgraded to Vishay designs.

I used the Premier 17LS2 with Clearaudio Master Reference and Wadia 861SE front-ends. The phono-stage was the Groove plus while power was provided by the Hovland RADIA, Rogue Audio M150 and

Bonnec power amps. Cabling was Nordost Valhalla throughout, including the mains leads, and the latter proved well worthwhile, to the extent that I’d strongly recommend that any prospective or current 17 owner should investigate this aspect of set-up. Previous experience suggests that the Cardas power cords also work rather well, so don’t feel wed to Nordost.

Historically, c-j pre-amps have always been justifiably lauded for their rich, natural tonal colours and

exceptional dimensionality: Nice qualities that shy away from the overtly impressive or obviously hi-fi in favour of a realistic (rather than exaggerated) perspective on the musical performance. But they can also be double-edged

swords, particularly in the context of a quick-fire comparison.



Well, the LS2 (like the Premier 140 and MV60SE before it) changes all that. The component changes have delivered significant improvements in overall transparency and focus, low-level detail and micro-dynamic definition. What that

► means in musical terms is greater immediacy and intimacy, more vivid instrumental colours and a greater sense of life. The increased definition banishes any hint of roundness, but does so without introducing a false or wearing edge to the music.

These are primarily low-level effects; they work on the tiny, human elements in the performance. Play Shawn Colvin's beautiful duet with Mary Chapin Carpenter, 'One Cool Remove' (*Cover Girl*, Columbia 477240 2) and you'll hear the way the line-stage separates the two, virtually superimposed voices. They are defined in character and timbre; they are arrayed with MCC (very) slightly behind and to the right of Colvin, presumably reflecting

helped by the delicate precision of the understated and restrained backing, the rock solid timing and texture of the subtle percussion. If making performances communicate requires an almost subliminal grasp of pace and tempo then the LS2 is a virtuoso performer in its own right. This isn't the trip-hammer timing and breakneck drive of old-school "rhythm and timing"; This is slipping inside the track's progression, wearing its innate pace, its steps and hesitations, as comfortably as an old jumper.

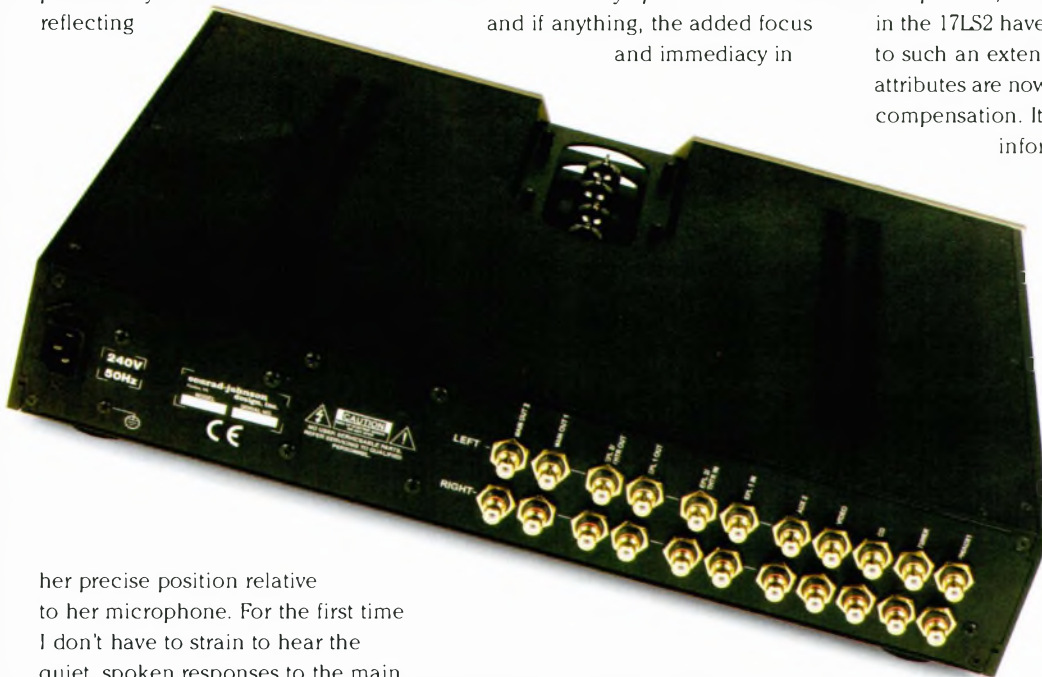
The coherence of the 17's soundstage remains mightily impressive, unimpaired by the extra detail and definition. Indeed, play the familiar Johanos/Dallas Rachmaninov *Symphonic Dances* and if anything, the added focus and immediacy in

underlining exactly why this is such an emotive (rather than cerebral) performance. Likewise, differences between this 30 year old performance on LP and the recent Reference Recordings and Telarc releases on HD and SACD are clearly apparent, sonically and, more importantly, artistically. With this pre-amp you'll never struggle for the sense in the music, whether you're playing Haydn or Kristen Hersh.

In absolute terms, the 17LS2 lacks the detail of the Hovland HP100 although it also leaves its nearest competitor sounding thin and pared away, lacking the wonderful coherence of the c-j. Once was, the shortfall in information would have troubled any-body making the comparison, but the improvements in the 17LS2 have narrowed the gap to such an extent that its other attributes are now more than ample compensation. It delivers more

information than it used to, and thanks to its vibrant colours and musical coherence, that information is simply more useful. Move up the range and I suspect that the Premier 16 LS2 and the new flagship ACT2 line-stages will offer wider dynamics and more authority at the fff end of the dynamic range, but you won't be aware

of the 17's shortcomings in this regard without resorting to direct comparison. Musically speaking, it's so satisfying that you concentrate on what it does rather than worrying about what it might or might not. Throughout the period I had it at ►



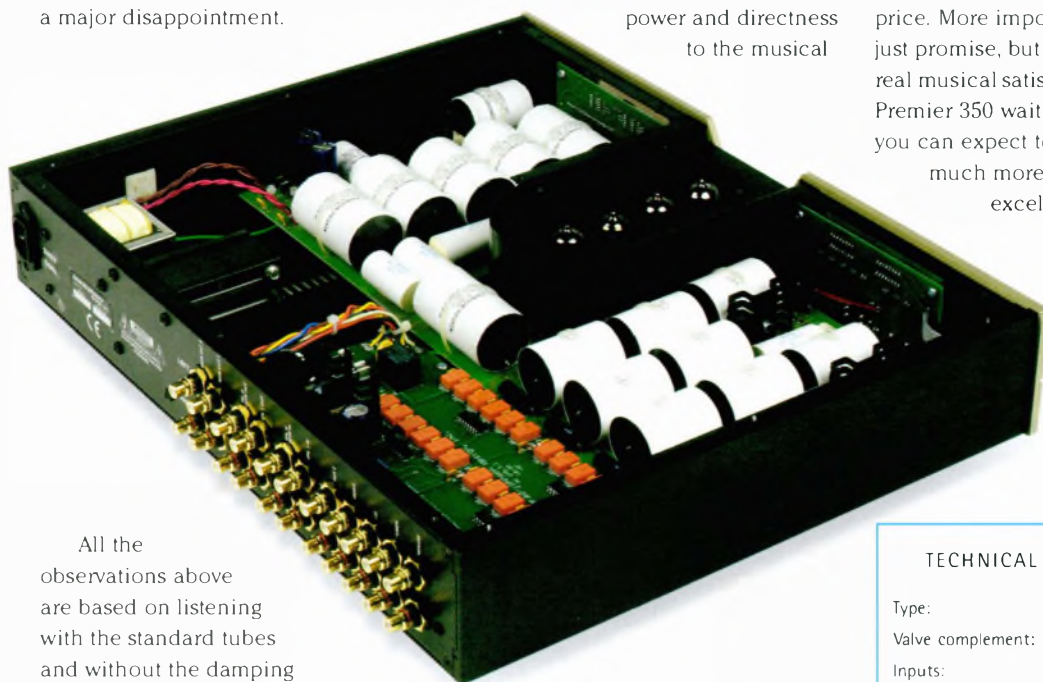
her precise position relative to her microphone. For the first time I don't have to strain to hear the quiet, spoken responses to the main lyric, the almost unspoken sub-text that makes this such a beautiful song. That's why the voices are laid one on another rather than spatially separate. That's what the Premier 17LS2 tells you. But shift a gear and things still make just as much sense. The bittersweet anguish and longing of 'Someday' are almost palpable,

the quiet passages makes the sense of a single coherent acoustic even more pronounced. The stability of the picture, the clarity of the dynamic steps that lead to the ascending ladder of opening crescendos, combined with the poise and perfect pacing of the playing notches up the tension,

► home, I never felt the need to listen to anything else, and swapping it out in order to run the balanced connections necessary for the active speakers I also had for review was a major disappointment.

emotional cover of 'Memphis Tennessee' (from the new album *Early Hours*) the naturalness of the stable, dimensional, central image adds tremendous power and directness to the musical

and at a far more approachable price than ever before. Paired with either the 60SE or 140 it offers the promise of genuine high-end performance at an (almost) affordable price. More importantly, it doesn't just promise, but actually delivers, real musical satisfaction. With the Premier 350 waiting in the wings you can expect to hear more, much more, about this excellent line-stage. ►+



All the observations above are based on listening with the standard tubes and without the damping rings. Put the damping rings in place and you'll hear an increase in focus and transparency, but you'll also hear a slowing in the music and a more contained, less lively presentation. Personally, I prefer the life and air that you get without the rings, the sense of intimacy. But, the louder you play the more attractive the rings become, so they're a suck it and see option that you should consider for yourself. There's also a second choice to be made, again regarding the tubes. After I'd spent some time with the 17LS2 in standard trim, Audiofreaks supplied a quartet of "very special" E88CC valves, a £150 upgrade option. Installed and warmed through, the new valves delivered the transparency and focus of the damper rings, along with even more low-level detail, without any loss of life or intimacy. Listening to Eleanor McEvoy's beautifully under-stated and

communication. The tiny vocal details and inflexions really bring the performance to life. It's a crisper, quicker and more emphatic delivery that lifts the performance of the 17LS2 even further up the scale, sufficient to make the tube upgrade an essential one as far as I'm concerned. (Contact Audiofreaks for further information regarding availability.)

Just like the MV60SE and Premier 140, the Premier 17LS2 breaks the mold. It takes and preserves c-j's traditional strengths, while mounting a concerted assault on the previous model's weaker aspects. If you think you know how conrad-johnson products sound then you're in for a shock. The latest generation speaks with a new musical authority that is at once convincing and beguiling. The significance of the 17LS2 is that it delivers this performance at a critical point in the system

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Vacuum tube line-stage
Valve complement:	4x ECC88/6922
Inputs:	5x line-level (RCA phono) 2x external loop (RCA phono)
Outputs:	2prs main outputs (RCA phono) 2x external loop (RCA phono)
Remote Control:	Full facility, including balance
Dimensions (WxHxD):	480x95x390mm
Weight:	9.5Kg
Finish:	Champagne gold
Prices -	
Premier 17LS2:	£5000
Tube Upgrade:	£150

Distributor:
Audiofreaks
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COPLAND

INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER CSA29

CD

TAPE

POWER

Copland CSA29 Hybrid Integrated Amplifier

by Alan Sircom

A hybrid blends the best properties of two related things. Mules take the load-carrying properties of the horse with the donkey's all-terrain hooves to produce the ultimate hay-powered 4x4. The hybrid £1,900 Copland CSA29 integrated amplifier makes a fine audio mule. It combines the linearity of valves with the speaker shifting properties of solid-state. And it doesn't suffer the mule's sterility problems.

Copland places the valves of this hybrid in an unusual place. Normally valves are used in the gain stages of the pre-amplifier or the power amplifier sections. The CSA29 plants a pair of 6922 double triodes in the differential input stage. This bestows valve linearity and warmth on the sound without being used for amplification purposes. A transistor output stage means the CSA29 can deliver 2x 85W continuous into an eight ohm load. This is combined with an over-specified AC transformer that will cope with demanding speakers. To create a valve amp that could match that power would entail an amplifier weighing as much as a car engine.

Instead, Copland has developed the most even-mannered of valve integrated amplifiers. Aside from the 15kg weight, the amplifier is designed to run so cool that it doesn't even need to have vents above or to the side of the valves. There are vents on the top of the amplifier, but these are above the power amp heatsink, not the tubes itself. Whatever, you'd have to run the CSA29 as an arc welder to get this hot to the touch.

The six input CSA29 has an optional

£150 plug-in MM-only phono module. This is a single board using field-effect transistors and is entirely active. The CSA29 even comes with a remote control that can operate the company's CDA822 CD player. This remote control is comprehensively equipped, although it does have the black plastic look of mid-fi electronics. Regardless, plug-in modules, motorised volume pots and remote



controls serve to prove that valve technology does not mean archaic standards of hi-fi development. Copland is Swedish and it shows. That SAAB and Volvo build quality is a function here. The CSA29 is built solid and heavy, with a half-inch thick alloy front panel and the sort of carved-in Copland logo that looks like something on the front of the Parthenon. Stick the Copland on the front of your car and you could use it as a snowplough. Opening that top panel is not easy, thanks to the sheer bulk of the alloy used. If you are used to millimetre thin casing, you might be forgiven for thinking the product is both glued and screwed together if you try to open. It's also minimalist and attractive, with the sort of neo-Cello look that Copland perfected some years back. The style has evolved, though. Instead of a brace of solid-looking dials across the whole of the

front panel, there's just a volume and source selector, with press-button tape monitor and standby buttons and a dark panel in the middle. This last has illuminated red lettering for standby, full power and the source selected; while this may not include volume level or anything more advanced, it is better than nothing. It shows that the CSA29 spends some 30 seconds in mute (with the 'power' light flashing) before the amplifier springs to life. Now, here is the only potential stumbling block to the Copland design; play with the standby button a lot while the amplifier is in its 30 second power up and the main internal fuse can blow (it did this twice during test). But this is hardly surprising – many valve designs would suffer the same fate.

It's easy to downplay integrated amplifiers by not giving them the care and attention associated with more up-market pre/power amplifier systems. There is also a tendency to play down the need for expensive cables and tables when the product is so bullet-proof, especially at this level. Call it the Brit-fi effect, if you like; we are so used to an almost inverted snobbery from the likes of Naim and Quad at this sort of price that, when it comes to cables and stuff, they are almost overlooked. This sells the Copland design seriously short. You should look at spending several hundred pounds on cables; Kimber's 8TC works wonders and the likes of Transparent and Cardas would work well, but Nordost might push the treble too far into brightness. Similarly, on the equipment support ▶

► front, the likes of Quadraspire and Finite Elemente would be good for those who wanted to maximise the darker end of the CSA29's spectrum, while glass shelves would bring out the best at the top end.

Of course, you need a good CD player and speakers. Copland's own CDA822 player is a natural choice, but a player of £1,500 or more would fit the bill nicely. As to speakers, the Sonus Faber Concerto springs to mind simply because it has the right tonal balance and the sort of loading and sensitivity to match the amplifier. The need to match the speaker sensitivity is crucial. Too sensitive a speaker and the volume control is an exercise in fine tuning; the difference between too loud and too quiet is a fraction of a degree, especially when using the remote control. Using a slightly less efficient speaker – around 86dB or so – bestows a very smooth transition from quiet to loud. Which is another nail in the coffin for those who think reflexively whenever valves are mentioned; efficient speakers may be fine for valves in general, but the CSA29 in particular works better in partnership with more conventional designs.

Most Copland electronics have a hybrid sound. That makes the CSA29 very Copland. There's the fluid softening and rosy hue of valves at the bottom end. This is in contrast with glossy extended treble, the dynamics of a solid-state power stage and the transparency of the FET inputs. They all mix together to make a soundstage that's as deep as a lecture on Kantian metaphysics and more attractive than a dozen lightly-oiled supermodels at a Viagra party.

As you might imagine, this is very beguiling. Music is presented with an enticing combination of richness, clean treble and detail. That's combining the emotional with the cerebral and is a perfect way of digging out the passion in a recording.



It's also a surprisingly fast, clean performance – but with the sort of bass that is filled with coherent detail, too. This isn't the sort of amplifier that leaps out at the listener; instead, interest slowly builds and builds as you find your criticisms subsumed. Before you realise it, you are won over by the Copland charm. Then you start to really see the benefits.

The stereo soundstaging is extremely good. It creates a bolus of sound standing about a



metre wider than the speaker spread and with fair – but not cavernous – depth. Where the Copland scores highly is in returning more height information than you might expect from an integrated

amplifier. Play 'Day of the Locusts' from the vastly underrated *New Morning* CD (why isn't this a part of the Dylan SACD re-issues?) and the sound has a vertical layering that makes the soundstage fill out in all the right places.

For all that image size, it's not too large in scale. An orchestral swell or a drum solo through the CSA29 trades power for speed and does so successfully. This is because the extension of the treble is so good, and seems to speed up most music played through the Copland. A spit more treble and this would start to sacrifice the bottom

end performance too much (hence the Nordost caveat – the top-end detail and speed of impact of that cable and this amplifier might tip the presentation over the edge of brightness).

A big plus is the image solidity. The combination of the weighty power amplifier stage and the natural image stability of the 6922s means sounds are rooted down in a very natural manner. It softens the percussive with that valve warmth. But the softening of transients is minor and assuaged by the size of the sound produced. It makes a vast spread of sound, especially on close-mic'd live recordings of relatively small-scale music. Damien Rice's album is a rare new gem, carrying the flag for all those dead singer-songwriters like Nick Drake and Buckley Old and Young. And on the Copland, Rice's dour vocal is perfectly sized in its own very physical space between the speakers.

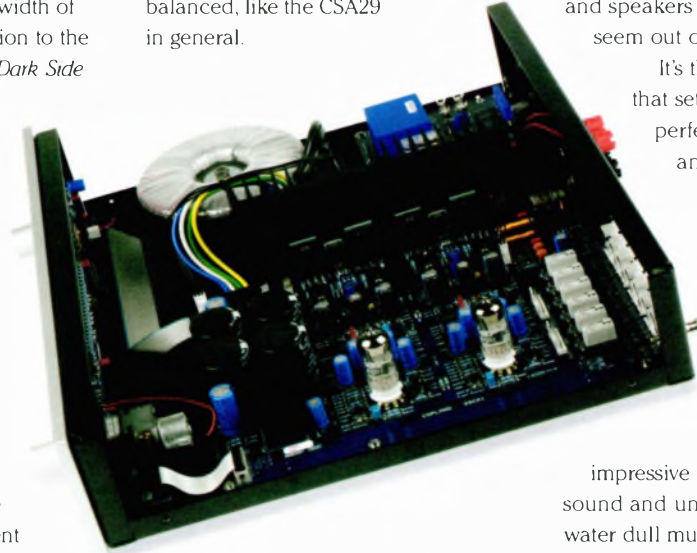
There's a revolt against valve warmth from the SACD and DVD-Audio confederacy. "Don't add warmth" the logic goes "it swamps fine detail". This has some justification when hooking SACD to a sludgy old-school valve amplifier with weak output

► transformers that give you nothing above 15 kHz. That criticism has no place here. Copland's CSA29 retains the richness of valves without suppressing detail, at least unless you only play the Copland at whisper quiet levels. It works extremely well with the extended bandwidth of SACD, giving a level of precision to the stereo mix of 'Breathe' from *Dark Side of the Moon* and a palpable solidity to 'Hey Nineteen?' from *Gauche* by Steely Dan. Yet, for all this bolted-down sound, it retains a sense of air and space in the top-end. It's clean and extended and fast enough to give a sense of the extended range and extra detail SACD entails.

What the CSA29 does best is welcome you into the recording; not with some rose-tinted audio improvement scheme. Instead it just plays, with a gently charming manner that only comes from effortless music-making. It isn't arrogant-sounding enough to make the listener consciously reach for more discs; instead you just find yourself enjoying the music more. 'Comfortable' is an awful word, bogged down with faint praise and sounds as if you are comparing the product to a pair of old slippers. But the Copland's performance is so damn 'comfortable' in all the right ways, there is not better word. It simply fits snugly into the music (and into most systems) without drawing attention to failings or flaws. Yet, for all that, it is clear and bright and detailed.

The plug in phono-stage is extremely good, well in line with the very best built-in examples. It has the same basic

tonality as the rest of the line stage. There is some veiling of detail and softening of dynamic transients, in comparison to good external phono-stages, but the overall performance is noise free and very well balanced, like the CSA29 in general.



It presents the scale of the classic Decca *Pirates of Penzance* wonderfully well, but lacks the holographic hear-the-colour-of-the-costumes properties this recording can have with the best possible equipment. But for £1900, this works out as a bargain.

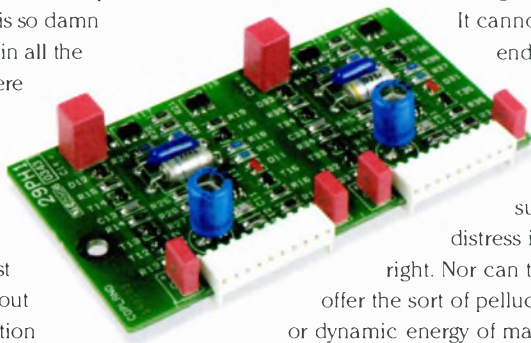
The limitations of the Copland CSA29 are merely the limitations of a sub two-grand amplifier.

It cannot drive top-end speakers to end-stop breaking levels without suffering distress in its own right. Nor can the CSA29 offer the sort of pellucid resolution or dynamic energy of massive pre/power combinations. Then there's the overall character of the Copland sound. An amplifier combination with 'no' perceptible character will always find greater favour with the high-end fraternity than an amplifier with even

Copland's benign character. Such comments could be applied to any integrated amplifier at the price, though. Use the Copland in sensible systems and it will blossom. Use the CSA29 with five-figure CD players and speakers and it will naturally seem out of place.

It's that sense of balance that sets the CSA29 apart. It's perfectly placed from a price and performance standing and makes a very 'now' sound which balances the qualities of solid-state and hollow-state extremely well. It also manages to keep on an even keel the opposing forces of immediate,

impressive and ultimately tiring sound and undemanding yet ditch-water dull music. In musical terms, this is a difficult tightrope to walk, and many products fall one way or the other.



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Hybrid stereo integrated amplifier
Tube Complement:	2x 6922 double triodes
Inputs:	6x line level
Input Sensitivity:	
Phono Input:	Optional MM phono-stage
Outputs:	
Power Output:	85 Watts per channel
Dimensions (WxHxD):	430x110x390mm
Weight:	15Kgs
Prices –	
Amplifier:	£1900
Phono Stage:	£150

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Pathos Classic One Hybrid Integrated Amp

by Chris Thomas

As someone firmly used to solid-state amplification for the past twenty something years, the arrival of the Pathos Classic One integrated amplifier was a somewhat interesting proposition. I have no ideological leaning toward solid-state amplification at all. It just turned out that way. Most of my previous experience with valve equipment has in fact been good, though I haven't really felt the full force of any of the modern day examples which those in the know tell me are a lot better than their predecessors. Over the years I have had very, very few reliability problems with the solid-state amplifiers I have both owned and reviewed. But almost every time I use a valve amplifier there are concerns and this usually takes the form of noise or channel imbalance of some kind or another. In fact, just a couple of years ago I was rather enjoying the thermionic delights of a chunky integrated valve amp, drowning in its warmth but impressed with its resolution, when I began to hear what sounded like a steam train in the distance on the right channel. Suspecting that this was not in Elgar's original score I contacted the manufacturer. "Oh it's just a valve", he said. "Valve amplifiers are like that". Really! What a nuisance. And this is the very thing that puts many of use off the whole idea of valve amplification. We like the rich tonality and the naturalness of the sound, but do those of us interested in something other than classical music or 3-piece soft jazz combos want to listen to an amplifier because it reminds us of our Dad's old radiogram? Are valve amplifiers really

still like that? Are they fast and dynamic enough to separate Billy Cobham's twin bass drums or are they all soft leading edges, harmonic warmth, nostalgia and replacement valves? The Pathos Classic One is unable to give all the answers to all the above questions, as it is a valve/solid state hybrid design with a valve front end and a solid state driver section. But, it's a start.

Pathos was founded in 1994 in the ancient Italian city of Vicenza and their amplifiers have always been visually stylish, as is most Italian equipment. The Classic One is no exception. It certainly looks a stunning little piece of audio sculpture and for such a compact component combines



real musical punch with convenience and versatility. This is in fact its second version, which shows several improvements over its predecessor. It now has an output of 70 watts per channel into 8 ohms and can even be mono bridged to give 135 watts. It has a full compliment of 5 inputs, including one pair of balanced XLRs and features a 100 step motorised volume control with a red front panel readout. This is remotely operated, along with input selection, by a very cute and straightforward wood and chrome 4-button handset. Speaker

connections are to the rear of the black acrylic top panel that sits on a shiny chrome chassis. The tubes used in the pre-amplifier section are Sovtek (6922-ECC 8625) devices and sit under twin chrome grids, while the solid-state output section, which runs quite hot, is obscured from view by a cage between the bright red capacitors and the shining transformer.

With my Naim CDS 3 as a source I hooked the Classic One into the back of the excitingly different Eben X-Centrics which, by this time, I knew to be potentially ruinous to lesser amplifiers and then gave it a half hour to come up to cooking temperature before having a listen. I have to be honest here and say that I was not expecting great things. No prejudgement of the Pathos but rather that I had been listening to the Ebens with Tom Evans' Vibe and Pulse with a Hovland Radia power amp and in the solid-state world things don't get a whole lot better than that. In fact I was not expecting to use the X-Centrics for the Pathos review at all, figuring that a cheaper and 'easier' speaker would be needed. But I was wrong and quite amazed at what I was hearing. Straight away it was clear that the Ebens presented no great challenge for the Classic One at all. In fact you could almost believe that they were made for each other. The clarity and dynamic freedom in the treble was what first grabbed me and in particular the whole shape and depth of cymbal work. The impact of the stick-work and the way the metal fleshes out with energy and vibrates and shimmers ►

▶ the air around it was really superb and played straight into the hands of the X-Centrics quite exceptional tweeter and in fact really gave me a view of the capabilities of the Ebens that I hadn't had before. It wasn't as fast and didn't have the same speed of attack or leading edge resolution as I had grown used to but, despite having its own way of doing things, the X-Centric imposes very little of itself over the musical character of its driving amplifier, so it really lets the Pathos sing

Though I am not an amplifier designer I imagine that the hybrid marriage between valve and solid-state must throw up all sorts of problems when it comes to rhythmic and timing issues whether they be electronic or subjective. If so, then the designers have done an excellent job with the Classic One. I am comfortable with amplifiers that are slower than I am used to but I feel distinctly uneasy when an amp is out of time with itself so the bass drags the music back, robbing it of motion and impetus. The Pathos feels rhythmically on the ball from top to bottom. There is a little softness and rounding of edge definition in the bass, but tonally it is commendable and so is its ability to start and stop. It's not exactly a boogie machine and I doubt it's the amp for you if you are exclusively exploring the outer regions of heavy metal, but it is no better or worse than a number of solid-state designs in this regard either.

After a couple of days I had completely forgotten that the Pathos was half of a valve amplifier and had stopped listening to it as such. By this time I was beginning to appreciate its excellent volume control that enables one to set the level precisely, and its performance at low levels where it still sounds involving and full bodied. Its power is probably enough for me but I did find that when pushed hard it lost

a bit of its reserve though, at these levels, the room will have its say. But it is easy to forgive this amplifier most things when you spend a while exploring your music collection and



this thing is so undemanding to listen to that you may find, as I did, that sessions can go for longer than usual. I even ended up listening to discs that had, over the course of time found their way to the bottom of the pile through boredom, disinterest or indifference. Discs such as Martin Taylor's *Nitelife* (Columbia 5033212), a generally unsuccessful attempt to widen Martins audience by electronically funk up his style and making him more hip, although the ginger beard might be a serious stumbling block. I think Taylor is a truly great player and if proof were needed, listen to *Hymne a Lamour* where he shows just what gifts a great jazz guitarist needs in his armoury. First there is his sound which the

Classic One opens up beautifully. It's sweet, but not fat, bloated and inexpressive with all the tone switched off at the guitar volume pot like George Benson is currently using. Here Taylor has the perfect blend of the warmth of the guitar body and the thinner high end so his phrasing still has clarity and pitch coherence. And then there is his technique, which, as the Pathos shows, is totally brilliant, as it has to be when you are left to carry the whole tune, that's the melody and the chord sequence, yourself. Add to this the numerous passing chords and embellishments and on many systems, as the notes fire out you wonder if he hasn't got three hands. But what is so impressive about the Pathos is the character, shape, presence and tonal energy of the instrument and the person playing it. Close your eyes and you can see his hands and fingers working the strings on the fretboard and hear the subtle way he uses the natural

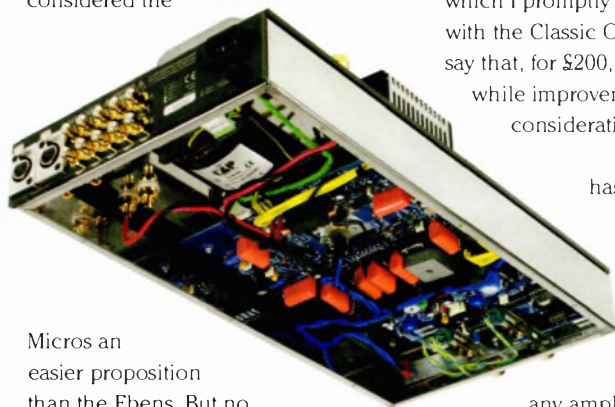


shading and dynamics of the instrument to drop the volume and create another drop of tension. Or the techniques he employs as he varies his speed and attack on the string, voicing the note or chord, making it stand up or cascading into a descending run. It's beautiful stuff and the Pathos is in its element here as it goes about its business in a very relaxed yet focussed way.

Likewise on vocals, which I found to be the most seductive area of the amplifier's character. Driving the Ebens I was stunned with the 3 dimensional quality of the voice and the sense ▶

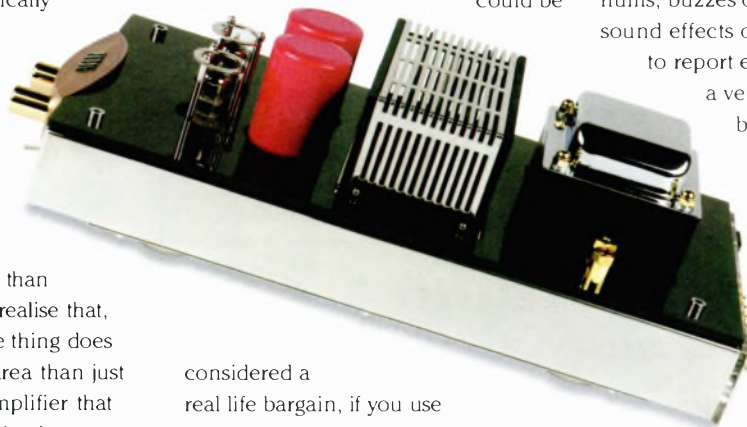
of naturalness and would say that in this area alone it has a closer link to real life than all but the very, very best solid-state designs I have heard. As I listened through Boz Scaggs, Gillian Welch, Alison Krauss and Ike Willis I was struck by that extra sense of reality and emotion that the Pathos seemed able to produce. Quite simply, it does this by sounding dynamically unrestrained and both unprocessed and uncompressed. There is no flattening of perspectives and the sense of a real person singing into a microphone is palpable. And it is more than a little disconcerting to realise that, with the Ebens, this little thing does a far better job in this area than just about any solid-state amplifier that I have heard, with the absolute exception of the Connoisseur pre-amplifier, which does a better job than anything else, full stop.

When I bought the JM Labs Micro-Utopias into the equation I was expecting great things as, up to now, I would have considered the



Micros an easier proposition than the Ebens. But no, even with that quite amazing tweeter, the little Pathos never quite managed to whip the speaker into shape in the same way it had done with the X-Centrics. In fact it sounded more than a little lightweight and even confused at times, especially when

asked serious rhythmic questions. Now I know from experience that the Micros can sound much, much better than this so I'm forced to concede that this combination just doesn't work and there's a warning sign with regard to system synergy if ever I saw one. Because at the price of £1325 the Pathos Classic One could be



considered a real life bargain, if you use it with the right speaker. And as the right speaker cannot be predicted through paper specifications, you're going to have to take advice from your dealer and listen for yourself. In the interests of fairness I should also add that, toward the end of the review, I received a Nordost Shiva mains lead which I promptly pressed into use with the Classic One and I have to say that, for £200, this is a very worthwhile improvement and well worth consideration.

For me, the Pathos has opened a small door and allowed me a view of a different way of doing things.

I thought I would be disappointed by any amplifier that was noticeably slower than a Naim or Spectral or any that had a less than iron-like grip of the bass, but in fact I really enjoyed my time with the Classic One. Once I had grown used to how different it was from what I am used to, I really began to appreciate its

strengths. For me and my solid-state history it provides an alternative, relaxed and colourful view of the world that is very thought provoking and I discovered a lot about the intricate series of threads that binds music together that I either hadn't heard, or had overlooked before. And there were no dodgy valves, hums, buzzes or accompanying sound effects of failing components to report either. Think of it as

a very reasonably priced but great little amplifier that just happens to incorporate valves and give it a listen. I think you might be surprised. ➤

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Hybrid stereo integrated amplifier.
Pre-amp section:	2x Sovtek 6922.
Power section:	Solid-state Class A/AB
Power output:	2 x 70 watts @ 8 ohms 135 watts-bridged mono
Inputs:	5, including one balanced XLR
S/N ratio:	90dB
Input impedance:	100 Kohm.
Dimensions (WxHxD):	150x230x450mm
Weight:	16 kg
Price:	£1350

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Manufacturer:

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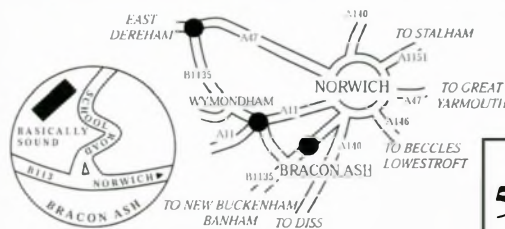
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The Real Deal

The Amplifon WL25 Integrated Valve Amplifier

by Jimmy Hughes

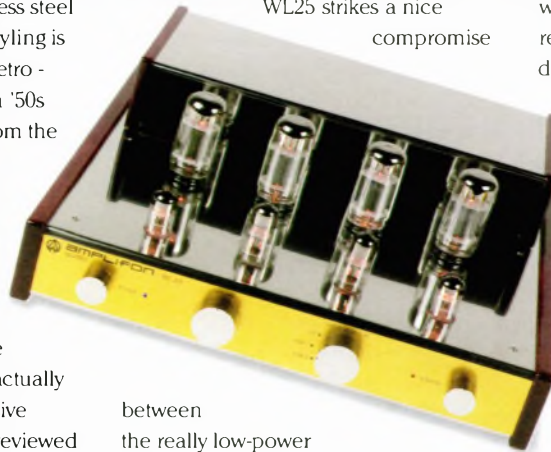
Amplifon WL25? No, I hadn't heard of it either. But remember the name. I certainly will. And remember the price. Made in Poland, and imported by London dealers Walrus, it's a clean honest-sounding amplifier that offers excellent results at a surprisingly affordable £799. Build quality is extremely good; polished stainless steel and varnished wood, and the styling is vintage-traditional; attractively retro - albeit more late '60s Kitsch than '50s cool. Sonically, I liked it right from the word go. And if anything things improved as time went on.

To begin with, it's an amp that sounds balanced and easy on the ear. Full-bodied and detailed, results are tonally natural and pleasing. And while I couldn't say hand on heart it actually sees off any of the more expensive integrated valve amplifiers I've reviewed in the past few months, it's definitely not their inferior either. Different? Yes. Worse? No way. Bass is full and strongly defined: powerful and controlled, with a solid weighty rounded quality.

The WL25 has a nice creamy tonality and very good definition. The overall presentation is warm and rich, but nonetheless quite lucid and articulate - sometimes surprisingly so. Don't think that because the sound is attractive and easy on the ear, it's soft and lacking in brilliance - it's not. I liked the WL25 because it's a very easy amplifier to listen to, refined, inviting and at the same time crisp and involving. Timing is good, retaining the rhythmic drive of the music.

In order to lengthen valve life and eliminate the possibility of changes in sound quality as the amplifier warms up,

the WL25 is designed to be left on all the time. In Standby mode the valve heaters are kept switched on, but not the high tension (ht) supply. So, although all the valves are lit up, they're not actually operational; left in Standby, the valves stay nice and warm but aren't wearing out. With an output of 28W RMS, the WL25 strikes a nice compromise



between the really low-power single-ended designs, and amplifiers offering 50W or more. Although output appears somewhat limited, a little goes a long way; given reasonably efficient speakers the WL25 will be powerful enough for most situations. It's got a remarkably gutsy sort of sound, creating an impression of weight, power, and presence. Pitch definition proved excellent, and it proved surprisingly difficult to get the amp to clip. Pushed hard, the sound stayed clean. There was a little bit of compression at very high volume levels. But to be honest I couldn't be sure if it was the amplifier or my Impulse H-1 speakers giving out! Even though sound pressure levels were approaching 'uncomfortable' (loud!) the amp seemed to cope. Partly out of fear of annoying the neighbours, I couldn't get hard

clipping on rock/pop: pretty amazing for an amplifier of just 28W.

Massed choral forces didn't faze the WL25 either. Playing John Eliot Gardiner's Philips recording of Bach's *Magnificat*, there was no sign of intermodulation or breakup even with volume levels significantly louder than I would normally listen at. This particular recording is a real amp killer. It's deceptively dynamic. Subjectively, you

don't appreciate how demanding the peaks are. To the ear, there's a small rise in volume. But this apparently slight increase can easily call for twice as much power (sometimes more) compared to the average/mean level. Playing the final *Gloria Patri*, the WL25 did not flinch. High voices, some clashing harmonies, and piercing razor sharp baroque trumpets, aren't the easiest things to reproduce cleanly. However, there was no sense of the amp struggling. Yet I know from past experience that many amplifiers (some having a lot more power output than the WL25) hard-clip on this section when played loudly. The WL25 sailed through, remaining impressively dimensional and dynamic.

Although not quite in the Jadis DA-50 class, the WL25 sounded quite holographic - able to make the speaker boxes 'disappear' as sources of sound - so that the music floated freely in space. It did not create the Jadis' remarkable sense of image height, but nevertheless it was good at clarifying and separating out the various musical strands in complex recordings while vividly recreating the spatial qualities of your recordings. Playing the Tom Jones/Art of Noise track 'Kiss', I was impressed at the

► way the various phasey imaging effects were vividly recreated. This clarity and dimensionality is one of the characteristics of a good transformer-coupled amplifier in my view. Unusually, the WL25 employs toroidal transformers frame type transformers most manufacturers use. Amplifon presumably use toroids because they like the result produced. Certainly, the performance seems in every way to be excellent, so no complaints from me.

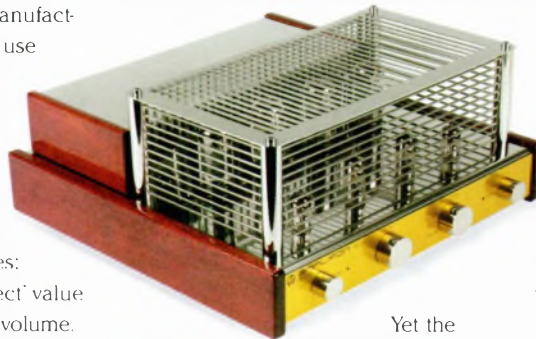
You've a choice of loudspeaker output impedances: 4 Ohms and 8 Ohms. The 'correct' value is the one that gives the loudest volume. However, if you're able to sacrifice a little power output, you may agree with me that the 4 Ohm setting sounds slightly firmer and more precisely defined.



Certainly, this output option offers the lowest source impedance. And this in turn seems to result in a tonally darker more precisely focussed sound. Bass and treble extremes are very well balanced. The bottom end sounds full and extended, with nice warmth and weight. The mid-band is fluid and rich, while the treble is airy and sweet. The overall impression is one of integration and cohesiveness. There's nothing flashy or spectacular about the way the WL25 reproduces music; it's not a gaudy extrovert amplifier. Instead, it gets on with the job, doing what has to be done quietly and efficiently.

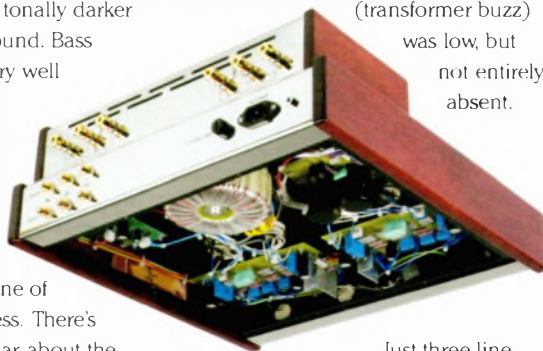
I really liked the way the WL25

seemed able to clarify dense, busy musical textures. Despite a tonal balance that's warm and honeyed, the WL25 is very clear - sometimes almost deceptively so. You can hear right into the music.



Yet the WL25 is not obviously 'detailed'. It doesn't thrust detail in your face. Rather, it clarifies by keeping individual strands separate. As a result, voices and instruments retain more of their individuality.

Noise can be an issue with tube amplifiers. The WL25 was pretty quiet, but I noticed a slight residual buzz from the speakers when sat close by. During normal use this was completely inaudible, and I wasn't troubled by it at all. However, those with very efficient speakers may notice it, especially sitting close by in a smallish room. Interestingly, the noise was slightly reduced with the amplifier volume at maximum! Physical noise



(transformer buzz) was low, but not entirely absent.

Just three line inputs are offered. So clearly the makers aren't after a slice of the AV market! And there's no set of line outputs for taping. Actually a number of recent amplifiers have dispensed with tape out

sockets - something to do with the quiet death of the cassette deck, and the direct digital connection of devices like CD, DAT, MD, and CDR. It's probably been going on for some time, only I hadn't noticed... Tube compliment consists of two 6N2P-EB and two 6N6P, with four 6P3C-E output tubes used in class A/B Push Pull. Bandwidth is wide, with a quoted response of 5Hz to 82kHz -3dB at 1W. Power band-width is almost as good; 18Hz to 64kHz at full power. But as is often the case, specifications alone do not tell the whole story. The amp is self-biasing, which eliminates all the fiddling about when valves are replaced. I'm told EL-34s can be used in place of the supplied 6P3C-Es if desired.

An outstanding amplifier, very reasonably priced, succinctly sums up the Amplifon WL25. Sonically it's very hard to fault; I'd be more than happy to live with one. You could pay an awful lot more and not get a sound half as good. ▶+

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Integrated valve amplifier
Valve Complement:	2x 6N2P-EB, 2x 6N6P and 4x 6P3C-E
Inputs:	3x Line-level
Input Impedance:	50 KOhms
Line Outputs:	None
Speaker Connections:	5-way binding posts for 4 and 8 Ohm taps
Power Output:	28 Watts into 8 Ohms
Dimensions (WxHxD):	435x235x430mm
Weight:	16Kg
Finishes:	As shown
Price:	£799

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amphion

Amphion Helium 2

by Alan Sircom

Does Finland count as Scandinavia? The Finnish Amphion Helium 2 – with its light birch wood veneer and light grey front baffle – looks so Scandinavian that if it were built cheaper and called something like Pjõnk, it could be something out of the Ikea catalogue. The \$550 bookshelf (\$500 in painted finish), effectively replaces the Helium+ and represents the entry-point to the Amphion range. And it comes in finishes like cherry with a black baffle, silver with a silver baffle and black with black, too.

There is a strong similarity between the Helium 2 and the Argon 2 tested in Issue 17, at least on the surface. Both are rear-ported two-way designs, although the Helium 2 is single-wired and the Argon 2 has bi-wire terminals. The aluminium drivers are gone in the Helium 2 (a small alloy bass driver was a feature of the Helium+, too), the speaker is smaller and delivers bass from a suggested 50Hz instead of the 40Hz claimed in the bigger speaker. Also, the front baffle isn't integrated into the veneer like the Argon 2. But, thanks to the front not-quite-horn-loaded tweeter wave-guide that remains the same size as the bass driver, the speaker could only be an Amphion design.

The Helium 2 features an entry-level 25mm titanium dome tweeter (found also in the Athene 2 and older Helium+) allied to the 135mm paper mid-range unit found in the Creon 2 floorstander. This gives a speaker that the manufacturer suggests has a frequency response from 50Hz-20kHz, with a nominal impedance of eight ohms and a comparatively low sensitivity of 86dB. They are fully magnetically shielded, for those who

intend on destroying their stereo sound by placing a TV in between the speakers. The company also offers a centre channel speaker voiced to match.

Amphion makes a big thing of its crossover points. The company points to the 2kHz-5kHz region as the place where the human hearing is most sensitive, but this is also the place where most crossover points are placed. As a consequence, we can readily hear the point of integration between treble and bass. The Helium 2's crossover frequency is at 1.5kHz and therefore just outside the all important presence region.

The Amphion ethos is cool on free-field measurement. These are speakers that will not necessarily perform well in the anechoic chamber, because they are evaluated in a more domestic environment than that somewhat sterile environment. Amphion's engineers claim that this practical approach addresses some key issues about room reflection without recourse to filling a room with absorbers, reflectors and other sorts of treatment. The company's proprietary Uniformly Directive Diffusion (or UDD) technology helps counter this, by addressing that the directivity of speakers vary with frequency; bass and midrange sounds tend to radiate spherically, while higher frequencies are more likely to beam directly at the listener. Ultimately, Amphion has developed their speaker range to work equally well in the listening room as in the lab, and this makes them far less

likely to be affected by the idiosyncrasies of the listening room.

Stands are a key issue with these speakers. They look as if they will work perfectly on standard 600mm stands, but looks can be deceptive. The acoustic centre of the speaker is the point between tweeter waveguide and bass driver, right in the centre of the front baffle, and that means ideally raising the speaker another 50mm or so. When Blutak'd on mass-loaded Kudos stands they sounded fine,



although I had to slump even further into the sofa to get the best sound. Fortunately, slumping on sofas is easy after several larges glasses of good whisky. Amphion recommends a very mild toe-in, aiming the speakers slightly to the outside of the shoulders of the listener. This isn't quite as off-axis or wide as required by KEF's Uni-Q, but is less toed in than normal, and the Amphion toe-in seems just about right in practise.

Rear-wall proximity is important but not critical, thanks in part to the addition of a bung that can be inserted in the rear port. Inserting the bungs knocks 1.5dB off the bass level, ▶

▷ for settings closer to the rear wall. Amphion suggests this allows the speaker to work up against a wall or even in the corners of the room, but this appears a bit too enthusiastic; 25cm or more from the room boundary with the bungs works well, but 1m or more from the walls without bungs sounds best. If you place the speakers close to the rear wall, give them slightly more toe-in, as the manufacturer recommends.

Moving to a paper bass cone instead of aluminium does make the speaker slightly more amplifier friendly and frees up the bottom end of the speaker sound more readily.



It also makes the speaker a bit more amplifier-chummy. The tight, slightly thin sound of alloy bass drivers often require a valve amplifier to beef the sound up, whereas the paper cone makes bass deeper and fuller on solid-state amplification that doesn't cost as much as a saloon car. In fact, the speaker made very acceptable sounds with something as humble as an Audio Analogue Puccini. Nevertheless, the Helium 2 is power hungry, and works at its best being hooked up to something

meaty and close to the 120 Watt suggested maximum power rating.

The review of the Amphion Argon 2 suggested that the speaker went through a two-week flat spot during the product's run-in period. No such variations occurred with the Helium 2. It started out good and just got slightly better and better. Whether this was because someone else had

a chance to run in the speakers or whether the less demanding design meant less of a run-in is a moot point. Whatever, the speaker behaved itself throughout the whole review period.

This is a speaker that challenges the received wisdom of how a speaker should perform at the price... and comes up with good alternative answers. Don't expect the holographic imagery or transparency of popular monitor-wannabes at the price. Instead, this is more like a low-efficiency, low-coloration horn sound, presenting the music in a manner that makes the

Amphion sound like musicians making music rather than an exercise in studio acoustical engineering.

This is an extremely smooth and coherent sound, perhaps due to the crossover point and the wave guide. Somehow, it manages to sound smooth even when the treble can be slightly spitchy with sibilant off-air vocals for example. It seems to push the treble forward in a laid-back manner; this sounds like a contradiction and in most cases it would be. But here, the treble is clean and direct, yet seems as if it is rolled off. This is unlike most speaker designs at the money (where the speaker has a definite bright or dull tonal character) and instead has the balance of a true high-end design. What sets this speaker apart from its peers is an earthy realism to the sound. It's the antithesis of bland music played on bland systems. It's like the speaker has a built-in Norah

Jones filter (a substantial bonus to this listener), simply because it doesn't present the standard-issue anodyne 3D imagery that usually passes for high-end sound at this price. Joni Mitchell is a perfect arbiter of how the Helium 2 handles music; when she had an edge of sorts (*Court & Spark*, *Blue*) the Amphions come to life. Play something from the time when she was a wonderfully produced painter (*Chalk Mark in a Rainstorm*) and nothing can hide the dullness of the music.

It's not that the Helium 2 is bad at imagery; it isn't, but it does portray imagery in a different manner to the norm. Sounds are not as exposed, not as separated as regular soundstages. It creates a tight, cohesive knot of sound between the speakers, with right-sized images. The sound is detailed, too, but again the sort of detail produced isn't of the standard type. Instead of detail presenting itself as a sheer onslaught of information, this is more selective. It's a sort of musical detail, that focuses on the structure of individual

▶ instruments and how they are used to make music, rather than the ignoring the music and concentrating on trivial like what gauge of strings the guitarist uses.

Most sounds from the Amphion's peers can be likened to an architect's drawing of a house; accurate and dimensionally precise, but of no real aesthetic value. Continuing the analogy, the Helium 2 is more like a Modernist interpretation of the same property; pin-sharp precise, no, but a bold interpretation that is deeply artistically interesting. Try something structurally dense like Schoenberg and you see what this means and why it's so important. Freed from the tyranny of musical convention, the ten-toned Schoenberg makes sounds that challenge our well-tempered ears. Many speakers either try to make this sound more in line with our ordinary concepts of music (and fail) or try to make the sound purely atonal (and fail). The Helium 2, simply focuses on Something Else - the noise the music makes if you want. The result is pure Schoenberg. The same could be said for almost any form of music, from Eurodisco to Monteverdi madrigals.

There is one telling and crucial acid test for any speaker; human voice. We are designed to discern even the slightest changes in vocal articulation and character and any deviations from the original are easy to spot. The benchmark here is the classic LS3/5a BBC monitor and the ultimate test is listening to the Today Programme on Radio 4 (closely followed by comedy from Bill Hicks, Derek & Clive and *The Hitch-hikers Guide to the Galaxy*). Once again, the Helium 2 does things differently, but is all the better for it. The classic BBC monitor sound is more tonally correct and perfectly reflects the close miking in the Radio 4 studio. But, the Helium 2 side-steps this by making a sound that is less like a man in a radio studio and more like a real man's voice. It's not

holographically projected into the room, it's not so detailed that you can hear whether the speaker had a sore throat in the last three months or so and it doesn't even have the sort of nailed-down solidity that makes sounds take on an almost physical form, but it does make the person sound like a real person.

This isn't the deepest sound around, but it seems not to matter too much. The speed of the speaker system, the breathtaking



integration from top to tail and the overall rightness of the sound more than makes up for any bottom end limitations. It is possibly also deeper than its bigger brother; deeper, but not as ultimately accurate. It also is not the loudest loudspeaker on the planet, and needs an amplifier with a large powerful current delivery to make it really sing. But, it is also probably the only speaker in its price range that would appeal to those trying to find a speaker to tag on the end of some truly high-end gear.

There's a profusion of big name

speaker brands making products that gain endless recommendations, are sold everywhere and have the advertising clout to be repeatedly promoted to a hungry buying public. Most of these designs are made to appeal to the maximum number of listeners and are efficient and beautifully mannered, if a little uninspired from a high-end standing. The Amphion Helium 2 is different. Although more amp-friendly than other speakers in the range, this is not capable of being partnered with any old amplifier. Also, few other speakers in this class make such an

impassioned plea to the emotions

as the Helium 2, even if that emotionality comes at the expense of image and transparency. For many, this is a trade-off worth making. Amphion's Helium 2 is a charismatic performer in a characterless world and is just the thing for those who discovered that there's more to life than Celine Dion. ➤

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Two-way reflex loudspeaker
Drive Units:	25mm titanium tweeter in wave guide 135mm paper mid/bass unit
Cross-over:	1.5kHz, Single Wired
Port:	Rear port with foam tuning bung
Impedance:	8 ohms
Sensitivity:	86dB/W/m
Bandwidth:	50Hz-20kHz
Dimensions (WxHxD):	155x310x265mm
Weight:	7Kgs
Price:	£550 (Birch veneer) £500 (Paint finish)

UK Distributor:

Audiocraft
Tel. (44)(0)1895 253340
Net. www.audio-craft.co.uk



The Heed Audio Modular Amplification System

by Paul Messenger

I like minimalism. I fondly recall the Naim NAC12 pre-amp that I acquired in the mid-1970s and used for more than a decade. It had three knobs, no switches, and just three inputs (which was all that one needed in those days: one for vinyl one for tuner and one for tape). Friends at the time marveled that I didn't mind sacrificing tone controls, scratch filters, loudness contours and so forth, and I admit I was initially apprehensive that I'd miss all the extras. But I didn't, and soon came to appreciate the more subtle advantages of utter simplicity. It's an attitude that continues to this day, and is one reason why I can raise little enthusiasm for devices such as VCRs, computers and mobile phones, all of which seem to regard complexity as a virtue, if not an end in itself.

The worst offenders are computers of course, which are veritable chameleons in their complexity, and their pernicious influence is spreading inexorably into our hi-fi components. High-class pre-amps I've used recently, such as the Naim NAC 552 and Halcro DM10, are essentially computers at heart. They offer extra flexibility, true, but do so at the expense of simple intuitive operation, requiring that the manual is kept handy for ready reference. At heart therefore, I much prefer products that are simple and unambiguous in operation, and that's reason enough for a close up look at this very neat and ultra-compact amplifier combo, which

is unusual for several reasons, not least that it comes from a Hungarian manufacturer called Heed Audio.

Few can beat its minimalism, yet it does have some useful flexibility at the same time, partly through its modular architecture.

Each part is built into a tiny little rectangular steel tube, just 7cm high, 9cm wide and roughly

27cm deep, with a front panel in Perspex decorated by a blue LED dead centre. It's a bit hair-shirt in appearance and feel, and the steel-wrap casework doesn't quite have the appeal of the alloy extrusions used by Crimson and Creek, for example. But it's neat, beautifully discreet, and entirely practical, apart perhaps from the need for a considerable number of mains leads!

The system can be configured in several ways, the core collection covered here comprising a two-box Luna pre-amp at £550, and a pair of Canopus mono power amps (£550/pair). Then there's a single-box MM-type phono-stage called Pulsar (£275), or a two-box MM/MC phono-

stage called Quasar (£550). And there's the additional upgrade option of doubling up the power amps in order to bi-amp the speakers.

The Luna has just a single knob alongside a single pushbutton, so ease of use is clearly exceptionally good, assuming that the availability of only two inputs is not considered a fatal handicap. A further ergonomic bonus is that the volume knob is motorised, and may be operated by remote control; input selection, however, is exclusively 'hands-on'.

Before getting any deeper into the product, a little more background is due, since Heed Audio is very new to Britain. The two principals, Zsolt Huszti and his brother Alpar, started out importing a number of leading British brands to Hungary in the 1980s. They developed a particular relationship with Richard

Hay, at one point actually assembling the Ion Systems Obelisk amp in Hungary. Zsolt has subsequently applied some of the same underlying technical principles in his own electronics designs, including using balanced circuitry, outboard power supplies and the deliberate avoidance of DC coupling.

The first of these little modular units appeared in 2000. An outboard power supply for Rega Planar turntables, it's codenamed Orbit, sold particularly well in Germany, and will be covered elsewhere in Hi-Fi+. The two-box Quasar phono- ▶



▶ stage then followed, enjoying similar success and leading on naturally enough to variations like the Luna two-box pre-amp and Canopus mono power amp that are the main subject of this review.

Although the Luna pre-amp is simple to the point of simplistic,



with just two stereo inputs plus two stereo outputs (one fixed the other variable) the Quasar phono-stage offers a comprehensive array of loading and gain options. It's a dual-mono design with separate amplifier stages for MM and MC cartridges, the latter effecting adjustments of sensitivity and load via PCB jumpers. Separate 'high' and 'low' outputs are available, the former specifically for driving power amps directly. The Pulsar, for high output (MM) cartridges only, follows a broadly similar configuration. It uses passive/active RIAA equalisation, and has ample output for direct power amp drive (via a passive pot).

The 50W Canopus power amp is a three-stage Class AB design using fully discrete components. Its power supply has a 100 VA toroidal transformer and two 10,000 µF capacitors, while the Darlington output stage has comple-

mentary 25amp power transistors. Fully balanced circuit topology reduces susceptibility to external interference. An extra phono socket is fitted to pass the input signal onto a second power amp for bi-amping.

I started off simply plugging my regular Naim pre-amp into a pair of Canopi, with results that were a little dull and disappointing. This was clearly not an ideal match, so I added the Luna pre-amp to the equation, which perked things up considerably.

Fed from a top quality CD player, a Burmester 001 as it happens, the Luna/Canopus combo immediately impressed with its lovely delicate and expressive mid-band. Singers in particular sounded very believable, especially when they were well towards the front of the mix, like Alison Krauss on the *Alison Krauss + Union Station Live* CD, where

she managed to sound even more seductive, humorous and simply more human and real than usual.

At the same time, the top end is rather restrained, which can often be beneficial with modestly priced equipment, but which also manages to suppress a little fine detail. I'd just acquired and was exploring Lambchop's new double CDs, *Awcomon* and *Noyoucomon*, which is a much denser production than its predecessor *Is a Woman*, and has Kurt Wagner's lead vocal much further back in the overall mix. I was finding it difficult to pick up on the lyrics, because the consonants were a little too retrained. Changing back to my regular (much more costly) amplifier did improve the diction, and make it easier to make out the lyrics, confirming that the little Heed amplifiers do have their limitations.

But then you're not going to ▶



► achieve amplifier perfection for £1,100, and what this cute little combo does well, it does very well indeed. There's little evidence here of the mid-band congestion and thickening that is found in many amplifiers, especially those built from solid state components. And while I wouldn't describe the Luna/Canopus as thermionic in character, it clearly manages to avoid many of the solid state vices.

Partly to check out the bass end of things, I hooked up some monstrously large Tannoy Yorkminsters, a 100-litre reflex-ported enclosure with a 12-inch

are quite expressive, if a little soft and lacking in tension. Decent levels of loudness could be achieved, even with relatively insensitive speakers like the Leema Xens. That said, I did generally prefer the sound of this amplifier when it wasn't working too hard, as a mild presence emphasis seemed to become more obvious and show a touch of aggression when it was sweating.

Checking out the vinyl stages showed that both the Quasar and Pulsar had broadly similar characters to the Luna/Canopus combo, and that the two-boxer is clearly superior to the single-box Pulsar in terms of dynamic authority and precision.

Both slightly roll off the extreme top end



Alnico magnet Dual Concentric, and was impressed at how clean and firm the bottom end sounded here, even without embracing the DC-coupling that so many other designers advocate. The tiny Canopus has convincing enough weight, but might perhaps have had a bit more drive and urgency.

The mid-band in particular possesses good transparency and depth resolution, and the sound as a whole is notably free from any shut in boxiness. The dynamic range is good, and dynamics themselves

and soften leading edges just a little, but have notably coherent tonal and dynamic structure and architecture. I was spinning a familiar favourite, the Grateful Dead's acoustic *Reckoning* set, and found myself sucked into focusing on Garcia's guitar much more intently than usual, and my partner actually started dancing along as she came into the room. Which rather neatly sums up the

way this Heed combo transcends mere issues of sound quality and simply gets you into the spirit and emotion of the music itself. ►+

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Canopus	
Type:	Mono Power Amplifier
Input Sensitivity:	500 mV
Impedance:	10 kOhms
Power Output:	35 W/8 Ohms 50 W/4 Ohms
Bandwidth (with filter):	4 Hz-60 kHz (±1 dB)
Price:	£550/pair
Luna	
Type:	Stereo pre-amplifier with separate power supply
Inputs:	2x line
Outputs:	1x line, 1x variable
Remote control:	Volume only
Price:	£550
Quasar	
Type:	Phono-stage with separate power supply
Sensitivity -	
MM input:	5 mV / 47 kOhm / 100 pF
MC input (adjustable):	100 µV / 200 µV / 600 µV
MC Input Impedance:	100 Ohm / 220 Ohm / 470 Ohm
Output voltage "Low Out":	220 mV/100 Ohm
Output voltage "High Out":	775 mV/ 22 Ohm
Price:	£550
Pulsar	
Type:	MM Phonostage
Input Sensitivity:	5 mV
Input Impedance:	47 kOhms
Bandwidth:	20 Hz - 15 kHz/± 0.5 dB
Output Level:	600 mV
Output Impedance:	50 Ohm
Signal/Noise Ratio:	80 dB
Price:	£275

Physical Specifications (all):
Dimensions (WxHxD): 90x 70x270mm
Finishes: Black casework with either black or white fronts.

UK Distributor:
t-Source
Tel. (44)(0) 1626 369952
E-mail. heed@tsource.co.uk

Manufacturer:
Net. www.heedaudio.com



Creeo

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Play
Stop
Pause

Repeat
Random

CD50 mk

CD50 mk

Creek CD50 Mk2 CD Player

by Alan Sircom

There's a received snobbery passed off as wisdom among the hi-fi cognoscenti that any CD player below around £2,000 isn't worth looking at. It's a hangover from the days when a good cheap record deck could out-perform every CD player on the market, and only those CD spinners with stratospheric price tags could make polycarbonate sound even slightly musical. Those times are long gone; today, modern CD discs and players turn in perfectly good sound and while it's altogether right and proper to blow several thousand on a CD player when the system costs tens of thousands of pounds, more humble systems can make some seriously good noises with a player like the £850 Creek CD50 Mk2.

Creek Audio has recently rationalised its range. Gone are the pre and power amplifier systems and the drab green on black styling. Now, we have two ranges of products – the cheaper 50 Series CD player, tuner and amplifier, and the more up-market 53 series CD player and amplifier. There's also the smaller sized OBH trio of two phono-stages and a headphone amplifier. All are now finished in Creek's 21st Century elegant, 10mm thick, brushed silver aluminium alloy front panel and squared off look, which bestows a classic quality on the whole Creek product pantheon.

The previous CD50 player sported a Philips CDM12 transport. Philips doesn't make CDM12s anymore, so basing the CD50's replacement on a transport mechanism that's already

turned up its toes would be daft, whatever it did to the sound quality. So, Creek now uses a CD-ROM transport mechanism. As the more up-market CD53 also uses the CDM12, that is also due to be revised any day now.

We had hoped to look at the more up-market player too, but it was not available at the time of publication.

This one change alone would require Creek to radically rethink the CD50 anyway, but the changes to the Mk2 are so radical that virtually no components make the transition untouched. Cleverly, though, Creek has managed to keep the CD50's original look and feel intact, so owners of older 50-series kit will not feel hard done by. Of course, with so many internal changes, upgrades from original to Mk2 status are impossible.

Using a CD-ROM drive means the digital information is carried on an ATAPI bus (ATAPI stands for AT Attachment Packet Interface, the 'AT' part coming from the 20+ year old IBM PC-AT). The advantage of this computer bus is that it drastically lowers jitter (from the source, at least); the downside is the data is not in a CD player friendly form – it needs to be

passed through a Field Programmable Gate Array acting as a digital buffer circuit to store and convert the signal to make it compatible. A similar system is used in portable CD players, but this time for shock protection – of course, this also bestows some shock immunity to the CD50 Mk2. It also gives the player its SPDIF digital signal, which is output through both optical and coaxial audio connections.

This digital buffer does mean that the player doesn't act instantaneously, and doesn't play in real time. Instead, it reads slightly ahead and the digital output is slightly delayed through the buffer. This has no great practical impact on the Creek, except for making the track access and load-to-play time a bit more glacial than most.

About the only unchanged component in the CD50 is the Crystal CS4396 24bit 192kHz digital to analogue converter. Although the chip remains the same from original to Mk2 version, the application (the way the chip is used in circuit) is very different. A synchronised high frequency clock, distributed power supplies with 12 low noise voltage regulators (seven in the digital domain and five in the analogue) and separate power supplies for digital and analogue sections all contribute to improving the performance of the player in general. Shorter signal paths and a more symmetrical board layout also help, and are claimed to improve both THD and signal to noise ratio ▶



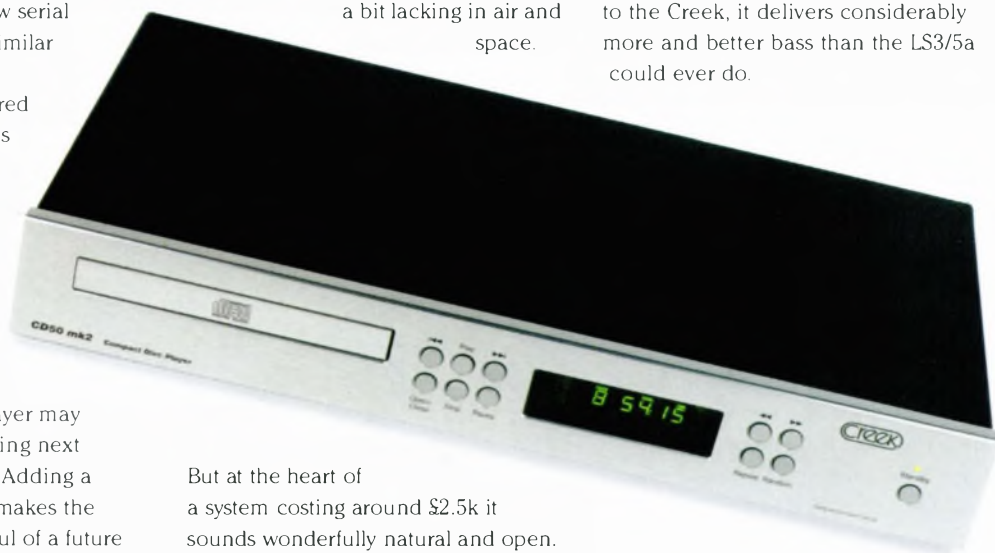
► over the original CD50.

Future-proofing is always difficult with CD players, especially when the player costs less than a small family car. But Creek has made the new CD50 surprisingly upgradeable. It includes two computer communication ports at the rear panel (the two sockets that look like the sort of thing you connect your phone to): These lie fallow as standard, but a dealer-fit module can be included to allow serial control by Crestron or similar control systems. It also has all the software stored on EPROM, so if there is an upgrade, the dealer can replace EPROMs for those with the latest software. This is more useful than it first seems; copy protection on CD discs continues to develop and a 2004 player may not support discs carrying next year's copy protection. Adding a programmable option makes the player unlikely to fall foul of a future protection algorithm, but perhaps the upgrade would be more convenient if stored on flash memory that could be upgraded by CD-ROM, instead of an EPROM swap.

Like any good CD player, the CD50 – new software or not – takes an eon to run in properly. Fortunately, it doesn't run hot and the user-chummy layout makes it easy to operate on repeat. Play the same CD non-stop for a week and never switch the player off and the Creek delivers a palpable sense of musical immediacy. Not in that sort of etched, up-beat style that typifies cheaper but decent CD players, but in an honest and unfussy manner that makes the CD50 Mk2 extremely listenable and supremely likeable. Perhaps this is because the player doesn't focus on dynamic range, soaring treble or gut-churning bass. Instead, the player highlights a

wonderful mid-band that perfectly matches the sort of not-quite-full-range loudspeakers and small, refined sounding amplifiers this player will likely be partnered with.

That's the big plus point of the Creek; it works perfectly in context. Play it in a system with the sort of bandwidth we expect from proper high-end and the Creek will sound a bit light and uninspired in the bass, a bit lacking in air and space.



But at the heart of a system costing around £2.5k it sounds wonderfully natural and open. And that's how it should be; you don't put a flyweight boxer in the same ring as a heavyweight, you don't put racing slicks on your Hyundai Getz – so why expect a mid-price CD player to work well in high-end systems? Creek's CD50 can – and does – work effectively in more expensive set-ups, but the smooth and easy to live with charm can sound a bit light in its loafers in a truly high-end system.

The Creek's light touch doesn't undermine the performance. In many ways it enhances it. Often, players that don't have earth-moving bass properties sound insipid, gutless and boring. Here it makes music sparkle, with a small but perfectly formed soundstage 'bubble' between the speakers and plenty of detail, especially in the mid-band. It has detail in the highs and lows too, but here the player merely does well; it's

mid-band is where it is at its best, and its best is very, very fine. You can't help thinking of the sound of LS3/5a speakers (or indeed much of the sound of decent vinyl) when listening to the Creek. It has that same mid-band clarity, honesty (with a touch of euphonic enhancement, making piano sound better than the real thing) unforced ease and wonderful musical communication. In fairness to the Creek, it delivers considerably more and better bass than the LS3/5a could ever do.

It sounds like faint praise, but this is one of the few players that excels at playing at background music levels. Stick on some gently plaintive Nick Drake, some chilled out '50s Miles Davis or Belle & Sebastian depressopop to accompany your dinner party and the Creek performs perfectly (Important note: be very careful with mixing Belle & Sebastian with dinner guests – suicides between courses can be misread as criticism of your culinary skills). Strangely, this is no easy feat, as most CD players draw attention to themselves at low listening levels. The relaxed charm of the Creek extends so well to lower levels that it becomes one of the most unobtrusive players around. And it is that unobtrusiveness that makes the player so good for everyday listening, even when the After Eights have all been ►

▶ downed. Yes, the Creek has excellent mid-band detail, fine and focussed soundstaging and excellent vocal articulation, but these audiophile aspects seem less important compared to the way it communicates music in a thoroughly unpretentious manner. It's not like there is no CD player between artiste and ears, but the player's impact is discrete, like a good butler.

Play something raucous and lo-fi – Kings of Leon, The Strokes or The White Stripes for example – and the Creek makes a prettier sound than normal. Do the same with orchestral pieces and Richard Strauss is transformed into Johann. It's like the Creek CD50 Mk2 has a Mozartification filter somewhere inside, smoothing out the rough edges of music but leaving all that wonderful inner detail intact. The Creek isn't that authoritative or upbeat, but it really doesn't matter, unless your CD collection is made up entirely of thrash metal and copies of Copland's *Appalachian Spring*.

Quite by chance, this review coincided with taking receipt of one of the first Naim CD5i CD players. The two could not be more different, yet strangely are also very similar. Where the Creek is soft and welcoming, the Naim is direct and upbeat. However, both seem to place the music at the forefront: different perceptions of the music perhaps, but still the same musical drive and integrity at the fore. Similarly, the Rega Jupiter has the same music-first presentation, this time playing tracks in a close-knit, slightly more stark way than either the Naim or Creek, but all three are very much in the same league. Personal preferences are all that separate these three players; there are no intrinsic 'winners' or 'losers'. And that shows just how far CD has progressed recently. A few

years ago, you'd be lucky to find any CD player the right side of two grand that made a musical sound; now there are at least three of them.

There's a British thing that needs to be side-stepped, here. Classic Brit-fi names like Creek, Naim and Rega are all thought to produce products that work in a distinctively British manner. They are considered to make a sound that trades accuracy for enthusiasm and detail for a sense of rhythm. As a consequence, Brit-fi gear is often partnered with other



Brit-fi components.

While this locked-in system works exceptionally well, the Creek is not exclusively Brit-fi oriented; to discount it simply because your system doesn't comprise a Naim Nait amp and a pair of Royd RR3 speakers is to miss out on a very fine CD player.

That said, the Creek CD50 Mk2 does fit extremely snugly in some Brit-fi style systems. Naturally, there will be a high degree of synergy with Creek's A50i integrated amplifier and Epos loudspeakers (Epos Acoustics was taken over by Mike Creek in 1999). And, like the integrated amplifier and the speakers, the CD50 Mk2 responds well to the light, rigid support and solid-core cable treatment. That it also works well in valve based systems with massy stands and big, complex multi-strand cables only

serves to show just how flexible the CD50 Mk2 really is.

As a nation, we tend to love an underdog, and we especially love something plucky that fights above its weight. Compared to big names in the audio business (whether big business like Marantz or the world's best like Wadia), Creek Audio is every bit the underdog yet the CD50 Mk2 is a performer that is only outpaced by the real heavyweights.

The price has risen by £150, but that doesn't matter; such performance at £850 makes this a player to watch out for. ➤+

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Single disc CD player
Frequency Response:	1Hz-20kHz +/- 0.25dB
Signal/Noise Ratio:	>97dB
Analogue Output:	Single-ended phono
Output Level:	2V RMS @ 1kHz
Output Impedance:	50 Ohms
Laser type:	Semiconductor ALGaAs
Digital Outputs:	1x Optical (TOSlink) 1x Co-axial (phono)
Serial Ports:	2x RJ45 connectors
Operating System:	Upgradeable EPROM
Dimensions(WxHxD):	430x62x250mm
Weight:	5kg
Price:	£850

Manufacturer:

Creek Audio Limited
Tel. (44)(0)1442 260146
Net. www.creekaudio.com

One Careful Owner...

The Meridian M20 Loudspeaker

by Chris Binns

Nostalgia can be a dangerous thing: It is also something that the new forward thinking, positive me tries not to indulge in. But unfortunately I find that listening to music provides an ideal opportunity to revisit the murky pools of my past, and the rose tinted spectacles come out while I think of old girlfriends, places I have lived and sadly, hi-fi I've owned. Have you never been tempted to wonder how the loudspeakers you owned twenty years ago would sound on the end of your present system? And is there not a piece of equipment that you always regretted getting rid of? On the odd occasion that I have fallen for a 'bargain' and bought something that I have previously owned (or always wanted to own) it has usually been a disappointing experience, and I was immediately reminded as to just why I got rid of it in the first place. But there are exceptions...

I first owned a pair of Meridian M2's for a short while in 1980, more or less when they first came out. While I can't now exactly remember

why I sold them, the opportunity to buy a second-hand pair of M20's for not a lot of money proved too much of a temptation. After all, I did need a pair of compact speakers for the office. Which, until now is where they have remained; performing extremely well under what must be said are hardly demanding listening conditions –

indeed the less distracting

the music is the more work gets done, while the lack of complication with power amplifiers and speaker leads has been a real benefit. However, fired up by the arrival of the PMC and ATC active monitors, both RG and myself thought it would be educational to haul the Meridian's into the living room for a more serious listen.

The M2 was the second active loud-speaker to come from the Boothroyd-Stuart partnership, and I suspect in many ways the most successful. With the experience of the three way M1 under their belt, the M2 was a compact, two way design that showed off the Meridian 'interactive'

technology at its best, essentially by allowing the speaker to sound a lot larger than it was. Deep, articulate bass together with a lucid mid-band and pin point imaging, all in one of the most elegant and proportionately correct packages I had seen, did it for me the first time I heard them, and I was always surprised that they never took off with the lifestyle brigade. The M2 and smaller brother the M3 (introduced a couple of months later – smaller, with a single bass unit and the infamous Audax HD13D34H tweeter) were upgraded in the later eighties, the main changes being the addition of adjustable EQ via small switches on the back and the substitution of the (excellent) large dome KEF T52 tweeter with the more contemporary T33. The two B110 bass/mid drivers remained unchanged, as did what was essentially a Meridian 103 stereo amplifier with crossover to drive them, supplying 70 Watts for bass and 35 for the treble.

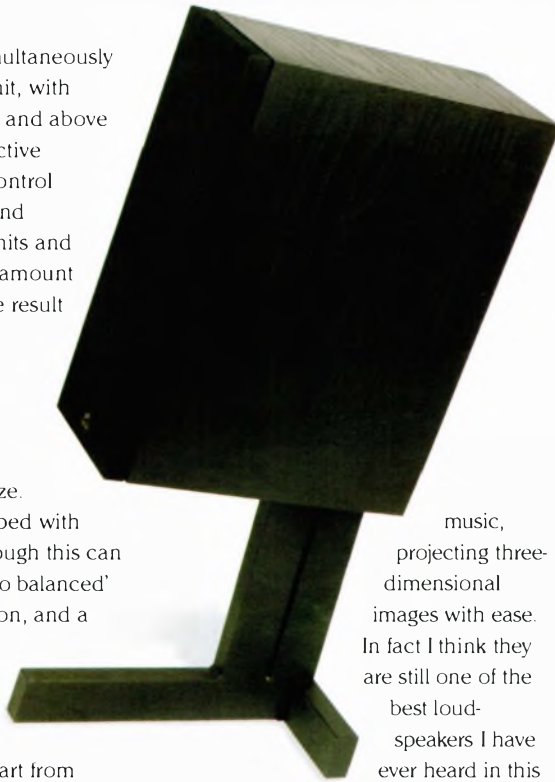
It is important to note that the M2 (and its relatives) were far more than a loudspeaker with a couple of amps bolted on the back. At a time when it was fashionable for manufacturers to offer active versions of standard loudspeakers for use with designated amplifiers (the Linn/Naim systems being an obvious example) Meridian were always keen to point out that their loudspeakers were 'interactive'; where the amplifier, drive units and



► cabinet were designed simultaneously to work together as one unit, with considerable benefits over and above those already offered by active operation. Being able to control and equalise the bottom end specifically for the drive units and cabinet enabled a certain amount of magic to be created, the result being an exceptional bass performance that was way beyond what could be achieved with a conventional passive loudspeaker of a similar size.

The M20 is only equipped with a single ended input, although this can be switched to offer 'pseudo balanced' (i.e. ground lifted) operation, and a bit of experimentation suggests that the quality of interconnect is crucial (as one would expect over five metres or so). Apart from tightening up the drive units, the speakers have had nothing else done to them; it is worth mentioning that with any electronics after twenty years or so, electrolytic capacitors could have dried up and could probably do with replacing, although this particular pair seemed fine. Secondhand pairs that hum, are however, best avoided.

Using the Meridians for a few days in my main system with their dedicated stands, they did not disappoint. There was something immediately 'right' and comfortable about the sound quality, and they did not draw attention to themselves in any way and the attributes that I remembered them for were on fine form. Bass was full and extended, while they managed to disappear completely with the majority of



music, projecting three-dimensional images with ease. In fact I think they are still one of the best loudspeakers I have ever heard in this respect. Mid-range


was detailed and articulate, quite warm in character, with a top end that while not being the most natural that I have heard, did not suffer from the hardness that I recall from years past – maybe this is the result of a superior front end and pre-amplifier. Slightly lacking was an element of bass slam, and the ultimate volume capability is limited with vigorous rock music.

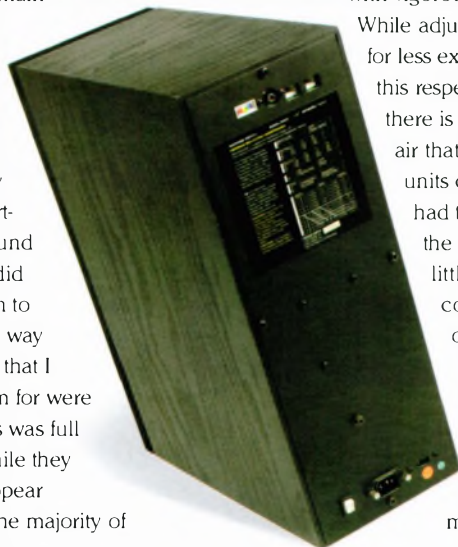
While adjusting the bass tilt for less extension helps in this respect, ultimately there is only so much air that two five inch units can move. If I had to offer criticism, the M20 lacks a little excitement compared to some of the more recent loudspeakers I have lived with, particularly the more efficient designs, but musically they offer

plenty of expression while the important dynamics remained intact.

And I can live with that.

Maybe as this is an old product, my expectations were not that high. Maybe speaker technology has not progressed in the leaps and bounds that the hype from some manufacturers would have us believe. Were the M20's as good as I remember them? Yes, better in fact. The benefits of being driven by superior products compared to those that I owned twenty years ago is apparent, and to some extent their slight vulnerability with bass power handling is helped by the taughtness of CD, and more refined vinyl replay. I can honestly say that if I was limited for space, and budget ... and did not review hi-fi, I could easily live with the Meridians, and I think their approach is just as valid, if not more so, than it was when they were first introduced.

Expect to pay in the region of \$400 for a pair in good condition. The review pair set me back £100 with the vital, matching stands, but then, I've got inside contacts. Besides that you'll need a decent line-stage and some good interconnects. One final caveat; replacement drive units are no longer available from either Meridian or KEF, although existing chassis can be rebuilt. 



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Two-way, reflex loaded, active loudspeaker
Bandwidth:	38Hz and 20KHz \pm 3dB
Maximum output:	105 dB SPL @ 1m
Sensitivity:	-20 dB for 83 dB SPL at 1m @ 1KHz
Input for full output:	0 dB (+ 3dB peak) over 11k Ohms
Crossover:	2.0 KHz double butterworth 24dB per octave
Dimensions (WxHxD):	180 x 500 x 375mm
Weight:	18 Kg including stands

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Dynavector P75 Phono-stage

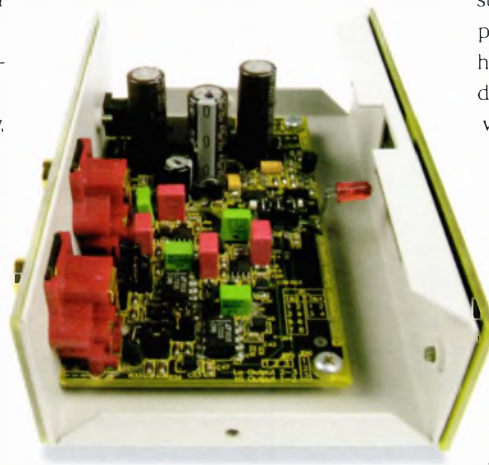
by Jason Hector

In issue 24 I attempted the job of testing four phono-stage solutions at the lower price end of the spectrum. It turned out to be very instructive and demonstrated that a few pounds can make all the difference, as can the specific aims of the designer. My personal favourite turned out to be the MM only Graham Slee Era Gold at £400, give or take a penny. Mind you I didn't remotely hear all of the options in a wide open field, with devices like the Tom Evans Micro-groove an obvious contender. At a price of £450 the subject of this review, the Dynavector P75, is entering a surprisingly competitive market place considering we are talking about a niche product in a niche market.

A cursory examination reveals that the Dynavector follows similar lines to the stages I looked at before; a small unpretentious box for the stage itself and a separate power supply. A "wall wart" type in this case, which supplies a basic DC voltage to the phono-stage. At this point the similarities start to end as the Dynavector designer, Jonathon Davies, has gone in a very unexpected direction with the rest of the power supply.

Most audio electronics make use of standard power supplies, usually consisting of a big transformer to step the mains down, followed by a rectifier (achieving AC to DC). Then some sort of smoothing (usually through capacitive storage of charge) and if you're lucky a linear regulator to remove as much of the rest of the ripple on the ideally DC lines as possible. The other common type of power supply that seems to be spreading through audio, albeit with mixed results, is the switch mode supply. Switch mode supplies offer some very obvious technical benefits but commonly these have always been used to make cheaper, smaller, lighter

and more efficient products for mass market applications (PC power supplies are the most obvious). In operation, switch mode supplies chop up (or switch) the incoming power lines at a high frequency making an AC signal which can then be rectified and filtered to DC. Because switch mode supplies operate at this very high frequency



(100's of kHz is normal) they do not require such large components, or expensive linear regulators, to achieve smoothing and regulation of the generated supply rails. To put it another way, to achieve a given power supply specification smaller, lower specification (and hence cheaper) components can be used and this is the attraction to the consumer electronics companies that use them. In audio applications a better regulated (lower rail noise and faster) power supply can theoretically be made for the same money than the equivalent traditional supply: same benefit, different emphasis. The Achilles heel of the switch mode supply is the switching itself. If the supply is not adequately designed you run the risk of generating noise into the circuits being powered.

Dynavector believe so strongly that

they have solved the noise issues with their implementation that they have decided to include the switch mode part of the power supply inside this phono-stage right up close and personal to the amplifying electronics. Considering a phono-stage is designed to handle the smallest signals in audio (MC cartridge outputs) any noise from the power supply would be a disaster. So the P75 power supply really comes in two halves. The raw mains AC is stepped down and rectified to DC in the wall-wart supply already mentioned and then this DC supply feeds the switching DC to DC converter and regulator.

Because of this stacking of the two supplies Dynavector claim that the quality of the wall wart supply and the mains itself will have no impact on the performance of the phono-stage: big claims indeed. Looking at the circuitry inside the phono-stage it is apparent that the supply is well thought out using a novel input PCB transformer, made possible because of the 250kHz operating speed of the supply. Placing the supply this close to the amplifying circuits reduces the impedance between them, always a good thing.

All of the loading and gain settings are programmed inside the P75 by shifting jumpers around. A word of warning is needed at this point, especially if you are of the ham-fisted tendency, the jumpers are small and tightly packed in amongst the rest of the circuit components. Adjustment almost mandates the use of haemostats and is a job ideally suited to your dealer who should have the necessary tools and will know the best settings for your cartridge. The P-75 offers settings for both MM (also for MI and high output MC) and low output MC cartridges. The gain setting for MCs is either 60 or 63 dB ▶

▶ which makes them suitable for cartridges with outputs of 0.2mV or 0.15mV respectively. The loading can also be switched between 30, 100 and 470 Ohms in low output MC mode. The MM mode offers 40dB of gain (suitable for cartridges with 2mV output) and offers the usual 47kOhm loading. Capacitive loading is not adjustable in either gain regime.



I'll start the discussion of sound quality by recording my initial

reaction when it entered my system: Dynavector TeKaitora in a Well Tempered Reference which at the time fed a Dynavector amplification chain (consisting of a P100, L100 and HX75) all terminated with a pair of Shahinian Obelisks. Home territory for the Dynavector, but you can expect an away match in a forthcoming issue. The diminutive P75 simply replaced the P100 and, initially, I used its out of the box settings (63dB gain and 100 Ohm loading). On to the deck went the excellent Diverse pressing of Richard Thompson - Old Kit Bag. Initial observations were that the P75 was something a little bit special. Immediately obvious was the detail it was allowing through and the sheer dynamic power the P75 could bring to the proceedings was very impressive indeed, maybe a little too impressive. Playing more records revealed a slight hardness and a lack of the organic nature possessed by the P100, most obvious in the mid-range. Fortunately

this negative aspect to the sound was relatively short lived and over the next few hours (into the early hours of the next morning) the stage settled down to a much more even sound. The powerful, dynamic attributes were retained but the hardness was replaced by a relaxed but accurate presentation, never fatiguing but still full of detail. The P75 continued to improve over the next 24 hours but after that it seemed to stabilise quickly.

However, it always seems to need a full day to return to its maximum performance after being switched off for any lengthy period. So once the P75 was settled in and connected up using my preferred bullet plugged microphone cable I settled down with it to just listen to music. Since the P75 was in my system during a rather hectic period for me, this review has been delayed a few times which has been quite pleasant because I have had the opportunity to listen to it in great depth and in another, albeit similar (Well Tempered and Dynavector) system.

The P75 is best characterised by what it lacks ...

Firstly it lacks noise: background noise is impressive by its commendably low value, especially when the amount of gain available is considered. Instruments materialising on a low-noise background strike you as more realistic even if the genuine recorded ambient noise is high.

Secondly it lacks a constrained dynamic range: from large transients (just listen to a well recorded drum kit like the one on the Kings of Leon – *Youth And Young Manhood*) to the gentle caress of a whispered voice, the range, contrast and speed of attack

are exemplary.

Thirdly it lacks mechanical timing: by which I mean that the P75 fails to impart or impose any false sense of timing on the music and this means a wider gamut of emotions are presented to you irrespective of genre.

The construction of the P75 is simple and innovative (why waste pounds on expensive cast or machined and printed front and back plates when PCBs can do the same job very cheaply?) and a little, well, basic. In this area the Lehmann I looked at before leaves it and the rest of the competition wanting. The rest of the case is steel which the designer prefers because it gives improved shielding, both of the super sensitive circuitry inside and to stop any of that switching noise escaping the box with unpredictable results. Round the back the inputs and outputs are all phono sockets. A small (and difficult to use with bare wire) earth binding post is provided. This may or may not be needed and if used you need to ensure there is a path to ground from the P75 since it floats in normal operation.



In my system and location I didn't need it but in another location the binding post, connected to ground, was necessary to avoid some hummmmmmm.

This Dynavector stage has a further trick up its sleeve. Not content with offering the traditional gain and resistor loading the P75 includes a mode called Phono Enhancer which is a reworking of a technique invented by Dr. Tominari of Dynavector Japan. This mode gets ▶

► rid of the input resistor, found in almost all other phono-stages, and configures the P75 to act as a current amplifier. The result is that the coils of the cartridge see an effective short circuit as load, the ideal condition. Within the Phono Enhancer mode there are three gain settings but the actual gain level achieved in this mode is dependent on the output impedance of the cartridge. The Phono Enhancer mode is only really suitable for cartridges with low output impedance. Unsurprisingly, Dynavector Japan's cartridges from the 17D2 upward have the necessary low impedance.

After familiarising myself with the standard MC settings I switched the P75 over to Phono Enhancer mode. Cripes, what a difference! I was obviously expecting a different sound and in this assumption I was partly wrong and partly underestimating the differences. Phono Enhancer or Dr. T. mode lifts this stage's sound quality to new levels and price brackets (but remember, this is in the context of my Dynavector TeKaitora). The sound produced is still characterised by the great dynamics, neutral rendition and ease of listening shown in the other modes. In other words it's still the same phono-stage. but it is simply a better version. You can dissect the changes wrought by moving a few jumpers; more bass with even better control, more detail - but it's the way these things are incorporated into the whole picture that so impresses me in the standard gain modes. Phono

Enhancer does an even better job.

Listening to Suzanne Vega - *99.9F Degrees* or Holly Golightly - *Truly She Is None Other* in Phono Enhancer mode and we are more aware of their vocal intonation. In both cases the frequently complex backing instrumentation made more sense because of the ability to resolve and integrate the music into a whole. If you aren't resolving all of the detail then you aren't hearing all of the music in the grooves. But its not that simple, and conversely if a system doesn't keep everything together in time then all the extra information is wasted and it can even distract from the message the performer is trying to get across; No such concerns with the P75. Instrumental tonality was up there with my P100 (and the Lehmann) and that is impressive. There is no greying out of the richness of acoustic instruments, and the differences between guitar amps, for example, are plain to hear.

Playing an old favourite is always instructive because you really know what is in the grooves, or at least you think you do. Amongst many others (including a new pressing of REM - *Automatic For The People* which sounds great, and numerous returns to the J. J. Cale and Steely Dan back catalogue) I cued up Lloyd Cole - *Mainstream* and settled back. The result? Effortless emotional involvement from a sound that just flows into the room. This really highlights what the Dynavector P75 is all about - musical neutrality.

I have really enjoyed owning and using the Dynavector P100 stage but the P75 has equalled (and surpassed in some areas) its predecessor's performance for a third the price, a great achievement. I think there is a very real risk that the P75 will be overlooked on grounds of price; it's simply too cheap to appeal to some big-spending audiophiles. But that would be a huge mistake. Buy one of these little beauties and I can guarantee that the CD player will be seeing a lot less action from then on. ►+

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Low output MC - Standard:

Input Sensitivity: 0.2mV or 0.15mV
Gain: 60 Et 63dB
Loading: 30, 100, 470 Ohms

Low output MC - Phono Enhancer

Input Sensitivity: As above
Gain: As above
Loading: Zero Ohms

High output MC, MM and MI

Input Sensitivity: 2mV
Gain: 40dB
Loading: 47kOhms

Dimensions (WxHxD):

Price: £475

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IF Designs RSS Loudspeaker Stands

by Roy Gregory

Speaker stands have been in something of a rut for a while now. With the ever increasing popularity of floorstanders, expensive stand-mounted designs seemed to be living on borrowed time. Design emphasis switched to aesthetics over sound, undertaking the unenviable

task of trying to create an attractive speaker stand. I've seen little evidence of success and in many cases the sonic results have been truly awful.

However, the success and sonic quality of the Sonus Faber Cremona Auditor and Focal/JMLabs Micro Utopia

Be has underlined that the inherent mid-band benefits of such small cabinets are hard to duplicate and even harder to ignore. With such pricey compacts competing for attention there have been new stirrings in the world of serious speaker stands. First to surface were ►

▶ the Garrick stone designs, and I've been relying on a pair of those at home for well over a year. Now IF Designs have upped the ante with their RSS model, a stand slowly evolved to maximise sound quality which, somewhat ironically, also succeeds in looking attractive too.

RSS stands for Roger Stone Signature, which is nothing if not a good omen. After all, it was none other than Cliff Stone who revolutionised the quality stand market with his original Foundation design. But if his namesake really got us started on mass loading and filling our metal stands,

IF boss Roger has elevated the art of stand design to a whole new level. Gone are the simple, welded tubes with their various different fillings. In their place is a complex mix of different materials, carefully combined to create a visually and functionally elegant structure.

The end result is at first glance, a fairly conventional, single column stand, but appearances are deceptive. There's little that's conventional here. The basic design consists of metal top and bottom plates linked by a solid, wooden column. The detail is what makes it interesting. The top and bottom plates are cut from laminated steel constrained layers, making them extraordinarily well damped and resistant to ringing. The column is shaped from carefully selected (the

process is classified – well, proprietary at least) timbers, with special attention paid to the way their grain is combined. The end result has an ovoid footprint, with a deep groove cut in the rear edge. A pair of shallow grooves, one in each side, recess the two chromed steel tie-rods that hold the central column in compression. They're carefully spaced from the woodwork and fitted with rubber O rings that prevent any inadvertent rattles. They're secured with heavy duty allen bolts, countersunk into the top and bottom plates.

The base-plate is a sculpted triangle. The careful shaping eliminates parallel sides while maintaining the preferred three-point contact. It's fitted at each point with quite the best spikes I've come across. Large, knurled caps allow simple adjustment from above, with large diameter locking collars are hidden below the base. The spikes themselves are sharp enough to penetrate without damage, heavy duty enough not to fold under abuse. In combination with the spirit level mounted in the top-plate they make leveling an absolute doddle. Likewise, a cutout in the base-plate and matching dip in the rear of the top-plate means that speaker cables can be passed up the deep, rear groove. Neat restraining bars keep everything tidy, held in place with beautifully executed, knurled thumb wheels. The top plate comes with a choice of small, upward facing spikes or cork pads. I used the former.

The end result is both elegant and extremely practical. The question is, is it effective? The answer in short is yes. Used under the PMC and ATC speakers reviewed in this issue, as well as the Reference 3A De Capos, it was consistently excellent. Compared to the Garricks the IF Design stands provided equal focus, transparency and stability, but where they were clearly superior was in the portrayal of instrumental and vocal colour and character. Voices were more natural, as was the tone of violins and acoustic guitars. Upright bass was more tuneful, the pitch of its notes easier to follow. The increased harmonic accuracy was reflected in more natural and expressive timing of notes. Overall, music sounded less forced and more enticing, engaging as opposed to impressive.

The other major improvement was in soundstage coherence.

The soundstage was more clearly and continuously defined, especially as regards height. There was no tendency for images to climb with frequency or level, an effect that can pass almost unnoticed until you hear a stand that doesn't allow it. The Garrick is good in this respect but the RSS is better.

It goes without saying that neither stand allows images to step forward with level or pitch, a really disconcerting effect.

The RSS stands start at £560, which might seem like a lot until you hear what it does for your system. If that really is beyond the budget there are cheaper and simpler models too, although I haven't heard those. For further information on sizes and heights, as well as finishes, you can contact IF Designs at:

Tel. (44)(0)870 744 1382

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Using Nordost's Valkyrja cables in an inexpensive HiFi system, or "How I learned to ignore the guilt and love the music"

by Steve Dickinson

It's not every day that someone drops \$15K worth of cables in your lap, even if you do enter the odd competition. When I got The Call, I was delighted, surprised and embarrassed in about equal measure. Delight and surprise were to be expected, of course, but I recall also a fair degree of self-consciousness when Roy asked me about my current system. The thing is, well there I was on the phone, talking to the editor of a highly respected high-end hifi magazine, telling him what sort of system the exotic and expensive Nordost cables I'd just won would be gracing and trying not to shuffle my feet and mumble into my shoes...

So, my system, then: the amp is fine, an NVA AP50 which I liked a lot from the moment I first heard it. Musical, with a natural warmth, tuneful bass and a clarity and speed which was radically improved when partnered with NVA's own LS-1 loudspeaker cable, but my CD player sort of lets the side down. I'd chosen it in 1993; it was the best I could afford then and I'd heard a few in the price range before I settled on the Arcam Alpha One. Most of what I'd heard had merely reinforced my prejudice against CD: the more expensive ones tended towards a shrill, even strident tonal balance, while the cheaper ones were just grey and dull. The Alpha One stood out because Arcam had voiced more warmly, it to complement their more expensive models, but maybe slightly more rolled-off at the top end to avoid harshness and with a forward midrange balance

which suited the Cyrus One amp I was using. Anyway it worked for me, and until I can afford something seriously good, it's here to stay.

The cables arrived about a week before Christmas: mains leads, interconnects and speaker cable all



dressed out in a fetching and, so my wife tells me, fashionable shade of lilacy-pink. They looked a million dollars, well, expensive anyway, even though they fitted into a box no bigger than that for a pair of Doc Martens. And there they sat for about ten days, just calling to me in the small hours... You see we'd not quite done redecorating the sitting room, where the hifi lives, and it had to be finished for Christmas. Also I'd demolished the old hifi cabinet and built something rather more solid, contemporary and appropriate in its place but that had made quite a radical difference to the

tonal balance of the system. So no sense installing the new stuff until I was sure what the old stuff now sounded like. A bit of tweakery-pokery later and I was getting used to the sound of the system in its new surroundings. Good parts: more bass, still tuneful but not so full that it boomed and overpowered everything; not quite so forward in the midrange, more laid-back but not 'slow'; bad parts: a disappointing loss of air and space and sparkle at the top end which I'd prized in the system as it had been - imagine the difference in room acoustic when you close the curtains in the evening and you'll get the idea. My speakers are based on a Focal-JMLabs design from about 5 years ago, but built from a kit. They sound better than anything I've heard under \$2K and a large part of that is, I think, down to the superb Focal tweeter. They are open and free-breathing, the very opposite of the highly damped, shut-in sound of even the best competition at the price (I couldn't have afforded the Focal-JMLabs versions, ready-built). Anyway, a couple of days after Christmas and I've had a good time revisiting some old favourites - no, not distant relatives, but familiar discs, music I return to over and over. Having thus got a handle on things, I confess it was with some trepidation that I unpacked the Valkyrjas...

I'd heard Nordost stuff at the Heathrow show, but that was connected to fifteen grand's worth of Burmester electronics and eight grands worth of Eben loudspeakers. If it hadn't sounded incredible, I'd have been very surprised. Roy had reminded me that Nordost reckoned their cables could



▶ enhance even modest systems, but my concern was that my system might be too modest for even Nordost to redeem - or that my ears would not be discriminating enough, or my vocabulary subtle enough, to share any worthwhile impressions.



I started with the Shiva mains lead on the CD player (my amp has a captive mains lead so that'll have to wait for some minor surgery) and Valkyria interconnect. Just for openers, so to speak. The first thing I noticed was that the air and space had returned. The second thing was that the whole system was cleaner and more open than before: cymbals took longer to decay and had more body, not just a top-end shimmer but also more of a sense of the fundamental note. In fact the timbre of most instruments seemed to have been fleshed-out in much the same way, so I could hear more of the character of an instrument.

So here I was, ten years on, discovering that, really, my CD player was pretty damn good, actually, thanks for asking. I'd always assumed that as Arcam's entry-level model, and a ten year old budget model at that, it was no great shakes as these things go, yet here it was, sounding better in my living room than a lot of the rather more expensive kit I'd heard at the Heathrow show. A couple of examples: kd lang's album *Ingénue* is a personal favourite, and the track 'Miss Chatelaine' is a delight, full of the air and space I prize, with subtle percussion and rich vocals and

accompaniment. The percussion was tighter, but the cymbals, triangle, maracas and tapped sticks had more life and energy, without coming forward in the mix and upsetting the overall balance. This is a piece I know very well, it has never sounded better, but the overall coherence remains. Imagine cleaning a window, even though you hadn't noticed it was dirty, then coming back into the room. The view is just the same, but now you realise how dirty the window had been after all. Another one: Rodriguez'

Concierto de Aranjuez, a subtle and complex piece, the interplay of guitar and orchestra is a tricky balance to get right even with microphones, and the work endures not only because of Rodriguez' enchanting melodies, but because of his skill in balancing these opposite forces. Now, not only was the guitar cleaner and clearer, but the orchestra was easier to follow in the background, revealing subtleties in the orchestration I'd never noticed before. The soundstage was deeper, making instrumental separation easier to discern, but without making the guys at the back sound distant, somehow. And this was just a change of one mains lead and one interconnect, remember. Probably time to hook up the speaker cables, then.

There are people who maintain that the use of expletives shows a paucity of vocabulary and a lack of imagination. Me, I think a well-placed expletive can be quite effective if not overdone. I also think those who take time to replace the expletives they'd like to use with carefully-chosen epithets ought to loosen up a bit, be a bit more spontaneous, live a little. The first thing

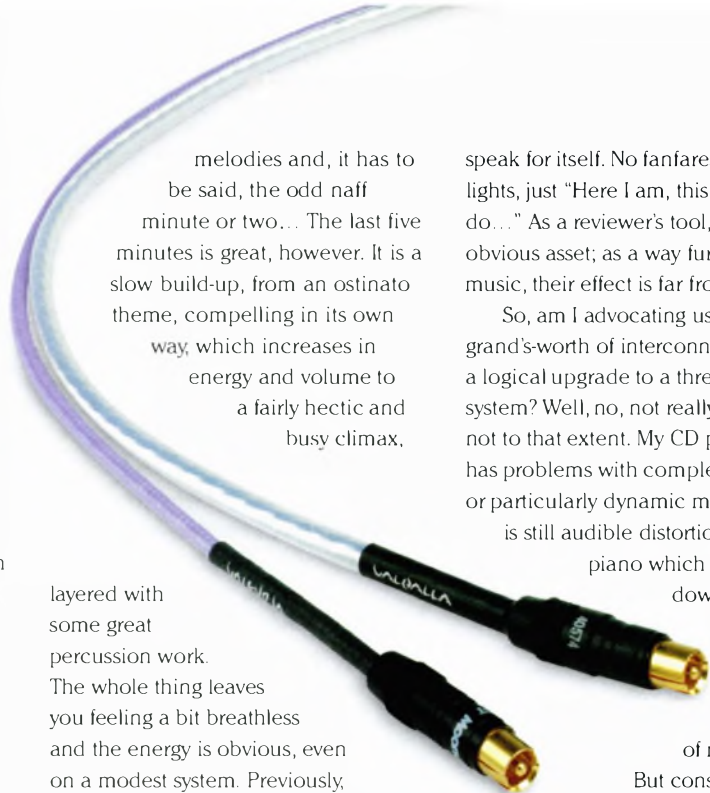
I played was Nat King Cole singing 'Let there be love', mainly because it was already in the player and I was too impatient to choose something else but hey, it's a wonderful piece, beautifully performed, and this time it absolutely came alive. When I've listened to this track before, the things that have always struck me were the warmth of the vocals and the subtlety of George Shearing's piano playing, but this time these features were joined by percussion detail I'd barely noticed before. Track after track, everything I played exhibited this same trick. The treble was improved in ways I find hard to attribute to just a change of cable: the life and sparkle I wanted was back, in spades, but it wasn't bright or spotlighted, just naturally 'there', fast, detailed and crisp but part of a cohesive whole. Somebody at Nordost is a big, big jazz fan because these cables just ate up anything with a bit of a swing to it. The speed, timing and sheer incisiveness brought out the best in every recording I played. Bass seemed, superficially at least, to be slightly attenuated, but when I analysed it more carefully it was still all there, but



tighter and better controlled. From top to bottom, the tonal balance is much more coherent than before. Bigger stuff, too, got the same treatment: the 'Agnus Dei' from Fauré's *Requiem* kept the warmth and humanity of the lavish harmonies, ▶

▶ but the orchestral parts and choir voices were better separated in a bigger acoustic space, which made it easier to follow a thread, or pick out a counter melody without having to strain to hear it. It's the sort of improvement I'd hoped for, but on a scale I thought I'd need a much better CD player to achieve. The best stuff for me came a few days later. Our Christmas guests had gone and I'd had a few days of occasional playing to get used to the new balance of the system. I dug out some real favourites, and high on the list was Ashkenazy and the LSO under Previn, playing Prokofiev's *2nd Piano Concerto*. I have this recording on vinyl and CD and it'd be one of my Desert Island discs. In terms of the number of performances (live or recorded) the *2nd* gives ground to the *1st* and particularly the popular *3rd Piano Concertos*. But for me at least, these two are eclipsed by the second whose dark air of menace pervades everything and makes the work so compelling from the first note to the last. The first movement has a phenomenally difficult cadenza, full of runs up and down the keyboard, and huge great handfuls of crashing chords. I've always thought Ashkenazy made slightly heavy weather of this admittedly demanding section, but played with the Nordosts in place it came together better than I've heard it before, and the moment when the orchestra re-enters at the end of the cadenza – always an electrifying event – raised all the hairs on the back of my arms, legs and neck like never before.

But the real affirmation of these cables' greatness came from an unexpected direction, a week or so later. I was going through some rarely-played stuff and I came across my copy of Mike Oldfield's album *Crises*. I've always had a soft spot for Mike Oldfield; his music is always full of great tunes, but I rarely listen to it nowadays. Anyway, I put on the title track – typical Oldfield, quite long (about 20 minutes) with some good



melodies and, it has to be said, the odd naff minute or two... The last five minutes is great, however. It is a slow build-up, from an ostinato theme, compelling in its own way, which increases in energy and volume to a fairly hectic and busy climax,

layered with some great percussion work. The whole thing leaves you feeling a bit breathless and the energy is obvious, even on a modest system. Previously, though, the last couple of minutes always sounded fantastically busy, but confused. The large amount of bass energy, the fast and detailed percussion, was too much for my equipment and the subtle treble detail just got swamped. With the Nordosts in place, the whole thing held together so much better. The bass was pinned down tight, the percussion detail was clean, fast and absolutely electric.

There's another track on the same album, a simple and short acoustic guitar piece, 'Taurus 3'. Imagine Mike Oldfield does Antonio Forcione and you're mostly there – quick, clean, incisive guitar playing with percussion and timing that has a real 'snap' and with a climax which consists of several guitars thrashing big, loud chords. The overall effect is a sort of wall of white noise, with rhythm. It demands to be played at neighbour-baiting volume, but when I do, it all sort of comes apart at the seams. The Nordosts cleaned the whole thing up to the extent that I've now managed to annoy neighbours a good 2 doors further down than previously, without the speakers or amp losing the plot. What the Nordosts seem to do so well is allow the equipment to

speak for itself. No fanfares, no spotlights, just "Here I am, this is what I do..." As a reviewer's tool, they are an obvious asset; as a way further into the music, their effect is far from subtle.

So, am I advocating using fifteen grand's-worth of interconnects as a logical upgrade to a three grand system? Well, no, not really: At least not to that extent. My CD player still has problems with complex, dense or particularly dynamic music, and there

is still audible distortion on solo piano which is probably down to either digital artefacts or some limitation of my amplifier.

But consider this: if you have aspirations towards the high-end (and you're reading Hi-Fi+, so let's take that as read, shall we?) somewhere down the line, you'll be spending a tidy sum on electronics, and you'll need to allocate a goodly amount towards interconnects to do them justice. You'll probably need to upgrade from some already fairly pricey cables, and your old cables are unlikely to pay you back what they cost you. So there is some merit in getting the cables right first time, enjoying the benefits they bring to whatever equipment you now have, and not suffering the loss later. Putting £2000-worth of interconnect and mains leads on my ten year old £300 CD player made it sound better in my system than several new £1000 CD players I've heard: And the speaker cables improved things again by another order of magnitude. So if and when I spend some serious money on a new CD player, I'll know I'm doing it justice. Besides, what if my CD player was just a little younger anyway?

In response to Julian Hermele's letter in issue 28: you can have my new cables, Julian, but you'll have to prize them out of my lifeless fingers first. ➤

The Townshend Maximum Super-Tweeters

by Jimmy Hughes

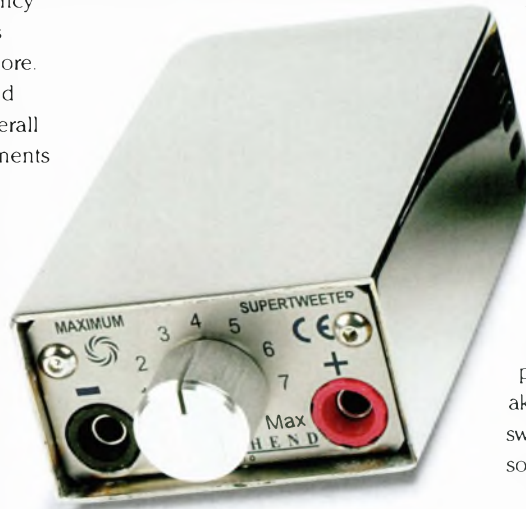
The advantages of having a sub-woofer are now well established. Most audiophiles know that adding a sub increases tonal richness, transparency, depth, enhancing the sense of 3D holographic stereo sound-staging. As a minor incidental bonus, you also get gut-wrenching low frequency impact on things like bass drums and deep organ pedals! There's more. A good sub increases subtlety and delicacy, treble sweetness, and overall spaciousness. Often, the improvements are far from subtle...

Conversely, the benefits of adding a super-tweeter seem much less appreciated. Actually, there's some logic to this. Even big speakers have limitations when it comes to really deep bass. So clearly a little assistance is useful: Not so at the opposite end of the frequency spectrum. Most tweeters are flat to 20kHz and beyond. And many of us - certainly those the wrong side of forty - can no longer hear frequencies above about 16kHz. So - what's the point extending the bandwidth beyond audibility?

It's a persuasive argument - but wide of the mark. Fact is, super-tweeters do contribute significantly in several areas, regardless of bandwidth limitations in source material or individual listeners (just look at RG's report on the demonstration he ran at the Manchester Show). Speaking personally, I need no convincing when it comes to the virtues of super tweeters. Having used a set since the mid-nineties, I know

the incredible difference such devices make. The ones I use are based around cheap 'n' cheerful Motorola Piezo horn tweeters of very high efficiency.

Townshend's new Maximum Super-Tweeters use high quality ribbon drive units. They're very easy to install, and



produce an immediately obvious improvement. Want a simple effective quick-fix? You'll find it here. You only need to get the levels adjusted correctly. And that's not difficult - just set the tweeters for minimum output and you'll not go far wrong. Given that I was effectively substituting one set of super-tweeters for another, I wondered if I'd hear much difference.

I needn't have worried; there was an immediate increase in brilliance and immediacy with the Townshend super-tweeters. Although I had the level control set to minimum, the Townshend STs were noticeably louder than mine - though still 'quiet'

by general standards. Subjectively, I heard an increase in the speed and impact of transient attack, with overall gains in sharpness and immediacy. High frequency percussion benefited immensely. But less predictably there were improvements lower down.

Bass became tighter and firmer, with a greater sense of control. At the same time there's increased space and separation between the notes. Adding super-tweeters makes the sonic picture snap into focus.

I accept it's counter-intuitive to look at the high treble as a means of subjectively altering bass depth and control. But that's precisely what happens! It's exactly akin to the way adding a good sub sweetens the top-end, making the sound smoother and richer.

Because the music becomes more focussed and precise, it's possible to play the system at slightly reduced volume levels without losing immediacy or presence. If you're playing things too loudly to create an impression of dynamics and attack, adding a set of Townshend Maximum super-tweeters should allow volume levels to be lowered without sacrificing detail and forwardness. Tell your neighbours; they might club together and buy you a set...

Timing improves too, making the music sound rhythmically more cohesive. I really noticed this timing improvement playing recordings of solo piano. The instrument appeared much more solid and stable, and there seemed to be a greater

▶ 'abruptness' to phrasing and articulation. You'd notice this on trills and arpeggios, as though the player were more in control of the instrument - better able to make the notes start and stop. Of course the effect was very apparent on loud chords, which had excellent weight and attack. But there was an equally big difference during quiet reflective passages. While most hi-fi systems cope impressively when the music contains large brilliant contrasts and strong powerful dynamics, many handle quieter more introspective passages less well. You get a sense of the quiet passages receding, and somehow becoming less interesting musically.

On piano music, there can be a tendency for the left-hand (bass) part to become shadowy and vague unless the player has a commanding technique and the music contains plenty of colour. It's as though the instrument loses presence as tempi become slower and dynamic levels drop. It's a common problem with many hi-fi systems. But who'd have guessed the solution was to be found at the ultra-high frequency end of the spectrum? Having the Townshend Maximum super-tweeters really helped focus the music during quiet introspective moments. Not by making it more garish, but by improving subtle articulation so that the notes seemed able to start and stop with greater precision. The effect is noticeable in terms of sharpness and focus, but also influences timing and rhythmic coherence. Put another way, the playing has more flavour - there's more light and shade; a wider contrast of tone colour.

Yet the question remains; why are super-tweeters necessary? What are they actually doing? If, like me, you're the wrong side of 50, chances are you can't hear much above 15kHz to begin with. And if you mostly listen to music via CD, there's little (if anything) about 18kHz anyway - certainly nothing that might justify extending the bandwidth out beyond 50kHz as is the case with the Townshend Maximums. So - isn't it true to say all you're doing is faithfully reproducing noise and distortion?

The justification for ultra-wide bandwidth has always been controversial, and many theories have been put forward to explain why it's necessary to extend the

at super-sonic frequencies often indicates excellent mechanical performance and exceptional linearity - an ability to respond accurately to fast, tiny movements. Such things almost certainly have worthwhile positive effects on the audible part of the frequency spectrum. Way back in the '70s, harman/kardon made great play of the adverse effect limited bandwidth had on the ability of amplifiers to accurately reproduce properly square wave-waves - this being an indication of crisp transient attack and minimal overshoot on fast leading edges.



frequency response out beyond the limits of human hearing. It's long been claimed that even those who can't hear anything above (say) 12kHz can tell when a filter attenuating frequencies above 18kHz is switched in. One of the reasons CD is said to sound 'hard' tonally is its restricted bandwidth. One explanation is that 'brick wall' low-pass filters (such as those used in many CD players) have a damaging effect on lower frequencies, causing phase shifts and ringing effects. Also, the ability of a tweeter to operate

There's even some evidence to suggest that high frequencies beyond the normally accepted limit of 20kHz are somehow physically perceived through the bones of the skull!

But, whatever the explanation, truth is you don't need bat-like hearing or ultra-wide bandwidth recordings to enjoy the subjective benefits of super tweeters. The effect is there for all to hear on the vast majority of recordings, be they new or old, digital or analogue, mono or stereo. This is an important point. Adding a set of super-tweeters should provide a wide-ranging consistent improvement that's not dependent on personal hearing ability or super-sonic ▶

► audiophile recordings. It's the same with sub-woofers; the initial appeal is on movie sound effects, or musical material that shakes the floor. Especially when you first get your sub, you constantly want to be reminded of its presence. But in my book an even more impressive demonstration is to play quiet undemonstrative music, with and without the sub, and hear the difference made to material that really shouldn't benefit in any way shape or form because it isn't wide bandwidth to begin with. One of my killer sub-woofer demos is to play the slow movement of Vivaldi's concerto for two mandolins - with just the two solo instruments playing quietly. No bass there! Yet the difference with and without the sub is quite remarkable; suddenly the recording exhibits depth and three-dimensionality with the sub, plus a greater sense of richness and tonal sweetness. Yet - turn off the main speakers and listen to the sub alone and - nothing! The sub seems to be doing zilch...

It's the same with super-tweeters like the Townshends; the subjective effect produced seems to cover areas apparently unrelated to high frequencies. Bass seems to go deeper, becoming tighter and better controlled, with improved pitch definition and greater weight. The sound becomes holographic, as though the speakers had grown taller. Yet the nature of the improvement seems totally out of proportion to what the super tweeters are actually doing. And while on the subject of sub-woofers, if you've got a sub already, adding a set of super-tweeters like these Townshend Maximums seems to create a more pronounced effect than if you added the tweeters to a system without a sub. It's as though having extended bandwidth at the bottom end needs balancing by extended bandwidth at the top - and vice-versa. Having both frequency extremes extended creates an end result greater than the sum of

the parts.


Interested in a second opinion, I took the Townshend super-tweeters over to a friend's house. He's already got a set of my Motorola super tweeters plus a sub-woofer. Adding the Maximum super-tweeters to his system gave improvements very similar to those I'd heard at home. The music had greater presence and increased fine detail. Things sounded subtler and more delicate, and clarity and definition improved. Now it might be thought that adding a set of super-tweeters might increase any tendency towards harshness/brightness. You certainly do get an increased sense of forwardness and presence, but playing one particular CD with a rather busy/congested sound showed that the super-tweeters actually made things sound cleaner. With the super-tweeters working, there was a greater feeling of air and space around voices and instruments - creating a holographic impression of sounds hanging in space. With the super-tweeters switched off, the sound lost some of its separation and seemed to collapse back into the speaker boxes. Everything sounded 'crowded' and closed-in. The question is - why? When I was standing by the super-tweeters, switching them on and off, I could hear absolutely no change to the sound - no difference whatsoever. But from the main listening seat it was a different story. Why? Could it be something to do with acoustical things happening locally around the loudspeaker?

Is it possible that the presence of very high and/or low frequencies assists the main drive units in your speakers to get the air moving? Is what you're hearing not so much the 'sound' of a sub-woofer or a set of super-tweeters, but the effect of these items on your loudspeakers? Think of it as (in effect) the load being spread - the sub or super tweeter taking some of the burden away from the main speakers by vibrating the air at very

high or low frequencies... This would explain why a sub or super-tweeter can appear to contribute little or nothing when heard on its own from the listening seat, yet make a noticeable difference when combined with the sound of the main loudspeakers.

I mean, if (as with my home-made super-tweeters in particular) the contribution is so tiny you can hardly tell they're working when they're played on their own, how on earth could you possibly hope to hear them when the main speakers are in full cry?

You couldn't; their contribution would be totally submerged. But if, by adding frequency extremes via a sub or super-tweeter, you somehow assist the main speaker drive units as they do their job. That would explain why so little does so much. To me this is more plausible than suggestions that you somehow detect the presence of ultra high frequencies though your skull bones. Even so, my answer may still be wide of the mark - I don't think anyone really knows...

Thankfully, for most of us, explanations are of secondary importance; it's the effect on sound quality that counts. And in that context I feel certain that, almost regardless of the speakers you have, a set of Townshend Maximum super-tweeters will make a noticeable difference to the sound of your system. Shrewdly, the makers have included an Off switch. So you can easily and quickly A/B the effect without needing to disconnect. Try a set - I think you'll be surprised and impressed by the difference. 

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Eleanor McEvoy

Interviewed by Roy Gregory

*Following the critical acclaim heaped on *Yola*, audiophile darling Eleanor McEvoy has a new album out, and a new voice to go with it. Roy Gregory met her to discuss the new disc, the changes it shows and her career to date.*

RG. *Yola* had a highly polished yet almost brittle fragility about the sound and the songs. Beneath that beautiful exterior there was a very vulnerable core. The new album (*Early Hours*) has a far more confident feel about it. Do you think that's a fair analysis?

EMcE. Absolutely. *Yola* was the first time we'd ever done this on our own – and I was a little scared. It was also the first time we'd taken this no over-dubs, no drop-ins approach, which if you used to playing the songs live at gigs you wouldn't think would be a problem, but it's a little scary committing to record your flaws. A live performance, by its nature is flawed. That's why I always like to quote Leonard Cohen – "It's the cracks in the wall that let in the light." After *Yola* I came to realise that some of its imperfections were what made it so lovely. When it came to *Early Hours* I thought, right, let's absolutely go with these live performances. It doesn't matter if my voice cracks because it's all part of what we're doing, what we're about. That gave me great confidence, it really did.

RG. It's a much more substantial sound.

EMcE. It is, yeah. I think partly because we have extra musicians – we have a guitar player and we have a trumpet player – and it makes it easier to figure the bounds you have because you have to do less. You're more on the spot when the time comes.



RG. You said it makes it easier, but doesn't it also make it more difficult? When you perform live it's generally just you and Brian (Connor), which is a very exposed and disciplined way of playing. Isn't there a danger that when you get into the studio you are tempted to go hog wild?

EMcE. Not so much now, at this stage in my career, because the discipline extends into the studio too. The first couple of albums, the first few times in the studio it was like, "Yes!" – and I did go wild, but I've been around long enough now that I've learned what happens to the end result if you do that. What it does is it delays you, because the way we work, we'll spend hours setting up the sound and then say, "Right, let's go for it" and just go for a take. The more involved and complex the

arrangement the longer it makes that setting up process, just by virtue of the fact that someone has to actually come in and adjust the microphone, or this or that. It adds up to a lot of waiting around. Then, physically, it takes a lot longer to get five people into a building than three. Fortunately, with the calibre of musicians we've used on this album, if you end up re-doing something it's to capture a different approach rather than to cover a mistake. So it's an artistic rather than a practical decision and it's lovely to have people who perform at that level. You get five people's energy going into each song and that's great.

RG. There's a lovely sense of space on both albums; perhaps even more so on *Yola* by the very nature of the music. But on both records the arrangements are very open and uncluttered.

EMcE. I think that part of that is recording it in six days. ▶

► It imposes its own discipline. People put too much stuff on records, because they can, because they've got the time. I think it's nice in a way to say "Right, let's get the maximum out of this in a single take." Sure, I wasn't as paranoid this time about overdubs as I was last time. We're going to do backing vocals; I don't think there was a single backing vocal on *Yola!* This time we did backing vocals on 'Days Roll By' and there are backing vocals on a couple of the other songs. Of course, we also had Callum McColl and Liam Bradley who are great singers in their own right, who sing a lot together anyway, so we had this ready made choir, which was great.

RG. The other thing I love about the record (*Early Hours*) is the variety. On the one hand you've got the straightahead rock'n'roll of 'Days Roll By', on the other, you've got a great, but very different cover of 'Memphis, Tennessee'. It was a very brave decision to such a well-known song in such an individual way, yet it really works...

EMcE. I think it does work. Okay, it's a wonderful song and I love Chuck Berry, but I remember one day listening to the lyrics of that song and they really brought home the whole thing of estranged fathers. I don't know what it's like in the UK but in Ireland it's absolutely dreadful – a dreadful situation. It's appalling and you end up with guys who are manipulated into paying all kinds of money just for the privilege of seeing their own children. It's the biggest injustice in our society today, and I'm always willing to stand on a soapbox to talk about feminism but it occurred to me that this huge injustice is happening to men. So I thought if I want to talk about sexual equality then I have also to deal with this, and maybe that I should do it in a way that exposed the words a bit more...

RG. I think that's the real point. How many times have I heard that song, but I never picked up on the lyric: Like I never really got 'Satisfaction' until I heard the Devo cover. I think the way you've handled that song more than anything else, underlines

the confidence of the new album – it's just so exposed...

EMcE. I think what you said about 'Satisfaction' is really interesting. You can hear a song many, many times and on different occasions you'll take different things from them.

I tend to listen to lyrics a lot, but then sometimes I don't; I'll listen to grooves or sometimes the actual sound itself. It's so satisfying to find an album that you can listen to 100 times and still find different things in the same song.

RG. As well as the album being much more confident, I also think that it's much more Irish.

EMcE. Do you think so? People have said this to me but I can't see it myself.

RG. I don't think it's Irish in that it sounds like the Pogues, but the singing seems much more relaxed, making your accent, your "voice", far more apparent. The track 'Ave Maria' sees the world from a very Irish perspective.

EMcE. It does, yes.

RG. Given what's happening with the (Catholic) Church at present, that must be a very sensitive subject. I'm not surprised that you handled it, but it's certainly an interesting choice.

EMcE. There'll be people who'll not be talking to me in Ireland because of that song. It's already started with a very good friend of mine whose parents just don't want to know me – don't want me in the house, you know. Which shows you how contentious an issue it is.

Regarding the Irish-ness first of all: I have a house in Wexford and there's a pub about three miles away that has a session every Friday night. Shortly after I moved there I was walking down the road and this van pulled up in front of me and this guy leaps out and starts running towards me... coming from Dublin I actually thought I was going to be mugged. So he comes up to me and he says "I'm a piper and your postman too and I heard you moved down here and would you bring your fiddle down on Friday night?" I was so



► relieved not to be raped or murdered that I said, "Of course I will." So I went down one Friday night and started playing trad fiddle – which I haven't played since I was about 14. I used to be really into it, playing and West Clare and the like, but I'd just sort of moved on to other things. I'd forgotten just how much I loved traditional Irish music. I love it, and every Friday I'm amazed at the lengths I go to, to get to that session. And it's just sitting in the corner of a pub with a piper, an accordion and a mandola player. It's just fantastic and they've taught me a whole load of their tunes that are different to my normal range of tunes, because they're from Wexford. So it's funny that you were saying about the Irish-ness, because you do end up playing what's around you. Of course, I have included 'Anach Cuain', which is a traditional Irish song, oh, and 'Driving Home From Butler's'...

RG. That is there, but for me it's more within the fabric of the songs...

EMcE. Yeah, it just sort of seeps into you. I remember doing a tour years ago in Japan and we played a track where we all played solos. There was a recording of the first concert in Tokyo, and then another of the one in Osaka, just before we left. By the Osaka concert we were all playing pentatonic scales! I wasn't conscious of it at the time, but listening to the tapes months later it was really obvious. It's just being immersed in it for so long – like, every time you get in a lift, or go to a restaurant.

RG. *Yola* was put out on SACD and it was one of the first DSD recordings that actually became commercially available as a hybrid disc. In our little hi-fi enclave that was actually quite important, and it was important that it was such a nice recording of really good music, because a lot of the stuff that was coming out was not really that musically valuable. You've taken it a step further with *Early Hours* and added

surround to the mix. How did you find working to more than two channels?

EMcE. I absolutely loved it. My partner Mick O'Gorman is a sound designer and that's how we originally got onto the SACD route. I'd always tended to record in analogue, which is unusual and expensive. It's also getting harder, just to find a studio that still works in two-inch (tape). You're finding tape-ops now, experienced tape-ops in big studios, who've never

worked in two-inch. They just sort of go, "What?"

So Mick picked up on SACD; myself and Brian were not convinced so he organised a demonstration between DSD and ordinary CD and we just went, "Oh – okay. You've convinced us!" So we went on to use that for *Yola*.

This time he (Mick) said early on that he really fancied doing this one in surround, so I started thinking, early on, about surround. Even as I was writing some of the songs I was thinking about surround, which is pretty unusual even today. Myself and Brian went to Schiphol to hear surround systems there at Sony headquarters, and most of them were really quite gimmicky. We talked about it on the plane-ride home and Brian was really anti that gimmicky route.

RG. There's a horrible tendency to suddenly have the drum kit appear behind your left shoulder – just because you can.

EMcE. Exactly – and exactly what we wanted to avoid. We just wanted straight sound but with a more ambient quality. Having said that I do think we move the trumpet in 'Sail Me High' very, very delicately around the back, but you almost don't notice it. It's a song about paragliding, and when you paraglide you get that faint motion going on. But that's the only track with real manipulation. We added some space to the chorus on 'Ave Maria' too, just to give ►



Scarves from Georgina Von Erzdorf, Telecaster from CB, Wardrobe and attitude model's own.

▶ a feeling of a church acoustic. Apart from that it's really about having a feeling about the sound being wrapped around you.

I really enjoyed it: It slowed us down, it made it much more expensive – horrifically more expensive. Mixing, mastering – it all becomes more difficult when you do it in surround. Sony manufacturing were very helpful, and there were times when we would have been totally stumped without them. But it's funny – you saying that I'm singing more confidently. When you're singing in the studio and you here the playback from the speakers – if you know that the final result will actually be really close to that, that's what makes you confident.

RG. Did you find that the surround aspects of the recording caused problems within the band?

EMcE. It caused a lot of – discussion. (Laughs) I think that people were very nervous of it – rightly so – particularly Brian; worried that it wouldn't be handled sensitively, that it's open to abuse. But I think that, having discussed his fears, and me having discussed my fears, it meant that we trusted Mick and said okay.

RG. It's unfair to ask you to speak for Brian, but how does he feel about the results, now that he's heard it in its final form?

EMcE. He likes it. He likes it because it delivers exactly the effect we wanted – of wrapping the sound around you.

RG. You were talking about having trust in the final sound. Your recording career has been somewhat chequered; you've flitted from one label to another and you haven't always been happy with what those labels have done with your material. Why is that?

EMcE. Well, my first deal was with Geffen Records and I was a rookie. It wasn't my first time in the studio – I'd been working for years with other people. But there's a lot of pressure on you when you are suddenly responsible for everything. You maybe don't have the confidence to really go for it the way you maybe do later on. I had a big supporter at Geffen, Tom Zutaut who signed me to the label. He was an important guy, signed Guns and Roses, Edie Brickell, bands like that. Imagine; there I was doing a gig in a small back room and this guy walks up and says "I'd like to sign you to Geffen Records". It was a huge change in my life. Suddenly, I was off in Los Angeles with my own musicians, recording this album with the three guys who'd been with me pretty much from the start.

It was quite a rocky sound. Listening to it recently I was touched by how much the producer got out of us at the

time, because he really did get the best out of us. I wasn't aware of that at the time, but some of the playing, some of the song-writing is really quite naïve. Listening to it again for the *Special Edition* disc recently was really nice, but it makes you realise how far you've come.

That was Geffen. Tom was my champion at Geffen and when he fell out with the label it left me in a difficult position. If you know anything about the record business then you'll know that you don't want to be stuck on a label after your champion has gone. They were actually really good to us and let us go under good circumstances, let us take our tapes and so on. Then we signed to Columbia, which was owned by Sony, and did two albums for them.

But being signed to a major label was not a good thing for me; it wasn't a holistic thing in my life. I can't tell you the sort of horrific stories that some of my label-mates can. It wasn't that sort of thing. It just didn't really work for me, and not only that, it didn't work musically for me either. It also didn't work on a practical level. So, for instance, they'd bought the rights to my first album but then they didn't put it out. That's the sort of thing they'd do. So people would come up to me at gigs and ask to buy the first album but Geffen had sold all their stock and weren't allowed to produce any more because Columbia owned the rights but they weren't pressing any. Recently, I finally managed to buy back my first album from Sony and we've re-released it so at least people can buy it now.

It (being on a major label) was great in that it let me work with some great producers and fantastic musicians. Otherwise I'd never have had the budget to work with people like Rupert Hine, and I really learnt a lot. Even on *Early Hours*, you call on all the experience and all the tips that you've picked up from people like Pat Moran and Rupert. So I don't regret it, but it didn't work out for me. *Yola* was the first, tentative step to doing it on my own. I'd left Columbia and I had my own publishing company anyway, because for years and years and years I wasn't able to get a publishing deal, although I finally got one with EMI although I retained my own rights. With Mick's help we formed the record company that put out *Yola*, and I think we were pretty surprised when that came together.

RG. Has *Yola* been a success from a business point of view?

EMcE. From a financial point of view? (Eleanor pulls a face) We're still learning from the mistakes we made. From a musical point of view it was great, turned us around, put us in another place, a happier place for me. Financially we're still recovering from it, but it's still selling, and last year it sold more than the year before, so it seems to be building some momentum. But it was successful enough for us to say, "Look, this is working. We're going to do the same thing again." Everybody in the industry who I like and admire, they're all doing this. ➤

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, Sian Drinkwater.

Key to Icons

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



Amy Wadge

Woj

Hatman 2014 

Amy Wadge originally caught my attention with her opening set on Eric Bibb's tour a year or so ago. She won me 'round immediately, delivering a set that whilst it was less slick, was in many ways much more enjoyable than the headline act.

I bought her EP *The Famous Hour* at this gig and have enjoyed it since. Having gained significant attention in her native Wales (Female Artist of the Year and a best album nominee at the Welsh Music Awards), this is her first full-blown CD. The first thing that grabs you is her voice. With a raw edge to it, she retains a femininity and range of expression that draws you straight in. Just listen to 'Anywhere' where she conveys a heartfelt longing with a gutsiness in her delivery that is totally captivating, and if numbers like the upbeat 'Paris' complete with accordion (but naturally), don't bring a smile to your face 'there's no hope' as they say in South Wales. This is a strong collection throughout and it'd be a tough job to select a favourite track although 'Prophet' raises its head over the parapet for me.

Well recorded with a wide, deep soundstage and Amy's voice and guitar solidly centre stage, this album is so much more real, heartfelt and enjoyable than a barrel full of Shankar offspring. Strongly recommended.

DD

Supplier: www.vivante.co.uk

RECORDING 
MUSIC 



Steely Dan

Gaucho

MCA B0000868-36

Normally, re-masters are produced to replicate the original as closely as possible. This time, the engineers worked from the original master tapes to cut an entirely new mix for this release. This is both a good thing because it frees 1970s music from the Quadraphonic mindset, and a bad thing because hardcore Dan-ists will want to burn someone at the stake for such heresy. The jury remains very definitely out with regard to this recording. There are elements that have been untouched (the Rhodes sound, the drums) and the added detail only serves to improve the performance considerably. This must be tempered by the sloppy sub-bass and sheer lack of air and reverberation, especially on vocals, which may give a dusty, arid quality to "those Santa Ana winds" but seems to bring the "distant lights from across the bay" far too close to the microphone. That said, this does make the laid-back Californian sound of the 1970s a more exciting 21st Century experience. Whether this venture into dry lyrics will be well received by all, remains to be seen. Musically, though, this is the Dan at their smoooooooooother and (arguably) finest; tracks like 'Hey Nineteen' and 'Babylon Sisters' are true classics and anyone with the slightest Dan-ist tendencies will have this in at least one format. With the new re-mix, don't throw away the older copies... yet.

AS



ZZ Top

Mescalero

RCA 82876 51654-2

Back in 1983 I was rocking to the rhythms of 'Sharp Dressed Man' and 'Gimmie All Your Lovin'', egged on by those hot girls in the videos, and now nearly twenty years later ZZ Top are back. Actually they never went away, releasing an album every year or two, but most of us have been missing something. On tracks like 'Two Ways To Pay', with its great power-chord progression and weightier drums than anywhere in the past two decades, they really rock but with poetic lyrics. 'Buck Nekkid' is reduced to a rudimentary form of syncopated blues, but with added ferocity. Okay, so it may not be the most P.C. album in the world - "Twenty-six chicks all tied in a knot / Ain't all good, but it's all we got / So get nekkid" - but this is so much more fun than most stuff kids listen to today - The Darkness can only dream of producing an album like this. Then they surprise us with tunes like 'Que Lastima', a great Mexican waltz that just makes you want to open a bottle of Bud, or a fantastic version of Lowell Fulson's 'Tramp'. In the end you'll feel twenty years younger, so give it a listen.

SG



The Buffs

1914

Transcopic Records TRANCD 026

The Buffs (named after the Buff Medway breed of chicken) are an anarchic three-piece band fronted by wild Billy Childish (vocals & guitar). Their music (following a modern trend) is rhythmically driven through the Johnny Barker bass playing and drumming of Wolf Howard. An opening 'Unable To See The Good' is a raucous and punk inspired thrash as guitars and drum set collide behind mike chewing vocals. A little later 'Sonya Fagg', a mantra like love song that is indebted to the feel of Sixties rock music with its borrowed Ray Davies guitar work, bolts on punk attitude to repetitive backing harmonies that belong in that previous era. Another romantically inclined song, 'Just 15' continues much in the same vein as they again graft an aggressive vocal thread (and of course that questionable theme) on to rock solid musical foundations. Their irreverence, sheer dynamism and angst of this rapid fire vocal delivery reverts to a more classic punk stance in the wittily penned 'Barbara Wire' and Billy Childish's tirade against rock stars, celebrity, mortgages and small dogs in 'You Are All Phonies'. Going over the top with the Buffs is a lot of fun but I wouldn't be too surprised if you return to your own lines shell-shocked.

RP





Muse

Absolution

Taste Media 5050466-8587-2-6 


When Muse released their debut album they were, rightly, compared to Radiohead. Albeit flattering, the undertone was that Muse were simply trying to tread the same ground. Since then Radiohead have turned away from their original sound, leaving guitars for something less tangible. And Muse, in turn, have created their own path, carving their own niche. For me, that comparison is possibly the most powerful: Muse have now turned into the emotional force that Radiohead could have been. It may be that there are some people who have not heard a Muse track, but there can't be many. *Absolution* follows on from their last album: having taken the step to producing vast progressive landscapes of sound, they have developed this further, and produced a correspondingly stronger record. *Absolution* is harder and darker than *Origin of Symmetry* befitting its more difficult subject matter. This is another album tainted by the dark cloud of last year's war, barely concealing its political connections. But *Absolution* also has the stronger tunes, better guitar lines and more powerful orchestration to shore this up. If Muse's theatrical tendencies have previously dissuaded you from buying their records, I would advise you to think again, this is a solid album by any measure. With all things said and done, it's hard to imagine how they could have done it better.

MC



Jeff Buckley

Live At Sin-é

Big Cat Records ABB61X 

Jeff Buckley's coffee house debut from 1993 is a tentative but essential four-track twenty five minute mini album which hints at the expressive vocal range, interpretative brilliance and compositional skills that were to be fully revealed a year later on an astonishing and critically acclaimed *Grace*. Here, Jeff, who had been playing on the New York club circuit at the time, just plugs his guitar into the amp and works a mike in this pared back to nothing performances of his own 'Mojo Pin' and a questioning 'Eternal Life'. On its flip side there are two covers in 'Je N'en Connais Pas La Fin' (a song that will forever be associated with Edith Piaf) and the Van Morrison penned 'The Way Young Lovers Do'. Both dramatically show the way in which he developed the evocative style and brought an emotional grip to the performance of other people's music. 'The Way Young Lover's Do', especially, is a breathtaking ten minute vocal showcase packed with scats, clever and often quite subtle shifts in tone, weight and volume that draws out intriguing insights packed full of meaning. You're never worried by the fact that it's just him and a guitar. Touching, vulnerable, poetic and melodic.

RP

Supplier: www.vivante.co.uk

New black

New black

Thick Records THK-097 

New black are a punky four-piece from somewhere in America, I suspect exactly where is not important, as it will always be New York in my head. Sounding like nothing less than a bizarre cross-breed of the Yeah Yeah Yeahs with the B52s they might well qualify for the damning summary of "trying too hard". If, that is, they weren't actually quite good. First of all though, there are some truly terrible lyrics, badly scanning and with more than a little art school pretension. Back that up with a distinctly unsettled (and unsettling) feeling of a band yet to gain the confidence to relax, and that sums up the record's main problems. But then, coming through this, are some fine tracks, backed up with clipped guitar lines and spiky production. When New black actually give themselves a track with more space, they can create a much more intimate sound. On these tracks they leave behind easy comparisons to Sleater Kinney and manage instead to capture a little of the feel of The Talking Heads, or even late Fleetwood Mac, which is no small achievement. New black have some pretty good hooks, and some pretty good ideas, which make this album worth taking a chance on. But whilst this record has a lot to offer, I suspect it may be nothing compared to those yet to come.

MC



Sonic Satori



by Michael Mercer



Damien Rice

O

Whether you are a Norah Jones fan or not, it would be difficult to argue against the formulaic core of her success; honest music, no glam, no gimmicks just the artist and the instruments. The unexpected response to her *Come Away With Me* record may have opened the doors for many talented singer/songwriters whose mission it is to share their music with the masses but could not find label representation to aid them in their quest. Being musicians without the "hit" and hard bodied dancing prowess that much of the record buying public had come to expect, it was difficult to get label's ears. In addition, these so-called pop sensations had been making it increasingly difficult to break through the cookie cutter top 20 without a true show to offer ticket buyers. Thank you Ms. Jones (and of course producer extraordinaire Arif Mardin) for proving once again that the music speaks for itself. *O*, the debut album from the Irish born Damien Rice, follows the same principles (while differing greatly in style of

course): honesty through music. Rice poured his heart into this album. The musical themes jump from full bodied, deeply contemplative works to emotionally uplifting ballads. 'Delicate' is an instant introduction to Rice's vulnerability. The chorus, seemingly aimed at a lost partner, ponders manipulation and treachery with simple words. This is most effective as it conveys hurt without self-loathing. 'Cold Water' turns inward. Metaphorically charged, this song, while short, manages to create beautiful images through effortless vocal melodies, sweeping strings, and timid piano chord progressions. There is a universal thread throughout 'Older Chests'. This track meanders through many aspects of everyday life; our preoccupation with time (past and present), a need for a loved one, commercialism and a fathers woes. Rice soars through these ever-present thoughts without losing himself. Albums like *O*, simplistic in nature, lend themselves to an easy connection with the listener. Sonics are essential in delivering the emotive quality behind an album as self reflective as this, and Rice, along with his production team have delivered the goods here. Vocal textures are lucid and vibrant. Guitar strings are tightly articulated while retaining warmth and presence. The piano possesses a real sense of surrounding space. The albums tonal quality is superbly balanced and the breadth of the soundstage is staggering, considering the sparseness of the music itself (delightfully sparse I might add). The encapsulating intimacy of this record makes it one of the most pleasurable listens of the last few years.

RECORDING
MUSIC



Teitur

Poetry and Aeroplanes

The life of singer/songwriters can be daunting at times. Endless city tours, airplane food, and the long hours on the road between gigs can detract from the artists' creative process. In Teitur's case however, traveling and cramming to find time to write helped formulate a vision that yielded the wonderfully crafted *Poetry and Aeroplanes*. Aptly titled, the album chronicles his life reflections while on the road, hoping from room to room while trying to find some sense of contentment. The record's mood, while melancholic, manages to maintain hopefulness through lighthearted ballads like 'Let's Go Dancing' and 'One and Only'. Songs born out of longing for companionship, their choruses sing of carefree times, togetherness, and subtle challenges presented by finding yourself in a partnership. 'Rough Around the Edges' is poetry. "It's ok, I'm alright, I'm just

a little rough around the edges of this life. Play it cool, you can always follow breadcrumbs in a line when you are lost." Beautiful prose aimed at reassuring the listener after a long day caught in the rat race. This track, while set amongst pensive and sometimes saddening music, is smart and uplifting without being contrite. One theme that is consistent through *Poetry* is loneliness. From the first lines of 'Sleeping With the Lights On' to the closing 'To Meet You' Teitur contemplates a relationship lost, a word misspoken, or how simply chance dictates the very path we choose. Memorable records can provide us with this temporary escape from the harsh reality that is the world around us, while addressing the very issues that we face while truly living. Additionally, sparse recordings such as this enable the listener to share the experience as if it were being performed there in the hi-fi system (providing the quality of the recording is intact). Many pop recordings of late are lost in a sea of digitally enhanced effects and workstation tricks. They simply lose their believability, and thus the connection with the intended audience. Teitur's vocals are the main instrument here and they are concisely represented, without being too far back in the mix or in your face. This allows for the instrumentation to shine through as well. Guitar licks and strings float, creating a gorgeous soundscape while bass notes pound with the backbeat. All sounds are present and lend themselves to the overall rhythm of this record. *Poetry* is an impressive combination of well constructed songs and sonic coherence. Perhaps a few of these so-called hip hop artists and pop icons should try writing a song with some merit without the meaningless tales of Crystal, jewelry, and body curvature, or maybe there just isn't enough soul there to begin with. After all, we're living in the age of the almighty dollar. Classifications abound, yet it is difficult to categorize the style of music that Teitur creates, and a solid singer/songwriter with a touch of folk may just do it. Fans of Rufus Wainwright should enjoy this album.

RECORDING
MUSIC



Dar Williams

Out There Live

Label: Razor & Tie

The electricity of live performances can be tricky to capture. There are those artists that simply shine in the studio (thanks to those brilliant producers and evolving technology, pitch correction aside) but when faced with the spot lights and a crowd their abilities seem to dissipate into the craziness that is, in essence, a form of show business. We can not begrudge those talents for this phenomenon. It is a difficult and downright terrifying experience to share your chosen medium with an audience full of strangers. Dar Williams however, seems to thrive off the energy in *Out There Live*. While a wonderful singer/songwriter (if that term is not oversaturated enough, sorry) she is also a magnetic entertainer and guitar player. She draws the concert-goers into her little world with ease, and keeps them there through all her humorous and playful journeys. Songs like 'When I Was A Boy' and 'The Babysitter's Here' ring with joyful storytelling enthusiasm. Williams' ability to paint a musical image with so few words is staggering. She writes with a sense of wonder and excitement about the world that is match by only a privileged few in the folk world these days. The intro to

'I Won't Be Your Yoko Ono' where Dar explains her experiences in college with people possessed by this amazing desire to connect with the Avant Garde is hilarious. The lyrical content of the song is powerful in spite of its playful nature. She toes this line very well. It would be difficult to be offended by her words due to the way in which she delivers them. Her connection to the crowd during 'Iowa' is communicated through the tremendous unsolicited sing-along that takes place during the chorus (with some notes that I would be embarrassed to attempt in a public venue I might add). The people are having a genuine good time, and with ticket prices soaring these days it's magnificent to hear it. Pretension has no home in this concert space. 'February' is a pretty number to relax to with your significant other. Her soft, subtle style is beautifully expressed through her wispy verses and silky guitar chords. The noise level is surprisingly low for a live CD. Williams's vocals are textural and clean. Her guitar is cozily reproduced with a coherence that mimics some well produced studio albums. In all the soundstage is dynamic and vast. Those who read this column know of my concerns about the airy-like quality that is present at venues in real time and space, but is often lost in recordings. The engineers caught it here, and did so (seemingly) without too many tricks. Considering this is a compilation of live tracks, and not one concert, I have to say hats off to Greg Calbi at Sterling Sound NYC. There is a certain fluidity to this album that creates an illusion of "oneness" (yes, I'm creating words as I go along). *Out There Live* is worth every penny.

RECORDING
MUSIC



Tomorrow Is Already Here... Stereolab unleash the future today

by Richard Clews

Stereolab are a fascinating band. Their output, and there is a hell of a lot of it, zigzags across musical borders and often heads into very strange territory. Sometimes disposable, occasionally annoying, but frequently profound, Stereolab's music has seeped into the consciousness of popular culture and turns up in many unexpected places. They began underground, yet today they can sell records and give concerts all over this planet and, many would suspect, probably a few others.

The band emerged from the musical wasteland of the early Nineties, when the charts were clogged with Stock, Aitken and Waterman 'discoveries'. Guitarist Tim Gane and his partner, French singer Laetitia Sadier, joined with Martin Kean (bass) and Joe Dilworth (drums) to record 'The Light That Will Cease To Fail' (Duophonic DS45-01). Gane had served in leftwing indie unit McCarthy, who 'out-Smithed the Smiths' with 'Boy Meets Girl So What' and 'We Are All Born Creeps'. The early Stereolab songs were a reaction against the pop stylings of McCarthy's final album, *Banking, Violence and the Inner Life Today*. Gane's love of The Velvet Underground, Neu! and Faust had a heavy influence on Stereolab's music at this stage. The droning, minimalist guitars and deadpan vocals focused the listener on the energy of the song rather than the sound or melody.

A metamorphosis began after Mary Hansen and Andy Ramsay joined in 1992, with vital contributions from Sean O' Hagan. Hansen's singing, Ramsay's inventive drumming and O' Hagan's mastery of arrangement (furthered through his work with The High Llamas) pushed Stereolab in new directions with each release. *The Groop Played "Space Age Bachelor Pad Music"* (Too Pure CD19) was the band's first dabbling in 'loungecore', harking back to Sixties soundtracks. Compared to later work, *The Groop Played...* lacks cohesion, but it brought Stereolab to the front of a wave of bands who drew on unorthodox Sixties and early Seventies influences.

While Britpop drowned in the Atlantic, Stereolab's unique sound won respect from American alternative radio. *Transient Random-Noise Bursts With Announcements*

(Duophonic D-UHF-CD02) and *Mars Audiac Quintet* (D-UHF-CD05) drew favourable reviews, as did the pivotal *Emperor Tomato Ketchup* (D-UHF-CD1) in 1996. *Emperor* benefits from confident musicianship, incisive lyrics, Sean O' Hagan's arrangements and John McEntire's production. Above all, Gane and Sadier presented more engaging ideas.



The style of the music was more distinctive, but the emotions conveyed and lyrical concepts were deeper. Discernible influences range from Gil Scott-Heron (on 'Metronomic Underground') to *Autobahn*-era Kraftwerk ('Olv 26'), with flashes of nihilist punk. The sound of the album is another distinguishing factor: upfront and gritty, with bubbling electronics, boxy strings and close-miked vocals. The impression is of audio soaked in diesel oil.

Stereolab's fans tend to fall into 'pre-*Emperor*' or 'post-*Emperor*' factions. Certainly, after its release the band's sound changed: out went chugging guitars and in came vibes and harpsichords. Under the influence

► of Brazilian artists including Marcos Valle and Os Mutantes, the melodies became much warmer, arrangements more dense and the instrumentation more diverse. *The Turn On EP* (DS45-CD18), a 1997 side project, acted as the bridge between *Emperor* and the first 'Brazilian' album, *Dots and Loops* (D-UHF-CD17). *Dots and Loops* was seen as a leap forward because of its sophisticated playing and production. From the band's point of view, it was simply an experiment with new sounds



and styles, no better or worse than their earlier music. For many listeners, the album still remains the best Stereolab release.

All of the songs bear close scrutiny, but amongst the most notable is 'Brakhage', which fuses stuttering electronics, hip hop rhythms, vibes and Farfisa organ stabs. The interplay between Sadier's and Hansen's vocals propels the song forward, with lyrics thrown back and forth. 'Diagonals' has the most intriguing opening of any Stereolab track: the twisting, rising drumbeats never fail to enthrall. 'Refractions in the Plastic Pulse', Stereolab's first successful attempt at an evolving piece of music, also contains passages of mesmerising electronics. Not surprisingly, Volkswagen used another track, 'Parsec', as the soundtrack for their impressive New Beetle campaign.

On the next full-length album, 1999's *Cobra and Phases Group Play Voltage in the Milky Night* (D-UHF-CD23), the band made the Brazilian influences more prominent (especially on 'The Free Design' and 'Puncture

in the Radak Permutation'). Overall, the music was sombre and not as invigorating as *Dots and Loops*. As Gane has admitted, there was too much music on the record for some people to take in. Still, the band were on a creative roll at this point: in early 2000 they released *The First of the Microbe Hunters* (D-UHF-CD25), an EP of extra songs from the *Cobra* and *Phases* sessions.

The critical reaction to *Cobra and Phases* led Stereolab to reconsider their approach. *Sound-Dust* (D-UHF-CD27) was a more 'acoustic' record, with fewer synthesizers and more electric pianos. As Gane explained to *Future Music*: "This is our most naturalistic record in a while actually. We felt we needed to do something different to what tons of other bands are doing. Falling back on electronics can be an easy way out. We tend not to use too much hi-tech stuff so there are no sequencers or MIDI. We could use it but decided not to. Too much time and too much choice." Tim Gane's love of Krzysztof Komeda's soundtrack work inspired the band to create atmospheric music.



Even the atonal weirdness of Messiaen's *Turangalila* was brought to bear, including the eerie Ondes-Martenot lines. "That's my all-time favourite piece of music", Gane told *The Guardian*. "It's very static, fast and weird, and it's influential on our new record in as much as Messiaen had a sense of rhythm where loads of things happen at once. It's called insect orchestration, with lots of little sounds combining to ►

► create that bigger sound.”

Sound-Dust and the preceding *Captain Easychord* EP (D-UHF-CD26) saw Stereolab’s music reach maturity. There was a new assurance in the songs, and Sadier’s lyrics, while still abstract in places, conveyed stronger emotions. The album and EP need to be heard side-by-side, as the three bonus tracks on *Captain Easychord* rate among Stereolab’s best. The sound quality also saw improvements: warm and expansive, with the CD sounding very analogue-like. Tim Gane is a hardcore vinyl and valves fanatic and,

accordingly, Stereolab have always released their albums on vinyl alongside CD. The one exception is 2002’s *ABC Music* (Strange Fruit SFRSCD111), a double compilation of Radio One sessions. The first disc was a good round-up of their earlier thrash guitar numbers, while the second contained a few songs from *Emperor Tomato Ketchup* and *Sound-Dust*. One song that shows massive improvement over its original version is ‘Metronomic Underground’: in this incarnation it is far more menacing.

At a time when Stereolab could afford to look back on a decade of achievement, they were suddenly robbed of one of their founder members when Mary Hansen died following a traffic accident. Her singing and guitar playing had been one of the main elements of Stereolab’s sound and her stage presence would be terribly missed. Many fans were left wondering how the band’s music would change. In the meantime, Laetitia Sadier released her first solo album as Monade in early 2003. *Socialisme ou Barbarie* (Duophonnic DS45CD32), a collection of songs mainly recorded on 4-track cassette, gave critics and fans another perspective on Sadier’s songwriting skills and trombone playing, drawing highly positive reviews. There was another boost in the autumn, with the release of the EP *Instant O In The Universe* (D-UHF-CD28). The first music to emerge from Stereolab’s new home studio, this showed tighter arrangements than recent albums. On ‘Good is Me’, Sadier used her

dry wit to good effect: if ever there was a song that Blair and Bush need to hear, this is it.

The announcement of a new album for 2004 came as a total surprise. The timing also seemed strange as *Margerie Eclipse* (D-UHF-CD9) could be described as Stereolab’s first ‘summer album’ (an imminent tour influenced the release date). Many of the new songs are comparable with Stereolab’s best, especially ‘Cosmic Country Noir’ with its blend of Bach-like chords and

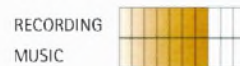
Raymond Scott bleeps, and the driving hip-hop/jazz of ‘La Demeure’. There is also a tribute to Mary, ‘Feel and Triple’, and a rare look back to early Stereolab on ‘Margerie Rock’. The independence which Stereolab have created and maintained for themselves means they are free to take their career in whatever direction seems fit. The band’s talent for creating atmospheric music might lead to soundtrack recording, provided they are given enough freedom. Perhaps their next album

will be another surprise, and fans will once again split into those who prefer the band ‘before’ or ‘after’. Whatever happens will definitely be worth the wait.



Recommended:

Emperor Tomato Ketchup



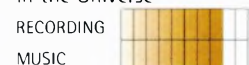
Dots and Loops



Sound-Dust/Captain Easychord



Margerie Eclipse / Instant O in the Universe



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Jaco Pastorius Big Band

Word Of Mouth Revisited

Heads Up Husa 9078 

No he hasn't returned from the other side, but this is an outstanding tribute to the genius that was Jaco Pastorius. Involving a whole, whatever the collective word for bass players is... 'pluck', 'gut', 'rumble', 'double stop' ...of different bassists, including Jimmy Haslip, Victor Woolen, Gerald Veasley, Richard Bona, Jeff Carswell, Christian McBride, Marcus Miller and even Jaco's nephew David Pastorius. The man himself is even involved, via a live recording of his bass part around which the band perform. The joy of this recording comes from hearing different interpretations of familiar numbers like Jaco's 'Teen Town', so familiar in its Weather Report guise but taking on new life in this weighty, extended big band treatment. '(Used to be a) Cha Cha', originally from Jaco's debut album, features some lightning fast playing from Victor Bailey and great piano from Mike Levine. Herbie Hancock's 'Wiggle Waggle' featuring Jaco himself, fits seamlessly into the mix and really allows the horns to stretch out. The recording does it full justice too with appropriately weighty yet fleet bass notes, fat, fat brass and plenty of punch. Buy with confidence. Oh, and your neighbours may hate you but this is definitely one to play loud!

DD

Supplier: www.vivante.co.uk



Tommy Turrentine

Tommy Turrentine

Audio Fidelity AFZ 007 

Much less well known than Stanley, his saxophonist brother and severely under-represented when it comes to recordings, this set recorded in New York in 1960 was Tommy's debut. Accompanied by his brother, Horace Parlan on piano, Julian Priester on trombone and the great Max Roach on drums, Turrentine contributes no less than five of the album's seven tracks. From the opening 'Gunga Din' the strength of the playing here is immediately obvious. Stanley takes the first solo and his confident Hawk's inspired playing dominates his brother's trumpet. The frenetically paced 'Webb City' sees a great solo from Priester followed by a crisp, fluid solo from Tommy. Roach is his usual excellent best, powering the band ahead. And whilst it could be argued that Tommy is somewhat outshone by his more illustrious stable mates, he contributes some superb playing throughout. During his own composition 'Two, Three, One, Oh!' he delivers his best solo of the set: fast, beautifully controlled and superbly expressed. This is a tight band powering through some great tunes and their enjoyment is clear in every note. The recording in no way betrays its age: warm, spaciouly staged and solidly three-dimensional. This is an unpretentious and highly entertaining set guaranteed to warm the cockles of any jazz lovers heart.

DD

Supplier: www.vivante.co.uk



Carol Kidd

Nice Work

Linn AKD 229 

This is one of a batch of Carol Kidd re-issues from Linn, and not only is it a multi-channel SACD, but also features HDCD in the red book layer, pretty neatly covering all the bases bar DVD audio. Technology aside, the main point here is the music and fortunately it merits the attention lavished on it by Linn. Carol Kidd, although she's gained increasing recognition over the years including an MBE in '98, still deserves greater international recognition. She's blessed with a wonderful voice, crystal clear, expressive and with great phrasing. This is my favourite of the three re-issues so far. Kidd, superbly accompanied by Sandy Taylor on piano, Alex Moore on bass, and Murray Smith drums, along with a crisp and punchy horn section, is in great form as she storms through a selection of standards. Standout examples include a delicate rendition of the Ellington/Strayhorn/Latouche classic 'Daydream', where she so perfectly captures the number that the Duke would be proud. There's also a perfect rendition of 'Mean To Me' but to highlight particular tracks from this set is unnecessary. It's all equally strong. The recording quality is excellent, clearly setting out every nuance of Kidd's fine voice and giving full reign to the punch of the brass and percussion.

DD

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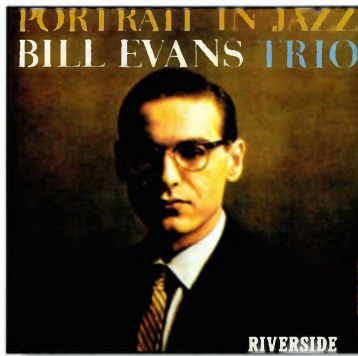
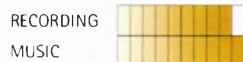
Iain Ballamy with Stian Carstensen

The Little Radio

SoundCd1005 

Readers with particularly keen memories may recall my raving about the previous release featuring these two (*Pepper Street Interludes* ASFA 102), which I still dearly love. This time they've dispensed with the band and it's just the duo. What is so remarkable is the range of sound and emotion they can trigger from such apparently ill-matched instruments as tenor sax and button accordion. If anything the launching pad for their musical journey is even more eclectic than last time around. 'Body and Soul' anyone? Fine, well how about 'Windmills of Your Mind', 'Saving all my Love for You', or even 'Teddy Bears Picnic'? All these and more are taken on, turned inside out, upside down and every last drop of emotion, nostalgia, whatever each piece can evoke is wrung to the last drop. The set culminates in a version of that hoary old chestnut 'Danny Boy' that will bring tears (of joy) to any soul that has an ounce of sensitivity. By now I guess you'll have gathered that I like this album. Wrong, I love it! It's a perfect companion to *Pepper Street* and like that album is set fair for regular playing chez Davies for years to come. The recording is fine; you can all but see Carstensen's fingers flying over the buttons of his accordion. Recommended is too weak a word!

DD



Bill Evans Trio

Portrait In Jazz

Alto/Riverside RLP-1162/ AA-022 

This 1959 session dates from the same year as *Everybody Digs Bill Evans* although here Evans is accompanied by Scott LaFaro and Paul Motion rather than Sam Jones and Philly Joe Jones. Of course with musicians of this quality it's unduly nitpicking to compare one with the other and whilst this set doesn't stay in the mind quite as much *EDBE* it's still pretty damn fine. Taking in a clutch of standards from the likes of Cole Porter and Rodgers and Hart, the set also features Evan's own 'Peri's Scope' and the wonderful Davis/ Evans number 'Blue In Green' from that year's groundbreaking *Kind of Blue*. The mood is immediately set by the opening 'Come Rain or Come Shine' with a fluid, walking bass line from LaFaro offsetting Evan's staccato runs. Better yet the following 'Autumn Leaves' sees Evans really flying and the band relaxing into the groove. The quality of music making throughout is superb but the real standout tracks for me are the oh so gentle version of 'When I Fall In Love' with Evans notes falling like gentle summer rain, the fast paced 'Peri's Scope', and 'Blue In Green' mainly because I just love the tune. Exemplary pressing from alto, and a splendid cover shot of a grumpy looking Evans. Strongly recommended.

DD

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Gary Burton, Chick Corea, Pat Metheny, Roy Haynes, Dave Holland

Like Minds

Pure Audiophile Recordings PA 003 

Like the companion release, Ray Brown's *Soular Energy*, this double set is pressed on near transparent and intensely blue vinyl. I doubt that there's an audiophile reason for this aside from proving the purity of the vinyl, but it sure looks pretty. In every other respect though the audiophile credentials are 100%: Recorded by James Farber, mastered by Greg Kalbi at Masterdisk, half-speed mastered by Stan Ricker and superbly pressed, the musicians are given their best opportunity to shine here and shine they do. Immediately evident is that this is a class recording: nothing overtly 'hi-fi' or showy about it but a very natural acoustic, with just the right level of detail and presence coupled with dynamic punch to make it a convincing experience. Always telling, the cymbals sound entirely natural, no hi-fi 'tizz' here just the tangible sound of stick or brush on metal. All the numbers are strong - with players of this calibre I'd be surprised if they weren't - but stand-out tracks for me are Burton's 'Like Minds', the sly bass-driven take on 'Country Roads', Corea and Metheny's playing on 'Tears of Rain', and the bands joyful romp through 'Bag's Groove'. Like the Ray Brown release, this is a limited edition set. I suggest you get your order in fast!

DD

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Neil Norman

SCI-FI in HI-FI

Audio Fidelity AFZ 012 

Space rock and sci-fi, "It's music Jim, but not as we know it". Sadly, too, it's also entertainment but not as we know it as well, in this twenty-track collection of TV and Cinema themes from *Godzilla* and *Star Wars* to *The Prisoner* and *Space 1999*. Neil Norman's guitars, synths, theremin and keyboards (together with an orchestral cast of thousands) give performances that are a pale imitation of the tunes many of us so fondly remember. Only his arrangement of *UFO* and *Blade Runner* can be recommended—they never stray too far away from the originals. It doesn't really work as pastiche either, probably because there seems to be very little wit or humour crafted into scores that generally plod on with an unerring disco beat. When *Mysterious Island* came on Bernard Herrmann must have turned in his grave. Now there was a man who understood the use of full orchestra and a whole array of weird and wonderful instruments. I would urge you to seek out his *Fantasy* and *Mysterious Film World* CDs if you want to hear how this should really be done. The recording though will be compensation enough for some. All I can say is "Please God, don't let this disc become common currency at hi-fi shows". If it does, "kill me now!" However, I must add that there were fans of this CD in the Parry household - the budgies - who happily sang along throughout. But then they are Australian.

RP

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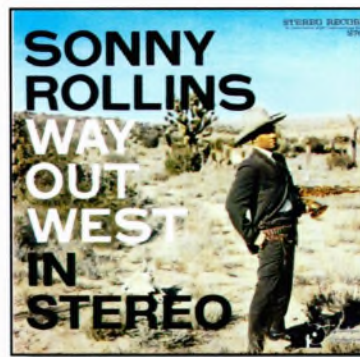
Mozart
Clarinet Concerto and Quintet

Fröst/Vertavo Quartet/Amsterdam Sinfonietta/Oundjian

BIS-SACD-1263 


Swedish clarinetist Martin Fröst is renowned for the intrepid, working with a number of contemporary composers to stretch and create new boundaries of musical expression. So why has he approached the work of a composer whose work can hardly be called audacious? At least not for the last century or two. The answer is not at first obvious. He utilises a basset clarinet (for which the work was originally conceived - see my Opus 3 overview in issue 8), providing a richly-hued tone, but with a number of other such performances available this cannot be classed as daring. But it is a tasteful choice, hinting at Fröst's reasoning, for the ultimate goal when approaching Mozart has to be refinement allied to technical perfection. His readings here may not flaunt any previous reputation, always remaining on the nonchalant side, but with prolonged listening it is easy to appreciate his pristine command. Both the Amsterdam Sinfonietta and Vertavo Quartet accompany him with totally satisfying displays but it is Fröst's performance that steals the show, with playing of great sensitivity and dynamic control, most obviously in the slower movements, resulting in the most beguiling of releases that simply leaves you wanting more.

SG



Sonny Rollins

Way Out West

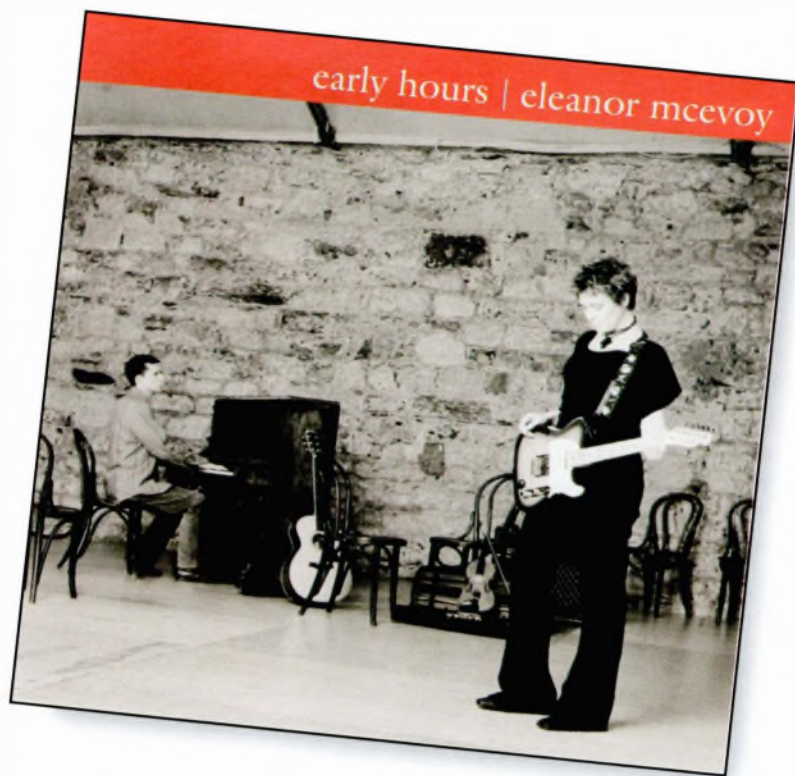
Analogue Productions CAPJ 7530 SA 

Sonny Rollins gives a sonorous, exceptionally open and swinging performance as he immerses himself in this unlikely Western orientated material. 'Wagon Wheels' and Johnny Mercer's 'I'm An Old Cowhand' (which is repeated here as one of three alternative take bonus tracks) develop from comfortable and quirky beginnings into sublime and uninhibited jazz. Grooves where the Ray Brown bass and Shelly Manne's "oh so cool" beat delicately fleshes out the space left by the Rollins with an imaginative, complementary and sympathetic underlining or counterpoint to his tenor sax lead. These are witty and respectful performances. Elsewhere, the full ripeness and warmth of Sonny's tone communicates at a deeply emotional level for the sweet Jones-Symes ballad, 'There Is No Greater Love' and his interpretation of the Ellington standard, 'Solitude', is a haunting one. Doug Sax beautifully transfers these performances and the Rollins title track and 'Come, Gone' (in both their original 1957 guises and in the alternative takes as well). The sound is remarkably naturally and the subtleties, nuances and delicious interplay are clearly demonstrated in this transparent and finely detailed format.

RP

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Eleanor McEvoy

Early Hours

Market Square MSM51SACD128



Eleanor McEvoy might be the current audiophile darling, but it's the musical quality as much as the sonics that make *Yolo* such a hard act to follow. Well, you needn't worry. *Early Hours* is a triumph that succeeds as art as impressively as its predecessor while notching up the technology another level by adding multi-channel to the SACD mix.

Musically it's a more resolute and confident outing, lacking the almost brittle fragility that gave *Yolo* its slightly winsome appeal. These are strong songs that pull no punches and head straight for the heart of things. A fabulous, slow tempo rendition of Chuck Berry's 'Memphis, Tennessee' refocuses the song on its lyrics rather than its simple, rocky chord progression, revealing a depth and sensitivity to the words of which I was completely unaware. A plea on the part

of estranged fathers? Yep, I was surprised. The best cover since Devo elevated 'Satisfaction'? Probably. It's a brave artist who takes on such iconic material, and a great one that lift it to this extent. The decision to deal with such a legendary track speaks volumes about Eleanor's confidence in both herself and those around her. It's a quality that pervades the whole album, from the personal songs of commitment, fulfillment or loss, to the overt statements of 'Ave Maria' or 'Memphis...' Then there are the catchy pop tunes of 'I'll Be Willing' and 'Days Roll By' to provide light relief (and radio air play). But the real change is in the voice and fabric of the music itself. This is a distinctly more Irish album, and not just because of the presence of 'Driving Home From Butlers' and 'Anach Cuain (Eanach Dhuin)'. There's an accent and idiom to the playing that is somehow unmistakably Irish, while there's no attempt to soften or mask Eleanor's natural vocal delivery. The result is an authenticity to the playing that breathes power and purpose into the songs. With single takes recorded on two-inch analogue tape before the addition of

minimal overdubs and conversion to DSD, both musical and sonic integrity are superbly served. This is great music, beautifully recorded and deserves your attention. You'll enjoy the experience.

RG

RECORDING
MUSIC



McEvoy's latest is SACD done right. Whether on the CD level, delving into stereo or full-blown multi-channel SACD, each format has been approached intelligently, using the right tools for each job. The recording was made on analogue multi-track, then mixed to half-inch analogue tape and onto a SADIE DSD mastering device for stereo SACD, or the 16-bit output of a SONOMA mastering device for CD. Meanwhile, the SACD surround mix came from eight digital subgroups using state of the art TIMAX processing, before also passing to SADIE mastering. This is the same set-up that helped to make McEvoy's last release - *Yolo* - such a critical success. The added surround effects are subtle enough to enhance rather than distract from the winning recipe.

This is a beautiful recording of a beautiful-sounding artiste, more immediately bluesy/jazzy than earlier recordings, yet retaining her distinct Irish folk roots. There's not a duff track among the thirteen on the album (including three covers, a fine reworking of Chuck Berry's 'Memphis Tennessee' among them), all of which show McEvoy to be as gifted with the pen as she is with the plectrum and larynx. She's even comfortable when the tempo turns up a notch on 'Days Roll By', even if this does sound like acoustic Cranberries. From a hi-fi buff point of view, this is a mandatory show-off disc. Even the weakest recording (Slipping Away) remains stronger than most of the competition. It doesn't really matter whether you are an SACD devotee or not, this is a must buy album. Good enough to find its way into CD dems as well as every SACD dem going. Enjoy it while you still can

AS

RECORDING
MUSIC





Prokofiev/Martinu/Hindemith
Sonatas for Flute and Piano

Mathieu Dufour/Aleksandar Madzar

Harmonia Mundi HMN 911770

Harmonia Mundi have a real knack for finding excellent new talent for their Les Nouveaux Musiciens label, and this debut release by Mathieu Dufour confirms the point. While he has played a fairly safe in choosing three pieces from the mainstream of 20th Century flute repertoire, Dufour's manifest technique makes it work, producing some exquisite music. The principle character of his performance appears mainly in the pianissimo sections, especially in the Prokofiev and the beautiful and lyrical Martinu pieces, where he achieves sounds that can be most ethereal - the effect can sound weak and fabricated if the flautist lacks the necessary control or is too tense. He also impresses with his evenness of tone, especially in the Prokofiev where his higher registers are superb, reaching the most treacherous notes with aplomb and creating more sweetness than most. Aleksandar Madzar's accompaniment is also excellent, animating proceedings with the bright piano tone, but never losing sight of their interplay. Since 1999, Dufour has been the principal flute with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. This auspicious debut has introduced him to those of us outside the "Windy City", and made me eager to hear more, especially in less familiar repertoire.

SG



Mussorgsky
Pictures at an Exhibition/Night on the Bare Mountain (Original and Rimsky-Korsakov versions)
NSO of Ukraine/Kuchar

Naxos 8.555924

These performances remind me of the brilliant, compelling style of many Russian orchestras of the 1960s that appeared on the Melodiya label and their EMI incarnations. They may not be the most subtle, but then neither is the music. In *Pictures at an Exhibition*, *Gnomus* is too frantic, while both *Samuel Goldenberg* and *Schmuyke* exhibit less than perfect rhythms in the brass section, but with Kuchar's execution these imperfections are of little importance. Although *Bydlo* is a little ponderous, the second *Promenade* reveals sonorous wind characters, while *The Hut on Fowl's Legs* and *The Great Gate of Kiev* both demonstrate an entirely unreserved attack from the brass and percussion. These blistering events are wholly matched by the two renditions of *A Night on the Bare Mountain* (both the original and more familiar Rimsky-Korsakov versions), while the two other short pieces simply put the icing on an already intensely rich and flavoursome cake. Their warmth and excitement is assisted by the fitting recording, which brings out the nuance of each performance, resulting in a real musical treat that confirms that the great Russian orchestras, with their unmistakable style and marvelous bravura, have yet to disappear.

SG



El Diablo Suelto
Guitar Music of Venezuela

John Williams/Alfonso Montes

Sony Classical SK 90451

Venezuelan guitar music and the performing of it is generally a 20th Century phenomenon, and follows the teaching of Raúl Borges, whose work *Vals Venezolano* is included here. All the pieces here reveal the influence of the country's folksongs and dance, exhibiting an intoxicating amalgam of European styles and native Indian and African rhythms, meaning that a waltz becomes much quicker and more intricate, especially rhythmically. Most are short and simple, lacking formal complexity, but the majority more than make up for this in energy and drive. Four require the support of a second, smaller guitar known as a *curato*, admirably played by Alfonso Montes, but the majority remain solo efforts performed with total assurance by John Williams. His playing reveals dynamic tempos allied to exquisite charm and lyrical freedom, and exhibits absolute technical command, which is just as well as the Sony engineers have supplied a particularly close and revealing recording. In fact a lesser performer would not have stood up to the scrutiny. Despite the number of recordings of guitar recitals currently available, this charming disc is a remarkably fine tribute to the guitarist's art, as well as an appealing and vivacious musical tradition.

SG





Kancheli
Simi/Magnum Ignotum

Rostropovich/Royal Flanders
Philharmonic Orchestra/Kakhidze

ECM New Series 1669 462 713-2 (CD)

Georgian composer Giya Kancheli's music generally expresses sorrow and lamentation, with little sense of joy, and played either loudly or softly, with very little in between. It is structured with a stop start approach that breaks up the general slowness of pace, relieving any weariness that may overcome the listener. On the surface it may give off an aura of total misery, but beneath the surface there is a greater sense of poignancy and a sincere unsentimentally that more than compensates for the gloomier emotionality. Although there are very few artists who can perfectly reveal the music's more lyrical qualities, through attention to detail, his integrity, and supreme concentration, Mstislav Rostropovich does just that, taking the reverent simplicity of *Simi* (a kind of cello concerto) and letting it grow from its fragmented opening through a couple of huge climaxes to its sad conclusion. *Magnum Ignotum*, for winds and tape, sees the composer working on particularly original lines, with the folk song and religious chant of the tape gradually intermingling with the instrumental to rise to a single climax, perfectly revealing Kancheli's technique of utilising his chosen materials and fashioning them through natural growth.

SG



Mendelssohn
String Quartets Nos. 3 and 4

Eroica Quartet

Harmonia Mundi HMU 907287 (CD)

These pieces are to many simply examples of standard chamber repertoire, with nothing new to examine, but the Eroica Quartet treat Mendelssohn's quartets as if they were the equal of his large-scale works. This is their second volume of the composer's work and it is obvious that the excellence of their debut recording was no fluke. *Quartet No. 3's* opening movement, *Molto Allegro Vivace*, is not just lively, it becomes a living and breathing entity. But they do not ignore delicacy when it is required. They simply take the slower movements and nourish the music with charm. But they are always ready to launch back into the playful or exhilarating, generating strength and weight if so desired. The *Fourth Quartet* may not be quite as concisely written as its predecessor, but its darker, more plaintive mood is beautifully handled by the Eroica's articulation, which reveals much of the same excitement. This may not be the scholarly way to interpret these quartets, but these performances certainly entertain, supplying the atmosphere of each with an electrical charge that invigorates our view of the work of a composer we thought we knew, and therefore doing everything a quartet recording should.

SG



Guarnieri
Symphonies 1 and 4
"Brasília"/Abertura Festiva
São Paulo Symphony
Orchestra/Neschling

BIS-CD-1290 (CD)

The São Paulo Symphony Orchestra, under the direction of John Neschling, present their second disc of works by the Brazilian composer "Mozart" Camargo Guarnieri for BIS. As with the first, which featured *Symphonies 2 and 3*, this release exhibits performances of excellence, with first-rate playing, and glorious sound. The music here can only be described as pure American neo-classicism. The *First Symphony*, composed in 1944 and dedicated to Serge Koussevitsky, is reminiscent of a number of American composer's work, from Copland's to Piston's, but intertwined with Tippett's rhythmic complexity and contrapuntal writing. The *Fourth*, although subtitled "Brasília", is actually dedicated to Leonard Bernstein. Although the work, which is based on Brazilian folk music, only lasts less than eighteen minutes, its central movement, which is almost half the length of the whole piece, is marvellously scored gracefully formal. In between the two symphonies is the colourful *Abertura Festiva*. This brilliant work comes complete with a number of percussive outbursts and is a joy from start to finish. With Guarnieri hardly a household name and his work pretty-well unknown outside his native Brazil, these attractive releases should do much to further this talented composer's wonderful music.

SG





Beethoven
Symphony No. 3 "Eroica"

Cleveland Orchestra/Dohnányi

Telarc CD-80090

Recorded in 1983, this compelling *Eroica* was among the first recordings made by Dohnányi following the opening of his tenure as director of the Cleveland Orchestra. Now re-issued on the Telarc Classics Midline series, it still sounds wonderfully exhilarating. This is testament to both Telarc's engineering prowess and the conductor's convincing direction. He pushes the score forward with ever increasing momentum, fully aware of his new charges' full-bodied tone. Dohnányi is always bold, asserting the forcefulness of Beethoven's phrasing, in a truly "heroic" reading that stands up against the very best *Eroica* recordings, even if the closing coda lacks the absolute thrill supplied by Szell, although the Telarc disc exhibits even better playing and sound that is both dynamic and vivid. There are moments of true explosive drama, such as during the central bars of the *Funeral March* or in the opening of the *Finale*, where vigorous string playing is met by the pounding tympani and assertive brass. The disc does need to be played loud for full the effect to materialise - something most Telarc discs require - but once in full flow there are very few releases of Beethoven's work that can compete with this CD.

SG



Chopin
Cello Waltzes, Vol. 1

Pieter Wispelwey/Dejan Lazic

Channel Classics CCS 16298

While Chopin's musical conceptions were most certainly aimed squarely at the piano, his most appreciated and successful works can be performed on alternative instruments. Of course the success of even the most skilful transfers falls on the shoulders of the players involved. Chopin's music reveals a distinct lyrical quality, and this is demonstrated by playing of the utmost eloquence by cellist Pieter Wispelwey. Using this disc as an example, Chopin's *Waltzes* suit the cello superbly and Wispelwey performs each difficult section with apparent ease. The fact that out of the eighteen selections on this release, only four are actually waltzes does not matter, and he is able to transform the most taxing runs with aplomb, including the left hand piano part from the *G major Prelude*, which becomes a softly-spoken *etude*. Similarly the two pieces originally written for the cello - the early *Polonaise Brillante* and the *Scherzo* from the *Cello Sonata* - are both despatched with effortless panache. Dejan Lazic's accompaniments are incisive and accentuated, as well as perfectly gauged, and the warm and atmospheric engineering is also first-rate. Clearly the performers here are the right ones to make these effective arrangements an entertaining and masterful success.

SG



Arriaga
Cuartetos para cuerda

Cuarteto Casals

Harmonia Mundi HMI 987038

Born in Bilbao fifty years to the day after Mozart, Juan Crisóstomo Arriaga was only eighteen when he composed these three string quartets. Yet they were viewed by his contemporaries as works of originality and refinement, displaying a freshness, charm and fluency of technique also found in the Austrian's work. They also exhibit the influence of Cherubini, Haydn and Rossini, as well as foretastes of both Mendelssohn and Schubert. However, the sensuousness, gentle poignance and lively passages of local colour are undeniably Arriaga's own. Listen to the opening *Allegro* of *Quartet No. 1* (which must have been the first quartet to include a *bolero*) and you will hear a profound, yet at times decidedly melancholic composition, while the slow movement of *No. 3* begins in a mood of rustic apathy before launching into a vivacious development. The youthful Cuarteto Casals supply ardent performances that reveal a sense of improvisation; phrasing the lyrical melodies most elegantly, retaining animated rhythms and savouring the composer's colourful textures. Ten days short of his twentieth birthday, Arriaga was dead, in Paris, exhausted from tuberculosis and overwork. It's not surprising that he became known as the "Spanish Mozart".

SG





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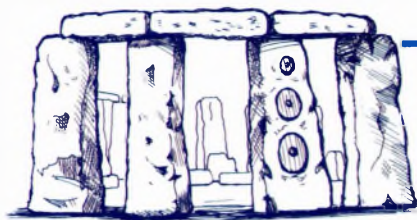
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The History Man

by Richard S. Foster

Titan – King of the Monos

By now most of you will be aware of my love for mono recordings. I've made that very clear in previous columns. I really began aggressively pursuing this love affair after purchasing my first Helikon mono in March 2001. Prior to that purchase I was not getting the enjoyment I had anticipated from many of the mono recordings I was buying. I purchased them for their performances, but unfortunately, stereo stylus profiles (among other things) go too deeply into the groove where there is no information. This definitely adds a noise factor that can, at times, become overwhelmingly obtrusive. Stereo cartridges will retrieve information in both a vertical and horizontal plane from the groove walls of any record. Mono recordings have no information in the vertical plane so you are introducing a nasty to the playback chain at the most critical point: the beginning. There were times I even returned certain records because the noise factor was just too great. Boy, do I regret that now! The only accomplishment the mono switch did on my line-stage was to eliminate some of the phase issues that were occurring. This did nothing to solve the noise (crackling as if the record was damaged) problems.

To explain briefly, stereo cartridges have their coils at a 45-degree angle to the stylus (and the record surface). This freely allows the cartridge to pick up information in both planes (vertical and horizontal). The mono versions of the Helikon and the Titan have their coils perpendicular to the stylus (and the record surface). Based upon this configuration, the mono Helikon and Titan will generate a response only for the horizontal (lateral) groove modulations. They will totally ignore any vertical modulations.

An interesting observation with these cartridges is that if your pre-amp or line-stage is equipped with a mono switch, when you engage it while listening ... it has absolutely no

effect! The other difference that separates these cartridges is that the mono Helikon, stereo Titan, and mono Titan all use the same stylus shape. This special line contact stylus, a proprietary shape made especially for Lyra, has a contact radius (with the LP groove) which is over two times larger than that of the stereo Helikon. Also, the cantilevers on both versions of the Titan are diamond-coated, a feature which is not available on any of Lyra's other current cartridges. Some of you may ask why Lyra decided to use two coils. I think the logic behind this is that most of us have a stereo system and therefore we would not want the sound to come out of either the left speaker or the right speaker only. This can be accomplished however, by only connecting either the left side or the right side of the pins to the cartridge clips in your tonearm and plugging in the appropriate interconnect. I prefer to listen with the sound coming from both speakers ... but in mono.



I believe that it is very important for readers of this magazine to refer to the review of the Titan Stereo versus the Helikon by RG back in

issue 23. So much of what I could say (and not quite as well) about the differences between these products is explained in detail. Roy really nails the sound of the Titan versus the Helikon and more importantly, paints an excellent picture of what the Titan sounds like.

I hate to break in cartridges. It seems they take forever and this Titan is no exception. Now with about 70 hours of playing time, it's begun to open up to the point where one can make a sensible judgement as to its attributes. While doing other tasks (I work from home) and during certain periods, I can get eight to 12 hours of playtime per day on the cartridge. There's nothing better for one's concentration than to get up every 20 minutes, clean the stylus, carbon fiber brushing the record and begin the process again. ▶

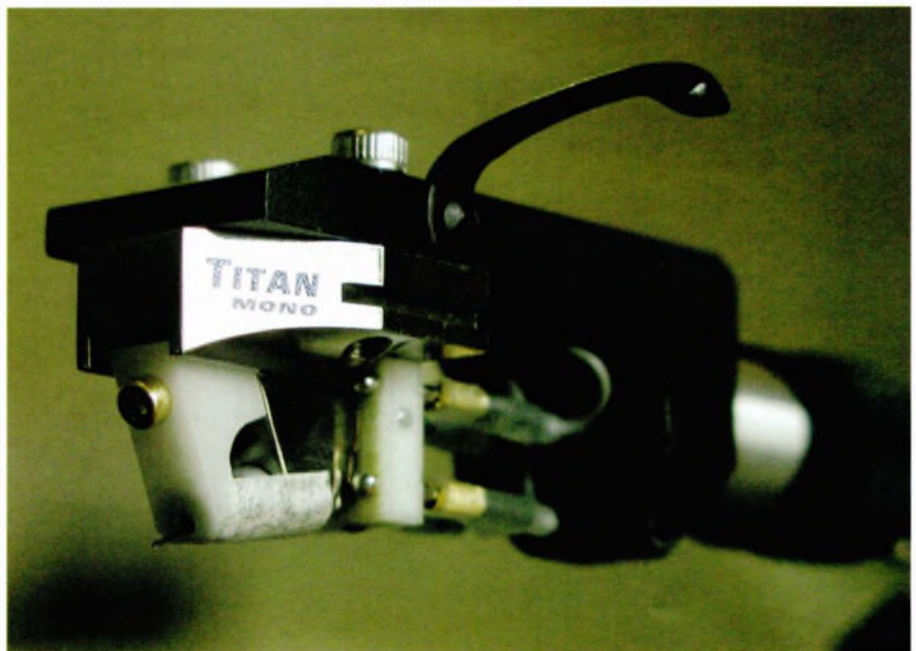
▶ A friend of mine, Sid Marks, uses organ records when he breaks in a new cartridge and I've stolen this idea from him. It makes perfect sense, based upon the 'torture test' a deeply grooved organ record can provide, that this will do a great job of working the suspension. (Needless to say, you can imagine what it does to one's brain after listening to the same organ record over a 10 odd hour period day after day ... even if the volume is low enough so that you know just when it's time to start the process again.)

When we talk mono, most of us have only had the experience of flipping a mono switch and getting all of the problems I've previously mentioned. With the Titan, and its cousin the Helikon, what you get is BIG MONO. Both these cartridges provide a sound fill that is floor to ceiling and extends outside the speakers. With these cartridges you get phenomenal depth and regardless of what you may think ... mono does image ... not only front to back, but in a mono fashion from both the left and right front to back areas: It's truly amazing.

Okay, so a lot of you are trying to stay awake by this point. You might have a handful of mono records, but how much better are they actually going to sound? How could it possibly be worth buying a special cartridge just to play them? Well, with the mono Titan they're going to sound better than you could ever imagine. In fact, once you own one, you realise that mono is no-longer stereo's poor relation. In fact, quite the opposite. Pretty soon you'll start searching out mono cuts of your favorite 1960's recordings, be they classical or rock. Name the title - especially rock - and I can almost guarantee the record will have greater impact, dynamics and presence in mono than its stereo counterpart. Why, you ask? In the late 1950's and early 1960's the people doing the cutting knew an awful lot more about how much they could get in the grooves of a mono record. Stereo cutting was still in its infancy. I'm not suggesting that you should discard all your early stereo recordings and try and replace them with mono issues. What I am saying is that not only should you stop flicking past the mono issues in the second-hand bins, but that picking up mono versions of recordings you already own could prove a revelation. Remember, that embraces the Stones, the Beatles and some

of the greatest jazz and classical performers ever recorded. What I'm also saying is that once you hear what these recordings can do (and current micro-groove re-issues are some indicator) then you'll want to take it further. If that's the case then Lyra is the way to go as they are the only company on the planet currently making a true mono cartridge.

But which one? Making comparisons is not nearly as straightforward as it seems. When you play the same record twice in a row, it usually sounds better on the second play. This probably has to do with the groove walls relaxing just a bit. To counter this, I mixed which cartridge was played first at different times. Within a day of the first listening session, I went back and reversed the playing based upon my notes of which LP was played with the Helikon first and which was



played with the Titan first. The tracking force on both cartridges was set at 1.68 grams and VTA adjustments were made with absolute ease because of the JMW wands. Harry Weisfeld, I think you're brilliant. You've made this job so easy!

On *Joan Baez 2* there is an old American Folk song that begins side two, 'The Banks of the Ohio'. On this album Baez accompanies herself on guitar throughout, however this is one of two tracks where she is also accompanied by The Greenbriar Boys (no, not the Soggy Bottom Boys of *O Brother Where Art Thou* fame). What I found so interesting is that listening with the Helikon, you're aware of the three 'Boys' in the background softly singing and just barely strumming their banjo, guitar and mandolin. It appears as if they are in another booth, separate from the one in which Joan is singing. Either that or they are somehow partitioned ▶

System Preferences

Since this is the first time I've really discussed equipment in these pages it seems appropriate to detail my current system:

Speakers: JMLabs Micro Utopias

Stands: A Canadian generic brand that are made of steel and not only do they not "ring" because of their mass, I found them to be quite superior to the stands made by JMLabs.

Amplifier: A pair of Manley Lab 300B Neo-Classic SE/PP always used in the push-pull mode as opposed to the single-ended mode.

Line Stage: Herron Audio VTSP 1A/166 - all tube (<http://www.herronaudio.com>)

Phono Sections: 2 Herron Audio VTPH-1 sections, one for moving coil and one for moving magnet.

Turntable: Modified VPI TNT6 with full-blown HR-X bearing and platter with periphery ring and weight . . . and a hotrod edition.

Tonearm: JMW 12.6 with extra wands

Cartridges: Lyra Titan Stereo, Lyra Mono Helikon

VPI SDS power line conditioner/speed controller

Immedia NoiseBlock (Ina): An active air isolation platform using Newport Technology modules. Because this platform is active and utilizes a constant air source, the platform de-couples the turntable from the VPI platform and stand it sits on. (For further understanding and information about the Newport modules, go to: <http://www.newport.com> and look for the CM-224 pneumatic

isolator) [four modules are used in the NoiseBlock]

Yamaha Professional CDR-1000 CD Recorder/playback unit.

Thorens 124 completely rebuilt with NOS parts also using an Ikeda 407t tonearm and Pierre Clement (1950's NOS) moving magnet cartridge. [This is a mono only setup and although it has its colorations, there are some records that must have the profile the Clement provides. The very early French records almost demand this conical stylus in order to sound their best.]

Speaker Cable: Bi-wired Nordost Valhalla

Interconnects: Nordost Valhalla

Interconnects for the Yamaha CDR 1000 (this is a balance in/out unit only and I needed special cabling for this kindly supplied by Joe De Phillips of Discovery Cable Company (<http://www.discoverycable.com>) using his top-of-the-line Essence interconnect configured for balanced on one end with RCA's on the other. These are superb interconnects.

Power Cords: I've just installed three Nordost Vishnu power cords: one for the Herron Line Stage, one for the moving coil stage and one for the VPI SDS.

That's it . . . however, before I get into the Titan/Helikon issue, I'd like to mention the staggering change in the overall sound of my system by just changing these three power cords. My previous power cords were the Nordost El Dorado's . . . not exactly chopped liver. I received the Vishnus in December 2003 and was not prepared for what I heard! Truly the openness, effortlessness of the music was quite simply a shock. I'm awaiting more from Nordost and I am very much looking forward to incorporating them into the system. It truly has been transformed - just by power cords - and until you try them for yourselves you'll never believe it! Get to your dealers today and see about "borrowing" some of these cords.

► in the recording venue.

When you switch to the Titan Mono, BANG, they are right there in the same room just behind her! Their presence is greater; there is a fullness and richness to their contribution, with greater detail, more information . . . but more musical information, not just analytical detail. I find Joan's voice to be the real test as her presence has increased and there is more natural attraction in her intonation. Add a similar qualitative leap to the guitar and the result is a dramatic increase in the musicality of the whole.

I found this across the board for each and every recording. While the

sound of Plas Johnson's tenor sax is wonderful with the Helikon, it is absolute heaven with the Titan. TBone Walker's voice and the strength and power of his electric guitar

are, well, quite 'electrifying' with the Titan.

Again, all of the qualities mentioned above come through, recording after recording. Yvonne Loriod's Steinway just sounds "more real" with the Titan, her piano has more form and the dynamics of her fingering technique are heard with greater ease and authority. Aretha Franklin's 'Respect' becomes an unbelievably powerful and rich wall of sound. (Incidentally, this is one of those LPs where the mono destroys the stereo. There is just no



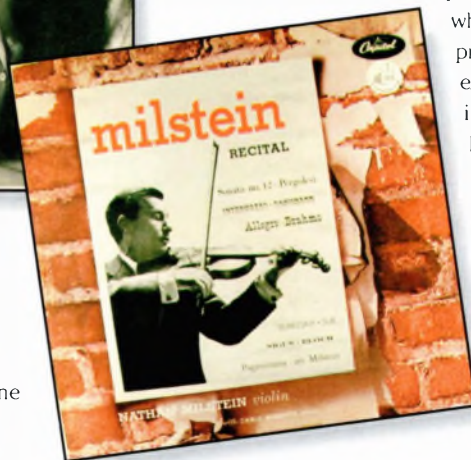
▶ contest.) The singing and the orchestral weight in Kempe's magical Mozart *Requiem* provides the listener greater drama to Mozart's masterpiece. You get the 'rosin on the bow' effect with the Milstein recording and I'm here to tell you that Woody Herman and Buck Clayton never sounded as good to these ears.

Let me finish by trying to explain that what I've said about the Titan in no way should diminish the quality of what you'll hear with the Helikon. These are both special products at different price levels. Many may not believe how truly great mono recordings can sound, but I can attest to the fact that I am aware of dozens of individuals who have purchased the Helikon mono after they heard it in a friend's system. I think I may have sold a couple dozen myself because of friends coming in and not believing their ears. They in turn, would act as sales agents when their friends came over and on and on.

The world of mono recordings is fantastic. Most of them were made using the simplest of microphone techniques with negligible mixing (if any at all) involved. The vast majority were made with tubed electronics. It was only in 1964 that transistors came into effect and by 1969 the mono era had come to an end. Meanwhile, the current fixation with early stereo means that there's a wealth of great music sitting idle in record collections and second-hand shops, just waiting to be discovered at bargain prices.

The Titan mono is a very special product. Unless demand really kicks off it will remain a special order only item, and even then it's going to cost anywhere from 15 to 25 per cent more than its stereo counterpart. The reasons for the increased price are several. Firstly the cantilever/diamond assembly costs Lyra almost twice what a Helikon assembly costs because their supplier, Ogura, has to make them on a one by one basis especially for Lyra. Even then there is a minimum order required. Secondly, the craftsman who makes the cartridges has to break his normal production schedule and make a one off Titan Mono. Having said this, the Titan is a once-in-a-lifetime product. I doubt anyone will ever better this cartridge for single channel replay and, given the stylus profile, I doubt you'll ever wear it out. Analogue's superiority to digital has never been so apparent. How ironic is that?

If you're serious about mono, or perhaps already own the



Play-list

Here are some of the recordings I relied on for this review. I thought it was easier to list them in one place...

US Capitol PB259: Milstein *Recital* with Carlo Bussotti, piano
 German Electrola W ALP 1514 (UK ALP1444): Mozart *Requiem*, K.626 with Rudolph Kempe conducting the Berlin Philharmonic (a to DIE FOR performance)

US Columbia CL 567: *How Hi the Fi*, A Buck Clayton Jam Session with Woody Herman

US Atlantic 8139: Aretha Franklin: *I Never Loved A Man The Way I Love You*

French Vega C 30 S 224: Yvonne Loriod, piano: Mozart *4 Fantasies*, *Sonata K.331* and *Rondo K.485*

French Atlantic 332006: T-Bone Walker *The Blues*, vol. 2

US Vanguard VRS 9094: *Joan Baez 2*

By the way ... a trick that I use with my Yamaha recorder is to record various passages with one cartridge and the same passage with the other, directly to CDR. Your sonic memory is not as long as you think and this machine allows me the luxury of comparing the products with the same material but at different times. I'm a firm believer that temperature, humidity and atmospheric pressure really do play a major part in sound quality from one day to the next, not to mention the variables in electrical current.

Helikon mono, you owe it to yourself to explore the wonder that the Titan mono can bring to your listening pleasure. If you decide you cannot justify the price of the Titan, the Helikon mono will still kill ANY stereo cartridge when it comes to playing mono discs – the right equipment really is that important, which

probably explains why the Titan mono provides a musical experience so totally in a class of its own. I don't know how many of these Lyra expect to sell. I also know that designer Jonathan Carr sees the creation of this cartridge as an article of faith, preserving our recorded history for future

generations. Laudable as that is, he might well end up with a surprise financial success on his hands once people get to hear just what the Titan mono is capable of.



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John Lennon: *Imagine*

Mastered from the original master tapes from Yoko Ono's recent remix. A rock classic (1971), and very possibly the strongest musical statement in John's career. Tracks include *Imagine*, *Jealous Guy* and *Gimme Some Truth*. **Mo-Fi LP 180g £25.95**



Isaac Hayes: *Hot Buttered Soul*

Hot Buttered Soul (1969) is a musical departure for soul that is taken for granted these days, but its day it was very much a ground breaking effort. With only four tracks, extended monologues (Mr Hayes rapping on his favourite subject...curve), sophisticated production and the use of a symphony orchestra on some tracks this is an album that will merit a lot of time on your turntable. Tracks include *Walk On By* and *By The Time I Get To Phoenix*.

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Aimee Mann: *Lost In Space*

Aimee Mann is a highly talented singer/songwriter who has been critically acclaimed in the music and hi-fi press for years. If you love catchy guitar based rock with lyrics that look at the dark under belly of love and romance, then *Lost In Space* is for you. Tracks include *High On Sunday*, *51*, *Real Bad News* and *This Is How It Goes*. **Mo-Fi LP 180g £25.95**



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Respighi

The Birds and Brazilian Impressions

Speakers Corner/Mercury SR90153 **180g** **1**

If you ask any collector of the Mercury Living Presence series to put together a Top 10 list, no doubt this record will be on it. For whatever reason, the only other stereo, vinyl recording of *The Birds* that I'm aware of is EMI ASD 3327 with Sir Neville Marriner and the Academy. Unfortunately, their recording isn't in the same universe as the Dorati. I know of no other vinyl release of the wonderful

Recorded in July 1957 at Watford Town Hall, the liner notes tell us, "...the composer's rich orchestral palette constituted a perfect demonstration of high fidelity stereo reproduction." After you purchase this re-issue, and you absolutely should, please read the back of the jacket for a wonderful explanation of the instruments the London Symphony used to portray the dove, the hen, the nightingale and the cuckoo.

Reviewers of the original U.S. Mercury have sometimes felt *The Birds* a little on the bright-sounding side. As usual, I disagree with that. To me it's tonally and harmonically accurate - but I will tell you I went through several copies until I found that perfect copy (a white label promo). I love this music and the way it was recorded. A big, spacious natural sound with all the delicacy, yet authority one could



demand. *Brazilian Impressions* is an evocative triptych - beautiful and atmospheric. It's a shame there are not more performances of these works in the catalogues.

I do think Speakers Corner is doing an outstanding job of re-creating the "U. S. Mercury Living Presence Sound," and before my Editor pokes at me again, this is another must own release. The music is fun and engaging and the sound quality is genuinely first rate. This is a recording guaranteed to please every classical enthusiast and should even cause those readers who aren't too comfortable with their knowledge of this category to dive right in. Great performances, great sound quality, don't hesitate: Buy it.

RSF

RECORDING
MUSIC



Joan Baez

Farewell Angelina

Cisco/Vanguard VSD79240 **180g** **4**

While my musical tastes have evolved over the years, this particular record is reminiscent of that old adage "the more things change, the more they remain the same." *Farewell Angelina* was first released by Vanguard in November 1965 -just three years after my only opportunity to see Joan Baez

in person. Somewhere, sometime I had lost track (and ownership) of this well loved album. For me, this was the last album that Baez performed with a true folk ethic - and yes, I'm fully aware of Donovan's *Colours* as the last track of side one. After this album, in my opinion, there were too many Beatles and Paul Simon influences for my taste. (Okay, I also like VSD79240 entitled *Joan ...but that's it*)

On this stunning re-issue by Kevin Gray of Acoustech and Robert Pincus of Cisco Music, pressed on beautiful, silent 180 gram vinyl by RTI in California, we've caught Joan at the height of her powers. The repertoire is classic 1960's Folk and there is nothing not to like about this release. I had the opportunity to compare this record to an original and to my ears there is no doubt that the sonic winner by miles (or kilometers, if you're so inclined) is the re-issue. It's richer, more detailed and contains a fuller sound than the 'polite' sounding original, which also exhibits more tape hiss. Kevin Gray has obviously increased the levels while reducing the tape hiss with no detriment to the sound of the re-issue - quite the opposite.

I find the immediacy, presence, dynamics and that "she's in my room" effect on this recording wonderful. What more could we ask for than more recordings like this from this team. Cisco can be located at: <http://www.ciscomusic.com>, and I suggest you check out their other offerings; You won't be disappointed. I consider this a must own LP - wonderful music, extremely well recorded on super-silent vinyl; a winning combination.

RSF

RECORDING
MUSIC





Peggy Lee

Latin a la Lee!

Capitol / S&P Records S&P-504 **180g** **5**

Peggy Lee, although better known in later life for that well publicised law suit against the Walt Disney Corporation for outstanding video royalties from her songs and voice overs in *Lady And The Tramp*, will still be remembered as one of the classiest singers of the twentieth century. Scandinavian good looks and her deliciously light voice, delivered with just a touch of huskiness, brought an unspoken sexually charged dimension to those standards of the Forties, Fifties and Sixties. *Latin a la Lee* (1960) was one of those trademark albums that contrasted this vocal delicacy and a barely disguised sexuality against much broader orchestral canvases. Here, fifteen Broadway songs including 'Till There Was You' (The Music Man), 'I Could Have Danced All Night' (My Fair Lady) and 'C'est Magnifique' (Can-Can) swing and sway to the rhythms and intoxicating tempos of an Afro-Cuban beat. Lee eases through these ballads and dance numbers: Breathless, tender and sultry for the romantic moments. Agile, vibrant and pulsating on the fleet, foot tapping tunes. Perhaps this material is a shade dated but then these Steve Hoffman re-mastered original tapes are a shining musical time capsule that transports you to the music theatres of another age.

RP

Supplier: www.vivante.co.uk



Tchaikovsky & Rimsky-Korsakov
Capriccio Italien & Capriccio
Espagnol
Kiril Kondrashin RCA Victor
Symphony Orchestra

JVC / RCA JM-XR24013 **XR**

Some will find these Kondrashin readings a little too individual simply because we have as a matter of course come to expect white-hot performances of the *Capriccios* to the exception of just about everything else. But this is a conductor who understands that the Russian psyche - even in moments of unadulterated exuberance - is still dogged by an underlying melancholia. Here the visions of Italy and Spain are taken from a truly Russian perspective. He develops a sense of this emotional complexity through the dramatic almost ceremonial recreation of music, which does not alone rely upon the adrenaline sustained tempi for its excitement. The inherent flamboyance, passionate and idiomatic nature of these themes is not overlooked but instead of a breathless chase through the piazzas we are treated to a more dignified and considered journey. The thrilling part is undoubtedly Lewis Layton's extraordinary 1959 recording from the Manhattan Centre in New York. Bold orchestral colours, searing brass flourishes and a richly vibrant and full-bodied string sound caps an incandescent and superbly defined production. Solo passages like that for Oscar Shumsky's violin in the *Sceno e canto Gitano* are beautifully balanced as Layton easily captures both the exaggerated gesture and slightest instrumental nuance of his playing with the corresponding dynamic and appropriately weighted solution.

RP

Supplier: www.vivante.co.uk



Peggy Lee

Bewitching-Lee!

Capitol / S&P Records S&P-502 **180g** **3**

This is a scintillating collection of Miss Lee's finest performances. All the big guns are present from a seductive 'Fever' to the worldly-wise 'Why Don't You Do Right'. There are also heart-rending interpretations from the Great American Songbook, often with backing orchestras conducted by the likes of Max Bennett, Jack Marshall and Lee's husband, Dave Barbour. Interestingly, this release comes as a numbered and limited edition LP that also contains three immortal bonus tracks: 'Unforgettable', 'You Don't Know' and an unusual avant-garde Lieber & Stoller penned 'I'm A Woman'. Together they offer a beautiful and thoroughly satisfying snap shot of Peggy Lee's artistry. She was the beguiling pop standard, blues and archetypal jazz diva who captured the very essence of a lyric through slight and subtle vocal changes. So much so that each and every emotional undercurrent has a corresponding shift in weight, intonation, volume or inflexion. This is a remarkable album full of colourful and tactile observations with textures that are clearly drawn from her blue-collar roots. While these recordings were made over a three-decade period, it is only the earliest tracks like 'I Don't Know Enough About You', which were cut in the mid-Nineteen Forties, that lack technical refinement. They do nevertheless give us delightfully expressive insights.

RP

Supplier: www.vivante.co.uk





Peter Green

Man Of The World... Reflections on Peter Green

Audio Fidelity AFLP 011 180g SA CD

Peter Green, from those early days with John Mayall to the Fleetwood Mac years and the relatively infrequent solo albums that have followed, has proven himself to be the UK's finest white blues guitarist—one whose compositional skills are sometimes overlooked as a consequence. This album is a tribute to those occasions when he put pen to paper. A scintillating line up including Billy Sheehan, Rory Gallagher, Savoy Brown, Paul Jones, Southside Johnny, Dave Peverett, Harvey Mandel, Arthur Brown and Vince Converse rip through electric blues interpretations of raw and emotional music. Stunning and sometimes quite melancholic performances of 'Leaving Town Blues' (Gallagher), 'Oh Well' (Billy Sheehan) and 'If You Be My Baby' (Dave Peverett) have to be worth the entrance fee on their own. But these are the appetisers in a feast wire bending moments. Larry McCray's jaw dropping rendition of 'Black Magic Woman' burns with intensity. A soulful 'Looking For Somebody' delivered with those voluminous Snowy White vocals and Ian Anderson's heartfelt closing title track demonstrates the eloquence, passion and sadness that Green as a lyricist brings to this table. A tasty Steve Hoffman transfer of these original 1995 analogue master tapes puts an indelible stamp of quality against everything from the savage guitar breaks, mournful rising harmonica notes and to the frayed and vulnerable singing.

RP

Supplier: www.vivante.co.uk



Khachaturian & Kabalevsky
Masquerade Suite & The
Comedians
Kiril Kondrashin RCA Victor
Symphony Orchestra

JVC / RCA JM-XR24014 XR

Unquestionably this Lewis Layton/Richard Mohr collaboration is one of the finest sounding Living Stereo recordings. The Manhattan Centre hall acoustic is as big as a parade ground and arrayed before his podium are Kondrashin's orchestral formations who play these vibrant, sweeping and often bombastic tunes with a wonderful precision and of course with all those exaggerated gestures that this music demands as well. Accurate timbres, delicious transparency and a real snap in the delivery of instruments like the snare drum in the *Masquerade Suite* are a revelation. I love that rolling inevitability of the opening *Waltz* with its peaks and troughs that surge forward and as suddenly collapse inwards, then to rise again. These are beautifully realised. For the *Nocturne* Oscar Shumsky's solo violin image is both secure and accurate and this helps to impart a sense of expressive integrity. A cavorting *Comedians* that burst apart with a splash of bright orchestral pigment reflects all ten of those varied but good-natured scenes painted by Dmitri Kabalevsky. Yes, these are two relatively lightweight compositions but that doesn't stop them from being hugely enjoyable. Just take them at face value.

RP

Supplier: www.vivante.co.uk



JJ Cale

Naturally

A&M/ Vivante AMLS 68105 180g 4

If you own just one JJ Cale release this is the one to have. Stuffed to the brim with Cale's ubiquitous roots rockin' laid-back sound and a good smattering of his best numbers. Although hardly known for his enormous range there's something about the album that is just so darn comfortable the effect is like a long smooth glass of the finest bourbon. In a way Cale's weakness is also his strength. Whilst there is a touch of repetition in his music and a lack of really strong tunes, the consistency of feel and the quality of playing coupled with his distinctive vocals make his albums, and this one in particular, a joyful listen. Just take the oh so relaxed 'Magnolia' as a fine example and note also that despite its apparent simplicity there's great artistry on display here too, from Cale's smokey vocals to his beautifully understated guitar work. Other standouts are 'Call Me The Breeze', 'Nowhere to Run' and 'After Midnight'.

The album's not an obvious contender for Vivante's audiophile treatment. Cale fits more comfortably in the low-fi than the hi-fi bracket, but they have done it proud, bringing the best from this recording with Cale's guitar shining out from the warm full-bodied acoustic, in a good clean pressing. A very nicely printed sleeve too.

DD

Supplier: www.vivante.co.uk



Mercury Living Presence Stereo, A perspective

by Richard S. Foster

The U.S. Mercury Living Presence classical, stereo LPs, in first pressings, are to my mind, a group of records that are unique in the annals of record manufacturing. They sound like no other records and I believe are some of the finest sounding discs ever made, and this includes your direct-to-disc or what-have-you, special re-mastered half speed issues or any other fancy speciality recordings.

The records truly are natural sounding! The 'lifelike' sound of instruments, where the particular instrument really sounds in reproduction as it does in reality is just unique. This is not to say that other companies like Decca, EMI, RCA and so many other manufacturers worldwide did not produce great sounding recordings. There are so many great sounding records out there you could not listen to them all in a lifetime. It's just that the Mercury's are very special.

Robert Fine, Wilma Cozart, George Piros, the equipment used by Mercury, their unique 3-microphone ONLY technique, captured sound as no other company had done before, or has done since. I find the only shortcoming in their catalogue to be in their Opera repertoire. Here I personally think is the only weakness, where the three microphone technique failed to capture the 'aliveness' of the performance. The recordings are not as realistic, not as involving, and in some cases, could send you fleeing the room clutching

your ears! Then there's the whole thorny issue of 'getting the right pressing', discussed briefly in Issue 27. But this is not the space to bring up a detailed history of each pressing and which is the correct matrix information to own.

I think for me, what Speakers Corner are in the process of releasing is certainly, classically speaking - and based on

the quality of their first five titles (three LPs in the box set, 90153 and 90213) - the most exciting project ever done in the re-issue marketplace. Remember, classically speaking. I say this because Speakers Corner is capturing the essence of the Mercury sound as good as we've ever going to get and at a price that is most definitely affordable to all collectors. I am absolutely ecstatic that they're releasing them, and to

date, have been more than pleased with the quality of the product. Interesting then, that Mercury occupies a special place in Kai Seemann's heart too, as you'll see from the accompanying side-bar.

Now let's talk about the real deal. Pick up a copy of almost any Mercury and you're struck with the attention to detail not only

on the jackets (yes, some were a little unreal for my taste - *The Birds* is an example... a great



▶ jacket... but they did not use real birds, that's for sure!) I love the colour back portion of the jacket which wraps around about one fourth of the rear and is a partial copy of part of the front cover. Tasty. The liner notes regarding performances are outstanding and rivals companies twenty times the size of Mercury. Then there are those 'Hi-Fi Facts' on the back of most jackets. Here there is a wealth of information regarding the recording dates, venues, equipment used and also, as in the case of the Birds, what the music is trying to portray and what one should listen for. Find that on your next SACD or CD purchase!

The main idea of this article is for me to discuss some of my favorite recordings and to talk a little about the Mercury's in general. As I went through my collection, I began to laugh. While I don't have the 'complete catalogue' (I only buy and keep what I like. I never buy



a record because it's on someone's list or as a trophy. If I have it... I'm going to play it, enjoy it and you can be assured it will get played more than once or twice.)

There's a little less than four hundred records in the Mercury catalogue and I own less than half. This doesn't

include about twenty or so mono recordings of American Music that I consider an extremely important contribution by this company to recorded history. It's an almost impossible task for me to list a few favorites - there are just too many. Still, here goes... I won't bother listing any of the Janos Starker recordings. They are all unbelievably wonderful and I think musically important. There is an anecdote my friend David

Nemzer had mentioned to me which I'll share. About 14 years ago while Starker was on a tour in New York, several of my friends somehow got back stage and being the 'groupies' that we all are, brought several of their coveted albums in hopes of having the Maestro



autograph them. David handed several jackets to Mr. Starker and Starker took one look at them, looked at David and said, "The sins of my youth." Well... he may feel that way, but in my heart I don't believe it to be so. These are all great performances and are must owns for everyone; I'll list them in a sidebar.

I'm not a "band music" type of person, generally. Frederick Fennell and his Eastman Wind Ensemble changed that for me on many recordings. Before I get too much further into this, I must remind all the readers that everyone in the Eastman Rochester Orchestra (the Hanson recordings) and the members of Fennell's

▶ Eastman Wind Ensemble were ALL students attending the Eastman School of Music! If you want a taste of Military Band Music, grab a copy of SR90112, *Ruffles and Flourishes*. It's a real stunner sonically and because it is recorded so well you really can get into the fun of this. (I suggest listening to this at loud volume levels when there is no one around. Woofer aficionados please take note - this is killer recording for Bass drum attack!)

SR90134, *Fiesta in Hi-Fi* with Howard Hanson conducting the Eastman-Rochester Orchestra is just a magical recording.



The record contains four works by American composers: McBride's Mexican Rhapsody, Nelson's Savannah River Holiday, Mitchell's Kentucky Mountain Portraits and Charles Vardell's Joe Clark Steps Out. Sonically another wonder, musically speaking this record is an exciting experience of works that are not recorded often enough. A treat for the ears and a toe-tapper if there ever was one.

SR90172 and SR90246 are both disks featuring the music of Aaron Copland. These are conducted by Dorati, the former with the Minnesota Symphony Orchestra on December 21, 1957 and the latter with the London Symphony Orchestra presumably in the summer of 1961 when Mercury was recording the LSO at the Watford Town Hall. These are solid performances. Certainly Leonard Bernstein offered up some of the finest performances on vinyl, but US Columbia sadly didn't provide him with the sound they really deserved. The Mercury albums offer Copland's *Rodeo*, *El Salon Mexico*, *Danzon Cubano*, *Appalachian Spring* and *Billy the Kid*.

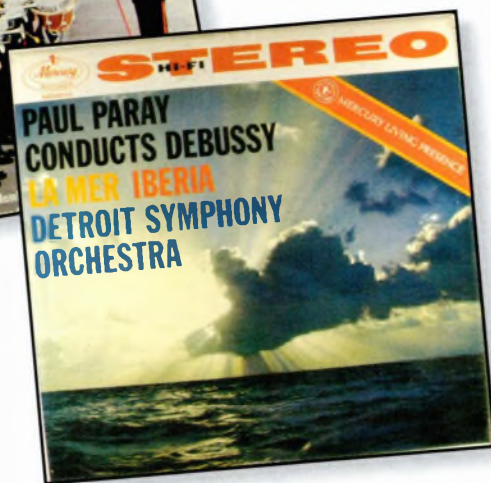


Starker on Mercury

3-9016	Bach: Complete Suites for unaccompanied cello
90303	Dvorak/Bruch: Cello Concerto/Kol Nidre
90320	Chopin/Mendelssohn: Cello sonatas
90347	Schumann/Lalo: Cello Concertos in A & D
90370	Bach: Suites for unaccompanied cello
90392	Brahms: Sonatas for Cello & Piano
90405	various: Cello Sonatas
90409	Tchakovsky/Saint-Saëns: Rococo Variations Et Cello Concerto
90460	various: Italian Cello Sonatas
90480	Bach: Three Sonatas for Cello & Piano

SR90226: Stravinsky's *The Firebird*. Another Dorati sonic blockbuster with the LSO in Watford again...

but this time not only do you get the finest sounding Firebird on record, you get one of the greatest performances ever done. This is just a plain thriller from start to finish. Play Ansermet's performances on Decca, either his mono or his two stereo



recordings. Then put on Dorati. Fuhgedaboutit. Dorati rules!

SR90010: Debussy's *La Mer and Iberia - Images for Orchestra*, No. 2; Paul Paray and the Detroit Symphony. This is an early Mercury Stereo release and very hard to find in a clean, quiet copy. I'd guesstimate that this was probably a 1955 production and I'm here to

Kai Seemann on Speakers Corner and the Mercury Legacy

You asked me to offer some comments regarding the hows and whys of are doing the Mercury Living Presence re-issues.

I don't know if you are familiar with our history. Speakers Corner began as a hi-fi studio with the same name-which is still in existence today - and as well I am still associated with them. The name, by the way, came from the very beginning as we were selling DIY speaker-kits - and the shop was located on a corner.

It was in 1992 that we received the first samples of the MLP CD-re-issues in our shop. We were struck by their sound-quality and dropped virtually everything else in favour of using them for demonstration of our hi-fi gear. At that time (and perhaps still today) we regarded them as the best CDs available.

Even if you have never worked in a hi-fi shop, you can imagine that hi-fi is not a big subject in the summer, especially if your shop is as close to the beach as ours is. It was on one of these boring summer-afternoons in the shop (everybody except me was at the beach) listening to the aforementioned CDs, that the idea of LP-re-issues came into my mind. If the CDs are that good - and we were very aware of the limitations of this medium, how good might the tapes be? More importantly, how would a newly manufactured LP sound, made in the best possible way from these tapes?

Four labels came into consideration: Mercury Living Presence, RCA Living Stereo, Decca SXLs, and EMI ASDs. MLP and RCA were American corporations and too complicated for us at that time. Decca had just been purchased by PolyGram - whose main office was just 100km away from us. It was logical for us to contact them first. So, even though we started with Decca - and have put out almost 100 titles from their catalogue over the years - the idea as such was started by our introduction to the MLPs CDs.

It took more than one year after our first contact with PolyGram until we were able to release the first four Decca titles. This time was not only taken up by negotiations, but by the need to learn how the job should be done properly.

I would like to point out that Speakers Corner Records would not stand where it is today without the help of Tony Hawkins, senior cutting engineer at Decca. If we wanted to recreate the records faithfully, it was him who showed us that one cutter with one sort of equipment wouldn't suit all labels or satisfy the intentions of the various artists and engineers. This is why we currently employ three different cutting facilities. Even

with Tony's help it was slow going and it would take us another two years before we expanded our catalogue with the Verve re-releases. The first years were extremely interesting. We learned so much and we are still very eager to fight with PolyGram so that we may achieve the quality standards we have in mind. We traveled with our reference turntables to Hanover and London and had meetings with the Presidents of Verve and Decca.

The paths of Speakers Corner and MLP crossed again in March 1995. At that time, the CD-line was expanded and PolyGram decided to import the complete catalogue. We were asked if we would participate in the distribution for Germany for the hi-fi trade. Over the years we distributed quite a number of CD labels in Germany, but none of them were as successful as these. To help promote this, Wilma Cozart-Fine came to Germany. I had the opportunity to be introduced to her. Together we had several press conferences. She is a very nice lady who knows absolutely what she is talking about. Of particular interest were the little anecdotes she told concerning the recording sessions. It was quite an experience to listen to the relevant CDs again, now knowing their background.

At that time, she totally rejected the idea of LP re-issues from her catalogue. However, and as you know, this was later reconsidered and Classic Records came up with the first releases in 1997. But this was just a short series and virtually coincided with Universal Germany deleted the majority of the MLP-CDs from their catalogue.

Since the late 1990's, we regularly attend MIDEM in Cannes - still the World's largest music-fair. In 2002 we had a meeting with Costas Pilavachi, President of Decca. Philips, along with MLP, had just become part of Decca and Mr. Pilavachi brought the MLP subject up. It wouldn't have occurred to us to mention it, but we were very glad he did and we were more than pleased to follow this up. It was to our advantage, due to all the consolidation at Universal Music, that the original tapes were moved to their Hanover facility.

Our cutter there, Willem Makkee, is a dedicated analogue guy. Usually, everything that is done in digital is produced in the Emil-Berliner-Haus. As you might know, they are very innovative in this respect. Willem freely admits in any interview what he thinks of the digital format and invests money from UM in his cutting gear, which these days is practically used for our releases only.

I must say that I am very happy that we can do these titles. It is not so much for business reasons, although I'd guess that these will be just as successful as our Decca's, but more for the fact that somehow a circle got closed. It started ten years ago with MLP and now we have them in our catalogue.

▶ tell you that it's one of the greatest performances of La Mer I've ever heard. I absolutely adore this record and I hope Speakers Corner will have a listen to the tapes and make up their own minds about releasing this.

I'm going to close this article with another real favorite, not only of mine, but almost everyone who hears this record:

SR90235-Liszt: *Hungarian Rhapsodies 2 & 3*; Enesco:

Roumanian Rhapsodies 1 & 2. Again, the Dorati/LSO/Watford connection. This record is another one of those sonic killers that also offers fabulous performances. It is impossible for the listener not to get excited when you hear the job Dorati, the LSO and Mercury did. Thank goodness this is definitely going to be re-issued.

To be continued . . .



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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